

Social Exchanges in the Digital Media

Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of Leicester

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May 2019

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### Abstract

This research explores how social relationships and exchanges in the digital sphere can be framed as gift practice. Many qualitative studies have been exploring the processes of social exchanges between individuals thanks to the concept of gift theory (Mauss, 1954). As result, this study aims to analyse the salient patterns of social exchanges on Instagram using the theoretical and conceptual framework of the gift-giving practice. I analysed the content of 15 face-to-face interviews and I conducted a netnography to appreciate the media users' experience and social interactions on the Instagram platform. This research, led by an interpretive and phenomenological approach, focuses specifically on food-related contents to understand the forms and dynamics of social exchanges on Instagram. Previous research on digital media has given credence to reciprocal exchanges which encourages social relationships and boosts the users' social capital. Reciprocal exchanges in a community can create unbalanced relationships and can lead to a sense of 'indebtedness' (Marcoux, 2009). Scholars provide evidence for this new tendency that challenges the idealised vision of the gift giving practice. Not only does the research aim to understand how the practice of giving online (sharing, posting, commenting, 'liking') create bonds and boost social capital but it also explores the notion of obligation in the digital social environment. The findings indicate that the use of Instagram can be both beneficial and detrimental for users' sociality and psychological well-being. Digital exchanges can expand users' social network, increase social capital, prompt users to feel that they belong actively to a social group, and ensure self-presentation. Nevertheless, the use of the digital platform reveals detrimental aspects, such as generating indebtedness, social comparison, jealousy, misunderstandings, anxiety and loneliness.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Professor James Fitchett and Professor Jennifer Smith Maguire, for all their support and guidance with my research over the past four years. I want them both to know how much I have appreciated working and learning from them. Their expertise, depth of knowledge and encouragement have been vital in the completion of this thesis.

Additionally, I would like to thank my research participants. I sincerely appreciate their enthusiasm, stories and time they contributed. Thank you to all of them, I am grateful to have had their input and all they have shared with me. I wish you all the best.

I owe a special gratitude to my sister, Inès Hassen. While no words can truly express how thankful I am, I want to express my unconditional love and gratitude to her. Without her patience and support, I would have not been able to complete my work.

To my parents, thank you for being supportive, encouraging and patient with me. You always had a great concern for my research, you helped me, listened to me and inspired me. Thank you for everything that you have done to enable me to be who I am today.

It is with all my love that I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandmother, Emna Hassen, whose encouragement always gave me strength and motivation to achieve my goals in life.

I consider myself blessed to have so many supportive people in my life.

Thank you

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## List of abbreviations

SNSs: Social Networking Sites

IGTV: Instagram Television

App: Application Program



## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction

“Look at this blueberry-acaí bowl! Oh wait, scroll down, scroll down, this one... I love this coffee shop. It’s this new trendy coffee shop in city centre, they make such Instagramable cocktails and ice-cream sandwiches! For sure I am going next Saturday with a friend, we will take pictures! We need to get two different flavours though... to make sure we have nice shots to get tones of ‘likes’!”.

Excerpt from one of my female participants, 24, from London.

December 2017, BBC news posted an online article entitled “Picture perfect? How Instagram changed the food we eat”, in which Sarah Lee, BBC reporter, argued that chefs and restaurateurs adjust menus to create meals that look good on a smartphone camera. The article highlights the growing trend of the aesthetically polished food pictures being posted on the Instagram platform. Similarly, on November 2016, Ruby Tandoh, blogger and columnist at the Guardian, has argued:

“I often post pictures of my food online before I have tasted it. I take the photo, adjust the brightness, contrast and saturation, upload it to my social media accounts and rejoice in how amazing it is. Sometimes, when I go on to eat the food in front of me, I don’t even like it. That pretty orange and pistachio thing I made is bitter because the oranges have gone rancid. The photogenic Italian sfogliatella pastry, which I bought more or less entirely to take a photo of, is actually pretty tough. I am left chewing the pastry long after the ‘likes’ have stopped trickling in. The interaction was sweet while it lasted, though”

What if Instagram is changing the way one exchanges and what one communicates in the digital world? This study investigates whether digital social exchanges can be understood by using the codes of gift-giving practice conceptualised by Marcel Mauss (1954), and the extent to which digital exchange practices increase social capital and benefit the users’

social lives. The study uses the theory of the gift to understand the social norms around social exchanges in the digital community of Instagram. In this research, the term community is being used to refer to individuals using the same platform to share common interests, hobbies, lifestyles, location, beliefs. The Instagram community represents a collection of people, who are able to learn, post and connect with each other through the platform.

My MA thesis focused on the impact that digital media has on media users' food perception. This research has inspired me to interrogate thoroughly the way individuals exchange content in the digital sphere. My held beliefs on social interactions drove me to reconcile traditional concepts of anthropological knowledge with contemporary digital technologies. Reflecting on my personal position as a digital media user, I realised that my involvement and participation within the digital sphere enabled me to instantly connect with my friends through my devices, and I wondered whether digital platforms change the way individuals exchange socially. As most people around me use social devices to communicate and interact, I questioned how the embedded structures of digital platforms became rooted in individual practices to communicate back and forth and share their experiences. I asked myself the true meaning of a digital 'like', a post or a comment used by individuals to connect with each other through visual media. How can social exchange and interactions in the digital sphere be conceptualised and understood? Many qualitative studies have investigated the processes of social exchanges between individuals through the concept of gift theory. Gift exchange is a pervasive form of human interaction with significant social, cultural, and economic implications. The anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1954) developed the concept of relationship exchanges by exploring archaic tribes and cultures. He provides an understanding of gift exchange from anthropological and sociological examinations of archaic societies. Mauss came to the conclusion that the practice of social exchanges established connectedness between people as the practice of giving gifts is a fundamental part of human relationships (Mauss, 1954). Researchers (Leeds, 1963; Schwarz, 1967; Sahlins, 1972; Sherry, 1983; Roberts, 1990; Belk and Coon, 1993; Levi-Strauss, 1996; Kollock, 1999; Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Marcoux, 2009; Caillé, 2010; Skågeby, 2010) have then used this pioneer piece of work to explore societies and to develop theories of social exchanges.

The assumption of gift-giving is that it provides social capital by strengthening the potential future benefits each side might expect from the other. Gouldner (1973: 247) presents gift exchange as a “concrete and special mechanism involved in the maintenance of any stable social system”. Gift-giving allows an individual to communicate his willingness to invest in a relationship in the future distancing from an economic value (Mauss, 1954). Early work on the model of reciprocity and the gift-giving practice have paved the way for researchers to focus on social relationship dynamics in both offline and online social communities (Sahlins, 1972; Marcoux, 2009; Pelaprat and Brown, 2012). New models of social exchange and reciprocity have therefore been established by scholars while exploring 21<sup>st</sup> century communities. Gift exchange adopts a logic that reproduces social bonds (Mauss, 1954; Malinowski, 1922; Sahlins, 1972). Within the gift economy, the voluntary transfer of goods is part of the expected social behaviour. Gift-giving can therefore be described as a cyclical process of mutual reinforcement driven by a moral norm of reciprocity.

However, past research has identified that the gift economy can indebt individuals and make them feel obliged to return a gift to achieve a balanced relationship (Marcoux, 2009; Sahlins, 1972; Roberts, 1990). Gift-giving creates an environment that encourages the demonstration of status, social emulation, rivalry and indebtedness. Several scholars (Shwartz, 1967; Sahlins, 1972; Marcoux, 2009) highlight the notions of rivalry, inferiority and social pressure that are all subject to the obligation of reciprocity. Reciprocal exchanges in a community can create unbalanced relationships and can lead to a sense of ‘indebtedness’ (Marcoux, 2009). The exchanges of gift are subject to a logic of debt, which derives its strength from its economic utility and from the constraining power of the moral obligation of reciprocity that binds together creditors and debtors. Past research on gift-giving practices present the social obligations to reciprocate in order to maintain one’s social status. Reciprocity thus is an essential part of maintaining friendship, boosting social capital and displaying one’s status.

This research presents the similarities between Mauss’ archaic societies and the digital media communities by evaluating the practice of gift-giving and assessing how digital media fits into Mauss’ framework. The gift economy opposes the market economy; it presents an economy outside any forms of hegemonic market exchange. While the gift exchanges express the establishment of a new relationship or an existing one on the one

hand, the impersonal market relationships express material advantage on the other hand. Researchers have thus highlighted the limits of the gift economy and the struggles of unpaid gifts in our contemporary society. Different forms of obligations and responsibilities have emerged from the gift economy and which lead individuals to experience feelings of social pressure and indebtedness (Marcoux, 2009). Regulated and compulsory reciprocal exchanges in the social sphere create an asymmetry in gift-giving relations that challenge the norms of idealised and balanced reciprocity. Social exchanges established in the 'old' media are redesigned by virtual tools which offer new conventions in relationships. While much of our understanding of gift exchange comes from anthropological studies (Mauss, 1954; Malinowski, 1922) more recent studies have focused on virtual social exchanges to explain computer mediated communication practices (Skågeby, 2010; Peleprat and Brown, 2012; Ellison *et al.* 2014) that explore the social process of gift-giving. Nevertheless, a limited social science literature exists concerning the scope of social platforms and digital exchanges.

Digital social exchanges are increasing every year with the birth of new social platforms that reduce geographical and temporal barriers to social exchanges. People share hundreds of millions of photos daily through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter (Pew Research Centre, 2018). These social spaces of networked public culture (Boyd 2008; Boyd and Ellison 2007) allow individuals to communicate by giving, receiving and reciprocating digital contents (images, videos, comments, 'likes'). However, little prior work has examined the consequences of sharing, receiving and reciprocating digital content on consumers' personal lives and sociality. As digital technologies are means of communication and social exchanges, it has become progressively more important to understand and to study both the content being created and the resulting exchanges that the content creates.

The Instagram platform encourages social exchanges through visual-based media practices: double tap 'likes' exchanges, captions, comments, hashtags using the # symbol to describe the pictures and videos, and by tagging other users using the @ symbol. Additional efforts need to be devoted to better understand how the image-based platform mediates social bonds and affects media users' sociality. Digital interactions (posts, tags, comments, 'likes') offer an opportunity to understand the social dynamics of modern-day gift-giving. The photo-sharing app Instagram, enables its users to share visual content

with their phones (Instagram, 2018). Instagram's 14 filters allow users to incorporate images of their everyday activity and to construct narratives of their lives and sense of self (Van House, 2007; Fox and Rooney, 2015). The use of social media platforms reflects and sustains relationships by telling stories and stressing the notion of "togetherness" (Van House, 2007). While some document the benefits of social exchanges in the digital sphere regarding the sustainability of relationships, social capital gain and peer recognition (Rheingold, 1993; Kollock, 1999; Hars and Ou, 2002; Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Bryant and Marmo, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Lee *et al.* 2015), some have suggested social media damages relationships (Chen and Lee, 2013), and triggers users to construct advantageous visual representations of themselves (Van House, 2007; Fox and Rooney, 2015; Manovich, 2016). Photographs are important elements with regard to identity (Goffman, 1959) and the construction of authenticity in online environments (Burns, 2014; van Dijck, 2008). This creative ability has led to the authenticity of digital exchanges to be questioned and the beneficial or detrimental outcomes of digital reciprocal exchanges to be discussed.

The burgeoning use of social media raises concerns about the effects of its use on the users' social and personal lives. If digital interactions can be linked to negative outcomes, researchers need to devote more attention to understanding the process of exchanges and social norms that rule the digital sphere. Numerous studies present a correlation between social media use and negative outcomes, for instance depression, anxiety, compulsive behaviour, loneliness, self-presentational concern and narcissism (Kraut *et al.* 1998; Turkle, 2011; Kross *et al.* 2013; Steers *et al.* 2014; Barasch *et al.* 2018).

This research aims to comprehend the impact of digital exchanges on the users' social bonds, relationship maintenance and social capital gain. It aims to extend and develop past research that discussed the paradox of the internet that failed to meet the important functions of socialising and communicating (Kraut *et al.* 1998). Since then, the debate has evolved and focused on how social media tools mediate social relationships. Technology has changed the way individuals communicate and how they view relationships (Turtle, 2011). As several recent studies have hypothesised that social media has a negative effect on users' happiness, and satisfaction with life, it seems essential to provide an updated account of the use of the newest platforms of exchange such as Instagram, to explore whether it strengthens social bonds, community belonging

and relationship maintenance, and to also assess whether digital exchanges play a significant role in affecting loneliness, generating social pressure or feelings of indebtedness.

As digital exchanges are a relatively novel form of social communication that involve social networking platforms, the study expects to discover the spectrum of outcomes generated by these exchanges whether adding value or being detrimental to the users' social and personal life.

### Context of the Research: The Case of Food

Social media is a relatively new development which can be used to reflect the transparent social exchanges between individuals. One way to observe this is by looking at food images shared on Instagram. Food aims to successfully present the process of digital exchange, and how individuals select pictures to be shared with their community. In the present study, the descriptions provided by the participants of the food they shared, provides an awareness of the neglected phenomenon of the digital-focused lived experiences of individuals who contribute daily to the sphere.

Not only is food a wide-spread content in social media, it also conveys meaningful details about an individual (Brillat-Savarin, 1825). Food media contents are displayed and shared in social platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook (Murphy, 2010). Thanks to food-related posts in the digital community, I am able to analyse the meanings attached to these posts. Indeed, the study of the media users' involvement in the digital sphere and the exploration of their online posts (comments, pictures, videos, descriptions) aims to discover whether the notions of social capital and obligations are intertwined with the digital gift-giving practice. Food posts are the empirical entry point to study more general phenomenon. Food posts enable me to understand how digital content can be associated with value, and how it can be transcribed into social capital. The notions of social capital and obligations are essential to explore to provide an in-depth understanding of the community members' digital involvement and gift-giving practices.

The theoretical problem lies in the lack of research and documentation on reciprocal exchanges in the digital sphere and the outcomes provided by their digital participation on a social level. Different contents could have been used to explore reciprocal exchanges, and would have suited this phenomenological study. The aim of this study is not to provide an analysis of the food-related contents being exchanged on Instagram, but rather to use this empirical focus to explore the visual representations and understand the nuts and bolts of digital reciprocal exchanges. The study could have indeed focused on travel—related, cosmetics-related, or sports-related pictures to offer equally rich personal accounts of the users' experiences and social exchanges.

On Instagram, food-related posts provide a means for expressing an abstract significance of social systems and cultural values. The exploration of food related content allows to understand digital posts by making sense of their functional role on the platform. A digital post presents a context rich in meaning that enables me to better identify the dynamics of exchanges, the reciprocal rules of conduct in addition to the potential detrimental effects nurtured by digital participation. Food is adequate to identify how technology shapes social exchanges and triggers users to reciprocate the exchanges. It is an empirical focus that enables me to explore whether digital exchanges require a moral obligation or indebted the users towards their community. Whether reciprocal exchanges are detrimental or beneficial and whether technology helps to maintain or threatens relationships are contemporary issues of controversy. Digital posts in the mediated environment enables me to assess potential anxiety of visual representation that leads to further enhancement of detrimental effects linked with digital reciprocal exchanges. This thesis' focus on food provides the means to answer my interrogations thanks to the material and symbolic significance of food (Levi-Strauss, 1970; Douglas, 1975; Bourdieu, 1984; Belk, 1996).

### Statement of the Problem

As past research (Mauss, 1954; Sherry, 1983; Gregory, 1982; Godbout, 1998; Caillé, 2005) distinguish the gift economy from the market economy, it is essential to understand the mechanisms of digital exchanges and discover the outcomes whether beneficial or detrimental to the users' social and personal life. Theories on social bond maintenance and indebtedness start the process of understanding but there are many gaps that need to

be filled in order to obtain a complete picture of what social exchanges on Instagram mean. It is therefore important to include a phenomenological approach in order to comprehend the users' social experiences on Instagram. There is a gap in the literature regarding the meanings and essence of the social exchanges of lived experiences by the users. Addressing the current research gap provides media users an opportunity to tell their stories, to conceptualise the forms of exchanges and to identify the social norms of exchanges in the digital sphere.

There are surprisingly few studies where Instagram is the subject of investigation. Further discussions and research are needed to explore how social relationships are maintained, disrupted, challenged or enhanced via digital media as an increasingly pervasive interface or context for the practices and experiences of everyday life. Why is this interesting? There is a general debate going on about what it means to participate and interact in a digital environment. How do individuals benefit from the tools offered by digital platforms to construct their image, show appreciation, maintain bonds and how do individuals handle feelings of frustration, jealousy and loneliness linked with the use of social media? Researchers have pointed out the paradox of the internet and the controversy of being simultaneously permanently connected to each other while ultimately feeling alone.

Besides, the literature is not sufficient due to a change of communication landscape with the use of social networking sites. As social sites are constantly evolving, it is crucial that researchers understand the social practices of newer social platforms. For instance, new types of social media based primarily on images have emerged such as Instagram, which provides digital exchanges dominated by visual content, contrary to other platforms that rely more on written content (Facebook or Twitter). As a result, the image-sharing platform (Instagram) differentiates itself from traditional blogs and lengthy written content, by offering visual contents that encourage individuals to generate content and interact with other users. The platform of investigation, Instagram, gives access to newer forms of social exchanges and communication being used by the younger generation which is moving away from older platforms such as Facebook (Stern, 2013). The features of Instagram result in different outcomes regarding social bonds and identity that need to be explored.



## Purpose and Objectives of the Study

There is an ongoing debate, not solely among academics but also within popular culture, as to whether social media strengthens an individual's social capital, whether cost-free interactions indebted individuals and whether digital tools are detrimental to the well-being of its users. This thesis addresses these questions subjectively, from the point of view of Instagram users, and explores the process of interactions, codes of exchanges and the notion of reciprocity that takes place in the digital sphere.

This is a qualitative multi-method study that contributes to past research on social exchanges and gift-giving exchanges. This study examines if digital social interactions enrich one's social capital, social status and prestige. Are social interactions providing a sense of belonging that entitles individuals to reproduce reciprocal exchange under a form of moral obligation? I use food-related contents to understand the patterns of exchanges between media users and their social activity. This study adds to previous research by exploring how people exchange on Instagram, and how these interactions are related to an individual's social capital, by focusing on the lived experiences of the posters themselves.

The research broadens the understanding of the impact of visual-based digital tools on social interactions, individuals' identity and the maintenance of social bonds. Practically, the study complements anthropological work on how societies maintain relationships and social cohesion, and contributes with guidelines on how Instagram is being used as a communication tool. It begins with the exploration of Mauss' findings on the archaic tribes by exploring how relationships affect social practices. The thesis is concerned with the role of the gift practice in digital social communities and how individuals experience reciprocal exchanges in the digital environment. A body of literature has linked the use of social media and social exchanges with anxiety, depression and loneliness (Campbell *et al.* 2002; Chou and Edge, 2002; Krau *et al.* 2002; Kross, 2013; Clark *et al.* 2017; Stapleton *et al.* 2017). These studies contradict Mauss' premise that social exchanges are known to build alliances and boost social capital. This research therefore explores how social relationships and exchanges in the digital sphere can be framed as gift practice. My aim is to demonstrate that the concepts of reciprocity and exchange from the anthropological view of Mauss are still essential in contemporary social sciences. Gift-

giving appears as a universal behaviour that can be applied in different settings and time scales to interpret social forms of exchange.

The findings contribute new insights into the adoption of digital exchanges, modern-day gift exchange practices, and conceptualise behaviour of exchanges in digital settings. The study offers information to better comprehend social relationships and provides an updated account of social exchanges in the digital sphere. In addition, this phenomenological study can have compelling implications for consumer behaviour, and can be relevant when social relationship practices are being explored in different social platforms (not only image-based ones). It will both be useful to the marketing food industry and to social sciences in order to understand better consumer social exchanges, behaviour and perception in the digital food-related environment. Furthermore, findings from the present study can identify potential benefits or detrimental effects when newer social platforms are being examined.

### Theoretical Framework and Nature of the Study

I focus on Mauss' concept of the gift-giving theory (1954) to understand the process of exchange between media users in the digital sphere. Mauss' theory enables me to explore whether the gift-giving practice facilitates social exchanges and improves social bonds in the digital world, in what ways do digital postings comprise social exchanges and how best to conceptualise those exchanges (i.e. as market vs gift practices of exchanges)?

Gift-giving theory also helps to describe whether value becomes associated with particular objects of exchange and increases media users' social capital. Indeed, Bourdieu's concept of social capital (1986) is relevant to this research in order to understand the reasons why media users take part in the online communities. The core idea of this concept suggests that social networks have value and provide benefits within social groups. Social exchanges and reciprocity can lead an individual to experience feelings of obligation and indebtedness towards other individuals within a community. I therefore explore whether Marcoux's 'sense of indebtedness' (2009) is applicable to members of the digital sphere. This notion refers to the social pressure and obligation

that social exchanges can create within a community. I therefore explore the scope of social obligation in digital mediated relationships that result in either friendships or rivalries.

The qualitative study uses two types of data collection that build on one another. First, I conduct personal interviews on digital social exchanges and interactions with Instagram users. Then, I conduct a netnographic research to understand the mechanisms of exchanges from the inner perspective on the research problem. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand and describe the lived experiences of Instagram users. The combination of research methods allows for a more in-depth examination of the meanings the participants ascribe to their social experiences and exchanges within the digital community in order to understand the forms of social capital, social responsibilities and obligation.

Participating in the exchanges in the digital community of Instagram may affect the psychological wellbeing of some individuals. To determine this, this thesis uses hermeneutic phenomenology in order to interpret and analyse the online communities' narratives. The phenomenology of human conversation (Gadamer, 1976), the role of language and the nature of questioning are combined to create an appropriate approach to understand the media users' experiences and behaviours (Thompson *et al.* 1994). The overall philosophical framework is compatible with the hermeneutic method and interpretive analysis that provide answers to how participants give a meaning to their world (Bryman, 2012) and analyse digital exchanges.

Mauss' (1954) concepts of reciprocity and gift-giving are used to understand how a digital platform's social exchanges generate forms of social capital and forms of responsibilities/obligations among community members. These concepts have informed a research design which favours the capture of meaning in human interaction, and which is perceived as reality (Carson *et al.* 2001). The theoretical framework has lead the research to adopt an interpretive paradigm that aims to collect knowledge that is socially constructed rather than objectively determined and perceived (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

## Operational Definitions

Social Media: Boyd and Ellison (2008:211) define social media as “web-based services that allow individuals to: 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”

Social Networking Site: Social network sites (SNS's) allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Social networking sites are internet-based applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Pinterest and Instagram. The users can use these sites to interact with individuals they already know or to meet new ones, to build social networks and relations.

Users: A user is an individual who has a social networking account (Oxford English dictionary, 2018). On Instagram, users are able to post pictures and videos, ‘like’ a content, use hashtags and comment.

App: An App is a piece of software downloaded by a user to a mobile device (Oxford English dictionary, 2018).

Hashtag: A hashtag is a word or a sentence preceded by a hash sign (#) that is used to complement a photo or video shared on Instagram. They are usually used to connect and link with other users on a specific topic. It denotes a specific category that the post is assigned, which is specifically used on SNSs (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013).

Feed: A feed is the collection of updates on the user’s Instagram account that shows posts by other users that the user is following. This is sometimes also referenced to as a news feed. Users consume pictures and videos mostly by viewing a core page showing a “stream” of the latest pictures and videos from all their friends, listed in reverse chronological order.

‘Like’ button and comment sections: A ‘like’ is used on Instagram to show appreciation of a post by a simple tap on a heart button or by a double click on the post (Tong and

Walther, 2011). The comment sections allow users to leave comments below pictures or videos and interact with others by sharing their thoughts.

Instagram: A social network for sharing photos and videos that can be edited with various filters. Instagram has attracted more than 200 million active users, with an average of 95 million photos uploaded daily, and more than 40 billion photos shared since its launch in October 2010 (Instagram 2018).

Digital community: It refers to environments that are created online where individuals can interact with other people via the Internet. To be part of an online community where members can post, comment, or interact *via* 'like' etc. an individual needs to be connected to the internet (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Individuals are able to communicate through social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat.

### Contextual Definitions:

This section is dedicated to provide awareness of certain terms and expressions used in this thesis. A concrete explanation of each term is provided, to present its specific meaning within the context of this research and avoid confusion.

The diminutive form 'Insta' is used in order to emphasise the notion of immediacy of the Instagram exchanges. The implications of 'Insta' refer to both the instant transmission of the content and the single instant being captured by the users. More specifically, in this study, used as a prefix, it is combined with nouns in order to characterise the way users connect and exchange with each other in the actual time it happens (e.g. *Insta-Potlatch*, *Insta-Gratification*, *Insta-Rule*, *Insta-Game* and *Insta-Paradox*).

The notion of 'aestheticism/aesthetics' is used to define the perfect-picture driven posts of Instagram users. Pictures are edited and filtered by the users who put an effort to display a perfect life on their digital profile. The respondents work on the perfect angle and lighting of their pictures to provide the most beautiful plates of food and dishes. In this research, the notion of aesthetic strictly refers to the sophisticated and visually-pleasing pictures on Instagram.

In chapter six, ‘mechanical exchanges’ refer to social interactions that are performed mindlessly, from force of habit to reciprocate social exchanges. It is used to define Instagram users’ way of interacting and their machinelike ability to ‘like’ a digital content which lacks spontaneity.

In chapter seven, the terms ‘stalking’ and ‘creeping’ describe the use of Instagram to observe the digital actions and interactions of another Instagram user. Instagram ‘stalking’ or ‘creeping’ can include frantically viewing of particular profiles and pictures.

### Delimitations

By narrowing my study to a specific social networking site, I limited the scope of social exchanges to focusing mainly on visual based exchanges on the Instagram platform (pictures, videos, comments, ‘likes’ and hashtags).

Instagram Lives and IGTV were not taken into consideration in this study. Instagram launched Live Stories in 2017 and created the IGTV in 2018, these are both new ways to connect with people. To go live, the users swipe right from their feed and choose to start a live video in the camera in order to connect in real time and interact with other users. Instagram also has a series of add-on apps available (Boomerang; Hyperlapse and Layout). IGTV is the last feature to date. It is a new app for watching long-form, vertical videos. These apps generate new ways to communicate and exchange such as the rating and voting system which goes beyond ‘liking’ and commenting, that would need to be further explored by social scientists.

The study thus explores how people interact with each other on Instagram and how people experience and reflect on their engagement on Instagram, focusing merely on posts, comments and ‘likes’. It also analyses how participating in the sphere helps, or breaks, social cohesion by exploring the content being shared and what motivates users to reciprocate social actions in the digital sphere. However, the research does not focus on demographic differences or gender difference, it explores the use within a specific cultural and social group in this context.

## Significance of the Study

While there is a vast literature concentrated on the gift-giving practice which explores the patterns of social relationships, this research aims to go further and examine this particular practice within digital communities. This study addresses the value of gift-giving in online communities and its impact on media users' attitudes and feelings. The research of digital social exchanges demonstrates how and why individuals interact with each other in digital communities. Not only does this work understand whether the practice of giving online (sharing, posting, commenting) creates bonds and boosts social capital but it also seeks to challenge the naïve conceptualisations of the gift economy by analysing its potential limits. Most of the literature focuses on the practice of gift-giving by exploring real-life social exchanges. As digital media supports new interaction methods, this research therefore showcases the gift theory practice in our digitalised society.

## Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into the following sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Method, Empirical Findings and Analysis, and Discussion (see Appendix 1: Structure of the thesis Table). The introduction chapter includes the background to the topic, the context of the research, the statement of the problem, the purpose and objectives of the research, the definitions, the delimitations and the definitions and significance of the study. Chapter two describes the necessary theory, which forms the basis for my analysis. It provides a thorough understanding of the gift economy and social media platforms. It discusses the concept of gift-giving exchanges within social communities in contrast with market-based transactions. This chapter introduces the notions of indebtedness and social obligation that past research has linked to gift economy exchanges. The use of digital mediated communications is discussed and the role of social media communities as a communication tool is presented. The chapter then turns to the explanation of theories of self-identity and social capital within the context of social media. The literature review moves on to consider past research highlighting both the benefits and the detrimental aspects linked with the use of social mediated communities on the users' social network, social gain and personal wellbeing. The chapter concludes by identifying a literature gap

and recognises the need for a comprehensive view of the digital exchanges happening in social media platforms.

Chapter three presents the methods used in the research, which includes the ontology and epistemology and overall research design. This chapter presents adequate justification for conducting personal interviews and using netnography as the data collection methods. The choice of the qualitative approach adopted in this study is then substantiated based on the nature of the research questions. The chapter further explains the choice of sample and the style of analysis that was used. The fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh chapters contain the study's findings and the analysis of the research.

Chapter four is the first chapter of the findings and explores digital food-related exchanges to understand the nuts and bolts of gifts giving theory. It presents the empirical context of the research by interpreting the way media users exchange content to increase their sociability, share meaningful experiences and create bonds with other users.

Chapter five explores the motives, expectations and investments of the media users when participating in the Instagram community. This chapter presents the patterns of exchange that exist in the digital sphere and identifies reciprocity as a social norm, and obligation, to perpetuate social exchanges in the digital sphere. Social exchanges are strengthening media users' social bonds and enable both parties (giver and receiver) to benefit from these exchanges.

Chapter six explores how digital interactions are being strategically exchanged, enforced by specific social rules and codes. The media users manage their posts, comments and 'likes' in order to maintain social capital and collect social rewards. This chapter gives further insight into the implication of self-presentation within social exchanges. It provides a rich understanding of the digital gift economy and exchanges.

Chapter seven explores digital media use and its impact on the media users wellbeing and sociality. This chapter presents the notions of discomfort and anxiety emanating from media users digital participation. Imbalanced relationships and asymmetrical exchanges are identified and discussed in depth. Platforms enable individuals to stay in contact that could end up in damaged bonds and weakened social ties.



The final chapter includes a conclusion and discussion based on the findings of the study, it answers the research questions of the study. Through a critical synthesis of the study's findings, chapter eight attempts to draw the big picture by providing an overall view of the impact of digital media exchanges on media users social cohesion, bonds and social capital gain. The synthesis proposes a critical existence of five notions that describe the digital media exchanges on Instagram that emerged in this research: *Insta-Potlatch*, *Insta-Gratification*, *Insta-Rule*, *Insta-Game* and *Insta-Paradox*. A critical reflection of the researcher's journey is provided, with theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations of the study and recommendations for further study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the first part of the literature review, it is demonstrated how gift-giving establishes social relations. This is a theoretical framework that has been prominently used to understand and explore behaviour associated with the phenomenon of giving and receiving gifts in different societies. Within the scope of anthropological studies, gift-giving and gift-receiving can be considered culturally embedded practices whose origins can be traced back to primitive societies, where gifts were associated with life markers; they were also used to maintain personal relationships and perceived as a medium of economic exchange. The literature review examines how the practice of gift-giving facilitates social exchange and improves social bonds. The review then discusses the forms of indebtedness and feelings of obligation that are entailed by social exchanges and reciprocity. This part contrasts the gift economy with the market economy; it presents an

economy outside any forms of hegemonic market exchange. This part also attempts to gain an understanding of the limits of the gift economy and to highlight the struggles associated with unpaid gifts in our contemporary society. Different obligations and responsibilities have emerged from the gift economy which has led individuals to experience feelings of social pressure and indebtedness.

The second part of this review makes an argument for applying the Maussian framework to online communities. This section introduces the digital environment of Instagram and digital community networks, and examines the similarities between Mauss' archaic societies and digital media communities by evaluating the practice of gift-giving and past research conducted within the field of the social sciences. The literature reveals the social exchanges and interactions taking place in the online environment, and shows how digital media fits into Mauss' framework. This part leads to a better understanding of the ways in which the digital environment encourages the creation of social bonds, presenting how weak and strong bonds encourage the creation of social capital. This part also highlights the incentives for media users to participate to in online communities and reveals a body of literature that presents the negative sides associated with the use of social networking sites on its users' sociality.

Finally, the literature review discusses past research, focussing on the symbolic value of food in providing the means to understand feelings, motives and behaviour of individuals. Further, the review explains how digital media has enabled researchers to explore digital contents thanks to the self-presentation and symbolic dimension of the digital environment. The literature review underscores how food conveys cultural symbols and meanings that are essential to a further understanding of the principles of the gift-giving framework. This part discusses how digital food-related exchanges have become common practice in the digital environment, and how past research has used food as a tool to examine social experiences and practices.

My core theoretical framework is informed by Mauss' concepts of gift exchange and reciprocity, however, in order to provide an in depth understanding of this theory, there are complimentary pieces that I build my research upon. First, I use Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualisation of social capital. The concept of social capital is linked to social exchanges and to gift-giving practices as they are embedded within social networks. I

elaborate the concept of the gift economy through Marcoux's (2009) discussion of indebtedness which subsequently leads me to draw upon Marx's (1867) idea of commodity exchange in order to understand the gift exchange in the contemporary society. Finally, I use Goffman's (1959) notion of impression management and the presentation of self. Goffman is indeed essential to understand how individuals present themselves on the screen. I present past researchers that have used Goffman's ideas to understand digital presentation of self in order to support the Maussian theoretical account of my study.

What Mauss (1954) noted, in essence, is that giving is an extension of the self and hence the obligation to give is bound up with the notion of self. As giving is an extension of the self, hence the obligation to give is bound up with the notion of self-representation. The idea of self-representation is relevant to an understanding of the way in which gifts are generators of identity as they reflect the picture individuals have of other individuals. Gifts communicate intangible meanings about the giver, who is able to confirm who he/she is, by giving, receiving and reciprocating. Transactions evidence the nature of relationships via 'tie-signs' (Goffman, 1959). The exchange of gifts confirms that a relationship is anchored in a framework of mutual recognition of the participant's social and personal identities. Following Goffman's perspective has allowed my research to consider the interaction rituals and social value attached to the notion of gifts. As transactions enable individuals to construct, define them symbolically, I therefore intended to pay attention to the instrumental and expressive dimensions of the digital exchanges within the Instagram community to understand the associated patterns of exchange. Besides, according to Bourdieu (1977), the gift is a form of social capital invested by individuals who are able to access intangible resources embedded in social relations. Previous research emphasised that the individuals involved in communities have a strong social capital (Gregory, 1982). My research relies on these notions to explore the nature of the exchanges and subsequently determine the resources being mobilised in a digital context. Thus, to explore the nature of the digital exchanges on Instagram, this research focusses on individuals' social capital to determine the resources and assets being mobilised.

## 1) Gift exchange and social relations

The following part explains how Mauss' theoretical framework of gift exchange has been applied in consumer research. Previous research (Leeds, 1963; Schwartz 1967; Belk, 1979; Kollock 1999; Skågeby, 2010; Lampel and Bhalla 2007) on gift-giving has presented a number of different models that have been used in contemporary studies and that have also evolved over time. Most of the early work on gift-giving comes from anthropologists and sociologists who have explored primitive societies (Malinowski, 1922; Sherry, 1983; Mauss, 1954).

### a) The Gift: Practice and Meaning

Mauss (1954) made an ethnographic study among archaic societies which helped him to conceptualise gift theory. His study explored the notion of gift-giving practices in the context of a pre-modern capitalist society. As an anthropologist, Mauss (1954) visited a number of different tribes and reported on the way in which certain societies work within the system of gift economy. Mauss (1954) highlighted the aspects of both mutuality and reciprocity embraced by gift-giving practices. His work enabled researchers to understand how gifts make or break relationships in such societies. Several motives trigger gift-giving: it can be to express gratitude or fortify relationships; a need for power; reputation or prestige; the expectation of reciprocity and equality. Reputation refers to the character imputed to a person in a community, while prestige refers to the respect, recognition and admiration given to a person on the basis of a perception of his/her achievements, success, or social position (Hurlet *et al.* 2014).

There is a propensity for people to give, as driven by the feelings of moral obligation to return a gift, which forms the main underlying psychological motive behind reciprocal giving (Mauss, 1954). Gift-giving was used in several fields to examine different concepts, for instance, altruism (Leeds, 1963) and social psychology (Schwartz, 1967). Studies within different areas of research have allowed for a deeper insight into gift-giving behaviour over the last fifty years. Gift exchanges have been intended to nurture relationships (Belk, 1979) and to maintain established relationships (Bourdieu, 1986).

Giving and receiving strengthens relationships in the sense that it creates an ongoing transaction between individuals which preserves social ties and bonds (Sherry, 1983). Thanks to gifts, social bonds can be improved and social communications maintained. Gift-giving goes beyond the simple action it implies; it also triggers social interactions and fosters relationships. Mauss' (1954) work provides an explanation for the communication system structure of archaic cultures and presents the central role of gifts within societies: Mauss explained that a gift must be 'paid back', thus emphasising the implicit obligatory aspect of the gifts. He revealed the power that triggers the recipient to want to pay back and distances the voluntary act of giving from the gift.

Gifts can be considered as tie signs that inform as to the nature of the bond between the giver and receiver. Rather than necessarily having a monetary interest, some gifts are valued because they are rich with personal meaning, and it is this aspect that lies at the heart of the social exchange theory of gift-giving. The action of giving goes, therefore, beyond that of a mere gift and represents self-expression or shared memory. Gifts thus represents the giver or symbolises the relationship's devotion and attachment (Belk and Coon, 1993). In the minds of the recipients, such gifts often hold sentimental value with the desire to bring love and happiness through gifts to loved ones (Belk and Coon, 1993). According to Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1954), gift-giving represents a symbolic ritual that indicates gift givers' positive attitudes toward the intended recipients and their desire to devote themselves in any future relationship. This notion can be linked to Sherry (1983), who describes the gift as part of an altruistic and agonistic intention from the giver. In other words, by giving a gift to another person the giver's motivation is to provide something more than a simple gift, but also to deliver the recipient happiness and to enhance his position of giver. These motives are part of the outcomes provided by giving. Gift-giving generates multiple benefits other than just the mere action of giving itself. The act of giving something to someone offers the giver not only the possibility to communicate a personal dimension through the gift, but also to obtain a degree of personal satisfaction. Indeed, the gift conveys a personal message which both maximises the gift giver's satisfaction and the recipient's pleasure (Sherry, 1983). The gift acts as an expression of the bonds of alliance and commonality.

Gifts symbolise more than material attributes as according to Mauss (1954), to give something is to give a part of oneself. Gifts are considered representational and

emotional, allowing givers to communicate without the use of language (Belk, 1996). Previous research has explored the benefits of social exchanges: to boost one's social capital, to communicate a personal dimension (Mauss, 1954), to maintain relationships (Belk, 1979), and to maximise the satisfaction on the part of both parties (Sherry, 1983). A cycle of reciprocal gift exchanges maintains the transactions between givers and receivers (Sherry, 1983) and thus strengthens relationships through the act of gift exchange. Past research has emphasised a generally positive experience associated with gift-giving. Belk's findings (1979) further support the idea that gift-giving maintains interpersonal relationships and marks important life events. He points out the need to focus on the process of gift selection, discussing the importance of exploring the donors' perceptions of the recipients' needs and preferences (Belk, 1979). Previous research has extended the knowledge of the practice of gift-giving in different contexts by developing the social, economic, and personal dimensions of gifts (Sherry, 1983).

A gifting action in a given community provides collective benefit and thus accumulates social capital. The term 'social capital' emphasises a wide variety of social benefits associated with social bonds. It conveys tangible assets such as goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse within the members of a given society. The idea that social capital is network-based is acknowledged by Lin (2001), who defines social capital as resources (e.g. wealth, power or reputation) embedded in one's social networks, that can be accessed through ties in the networks, and that can generate a return for the actor. This typology is also based on Bourdieu's concept of social capital. Within a given community, social capital depends on the quality of the ties between individuals. Bourdieu defines it as:

The aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, in other words, to membership in a group. (1986:248)

A group can be defined by the sense of belonging held by its members. In this sense, the members from the group embrace a set of shared beliefs and behaviour. Social recognition constitutes a "vital human need" (Taylor 1992: 26) that points the acknowledgement of a person's status or merits. Bourdieu (1986) supports the idea that a durable network of relationships is not a given, but is instead established as a result of repetitive social interactions that are further fortified through obligations. The conceptual origins of social

capital stems from the creation of social interaction or exchange (Bourdieu, 1986). Gift-giving and social capital are interrelated because the social structure established by gift-giving practices facilitates the emergence of social capital. Gifts are exchanges designed to capture memories and feelings about a relationship, generate bonds, and maintain social interaction (Godbout, 1998). As gift-giving allows the communication of the value of a relationship, they are thus the threads of relationship, and thereof community. Gift exchange is the core of a community formation (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1954), where the notion of community is defined by McMillan and Chavis as:

A feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. (1986:9)

Gifts generate social capital by solidifying the potential upcoming benefits each side might expect from the other. Social bonds and mutual interdependence are stimulated by the practice of gift-giving, which produces social capital. As mentioned earlier, sociality becomes a form of capital which explains the ongoing reciprocal exchanges within communities. Bourdieu (1986) and Mauss (1954) have a common interest in communities' social exchanges and interactions. Bourdieu (1986) argues that sociality involves the exchange of both inalienable gifts and social capital. Bourdieu noted that relationships constitute valuable resources that provide "a credential which entitles members of a community to credit, in the various senses of the word" (1986: 249). As mentioned earlier, gifts are the initiators in building, expanding or deepening one's network of social relationships (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986). Gupta suggests that

The study of gifts in general is of key importance to social capital theory, gifts are evidence that social capital is present, and could possibly adopted as one indicator of its scale. (2008:209)

Social capital is thus a dependent variable of gift-giving. The idea that relationships are a valuable asset in the sense of providing positive experiences is reflected in social capital. Gupta (2008:209) emphasises this idea and suggests that gifts both keep the peace in relationships and can be regarded as "an input to social capital". As a result, since a relationship is maintained thanks to reciprocal exchanges and social ties are established,

social capital increases. Similarly, if the social ties are weakened, social capital reduces or even vanishes (Cheal, 1988). Gifts can provide economic, functional, social, expressive and sentimental value, especially when the gifts reflect the giver's individuality, which is then passed on to the receiver (Sherry, 1983). As elaborated by Mauss, gifts reveal complexities; they possess something of the giver called the 'spirit of the gift', which triggers the gift cycle to be completed and reciprocated so that the gift is returned to its initial giver. Mauss argues that objects of reciprocal exchange are never completely separated from the people who exchange them (1954). The gift mirrors the giver's identity and reveals how the giver recognises the recipient. According to Mauss, objects are transferred because the affiliation with the identity of the giver compels reciprocation. This affiliation encourages the creation of ongoing relationships between individuals. Belk (1979) supports this idea and defines the practice of gift-giving as a process of symbolic communication. He explains that a gift has a message to decode and a meaning to understand. He explains the psychological relationship between the gift with its giver and receiver. Mauss' framework emphasises the reflection of oneself thanks to a gift which informs as to the members' personal characteristics and traits. According to previous research, gifts are the symbols of communication and social support during social events (engagement, weddings, rites of passage, etc.) (Belk, 1979). Gifts are social acts which include sentimental and personal significance between the giver and the receiver.

Mauss provides an account of symbolic exchange whereby he analyses gifts in archaic societies as symbolic exchanges to understand indigenous social life and social interactions. He explains that gifts have an instrumental value due to their instrumental purpose to strengthen bonds and relationships. This notion of value is related to the notion of capital gained through gift-giving. On this note, Bourdieu (1992) emphasises the equality in honour achieved once a gift is reciprocated. When giving a gift, the giver challenges the receiver to return it, and if the receiver acknowledges the gift, the bonds are maintained. The receiver is then in a situation where he must prove he can make a riposte and return the honour in order to not lose face within the community, maintain alliances and gain social capital. Besides, Osteen (2002) contributes to anthropological studies by questioning the role of non commercial gift exchange in creating communities. Osteen also questions the link between gifts and commodities and whether free gifts are possible. According to him, Mauss' classical stance of gift theory underestimates the



altruistic and spontaneous act of giving and reciprocating. He contradicts Mauss' view and criticises the overemphasis on economic rationality character of the gift.

Mauss describes the practices of archaic societies as a "system of total services" (1954: 77), which is a reference to the idea that gifts come with the obligation to reciprocate. In these societies, the refusal to accept a gift or to give back is synonymous with declaring war. In the situation where the gift is not accepted, the receiver has proved his unwillingness to enter into a relationship. As Mauss claims, "a gift is received with a burden attached" (1954:41) which suggests that once a gift is given, the receiver is being challenged to reciprocate at some point in the future. Mauss argues that in many tribal and native cultures, gifts are given with the expectation of something ultimately being given in return. For instance, when analysing the Maori community, Mauss noted, "They had a kind of exchange system, or rather one of giving presents that must ultimately either be reciprocated or given back" (1954:10). A spiritual power is associated with all personal possessions that Mauss calls *hau*. The logic behind the *hau* is that a soul is attached to the possessions which means that giving something is equivalent to making a present of oneself. The substance and symbol associated with the gift represent the giver's spiritual essence, which triggers the receiver to return the gift because of the *hau*. Godelier claims "[Mauss] believed he had found ["the key to the enigma" of why the gift was returned] in the concept of *hau*, the spirit of things" (Godelier 1999: 151), so accepting a gift thus signifies accepting the spiritual essence of the giver's soul. The symbol that is conveyed comes from the giver and not from the commodity itself. The gift takes over the commoditised object by adding the giver's personal touch, which gives the object a unique dimension. Such a phenomenon (*hau*) contributes to a general theory of obligation; in Maori law, the bond through things is a bond of souls. In Mauss' theoretical analysis of the gift-giving mechanism, he came to the conclusion that gift-giving is a self-perpetuating system of reciprocity and identifies a threefold obligation process: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate. Mauss further elaborates and explains that a society is a "system of total services" (1954: 77) since individuals do things for each other interdependently. Gifts are therefore part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and receiver are engaged.

In the archaic tribes that Mauss (1954) explored, he identified rivalry and hostility during the *potlatch* exchanges. The *potlatch* refers to the display of wealth by the tribes. The

exchange needs to be a gift followed by a counter-gift. The principle of reciprocity is the fundamental rule underlying the ceremony. Mauss describes both the *moka* and the *potlatch* as “systems of total services”. Generosity is not the motive that characterises these types of exchanges, but rather the desire for honour and prestige, or *mana* (the source of wealth), Mauss (1954) qualifies these exchanges as total agonistic services that must be reciprocated if one does not want to lose *mana*. The *potlatch* comes from the Tsinuk, and is a reference to ‘feeding’, ‘consuming’. The tribes express their power through gift-giving to show all they possess. During the *potlatch*, rivalry is palpable because the tribes give generously in order to put themselves in a superior position. A hierarchy is formed according to the types of offerings made by the tribes, which triggers the giver’s desire to dominate through gift-giving. The *potlatch* thus defines the individual’s place within society by an accumulation of property that symbolises wealth during the ceremony.

An illustrative example of the concept of gift economy is the *moka*, which is a highly ritualised system of exchange observed in Papua New Guinea. Gregory (1982) suggests that this reciprocal system of gift-giving can be associated with profit seeking; *moka* results in earning prestige and maintaining social relations with other tribes through pigs and sea shells, used as source of value. *Moka* emphasises the competitive spirit between tribes to earn honour: the system suggests that the giver must give a larger gift than the one he received, to put the receiver tribe in debt. In the *moka*, one returns his debt by giving back extra in order to gain in prestige and thus put the receiver in an indebted position (the chief’s status is identified by giving more pigs or rare sea shells). Social ties and transactions are therefore maintained, and the reputation of the giver can increase. The *moka* offers the possibility of emplacing the chief as a *Big Man* when giving more than received. In the case where the debt is not returned, reputation is tarnished and the place of *Rubbish Man* is attributed (Gregory, 1982). The receivers strive to return their debts and to be placed as donors in order to enjoy the benefits of having a higher social status. The consequences of being placed as a *Big Man* enables the individual to build a wider network and gain preference when exchanging gifts since the repayment as a *Big Man* will carry extra influence. This gifting gesture within the framework of *moka*, which generates competition between the *Big Men* who wish to give the biggest gift to each other, allows them to excel in society and maintain both reputation and social ties. Both

*moka* and *potlatch* characterise gift cultures and embody the concepts of reciprocity, authority and wealth that aim to avoid conflict within society.

The requirement to give is thus ingrained within societies in order to maintain a status hierarchy and to establish or maintain peaceful relations. Gift-giving is rooted in the social fabric of societies in order to avoid tensions. In archaic societies, the obligation to make gifts often reflected power relations within a hierarchical society. Amongst the Maori, Mauss (1954) claimed that once the debt obligation had been honoured, the situation is reversed, and the former creditor is now the indebted. Both giver and receiver aim for a balanced relationship through their exchanges, to which end an ongoing transaction is therefore maintained due to the desire to give back in order to establish a symmetrical exchange and ensure social status. By sustaining a balanced relationship, both giver and receiver strengthen their partnership over time. As previously mentioned, Sherry (1983) depicted the motivations for gift-giving as both altruistic and agonistic, with the intention to provide happiness to the receiver and with agonistic intentions to display power and gain prestige. These motives are intended to maximise both parties' satisfaction (giver and receiver). The profits gained by both giver and receiver suggest a two-way exchange rather than one way, in which benefits are accumulated. The objective is, ideally, to achieve a 'balanced reciprocity' which refers to the symmetry between giver and receiver being complete once gifts are returned (Sahlins, 1972; Roberts, 1990) in order to maintain bonds (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986), maximise benefits and accumulate social capital.

Mauss argues that within archaic societies, the exchange of goods was not between individuals but rather collectives. People exchanged services during festivals and fairs, though not on a system based on economical transactions but rather a contract-based system. Gifts are thus obligatory in order to ensure the absence of hostility between groups and to maintain peace (Sahlins, 1972). However, a 'balanced reciprocity' is complex because symmetrical transactions between giver and receiver are hardly possible (Sahlins, 1972; Sherry, 1983; Roberts, 1990). Consequently, feelings of being morally obliged to return a gift, combined with non-altruistic motives, characterise reciprocal giving. There is an inner calculus of the respective participants' positions on the 'debt balance' (Schwartz, 1996). Not only does giving a gift induce feelings of mutual support, it can also induce indebtedness (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss 1954). This is the reason why

the giver and receiver must perform the same actions in reverse, in order to sustain the exchange partnership over time. Unbalanced relationships between individuals may lead to feelings of indebtedness, discomfort and oppression (Marcoux, 2009). This imbalance conveys potential weaknesses that constitute a threat to the long-term sustainability of relationships. Lévi-Strauss notes that:

Vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion; and the skilful game of exchange consists of a complex totality of manoeuvres, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one's self against risks incurred through alliances and rivalry. (Lévi-Strauss, 1996: 19)

This amply illustrates the complexity of the exchange based on unpredictable and insecure interactions with other individuals. Many scholars have explored how such feelings of obligation could occur in the gifting economy. This has been explained by Sherry *et al.* (1993), who found that when people decide not to reciprocate a gift, this can cause harm to the relevant relationship. It suggests that gift-giving can damage relationships and result in negative effects on givers and receivers. Shama and Thompson (1989) emphasised that receiving a gift makes the receiver socially indebted to the giver. They also suggested those receiving remain in debt until they give something back.

The notion of imbalanced relationship is further addressed in the next section, which develops the notion of reciprocity and highlights the 'darkside' of the gift economy (Marcoux, 2009). Past research that indicates the limits of an unpaid economy within social groups is introduced. The following section uncovers the gift practice in the post-modern capitalist society, and its limitations and consequences for individuals.

#### b) Gift-giving practice: An economy of debts?

The study conducted by Marcoux (2009) offers a glimpse into the gift economy and the notion of obligation. Marcoux (2009) provides a critique of the gift economy and underlines the feelings of indebtedness felt by individuals. This ethnographic study of house moving draws on the experiences and feelings of individuals' gifting practices

within their social network. The participants point out key terms such as “services” and “favours” to express the social expectations and consequences created by the gift economy. Marcoux highlights in his study that informants want to escape to the market. The conclusion that the scholar draws is that the participants formulate the desire to escape from the gift economy and prefer to participate in a contract-based system, which frees them from the associated social obligations. Marcoux (2009) points out that social indebtedness is created by friends, family members and relatives in the community. The participants narrated their experiences and real-life stories which enabled Marcoux to come to the conclusion that the social indebtedness, inherent in the gift-giving practice, can produce negative feelings. The research shows that a supposedly altruistic act of giving can actually create embarrassment between people. His study challenges the conceptual frame of the gift economy previously addressed by a number of other scholars (Sahlins, 1972; Marcoux, 2009). He claims that the indebtedness and the ideological hierarchy created by the gift economy cannot be disregarded. In summary, this study correlates with the work of Marx (1978) and Godbout (1998) who have, in earlier studies, emphasised that the market was freeing men from tyrannical community obligation. Godbout (1998) suggested that contract-based exchanges are the key to freeing individuals from community obligations. In line with Marx’s thoughts, the market economy has its benefits; Marx (1978) points out that this economy is a way to ensure freedom in market relations. A contract-based system leads to fairly balanced social exchanges and also avoids any asymmetrical relationship.

Forms of exchanges, represented as instrumental in capitalist societies, oppose the non-instrumental gift transactions that have their roots in archaic societies (Mauss, 1954; Sahlins, 1972). Anthropologists such as Mauss (1954), Sahlins (1972) and Malinowski (1922) have explored these archaic cultures and explained how non-market transfers between individuals strengthen social relationships between givers and receivers. By contrast, capitalistic market-based transactions lead to a system that gives more value to the object being exchanged than the quality of the relationship between givers and receivers. Participants in market or commodity exchange may be driven by self-interest with regards to quantifiable commodities, with no need for extended relations after the transaction is made. As Sassatelli suggests,

Gift-giving is an important social phenomenon in contemporary societies: commodities are explicitly reframed as ‘gifts’ or ‘presents’ in specific, spatially and temporally bounded occasions. (2007:145)

This statement confirms the ambiguity that exists between the gift-giving phenomenon and the stagnant market values of our contemporary societies. Mauss depicts the gift-giving practice as the representation of an ideal logic for which alliance, mutuality and reciprocity are the main characteristics. As such, gift exchange enables givers and receivers to be altruistic, showing their willingness to invest in social relationships (Camerer, 1988). In gift-based exchanges, the items being exchanged embody membership and belonging to a social group, which leads to the construction of social capital in a given community. The bonds are non-economic, which promotes non-monetized transactions between participants. Its logic undoubtedly opposes that of commodity exchange which refers to a calculated and regulated logic. Gregory suggests that “what distinguishes commodity from gift exchange is the conceptualisation of kinship as a method of consumption” (1982: 212). The concepts of gift-giving and reciprocity depict voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous social exchanges that are present among community members. The gift economy highlights the importance of exchange for sociability, and emphasises the bonds of trust that are being created (Sahlins 1972). The concept of gift-giving has therefore been used as a theoretical framework to analyse social behaviour. The study case by Titmuss (1970) reflects this through the blood donation systems, which theorises about the gift relationship and contributes to the understanding of social exchange. It reflects a system of informal help networks which distances itself from the market transactions. Nevertheless, gift-giving leads to social debt with the associated moral obligation to return the giving. Gift exchange is different from commodity exchange because gifts are personal, non-quantifiable and inalienable (Gregory, 1982). Caillé (2005) sustains that the gift is a hybridation between freedom and obligation, utility and symbolism. He argues that the gift is a ‘moral act’, shaped by both self-interest and sympathy motives. The obligation to give is a paradoxical obligation to be free and to oblige others to be free too. He claims:

If self-interest were not mixed with interest toward others (and reciprocally) gift would become either a buying act or a sacrifice. And if obligation were not mixed

with freedom (and reciprocally) it would become a purely formal and empty ritual or collapse into non sense. (2005:5)

Marx's (1867) materialist stance offers a useful framework by which to understand the capitalist narratives based on the fetishism of commodities. The reasoning behind this concept suggests that human labour power and the values it produces must be objectified in the commodity form. Marx (1867) provides a critique of capitalist society in which economic concepts and models of self-interest, profit and calculation are presented. It is a vision of utility maximisation that tends to treat individuals as a means rather than ends. Social relations are dependent on self-interest motives and the potential profit being made. Within this view, economic exchange characterises the *Homo oeconomicus* who look for a rational way of life and aspire to fulfil individual happiness, a realisation of self-interest for individuals (Bourdieu, 2000). To better understand social exchange models, it is essential to comprehend the type of behaviour being adopted by individuals. Both *Homo oeconomicus* and *Homo sociologicus* are essential to make sense of the social system (Weale, 1992). By contrast, *Homo sociologicus* is presented as being generated by society to create and maintain social balance and caring for social norms. Besides, Bourdieu (2000) provides a critical analysis of the *Homo oeconomicus* in social sciences; according to him, this paradigm is overestimated and exaggerates the features of the rational man. It is a paradigm that emphasises a disconnection from human life, a social outcast and a 'rational idiot' self-centred. Marx (1867) presents commodity fetishism as the domination of human beings through the domination by things. He addresses the way the consumerist, individualistic and hierarchically stratified society calculates the value of any commodities produced. Capitalist society is thus dominated by commodity production and exchange in which individuals are enslaved by commodity production. This results in a social life that is dominated by the exchange of goods in a market where power and value is attributed to the goods themselves and not the human beings. Marx's vision explains that individuals are being commodified since they sell their own labour.

Appadurai (1986) provides a critical analysis of what social anthropologists describe as gift-exchange, and refers to commodity-exchange that is associated with self-interested calculation rather than simply an act of generosity. Appadurai suggests that

[...] the exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity in anthropological writing has many sources. One of them is [...] the tendency to romanticize small-scale societies [and] the proclivity to marginalize and underplay the calculative, impersonal, and self-aggrandizing features of non-capitalist societies. (1986: 11)

According to Appadurai, gift-exchange is similar to market exchange, since both rely on rational, self-interested premises. On this note, Bourdieu (2000) presents an economic vision of the gift, based on economic self-interests. Gregory (1982) criticises such claims and supports the idea that the giver is not motivated by profit maximisation. The principle of the gift economy preserves the debt in order to guarantee the reproduction of the social bonds, while the market economy favours the liquidation of debt. The purpose of the gift is to ensure the creation and maintenance of social relationships, opposing the purpose of the commodity exchange which refers to the acquisition of objects, and not social relations. Gregory claims:

The gift transactor's motivation is precisely the opposite to the capitalist's: whereas the latter maximises net incomings, the former maximises net outgoings. The aim of the capitalist is to accumulate profit while the aim of the 'big-man' gift transactor is to acquire a large following of people (gift-debtors) who are obligated to him. (1982:51)

The notion of commodified labour can be linked to the *potlatch*, which is an illustrative example of abundant commodity being given and received to save face within society (as it is the commodity that defines the individual's place within that society). The labour power of the giver is therefore being objectified with value towards other members participating in the *potlatch*. It is a system (ceremony of the *potlatch*) that presents an economic appreciation in which money is the social recognition of an individual. This reminds us of similar system processes, namely the *moka*, in which wealth and reputation is key to success and to excelling in society. Mauss' (1954) *Essay of the Gift* remains a work often used by scholars to explore and understand gift exchanges in contemporary research (Rheingold, 1993; Kollock, 1999; Roster 2006; Skågeby, 2010). Even though studies have expanded on gift exchanges, and the meaning of gifts and gifting relationships, there has been very little study on the practice of gifting in the virtual



environment. Romele and Severo (2016) define digital gift as a-economic, in order to distance the preconceived idea on the digital gift as a non-economic activity. They argue that gift and economic exchanges are compatible because they have different functions and belong to two separate universes. They claim that the gift economy is an improper expression that has been used and largely misunderstood. This can be explained by the fact that some scholars have associated gift exchange with the pre-modern economy that opposes the capitalist economy. Scholars assume therefore that within a capitalist consumer culture, Mauss' archaic gift exchange has evolved into contract- and market-based exchanges.

Previous research on the gift practice mainly focuses on the positive aspect of this practice and barely explores its 'dark side' (Marcoux, 2009). Nevertheless, researchers have uncovered and examined the concept of asymmetry in the gift-giving relations (Sahlins 1972), and the idea that a giver can exert power or oppress someone when giving a gift (Marcoux, 2009). The norms of balanced reciprocity have been idealised and romanticised in many studies, and hence there is a conceptual dead spot with no significance attributed to the gift-giving practice and its 'dark side' in the virtual communities in our contemporary consumer culture. This research aims to follow Marcoux's (2009) findings on the 'dark side' of the gift and to explore the gift-giving practice among virtual communities. In summary, the purpose of this research is to introduce the gift-giving practice in the digital environment so as to provide a unique and critical contribution to current research, drawing on the works of scholars such as Mauss (1954), Bourdieu (1986) and Marcoux (2009).

In conclusion, gift exchanges possess several functions. As Mauss (1954) emphasises, the gift-giving practice creates bonds amongst individuals, maintain social ties and reflect social status. Nevertheless, the gift economy can create feelings of social obligation and indebtedness (Marcoux, 2009). There is a need to further explore this practice in contemporary digital communities that may consolidate or challenge past theories and findings on gift-giving.

It is essential to fully understand both commodity and gift economy in order to fully understand social exchange processes, motives and outcomes on individuals. This understanding enables me to better comprehend social exchanges, how they function and

to critically assess the gift economy in the digital context. The economy presented in the digital sphere needs to be analysed to identify the potential conjunction of both market and communal exchange. The following part of the literature review discusses why digital social media is an interesting setting to explore as well as a key context to contribute to the field of social relationships and social capital.

## 2) Gift exchange and digital media

Although the primitive communities explored by Mauss (1954) did not rely on advanced communication and technologies, the description of exchange practices in archaic societies can be used to understand online network exchanges. Human interaction within online communities needs to be further explored in order to make sense of the social exchange practices between individuals on Instagram. In light of Mauss' view, this research analyses the practice of exchange in digital media. Posting content in the digital sphere can be conceptualised as a gift shared in the digital environment, in which the exchange is continuous and reciprocated. Mauss' work can therefore be used to understand the gift-giving relationship and behavioural concepts in an online context.

The first part discusses digital exchange practices and outcomes, using past research conducted on online communities to draw a parallel between the archaic societies and the digital sphere. This part reveals a body of literature which covers how participating in online communities provides an array of social benefits such as maintaining social bonds (weak and strong), increasing social recognition, providing social validation, and boosting social capital. The second part uncovers the idea within past research that depicts a 'dark side' (Marcoux, 2009) to the use of social media communities that results in the creation of stress and anxiety for users of these media. Researchers have illustrated how digital exchanges can negatively impact media users' social spheres and well-being.

Since past research reveals both positive and negative correlations with the use of social media, this research aims to provide a deeper analysis of digital interaction exchanges to reveal the social fabric of the digital communities. Within the gift economy, there is a propensity to give, compelled by a moral obligation to return a gift. Mauss' notion of reciprocity is applicable to the digital community, in which media users share content, post, comments and exchange personal information. The best way to assess the scope of

social interactions in online communities is to acknowledge the meaning of media users' posts, and their motives in participating in social exchange within the digital sphere. Mauss' theoretical framework allows to understand how gifts are conceived as socially meaningful acts and to explore the social mechanisms involved in gift-giving practices on Instagram.

The evolution of new forms of communication allow time and space constraints to be overcome and provide a new basis for community and identity. This environment permits a collections of social media affordances (socialising, storytelling, networking and knowledge sharing) in which individuals communicate visually (Lobinger, 2016). The early virtual communities had the reputation of being helpful and active (Rheingold, 1993). These communities acted as social support and contributed to social interactions between individuals. A link between community and social capital online has been made to explore the gain of status that can be achieved through exposure on social networking platforms. This research emphasises the concept of value in networks by exploring the connectedness between media users and the notion of social capital. The value of the exchanges corresponds to the ties that increase information flows and produce cohesive power. The notion of value within the communities can be translated as the members obtain a sense of efficacy (strong belief of their valuable input) and gain in social recognition (Kollock, 1999). Following Granovetter's (1983) distinction between strong ties (empathic support) and weak ties (access to new opportunities and ideas), the concepts of community and value are used to understand the nature of Instagram on relationship maintenance and the scope of individuals' social interactions. The aim is to question whether Instagram community members with high levels of social capital are likely to have higher quality, and well established norms of mutuality. Following Lampel and Bhalla's (2007) idea that communities enabled media users to promote their status and legitimise their identity, this research relies on notions of community and value to understand how reciprocity occurs and how individuals create bonds and connectedness in the digital sphere.

a) [The social good of social media](#)

The creation of internet and online social networks has enabled media users to create and spontaneously produce any media content. According to Ellison and Boyd,

A social networking site (SNS) is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user generated content provided by their connections on the site. (2013: 157)

A network can be defined as a web of interconnected personal relationships through which individuals can connect with each other. These online social networks enable content communities to gather content and share images, pictures, videos, posts, etc., with other members (Beck, 2009). Besides, online communities can be defined as “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, and information, a sense of belonging and social identity” (Wellman, 2001: 228). The Instagram platform is a media-based social network, launched in 2010, that enables its users to become involved socially by both creating and sharing content (pictures, videos, comments). The platform has over 500 million active users daily (Instagram, 2018) who register a login and control who they share their content with. Within the community, any content shared is usually for the benefit of other members with similar interests and values (Beck, 2009). Online social network sites such as Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook allow individuals to know about the people they follow and engage with, which provides a relevant context to explore digital posting practices and digital exchange practices.

Unlike Twitter and Facebook, Instagram adopts the “image first, text second” rule which addresses a visual-oriented culture in which users have access to editing features. Instagram provides the functions for its users to easily share information within their social networks; for instance, users are able to add captions and hashtags when creating their posts. They can also double-tap content with the ‘like’ button which triggers the users to reciprocate and exchange within their own networks. According to a survey conducted by Pew Research in 2018, some 71 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds use Instagram on a daily basis (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Due to the popularity of online communities where people share common interests and stories with each other, online exchanges have

become part of people's lifestyles. While Instagram has received increased attention from researchers and social scientists, little is known about the mechanisms that lead users to participate, share, 'like' and reciprocate content within the digital community.

Tremaye (2010) highlights the characteristics of online media which represent a threat to mainstream media. Tremaye (2010) emphasises, in particular, that content is cheap to produce on the former. The online environment favours media users both becoming involved socially and fostering social relationships by reciprocating with online posts. In this context of participatory culture, Jenkins (2006: 290) emphasises how users are invited to actively participate in the circulation of media content. He explains that this culture is led by three forces. First, the new technologies enable the creation of content, then the "do-it-yourself" production, and finally economic trends also encourage the flow of images (Jenkins, 2006: 135). In this environment, media users have the resources to participate and exchange with each other. The online social network of Instagram mirrors a system which favours "visual conversations" with a high frequency of interactions between users (Katz and Crocker, 2015). Social networking is based on an online structure that allows people to both express their individuality and meet people with similar interests.

In order to understand the gifting practice online, it is important to consider the stages of gift-giving (Sherry, 1983) and when/ how social capital is accumulated and employed. Instagram is a sharing platform where online actions (sharing, posting, commenting) can be related to the three stages of 'gestation', 'prestation' and 'reformulation'. The three-stage model was suggested by Sherry (1983) in order to illustrate the gift-giving transaction in which the gift giver and recipients' relationship progresses. This model might also be applicable in the online sphere, which I consider in order to explore the reversal of exchanges roles and understand the process of reciprocity. Sherry (1983) defines the three-stage process as a model incorporating a transfer of goods and involving the flow of social affection. The gestation stage refers to the conceptual idea of choosing an appropriate gift to strengthen the social bond. The stage at which the gift is exchanged is that of the prestation period. The last stage refers to the repositioning of the relationship (either weakening or strengthening it); that is to say, how the course of future exchanges will be affected. The gift can result in the formation of a strengthened bond, or a weakened relationship that can lead to rejection. The first stage of the model, illustrated

by Sherry (1983), can reflect the mental process of posting an image, or replying via a comment or a 'like'. Posting, commenting, sharing, replying or 'liking' are then reflected in the second stage of the model, with these actions representing the gift exchange itself and the attendant dynamics. Then, the social outcomes from the online interactions of the media users define the state of the relationship, either strengthened or weakened.

The online sphere consists of a network of individuals in which communication can take place as it allows the flow and exchange of information. Internet access via mobile devices has been a considerable influence in causing users to use phones more often and to create a bond between individuals and their mobile devices. For instance, Lobinger (2016) refers to photo-sharing practices, identifying online interactions as 'networked photography' through which users capture a moment and share it with their community online. Mobile and social media applications are included in the daily routine of a communicative act for individuals in today's 21st century (Napoli, 2011; Lobinger, 2016). Media users are thus able to participate, share and interact back and forth with each other on social platforms. The concept of reciprocal social exchanges conceptualises the creation of large social groups. Ties and bonds are developed between individuals of a social group and are considerably improved by the digital platform affordances. Formulated by Gibson (1977), the theory of affordances can be used to understand how technology causes or shapes social actions. Gibson (1977) presents technologies as "action possibilities" that are realised depending on the abilities of the individuals in a given environment or platform. In the case of Instagram, affordances refer to the platform features and how individuals choose to use them in order to ease social exchange. According to Murray (2012), digital design shapes interaction, providing new formats and genre conventions. Instagram therefore offers new opportunities for symbolic expression and content creation with food images, where the respondents have expectations and value judgments with particular digital actions. Affordances enable us to explore the ways in which technology affords sociality.

Research into online communities within the social sciences has been conducted since the early development of the Internet. Rheingold (1993) investigated online communities and their participatory aspects. In his research, he depicts rather utopic ideals attached to the Internet and suggested that media users aspire to earn social validation (the thoughtful effort of shaping perception aimed at producing a ratifying response) and peer recognition

(the act of being recognised by others) through their posts (Rheingold, 1993). The exchange practices in the online communities aimed to create a continuous network of relations that consequently produce social capital. He finds that media users were motivated to post content in order to obtain a virtual reward. Rheingold explains how users were able to accumulate social capital and earn recognition from their gift. Again considering primitive societies, Mauss highlights the fact that the act of giving and receiving reflects one's social prestige/status. Prestige is, therefore, based on the quality/price of the gifts. This notion of the 'prestige gift' in digital media can be analysed by exploring the nature of the users' contributions. For example, Rheingold (1993) and Kollock (1999), who have studied the motivations of online gift-giving, point out that reputation is an important resource for attaining greater prestige. Social capital is connected with "group membership and social networks" (Bourdieu, 1986:2) and on the individuals' motives for interacting within the community. For instance, Kollock (1999) identifies several motives (reputation, prestige, self-image) that encourage participation in online community and therefore boost social capital (Rheingold, 1993; Kollock 1999). According to several scholars (Rheingold, 1993; Kollock, 1999; Lampel and Bhalla, 2007), social capital, social prestige and recognition can be augmented within social communities where media users are able to promote their status and legitimise their identity (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007). Pioneer work conducted on virtual community reveals how social interactions provide status, which is then used to boost one's social capital.

Gift givers build their reputation through *moka* or *potlatch* and increase their social capital when exchanging gifts (Mauss, 1954). It is important to further discuss the different types of ties which enable individuals to gain social capital. Granovetter's (1973) concept of strong and weak tie examines how strong and weak social relationships contribute to building social capital. Network researchers have distinguished between strong ties (family and friends) and weak ties (such as acquaintances) (Granovetter, 1973). Networked social capital facilitates the exchange of social resources between individuals thanks to strong and weak ties. A high level of social capital recognises access to supportive resources from strong and weak ties within social networks. This concept is relevant for the digital platform of Instagram, where users create networks made of strong and weak ties, which results in the building and maintenance of relationships. There are a series of criteria that can be used to distinguish strong and weak ties: the duration of a

relationship (length of relationship and time spent together), emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services (Granovetter, 1973). These criteria are essential to understand which types of ties contribute to building social capital within digital networks. Strong ties entail a high level of trust, while weak ties are valuable when individuals are seeking diverse or unique information from someone outside their regular contacts. For instance, Thoits (2011) argues that support from strong ties is positively linked with well being and self-worth. Bryant and Marmo (2012) explain how social networking sites encourage relational maintenance by their users by allowing people to reconnect (lost connection) and strengthening weak social ties.

Social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc., facilitate connections of weak ties and strong ties, giving a channel for social support. For instance, Ellison *et al.* (2010) discuss the social capital implications of Facebook which eases communication practices and online friendships. A growing body of literature has shown that using social media is positively correlated to social interaction and network building, producing social capital (Ellison *et al.* 2007). Studies show that social media platform use correlates with social tie maintenance, social enhancement, social support and interpersonal connectivity as positive outcomes (Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Seidman, 2013; Mäntymäki and Islam, 2016). For instance, Ellison's study (2007) emphasises that Facebook affordances enable media users to easily maintain social capital by crystallising relationships that could otherwise have been ephemeral. Hence, the use of social media allows users to maintain their social capital through ties and bonds. Recent studies discuss how the use of social networking sites increases the size of social networks and generates social capital (Hampton and Wellman, 2001; Wellman, *et al.* 2001; Kraut *et al.* 2002; Donath and Boyd, 2004; Valkenburg and Peter, 2007; Valenzuela *et al.* 2009; Hampton and Ling, 2013).

The body of literature on online social exchanges and communication has to date focussed on the use of Facebook and its benefits for its users. The increase in interpersonal relationships, social interactions and social validation is positively associated with the use of social media. For instance, Valenzuela *et al.* (2009) found that Facebook provided happiness to its users by boosting social trust and engagement, while research by Hampton *et al.* (2011) showed that interpersonal communication is positively related to the diversity and size of the network. Online communities permit the support



of interrelations among individuals by offering different ways of communication such as commenting, tagging, posting and 'liking' with a wide and diverse network available to them. Furthermore, researchers have found that the 'like' button, records appreciation, shows support and social validation with feedback (Tong and Walther, 2011; Lee and Lee, 2017). It is therefore by clicking the 'like' button, by creating a post or a comment on a friend's photo that media users are able to experience a sense of belonging to the community. 'Likes' and comments are used to express affection on a different level which further enables individuals to express their willingness to commit to a relationship by expressing a form of acknowledgement towards other users (Donath, 2008). This is substantiated by Mansson and Myers (2011), who argue that posting and tagging a friend can show affection through Facebook. These research efforts explain how social media affordances enable its users to express and maintain relational maintenance.

Studies confirm a positive link between social media and social well-being (Tobin *et al.* 2014; Burke *et al.* 2010). When media users post, message, or 'like', their feelings of bonding and social capital improve, while their sense of loneliness decreases. Tobin *et al.* (2014) conducted a study separating two different groups of individuals. The first group was able to receive 'likes' and comments while the second was not able to. The results of this study suggest that the more 'likes' and comments a person obtains, the better he/she feels about himself/herself. The second group who did not receive any comments felt bad about themselves. The first group scored higher than the second group for all the following categories: sense of inclusion, belonging, self-esteem, control sense of meaningful existence and perceived interest. When individuals post and share content, it can be associated with feelings of pride, accomplishment, and recognition. These forms of gratification provide users with a positive experience stemming from these online interactions. It is noticeable that online social exchanges provide users with personal gratification comparable to a social currency that can be accumulated and helps users to feel good and maintain their relationships. Monetary rewards are disregarded in favour of a feeling of being recognised by a social group and maintaining social communication (Tamir and Mitchel, 2012). 'Liking' back and reciprocating interactions of social media provide the opportunity to connect with a large social network, thereby satisfying the need for belonging and affiliation (Cheikh-Ammar and Barki, 2014; Lee and Lee, 2017). Supporting this idea, Hars and Ou (2002) reported a positive linkage between peer recognition and the giver's contribution within virtual communities. They identified the

extrinsic reward accumulated when individuals participate to virtual communities, which refers to the notion that users are motivated by a desire to gain a reward. Users perform and engage within communities in an activity so as to get something in return. Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, refers to performing an activity for its inherent satisfaction. It refers to a form of behaviour that is itself its own reward, based on a sense of personal satisfaction and pleasure (Lakhani and Wolf, 2005). Similar to the public ceremonies of the *potlatch* (or the *moka* practice) associated with gift-giving, media users have the competence to elevate themselves, especially when others recognise the value of the content through reciprocity. Events such as the *potlatch* are relevant ceremonies to use as references when studying the concept of reciprocity within online social exchanges. During these ceremonies, the maintenance of social relationships and alliances were dependent on the ability to be recognised socially by other tribe members.

Several research efforts have pointed out intrinsic and extrinsic incentive mechanisms in online communities to identify the reasons why individuals participate in these communities (Hars and Ou, 2002; Lakhani and Wolf, 2005). Oh and Syn (2015) provide a list of the motives for posting on social media. They include both extrinsic and intrinsic incentives: enjoyment, self-efficacy, learning, personal gain, altruism, empathy, community interest, social engagement, reputation and reciprocity. More specifically, Lee *et al.* (2015) developed a survey with the aim of uncovering the dimensions of motives for participating (sharing, 'liking', posting, commenting) on Instagram. Five motives were identified by the researchers, including both social and psychological motives: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism and peeking. The research, conducted on Korean Instagram users, highlights that social interaction is a strong factor for users who want to maintain social relationships with other people using this platform. The findings support the idea that the use of the platform enables its users to obtain social support, present themselves to others, pursue relaxation, avoid loneliness, escape reality and browse pictures related to their interests.

The existing literature has several gaps. Firstly, little is known about the applicability of these findings regarding the use of Instagram and social capital. Secondly, there is a considerable absence of knowledge on whether the social image-based networking sites such as Instagram resemble the system of exchanges of the archaic tribes explored by Mauss (1954). Research must therefore contribute and add knowledge on the use of

Instagram, the notion of reciprocal exchanges and the gain of social capital regarding strong and weak social ties. It is essential to explore the motives behind the users' participation in order to further conceptualise the theory of gift-giving in the digital community. Past research has focussed on the motives associated with participating to digital communities; however, no research has explored the reasons that trigger users to maintain digital interactions and identify the mechanism of reciprocal exchanges with their community. Digital posting has received little empirical attention. An investigation into the use of the Instagram platform would provide a pioneer study to better understand digital practices (reciprocal acts of 'liking', posting, and commenting) and provide a critical analysis on the impact that the affordances of Instagram have on its users.

Applying Mauss' view to digital social exchanges and communities is relevant because gift exchange has been used as a lens through which to understand computer-mediated communication practices. Skågeby (2010) has indeed generalised the concept of reciprocity and expanded the knowledge on social bonding. He has explored the relationship between gifting and social networking technologies as part of a social phenomenon. Nevertheless, there has not been any extensive research into digital exchanges on the more recent Instagram platform. It is essential to identify if reciprocal exchanges are potentially led by feelings of moral obligation or indebtedness in order to provide a complete understanding of digital interactions and the digital social fabric.

#### b) An idealised vision of social media?

A romanticised vision of digital interactions boosting capital and social bonds has been highlighted by many studies discussed in the section above; nevertheless, past studies (the majority considering Facebook) have depicted a negative impact of the use of SNSs on interpersonal relationships and individuals' well-being (Campbell *et al.* 2002; Chou and Edge, 2002; Hars and Ou's work 2002; Valenzuela, 2009; Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Krasnova *et al.* 2013; Steers *et al.* 2014; Vogel *et al.* 2014; Tandoc *et al.* 2015; Mäntymäki and Islam, 2016; Clark *et al.* 2017). Several research efforts have indeed linked the use of social media to deviant and damaging effects, resulting in negative

outcomes on users' sociality and well-being. These past research efforts are discussed in the following section of the literature review.

When considering digital communities in which individuals exchange content, the question of how the digital environment has created new opportunities and new challenges can be raised. This research aims to provide the characteristics that determine how relationships and bonds are formed, maintained, or damaged via digital interactions. Social media has brought opportunities for individuals to communicate efficiently with mobile devices offering a "nomadic communication". This expression, as used by Creeber and Martin (2009:108), explains how sharing in online social networks is made easy: images are captured, and videos are uploaded to be instantly shared via social networks. Tong and Walther (2011) proposed that social networking sites' affordances facilitate social transactions thanks to low-cost interactions that enable users to perform relational maintenance within large networks. It is thus an era of independent users who take control over their media devices. Vollmer and Precourt (2008) illustrate this idea, and present the shifts in the media environment and its consequences in today's society. The authors suggest that people are constantly asking for more control over their media consumption and, consequently, they gradually become independent creators of their own environment.

Paradoxically, some studies discuss the increased dependence on media devices as being responsible for reducing social involvement and psychological well-being (Turkle, 2011; Anderson *et al.* 2012). Studies have revealed that the introduction of new communication technology has been centre of attention in the assessment as to whether social networking sites can negatively affect the quality of interpersonal relationships (Kraut *et al.* 1998; Nie *et al.* 2002). A body of literature has focused on the notion of social exchanges within the social networking site of Facebook, whereas research on newer platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat is still relatively sparse. This study thus explores whether Instagram digital exchanges boost social capital, and social relations but also questions the presence of indebtedness, responsibilities and moral obligation within digital postings. Social media's ability to provide prosperous social interactions and enjoyable experience for users' social circles remains unclear, but is a topic of considerable interest. As Mauss explains, archaic communities increase their social capital through social exchanges which spark moral obligations and social responsibilities to reciprocate. A

pertinent line of enquiry is, therefore, to explore whether digital exchange conveys feelings of obligation to reciprocate and feelings of indebtedness, similar to, respectively, Mauss' observation of archaic communities and Marcoux's analysis of social communities. The interest of this research is to identify whether digital interactions maintain social capital or negatively impact users' social sphere, creating social pressure and moral obligations.

Relative to Facebook and Twitter, there is a dearth of research on Instagram. Previous research focussing on the use of Facebook has outlined the negative outcomes on social interactions and bonds. Several past research efforts reveal a less appealing perception of social media sites as causing feelings of jealousy (Elphinston and Noller, 2011) and psychological stress (Chen and Lee, 2013). Besides, narcissism and self-esteem have received attention for investigation on social media sites (Mehdizadeh, 2010, Turkle, 2011; Fox and Rooney, 2015). The notion of self-esteem, defined by Coopersmith (1967) as an individual's positive or negative evaluation of the self has been the focal point of many researchers when exploring social media. Studies have reported that social media users with low self-esteem tend share pictures as self-promoting tools (the digital platforms are used by users to present themselves to others as accomplished, smart and skilled individuals) (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Furthermore, in contrast to Hars and Ou's work (2002), some studies have found negative relationships between the use of SNS and self-esteem, relationship suspicion and relationship uncertainty (Kalpidou *et al.* 2011; Fox and Warber, 2014; Stapleton *et al.* 2017). For instance, Mäntymäki and Islam (2016) point out negative influences associated with the use of social networking sites, and they discuss the idea that exhibitionism and voyeurism are negative gratifications related to the use of social media. Besides, Stapleton *et al.*'s (2017) findings support the idea of a correlation between low self-esteem and the use of SNS. The study suggests that intense use of Instagram influences the self-worth of users, depending on the approval from other users. Similarly, other research explores the associations of Instagram use with depressive symptoms and negative comparison (Lup *et al.* 2015). The authors highlight how Instagram can make users susceptible to negative consequences on their well-being.

It is essential to point out that researchers have debated whether the Internet is improving or damaging social relationships. Pioneer research on the use of the Internet and online relationships depicted a damaged sociality as resulting from various causes. For instance,

Kraut *et al.* (1998) conducted a study to explore how Internet use could impact social involvement; more specifically, the authors highlighted that the Internet was affecting individuals' social interactions by causing them to withdraw from their social circles. Kraut *et al.* (1998) described how Internet use had a negative impact on the maintenance of social connections. According to them, a decrease of psychological well-being and a withdrawal from physical relationships was associated with the use of the Internet. Furthermore, as the participants of their research initially used the Internet for communication, which generally has positive effects, Kraut *et al.* (1992) called this phenomenon the 'Internet Paradox'. This 'paradox' refers to the fact that they found a correlation between the use of Internet with loneliness, depression a reduction of social involvement and the consequent decrease in psychological well-being (Kraut *et al.* 2002). The scholars Nie and Erbring (2000) support previous theories about the impact of Internet use on society. They conducted a quantitative study to examine the time spent on the Internet and the impact on individuals' social lives. They found that individuals' loss of contact with their social circle was dependent on the time they used the internet (Nie and Erbring, 2000). Vitak (2008) substantiated these views with the finding that online relationships were much weaker and less supportive than offline ones (Mesch and Talmud, 2006; Vitak, 2008).

Communication researchers therefore argue that the development of online connections can negatively impact offline relationships (Kraut *et al.* 1998; Nie and Erbring, 2000). Increasingly, research has challenged the benefits of online social relationship maintenance and interactions, which are usually deemed to be at the expense of offline relationships. The experiment by the psychologist Kross *et al.* (2013) argued that Facebook tends to make people sad and lonely, opposing the research by Valenzuela *et al.* (2013) discussed earlier. The results of the study by Kross *et al.* (2013) challenge the beneficial use of Facebook for social connection and argues that its use weakens well-being and fails to fulfil the human need for social connection. Furthermore, Anderson *et al.* (2012) discuss the effects of Facebook on its users who can become addicted to the network, resulting in negative psychological consequences such as loneliness. The notion of loneliness is discussed by Turkle (2011) in her work, where she talks about the use of social media technologies. The author observed how individuals socialise on digital

networks and explained how these technologies may offer the illusion of companionship. She claims:

We are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face. We are offered robots and a whole world of machine-mediated relationships on networked devices. As we instant-message, e-mail, text, and Twitter, technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude (...). After an evening of avatar-to avatar talk in a networked game, we feel, at one moment, in possession of a full social life and, in the next, curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers. We build a following on Facebook or MySpace and wonder to what degree our followers are friends. We recreate ourselves as online personae and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. (2011:12)

While the use of SNSs may provide a sense of belonging, maintain relationships or boost social capital (Mäntymäki and Islam, 2016; Seidman, 2013), some research highlights how online technology tools give the illusion of being connected with a wide social network (Hampton *et al.* 2011) that provides social benefits; however, it can also convey a greater sense of loneliness (Kross *et al.* 2013). Does digital interaction promote a wider network and strengthen bonds, or does it enhance loneliness?

The research conducted by Clark *et al.* (2017) provides an interesting analysis on the use of social media, highlighting that social network sites can be beneficial when used to make meaningful social connections, however they can be harmful and increase feelings of isolation and social comparison for some individuals (Seabrook *et al.* 2016). The study supports a link between the use of Facebook and loneliness, when the users fulfil social needs by lurking and browsing through others people's profiles. This social snacking activity fails to contribute interpersonal connection, and thus provides an illusory social engagement that can lead people to feel lonely and isolated. Network sites can trigger upward social comparison (Vogel *et al.* 2014; Lup *et al.* 2015), envy and jealousy (Campbell *et al.* 2002; Chou and Edge, 2002; Stapleton *et al.* 2017). Social comparison is the basic human tendency to feel good or bad about ourselves based on how we compare to others (Festinger, 1950). Upward social comparisons induce negative feelings

as it occurs when an individual compares himself to a person he perceives as superior (Wheeler,1966). Certain profiles are at greater risk for social comparison than others, for instance, users who watch other's comments and posts without interacting with them (Clark *et al.* 2017). The users may feel their lives are lacking when they compare their lived experiences with others' self-presentations on social media (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

Some research has pointed out the importance of 'liking', posting and sharing within social networking sites in order to feel validated socially by other individuals. As previously mentioned, the study conducted by Tobin *et al.* (2014), which examined two different groups of users, revealed that the group obtaining the fewer 'likes' and comments was psychologically impacted by social invalidation. This idea was further substantiated by Lee *et al.* (2016) who found that enjoyment and interpersonal relationship are the main motives for users to 'like' their friends' pictures. Being compelled by social norms leads individuals to react and show support to the person who shares content (Lee *et al.* 2015). The 'like' button, therefore, helps to maintain relationships and fortifies closeness (Tong and Walther, 2011). Lambert (2013) discusses Mauss' anthropological work and draws a parallel between his findings with Mauss' notion of reciprocity. He links Mauss' idea that gifts are rarely given without the expectation of reciprocity with the participants of his research who, once they receive 'likes' from other users, are more likely to "like back" what others have posted in return (2013:65). Lambert (2013) therefore explained how gift debts can be moved to the online environment, which functions on the same grounds: the gift holds the spiritual power of the giver, which encourages the receiver to return the gift and thus create social bonds. He concludes by claiming that his participants "perpetuate reciprocal obligations of identification" (2013:65). The researcher observed a pattern of reciprocal exchanges when media users received a comment, a 'like' or a 'tag' from their friends, which made them compelled to return the gesture.

In the same vein, Colvin (2009) supported the idea that the power of reciprocity exists within online social interactions. She made the attempt to understand whether the dynamics of reciprocity on the Twitter platform were useful for business opportunities. She identified the five steps that should be followed in order to have a successful Twitter account and generate social capital from a business perspective: follow, reply, retweet,



share, repeat. Furthermore, Colvin (2009) emphasised the importance of giving if one wants to receive and gain in social capital. Although this research addresses the 'social for business' aspect of Twitter for individuals who use the platform as a promotional tool, it raises interesting questions and ideas as to how reciprocity works on social media. Colvin (2009) depicts a system based on strategies and calculation to achieve social capital, and therefore personal gain.

Little peer-reviewed academic research has been undertaken to examine the mechanisms and motives that make users feel the pull to reciprocate ('liking' or commenting behaviours). Indeed, the specific motives of reciprocity via sharing, commenting and 'liking' still need to be investigated on the Instagram platform. This idea leads to one questioning the nature of social exchanges on Instagram, comparing simple acts of generosity to obligated and self-interested acts. Mauss (1954) noted that, in archaic societies, social relationships rely on the action to give and to reciprocate gift-giving. The acceptance of receiving a gift shapes people's identity and consequently creates trust between individuals. By contrast, capitalist societies are represented by give-to-give contract exchanges; as a result, it seems relevant to explore digital posting and digital interactions, in order to understand whether the indebtedness, moral obligation and social responsibilities exist within the digital sphere of social exchanges. The aim is to explore the Instagram digital community and understand the nature of the system of exchange: does it operate through acts of generosity or acts of calculation, that is, self-interested contract-based motives?

Past research has identified the notion of reciprocity within social media, and established a link between social media use with various negative effects without actually focussing on the notion of indebtedness within digital communities. Past researchers have conducted numerous studies in the attempt to identify the impact of the use of SNSs on media users (whether for positive or negative correlation). However, these research neither focus on the system of reciprocal exchanges nor on the incentives that trigger users to post, 'like' or reciprocate. It is essential to distinguish whether users are driven by altruistic motives or led by self-interested premises (calculative) in order to conceptualise Mauss' framework of gift exchanges in the digital sphere.

The visual aspect of Instagram provides new ways to interact as compared to other SNSs. Instagram users are indeed able to use pictures to express themselves, their lifestyles and tastes (Lee *et al.* 2015). It is deemed to be necessary to focus on the self-presentation medium in order to 1) uncover the mechanism of social interactions, 2) identify the potential social rewards or loss when participating in a community, and 3) assess the incentives that motivate users to reciprocate. This research uses food-related pictures to explore the value of the gifts, and to understand better whether a virtual *hau* can be conceptualised to theorise the concept of digital reciprocity. The last section of the literature review discusses the cultural symbols and meanings associated with food and exposes how food provides the means to analyse reciprocal exchanges within digital communities. This research provides the best tools to answer a relevant set of questions by exploring digital gestures through food. Within this context, this research represents a pioneer study that will attempt to contribute to social science research and provide a better understanding of users' incentives to participate in the digital community and to critically assess the extent to which social networking sites facilitate social transactions and relationship maintenance. Based on Mauss' theoretical framework of the gift, this research therefore examines how digital interactions can make or break relationships within society.

### 3) [Digital posts: cultural and identity components](#)

The exploration of food provides knowledge on the social and cultural aspect of the individuals' exchange. This empirical focus is further detailed in the following section of the literature review. This section reviews existing literature on food media (offline and online) in order to explain how food is able to provide a thorough exploration of the concepts that embrace the gift-theory such as social validation (prestige) and identity. Indeed, the aim is to develop a clear understanding of the meaning of digital interactions and the mechanism of exchange via the exploration of Instagram food-posts.

The digital food-related content offers socio-cultural dimensions that represent meaningful patterns to explore in order to understand all aspects of social behaviour. Food has been used by past researchers to explore and understand social patterns. This research addresses how the media users build their identity and display it through a set of narratives embedded through food. The media users engage in the work of producing their identity and a sense of self in their digital platform. For example, according to Jang *et al.* (2015), post topics that result in interactions and enthusiasm translated by ‘likes’ are posts that reflect social media users’ interests and preferences. For instance, a recent study on Snapchat reveals a list of the main categories of pictures being sent, in which food appears amongst other categories such as animals, declarations of love, selfies or friends (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016). Food is therefore used by media users to express and share personal preferences. Research indicates that posting pictures and receiving feedback is linked to maintaining social relationship and social validation from peers; however, digital behaviour and its influence in building or maintaining relationships needs to be further investigated in order to understand the mechanism of social exchange in order to provide a critical analysis of the scope of digital participation on individuals’ sociality.

Both role of the visual and the interactive nature of social media add new dimensions through which the possibilities of exchange and communication can be enriched. The practice of sharing, commenting and ‘liking’ must be explored to conceptualise digital reciprocal exchanges in which users use image-based social media as a tool to convey narratives, stories, memories and maintain relational development. As previously mentioned, knowledge of a given culture can be articulated through food (Veblen, 1899; Lévi-Strauss, 1970; Elias, 1978; Douglas, 1975; Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, it can be argued that in order to further understand digital community practices, it is necessary – or it can certainly be helpful – to understand the visuality of food within the digital sphere. The digitisation of social exchange has enabled media users to interact, share and exchange with each other (Rau *et al.* 2008). Hence, users have the ability to provide instant feedback and communicate personal attributes. Within this context of instant exchanges, one might consider how posting and interacting can enrich one’s social capital.

The first part of this section specifically provides a discussion of food as a cultural and social tool used to understand social practices and behaviour. It reveals how food can be used to express an authority and power that can be transcribed into social capital. The second part focusses on self-disclosure within digital media and on past research conducted using image-based sharing digital media to understand social practices and users' behaviour. The section discusses past studies on sharing practices to further understand the motives behind the use of social platforms. This section discusses the social outcomes linked with digital media platforms.

a) The role that food plays in society

During the early twentieth century the food industry expanded, and food became a matter of interest for scholars (Appadurai 1981; Douglas 1971; Ortner 1978). Eating codes were used to define an individual's place in society (Douglas, 1971); food was interpreted as a language by which to express social structures and cultural systems (Lévi-Strauss, 1970) and taste was used to define social stratification and class (Bourdieu, 1984). The focus on food contributes to the provision of meaning to our social culture. Several researchers and anthropologists have relied on food to expose individuals' attitudes, practices and social relationships. Among these researchers, Malinowski (1935), Levi- Strauss (1966) and Douglas (1971) have explored traditional societies and present food as being more than merely fuel for the human body. To Malinowski (1935), the meaning of food enables the anthropologist to understand the social dimensions of the Trobrianders society. Malinowski (1935) explored the way in which food serves as a medium of exchange between people as a social 'lubricant' in various societies. As such, he explored how the Trobriand Islanders grow yam, taro, pumpkin, banana, mango, sugar cane and peas. As he writes, "gardening, and effective gardening at that, with a large surplus produce, lies at the root of all tribal authority as well as the kinship system and communal organization of the Islanders" (1935:101). Yam enabled the Trobriand Islanders to solve private conflicts by handing it out from one village to another. These crops were used as means of currency that becomes a tribute to a chief and a marriage gift. In the Trobriand society, a man who is about to get married is required to share his yam with the woman's household in the form of "a harvest gift" (1935: 277). Malinowski states that few Trobriand islander men were able to build huge, decorated yam houses as the average

man owned more modest yam houses, but still tried to present the vegetables harvested in an aesthetic way, forming impressive piles of it. The underlying notion of food and aesthetics present certain societal practices and norms. Only certain foods have been designated as being adequate gifts to maintain kinship bonds and the power relations among the Trobrianders. Malinowski's study offers information about cooking and food exchange, and presents the variety of functions of food which are present in, but not limited to, the so-called 'primitive' societies.

In the same vein, Levi-Strauss (1966) and Douglas (1971) assert that food adheres to the same general practices as language, as food is perceived as a 'code' that can express patterns about social relationships. According to Levi-Strauss (1966), food categories are products of human minds where units of food are constituted by *gustemes*. He draws the parallel between alimentary codes and linguistics phonemes, from which he creates a culinary triangle (raw-cook-rotten), in which binary oppositions between cooking and raw distinguish the civilised human from the animal. Cooking symbolically marks a transition from nature to culture, and also from nature to society. Since raw is natural in origin, cooked therefore signifies a cultural and social stage. Levi-Strauss's description of cooking techniques has been useful in this study to situate the cooked cultural side of the culinary triangle and the overcooked, which is not deemed to be natural. This structural analysis of food indicates how categories related to eating are subject to cultural ordering systems from which structure can be embedded in process of social life. In a similar manner to Malinowski and his study on Trobrianders who give food to maintain kinship, Levi-Strauss (1966) emphasised the symbolic structure of kinship, where the exchange of goods and language allows one to understand social life. Douglas (1971) developed Levi- Strauss' ideas (1966) and provided further information regarding food preparation and, further, contributed significantly to the study of the relationships between food and ritual and food and social structure. From Douglas' (1971) anthropological thinking, a culture can be understood via food. By focussing on symbolic anthropology, she identified inedible foods in fieldwork in a small-scale society in the Congo. I relied on her work to understand how, in specific ecological and historical contexts, individuals simultaneously create particular patterns of society and organize knowledge, and produce beliefs and ritual, in compatible patterns. Douglas's "Abominations of Leviticus" (1966) work argues that different cultures create symbolic order, where she uses disorder and dirt as a way to understand how culture is built around

categories of food. She presents how symbols are constructed and how they reflect a specific culture. These food categories contain messages and indeed represent mediums that articulate social relationships, social values, social hierarchies, social experiences and boundaries. Douglas's work (1966) has enabled me to understand the food hierarchy order on a deeper level and to distinguish the messages transmitted by certain food preferences (for instance mouthful versus large courses being posted on Instagram). Nevertheless, Meigs' ethnographic study (1996) criticises Douglas' rigidity (1966). Meigs studied food and nutrition in Papua New Guinea, where she focussed less on food categories and more on food and relationships as emotion carriers. One of Meigs' ideas was particularly interesting from the perspective of my study, which is the notion of 'nu'. 'Nu' refers to vitality of the food which is dependent on the quality of the relationships. Meigs (1996) described the transmission of 'nu' in the exchange process and circulation of foods, and develops the notion that 'nu' is a fluid transmission of identity and a representation of exchange.

Over the past few years, food-focused culture and media have exploded, from TV shows, health magazines, food-focussed applications that can be downloaded to smartphones, recipe books on kindle to food festivals. Food therefore serves as a medium for the expression of cultural meaning and has quite forcefully burst upon our digitised contemporary society in social networks through applications such as Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat and Facebook. According to the Webstagram website (Websta, 2017), which provides the ranking of Instagram's most popular images in 2017, food is one of the most popular types of content exchanged, with the hashtags: "yummy" "foodporn" "dessert". 95 million photos and videos are uploaded per day and the number of 'likes' per day is estimated at 4.2 billion (Instagram, 2018). With the explosion in the number of photos taken, individuals have adopted the habit of documenting their experiences, which of course involves 'mundane' details of their daily lives as their food (Murphy, 2010). Food is an anthropological tool that helps one to understand social integration, social habits and relationships. As Douglas (1971) argues, food enables us to learn more about people and culture over time. In Douglas's article, she claims:

If food is treated as a code the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. (1971:36)

Hence, food can be used as a symbol of identity and difference; it defines individuals through knowing what they eat and how they eat it, but also through what they do not eat. Food shapes cultures and creates a worldview among individuals who embrace similar, culinary cultures (Douglas, 1971).

The study of food and identity has been explored psychologically and anthropologically in terms of how meaning is expressed (Lévi-Strauss, 1970; Veblen, 1899; Elias, 1978; Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas, 1975). Food is viewed as a language that expresses social structures (Belk, 1996). Not only is food a source of nutrition but also a way to express cultural systems. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss (1970) suggests that food must not only be good to eat, but also good to think (with). Ethnographic research has shown that food reveals forms of social ranking within society and carries connotations as to class and privilege (Veblen, 1899). Social power and relationships status can be identified and defined thanks to the meaning of food. In the same area of thought, Bourdieu (1984) has also emphasised that class is defined by taste. Bourdieu (1984) defines food as an indicator of identity and suggests that taste mirrors one's social position. Taste (food choices) is socially conditioned, and reflects a symbolic hierarchy which distinguishes one social class from another. As result, using food in the online context enriches the meanings associated with the exchanges and interactions between media users. The food choices of cultural groups are usually linked to ethnic behaviour and religious beliefs. Kittler *et al.* (2012) address the idea of how food habits document an individual's identity by suggesting that eating is a daily reaffirmation of cultural identity. In other words, food provides appropriate cultural and social characteristics by which to understand how users project their individuality in their posts in a similar manner to gift givers during *potlatches* and *moka* exchanges. This leads to explore the everyday practices of users' interactions of food contents to further explore the link between social exchanges, social capital gain and identity in the digital sphere. De Fina *et al.* (2006) define identity as:

Neither a given nor a product. Rather, identity is a process that takes place in concrete and specific interactional occasions, yields constellations of identities instead of individual, monolithic constructs, does not simply emanate from the individual, but results from processes of negotiation and entextualisation that are social. (2006:2)

Food, within the context of digital media, offers a representation of social culture that is both constructed and shaped by media users. They create themselves, their identity and social affiliations through the social media and networks they participate in. As food is a cultural artefact, users' participation in social media inevitably gives a picture and an understanding of their culture. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that participation in social media is driven by the urge to generate an image that reflects one's personal identity. When media users post pictures, they give to the online community and share their personal lives (Jenkins, 2006). As Hu *et al.* (2014) and Moon *et al.* (2016) posit, Instagram users share everyday activity pictures captured by smart phones. On Instagram, users share information regarding their lives, hobbies, memories and much more related to their personal habits. Food can thus be seen as having a social meaning rather than a purely functional one.

Data from digital marketing agency 360i shows that 25 percent of food photos are motivated by the need to document our day. For instance, several motives for sharing food pictures are identified in this research, including completing a food diary; documenting self-creation; displaying a family/friend moment or posting food art. The digital exchanges between individuals can be perceived similar to the archaic exchange in which the gift itself is a symbol of the giver. Miller argues that food represents culture because it is "an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society, our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices" (1987: 215). The empirical focus on food therefore allows one to identify how digital exchanges are imbued with personal meanings so as to further understand the meanings attached to these interactions and discover whether a *hau* can be conceptualised within the digital exchanges. The food context of the research enables me to assess how the spirit of the donor (in the act of giving, posting, commenting or 'liking') encourages reciprocal exchanges between media users and increases their social capital.



According to Mauss (1954), the practice of gift-giving ensures the reflection of oneself. In archaic tribes, gifts possess a spiritual aspect that enables the conveyor to assert his identity. The notion of self in gifts is therefore an important characteristic of the gift-giving practice. Media users create themselves, their identities and their social affiliations through social media (Sunden, 2003) and the gift-giving practice (Belk, 1979). Digitalised society enables users to reflect their identities through social media; they are therefore able to display their food habits thanks to their online contributions (posts, comments, pictures, videos). Food identity in the media offers a representation of social culture through the shared media platforms which is shaped by the users' contributions. Indeed, culinary skills and choices often reflect both a social and a personal dimension (de Irala-Estevéz *et al.* 2000). "Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you who you are" argues Brillat-Savarin in his gastronomic masterpiece (1825). Food gifts are therefore an excellent means through which to reflect a person's identity. Brillat-Savarin's comment (1825) is emblematic and places food as the expression of an individual's personality and character. Food can also speak to a political identity on a cultural level. Brillat-Savarin was a self-proclaimed epicurean from the bourgeoisie, and gave definitions of taste, cuisine and appetite. He claimed that food and eating habits are markers of social position, as well as supporting one's identity. The values and meanings of food go beyond nourishment, what and how one is eating can constitute the object that makes it possible to identify and be identified.

I believe Elias' work (1978) has had a great impact on the social sciences within the context of the sociology of the body, emotions, relational, culture and leisure, and further the sociology of food and social manners. His work has enabled me to appreciate the web of interdependence between food and society. Elias' work on figurational sociology sheds light on the changing attitudes around foodstuffs. He focussed on the history of food – eating, washing, urinating, spitting and defecating – to study how social, politics, economic changes shape the expression of emotion, manners, taste and lifestyle. Elias' study presents how food determines social power and status relationships, but also how food preferences change over time. The views on vegetarianism were perceived as a logical development in the civilising process, where table manners and eating habits became more sophisticated with an increasing threshold of shame and embarrassment (Wicks, 2008).

My understanding of food is guided by certain theories elaborated by anthropologists and researchers (Malinowski, 1935; Levi- Strauss, 1966; Douglas, 1971; Elias, 1978; Meigs, 1996). Certain foods (i.e., yam) present a man's power (Malinowski, 1935), whilst food items are perceived as codes and linguistic tools (Douglas, 1966, 1971; Levi-Strauss, 1966). Past researchers have provided essential knowledge and understanding of food and social practices that are relevant to the exploration of the way in which food items are understood as structured carriers of meaning that are correlated to the social order within the digital context. While Levi-Strauss discussed food categories that express fundamental human attitudes and translate social structure; Douglas's work (1975) on food taboos opens a window into the understanding of the notion of identity in terms of what one consumes or does not consume, as this differentiates individuals. Historical research on food consumption and production, as led by Appadurai (1988), strengthened Douglas' idea of the symbolic representation of identity. Food can be used to dominate and mark equality solidarity as well as being able to create distance. Historiographical research on food production, consumption and distribution, cuisines and gastronomy indicates that local, regional or national cuisines are symbolic representations of the nation and, indeed, of the identity of individuals (Appadurai, 1988). This study of digitalised food-based contents has been led by numerous anthropological predecessors who present the values and meanings of food as not merely those of nourishment but as actually being capable of bringing out the identity of an individual.

Food is at the core of human relationships, and helps us understand how media users communicate and maintain bonds in the digital communities. It creates bonds between people (Belasco and Scranton, 2002); for instance, the word 'companion', which comes from the Latin word 'panis' for bread, describes someone with whom you share a meal. The social media platform Instagram allows the exploration of cultural practices using food to understand whether digital reciprocal exchanges act a social lubricant in online media. The existing research has focussed on uses and gratifications as the theoretical basis by which to investigate photo-sharing (Alhabash *et al.* 2014; Malik *et al.* 2016). Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge no research has centred on reciprocal exchanges and the focus of food-sharing in order to understand reciprocal digital interaction outcomes.

#### b) The visual communication and disclosure

The following section further discusses how social identity that is constructed online, plays an important role in conceptualising the practice of gift-giving in the digital sphere. The internet has allowed users to portray their identities through the online world. The concept of identity and the idea of a “self” was developed by Tesser (2002: 185), who defines the self as a “collection of abilities, temperament, goals, values and preferences that distinguish one individual from another”. This research uses Tesser’s (2002) definition of the self in order to explore how food-related posts mirror identity and personal preferences. Previous studies of identity presentation on social media have shown that media users are particularly attentive to audience (Ellison *et al.* 2010). The concept of self-presentation suggests that individuals have the desire to control the image that others can create of them during social interactions (Goffman, 1959). Goffman claims that “an individual is likely to present him or herself in a light that is favourable to him or her” (1959: 7). The fundamental idea is that social media enables users to create their identity via digital content images, where they constantly manage impressions. Hence, taking and sharing pictures is a ubiquitous phenomenon for Instagram users who have democratised the practice of sharing their identity with others. Social networking sites encourage self-disclosure as it enables its users to engage with others by sharing pictures, videos and others forms of media interactions (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Self-disclosure refers to the act of revealing personal thoughts, feelings, preferences that are consistent with the image one wants to project (Jourard, 1971). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that social media platforms can be classified according to their level of self-presentation and self-disclosure. Following this argument, as Instagram is a visual-based medium, it encourages self-presentation and self-disclosure via pictures and videos.

Photo-sharing on social networking sites has become the focus of several studies to explore the concept of self-disclosure. For instance, Facebook members share pictures to help relational development, which is the main motive for self-disclosure (Waters and Ackerman, 2011). A survey conducted by Williamson *et al.* (2017) reveals that users of different social platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) post to achieve identity clarification, relational development, social validation, self-expression, information

sharing to benefit others, and entertainment. The research also reveals that posts on Facebook are used as status updates to further develop relationships with friends and family.

Additionally, previous papers have focussed on photo-sharing practices on the online image-sharing community Flickr (Miller and Edwards, 2007; Liu *et al.* 2013). A recent study conducted by Moed *et al.* (2007) on Flickr argues that food is one of the most common themes of the pictures published on the platform. Liu *et al.* (2013) gave an exploratory study which attempts to understand members' behaviour when taking pictures of food and sharing their personal experiences. The authors expose how users use food in order to record travel experiences and share information. The food image is thus used as an act of information delivery. To illustrate this argument, Van House (2007) presents an empirical study of the use of Flickr in which she identifies two types of image-sharing on Flickr: "distant closeness" and "photo exhibition". Van House (2007) mentions that photographs construct narratives of our sense of self and lives. She further argues that social media has increased the use of photographs and identifies four different categories of social use for personal photography: 1) memory, narrative and identity; 2) relationships; 3) self-representation and; 4) self-expression, as the use of social media is linked with peer recognition and personal satisfaction. She suggests that:

The content and uses of personal photos has traditionally reflected and sustained relationships. Photos of people and of shared places, events, and activities are important for "togetherness". Photos are given as gifts. (2007:2219)

Within these four different categories, Goffman's concept of self-presentation (1959) is echoed as Van House (2007) discusses the idea that individuals seek to present themselves in such a way as to ensure that others see them as they wish to be seen. When using social media, users are able to construct a public or semi-public profile within the limits of the system (Boy and Ellison, 2008). Photos are therefore used as self-presentation tool mirroring the photographer's point of view and creativity.

Past research in visual studies has addressed the use of digital technology and photo-sharing in different social media platforms (Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat) (Miller and Edwards, 2007; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Liu *et al.* 2013; Alhabash *et al.*

2014; Malik *et al.* 2016). These previous studies reveal the power of the visual and the means through which digital media can transcribe one's reality. Images are captured and used as both narratives to the ongoing construction of identity on sharing platforms and memories to recall personal experiences (Van House, 2007). The Instagram platform enables its users to record, capture and interact with each other by constructing an image and an identity to communicate to the world. This construction is possible through the use of the visual media in which users are able to communicate what they eat, who they are with, where they eat, and which food is displayed.

In line with postmodernism, which posits the disbelief in absolute truth (Featherstone, 2007), the digital media platforms enable users to construct their own realities. The postmodernist view on the visual aspect of social media exposes the complexity of 'real' identity since individuals create their own desired identity based on social norms and expectations. In postmodern culture, individuals are individualistically driven and eager to create their identity to establish a positive impression. Hence the visual discourse helps to select and highlight specific features that leads one to wonder as to the veracity of an individual's visual content on Instagram. Goffman (1959) explains the practice of 'impression management' whereby individuals create favourable impressions with their own reality. Hence, individuals tend to monitor how others respond to them when presenting themselves. In Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, he argues that the self is merely "the mask one chooses to wear in a given situation" (1959: 19). Individuals therefore express what they want the audience to see of themselves as a theatrical display. On the one hand, when individuals engage in performing activities in front of observers, Goffman uses the term 'front-stage' performance, which refers to the positive idea of self or desired self. On the other hand, the hidden place where individuals are their real selves is defined as the 'backstage'. Identity performance therefore refers to individuals projecting their desirable image through social interactions (Goffman, 1959). As Lee *et al.* state, Instagram users create "their own personal cyber documentary through a variety of fancy photos" (2015:555).

Goffman's concept (1959) of self-representation is used in this research to understand social interactions on the Instagram digital media platform. As Goffman suggests (1959), humans are active and decide how to behave and interact in social settings, where the world is similar to a 'stage'. This research uses Goffman's (1959) work to understand

how individuals devise their own conduct to guide and control how others see them. Self-representation sheds light on how humans act differently around other individuals in social settings than they do when alone (following certain social expectations, norms, and rules). This research therefore uses the concept of self-representation to explore the process of dramaturgy in the digital media environment, where self-representation can be assessed on the basis of visual content. Concepts of frontstage and backstage are relevant to a determination of how users behave in their social worlds (crafted representation, techniques of impression management, manipulation by the actors). With the impressive number of more than 500 million daily active users, Instagram is the most important social networking site worldwide (Instagram, 2018), and has transformed the role of photographs and visual communication. It is a device that offers rich possibilities for conducting social research as it opens up a new pathway to the exploration of socio-cultural processes. Instagram enables one to see through the eyes of social actors, glimpse into everyday rituals and private moments, i.e., both backstage and frontstage.

Previous research has emphasised the notion of ‘social currency’ stemming from the act of photo sharing and digital interactions (posts, ‘likes’, comments). The 2016 food and drink Waitrose Report, which is an extensive set of research into food trends based on OnePoll Consumer Research, suggests that food is a currency used by people to show who they are, with 44 percent of people in Britain admitting putting in more effort when they share a picture of their meal on social media. Individuals are not only strategising about how to virtually convey who they are, but also how to craft an Instagram version of themselves in order to appeal to their audiences. The annual report states “As a nation, we’re expressing ourselves through food as never before. From healthy eating and the explosion of food photography on social media, to our desire to entertain others through cooking, food is today’s hottest social currency: through it, we tell others about ourselves” (Waitrose-Report, 2016). Hence food preferences give people the basic tools through which to establish and perform their cultural identities on Instagram.

Manovich's research (2016) has focused on 16 million Instagram photos shared in 17 large cities worldwide since 2012, exposing how Instagram is in fact a window into the identities of individuals connected by common social media platforms, programming languages, and visual aesthetics. The research gives an insight into the sharing of sophisticated cultural artefacts created by the use digital tools and platforms. Manovich

(2016) provides a description of the state of mind of Instagram users and notes that a significant number of Instagram users put considerable effort in providing sophisticated content and the construction of aesthetic lifestyles. This notion brings us back to the concept of fetishism and objectification developed in the first section of this literature review. Marx (1867) provides an account of self-objectification that can be related to the media users' motive of editing photographs before posting them. This has been researched by Fox and Rooney (2015), who develop the idea that self-objectification and the motives for posting are interrelated. Previous research claim that posting selfies on SNSs correlates with self-reporting narcissism in young males (Fox and Rooney, 2015). Recent studies provide evidence that SNS encourage self-promotional behaviour when posting and editing pictures. Given previous findings, self-objectification is associated with social networking site use when posting selfies and editing photos. Besides, previous studies highlight that women tend to highly value photographs rather than profile information (Haferkamp and Krämer, 2011). This means that social media may reinforce feminine ideologies and portray types of women that attract men, and it also may reinforce masculine ideologies and portray types of men that attract women. Researchers found that SNS users can be dissatisfied with their body and careers after viewing profiles of successful and attractive users (Haferkamp and Krämer, 2011; Kimbrough *et al.* 2013). Self-objectification leads individuals to post objectified images of themselves as they tend to seek affirmation by presenting themselves in a manner that is socially acceptable.

Media users create visual aesthetics using editing tools to manage their identities. Manovich claims:

Aesthetically perfected photos (many of which are taken with professional cameras) may dominate the Instagram search screen, serving as its official “face” and creating an impression that Instagram has become the platform where the casual and flawed no longer exists. We may think that what started as a platform for “producing photos on the go, in the real world, in realtime” (Kevin Systrom, 2013) has in a few years become its opposite—a platform where nothing is in real-time and instead every photo's composition, colours, details, posting time, tags, and position in user's gallery are rationalized and engineered. (2016 :21)

Similarly, this argument is exemplified in the study of Larsen and Kofoed (2015) which underscores the importance of creating aesthetic and quality content. The authors expose

that the meaning attached to posts has “situational relevance” (Larsen and Kofoed, 2015). Lobinger (2016) further argues that individuals express themselves visually through the practice of picture-sharing and document events or tell stories about their activities. The social media applications have become part of the individuals’ routine through which they exchange images used as “visual conversations” (Lobinger, 2016). Besides, data from the digital marketing agency 360i argues that individuals engage in creating and managing polished pictures to show them in a positive light to others. To exemplify this, the report estimates that 22 percent of food-related pictures show self-cooked meals from proud users who wish to obtain approval and validation from their digital contributions. As such, food pictures provide the visual images that communicate techniques, styles, and choices. On the various social platforms, the pictures so exchanged act as “a fluid and dynamic material for situational live communication” (Lobinger, 2016:482), through which posting aesthetic snapshots of food can reflect one’s identity. Media users aim therefore to give aesthetically pleasing gifts that simultaneously provide a prestigious image of themselves and their social status (Kollock, 1999). Indeed, the practice of gift-giving informs one as to the giver’s social status (Mauss, 1954). Media users tend to seek prestige through their posts (Kollock, 1999) and present the bright side of their identity. Consequently, in the context of SNSs, posting content can be rewarded through user comments and ‘likes’ which may function to legitimise the users’ social status. There is indeed a rich body of literature in the field of sociology of culture that considers the relations between exchanges and social gain or loss.

As with the gift comes the notion of moral obligation to reciprocate (Mauss, 1954). Still, as it is unclear whether digital interactions are driven by social responsibility and obligation motives, every aspect of the experience of exchanging in the digital must be explored (photo sharing, ‘likes’, comments). Further studies must investigate whether digital interactions lead users to feel obligated to reciprocate. This research is essential to an understanding of the mechanism underlying the social exchange system by using the empirical focus of food.

As Mauss explains, prestige and social authority are established by social exchanges thanks to the *moka* and public ceremonies. Achieving the position of the *big man* is a goal achievable once the gift is larger than the gifts available from other tribes. Once



media users post their content, there is no obvious reward to those providing the information, apart from the intrinsic satisfaction one might otherwise expect to gain. Sharing experiences with others has indeed a variety of benefits, such as boosting people's moods (Reis *et al.* 2010). This idea is further supported by Chen *et al.*'s (2016) study which explores how practical tools such as smartphone photography are used to enhance happiness; it reports that by taking and sending pictures of their present moment, people can form stronger ties. This being said, disclosure is therefore shown to fulfil the need for social connectedness and belonging (Tamir and Mitchell, 2012). Individuals are able to disclose themselves through meaningful visual contents and interactions with their community. Food is thus shown to convey social meanings and has the capacity to present situations and contexts (Locher *et al.* 2005). Beyond its satiety purpose, food can be used as a metaphor for satisfaction, happiness, comfort or reward, and display one's emotions within a context (Locher *et al.* 2005; Salvio, 2012; Chen *et al.* 2017).

Digital media users aspire to earn recognition through their posts (Rheingold, 1993). The exchange practices within digital media aim to create a continuous network of relations that consecutively produce social capital. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital emphasises mediated social relations that enable individuals to display their personal interests. The social interactions that occur within digital media can be conceptualised as visual-based exchanges that are rich in meaning and that aim to accumulate social capital. It is argued by some authors that self-disclosure is necessary to generate social capital outcomes (Valkenburg and Peter, 2009). Drawing a parallel to the exchanges seen during the *potlatches*, individuals aim to achieve reciprocal exchanges and obtain benefits from their gifts to ensure reciprocity and display their social status. Within the digital communities, individuals interact with each other and post content to obtain social validation, approval and support (Bazarova and Choi, 2014; Moon *et al.* 2016) and to satisfy the need for belonging and affiliation (Cheikh-Ammar and Barki, 2014). Hence, individuals self-disclose in the hope of attaining social rewards. Individuals are thus motivated to post content in order to obtain virtual rewards. Their posts enable these media users to accumulate social capital and to earn recognition from their gift. Social capital fosters reciprocity through feedbacks, intangible rewards such as self-esteem and reputation (Veale, 2003).

Yet, as research emphasises, social media requires time and effort to create a desired image, maintain bonds and gain social rewards. Lieberman (2013) puts forwards the self-reinforcing effect of successful sharing. He explains how individuals put effort and thinking into what to share and with whom, while they consume it. The rewards of a successful posting, which is translated by accumulation of ‘likes’, feedback from others and overall peer recognition, activates a physiological rush that is often self-reinforcing.

The archaic communities explored by Mauss revealed that community members were gaining from their participation but also had to return bigger gifts (sea shells, pigs, food) in order to belong to the community, gain social authority and maintain a high social position. Further research must be completed to understand the social responsibility and potential feelings of indebtedness. There is therefore a need to explore social exchanges, digital interactions and reciprocal acts in the digital sphere in order to make sense of the notion of reciprocity and assess the social responsibility of media users. Past research has emphasised the idea of the benefits and motives gained by media users by participating in and sharing pictures on digital media (relational development, social connectedness, belonging, self-disclosure, self-representation, social validation, peer recognition). These discoveries encourage researchers to focus on the authenticity of their participation, and their motives for perpetuating digital exchanges, in order to provide a critical analysis of the associated motives, whether driven by altruistic premises (related to gift theory exchanges) or self-interested premises (related to commodity exchanges).

When discussing the psychology of social media, studies into its negative effects are growing. For instance, the study conducted by Barasch *et al.* (2018) contrasts the act of taking pictures for one’s personal memories to the act of taking pictures with the intention of sharing them. The results show that the sharing goal in taking pictures can undermine enjoyment and heighten the engagement so felt. Although many studies show that the use of social media is related to psychological distress, people nevertheless continue using social media to exchange and communicate. A paradox has been identified, arguing that social media could make people lonely, more isolated and depressed (Seabrook *et al.* 2016). In addition to this, visual content and editing tools provide the means to use filters to manage identity (Moon *et al.* 2016). As taking photos with the intention of sharing them may increase self-presentational concern (Barasch *et al.* 2018), selective disclosure may minimise the level of exposure while allowing users to project their desired identity/

lifestyle through visual conversations (Gentile *et al.* 2012). This idea can be linked to Burns' (2014) study who emphasises the idea that since photo sharing practices are being increasingly criticised, individuals may try to conceal their authenticity for reasons of impression management. Researchers have indeed identified when people tend to share their most positive experiences to construct an appealing online persona, and they refer to the concept of "Facebook envy" in this regard (Tandoc *et al.* 2015). Evidence reveals that social media platforms (taking the example of Facebook) can pose a threat to users' satisfaction and well-being (Valenzuela, 2009; Krasnova *et al.* 2013), but it can also be helpful to such users' social capital and relational development (Stapleton *et al.* 2017).

As pictures become the means by which to gain social rewards, some researchers have pointed out how media users tend to compare themselves to their peers, a concept referred as 'relative deprivation' (Davis, 1959). Several studies have measured the relative deprivation to evaluate the situation of an individual facing the disparity between their own situation and someone else's that may result in feelings of jealousy or envy (Campbell *et al.* 2002; Chou and Edge, 2002; Stapleton *et al.* 2017). This idea is supported by Steers *et al.* (2014) who linked the use of Facebook with social comparison, negative feelings and dissatisfaction; and Vogel *et al.* (2014)'s study which exposes that the use of Facebook can cause a greater exposure to upward social comparison for some individuals. As individuals rely heavily on the sophisticated representations on Instagram, it is therefore essential to explore whether visual exchanges trigger dissatisfaction, or have an impact on relational maintenance, personal wellbeing and satisfaction. There is a need to further explore whether the Instagram-based digital exchanges support social cohesion and relational development, or whether interactions are led by the self-interested motives and social responsibility that require media users to present themselves in a specific way to ensure reciprocal exchanges.

The following chapter explains the methodological approach that is being adopted. I conducted a qualitative study with the aim of explaining this social process and capturing the essential aspects of the phenomenon from the perspective of study participants. Qualitative interviews and an online ethnography have enabled me to address my research questions. The following section introduces my methodology and how the research has been conducted. I discuss the study design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis that best suits my qualitative study.

## Research questions:

Chapter one and two have provided the background material and theoretical knowledge to formulate and develop research questions. The theoretical framework prefaces the discussion of methodology which focusses on the attentiveness to the lived experience of reciprocity and social obligation. This research aims to answer the following research questions. Find below an illustration of the research questions, aims and objectives of the research.

- How the experience of involvement in the digital community form gift exchange practices?
- What do digital interactions provide to the media users' sociality? Are the dynamics of exchanges in the digital community improving social relationships and boosting social capital?
- Are forms of obligation, or responsibility associated with participating (posting, commenting, 'liking') in the digital media platform? Is social indebtedness resulting from being involved on Instagram?

## Research aims

- Exploring the social exchange practice by evaluating its role on the media users' sociality
- Understanding the social interactions on Instagram and role media users play within their community
- Discovering the mechanisms of exchange, the purpose, the motives and outcomes of interacting in the digital sphere

## Research objective 1

- To explore the dynamics of exchange in the digital sphere
- To understand the purpose and motives of posting, commenting and 'liking'
- To identify the mechanism of reciprocal exchanges in the digital sphere

### Research objective 2

- To explore the role of digital exchanges in the maintenance of social bonds and social capital
- To identify the scope of social obligation and indebtedness through digital exchanges
- To understand the role and meanings of visual-based contents as communication tools and exchange tools

### Research objective 3

- To propose and updated account on the use of visual-based social media and its impact on the media users' well-being and social network
- To better understand and conceptualise digital behaviour of exchange in the digital setting
- To comprehend the impact of the digital interactions and exchanges on a personal level

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Ontology and epistemology

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodological approach that is taken in this research. The research uses a qualitative approach to explore the forms of social capital and social obligations that are generated by digital communities' social exchanges. This thesis adopts a multi-method approach to collect the data, where I conducted both personal interviews and an online ethnography (netnography).

Simply put, a sample of 15 Instagram users took part in this research, including 5 males and 10 females, each of whom was interviewed. In the meantime, an online observation of their digital exchanges, posts, and contributions was conducted. A thematic analysis was developed in order to conduct an in-depth level of analysis on their contributions (see appendix 3: Table of themes and theoretical framework). The rationale for choosing these methods and approaches are identified and discussed in this chapter. The informant selection, the research design and the ethical considerations are outlined, followed by an overview of the reliability and validity considered for this research.

### Research Philosophy

The research philosophy raises the different views that can be adopted by the researcher. This thesis, is led by an interpretive approach whose goal is to understand, and not to predict, behaviour (Rubinstein, 1981). It used a descriptive analysis of the observation of the participants to obtain a holistic view of the context. Contrary to the positivist approach, it is not based on universal laws and statistically organised knowledge (Saunders *et al.* 2003). The theory of gift exchange posits that the value of the gift and the reality of obligations are socially constructed through conventions, rituals and the relations between giver/ receiver, hence the need for an approach that is interpretive. This paradigm was therefore suitable for the research presented herein, which is based on the process of understanding the subjective media users' experiences and interpretations. According to Myers (2013), this paradigm is designed to help researchers understand the

social and cultural contexts within which they live. This approach allowed me to discover how media users made sense of their participation in the digital sphere and how they defined their interactions with other community members.

This thesis adopted the hermeneutic approach which is a dominant view that focuses on the understanding and interpretation of a given phenomenon. According to Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul (1999), the hermeneutic approach underpins qualitative method-based research. The hermeneutics phenomenology method of analysis is defined as the theory of the interpretation of meaning (Bleicher, 1980). Phenomenological research essentially induces a qualitative approach, where these models focus on the wholeness of experience and search for meaning, where knowledge is constructed through dialogue between a set of participants and moderator who share the same cultural and linguistic conventions. In this research, the emphasis relied on the interpretation of the participants' experience as "phenomenology is focused on the subjectivity of reality, continually pointing out the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them" (Willis, 2007: 53). This approach allowed me to explore through the subjective eyes of the participants into the social reality of their everyday lives, which is adapted to meet the research objectives. My research was therefore led by an interpretive and phenomenological approach to understand media users' perceptions of their daily use of social networks (Instagram). This phenomenological research produced 'thick descriptions' of the respondents' perspectives and experiences, emphasising an inductive logic (Gray, 2004).

In this study, I used hermeneutic phenomenology in order to interpret and analyse the online communities' narratives. This method focusses on the role of language, the nature of questioning and the phenomenology of human conversation (Gadamer, 1976). It is an appropriate approach which aims to understand the participants' consumption experiences and behaviours (Thompson *et al.* 1994). Using phenomenology has enabled me to develop an understanding of a phenomenon through the specific human experience of the phenomenon, therefore this suggests developing the ways in which an existing theory, gift-giving theory, applies to the digital community of Instagram. This has served me to understand the respondents' experiences rather than to provide causal explanation of those experiences. As guiding empirical interests, phenomenology has enabled the identification of the main concepts that frame this research. This thesis thus started with

a specific interest in five main concepts: reciprocity; social capital; identity; indebtedness; and social rules. I therefore used these sensitising concepts as a starting point from which to form and delineate my thesis and develop my ideas.

The limitations of the interpretive paradigm highlight the issues associated with the subject-person. Indeed, both Koch (1998) and Lowenberg (1993) note that the interpreter's own normative frames of reference and world of meaning are inevitably applied with an interpretive approach. It was therefore essential that I remained truthful in providing outcomes as the origin and use peer review to support the findings (Schwandt, 1998). Nevertheless, using a qualitative research method for this study, as guided by an interpretive framework, seemed appropriate. Numerous contemporary researchers who explored the gift practice in offline and online settings decided to conduct qualitative research to answer their research questions (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Marcoux, 2009; Skågeby, 2008). Several aspects attested to the importance of using the interpretive paradigm for my thesis:

Firstly, its ability to explore the richness and the complexity of phenomena (Crotty, 1998) (exploring the narratives, experiences, feelings, emotions). Interpretive methods enabled the deep exploration of the online communities in their cultural context, as undertaken in several research efforts (Yeslam and Williamson, 2004).

Secondly, Polkinghorne (1983) suggests that the interpretive approach relies on linguistics and employs meaning-based forms of data analysis. The hermeneutic ontology was adopted, and particular emphasis was placed on both the language and human experience. For my research, it was important to establish effective communication with the participants in order to collect rich data. The interpretive philosophy encourages participants to interact with the researcher and to share knowledge with the aim of enriching the social sciences (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012). The personal interviews enriched the data thanks to the researcher/participant interaction; this, unfortunately, was not possible with the online ethnography.

The principle emerging from this position is that the world we see around us is the creation of mind (Williams and May, 1993). As the intention of my research was to describe human practices in a specific community, the interpretive position endeavoured to investigate how individuals used language and symbols to understand both the



meanings and the construction of the world (Johnson *et al.* 1984). Indeed, the goal of my research was to explore digital media activity (posting, commenting, ‘liking’) through the lens of the gift exchange. This approach aimed to recognise the motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences which are time and context bound (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000). This paradigm therefore enabled me to obtain rich data and to discover the types of social capital and social obligations when media users participate in the digital community. The interpretive position also allowed me to understand how human beings behave in the online world; for instance, attitudes to excitement and thresholds of desire differ from one individual to another, and this understanding enriched the analysis of human behaviour in the online community. Schwandt (1998), suggests that the approach aims to understand the world according to the one who is experiencing it. This specific characteristic needed to be considered in my research, which in terms of understanding the way people gave sense to their lives is fundamental, and helped me to acknowledge their practices in the online environment.

Thirdly, the interpretive research philosophy was chosen to prioritise the meanings and actions of agents in order to address my research questions adequately. This research was therefore focused on a particular context which supports the choice of a qualitative research method. This notion is supported by Marshan-Piekkari and Welch, they suggest that:

In general, whenever a holistic, dynamic and contextual explanation of the phenomenon is required, qualitative methods would be the most appropriate methodological choice. (2004:512)

A quantitative research method would have provided factual and, in this instance, superficial findings. For instance, the use of a survey for this type of study fails to provide rich descriptions which can be revealed by a qualitative research approach that is composed of an online observation and personal interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). In other words, the overall philosophical framework is compatible with the hermeneutic method and interpretive analysis as it aimed to understand how participants give meaning to their world (Bryman, 2012) while using the most appropriate tools to observe their social exchanges.

## Research approach

The study approach aims to understand, through an inductive analysis, the types of social exchanges presented by the Instagram users and displayed on their Instagram profiles. By studying these digital exchanges about food on the Instagram platform, this thesis reveals the coherent scheme in which food manages to understand how digital exchanges maintain bonds, trigger exchanges and display identities. The research is associated with an inductive approach which provides subjective reasoning with real-life examples (Ridenour *et al.* 2008). It orientates itself towards the inductive approach, developed from a phenomenological philosophy, which implies that theories are built based on data and empirical findings.

In the paper written by Thomas (2006), the author reveals an approach that is aligned with the reality of how I approached my qualitative study. The key was to gain the subjective experience of the subject, sometimes by trying to put myself in the place of my respondents. Hence, phenomenology which refers to the exploration, via personal experience, of prevailing cultural understandings offered the best way to develop a good understanding of what was happening in relation to my research question. From an inductive perspective, I collected data to use it to explore a specific phenomenon and to recognise whether gift-giving theory could be conceptualised in the digital sphere. To do so, this approach aimed to develop concepts that aid in the understanding of natural phenomena with emphasis on the meaning, experiences and views of the participants.

The logic of phenomenological theory guided my methods of data-gathering as well as of theoretical development. As part of the phenomenological paradigm, I constructed theories and models from the data (inductive approach); I used multiple methods (interviews and netnography) to establish different views of the phenomenon and I also used small samples researched in depth (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2002). This phenomenological approach enabled me to describe the experiences as it was lived by the participants (Van, Manen, 1990), I was therefore able to identify what the individuals had in common while practising social exchanges in the digital environment.

The inductive research orientation enabled me to answer the research questions by interpreting media users' online exchanges and interactions, plus allowed an understanding of the visual meanings of their posts and digital exchanges. Indeed, the approach provided descriptive input to the empirical finding and analysis. The inductive approach from a phenomenological approach was considered the most suitable since there was a lack of established research studies that could provide any extensive insight into the digital exchanges within social communities on Instagram. Phenomenological theory was used here with the intention of helping me to develop themes that emerge from the inductive analysis of gift-giving theory characteristics constructed in the digital communities. This research approach was selected because of its ability to collect the dominant and frequent themes that are innate to my raw data. This approach ensured that the themes of the research were elicited, even the obscured or barely visible ones; for instance, the use of visual posts revealed emergent themes. Besides, the inductive richness of the data collected certainly produced unexpected findings; indeed, the identification of any unplanned or unanticipated matters gave rise to extensive and varied raw data. Strauss and Corbin (1998:12) suggest that "the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data". The inductive richness of the data gave rise to unexpected findings that were important for my research.

For this study, the research questions were designed to highlight the social exchange process that took place between media users on Instagram, specifically through the use of visual contents, comments, 'likes', and captions. The digital posts represented an emerging area of study where forms of communication are created, and where an inductive approach was the most appropriate method to understand the value and meanings of digital exchanges. Within this context, visual communication was centred on the Instagram pictures posted on the participants' accounts. The constant innovations of social media platforms and applications transforms the manner in which participants interact and exchange. I argue that phenomenological theory was suitable to the understanding of social media exchanges and practices on Instagram. The personal interviews and the netnography conducted are methods that hold the promise of advancing the emerging ideas of the topic under investigation. The inductive approach was appropriate to interpret meanings of visual communication through analysis of food content images on the Instagram platform. The inductive approach was indeed

informative for assessing the forms of social responsibilities and obligations to reciprocate inherent to the community.

It is also important to point out that the inductive approach is frequently used in social science research (Dey, 1993; Bryman and Burgess, 1994). Emerging themes are categorised after analysing transcripts and considering possible meanings (Elliott and Gillie, 1998). This approach therefore combined a set of procedures in order to create meaning from the raw data through the development of themes and categories. These procedures constituted descriptive qualitative data analyses (Backett and Davison, 1995). The reasoning behind choosing an inductive methodology came from the logic that this approach is suitable for relatively new research topics or ones for which there are a lot of pre-existing assumptions that need to be challenged. The focus on Instagram represents a pioneering piece of work to determine whether the Mauss' theoretical framework can help explain digital social exchange processes.

### Research strategy

The theoretical framework, which informs my study, shapes the ontological and epistemological stance that my research requires. The “qualitative methods may offer a unique advantage when the researcher is trying to observe, describe and explain dynamic processes” (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004:512). As a result, I aimed to place the emphasis on understanding the participants' subjective experiences and interpretations through the use of personal interviews with media users and an online ethnography. The qualitative research method enabled me to identify the development of theories in inductive practice, and allowed the exploration of real-life situations, and thus examined the ways in which the respondents exchange and participate to the digital community of Instagram. I was therefore able to reach an in-depth understanding of their behaviour.

Brennen (2013) emphasises the benefit of using qualitative research as it provides an in-depth explanation of how reality is constructed. According to him, within qualitative research a variety of methodologies can be adopted by the researcher. This is consistent with this study, which includes the combination of interview data (Rubin and Rubin,

2005) and netnographic data (Kozinets, 2010) in order to provide a better understanding of the problem. When combined, phenomenology methods offer keen tools through which to generate, mine, and make sense of the data. A qualitative methodology was chosen to best suit the research objectives, rather than any quantitative methodologies. This style of research calls for inspiration, closeness to the respondents and their statements, immersion in the field and an ability to interpret situations and testimonies (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The goal was to allow me to “obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:11). Arguably, a quantitative research method such as a survey or questionnaire might have provided reasonable results. Nevertheless, this research sought to understand the social exchanges and perceptions of the media users in depth, rather than just to provide a quantitative portrait of opinions. As Bauer and Gaskell (2000:41) suggest, “The real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue”. Thanks to my method of combining both personal interviews and online observations, the exploration of opinions became adequate to answer the research questions. The integration of multiple types of data was a pragmatic decision, as it allowed the researcher to take advantage of the strengths of both types of data and the further exploration of a greater variety of research questions (Creswell *et al.* 2003).

First, thanks to the interviews, I was able to observe people’s actions and speech in a non-standardised form (Burns and Bush, 1998). The choice of conducting interviews lays in the fact that it is a technique “involving a researcher who guides or questions a participant to elicit information, perspectives, insights, feelings on behaviours, experiences or phenomenon that cannot be observed” (Salmons, 2010:63). This technique was a useful data-gathering method for individuals who have the relevant experience (Lofland and Lofland, 1984). I was able to make sense of, and listen with sensitivity to, the respondents’ experiences within the digital Instagram community.

Secondly, thanks to the online ethnography I explored the media users’ community and culture. Kozinets defines netnography as “a qualitative method devised specially to investigate the consumer behaviour of cultures and community present on the Internet”

(1998:366). The facets of social and cultural life are accessible due to the Internet in contemporary sociality. The emergence of new social media has created social platforms and communities through which researchers move to explore whether existing theories are applicable within these platforms. Kozinets (2010) argues that the concept of netnographic research does not solely provide for the observation of online cultures but rather it profoundly understands online communities and social interactions. It is important for researchers to embrace new media and explore its features, users and uses, content and effects and development within contemporary society. Thus, to make sense of these new dynamics, I used a netnographic research to observe the respondents' social exchanges and interactions on Instagram, including photo sharing, comments and 'likes' with the aim of understanding the dimensions of the digital context of social exchanges.

Previous qualitative research that focuses on the digital environment has been conducted through the use of interviews and ethnographic observations to uncover the social practices in the naturalistic environment of the media users. For example, Dreyfus (2001) emphasises the different practices which are applicable in the online world (Web 2.0). The easy access to information content satisfies specific needs within the field of social sciences. Indeed, he suggests that the internet makes "everything easily accessible and optimizable" (Dreyfus, 2001:2) and thus, it enables the digitalisation of reality. The social practices represented in Web 2.0 enable social scientists to investigate mediated social relations and society. Another study (Wetsch, 2008) has combined interviews and online ethnography to explore the experiences of media users in their virtual worlds, such as in Second Life (a virtual world mostly used by teenagers).

However, little research has been undertaken into social exchange and gift-giving theory. The few studies that are available have either focussed on the offline type of social exchange (Marcoux, 2009) or on online exchange without attributing any significance to particular content-context (Kollock 1999; Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Skågeby, 2008). This research provides a unique approach to the exploration of the digital communities' social exchange through the lens of the gifting theory by observing the food content-context. This study combines two ways in which to gather data in order to address the limitations of each method and provide rich, deep and reliable findings. As consistent with the interpretive research paradigm, and in line with the need to explore the media users experiencing the 'phenomenon' under inquiry, a purposive sampling strategy was used

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The next section discusses how the participants were selected for their ability to contribute to the richest information for the research.

### Informant selection and Sampling

The research procedures used to select the participants in this thesis are discussed in the following section. The participants in this qualitative study were selected purposefully with the aim of best informing the research questions (Creswell, 2009). A specific participant profile was established in order to identify appropriate respondents who were able to enhance my understanding of the phenomenon under study (Kuper *et al.* 2008). Both the focus of the research and its theoretical perspectives defined the appropriate subject sample. The study object selection informed the essential views related to the phenomenon being studied, hence respondents must post food-related pictures twice a week minimum. I identified the relevant respondents by selecting active media users' accounts who made daily contributions (such as posts, 'likes', comments) by using my personal network and a snowball sampling method.

The research was conducted between June 2016 and January 2017. The sample included French, British, German, Singaporean, Tunisian and Canadian participants (see appendix 2: Table of respondents). The participants taking part in the interviews and netnography were students, recent graduates and early career workers. The collection of data began once the participants were given two consent forms (observations and interviews) in order to gain permission to use the data. The participants selected were both interviewed face-to face and observed online for a period of eight weeks. Some participants were already selected beforehand for this research; indeed, I contacted participants who took part in my MA project and met the research inclusion criteria. These people have indeed provided rich data for my research to explore the digital communities in depth (Instagram). It was a key advantage for my research in gaining access and documenting the cooperation of my respondents. In essence snowballing sampling suggests asking respondents who have already been interviewed to recommend other people they know who fit the inclusion criteria (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; Groenewald, 2004). It is a recruitment technique that involved identifying an initial purposeful sample which were my original MA participants as informants who in turn helped me identifying additional

people who qualified for the purpose of this research (Cohen *et al.* 2007). In other words, snowball sampling method allowed me to obtain additional referrals from respondents in order to generate interview participants (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). I asked the participants to recommend active daily users of Instagram who post food contents for future interviews. I sent a standardised Facebook message informing potential respondents of the purpose of my study and consent information. Upon receiving a positive reply, a meeting was scheduled to conduct the interviews after discussing the study goals and informed consent procedures. All the participants were thus familiar with posting their captured experiences, sharing food posts, commenting and linking digital contents. It is important that the participants had an interest in food so that they were able to explain the meaning of their food-related posts and to reveal details on digital social exchanges. The participant selection focussed on users having at least 200 followers; this ensured that they had a social network with which to exchange their contents. My MA research has indeed led me to establish the requirement of a minimum of 200 followers in order for the media users to be able to have a high-traffic social network (Kozinet, 2002).

To present a detailed account of the netnographic research design and the process in which my data was analysed, I wish to first emphasise that my involvement enhanced my cultural understanding of the Instagram community, and therefore I did not need to “lurk”, as Beaulieu (2004) suggests (non-participative activity that was not needed as I was interested in the experience of participation in an online field site). Firstly, I looked at previous research (which topics have been considered and which have not). I then prepared to collect the type of data specific to Instagram (e.g., comments, ‘likes’, posts). My aim was to make a successful cultural entrée as I was fully aware that an entrée can make or break interaction (potentially leading the researcher to be rejected (Kozinets, 2010)). This demanded organisation and anticipation. It required me to understand the data while collecting it; to understand the needs of the community members (cultural realities of living); and to have an initial cultural understanding of the community (the codes, the etiquette, the social structures, the ways of speaking, rituals, identities, etc.).

The main challenge of the online ethnography was to properly identify the most valuable interviewees to the research. I selected a sample to avoid any bias which would consist of respondents who do not represent the group of interest. Thus, the sample was selected



according to Kozinet's (2002) criteria, which advocates a good segment, a group of participants of interest to the research, a high-traffic online network, a large number of posted comments giving a detailed source of data and a high interaction between members. I observed the digital profiles of active respondents who regularly posted and reacted to food-related posts and comments in their social networks. The exploration of these digital exchanges enabled me to identify a system of reciprocal exchanges in the digital sphere and to collect records of exchanges of their personal experiences.

Given the fact that participants were not randomly selected, snowball samples can be biased and tend to over-emphasise cohesiveness in a social group (Griffiths *et al.* 1993). Arrangements were employed to keep bias from the snowball methodology low. These limitations were addressed by using a sample which included both female and male from age 20 to 32. Eventually, I managed to recruit participants from different social and ethnic backgrounds to enrich the data and avoid the inclusion of individuals with inter-relationships (Griffiths *et al.* 1993) (see appendix 2: Table of respondents). This heterogeneous sample contained individuals, or groups of individuals, who differed from each other (Daymon and Hollo, 2002). Indeed, the participants had different lifestyles and came from different cultural backgrounds. This diversity was an important aspect of the research as it generated an excellent dynamic for the research and contributed to the research findings. The sampling approach and study object selection was properly addressed in order to avoid a biased sample.

Nevertheless, the snowball sampling was chosen for this research because the topic required trust and comfort to elicit information. Following the logic of my research approach, I adopted this sampling strategy to elaborate and refine the categories constituting my theory, and I conducted the research until no new properties emerge. Using this sampling strategy directed me appropriately, and I recruited participants from whom to collect data while still comparing this data with that from the beginning of the research. This strategy enabled me to identify emerging categories and relations between concepts and categories in order to adapt the sampling and informant selection to best meet my research objectives (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). I took into consideration Hood's (1983) experience to move back and forth between data collection and data analysis when conducting research. By doing so, categories emerged; in her research,

Hood (1983) was able to identify new gaps, and thus kept writing and analysing until all her theoretical categories were refined. My research compared various data to help me form conjectures about my research categories and thus advanced my inductive reasoning. It also prevented the possibility of getting stuck in my research or focussing on irrelevant data. The use of snowball sampling was beneficial to my research to keep moving forwards and meet my research objectives: distinguishing categories and saturating the properties of each given category. My sampling strategy gave me the data to delineate the properties of a category, conceptualise it, and inform me as to when I reached saturation of the theoretical categories. The data saturation suggests that sufficient data is collected and therefore replicated (Morse, 1991). The replication in categories is thus ensured to verify, and to offer a complete analysis of, the study.

Regarding the saturation of my theoretical categories, I used Glaser's sophisticated account of saturation:

Saturation is not seeing the same pattern over and over again. It is the conceptualisation of comparisons of these incidents which yield different properties of the pattern, until no new properties of the pattern emerge. This yields the conceptual density that when integrated into hypotheses make up the body of the generated grounded theory with theoretical completeness. (2001:191)

I conceptualised saturation as comparing my memo-writings with one another, in a repetitive fashion, until no new ideas could be produced. It was a repetitive and comparative work that led me to discern no new relationships between my memos. I was therefore able to confirm that data was sufficiently collected for me to gain an adequate understanding of the dimensions and properties of the concepts and emerging themes. Saturation is considered as a criterion that enables the establishment of the validity of a data set (Glaser, 2001), it argues that sampling should continue until categories are saturated. This research reached saturation and proved its credibility through the description of these saturated categories and the development of how this was meticulously achieved. For instance, when questions rapidly produced a superficial saturation, in which case the strategy adopted was not to claim that saturation was reached but rather further questions that require a more complex set of categories were developed. It was essential to adopt a critical analytical point of view and assess these categories and

how they were enacted. Dey (1999) challenges the imprecise use of the term saturation, and hence develops the term “theoretical sufficiency” (1999:257). Within this rhetoric, I took into consideration Dey’s argument which raises concerns about saturation, so I provided credible and legitimate saturated category analyses. I therefore adopted a flexible approach and when I got stuck, I intended to go back and forth to previous data so as to be able to refine novel ideas.

The next section of this thesis presents the research design and provides details as to how the research was conducted.

### Research Design

A multiple method strategy has been adopted to verify and create validity by analysing research questions from multiple perspectives. I gathered my data from different sources (interviews, netnography) and the combination of which was an asset for the data collection. The interviews were targeted and insightful (descriptions, explanation) while the netnography covered the real contextual behaviour of Instagram users.

This strategy proposed a richer and more balanced picture of the phenomenon; which can also be used as a cross-validation method (Elliott and Timulak, 2005). This enabled me to collect my data from different sources and to enrich my research findings (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2002). The following section develops the research design. The combination of two research methods is used to ensure credibility and rigor: the online observation indeed balanced out the narratives of the personal interviews, and either affirmed or refuted the spoken viewpoints.

### Interview protocol

The interviews provided an understanding of how and why media users were being involved in digital communities in order to exchange and display their identities. Each

informant's interview was audio recorded then transcribed to cross reference for key themes. The personal interviews conducted with media users were useful in terms of exploring how their participation in the digital communities impacted their social lives, relationships and selves. It helped me to further understand how and what forms of social capital and social bonds proliferate in the community. Accessing their thoughts and experiences also enabled me to analyse possible feelings of indebtedness or obligation. I conducted qualitative interviews in a semi-structured format because it was essential that my participants provided extensive accounts of their experience as media users. It was therefore important to lead open-ended interviews and develop an interview guide that did not impose too much structure on the participants.

My aim was to define the participants' roles, attitudes and perceptions when exchanging/participating in a specific context. The research drew on data from a series of qualitative interviews with respondents from my personal social network and from additional volunteers. The sample size of this study was always subject to change depending on the desired data collection reaching saturation. Fifteen interviews were conducted until no new concepts and ideas were identifiable. Fifteen interviewees thus took part in the study so as to allow for the collection of different perspectives (Guest *et al.* 2006). Following analysis of twelve sets of data, data saturation was claimed. However, three additional participants were recruited to ensure data saturation was achieved so no new themes were generated from the interviews. In many studies, saturation is established, but further collection takes place with the aim to validate that there are no new themes emerging (Jassim and Whitford, 2014).

The rationale for this sample was to provide 15 interviews, with long conversations to build and maintain close relationships with the interviewees and thus engender an open and honest exchange of information. Furthermore, each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes to provide a comprehensive analysis of each profile and collect as much detail as possible. The research questions of this thesis expected specific descriptions and explanations regarding the perceptions and attitudes that the media users adopted when involved on Instagram. Thus, the interview approach resembled a guided conversation in order to follow the respondents' responses and extract narratives in a naturalistic way. The interviews adopted a flexible stance and were adapted according to each respondents'

narratives. This enabled me to accentuate certain questions according to the circumstances of the interview (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

Thanks to qualitative interviews, I was able to explore the rationale and reasoning behind why media users participate in digital communities and the specific social practices involved in these communities. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012:4) support this idea and suggest that interviews allow one to “establish what really happened in a setting”. These interviews aimed to include questions that unravel personal experiences, emotions and feelings. Media users’ involvement in the digital media is a day-to-day concern in which people interact with each other according to their personalities and behaviour (Jenkins, 2006). Interviews therefore generated, and allowed the gathering, of a great amount of rich data for my research. Besides, being face to face with participants presented an opportunity to capture verbal and non-verbal cues which can indicate a level of discomfort or enthusiasm with, or towards, the questions (Seidman, 1998). Interviews thus addressed the limitations of online ethnography in that it failed to capture emotions and behaviour. Berger argues,

Interviews are one of the most widely used and most fundamental research techniques- and for a very good reason. They enable researchers to obtain information that they cannot gain by observation alone. (2011:135)

Although I was also able to collect information from observing media users’ digital account activity, there is no denying that the interviews enabled me to go beyond pure observation and provide the opportunity to converse with the respondents in order to better understand their attitudes and beliefs. The face-to-face interviews started once the consent forms that reviewed the purpose of the study were signed by the participants. This enabled them to feel secure and made them aware that the data was going to be kept confidential. Not only is the creation of a good connection with the participants important but the interview procedures are also an essential step in the research (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012). The more the participants trust the researcher, the more thoughts they share with him (Seidman, 1998). As a result, I needed to offer the participants a safe and trusting environment for discussion. I conducted interviews in a semi-private place (coffee shops, library rooms) in order to make sure the participants felt safe so that they were willing to share their thoughts, thanks to an informal type of conversation (Jacob and Furgerson, 2012). The interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

All the participants were asked the same set of questions, but which slightly differed depending on the interactions between the interviewee and myself. An interview guide was created based on the theoretical framework and literature under study to attest the initial reconnaissance of the field. Nevertheless, the guide was tailored for each interviewee to accommodate emerging themes and topics (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000). Following the recommendations of Hill *et al.* (2005), I asked my participants a few scripted questions (see appendix: interview guide attached) to allow for the opportunity for more extensive probing. This strategy was intended to avoid thin data and to gain an ample rich understanding of my participants' experiences.

Interviews began with warm-up questions on their social exchange habits and behaviour, followed with questions on their network and its influence. The questions were separated into three parts, each part focussing on a specific theoretical perspective (see appendix: interview guide attached). The questions examined what happens in specific digital-life circumstances, explored the routine usage of the digital platform, the respondents' experiences, norms, values, rituals and their expected behaviours. Since the questions took the form of a discussion-like conversation, respondents thus detailed their digital experiences and provided detailed accounts of their virtual social exchanges. The questions were classified from broad questions to more precise questions thanks to probing techniques used. The aim was to first let the participants express their views on their role in digital social exchange platforms, and then to lead them to more 'intimate' questions, for instance ways they feel in a specific situation.

Berger (2011:136) outlines four types of one-on-one interview: informal, unstructured, semi-structured, and structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were employed due to their flexible nature. Unstructured and informal interviews would provide unfocused data to explore, and would fail to cover certain topics that are of interest to this research. Similarly, structured interviews would not be suited to this research due to the lack of spontaneity and flexibility of this type of interview. The semi-structured interview welcomes unconsidered ideas and allows concepts to emerge (Bryman, 2012). Thus, it was determined that semi-structured interviews were most appropriate for this research due to their flexible yet organised nature. The semi-structured interview guide was established with flexible open-ended questions in order to probe and generate a deeper understanding of the topics in question (Morris, 2015). This technique encouraged

the participants to give long, elaborated answers rather than to restrict their views due to a set of close-ended questions. The use of open-ended questions is appropriate for this research in order to encourage the participants to talk about anything that comes to their mind and to explore unexpected aspects of the topic. During the ‘warm-up session’, it was important to ask general and open-ended questions in order to open the discussion between the researcher and the participant. The aim was to establish a trustworthy relationship between the participants and the researcher in order to slowly incorporate precise questions.

The disadvantage of open-ended questions is the risk of misunderstanding (Wimmer and Dominick 1997:140). This is why the merging of both interviews and netnography further developed narratives and meanings to enrich outcomes and reduced each of the method’s limitations. Multi methods approach is often utilised in qualitative research to acquire corroborating evidence (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2009). My two sources of data sought to corroborate the findings of my study and verify the accuracy of the developed themes.

Nevertheless, different techniques were used such as probing, which is defined by Patton (1990:238) as “an interview tool to go deeper into the interview responses”. This technique aimed to increase trustful interactive dialogues between the participants and the researcher. Probing was essential in order to go deeper into the participants’ thoughts and reduce misunderstandings during the interview process. My interview guide questions encouraged the respondents to express their feelings/motives when posting, ‘liking’, or commenting digital contents. Most probing questions began with ‘what,’ ‘why’ or ‘how’, which is crucial to eliciting information (Hill *et al.* 2005). It was therefore vital to collect meaningful data by probing my questions, for instance:

“Do you feel like you have a relationship with the people whose posts you comment on/ the people who ‘like’ your posts?”

“Can you explain further what makes you post, comment, ‘like’ a content in the digital community?”

“How exactly do you feel when another media user replies to some of the content you posted?”

This strategy reduced the chance of expected response. I thus facilitated deep reflection through simple probes such as ‘in what way?’ ‘can you develop this idea’; ‘give me examples’. I also helped respondents to engage in analysing their own practices via elicitation exercises: To elicit fruitful discussion on the participants’ social exchanges in digital communities, an iPad was used to scroll through their pictures and navigate their online profiles at the end of the interviews. Participants were given the iPad in order to let them scroll through digital content such as videos, pictures or comments. The use of visual content helped the participants to think critically about their social exchange experiences and practices and to encourage them in explicitly commenting on their posts (Heisley and Levy, 1991). This technique, which relates to autodiving, enabled the participants to explain their involvement in the online community further (Hurworth, 2003). Autodiving is a term that refers to showing the respondents’ digital behaviour and asking them to explicitly comment on their digital exchanges and contributions. It engaged the participants deeper in the conversation and helped them to recall events, feelings and emotions. Digital content material used during the interviews acted as a stimulus to gather a deeper understanding of their role as media users involved in the digital sphere (Harper, 2002). This autodiving technique was used to harness collective thoughts and to create an atmosphere prone to spontaneous and creative ideas.

Furthermore, the research used photo elicitation interviews (see appendix: Photo elicitation Activity attached) to engage media users in terms of reflecting upon their own practices. Elicitation interviews refers to the insertion of a visual object (Harper, 2002) which in this specific research included a set of generic Instagram food pictures during the research interview. The use of pictures helped sharpen memories and elicit longer and more comprehensive narratives. Clarke-Ibanez (2004) argues that the use of pictures provides a context for reflection and reduces the chance of an expected response. She also suggests that simple probes deepen reflections. In my study, the elicitation activity uncovered questions that aimed to drive reflection and analysis concerning social sharing practices, exchanges and gift practices.

[Online observation protocol / Virtual ethnography protocol](#)



In discussing the limitations of my methodological approach, I acknowledged the limits of conducting interviews. Although the ethnographic approach does not provide access to physical cues, it leads this research to rich data outcomes (Hine, 2000). Online ethnography is a qualitative research methodology which adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of online communities (Kozinets, 1997). I have decided to conduct an online ethnography because it offers new forms of social interaction to explore (Hine, 2008).

Hine (2008) highlights the idea that social networking sites have provided alternative ways to conduct ethnographic research. Previous research using online ethnography (Wetsch, 2008; Skågeby, 2008) emphasises the importance of the immersion to ensure a good understanding and interpretation of the data. Over the past years, many sociologists and researchers have written about the need to adapt existing research techniques to the various communities that emerge from online communications (Kozinets, 1998; Miller and Slater, 2000). Being an insider was undoubtedly an advantage. An intrusive observation of the media users when contributing to and exchanging within the online communities enabled me to gain insights as to the respondents' social behaviours, feelings and perceptions. Media platforms such as Instagram correspond to a social context in which individuals engage and participate in a digital community. It is important to study people in their everyday contexts in order to observe and understand them (Saule, 2002). The posts, description boxes (space to describe a post), videos, pictures and comments were used as a window to gain access to naturally occurring behaviours. The participants who were interviewed also participated in the netnographic research, with the aim of collecting data on their social exchange behaviour. The respondents' daily activities were observed and followed through their Instagram username accounts. Given the digital context of this research, I was able to monitor the respondents within the Instagram platform by using an account exclusively created for the purpose of this study (@Janson51).

I observed the respondents' Instagram accounts in great depth for a period of eight weeks with the aim of providing data from a practical perspective of active participants in the digital world. The rationale behind limiting the observation to an eight-week period can be explained through a consideration of the abundance of visual materials in the platform. The eight-week observation intended to include several life and personal events (e.g.

celebration, birthdays, dinners, seasonal change(s), holidays and working life experiences) to convey a whole vision of the behaviour of the respondents in the digital environment. The food being posted at specific times or events triggered different meanings and associations regarding the respondent's digital exchanges. The online ethnographic method I conducted aimed to uncover the social practices of media users thanks to a full immersion in their world. The observation of the digital platform suits the research strategies, which focus on cultural and social aspects, and refer to new forms of social interaction and sociability. Besides, the benefits of selecting this setting included the large number of participants who regularly post, 'like', and comment on digital content. Indeed, Gerlitz and Helmond (2013:16) note that a "click on the 'like' button is supposed to be exposed to a user's contacts and thus generate both traffic and more activities". Furthermore, the 'like' button is defined as a sign of support and appreciation (Lee and Lee, 2017; Tong and Walther, 2011). The observation of digital gestures such as 'like' and comments thus informed me as to the type of exchanges performed within the digital community. The observation in general allowed me to make sense of the community building via these interactions.

Although the netnography did not provide long descriptive narratives (as the interviews of this research provided), it helped to understand the complexity of exchanges. By observing those food posts, 'likes' and comments, I was able to understand how social exchange created forms of social capital and social obligations. While the interviews enabled me to explain motivations and feelings, the netnography allowed me to access emotions and perceptions through images and to explore how "each individual produces meanings by relating the image to his or her existing personal experience, knowledge and wider cultural discourses" as the ethnographer Pink suggests (2007:82). The advantage of ethnographic research lies in the immersion that allowed me to become part of the study and obtain an insider's perspective (Goffman, 1989). The opportunity to be immersed and have access to the daily contents, and social practices, of the respondents offered new dimensions for understanding both the context and the phenomenon of the research. Indeed, Goffman (1989: 125) emphasises the idea that as a consequence of immersion "you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation". It is a key methodology in the interpretive research paradigm which includes observation and collects contextual information. The method therefore meets the research objectives as it insures total immersion and avoids memory loss (on the part

of the participants). The aim was to access the subconscious feelings of each participant when they made decisions within their natural environment.

### Ethical considerations

Two separate consent forms (see appendix: Interview and Observation Consent forms attached) were given to the participants to detail the confidentiality of the research data. The respondents were aware of the procedures and the purpose of my research before being involved. Their participation was voluntary, and they had the choice to either answer the questions, or decline to answer if they felt uncomfortable. The issue of anonymity in the interviews is equally paramount to qualitative research; therefore, I used pseudonyms to identify the participants when presenting their narratives. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006: 6) state that “during interviewing, the interviewee may share information that could jeopardise his or her position in a system”. Thus, it was explained to the interview participants that all the data would be kept private. The participants’ views and personal details were transcribed and used for research purposes only. Additionally, the signed consent forms and the interview records of the participants’ voices were accessible only to myself and were stored in a safe place (protected on my computer with a password). Similarly, pictures were screenshotted and saved using external software to provide a safe archive for photos and digital scripts. Regarding the interviews, although a respondent’s discomfort with being recorded is considered to be a disadvantage, “most researchers find that after some initial wariness, respondents tend to forget they are being taped” (Merriam, 2009:109). Furthermore, the relaxed atmosphere during the interviews reduced any potential unease or feelings of anxiety.

Since the research is looking for personal experiences, trust was fundamental and had to be respected. The choice of using a snowball sampling for interview based research was appropriate as it ensured some degree of trust, as indeed “trust may be developed as referrals are made by acquaintances or peers rather than other more formal methods of identification” (Miller and Brewer, 2003 :276). I worked at constructing an ethical identity with each of my participant in order to establish a relationship of trust (Kong *et al.* 2002), therefore, I spent time getting to know them before each interview. The trustful relationship triggered the participants to confess easily their reasons for posting, ‘liking’

and commenting. They also admitted practicing fake posting and revealed having insecurities when exchanging with other media users. I managed to combine a sampling strategy that helped me built trust with my participants who were able to provide rich and thick descriptions for my data analysis. This research aimed to discover the participants' feelings and perceptions, rather than collect potentially harmful intimate details of their lives or followers' lives. If my research collected private and sensitive information about other individuals who were not participants in the research, these "others" were considered third-party research participants. Generally, in these situations, whenever informed consent can be sought, it is best to obtain it from the third party, depending on the urgency, practicability, and cost of obtaining it. I therefore considered whether any third party was adversely affected by the research, but no-one was so affected to the best of my knowledge. I applied the standard codes of conduct to maintain high ethical standards so that the findings collected did not cause harm to the participants. Qualitative research often raises concerns about the protection of confidentiality, not only for the participants but also for any third parties mentioned in the transcribed narratives (Hadjistavropoulos and Smyth, 2001). If a third party was mentioned by one of the respondents in a negative statement, this statement was not included in my research. For instance, when a participant mentioned a third party in a derogatory manner, I removed the identity of the third party in order to avoid any harm. Consequently, all types of derogatory identification including names, physical traits, lifestyles or addresses do not appear in my research.

Similarly, all legal procedures were followed to ensure the legal rights of the participants who took part in the ethnographic research. The online ethnographic method required consideration of the ethical dimension of research practices. I followed the ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research in order to respect the autonomy and dignity of the individuals involved. Such guidelines also aim to maximise any benefits and minimise any harm, which is considered a social responsibility as a researcher (British Psychological Society, 2017). I carefully examined the five steps to maintain proper ethical conduct: informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, debriefing and netiquette. Informed consent offered the participants the choice of withdrawal; confidentiality secured the participants' anonymity, privacy was maintained by observing only 'public' profiles; debriefing offered a feedback procedure after the research process and netiquette took into consideration appropriate behaviour to adopt online. The potential for an online

ethnography to harm people is a genuine risk. It was therefore important that I followed strict ethical guidelines to ensure that my netnographic research was not perceived as disrespectful or intrusive, potentially damaging the reputation of my participants. As Ess (2002) argues, media users can share personal information online and discuss intimate topics, psychological, medical status or sexual orientation. The use of such personal information can result in shame or threats to individual wellbeing (Grimes *et al.* 2009). As mentioned, I observed the media users who took part in my qualitative interviews and their network. The interviewees were given a second consent form specific to the online ethnography. This form ensured the confidentiality of the data collected. It seems important to mention the matter of ethics in online ethnographic research, which has become a topic of much debate (Hine, 2000). Indeed, the main ethical issue regarding this research was that of the participants' followers and friends who consecutively joined the research. In response to this issue, I agree with Cavanagh who notes in her discussion of the ethics of online ethnography that:

Sociology has long accepted that public behaviours are a legitimate object for research insofar as such research focuses on the forms of interaction, rather than the acts of any individual. (1999: Issue 6)

I therefore observed media users who have a public profile, which means that they have set their privacy setting to 'public'. Indeed, I believe that a public digital profile implicitly gives permission for its contents to be analysed, discussed, or commented on by readers. The main focus was on the respondents who signed the consent forms and who were aware of the purpose of the research. My respondents' friends and followers' posts were considered in order to help me to give meaning to the context. I am aware that their privacy can easily be violated by quoting their exact words (Hine, 2000). Indeed, powerful search engines can index websites so that the original message and account username can be retrieved by anyone using the direct quote as a query, which is why I anonymised all Instagram users' account names. Also, there is a certain degree of ambiguity regarding users' expectations and understandings of privacy. Rosenberg (2010) examined the public/private distinction in the realm of virtual worlds, and suggested that it remains unclear whether Internet users truly understand if and when their online activity is regularly monitored and tracked. I therefore provided a detailed description of the procedures and the purpose of this research, and I also applied "private

information” to ensure that subject’s privacy was properly addressed. In the consent form, it was noted that web research can trace any data so that the participants are fully aware of their involvement in the ethnographic research (British Psychological Society, 2017).

Following the set of ethical concerns developed by Wiles *et al.* (2008) on qualitative visual research, I ensured anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, copyright, data sharing and archiving throughout the process of this research; this procedure protected the data collected by my netnographic approach. I took my responsibility to protect the anonymity of (1) the individuals (third parties) taking part in the research who did not sign the consent form, and (2) the individuals who signed the consent and shared intimate details that could cause harm to their lives were it to become public. I remained sensitive about managing ethical risks. Direct quotes were used with care and sensitivity (because of traceability). A communication perceived as public at the time (an Instagram post for instance) might become private at a much later date. This is why only the postings of the people who signed the consent form were analysed and subsequently appear in my thesis (if there is no associated harm that could be caused to the participant or a third party). Simply put, I followed Kozinets’ (2010) research ethics on the conduct of a netnography in that (a) I fully disclosed my presence and intentions to the Instagram community members; (b) I ensured confidentiality and anonymity of informants; and (c) I sought and incorporated feedback from members of the online community being researched (notion developed in the next section).

### [Evaluation of research results](#)

This section discusses the criteria and approach that are applied in order to obtain meaningful, rich and reliable data to analyse. This leads to the analysis section, which discusses the data evaluation for the methodology adopted in this research. The last section examines several points and limitations that a qualitative researcher needs to consider.

### Reliability and validity

Numerous strategies advocate quality and rigour within qualitative studies (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) states that validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should address while designing a study. A coherent methodology, a sufficient sample size and a consistent relationship between the data collection and data analysis ensured the reliability and validity of the research (Meadows, 2001). The data collected needed to be reliable in order to ensure the authenticity of the research findings. It is well known that qualitative research is often criticised for its lack of scientific rigour and that its findings are based on a subjective viewpoint (Rolfe, 2006). Many scholars have argued that validity cannot be applied in the instance of qualitative research because of the researcher's perceptions of validity and his subjective assumptions. Qualitative researchers have, therefore, developed their own vision of validity and adopted appropriate strategies to ensure quality and rigour in their research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Davies and Dodd, 2002). Demonstrating rigour through the methods adopted and through the transparency in the analytical procedures of the research were essential. Rigour was a desirable goal which was reached through specific verification strategies. Verification considered the philosophical perspectives inherent to this qualitative research, and thus the strategies used enabled me to identify when to continue, stop, or adjust the process of the research in order to achieve appropriate rigour (Creswell, 1997). As discussed in the previous sections, the methodological approach suited the research questions and the analytic procedures. It was indeed essential to achieve a methodological coherence in order to meet the goals of the research.

The strategy to combine different methods approaches stems from Yin's principle of reliability (2009) which supports the maintenance of the chain of evidence gathered and the use of multiple sources of evidence. The use of multiple research methods not only produced a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study but also authenticated data gathering and analysis tactics. The respondents' food pictures and screenshots of their profiles (comments, hashtags, 'likes', description box) were paired with interview transcripts to increase the validity of the data analysis. Visual data strengthened the insights by conveying the dynamics of exchanges and patterns of interactions. Demunck

and Sobo (1998) provided several advantages to using participant observation as it not only afforded access to the "backstage culture" which provided a credible and richly detailed description, but it also improved the quality of data interpretation and facilitated the development of analysis. Also, the netnography has enabled me to observe events and situations that respondents described during the interviews and to evaluate potential biases or check for inaccuracies.

Finally, to ensure the codes fitted the data, the respondents of the study gave input as in validating the findings. The corrections made by the respondents through subsequent reviews further enhanced the accuracy of the research claims. Checking the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods ensured the provision of valid and trustworthy findings (Patton, 2002). The data samplings techniques, data gathering processes and the sampling size of this research were meaningful and were developed separately to generate valid and reliable findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer alternative criteria for demonstrating rigour within qualitative research such as truth value, consistency and neutrality, and applicability. These components are discussed in the reflection section.

### Data Analysis

This section describes the combination of deductive coding and inductive coding that form a coherent account of the research analysis to interpret raw data. The methodological approach integrates data-driven codes with theory-driven ones based on the tenets of social phenomenology. I explain the different stages of the process of data coding from the raw data toward the identification of themes. In this research, thematic analysis was used to establish the ways an existing theory, gift-giving theory, operates when applied to the digital community. The analysis procedure aimed to assess the ways gift-giving practices apply to digital media practices. Thanks to the inductive approach, the thematic analysis was data driven (the themes identified are strongly linked to the data) (Patton, 1900), the deductive approach (theoretical thematic analysis) was driven by my theoretical and analytical interest in the area of gift-giving practices (Hayes, 1997). The choice of both inductive and theoretical approaches for my thematic analysis were aimed at: (1) coding for a specific research question (theoretical/ deductive approach); (2) identifying a specific question that can evolve through the coding process (inductive



approach). Straus and Corbin (1998) provided a practical way of how to code data, this research has been inspired by their framework to code the data. Also, I coded my data drawing upon Bryman's (2012) recommendations, which organised my data in a structured manner.

#### Interview and Online Observation (netnography) Analysis:

The analysis started during the data collection period, and was thoroughly incorporated into all its aspects, including an analysis of each interview immediately after they were conducted (and online observation). This method allowed each step of the data collection to feed in to my analysis. Throughout the process, I evaluated and compared various sets of data, and followed specific procedures to elaborate and develop theoretical codes. Qualitative coding refers to categorising, selecting and separating data segments, with short labels that summarise each piece of data. This is the first step in developing an analytical interpretation of the data. In accordance with Rubin and Rubin's (1995: 226) statement, I discovered "themes and concepts embedded" throughout my interviews. Thematic analysis is a method used for recognising, categorising, and reporting patterns within data. The idea within thematic analysis is to identify the various themes that emerge. The thematic approach was developed to identify five main themes that brought the topic towards an in-depth level of analysis. The themes that were identified are as follows: reciprocity, social capital, identity, indebtedness, social rules and loneliness. These themes have all been discovered and developed through the use of food as a medium of exchange in the digital environment. However, the study's set of research questions required a more inductive approach to provide the unexpected, and to permit more socially-located responses from interviewees that included personal experiences, events in their lives, and habits of posting.

During the analysis process, I raised the principal questions suggested by Charmaz (2006): What is going on? What are people doing? What is this person saying? What do these statements take for granted? These analytic suggestions helped me to code media users' acts, activities, meanings, relationships, digital participation and setting. These

following questions not only furthered my comprehension of Instagram users' life but also helped me orientate data-gathering toward the analytic issue of my research questions. After the transcription of each interview, I followed Bryman's (2012) four stages of qualitative analysis. I first read the transcripts and identified chunks of text to which coding applied. These were sentences, phrases or sometimes paragraphs. I grouped cases into categories. Then, I read the scripts again and marked the text using colour coding (underlining, circles, highlighting). I highlighted key words and noted analytic ideas by labelling codes. In the third step, I reviewed the codes one by one so that I could eliminate the recurring codes or combine similar ones (groupings). Finally, in the last stage I related general theoretical ideas to the text, that is to say, I interpreted and made sense of my findings. I refined the coding and identified the significant codes and the interconnections between them. I identified codes showing actions and indicating feelings that provided reasoning as to why the respondents chose to participate in the digital social communities. Then, I started to build categories of codes. By unifying my ideas analytically, I developed concrete events and descriptions into theoretical insights and possibilities which led me to writing my memos. I defined theoretical insights as the explanatory scheme that included concepts related to each other via logical patterns of connectivity (Birks and Mills, 2011).

Memo-writing constitutes a fundamental method because it prompts data analysis and codes (Glaser, 1998). Writing memos was beneficial to my research as it kept me involved in the analysis process where I formed theoretical categories. I made heavy use of memos in the comparison and construction of my data, codes, categories and concepts. For instance, in the memo, I established 'liking as a social requirement and expectation' as a category I aimed to analyse. I argued that the act of 'liking' has a deeper meaning than simply double-tapping on the screen as a sign of appreciation of the content. Hence, I formed a definition of how 'liking' acts as a social act and responsibility in the digital sphere. The respondents offered enigmatic stories and personal experiences, expressing the social pressure that made them act in a certain way on Instagram. The respondents' discourses included nuances of moral obligation and social codes to follow (the audio records were useful as to assess their tone and identify the emotional scope of the narratives). For instance, the category 'liking as social requirement and expectation' included codes that fit together and implied: feelings of anxiety and pressure; awareness of the social conduct to adopt; and duty to maintain social bonds. I connected these

conceptions and wrote memos to clarify how the act of ‘liking’ in the digital community turns into a social duty and responsibility. It also prompted me to create a list of situations in which ‘liking’ is an expected gesture as part of a reciprocal exchange. The memo incited me to compare, to go back and forth between my data and link it to my categories. In my research, I used memo as a free-flowing and personal stage to advance my thinking, probe data and define categories.

Within my thematic analysis, I collected interview data, and identified themes related to social exchanges and gift-giving practices. In addition, my theoretical approach led me to direct my interest and focus on particular features in coding the data. Thus, I started with research interests on social capital and reciprocity but also pursued other topics. For instance, I felt compelled to explore the respondents’ concerns to follow certain rules on the social platform, and also the notions of calculation and spontaneity which were emerging categories. I worked closely with the text to obtain insights into the participants’ experiences and perspectives of their social life. Recurring codes emerged and enabled me to identify the patterns of meaning (thoughts and feelings) through the transcribed texts. Those patterns helped me to define the main themes that mattered. Some themes came out early in the analysis, while others required an in-depth exploration of the patterns. The goal was to collect data to saturate the categories until no more themes emerged from the interviews. Thematic analysis lies within the interpretive approach in which the emphasis is placed in the views, beliefs, and feelings of individuals. The development of the themes themselves involves interpretative work. It therefore enabled me to develop a framework that explains the participant’s practices and it allowed me to fully incorporate the rich contexts of the media users on Instagram, to gain a deep understanding of their behaviours and social exchanges practices.

Thematic analysis is related to phenomenology as it focuses on the human experience subjectively (Guest, 2012). It covers interpretative realities of the participants themselves, their feelings and experiences as object of the study. The approach allows the participants to discuss the phenomenon in their own words. From my perspective, data analysis, coding and memo-writing were all combined within my analysis procedures, and all occupy a major role within my phenomenological research. I moved back and forth between my codes and categories to extract the main concepts of my analysis. My interests and concerns regarding the process of my snowball sampling and

saturation led me to construct a robust set of categories. Within this phenomenological approach, the capture of memos and the creation of diagrams helped in the analytical framing of my study.

I used diagrams as part of my analysis procedure (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Being a visual learner, I relied on colour coding and brainstorming diagrams (see appendix 4, 5 and 6: brainstorming diagram and colour coding examples) for my research analysis to help me create a good visual representation of categories and their relationships. I mainly used figures and maps to tease out relationships while the development of my analysis ensured I covered and identified all categories and connections one with another. I used diagrams at all stages of my research, mainly to see the scope of my categories. As an analytical device, I looked at Clarke's (2003) abstract of situational map and messy working version in order to make sense of how data moves and to integrate my memos.

The visual materials of this study were properly analysed through a meticulous approach to the specific case of Instagram. The practices of photo sharing, comment posting, description box written text, hashtags, and emoticons were analysed according to their specific digital context. As Bock *et al.* (2011:272) note, "analysing visual contents is almost impossible without considering the context in which the visual was produced and finally received". The analysis via a netnographic method thus delivered coherent data for the study of Instagram-related experiences within the digital context. After collecting the data, I provided the essence of the participants' experience, that is to say, I explained their online experience, the reasons for, and consequences of, their involvement in social media. Using Moustakas (1994) approach for analysing the data helped to provide a structured approach. I was able to understand what it meant for them to be involved in digital social media by interpreting their online activity (comments, description boxes, captions, hashtags). Through my analysis, I was able to make sense of the digital exchange practices. Reading comments and description boxes enabled me to understand the content, structure and functions of the digital exchanges and their meanings. It also made me aware of the variety of ways in which the media users interpret their world. I then highlighted clusters of meaning in order to develop a description of the participants' experiences.

The netnography was used following the idea that analysing visual content is almost impossible without a consideration of the context in which such content is produced and received (Pink, 2007). Photographs alone do not represent emotions, power relations, social relations, etc., and thus needed to be conceptualised through appropriate verbal discourse (Pink, 2007). My visual analysis relied on pictures, comments and ‘likes’ which extended my understanding by focusing on my participants’ disclosures (how they curated their contributions) and experiences (the nature of their posts). The posts were interpreted through classification and categorization of visual material. Thanks to my thematic analysis, the visual data was translated into categories (i.e., celebration, loneliness, happiness, etc.) to identify themes. Examining the interpretation of the participants’ understandings of the meanings of each of the pictures enabled me to collect different meanings for different informants and extract themes and patterns.

The netnography enabled me to uncover the patterns of the concepts of identity and social capital. The analysis of food images indeed revealed rich meanings, feelings, and beliefs. To analyse images, I denoted them purely on a descriptive level to then develop ideas (connotation). I recognised how food images had positive and negative connotations depending on the social and personal experiences of the media users. Also, the food images carried strong cultural and emotional associations in addition to their literal meanings (denotation). Hermeneutic interpretations suited my field of study to focus on the relationships between representations, intended meanings, and interpretations of signs and symbols (Baškarada and Koronios, 2013). The construction of meanings is based on the supposition that the whole of human experience is an interpretive activity mediated by signs (Deely, 1990); this is why Instagram exchanges were interpreted as being underpinned by sign-systems. Based on Moustakas’ approach (1994), the researcher also needs to write about his personal experience. I therefore followed Moustakas procedures and reflected on my personal experience in order to explain the context that influenced my experience, which was an essential variable to consider in the analysis process of the study. My analysis helped me to contrast meaning and interpretation from images and texts. It enabled me to take into consideration how signs, symbols and text are based on the frame of reference and informs as to how media users interpret and construct different meanings. This aspect of the research provided extremely rich data outcomes.

I used food as a social component, as it was easier for me to explore the associated meanings. Since food enables one to tell a lot about oneself, I was able to explore how food is associated with value and how it is transcribed into identity dimensions. Looking at the visual posts enabled me to better comprehend social exchanges. I was able to go beyond the notion of nutrition and extract the food codes and messages that give an impression of the Instagram community exchange mechanisms. I interpreted food as codes in which cultural patterns were embedded. Food enabled me to encode social events, to access emotions, to understand narratives, and to identify narratives of exchange.

For instance, during my netnographic analysis, I appreciated how useful Meigs' (1996) and Douglas' (1966, 1971, 1975) work on food codes were for my research reasoning and analytical scope. I focussed my interpretation on nutritive aspects of food and approaches to eating (setting, background, utensils, colours) to explore social meaning and functions. Besides, I was able to explore emotions of fear, disgust or appreciation towards certain types of food. The notion of fear of a specific food, as developed by Meigs (1996) through the concept of 'nu', has enabled me to understand the embedded cultural patterns and emotions for my netnographic analysis and interviews. I also focussed on the meals exposing friendship and the edible and non-edible food associated with specific settings. This enabled me to understand how commensality and food sharing was portrayed on Instagram and the associated emotional dimensions. I was able to identify certain patterns and rules that revealed much about social structures and the decision as to what / what not to post. The posts were used more intensively to ask the participants about their intentions when they took the pictures and the meanings they attributed to them in an effort to explore their relationship with the themes of the research in greater depth. The netnographic analysis presented significant information regarding the presence or indeed absence of certain elements and the way in which these elements are photographed (for example, whether particular food items are recurrent to provide certain meanings). What emerged is that the images photographed usually led to a series of comments from which the social exchanges were accessible and identifiable. These usually gave answers to the meanings assigned to particular posts and to their social interactions.

The photo elicitation exercise enabled me to focus on how media users constructed their exchanges, as I was able to interpret the associated social exchanges instead of focussing on 'who', 'what' and 'where'. The elicitation activity enabled me to make sense of the social interactions by giving meanings to specific pictures combined with other knowledge. The choice of pictures was well thought out and conceived. My aim was to display several photos in which 'food codes' and patterns were distinguishable and differed from one another to elicit the majority of the participants' thoughts. By the term 'food codes', I refer to the linguistic term 'food meanings' established by anthropologists (Douglas, 1971; Meigs, 1996; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Appadurai, 1988; Brillat-Savarin, 1825; Elias, 1978). Each of the pictures presented different aesthetic characteristics and different manners and preparation on a deeper level of interpretation.

As images are thought to connect with a deeper sense of the human consciousness than words (Harper, 2002), the photo elicitation provided a model of collaboration in research where the participants interpreted their photos and meanings for the researcher (Loeffler, 2004) and used pictures as a stimulus to elicit richer accounts of the phenomena under study (Frith and Harcourt, 2007). For each photo, my participants were asked, "what does this photo represent (about you, your profession, your hobbies, personality, habits)?", usually with follow-up probes to elicit the meanings and histories of specific ideas. The aim was to answer why these ideas were important, and how these ideas were embodied in everyday activities or conceptions of practice through the use of different food codes and meanings. As such, when commenting on the cake picture, the various informants drew attention to a number of more specific issues: the type of chocolate used; the colours and the fondant applied to the cake. For example, one of the participants felt it was important to describe how it was prepared, going on to describe the profile of the person involved in preparing/ buying and eating this cake. In this study, the images used in the photo-elicitation activities facilitated the participants' ability to associate and elaborate meanings. The photo elicitation enabled a collaborative meaning-making process in which empathy between the participants and myself was established.

### Reflections:

This section presents the main issues/limitations that I took into consideration in order to provide rich data that was both reliable and ethical to analyse. I ensured that I honoured patents, copyrights, and other forms of intellectual property. I did not use data, methods, or results without permission. I also gave proper acknowledgement or credit for all contributions to research.

I carefully examined the five steps to maintain ethical conduct: informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, debriefing and netiquette (Madge, 2007). Informed consent offered the participants the choice of withdrawal; confidentiality secured the participants' anonymity; privacy was maintained by observing only 'public' profiles; debriefing offered feedback procedures after the research process and netiquette took into consideration the appropriate behaviour to adopt online (Madge, 2007).

As a researcher, when conducting qualitative research, it was essential that I considered people's experiences, which were context-bound (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Both the values of the researcher and the participants become a central part of the research (Smith, 1983). It seemed therefore important to consider my own position in the setting of my research. The limitations of my qualitative approach related to my commitment and subjective meanings. Indeed, my involvement in the digital media could have clouded the interpretation of the data and impacted on the research findings. As result, I followed Gubas's model (1981) to ensure the trustworthiness of my research and used different strategies to avoid distortions in understanding. For instance, I collected various points of view, different frames of reference and took time to observe the social interactions and participation of media users in their community. As Gubas's model suggests, in order to ensure credibility, I used different methods (interviews and netnography) to support and verify my data. An account for credibility lies in the emerging themes' process, as it is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it refutes my active role as a researcher to detect and pick the themes which are of interest. I therefore did not fall for a naïve view of qualitative research where a research gives voice to the respondents, instead I developed a solid analysis procedure.

For the purposes of this study, the photo-elicitation method allowed my participants to reflect on their experiences (in the past, in the present, and potentially in the future) and the meanings associated with these experiences. Methodologically speaking, this was



likely to generate rich and interesting data due to the power the photos have within the interview context. By using photo elicitation within interviews, I gained a “phenomenological sense” (Harper, 1986: 23) of what the content of the photos meant to the participants, and it allowed people to share and define issues or concerns they have (Berg and Lune, 2013). However, there is a limitation that needs to be addressed regarding the selection of the pictures for the elicitation exercise that may cloud the research findings. I self-selected photos when eliciting data about media users’ experiences and understanding of food pictures on Instagram. When analysing the images, there is a risk that the researcher may, in some cases, contaminate these with his/her personal understandings and interpretations regardless of the actual understandings and intentions of the participants of the research. I presented the photos that I had previously selected to frame the direction of the study. In this way, the use of specific photos (being preselected beforehand) in the interview setting was not just in order to steer the discussion, but to also stimulate memory in a manner that standardised questions might not (Collier, 1957). In my role of researcher, I constantly strived to strike the correct balance between the desire to let informants express themselves freely, being open to unexpectedly interesting insights that arise during the course of the research, and rigour in ensuring research objectives are addressed and discussion is re-directed to the subject of inquiry. Specifically, the photos provided a dynamic perspective of the ongoing experiences of my participants. The reason for self-selecting the pictures was because I needed to target specific types of foods that represented different habits, notions and lifestyles. To do so, I therefore gathered decadent chocolate cake pictures, healthy snacks, meaty and cheesy burger shots. The idea was to use different foods to enable the researcher to understand the associated meanings that the participants were discussing, where this method offered a profound level of agency, and thus power, in the research process for the participants.

My aim was to promote a more direct involvement of the participants in the research process and to encourage and stimulate the collection of different information to that obtained in the interviews. The potential limitations of this technique are linked to the preselection of pictures and the individuals’ own judgment and interpretations. Nevertheless, for my research, the most important aspect was not so much what was photographed but rather the different food codes displayed and the interpretation and attitudes of the participants towards each of them. The participants were free to interpret

these pictures according to their own preferences, and the photo selection was rich enough to display a wide spectrum of different food items, preparations and meanings. Concepts of “who I am,” and what “that kind of person this represents” can be difficult to articulate. However, the elicitation exercise made it easy to represent situations, uncover preferences for certain foods and discuss certain habits or lifestyles. While the interview protocol asked participants to explain what they thought of the meanings of the pictures they had posted, the addition of photographs (elicitation activity) led to deep and nuanced explanations of these understandings. The preselection of the pictures ensured the depth of these understandings which was apparent in the participants’ use of metaphorical reasoning, wherein photos were used as metaphors or symbols for meanings and understandings that were quite personal to the participant.

Finally, in order to ensure trustworthiness of the research, appropriate criteria for qualitative research suggest different methods such as member checks, peer reviews, and multiple research methods. Member checks are agreed to be essential to establishing the accuracy and credibility of qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), to ensure the views are presented correctly to remove any suspicion of bias. The participants reviewed the report that reflected their views, feelings, and experiences, so that the study can be said to have credibility from this perspective (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

#### Chapter 4: Understanding the role of food on Instagram

I argue that the concepts of reciprocity and social exchanges in pre-modern societies are crucial to understand media users' involvement in digital media. I aim to describe how media users' interactions resemble a number of characteristics of gift exchange commonly referred to in the sociology and anthropology literature (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1954; Gregory, 1962; Sahlins, 1972). This study presents how media users use digital social media to objectify food posts through forms of ritual exchange. The process of objectification enables individuals to create a world of theirs in digital form through posting content and exchanging them.

This chapter presents the empirical context of the study in order to understand the gift-giving practice. I explain the crucial role of food in the contemporary culture of digital social exchanges. This chapter aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how social exchanges are maintained and formed in the digital sphere, thanks to the medium of food. The respondents were able to explain the scope of their social exchanges practices thanks to food-related posts. The findings are illustrated by quotes and personal stories which were useful to understand how food spurs gift-giving practices and encourages social exchanges in the digital sphere.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss how food enables my sample of media users to exchange meaningful posts that spark and stimulate their digital participation. Food is a common interest which is used to strengthen social bonds. Food posts binds therefore media users together. This study demonstrates that food and social media are embedded in the lives of individuals, and play a major role in social exchanges in contemporary society. The second section of this chapter uses the gift-giving framework within the digital context to present how food posts entail the dimensions of reciprocity and obligation. Mauss' theory of gift-giving exchange therefore enables me to explore how social exchanges are produced in the Instagram platform. This part focuses on the online context in which individuals connect, post, exchange and reciprocate.

### 1) Food: the digital medium of social exchanges

The focus and interest in food contribute to provide meaning to digital social culture. The findings demonstrate that food can expose media users' attitudes, practices, social

relationships and serves as a medium of exchange between media users. How can gift practices in the digital economy be understood? This can be answered thanks to the exploration of digital exchanges, as they provide the means to maintain social relations and create hospitality among people. The social media platform allows to explore cultural practices and the role of food as a social lubricant in online media.

I explore how food, in online exchanges, serves beyond its nutrition aspect but also documents personal cultural habits and shared experiences with others. Hence, the sample of media users' posts and online exchanges enable me to identify cultural patterns and users' identity traits. Several respondents (quotations below from Joe, Tarek, Bernadette, Sherine, Jane, Tanya, Hélène and Tatiana) shed light on sharing food pictures on different occasions, including: travels, family dinners, a friend's birthday, dinner at home alone, lunch on an airplane. The utilisation of food conveys vital features of individual performance, and cultural cohesion, and gives insight into the overall social frame. The sample of media users put forward the desire to give to their community more than a food picture but a window into their personal and interpersonal life. The respondents mention that by exchanging food contents that display their "*lifestyle*", "*memories*", "*feelings*", "*taste*" and "*friendships*". It seems therefore essential to explore the cultural meanings attached to food pictures, which encourage people to share and exchange, in order to mirror cultural and personal dimensions through their posts.

a) Digital food-related exchanges strengthen bonds and spark interest/ curiosity

The respondents' narratives give insights on how foods act as a medium of cultural exchange when they post a picture, as they share intended meanings. The first respondent I focus on is Joe, a 24-year-old young man from a British-Caribbean background, working in London. He uses Instagram on a daily basis and considers the social application as part of his everyday social life. Joe claims:

*"People I barely know follow me on Instagram and know me through the food I eat".*

Since Joe posts everyday what he eats, all his followers know his origins and what kind of person he is (i.e. what he likes, dislikes). Joe stated that his ethnic background was

omnipresent in his posts since he always cooks home foods (Jamaican dishes). Beyond satisfying the biological necessity, the respondents unveil the deeper symbolic cultural artefact of food within their social media communities. Food offers social media users mechanisms to express their identity (social class, ethnicity, religion, age group). The findings support Douglas' thoughts that "gifts of food are flows of life-giving substance" (1971:12). Through Joe's posts, Joe invites his audience into his world and food habits that are culturally embedded. The digital food-related content contains and transports the culture, traditions and identity of an individual and constitutes the initial means to enter into contact with others. Joe's friends are therefore able to penetrate his life, as Joe offers a glimpse of what he cooks and eats on a daily basis. Joe's deployment of his life-habits is an invitation for others to visually enjoy the food and implicitly learn about Joe as an individual.

Furthermore, Joe's life-giving substance can be represented by the familiar saying, "You are what you eat" (Brillat- Savarin, 1825). This expression addresses the role food plays as a cultural signifier. Culturally speaking, therefore, what one eats defines who one is and is not. By posting Trinidadian style-lentils (dhal), rotis, jerk chicken or beef patties, Joe shares part of himself and his culture via Caribbean culinary posts that carry strong symbolic meanings. Similarly, the quality of food is an expression of Joe's culture, culinary tradition and social status. His dishes are often rustic products (such as grains, freekeh, or barley) that have a cultural value, linked to the image of Caribbean street food. Joe's food customs are therefore the visual expression of his own identity. Hence, food varies from one person to another according to personal tastes and the culture and religion of the individual.

In the digital sphere, the respondents offer a glance of their cultural identity. The daily-ness nature of food is well-suited to the content demands of social media. By using their mobile phones, the respondents are able to capture on a daily basis their food and share their experiences whenever and wherever and with whoever. In accordance with Joe, most respondents affiliate their food posts from their culture, their personality and with 'who they are'. By posting food pictures, Joe displays his cultural heritage and dual British-Caribbean identity. The fact that Joe claims that other users are able to know him through his online posts, expresses the deep cultural symbolic role played by digital food posts. Food keeps alive the tie with cultures of origin in a tangible way as it represents an

anthropological place full of memories, stories, people and relationships. Food enables therefore an in-depth exploration into the reasons and motives behind why people exchange socially with their community. The cultural meaning attached to food in social media emanates through the representation and selection of food that is shared and exchanged.

On this note, Tarek claims *“Each time I come back to Tunisia, I eat a couscous. When I eat it and post it, I know I’m home... so that everyone knows I am back home!”*.

Tarek is a 32-year-old Tunisian man who came to France in 2011 to work as an engineer in Paris. He describes himself as an active user of Instagram who posts on a daily-basis both when he eats at home and when he eats out. During the interview, Tarek decides to look introspectively on his posts by scrolling down his profile. He concludes that exchanging food posts online reveals far more than the fact that he eats little fruit in a day. Tarek mentions: *“All my photos, I realise now, are extremely personal, and by looking at them you can perhaps assume the type of person I am, my religion, but also where I go and what I like to do!”*. The visual aspect of the digital media platform brings memories and emotions via pictures, in a way a written journal cannot. Tarek further documents on his online exchanges, saying *“I remember every single day, who I was with, how I was feeling”*.



*Figure 1: Tarek's Ramadan meal post*

Figure 1, from Tarek's Instagram profile, is evocative since Tarek documents his last day of Ramadan. Tarek's religion and personal beliefs are therefore displayed on his profile in a food post. This post enables Tarek to document his identity and it reveals traits of his personal life via food.

Furthermore, the netnography reveals specific attitudes and practices surrounding food which shed light on individuals' own beliefs and traits. For instance, Bernadette's posts are palatable, colourful shots of family comfort foods, such as sponge cakes with icing, beef stews, a loaf of bread in the centre of the table, and big round white plates with silver cutlery. Bernadette mentions during the interview that she uses Instagram to show "*what her life is like*". She is a 27-year-old salesperson who comes from a British-Irish background. Bernadette describes herself as an "*enthusiast Instagram user*" and describes her profile as a "*mix of all different things about myself, my family and my friends*" that allows her to converse and connect through visual content. Her posts detail her social background and cultural habits. The netnography also reveals the abundant comments below her pictures, praising the nice decoration, food preparation and eye-

grabbing colours. The social exchanges, in the comment section of each of her picture, enable her followers, friends and acquaintances to know more about the food and to compliment Bernadette. There are comments such as *“Wonderful table Bernadette, what is in the plate on the right?”*, *“What a nice picture, how do you do theses triangles, I’ve never seen that before, they look amazing”*, or *“Wow that is very nice. I hope you and your family is doing well. Send my regards”*, *“I usually eat it with onions for Christmas, you should try it, it is delicious too”*. Most comments praise the image, or make specific reference to what is on the picture. The comment section provides rich information on the nature of the exchanges and demonstrates how Bernadette communicates visually a distinct British identity through her pictures. Bernadette’s followers show interest in her cooking habits and specific food dishes. The act of sharing food which involves (in the case of Bernadette) westernised food products and dishes are particularly insightful in order to understand culture. She shows recipes passed down from generation to generation, with home-cooked dishes like pancakes and pottages she learnt from her grandmother. According to Bernadette, it is all about capturing not necessarily photos, but moments. These posts provoke enthusiastic responses from other media users who react and show their interest and care for Bernadette. Food offers a medium for multiple exchanges as both of Bernadette’s close and distant contacts comment on her pictures. Just as food reunites people around a table for a dinner, food is a medium for digital exchanges and allows the media users to talk, exchange and maintain their bonds by interacting with each other. Bernadette’s participation on Instagram helps her to establish and sustain her large number of ties in an efficient way. Food acts as a medium that allows respondents to keep in contact with their peers by sharing a part of their day.

Douglas (1971) points out a connection between food and hospitality which is used as a means to engage and sustain social relations. There are about eight to ten comments under each of Bernadette’s pictures, where people casually ask more about what is on the picture, or discuss the type of memories it reminds them of. It is in a peaceful and caring atmosphere, where Bernadette takes good care to reply to each comment. Food posts also act as a vehicle in individuals’ identity construction which ultimately sparks both interest and curiosity from the receivers. It is important to point out how food generates enthusiasm which triggers the respondents to share and communicate with others. Food remains a popular medium of exchange on Instagram because the respondents have a genuine interest in participating in the digital community and expose their food as a



strong marker for their identity. Creating and uploading food content for Bernadette's followers to 'like' and comment on is a way to entertain others. Bernadette takes pride in sharing her meals and dinners on Instagram to express her identity and to inspire others, spark curiosity, interest or conversation. Bernadette's social event dinner pictures are significant as it gives insights onto her familial practices and habits. Food as the central focus provides an understanding of Bernadette's cultural practices. Media users gain a greater understanding of Bernadette since her posts unveil a sense of her identity within the community. Bernadette claims the food she prepares is "*unique*". For instance, she further explains that her family beef stew "*shows that I still cook and eat what my parents and grandparents use to eat for Christmas fifty years ago, this is why I enjoy sharing it*".

The representation of food on Instagram consequently allows an understanding of social practices via food choices and uncovers individuals' identity. It defines individuals by knowing what they eat and how they eat it, but also what they do not eat. Cultural identity, however, is not constrained by the specific food one associates with a given racial or ethnic group. One's social class is also signifier of culture (Bourdieu, 1984). For instance, the netnography revealing Bernadette's Christmas dinners pictures presents her eating habits, taste and manners. The notion that food conveys a range of cultural meanings is supported by Douglas (1972) and Lévi-Strauss (1970). Food communicates information in terms of occasion, social status, ethnicity and wealth. In Bernadette's case, there is a desire to share a significant occasion by posting the food (family recipes) she consumes at Christmas, which illustrates social systems and cultural values. Food can be investigated by particular symbolic meanings that unveil social patterns and system of a society. This means that, the posts convey significant meaning to the receivers on Instagram. Bernadette's food items warrant further examination within the cultural context of Christmas.

Bernadette's picture (figure 2) reflects commensality, the practice of sharing food and eating together in a social group. It displays Bernadette's family reunion which mirrors social order: First the long rectangular table suggests communal eating, where all family members can participate, expressing family solidarity. Then, the cutlery setting displays a clear order to the table. The dinner table is a symbolic and culturally meaningful element of family dimensions. The dishes and table-laying convey a traditional British family meal in a warm atmosphere, while the food exposed is traditional and mainly

home-made. Furthermore, the table centrepiece and table crackers are two strong symbols of Christmas celebrations. The technology thus captures the family setting and traditions while exhibiting conviviality through a Christmassy atmosphere and its multi-sensory dimensions. The table thus gives insight on the structure of the family, conviviality and social bonding. By sharing this picture on Instagram, commensality is also achieved as Bernadette shares her food with her digital community. She ‘feeds’ her followers by posting her Christmassy table dinner, exposing personal characteristics of her cultural practices and lifestyle. The picture itself reveals that Bernadette had guests who received food, while the same picture posted on social media reveals that she is also having guests online who enjoy receiving the food. Her online receivers are invited to the table, as they are receiving the gift and enthusiastically showing gratitude via ‘likes’ and comments. Bernadette’s post of a dinner table symbolises more than a family event, it also documents personal cultural dimensions: She claims “*The beef stews, bread loafs and silver cutleries were always served with the warm mulled wine. The memory as well as the wine was delicious*”. This memory she refers to, uncovers her family’s heritage and culture, which confirms the idea that food unveils more dimensions than solely its nutrients. Memories, emotional connections, a sense of belonging, and ethnic pride are also conveyed in Bernadette’s food picture. Bernadette’s picture of her family dinner expresses more than a list of dishes laid on the table. Bernadette, as a gift-giver, chooses these pictures because they possess the meaningful properties she wishes to transfer to the gift-receivers. She says, “*I like to show people what we do, how I cook, who I am from Monday to Sunday*”. Bernadette and Tarek both expose powerful cultural and personal values they exchange with their community via their digital contributions.



*Figure 2: Bernadette's Christmas table*

The findings support extensive research traditions in anthropology and cultural studies which assert that food promotes communication and uncover individuals' culture (Lévi-Strauss, 1970; Douglas, 1982). Food is well established in anthropology literature; Mary Douglas presents well-developed research in cultural studies on the role of food in society. Douglas' work (1982) correlates with the findings that culture can be understood via food. The exploration of food in the digital context is therefore useful in order to explore the dynamics and forms of social exchanges in the digital sphere. As food is an essential part of everyone's lives, food is a matter of social interest and curiosity that encourage people to document on their daily life activities, hobbies, interests and consequently their food consumption. The respondents (quotations below from Tatiana, Sherine, Joe, Tarek and Bernadette) reveal themselves perhaps more accurately than they might by merely telling the names of recipes. Photographs are attention-grabbing and they hold the power to spark engagement. Moreover, they provide visual evidence and credibility of content that a paragraph text, hence the maxim "seeing is believing". The

respondents mention their ability to engage with ease via photographs since images can evoke emotions, and depict setting and atmosphere more efficiently than text.

As Lobinger (2016) argues, photo sharing has become a widespread routine and a communicative act in media users' everyday life. This notion is illustrated in Sherine's narrative, a 21 year-old-German medical student, living in Frankfurt. She discusses the routinely act of posting her food on social media. Both food and technology encourage the experience of life sharing. Sharing photos via technological tools enable the respondent to post food pictures and participate in social-visual food practices. Sherine argues:

*“When you have or do something cool you want to share it, and this is usually what happens on Instagram. Food is the first thing you think about sharing because its something that is part of our daily life, and also because food is like something that everyone loves and because we all have to obviously to eat at some point in the day. It's like you share your lifestyle...You know”.*

The respondents, once again, shed light on the dailyness aspect of food that is well suited in the Instagram platform. Food also creates enthusiasm and sparks interest, and reveals about respondent's values and beliefs. Food reunites people, just as people would share a dinner all together and practice commensality. The respondent emphasised the way food posts is included in everyday life. The portability and habitual use of the smartphone within everyday life enables Instagram users to create and circulate images of their foods, everyday lives, and cultural practices. This aspect combined with real-time sharing posts creates an environment where people have access to continuous posts displaying visual information of their life. As Kevin, a French personal trainer living in Montpellier, argues:

*“I see my cousin's breakfast pictures almost everyday, what he eats, so I always comment on it or sometimes tag my own friends but also it definitely encourages me to share mine as well. It makes me feel closer to him because it's like I know his routine and lifestyle.”*

Kevin's photo sharing practices is heavily intertwined with his mundane everyday life and online interactions. His off-line and online interactions with his cousin are enmeshed. Even though Kevin lives near his cousin and sees him every week end at basketball practice, he mentions that thanks to Instagram he feels even more connected and close to his cousin. Media users feel connected to each other by posting their eating lifestyle, sharing food content and tagging their friends on food posts. This is further explained by Sherine who mentions:

*“Posting is not a one-time thing, you follow someone's journey, and they follow yours, it's expected that you will give to the community something almost everyday because you will see them doing it as well so you kinda follow... And this is how people get involved with you. Whether my pictures are viewed by five or fifty people, every photo has triggered a conversation that I enjoyed having”.*

Instagram enables media users to connect and communicate instantly with each other. As the respondent emphasises, it discloses continuous and ongoing exchanges about their lifestyle. Users are as enthusiastic to share and to receive daily contents from their community (friends, family, acquaintances). A couple of respondents also mention that food posting specifically encouraged them to become involved in the platform by sharing, tagging or 'liking'. For instance, Eric, a 25 years old Franco-British Project Manager, suggests that one of the main thing he enjoys about Instagram is looking at and sharing food posts with his friends. He claims:

*“What I noticed with food posts is that obviously it's a trend, its part of people's daily routine but also you get carried away when you see food posts you unconsciously want to post as well especially when you follow someone who is inspiring. You feel like posting too.”*

The pictures expose both their ordinary, everyday food-related posts (morning breakfast, lunch at work, Sunday roast dinners) and their less ordinary, more fanciful posts (hotel lunches, restaurant dinners, romantic boat brunch gateways, picnics). Not only is food used to express cultural practices but also to communicate with others. According to the respondents of my sample, taking part in the Instagram community means being involved

in others' everyday life, as an invitation to participate in their lives via posts, comments and 'likes'.

Hence, creating, sharing, commenting and tagging keep the media users involved continuously in the sphere, as Jane, highlights: *"There is always something to check up there, I can always relate to someone and I'm sure people do relate to what I post. It's like you can see how people live and what they eat, you have a clear understanding of the way they live their life. You are a source of inspiration in an environment where you get inspired. It's an ongoing circle"*. Jane is a 22-year-old student who has been using Instagram for the past three years. She defines herself as an "addict to the app". When respondents share a photo of their food, it is more about sharing the wider moment. It reflects themselves, their daily activity, their friendships, their creation and their experiences. The findings corroborate with Miller who suggests that food represents culture because it is "an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society, our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices" (1987: 215).

It seems that food is objectified by the media users who detach themselves from it. It is now second nature for them to take a photo of a meal before the first bite. They post attractive pictures of food, detached from the essence of food as nourishing. Instead, they attach other dimensions to food, exposing personal experiences and practices. The respondents transmit whole experiences through food-posts and get other users engaged. Although the platform enables the respondents to connect with others and maintain social ties, it drives the culinary world into a digital space beyond the nutritious act. Tanya, the youngest media user of the respondents, suggests:

*"When you experience something thrilling, it's normal to share it immediately with friends and family. You can edit and share a picture in less than a minute. Obviously most people enjoy sharing what they eat, because first food is something everyone likes and then it's obviously very appealing visually and inspiring. It's like you invite people to have a look at your lifestyle and you take them in your environment via food posts so that they can see, share and like"*.

Most respondents share food as a way to offer a “sneak peek” of their lives and their daily routine to others. They mention their desire to show people “*what I do, what I eat, who I am, where I eat and when I eat*” as Eric argues. Sherine explains the purpose of her participation on Instagram, she says that she enjoys showing her Instagram friends her daily activity and receiving theirs. This has become part of her routine and lifestyle. The respondents embrace the possibility to both create and be inspired through the use of digital technologies. For instance, Joe suggests that he enjoys “*posting and showing what I ate in the morning and then scrolling through what other people ate on the same day, to see if anyone got creative so that perhaps the next day I can try a new recipe*”.

The Instagram sphere enables media users to give meaningful content to their community, on a subject that matters for them, to strengthen their social ties. They use the platform to offer their lifestyle and creativity as a gift to their community. According to the findings, the act of reciprocating is essential in order to maintain the satisfaction of the media users. Their gift-giving practices are embedded in communication technologies where they display their lifestyle and culture. Considering the meanings attached to food posts, modern social media shifts towards a use value of food imagery as a tool for self-expression and self-presentation. The following section discusses how positive emotions are disseminated via food posts.

#### b) Memories and positive emotions created via food posts

Social media is where media users document their lives. The Instagram platform and its community is at the heart of this because it enables media users to capture their experiences wherever they are and share them. Food posts on Instagram reflect meaningful moments in which people come together to exchange, celebrate life experiences and human relationships. The findings suggest that the media users affiliate food with happy feelings and memories. A reading of food images communicates significant messages about each respondents’ emotions, feelings and memories. Thanks to the netnography, I entered in the respondents’ space, explored older posts, and the respondents’ memories of past events. I discovered how the users expose their lives through pictures of food in certain places, cook certain ways, during specific events, which discloses identity and cultural practices.

The posts enable the users to tell their story through foods, indeed, Tarek, Joe and Bernadette use the media platform as a memory-space to remember personal experiences via food digital contents. In line with Liu *et al.* (2013)'s explorative study in which the authors expose that food is used to record experiences and share information; Instagram act as a gallery of personal experiences where memories are stored. The respondents capture their life and attempt to attract viewers into their world by an explicit representation of their creativity, taste, skills and preferences. The respondents' posts are creative productions, disseminating positive emotions and memories. By posting food pictures, the respondents do not just share experiences, they engage in a process of making meaning and defining their self with harmonious and sophisticated pictures.

For every social event, Bernadette shares a picture of the dinner she prepares. She says *"I always take a picture of the Christmas dinner and breakfast, the new year's eve dinner, my birthday and my siblings' birthday parties dinner... I like to show people what we do for big occasions, so I pull out my phone, set the table nicely, perhaps add two or three decoration items to spice it up and I take several shots to then, select the best one. That's how I capture a moment which is ours"*. I asked Bernadette to further explain what she meant by "capturing a moment which is ours". She elaborated that it is the best way for her to remember the good times spent with her family. Then, Bernadette further explained that each of these pictures is a representation of her family, their values and habits.

Instagram enables Tatiana to reminisce key moments and joyful times of her life. Tatiana is 25 years old and works in the fashion industry. She argues that Instagram is an application she uses on a daily basis to entertain herself and her friends/family, to stay in contact, communicate and laugh. Tatiana argues:

*"When I see a cool food picture I would instantly send it to my friends so that we make it! Or I can also send it to my aunt to tell her that next week end she should make this for the family dinner on Sunday. I mean you obviously share food because its something everyone likes, you cannot go wrong, it brings up so many memories... a happy moment... Like for my friend's name day we made a cake and posted it, because it was just a great moment of laughter and there is no great moment without food that you then share on Instagram #friends! Its part of it. So*



*in order to remember this event, I posted the picture of the cake because it's the best way to remember that day".*



*Figure 3: Tatiana's cake post*

Salvio (2010) investigated food blogs and identifies that postwar cookbooks and contemporary food blogs both have specific references to a discourse of comfort food. She explained how food is linked to erotic love, popularity, happy families, and social harmony. Similarly, on Instagram, much of the food content is associated with harmony, positive experiences and pleasant social events, in which food is often associated with home-made, well-being, cosiness and happiness. Besides, as Hu *et al.* (2014) posit, the users of Instagram share everyday activity pictures regarding their lives, personal hobbies and memories. The respondents (for instance, Bernadette's homemade dinner picture memories, Tatiana's name day cake memory) cultivate a taste for nostalgic memories of comfort food via Instagram posts.

The respondents emphasise that by sharing food they confirm and strengthen their relationships, express themselves and display memories. This practice is a common research focus (Moed *et al.* 2007; Van House, 2007; Miller, 2007; Larsen and Kofoed, 2015); Lobinger (2016) has identified different modes of photo sharing. She explains how photo sharing ensures communicating visually, with a focus on the content and visual qualities of the shared image. In this regard, Tatiana demonstrates how food posts and memories can become intimately intertwined. She describes her Instagram profile as “*a book with so many memories*”. These memories are conveyed via her food-posts and captions and hashtags which express both emotional significance and visual conversations. My findings support the idea that the food pictures are exchanged as “a fluid and dynamic material for situational live communication” (Lobinger, 2016:475). Within this rhetoric, the respondents of this research share pictures to express themselves visually. For instance, the food presented in figure 2 and 3 are polished shots of food that support conversational resource. The respondents indeed shed light on posting aesthetic shots to further beautify their experiences. This practice recalls Manovich’s (2016) thoughts on the state of mind of Instagram users who, put considerable effort in providing aesthetically sophisticated contents. The digital platform and food context ensure communication between users, embracing memories of family meals and good times.

The analysis of Tarek, Bernadette and Tatiana’s pictures provide an understanding of each post that represent memories and produce signs rich in meanings. I interpret the food posts through a interpretation of meanings and signs. For instance, the cake, a popular type of food on Instagram, refers to a specific context, a celebration. This food item is associated to a caption line, an emoji and several hashtags that give substance for interpretation. The description box as well as hashtags and comments are Instagram features that encourage production of meanings. The use of hashtags or emoji by the respondents strengthens and clarifies the purpose of their posts while enhancing the image. For instance, the monkey emoji (Tatiana’s post) is a signifier suggesting a cutesy “*oops*” expression. Tatiana uses this emoji to express embarrassment in a witty way to emphasise how decadent and indulgent the cake is. Furthermore, by posting these meaningful snapshots of their lives, it allows them to display social bonds and strengthen relationships. The post thus resembles a gift as it carries a symbolic meaning, that is manifested to the recipient. For instance, Jane mentions:

*“When I see a picture of a chocolate cake that obviously is tempting, it adds some happiness to my life! Because food means happiness and happiness means friends. For instance, when I had this Nutella crepe in Italy with my friend, I shared it, what makes you happier than a Nutella crepe with your friend? You just feel happy to put that on Instagram for people to see what you did and where you are. I’m sure my friends are happy to receive this type of post in their feed!”*

Food encourages people to exchange and express themselves through visual media, including pictures, videos, emojis and hashtags. Jane suggests how the features of the media platform reinforces the gift mechanism (three steps of receiving, accepting, reciprocating). She argues that her friends enjoy “receiving” her posts, as according to Jane, her food-posts bring happiness to others and compels other users to engage with her. Food connects people together. Sherine, Anya, Kevin, Tatiana emphasise how sharing food makes them happy and how they enjoy food content because it is “*enjoyable*”, with positive connotations. Food is a content that endorses different roles: it links people together, spreads happiness and is also a good reminder of memories with family or friends.

The results demonstrate how the respondent’s food pictures, that are shared, received and ‘liked’, provide a sense of satisfaction with the intent to increase emotional connections and positive affect. Some pictures aim to promote memories via certain types of food, such as the Sunday roast turkey Tatiana suggests in her narrative during the interview. The findings concur with previous research (Locher *et al.* 2005; Chen *et al.* 2016) showing that food has the capacity to enhance positive affects through association with situations or contexts. The fifteen respondents emphasise how food attracts them visually in the platform, and their deep interest in sharing and receiving contents with their peers. Food is an enjoyable and popular content to share that the respondents associate with positivity. Food posts, in conjunction with the platform features (e.g. hashtags, emojis), enrich the production of meanings to display memories such as holidays, dinners and birthdays. As Jane argues, food is linked to “*happy moment of life*”, and enables the respondents to express themselves via a post with a small caption, without having to include an extended textual description (Instagram captions are restricted to 2,200 characters). Anya is Canadian, she loves photography and can easily spend up to an hour on Instagram to select and edit her pictures. She claims:

*“I think its just easier than having a blog or something... because... “Pictures say a million words” they say... Like instead of writing a paragraph saying “I went to the CNE [Canadian National Exhibition]” they can just see how happy I am, what I ate, where I was thanks to the picture that I posted...”*

The respondents explain how they are visual learners which leads them to share and receive information through the sense of sight. *“A picture says a million words”* mentions Anya when she describes the pictures she posts. Image-based social platforms such as Instagram provides users with opportunities to communicate via visual food contents. The respondents consider Instagram as a valid connector between themselves and others since communication via images can enhance verbal communication. What can be said in words can be enriched via food images. For instance, Bernadette, Tarek, Jane, Anya and Tatiana recall memories with family and friends via pictures whose food-content connote happiness and trigger social exchange (curiosity and interest). On the same note, Kevin uses food posts to refer to reminiscences with his cousin and to connect with him.

The visual aspect of the media, combined with food, creates an environment that advocates gift-giving practices and social exchanges. The respondents express a feeling of contentment and satisfaction when giving/receiving/reciprocating food-related experiences, moments and memories. For example, Jane describes satisfaction from sharing and receiving ‘likes’ from her Nutella crepe picture. She suggests: *“It’s just great to be able to share something you have enjoyed and then you extend this moment of happiness online. People ‘like’ it, it’s like if they were somehow part of that moment as well”*. In comparison to Bernadette who invites her followers to her Christmas dinner table, Jane includes other media users in her personal experiences, who take part in that moment. This notion of connection to people via food is also palpable in Pei’s post. Pei is a Singaporean graduate in law, currently living in London. The netnography reveals figure 4, in which Pei shares visually pleasing toasted-bread slices with a caption. The food picture recalls good times with Pei’s friend, yet it embodies Pei’s emotions and friendship through the display of comforting and loving foods. The food snapshot displays fresh products, hand-made, *“from scratch”*. This natural harmony of health and nutritious foods embodies a loving and caring relationship.



*Figure 4: Pei's sharing plate post*

Once again, food has a particular relevance and capacity to serve as a medium of social exchanges on Instagram. The media users have therefore a direct connection with food that enables them to denote meanings associated with a specific occasion or memory. Figure 4 shows how food is used by the media user to express love and care. Scholars such as Lévi-Strauss (1970) and Douglas (1971) have asserted that food adheres to the same practices as language because food is a code that can express patterns about social relationships. Lévi-Strauss (1966:595) argues that 'the cooking of a society is a language [that] unconsciously translates its structure'. Pei's food picture represents social components that creates meaning to inform her bonds and attachment. The everyday food practices allow us to explore and interpret cultural contexts, food customs and preferences. For instance, the food choices being natural, home-made ingredients display a category of food that encode her social event (friendship reunion). Lévi-Strauss (1966) discusses food categories that express fundamental human attitudes and translate social structure. Food on Instagram is therefore central to understand the meaning of food and how it connects people together. Pei's picture presents a rich cultural context, Pei displays affection towards her friend by posting two avocado toasts she prepared herself

surrounded by grapes to share. The plate, combined with the caption, evidences the close bond between the two friends who are sharing a plate. The picture expresses social structure intimacy, close friendship and unity as both individuals share one plate and eat the same food. The respondents offer insights about the satisfaction and pleasure they obtain from the visual food medium in digital technologies. By using digital tools, the respondents are thus able to create and share sophisticated cultural artefacts that trigger enthusiasm and contentment. The respondents describe food content exchanges using a language of satisfaction. Sherine says

*“It makes me happy to share it and I’m sure my friends are happy to receive it”* and Eric suggests *“It is something everyone likes, you cannot hurt anyone, it brings up memories... happy moments of life”*.

Respondents express their satisfaction and happiness when they see or share food. This notion echoes Chen *et al.* (2016) study which exposes the satisfaction gained from the act of sharing one's experience. Food photo sharing offers a perspective from which users can understand individuals' personalities. This depiction is fundamental to the data: rather than simply reflecting a positive memory of a particular event, food is also used as a way to communicate with people. More specifically, food is portrayed as a manifestation of friendship and happiness, displaying one's values and beliefs. As H  l  ne evokes:

*“There is no great moment without food... that you then, share on Instagram! Its part of the Instagram-game”.*

*Insta-game* is a term which refers to the action of taking pictures, commenting or ‘liking’ contents for Instagram purpose only (sharing experiences with the aim to collect ‘likes’/followers). She associates happiness with food sharing in the media. Food has therefore the power to affect individuals offline and online positively and emotionally. Similarly, Chen *et al.* (2016) informed that using smartphone photography promotes happiness. This study, which explores how practical tools such as smartphone photography are used to enhance happiness, reports that by taking and sending pictures of their present moment, people made strong ties. Instagram creates new expressions of social connections and visual communication, where images are used to communicate positivity, happiness and to engage with others. My findings demonstrate that the media

users enjoy sharing and receiving digital content as it gives opportunities to interact with other users, and thus strengthen their bonds.

Food pictures infused with memories of dinners, stories and personal experiences, provide contentment and pleasure for the receivers. This was palpable throughout the interviews where the respondent reacted positively and with contentment when looking at food pictures on Instagram. Thanks to the photo elicitation exercise, the respondent's body language reinforces their verbal statement and personal experience (happiness, satisfaction provided by exchanged food posts). The activity reports non-verbal communication which supports the fact that food visual contents grab the users' attention and interest. Instagram put an emphasis on the aesthetics of the images shared, promoting the usage of different filters to visually enhance the content. The media users have also expressed a desire to produce aesthetic and quality content (Larsen and Kofoed, 2015; Manovich, 2016). During the interviews, the media users took from a few seconds up to a minute to look at food pictures to analyse the visual content while no textual information was available. While watching these pictures, they smiled and expressed their interest. They explained how food pictures enable them to identify specific lifestyles and understand more about the sender's identity. Haenlein and Kaplan's study (2010) has indeed exposed the way social media push the users to create images reflecting their identity. This research suggests that most of the photos taken by the media users are meant to spark interest and to connect the sender to the receiver by embedded shared memories.

Food appears to be an effective transmitter of emotions due to its physiological and psychological properties. However, it is surprising that although the content is digital, it still sparks emotions, provides satisfaction and brings happiness (Reis *et al.* 2010; Chen *et al.* 2016). Food acts as a booster for social exchanges, and encourages users to further give and reciprocate the content. On the one hand, the digital display of food (in the form of pictures or videos) communicates rich information which sparks social engagement and exchanges between users. On the other hand, food contents help to diffuse emotions through captured memories.

This section considers food as a form of communication since it provides nonverbal cues on media users' memories, friendship, taste and culture. Scholars such as Lévi-Strauss (1970, 1966) and Douglas (1971) provide the theoretical tools to understand and analyse

how food communicates and how people communicate about food that are essential to understand the contemporary food digital exchanges. Food is a particular relevant medium of social exchanges on Instagram that proliferates and produces exchanges in the community. On Instagram, media users distance food from its nutritional content and they use it to share snapshots of their everydayness activities and experiences. It is a medium that is culturally embedded as well as an indicator of hierarchical norms amongst people belonging to the Instagram community (social status, power and hierarchies via food are discussed in chapter 2).

The next section demonstrates how the respondents' food posts generate practices of exchanges, enabling us to understand how Mauss' gift practice framework (giving-receiving- reciprocating) is formed in the online community. How is Mauss' gift-giving framework of reciprocal exchanges within archaic societies one that can frame digital social exchanges? To answer this question, this section unveils the mechanisms of this framework and how it operates in the online community. The main question that drives this inquiry is how exactly does online involvement offer the media users the ability to give, receive and reciprocate? How is the three step dimension, distinguished by Mauss, also revealed in the digital sphere? The three steps that maintain social cohesion are further discussed and analysed in this section. Using the Maussian framework helps to understand and develop models of exchanges in the digital social sphere. While the first section of this chapter focused on food as a medium of exchanges, the second section focuses on the digital platform by exploring how food enables media users to exchange (give/ receive/ reciprocate) online.

## 2) [The Gift: The forms and exchange in the digital community](#)

Food sharing is much appreciated by media users in order to maintain their social relationships. Media users reveal that they use food as a tool to share their taste, hobbies and lifestyle in their community. It is a meaningful content that sparks curiosity and interest under the form of comments or 'likes'. Food posts, therefore, entail gift-giving practices and reciprocal social exchanges in the digital sphere. The specific context of



this thesis, food posts, enables me to understand in-depth the forms of exchanges in the digital community.

a) Food posts reveal reciprocal practices

Hélène, a 24-year-old marketing consultant based in Paris, exposes the dynamics of the platform and how the mobility of Instagram triggers social exchanges. Hélène expresses how everyday-ness food contents initiate social exchanges between individuals. The exploration of food as a medium on Instagram demonstrates how sociality is mediated on the visual platform. Although verbal cues are absent, the platform encourages exchanges and interactions using Instagram features (shares, 'likes', tags, comments, hashtags). The post thus resembles a gift as it carries with it symbolic meaning that is expressly manifested to the recipient. Hélène claims:

*"Last time, a high school friend of mine went out for dinner and posted a picture of herself and her parents with a celebration cake. I obviously felt like I had to 'like' the picture and tell her congratulations even though I haven't spoken to her since 2005".*

The act of giving to the digital community by posting a content creates a social bond, with an obligation to reciprocate on the part of the recipient. This notion correlates with Mauss' idea (1954) introduced in his work when he explored archaic tribes. Indigenous gift cultures help to understand the psychological and motivational dynamics of Instagram. The study finds compelling evidence for what I understand to be practices of gift-giving in which certain posts, 'likes' or comments are treated as gifts. The ritual of exchange is illustrated in the data: Reciprocity can be found in two well-defined forms either by 'liking' or commenting on content. To illustrate this point, Susan, a 22-year-old art student, mentions:

*"I always give to the community, every single day either I post something, tag my friends, or I 'like' or I comment... It depends... Sometimes I just feel its 'something I have to do' to comment on someone's picture or to 'like' it".*

I asked Susan to elaborate her thoughts when she said, *“I always give to the community”*. Susan emphasised her desire to give to the community to please both people and herself. Ultimately, the use of the digital platform seems to increase the frequency with which the respondents can interact and to maintain a form of intermittent, casual communication. Susan, Pei, Bernadette, Anya, Hélène and Jane and four other respondents place an emphasis on the importance of posts, ‘likes’ and comments exchanges between media users. Marie, 23 years old, linguistics student, suggests:

*“When I see my friends pictures I do ‘like’ them because usually they have really nice pictures. It is just my way to approve what they did and show them some support, or just to say ‘great’ or ‘this looks nice’. I feel that it is important to ‘like’/comment your friends’ pictures, I mean it does not cost anything...When I post something I like to have friends reacting to it. It’s like something you do because they are your friends”*.

Throughout the respondents’ narratives, I am able to trace the discourse of obligation. The language of moral obligation is indeed palpable, with terms used such as *“of course”*; *“have to do”*; *“I had to like”*; *“I obviously felt like”*; *“it is something you”*; *“it is common sense”*; *“they will react”*. These terms express degrees of certainty or obligation, with a “common sense” understanding of reciprocating the exchanges in the community. These obligation markers are expressed by the respondents who shed light on their duty as media users to post, share, ‘like’ or comment others’ content, echoing Mauss’ three steps of obligation: giving, receiving, reciprocating. Obligations within a community indeed require that individuals give, receive and to reciprocate (Mauss, 1954). As a form of respect, affection and concern, the respondents express how being involved in the community is translated into an expectation to fulfil their obligation to reciprocate. The moral obligation become embedded into the social fabric of the digital platform users so that the respondents feel socially obligated to give, ‘like’, share or comment. The findings suggest that ‘liking’, tagging and commenting are returned favours that bind media users into a ceremonial gift exchange. For instance, the expression *“Tossing a like”* was used twice, by two respondents who emphasise how a ‘like’ reflects the quality of their gift and indicates a close bond between the users. The respondents have expressed a sense of fulfilment and gratification when receiving ‘likes’

or being tagged by another media user. The respondents explain that sharing and communicating online foster reciprocal social exchanges by double clicking on pictures. Malinowski (1922) states that reciprocity is an implicit part of gifting; there is no “free gift” given without expectation. In the digital gift economy, the giving of a gift is always accompanied with the expectation to get returns (Skågeby, 2010). According to the empirical data, the digital media users show that reciprocity takes the forms of a reply by ‘liking’ or commenting giving feedback, compliments, suggestions or encouragements.

Figure 5 shows the mechanism of exchanges. Marie posted a picture capturing her reaction when eating a spicy corn on the cob. This picture has been ‘liked’ and commented on by numerous of her friends who have complimented the picture and thus sparked exchanges. The picture becomes a gift to the network and is reciprocated by ‘likes’ which act as compliments, and comments that support the user’s initial post. The reciprocal acts (‘likes’ and comments) provide Marie with personal satisfaction as all the comments are up-lifting and flattering. Marie has indeed received praises and compliments for posting a picture of herself eating corn, such as: “*so cute*”; “*lil chute*”; “*only you could have made this picture so stunning*”; “*ur the chutest corn ever*”; “*cutie*”. In order to acknowledge the comment of her friends, Marie has ‘liked’ each of their comment back, to show gratitude and to confirm that she has read them. Using the metaphor of a ball, each comment and ‘like’ can be interpreted as a ball being passed back and forth. This mechanism is the principle of reciprocity.

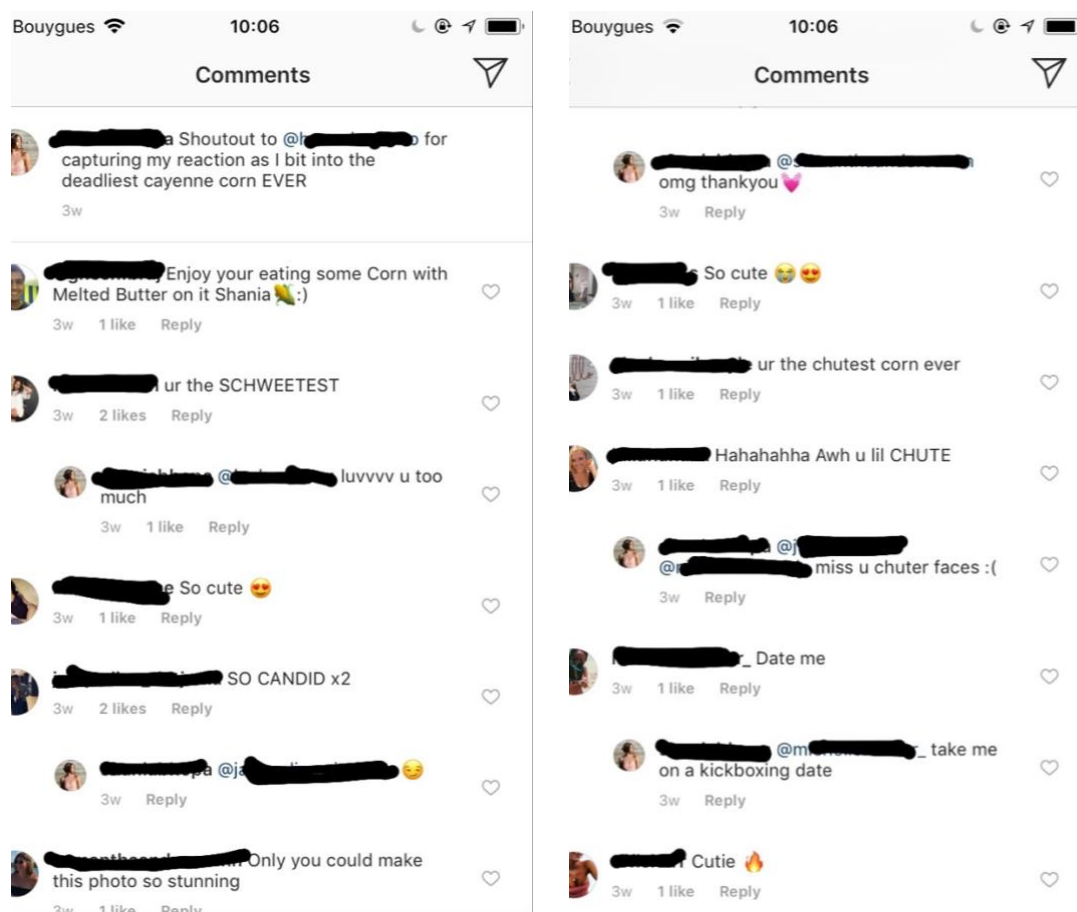


Figure 5: Marie's post list of comments

The media users recognise their moral obligation to enter the ritual to honour their relationship. As Susan suggests:

*“Of course I have to ‘like’ her post, you know, when I check my Instagram feed... I need to ‘like’ my friends’ posts...”*

The ‘liking’ gesture signifies support between users. The exchanges are ritualised, with a desire to value the content by ‘liking’ it. The gesture means more than merely an appreciation of the content; it acts as a sign of gratefulness that acknowledges relationships.

Gregory’s (1982) distinction between commodities from gifts enables me to understand how Instagram users feel indebted and dependent to their social exchanges.

Marx was able to develop a very important proposition: that commodity-exchange is an exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a

state of reciprocal independence [...]. The corollary of this is that non-commodity (gift) exchange is an exchange of inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence. This proposition is only implicit in Marx's analysis but it is [...] a precise definition of gift exchange (1982: 12).

On the one hand, Gregory (1982) characterises commodity exchange based on quantitative types of relationships with a low degree of sociability between individuals. On the other hand, Gregory (1982) illustrates gift exchange as gestures of social concerns and moral obligations that create qualitative relationships. Gift exchange makes therefore the giver and receiver indebted and reciprocally dependent. Susan indeed expresses the social concerns, the feelings of obligation and the gratitude that are involved in gift-giving. As gifts are inalienable, it causes the gift to have a power which compels the recipient to reciprocate. The act of giving creates therefore a debt that must be repaid. Digital gifts generate an obligation to return the gift to the original giver thus creating an ongoing cycle of interactions. These exchanges of inalienable things (under the form of posts, comments or 'like') between the media users put them in a state of reciprocal dependence, where a sense of indebtedness is palpable. The sample of media users express the desire to achieve a 'balanced reciprocity' which refers to the symmetry between giver and receiver, that is achieved through role reversal (Roberts, 1990; Sahlins, 1972). Eric's quote below gives insight into the desire to achieve a balanced relationship by giving back and returning a gesture. By 'liking' his friends' picture, Eric instantly indebted himself from any social duties and moral obligation. Gift-giving creates reciprocal relationships between Eric and his friends, where exchange serves a moral purpose. Eric claims:

*"When I post and I get 'likes', then it triggers me to do the same and go 'like' some pictures too... My brain is telling you that I need to do the same for the person who liked my photo. And that's how it works I guess, you kinda get... engaged more. If you 'like' my pictures, the psychology tells you that I am going to be more tempted to 'like' yours back".*

Eric illustrates the idea of an expected return of his gift, which leads to the production of exchanges with other users. He explains that these exchanges are performed when both parties want to maintain the relationship. Eric's ties are maintained and evolve through

time as a return is highly expected. Mauss (1954) indeed argues that a "free" gift that is not returned is an incongruity because it fails to produce social ties. Solidarity and reciprocity are achieved through the social bonds created by gift exchange. In comparison with Mauss' rhetoric, Eric explains the psychology of gift-giving on Instagram that puts individuals under obligation. According to Mauss (1954), if the "free" gift is not returned by the receiver, the demands of the obligations are not met. Mauss believes that social solidarity is therefore achieved through the concept of gift-giving and the social relations that it creates. Instagram digital exchanges cement social relationships among media users. Unlike commodities, gifts are inalienable and as Eric portrays, the gift is expected to be returned.

#### b) Ceremonial exchanges and gestures on Instagram

Not only is the ceremony of exchange ritualised but it is also continuous and ongoing. Media users are participating in a constant reciprocal circle through posting, 'liking', commenting and tagging. This system of reciprocity allows people to bind together. In the same way, Susan mentions:

*"I post so often because I just love to post... and say what I do, what I like, who I am. When you post you don't just do it for yourself but also for the people, your family and friends, my posts represent me, my personality ... I like to post because it makes people react and talk to me, they would of course... reply either by commenting or 'liking'. So we can just keep in contact".*

Susan's thoughts enable me to understand how some kinds of exchange enact practices of reciprocal exchange and recognition. Susan expresses how posting her content enables her followers, to interact and engage with her to sustain social cohesion. In this excerpt, Susan reveals that what she gives are valuable symbols of herself that initiate social interactions. Mauss (1954) associates the concept of reciprocity to symbolic exchange and distances it with the market exchange. Giving is therefore not linked to profit but rather seen as a precious act since it is a symbol of the giver. Thus, the symbolic medium of food enables the respondents to offer themselves and construct meanings. In order to form and maintain the relationships, the gesture is reciprocated and demonstrates a desire

to maintain a social bond with another person. Although the symbolic medium may change, the obligation to respond within the logic of recognition remains present. The symbolic object forms the bonds and ties of recognition between Susan and her friends. The value of the symbols exchanged lies in the fact that receivers recognise and reciprocate the exchange. The value is detached from a commodity exchange (profit gain) but rather attached to a symbolic exchange that solicits reciprocity from others in the community. The precious and symbolic object or gesture is tied to the identity of the person in the exchange that facilitates reciprocity and recognition from others.

Susan's friends intentionally reciprocate the action to recognise the giver (Susan) because of her previous actions. By demonstrating their recognition, Susan's friends solicit a return and maintain the relationship exchanges. This idea is emphasised by Mauss (1954) who shows that the purpose of the initial giving is to draw the other into a relationship. Susan's posts thus resemble a gift in so far as it carries symbolic meaning and draws her friends into a relationship with her. Susan's posts are given with a clear drive to produce value in social and symbolic terms as her gift possesses the quality of the giver and manifests a form of inalienability. Instagram features many examples of reciprocity in which the respondents seek to encounter, engage, and share a personal dimension with the community. Gifts are not given in an explicit exchange of goods or services for money or some other commodity. As Gregory explains, "Gift exchange is an exchange of inalienable things between persons who are in a state of reciprocal dependence" (1982: 82). By posting her content online, Susan offers a gift imbued with *hau*- a spirit or essence, which triggers reciprocal exchanges. Gifts contain a part of the giver (the *hau*), and in accepting a gift, Susan's friends accept a part of herself as well. Thus, the digital media platform allows for a particular sort of meaning to emerge from the individual's posts. Susan's posts are imbued with a spirit that ensures reciprocity. By 'liking' and commenting, Susan's friends return the gift to her in order to strengthen the bonds of relationship. This idea concurs with Gregory (1982) who claims that the affiliation of the giver's identity with the object, is what compels reciprocation. The returned gift is irrevocably tied to the giver, consequently a strong social tie is created between the two media users who have exchanged gifts, therefore they both possess a part of each other.

The findings suggest that the gift is irreversibly tied to the giver. Indeed, the giver does not purely give an object but also part of himself. As Mauss explains, "the objects are

never completely separated from the men who exchange them" (Mauss, 1954:31). According to Anya, posting is therefore a call for a response, a form of disclosing oneself that seeks reciprocity, in order to produce social relationships. A post, a comment, a tag or a 'like' are gifts, in so far as they have value, are connected with the giver, the recipient and the context in which the exchange takes place. Since the gift is so tightly linked with the giver and receiver, the act of giving implies the receiver to reciprocate with a return gift. The respondents have used a discourse that specify how obvious it is for them to 'like' or comment. It is an exchange that must be repaid in order to ensure social cohesion within the community. Pei emphasises the commonality of 'liking' and commenting her friends' birthday cake pictures. She mentions:

*"I was expecting people to comment and 'like' my picture and wish me happy birthday obviously! (...) My best friends obviously told me happy birthday... When my friends post on their birthdays I always 'like' and comment, its common sense".*



Figure 6: Pei's post



The respondents who participate in the gift economy have the social duty to post, ‘like’ or comment. Food pictures help connect the sender and the receiver, for example, figure 6 (Pei’s birthday cake) document her personal memories. The discourse of the respondent expresses how “obvious” it is for them to participate in an economy by ‘liking’, commenting and posting in order to maintain social cohesion, and ensure stable relationship exchanges. The findings support the idea that when media users post, comment or ‘like’ a content, they give something inalienable of themselves. They engage therefore in a visible act of sharing where some sense of obligation to reciprocate is fostered to maintain social cohesion in the community. As Mauss (1954) claims, in order for a relationship to persist, one or the other partner must always be in debt, or there is no relationship. Pei expresses this idea when she mentions that she “*always ‘like’ and comment*” her friends’ birthday pictures. It is her social responsibility to give back and support her friend’s online participation. The findings confirm therefore Mauss’ (1954) idea that the act of giving online creates debt that must be repaid. Similarly, Anya and Tatiana respectively claim “*we need to support each other*” and “*it is important to ‘like’/comment your friends’ pictures*”, which both emphasise once again their social duties. The social exchanges (‘likes’, comment, posts, tags) are essential to bind the parties together and undeniably foster intangible mutual debts that constitutes the social fabric. As Godbout and Caillé argue (1998), the gift constitutes the foundation of our social ties and ensures social connection, creating a sense of obligation to respond in kind. In the Instagram community, it seems important to identify the dynamics of exchanges that rule in the community to maintain bonds and ensure social cohesion.

The findings suggest that food posts characterise a symbolic ritual and create an arena for gift-givers to effectively indicate their positive attitudes toward the intended recipient and their willingness to invest resources in a future relationship (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1954; Camerer, 1988). Instagram users are connected to one another, sharing values and interests which ultimately hold the community together and engender social exchanges. Gift-giving in the digital sphere implies therefore reciprocity and sentimental connections in social communities.

Drawing from the respondents’ comments, it seems clear that the act of posting/ giving in the online community triggers reciprocal exchanges in which the media users engage in a ceremonial gift exchange. The respondents manage to show their support via the use

of emoticons (thumbs up, emoji kiss and heart were the most common ones) that signify appreciation of the photo and/or of the person posting it. The symbolic domain of these exchanges is essential to the formation of bonds in the digital sphere, as it is in archaic social exchanges.

This chapter presents ways to look at food in the digital community. Food reveals cultural and social aspects of the media users and also documents on the ways and forms in which media users interact with each other. The exploration of food posts exposed the dynamics of social exchange in the digital community. Once media users participate in the community and share their food posts, they engage in the social act of giving, receiving and reciprocating. Exchange, as Mauss argues (1954), is the fundamental and universal reality behind kinship systems. The findings reveal the emergence of various structures in which the Instagram users have a social responsibility to maintain social cohesion. On the Instagram platform, these exchanges foster social ties that bind the parties (giver and receiver) together. Posting, commenting and ‘liking’ act as intangible mutual "debts" that constitute the digital social fabric. However, the forms and reasons of social reciprocal exchanges online need to be further explored. Mauss (1954) depicts gifts as essentially ambiguous, merging altruism and self-interest. The following chapter analyses the fundamental structures of social exchanges, the forms of social bonds and social responsibilities. What role do gift practices play in creating communities and boosting one’s social capital?

## Chapter 5: The motives, expectations and high investment of gift givers and gift receivers

Chapter four outlined the process in which food is associated with sociability. The sample of media users stated how they capture their experiences wherever they are in order to document and display their lives to others. Furthermore, chapter four introduced the forms of reciprocal exchanges on Instagram, by using Mauss' framework of social exchanges. This framework permits us to make sense of the patterns of exchanges and social practices existing in the digital realm. The empirical findings demonstrate how the digital gift of food pictures present inalienable exchanges, from which a return, is eventually expected. Reciprocity is therefore a social norm in the digital sphere that enables its media users to perpetuate social interactions. The following chapter explores further these actions and forms of exchanges (posts, comments, 'likes'), with the aim to both identify the social rewards that are gained and reveal the social obligations that are enforced in the digital sphere. These forms of exchanges maintain social cohesion through the Maussian principle of reciprocal exchange.

Previous research has explored the benefits of social exchanges: to boost individuals' social capital, to communicate a personal dimension (Mauss, 1954), and to maintain relationships (Belk, 1979), so that both parties maximise satisfaction (Sherry, 1983). In this chapter, I present the forms of reciprocity that are performed in the digital platform in order to understand the motives of reciprocity and identify altruistic and self-interest dimensions. This chapter addresses the following questions: Do media users' reciprocal exchanges boost their social capital? What are the forms of exchanges? The findings suggest that digital media has made easier reciprocal exchanges which maintain social relationships and boost the users' social capital. As chapter four underlines, individuals tend to associate positive emotions from their gestures (posts, comments, 'likes'). Some media users gladly display their personal experiences, while others enthusiastically support these actions by 'liking' or commenting the content, thus creating a cycle of well-meaning gestures. The findings support Mauss' idea (1954) that gift-givers are compensated in return through social rewards. The circulation of gifts fosters reciprocity and social obligations between individuals. The respondents underline the notion of obligation to reciprocate so that both parties can achieve self-interested premises. This chapter distinguishes social codes, and reciprocal expectations from both parties that rule digital social exchanges to maintain social cohesion.

The first section presents the value of social exchanges (posts, comments, 'likes') as a means to enrich individuals' social capital by displaying life events, personal skills and success, happiness, gratitude, support or achievements. The findings reveal that commenting and 'liking' act as a currency, giving people the opportunity to feel or express gratitude and acknowledge a gift to reinforce social bonds. This section identifies therefore the practices and forms of giving and receiving online that are performed to enrich one's social capital. Furthermore, such exchanges, especially those that reflect the creativity and skills of the gift-giver, may act in such a way as to harvest social status and elevate 'worthy' media users up through the social hierarchy. In the second section, I assess whether one can understand the online platform as a form of *potlatch*. I describe how cultural value is created and power achieved through social exchanges (by both givers and receivers). The third section presents social behaviours and responsibilities that are performed to maintain and sustain social cohesion (the *Insta-rules*). Finally, I explain the nature of ceremonial exchanges in the digital sphere, revealing media users'

high commitment towards social exchanges which maintain one's social capital and achieve one's self-interest premises.

### 1) Instagram: A social capital booster

Instagram users give and receive information without financial profit. These digital contributions are not given in an exchange of goods or services for monetary value. It is therefore essential to explore how reciprocal exchanges are sustained since no financial profit is gained. Social rewards encourage users to exchange and reciprocate by commenting or 'liking' contents. This section identifies these social rewards that are accumulated via social exchanges, boosting one's social capital. Social gratification, social belonging and peer recognition are essential to understand media users' motives to post, 'like' and comment online. Since gifts are not given in an explicit exchange of goods or services for money or other commodity (Cheal, 1988), it is essential to understand the motives of these exchanges by focusing on the dynamics of archaic communities' gift exchanges. Media users take part in online communities that bolster their sense of belonging and self-esteem, while offering infinite reciprocated gifts. In this chapter, the concept of 'self esteem' reflects the media users' overall subjective emotional evaluation of their own worth. The notion of 'sense of belonging' describes how the Instagram platform nurtures the feeling of community for its users. Similarly, in the context of this thesis, the term 'self worth', defines the manner in which the respondents perceive themselves and their social environment, and the manner in which they see the social environment perceiving them. Finally, the term 'peer recognition' refers to the recognition/acknowledgement of a media user's contribution by other users.

#### a) Sense of belonging

The interview data suggests that media users are keen on feeling that they belong to a social group. For instance, Tatiana says, *"I like posting. I want my pictures to be seen by my friends, it feels great to be part of a social group"*. The act of exchanging gifts can be explained by the fact that givers/ receivers are able to reinforce their sense of belonging

to a community. The findings suggest that the respondents' involvement in the digital sphere has an important role in their social life, both online and offline. The line separating their online and offline interactions is blurred, as they use the digital sphere to boost offline exchange to further maintain both offline and online interactions. The respondents emphasise that their participation enabled them to feel valued as part of a social group. The more they share, the better they feel, and the more recognition they obtained. The interviews, combined with the netnography, concurs with Mauss' (1954) idea that social exchanges maintain social cohesion and boost one's capital.

I asked the respondents to explain the meaning of their digital involvement. I was therefore able to observe that their sense of belonging led to an increase in social exchanges and social satisfaction. The findings suggest that media users' involvement in digital exchanges has an impact on their social capital, which refers to "the network of connections the individual can effectively mobilise" (Bourdieu, 1986:246). Social capital is produced and reproduced through these constant reciprocal exchanges that show support from the network of media users. The reciprocity is linked with feelings of belonging and the creation of social capital. The media users indeed express the tangible benefits they receive from being members of a group. As Susan explains:

*"It's like you know ... Oh you had a bad day? You argued with your parents, your boss or whatever? Well you just go on Instagram and it calms you down, its like a little bubble of fun, friends, cool stuff ...where you share and have fun with people. There's something about Instagram that brings people together... people open up, share in different ways".*

In this regard, social connectedness and belonging may be the ultimate motivation for media users to exchange. The quotation above exposes Susan's desire to escape a certain environment for one that provides her with support and sense of belonging. As Susan argues, the digital environment acts as a 'bubble' where the media user feels good. By being included in the circulation of gifts and by being allowed to contribute, the respondents are recognised as part of that group (Osteen, 2002; Schwartz, 1996). The respondents enjoy the bonding experience provided through social exchanges. Susan depicts a unique experience; she expresses a feeling of togetherness that fuels her sense of belonging.

In line with past studies (Tobin *et al.* 2014; Cheikh-Ammar and Barki, 2014), this research provides evidence that individuals are seduced by instant gratifications, which foster a sense of belonging and provide social validation. My results suggest that a significant number of media users emphasise the importance of reciprocating one's post by 'liking' as a way to reinforce ones' sense of belonging and value in the community. The users generate value by 'liking' as it is a mark of affection and appreciation. Not only does 'liking' involve them in reciprocal exchange and increases their sense of belonging but also acts as a gesture of recognition and gratification. As Bernadette emphasises, she is "*glad*" when she receives 'likes' from her community since it gratifies her and thus triggers her to reciprocate the gesture. She indeed underscores the importance to reciprocate by 'liking' for the common good of social relationships. This is not entirely surprising because these social exchanges reveal the complex social fabric of the online community where media users ensure beneficial return in the future. The respondents enjoy being part of the community where value is generated by reciprocal gestures. The digital environment facilitates symbolic proximity between people and strengthens their bonds. Mauss (1954) understood the partners of ceremonial gift exchange to be demonstrating their intention to produce or nurture a social bond, when giving and reciprocating each other, through precious gifts. Eric and Jane illustrate this point:

*"Its like a big community where people support you, care for you, look what you are doing, check on your daily activity. But also they approve and support what you do, which is very cool... It just feels great to be part of it". Eric*

*"You feel that you belong to a community... because like we all like to see what the others are doing. And also, I can see what my friend in Moscow is up to, but also what my classmate from school did over the week end. And its just easier to keep in contact and to even have something to talk about when you see them on Monday morning". Jane*

The respondents' discourse exposes the notion of group membership using expressions such as "*bring people together*"; "*share and have fun with people*"; "*big community*"; "*people support you, care for you*"; "*approve and support*", "*great to be part of it*"; "*belong to a community*", "*keep in contact*". Since the respondents have the ability to seek connections with others via digital technologies, it enables them to achieve a sense of belonging. The environment allows them to perform infinite contributions and gestures

that generate value and meanings towards other members of the community. Media users articulate a contentment to be part of the digital community thanks to the reciprocal exchanges and signs of recognition. The Instagram platform creates new spaces for socialisation, which is also creating forms of social capital. Being involved in the digital community increases the size of the network that the respondents possess, which is a key dimension of social capital that Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes.

The respondents shed light on how the social exchanges that generate reciprocity result in the accumulation of social rewards for both givers and receivers. These rewards enhance their feeling of belonging, thanks to a supportive and caring group, and provide the users with personal satisfaction in the digital realm of exchanges.

#### b) Gratification and rewards on Instagram

Several motivational factors lead individuals to participate to these online communities and remain active. The main motives are: to belong to a group, feel rewarded and boost social capital. Social rewards, accumulated via social exchanges, are palpable boosters of social capital, and play a key role in motivating individuals to participate in the social exchanges in the digital environment. The core idea of social capital combines the resources available to the respondents through their social interactions (Lin,2001). I identified that the respondents tend to reinforce their sense of belonging and trigger reciprocal exchange by posting their achievements, knowledge and self-promoting contents to feel rewarded by their community's return gestures.

The term *Insta-gratification* refers to the instant gratification achieved through posts, 'likes' or comments on Instagram, which act as social rewards and enrich their social capital. Posting a photo on Instagram immediately floods the media users with social stimuli, leading them to feel a sense of gratification. Food opens up communication and grabs the attention of individuals, which make the givers feel important and valued. H  l  ne confirms this idea when she suggests: *"It feels nice when people 'like' your pictures. It makes you feel like they care about you, they like what you do"*.



In online gift-giving practices, individuals accumulate intangible rewards, including self-esteem, recognition and reputation (Rheingold, 1993). Rheingold's (1993) early work on the online community determines that individuals' motivation to contribute to a group is driven by desire of prestige. The author explains the power of contributions within a community of users who are able to obtain recognition. On Instagram, the 'likes' are salient motivational factors that lead the respondents to participate and contribute to the digital sphere. The more attention the respondents obtain, the more status and reputation they achieve. According to the study's findings, the desire to gain reputation is strong within the Instagram community.

Tarek mentions:

*"I usually post what I eat so that people can relate and perhaps be inspired by my creation if they lack of inspiration. They usually reply by 'liking', showing some interest, making compliments, or asking questions how I did this recipe or how long it took to cook it".*

The reciprocal exchanges that Tarek receives demonstrate how his contributions in the digital media solicit reciprocity that maintain the relationship through acknowledging his initial gift. These exchanges are symbolic and meaningful for Tarek, who displays his tastes and skills through his posts. Tarek, as a digital media user, aspires to be gratified and earn recognition through his posts (Rheingold, 1993). Kollock (1999) identifies different sources of motivations that further explain why individuals contribute to online communities. He argues that anticipated reciprocity, increased recognition, and a sense of efficacy are the motivations that drive individuals to contribute. The sense of efficacy refers to the outcome of the desired effect that media users' contributions have in their community. This is related to enhancing the feeling of self-worth in the community and gratifying other users' needs. The reciprocal exchanges tend to maximise the giver's satisfaction versus maximising the receiver's pleasure. Both givers and receivers accumulate benefits through social exchanges that impact positively their social capital. Media users expose how they usually reciprocate positive feedback to enjoy the gratifications and recognition from others in the future, echoing Kollock's idea of anticipated reciprocity. Hence Tarek's desire to give creative content to his friends does not obliterate his high expectation to obtain rewards and recognition in return, by reciprocal exchanges such as 'likes' or comments. The reciprocal gestures result in the





Figure 7: H  l  ne's home dinner

Interestingly, several respondents (Tarek, H  l  ne, Kevin, Tatiana) emphasise that they enjoy exposing their knowledge and skills in order to be acknowledged by others. Posting gives them the opportunity to accumulate intangible rewards. These intangible rewards are praises, compliments and acknowledgements. These rewards impact positively on the users' participation. Kevin illustrates this through reminisces about one of his post:

*"People who 'like' my posts make me very proud of myself. I become more and more willing to create and share. Like this day... when I made this dish and I posted it, people were so amazed by my skills. I mean this is also why I posted it haha... I knew I would have positive feedback from it".*

As Kevin mentions, he posted content that would please his community and would provide a positive outcome. The discourse of this respondent echoes therefore Kollock's sense of efficacy. Kevin exposes the positive outcomes (social rewards) through the 'likes', as he states that it makes him feel proud. Langer (2000) conjectured that the act of giving, places the giver in a position where he feels useful and generous. Gift-giving in the digital realm is not only beneficial for receivers in terms of knowledge gained, but also conveys a positive experience to the givers, such as Kevin who feels gratified thanks to other users. By posting his content, Kevin is thus able to feel socially validated (Tobin *et al.* 2014) and strengthen his sense of efficacy (Kollock, 1999).

In line with previous studies and according to my respondents' narratives, digital interaction is an effective way of providing support and enriching one's value via 'likes', and positive feedback (Rheingold, 1993; Hars and Ou, 2002; Tong and Walther, 2011; Tobin *et al.*, 2014; Lee and Lee, 2017). Gift exchanges display their skills and expose their merit, in a peacock-like display for the community to enjoy and acknowledge. It is a continuous, ongoing cycle of contributions and reciprocal exchanges that add value to the community and its members. The *Insta-gratification* helps to keep the community's social capital pool balanced. (The notion of balanced/ symmetrical relationships is developed in the next chapter of the thesis). The respondents experience a sense of gratification by gaining recognition from other members of the Instagram community. Both Hélène and Kevin experienced satisfaction by posting their dinners, hence they felt valued and gratified by others. This feeling is palpable when receiving feedback, compliments, praises, 'likes', and comments. Following Mauss conceptualisation of the gift in archaic societies, gifts in the digital community are associated with an implicit expectation that the gift must be reciprocated and returned. Tatiana illustrates this aspect and the personal gain she accumulates from her contributions. Tatiana argues:

*"(...) What you receive, then, is not one thing in value in exchange - there is no explicit act of exchange at all - but you have hundreds of 'likes' and up to 50 comments if it's a cool picture! Like its totally worth it".*

Peer recognition is another form of extrinsic reward for participating in online communities and is also derived from the desire for fame and self-esteem (Hars and Ou, 2002). Hars and Ou (2002) stress that peer recognition in the form of feedback has a

positive effect. It is proof that the content is useful and appreciated by the community, which motivates the initial giver to continue to contribute and attract positive feedback. Tatiana highlights the positive impact of posting in exchange of some 'likes' and feedback. This form of recognition from others ultimately brings joy and a sense of self accomplishment. The extrinsic reward from contributing in the digital sphere is triggered by peer recognition.

### c) Peer Recognition on Instagram

When respondents post about themselves and other users react by showing their interest, it instantly makes them feel rewarded. As Tong and Walther (2011) and Tobin *et al.* (2014) posit, 'liking' a picture can reveal a positive validation for the poster, it is a type of feedback that acts as social approval. Media users taking part in this research take advantage of Instagram design features (Instagram's 'heart likes') to strengthen ties and boost their social capital. It is relevant to refer to Gibson's notion (1977) of affordances through which he exposes how actors perceive the properties of the environment to perform actions and the way technology forms social actions in a given environment. The affordances available on Instagram (the platform features) create an environment where users are able to post their food on the digital platform, communicate information and share their experiences. In other words, the platform affordances allow media users to notify someone when they are paying attention to them and give them credit by 'liking' or commenting. The 'like' button has communicative affordances, such as expressing support and appreciation (Tong and Walther, 2011; Lee and Lee, 2017). It impacts on the users' experiences by acting as a currency, expressing value and affirming social bonds (Ellison, 2007). These material artefacts in media technologies allow the respondents to afford social relations. Instagram affords interactivity between users, through affordance for posts, 'likes', comments and hashtags that create feelings of real-life interactions with a group, hence boosting their feeling of group membership.

The media users harvest pleasure and gratification from the comments and 'likes' they receive from their posts. Comments are akin to giving another a 'gift' because most of the time the comments are positive, complimentary, and ego boosting (Donath, 2008; Skågeby, 2008; Tobin *et al.* 2014). Since these posts are accessible for their whole

community, the reciprocity comes from the group as a whole, rather than from individual gift-receivers. This “group effect”, as expressed by Tatiana, provides satisfaction to the giver. An arena is created by gift givers in which individuals express their willingness to invest resources in the relationship by reciprocating the action (via feedback, compliments). Furthermore, Andrew develops his thoughts on the benefits of comments on each of his Instagram pictures:

*“To be honest my friends’ comments is the most uplifting thing to me... Because let’s be honest we do not get any financial recompense for the time we spend taking pictures, editing and posting. It is just for fun”.*



Figure 8: Andrew’s comments on a food post

Feedback and compliments signify recognition from other media users. According to Andrew, the feedback (under the form of ‘likes’ or comments) reflect the quality of the posts and most importantly indicates the affection and connection existing between media users. Several respondents, including Andrew, who receives feedback from other members, express a sense of fulfilment and gratification. Figure 8 presents the comment section above one of Andrew’s picture. While the comments are brief and superficial, they nonetheless have a positive impact on Andrew. Andrew’s friends show their interest, ask for the recipe and also congratulate Andrew’s skills and creativity. The comments are positive and uplifting. Similarly, Marie suggests:

*“People usually ‘like’ my pictures or comment or tag their friends. I am always excited, I think those ‘likes’ and comments are the best returns I can get”.*

Sharing, posting, commenting and ‘liking’ are therefore ways for media users to interact with each other and to provide mutual benefits. The reciprocal gifts from Kevin’s, Andrew’s and Marie’s friends drive users to be more productive and prolific, as these compliments indicate the appreciation of their gift to their followers. Instagram gives the respondents the ability to demonstrate sociability, consolidate friendships and boost their social capital. The findings correlate with past research claiming that posting, tagging and ‘liking’ improve one’s belonging (Tobin *et al.* 2014); show support (Tong and Walther, 2011; Lee *et al.* 2015); affection (Mansson and Myers, 2011); express acknowledgement (Donath, 2008) and maintain social communication (Tamir and Mitchell, 2012). The gift-giving practice reveals the nodes of social exchanges online that enable them to gain social rewards. The results provide consistent evidence and support the notion that “gift-giving adds value to network relations and represent the social capital inherent in network” (Haythornthwaite, 2007: 127). Gift-giving fosters reciprocity, leading to social gratification in the online community. Instagram thus facilitates the exchange of gifts, knowledge and ideas, without expectation of material recompense. Nevertheless, media users gain something intangible such as public prestige or personal satisfaction. As a giver or as a receiver, the media user posts, comments and ‘likes’ to ensure social cohesion and benefit from social rewards. The findings describe individuals exchanging back and forth to feel that they belong to a community. A strong sense of community and recognition enhances the media users’ contribution and

participation in a community (Rheingold, 1993; Hard and Ou, 2002; Lampel and Bhalla, 2007).

By using Mauss' archaic structure of social exchanges, this section has exposed how both parties (giver and recipient) benefit from reciprocal exchanges to achieve self-gratification and to gain recognition. This section has thus uncovered how, thanks to food contents in the media, the hashtags and description box, the media users are able to show their skills. The users want to appear in a positive light and engage in self-promotion. Social media enables individuals to exchange with a large audience, as opposed to a one-to-one communication. As a result, respondents tend to share more self-promotional content (the notion of self-promotion/ performance is further elaborated in chapter six of the thesis).

The next section explores how media users' digital exchanges pave the way for social status emulation, in which the concept of performance is palpable. The choice of their food content, being embedded with their cultural practices and associated with meaning, is not selected nor posted trivially. The users wisely select their content with the aim to perform and be rewarded, complimented and supported, which impacts on their sense of togetherness as a group. Mauss' theory also suggests the potential for a cycle of reciprocity in which givers and receivers compete for recognition, social capital, or rise of status. This echoes the notion of the *potlatch* and gifting as competition. The act of posting and sharing as a complex effort is discussed in the following section of this chapter.

## 2) [The Potlatch](#)

(See Chapter 2, section 1 for more details on the potlatch)

This section paves the way to further understand the digital community system of exchanges. Using the *potlatch* as an example enables an understanding of the phenomenon of reputation and social debts existing in the digital communities. Public ceremonies, such as the *potlatch*, are spaces in which the obligation to recognise and to be recognised is critical to the production and maintenance of social relationships. The Instagram community adopts similar behaviours as north-west coast Indian cultures



explored in *The Gift* (1954). In comparison to these cultures, social status becomes the centre of attention in the digital media sphere and is further reinforced through the act of gift-giving. Media users' status is created and maintained by way of a gift economy, using the *potlatch* as metaphor. The *potlatch* ceremony resonates in the digital community and is an idyllic metaphor for understanding the gift cultural and social basis of digital social exchanges.

Social capital involves the recognition of “the network of connections [the individual] can effectively mobilise” and the volume of capital possessed by those with whom the individual has those connections (Bourdieu, 1986:246). Thus, social capital stems from the social recognition accumulated through the media users' interactions with others. As technology is providing new spaces and affordances, the media users are performing with the aim to collect social rewards and recognition to attain status. The central characteristic of the gift economy is that reciprocity produces intangible rewards, such as reputation, anticipated reciprocity and self-esteem (Kollock, 1999; Mauss, 1954). These expected rewards are useful to build reputation and to further motivate individuals to participate to the cycle of gift exchange. The Instagram platform can be characterised as a digital get-together where the digital contributions entail a particular kind of obligation, one that is critical to the formation (or non-formation) of social bonds. The respondents have indeed expressed happiness once gratified by others, and they have explained how the sense of belonging to the community triggers them to further participate in the community and reciprocate exchanges (as a form of obligation).

Social sharing, involves a reputation contest premised on the digital exchanges. Lin (2011) suggests that reputation is an indicator for social gain. He claims that reputation can be defined as “as favourable/unfavourable opinions about an individual in a social network” (Lin, 2001:244). Similar to the *potlatch*, the respondents seek to create value through ‘gifts’ in the form of posts, comments and ‘likes’. The more value they create, the more they develop a reputation and the more support they gain from their communities. The previous quotation from Andrew (section 1, chapter 5) mirrors modern examples of *potlatch*, where the receivers were impressed by the pictures and eulogised the skills of the giver via comments and ‘likes’.

Developing and applying the notion of *potlatch* to digital communities is an emerging metaphorical phenomenon. Metaphors, as Lakoff (1986) suggests, are figures of thought.

Using Mauss' term *potlatch* to describe the digital gift-giving practices helps make sense of the changes linked to the conceptual gift framework of the past, with normative, social and economic implications. *Potlatch* is about social and cultural capital, the greater the gift is, the greater social capital is produced (Mauss, 1954). This idea is supported by Hélène who states:

*“On Instagram I try to post pictures that are quite interesting: For instance, if I am visiting another country, going to a restaurant, having a party... I mean I will definitely not post my boring lunch in between my two work shifts... I just don't think I would get 'likes' or comments. I'd rather wait and post my dinner that I actually spend more time preparing. It's like why would I post a Nissan on my profile when I can post a Ferrari!”*

Hélène's metaphor explicitly addresses her desire to share posts that are interesting enough to enrich her social capital. The use of metaphors provides a frame to understand and evaluate the phenomenon. For instance, in this case, Hélène puts an emphasis on posting flamboyant posts to add value to both her profile and her status. In sharing her content, she plays a reputation contest, as the post challenges the respondent to greater expression of generosity, knowledge and skills. As reputation is a reflection of social capital (Lin, 2001), there is an obvious motivation for chiefs to give generously (Mauss, 1954). The psychological and motivational dynamics of the digital sphere comes into focus when viewed as a virtual *potlatch*. Media users acknowledge what other users are posting and, exactly as chiefs, earn reputation through gifts. Media users want to stand out using creative posts, collecting 'likes', hence accumulating social capital. Indian chiefs stage their *potlatch* by gathering everyone together and giving gifts of food, skins, weapons, crafts, and canoes. Posting online is associated to social status emulation. The number of 'likes' assign a value to a post, similar to an economic assessment of the worth of a good or service. Hélène's use of metaphors exposes her desire to distinguish herself through extraordinary posts and accumulate social capital via potential 'likes' and comments. The findings demonstrate that reputation create and allocate forms of recognition, hierarchy, and authority, which is evaluated by the visual quality of the posts. The number of 'likes' and comments, attributed to these posts, attests to well-appreciated content approved by media users. Both the quantity and quality of postings (gifts) created

by media users play a key factor in establishing their social reputation. This explains their desire to create sophisticated pleasing posts.

The greater the gift, the greater the reputation earned. This idea culminates in Mauss' *potlatch*, where individuals compete for status via their gifts, celebrating abundance. The tribe (social division in a traditional society) can then witness the gift of the giver who consequently earns prestige from it (Mauss, 1954). Applying this metaphor (the *potlatch*) to the digital sphere suggests that, when media users post, comment and 'like' others users' posts, they become chiefs who can earn a reputation through their digital gestures and contributions. According to the respondents, the Instagram platform has a built-in reward system via gestures and contributions. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, the respondents' participation helps them to create a community they feel they belong to, and collect social rewards (boost their social capital) via reciprocal exchanges. While reciprocating their exchanges, the platform gives therefore the respondents the opportunity to act as chiefs and enhance their capital. They are being rewarded by others based on their contributions, hence the particular attention given to what is being posted, as illustrated in H  lene's metaphor.

An unexpected finding sheds light on the structure of the Instagram community. Two different behaviours which assert social power are distinguished within social exchanges by both givers and receivers. A giver asserts their power by giving to the community social content that ultimately plays a key role for their social capital account (As I discussed previously with H  lene's quote). Nevertheless, the giver only maintains this hierarchical power if the receivers reciprocate and give back the number of social rewards (comments/ 'likes') expected. Thus, a giver may feel empowered when posting, but will not remain powerful if the expectation of reciprocity is not met. Therefore, the hierarchical structure can be subverted at any time in the digital community. To further understand this idea, Bourdieu argues that "a man possesses in order to give. But he also possesses by giving. A gift that is not returned can become a debt, a lasting obligation; and the only recognised power – recognition, personal loyalty or prestige is the one that is obtained by giving" (1992: 126). When digital gifts are further analysed and traced, a stable, hierarchical structure is revealed. Gift-giving is thus a sign of power that is a common practice in the digital platform of Instagram. By means of posting and sharing

their skills, knowledge and personal experiences, the gift givers accumulate social rewards, resulting in a position of superiority, which cause the receivers to feel indebted.

For instance, Joe, in accordance with Hélène, claims:

*“I posted this wonderful cake the other day that my girlfriend made for me... and I have to say I was quite proud of my girlfriend! Especially when all my friends ‘liked’ it and commented on it Haha!... It was a bit like “hey look what she did for me!”*

Joe and H         present similar views and express the idea that a gift is given to improve the gift givers' reputation within the community. This idea, emphasised in Joe's quote, reveals that his post mirrors the quality of his relationship, and his girlfriend's skills. Rather than financial rewards, immaterial rewards such as reputation constitute the key incentives for online voluntary contributions (Tamir and Mitchell, 2012). Joe creates value and challenges others to acknowledge his post. This quote proves the asymmetry in power. Once Joe posts his picture, his followers have full power to reciprocate the gesture to maintain a symmetrical exchange or refuse to 'like' the content and therefore disown Joe's social recognition and reputation. It proves the fragility of reciprocal exchanges that are at the heart of power hierarchies. The users' key motivation to give and receive is closely linked with the desire to accumulate social interactions, rewards, 'likes' and comments. Thus, the metrics are proven to be a crucial variable for media users to affirm their reputation, display their social capital and sustain their social bonds. The gift may enhance the givers' prestige, leading to a preferable immediate acclaim from other users. These facets of gift-giving enhance the idea that social interactions are driven by one key factor: reputation.

Interestingly, most of the respondents listed reputation as a motivation for them to be socially active on the platform. Respondents mentioned that they try to act superior to others, which indicates the possible existence of hierarchies. Joe's and H  l  ne's quotes express how they compete for prestige, as they both seek to share the greatest and the most remarkable posts to enhance their social capital. They use their posts to display their skills and qualities, personal performances by using food as a medium. Kevin, for instance, uses food as a medium to prove that he has the ability to live a healthy lifestyle on a low budget, from which he gains much admiration from his followers. Although



discussed in the previous section). This framing of the gift refers to Mauss' idea which suggests an on-going power dynamic within social cultures. Finally, Anya explains the process in which her gifts are valuable not financially but rather through the reciprocal value of her gestures. She claimed:

*“My Instagram routine is like this: I post what I eat almost every single day, I always try to be funny when I write the recipe instructions in the caption. Then I spend quite some time to ‘like’ all my friends’ pictures that I missed while I was away or sleeping. Because we all live in different time zones. And sometimes I also comment on their pictures. I think I spend more time scrolling, ‘liking’ and commenting my friends picture than anything else!”*

I asked Anya to elaborate on the reasons why she spends “*so much time*” on ‘liking’ and commenting. She responded that “*when you give, ‘like’ and support people, they notice it and they give it back to you when its your time to post*”. Anya’s quote reveals her deep investment and time devotion to other community members that do not bring her financial profits, but ensure social reputation instead. Anya acts as a tribal chief, competing for status in a virtual *potlatch*. Chiefs would give so excessively, as Mauss posits, for the sake of the reputation and prestige that is associated with it. Similar to the *potlatch*, the findings suggest that the Anya’s primary goal is to give and reciprocate as much as possible to circulate resources within a community. She establishes status via the reciprocal ‘likes’ and comments she receives, which is an indicator of prestige in the eyes of the community. As Mauss observed (1954:35), in the *potlatch*, “The man who gives recklessly is the man who wins prestige”. Her followers are embracing and enjoying her gifts while she enriches the digital community with any social gift she has to offer. The findings affirm therefore that the more media users give, the more reputation they gain, the more rewards they obtain. Indeed, the findings support that in a gift economy, status is accorded to those who give the most to others. This idea demonstrates the importance of metrics and digital gifts to determine one’s reputation, as emphasised in Anya’s quote.

The digital *potlatch* can be defined as a celebration of tribal solidarity. The digital gift is full of meanings through which social media users seek to create value for their followers in the form of posts, comments, ‘likes’, tags. The more value users create, the more reputation they earn and the more support they gain from their communities. Instagram

offers an infrastructure where reciprocal exchanges are the dominant modes of interaction.

The figure 9 synthesises the first two sections of this chapter. The findings provide an understanding on how social media affordances enable its users to maintain social relationships, obtain social recognition and experience a sense of belonging.

The exploration of food as a medium on Instagram demonstrates how sociality is mediated on the visual platform. Instagram maintains a form of intermittent, casual communication. The value of the digital interactions enriches the media users' social capital. They are able to display certain parts of their lives and receive 'likes', which are considered a form of currency through which to express gratitude and acknowledgement that reinforce social bonds. The findings suggest that the more the users post on Instagram, the more socially validated, active and valued they felt as both online and offline exchanges were triggered by their digital involvement. Instagram exchanges are meant to create mutual interdependence and produce social capital thanks to pictures being posted with the aim of being acknowledged and validated by others. The media users accumulate intangible rewards through their peacock-like display of skills, knowledge and life events. It is mainly the praise, acknowledgement and compliments that complete the mutual recognition. The nature of the ceremonial exchanges on Instagram reveal the high commitment on the part of users to maintain social capital and achieve their personal interests. The 'liking' etiquette is a form of reciprocal support, perceived as a currency, that enriches the users' social capital as they are being socially recognised and validated.

It is the social media metrics that delimit the users' social capital, create hierarchies and show deep instrumentality through the perpetual quest for 'likes'. Instrumental and self-interest exchange lead users to think of others as manageable social capital boosters and resources to be exploited. The 'likes' accumulated are a proof of their possession of a durable network of relationships and membership of a group. Symbolic profit is produced from these exchanges, as orchestrated from within an economy of recognition.

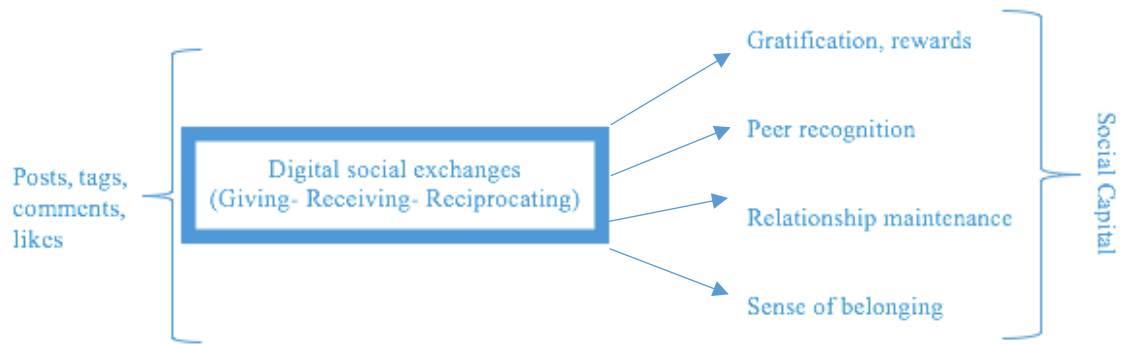


Figure 9: Synthetic diagram

Gift-giving reveals a range of benefits: The *potlatch*, defined by Mauss as a set of exchange practices in archaic cultures characterised by the competitive exchange of gifts, enables an understanding of the mechanism of social exchange in the digital sphere. This section has uncovered how media users gain social capital and a reputation in a competitive way by asserting a hierarchical power via social interactions and rewards (currency of ‘likes’, comments, followers). As gift-giving practices require reciprocity to sustain, it is essential to further explore how social capital is maintained and identify the social responsibility associated with digital gift-giving. How are exchanges on Instagram performed to create a stable nexus of giving, receiving and reciprocating? How are users able to maintain their social capital and what rules do they follow?

### 3) Obligation, High Expectation and Reciprocity

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the Instagram platform can be characterised as a digital get-together and compared to the *potlatch*, where gifts received entail a form of obligation. I have reviewed the reputation-driven motives to reciprocate, a gift-giving characteristic palpable in the digital sphere of Instagram. The respondents’ narratives have enabled me to recognise obligation markers that are associated with their participation in the digital community. The following section identifies the reciprocal exchanges and the social rules that are expected from both parties (giver and receiver) in the realm of the digital social exchanges, to maintain social cohesion. This section aims to uncover social responsibilities performed to maintain and sustain balanced



relationships. I further explore the types of moral obligations and identify the *Insta-rules* that respondents must take into consideration when participating to the sphere. This section also demonstrates how reciprocity is a socially expected norm from the respondents within the digital community. I explain the nature of ceremonial exchanges in the digital sphere, revealing media users' high expectations and feelings of obligation that maintain social cohesion and therefore social capital in the sphere.

As Gregory's (1982) work on Mauss demonstrates, the act of giving creates debt that must be repaid. My findings strongly agree that media users feel obligated to both contribute and return social exchanges to reproduce relationships. Media users shed light on socially expected behaviour to adopt in the online community, to strengthen social relationships. What are the rules to ensure balanced reciprocal exchanges to maintain social relationships? In this section, I reveal how media users' feeling of obligation to 'like' is seen as a 'requirement' or a 'rule' on Instagram to sustain social cohesion. The findings suggest that media users recognise their moral obligation to return social exchanges. As Andrew tells me

*"Of course I have to 'like' their posts, you know, when I check my Instagram feed... I need to 'like' my friends' posts".*

As discussed in the previous chapter, once again the discourse of this respondent sheds light on the semantic field of obligation: "*of course*" "*I have to*" "*I need to*". The modal auxiliaries are used to add layers of meaning to emphasise the degree of obligation. These obligation markers define the media users' social responsibility towards their social community. The 'liking' gesture is therefore dependent on an expected behaviour and is considered etiquette in ordinary digital exchanges.

Besides, the findings suggest that media users feel the urge to reciprocate exchanges. Tarek even describes other media users' interactions as 'an invitation' for him to contribute and as 'a need' to respond. Tarek uses the term 'invitation', which further describes the context in which responding appears as a social responsibility. The respondent depicts a context that requires him to reply to this invitation. The findings support Colvin's (2009) thoughts on the social platform of Twitter in which she concludes that Twitter users disclose the existence of a 'law of reciprocity' in Twitter

use. By analysing the respondents' thoughts, the findings enabled me to evaluate how the Instagram community system of reciprocal exchanges binds users via unspoken contracts. Furthermore, the findings support Malinowski's (1922) conclusions on gifting, who states that reciprocity is an implicit part of gifting. Reciprocity is a socially expected act on Instagram (*Insta-rule*). Pei and Tanya respectively argue:

*"No one is telling you to do it, you don't earn pennies each time you 'like' a picture, however it's just the right thing to do you know... you got to 'like' your friends' pictures".*

*"You have to support your friends. 'Likes' are important. Instagram is all about 'likes'! It is a sign of approval, of support".*

Tanya, Pei and Tarek further define this gesture as a *"right", "polite" and "socially expected behaviour"*. According to the respondents, 'liking' is a social norm that characterises the set of rules regulating the digital gift-giving practices. Based on their expectations, the respondents shed light on a strict self-discipline and social responsibility established by the Instagram community. Within this rhetoric, reciprocity of 'liking' can be used to define the codified atmosphere in which media users exchange. It refers to a gesture expressing a desire to recognise others and engage them into a social relation.

Reciprocity becomes a form of currency to demonstrate the receiver's approval, validation and support of the giver of the initial gift. Hence Andrew, Tanya and Pei illustrate the obligations to recognise their friends' contributions. These symbolic exchanges and gestures mediate interactions and explain how social relations are formed and maintained. As a social norm, the respondents emphasise that once one of their friends posts something, they feel obligated to return the favour. Digital gift-giving thus calls for the obligation of the gesture in return. This idea correlates with Lambert's (2013) discussion on the pattern of reciprocal exchanges in the online environment, which presents how individuals feel compelled to return and 'like back' to perpetuate social obligations. My findings suggest that any gifts, in the form of a post; a 'like' or a comment, carry an obligation and social responsibility codified by rules. Sherine expresses the strong feeling of obligation to return digital gifts. Sherine associates the process of 'liking' others' content as a need that is sent back and forth.

*“I think that when I ‘like’ my friends’ picture, then, they also feel the need to ‘like’ mine... so in a way you also do it for yourself ...and that’s cool... I always have lots of ‘likes’ from my friends”.*

The respondents expose a merging of altruism and self-interest when they further develop their reasons why they feel obligated to behave in a certain way. Malinowski (1922) presents the notion of non-altruistic motives for giving the gift. He states that individuals expect a return of equal or greater value. As discussed in the previous section, the media users’ motives to exchange are driven by the accumulation of social rewards, gratification and reputation from their social relationships. The feeling of obligation leads media users to behave in a certain way to achieve self-interests. Media users present the digital exchanges as a highly ritualised system of exchange. The findings present the existence of unspoken contracts between the media users, where they feel obligated to make a return gift in order to sustain their relationships. The respondents describe therefore their digital relationships as relationships of debt. Hélène, for instance, provides evidence of the notions of social debts when she expresses that she feels relieved once she gets out of debt by reciprocating through ‘liking’. The findings provide clear evidence that giving is accompanied with the expectation to get returns and establishes codes of exchanges. This finding is consistent with Skågeby (2010), who states that in the gift economy, reciprocity is socially expected. It is therefore coherent to argue that on Instagram, digital gift-giving practices require paybacks.

During the analysis, a pattern stood out, revealing that the quality of the relationships resulted in different intensities of obligation. Indeed, the findings identify socially expected behaviours of reciprocity, depending on the type of ties (friendship/ family ties or acquaintances). Several respondents shed light on the feeling of obligation to both ‘like’ and comment on their best friends’ and family posts. On the other hand, they reveal how respondents feel less pressured to react the same way on acquaintances’ posts. The type of gift (e.g. post, tag, ‘likes’, comment) is therefore used to mirror the quality of the relationship. To illustrate this idea, I refer to Anya and Marie ‘s narrative, who respectively claim:

*“I would ‘like’ all my close friends’ pictures, that’s for sure. And I would comment on their pictures too, no matter what. However, for my acquaintances, I would usually ‘like’ their post but I won’t necessarily comment on it. It requires another level of affection. However, if for instance I meet an acquaintance at the mall at some point and then I see the next day that she posts something, I can ‘like’ or comment on her pictures. It’s like if I see her I feel a bit more pressured to say something”*

*“Some of my friends take ‘likes’ very seriously. So I know it is something they expect from me. I guess it could hurt them if I don’t react”*

Different forms of return are expected according to the respondents’ affiliations. The respondents reveal that commenting is perceived as a duty towards their close friends’ posts. When their close friends post, they are instantly socially expected to both ‘like’ and comment. This reveals that the ‘comment’ and ‘like’ that they give back reflect the value of their relationship in the public eye. As Schrift claims, the object being exchanged is “incidental to the value of the relationship established” (1997:2). Not only do these rules of reciprocity lead to a social bond and mutual interdependence, but they also instantly deliver evidence of the quality of the relationship. This exposure of reciprocal actions is important as it adds pressure to the respondents to reciprocate. Interestingly, the Instagram affordances and feature of ‘liking’ is used by the respondents as a powerful way of publically acknowledging their friends.

This practice is revealed to be accurate for all the females who participated to this study. They feel extremely obligated to ‘like’ and comment on each of their close friends posts in order to show their support, love and affection. However, the male respondents do not necessarily comment on their close friends’ posts. Females are more vocal, expressive and willing to return digital interactions. In other words, the female participants feel more easily indebted to reciprocate social exchanges to ensure the cohesion of their social bonds. This can be explained by the fact women use digital platforms to maintain relationships more than men. The study by Kimbrough *et al.* (2013), supports this idea and indicates that women, relative to men, are connecting more and using mediated technology to maintain relationships.

Furthermore, the findings reveal another interesting *Insta-rule* which requires the media users to respect the chronology of social exchanges. Susan explains this phenomenon:

*“Also I would always ‘like’ and respond to any comments on my profile before posting anything new. Because otherwise it means that I saw their comments or ‘likes’ but I did not reciprocate anything”.*

Not only do media users express that they feel indebted to give back in a certain way according to their affiliations, but they also need to return the gift in the expected chronology of events (before giving back again, media users need to reciprocate first). This proves that there is a strong desire to maintain a balanced relationship where all users give and reciprocate back and forth (taking turns) (Sherry, 1983). Chronology as a variable needs to be considered by media users, as it is part of the Instagram etiquette to reciprocate before gifting again.

A sense of obligation to reciprocate is fostered in the digital communities which informs the quality of the relationship and the willingness to invest resources in the relationship. Therefore, social exchanges are motivated by feelings of obligation, putting media users into a debt that they need to reciprocate. They must reciprocate considering the *Insta-rules* (the need to ‘like’, the need to comment according to the quality of relationship and the need to follow the neat chronology of exchanges).

The consideration of the social uses of food pictures, combined with the Instagram platform affordances, help to understand the nature and processes of social exchanges dedicated to the creation and/or maintenance of social relationships. This chapter has explored how the sample of media users enjoy sharing food-related digital exchanges to gain social recognition and social capital (*Insta-gratification*). The analysis also reveals the social codes, rules and expectations (*Insta-rules*) that the respondents must follow to maintain symmetrical relationships, to avoid feelings of debts, and fulfil self-interest premises (i.e. boost their social capital). Mauss’ (1954) study sheds light on the motives and social expectations that rule archaic social relationships. My findings provide evidence that the Instagram community is a highly codified realm where media users are required to behave a certain way in order to collect benefits and sustain their bonds. Also, a distinction between strong-tie and weak-tie relationships is introduced in relation to the

respondents' affiliations (this notion is elaborated in chapter seven). Mauss' theory of exchange is key to understanding how digital communities work. This study confirms past research on the gift economy: reciprocity is expected (Skågeby, 2010) and sustains social bonds (Belk, 1979; Mauss, 1954); gifts exchanges boosts individuals' social capital and status (Mauss, 1954; Bourdieu, 1986); gifts are intangible (Cheal, 1988); giving and receiving form social contracts and debts (Gregory, 1982); and both giving and receiving are crucial for the balance of a relationship (Sahlins, 1972; Roberts, 1990).

The altruistic and self-interest nature of the motives, require examination of the degree of spontaneity and authenticity in digital exchanges and the extent to which digital exchanges remain balanced. It is essential to further explore whether these feelings of obligation to reciprocate are associated with positive or negative principles. What are the strategies used by media users to achieve a balanced relationship that maintain their social capital and sustain social cohesion?

## Chapter 6: Are digital exchanges strategic exchanges? Homo Oeconomicus or Homo Sociologicus?

Chapters four and five have revealed the forms of exchanges that drive media users to participate in the digital community. Using Mauss' archaic structure of social exchanges,

these chapters have discussed how both parties (giver and recipient) benefit from reciprocal exchanges to obtain gratification and gain reputation. These social exchanges encourage media users to strengthen their social capital and assert their values, power and personal preferences via meaningful food posts. Furthermore, I have reviewed that social cohesion was closely linked to reciprocity one that is formed through mutual obligations. The previous chapters have shed light on a complex set of rules, codes and obligations existing in the digital community. What do these *Insta-rules* reveal in terms of the nature of the gifts? Are digital gifts authentic and sincere or driven by social obligations and indebtedness? Do the feeling of obligation and indebtedness jeopardise the sincerity of gifts? Can *Insta-rules* and reciprocal obligation impact on the authenticity of the gifts? Are gifts disinterested on Instagram?

This sixth chapter attempts to examine the impact that social obligation and *Insta-rules* have on the digital gifts. The findings disclose the complexities of digital gift-giving: the digital exchanges present a system whereby the achievement of self-interest matters and calculation becomes a common practice. Past researchers question the self-interest motives of gift-giving without exploring the authenticity of these exchanges (Osteen, 2002; Skågeby, 2010). The following chapter questions the authentic nature of the gift exchanges in a realm where mutual obligation and rules are enforced in order to maintain social cohesion. The findings advocate that the media users distance themselves from the *Homo sociologicus* and rather adopt the logic of the *Homo oeconomicus* calculating their own interest. The idea exposes the strategies of exchanges used by media users so as to maintain their social capital and to collect as much social rewards as they can. Since little information exists on how digital platforms, such as Instagram, are utilised to understand social exchanges practices, this chapter examines how individuals use the platform to exchange self-promoting contents with the aim to increase their social capital. This chapter gives further insight into the implications of self-presentation within social exchanges and so contributes to a richer understanding of the digital gift economy and its practices.

This section challenges the notions of authenticity and spontaneity within digital social exchanges by discussing how media users manage several variables (editing, filters and use of hashtags) to create content meant to stimulate reciprocal exchanges and strengthen their social capital. This section examines the digital posts using Goffman's theory (1959)

on self-presentation in order to make sense of the nature of social exchanges and to evaluate how individuals project a desired impression to other users. The notion of impression management seems appropriate to further assess the authenticity of the social exchanges and to evaluate the extent to which media users want to conform to the Instagram social norms. The users are engaged in a competitive and comparative run whereby they edit, crop, add filter and customise their gifts thus leading to the question of authenticity when social exchanges are driven by self-interest. Individuals evaluate each other based on their postings, which explains why media users hold a particular importance to the visual aspect of their postings.

I used Goffman's concept of dramatical analysis to make sense of the nature of exchanges to assess the norms of exchanges on Instagram. This concept unveils the persona of the media users by treating their actions as those of actors in a play. The backstage reveals the 'overfriendly' nature of the exchanges in which media users engage in theatrical display that is characterised by a lack of spontaneity. The illusion of spontaneity, however, ensures the media users' inclusion and acceptance. The users select and edit their posts, which turn into commodities. Goffman's concept helped me to understand the lunar environment of the digital sphere, where superficiality dominates and media users turn into their devices to put on a mask and to fulfil their sense of belonging. Instagram enables one to see through the eyes of social actors; it is thus a device that offers rich possibilities for conducting research and opens up pathways for exploring socio-cultural processes. The platform therefore gives one a glimpse into the everyday rituals, private moments and the frontstage and backstage of the media users.

### 1) Are the digital exchanges authentic or strategic?

This section reveals three main themes on users' critique of digital social exchanges: 1) users who post pictures are conforming to a social trend aware of being openly judged by other members, 2) users display a content meant to encourage reciprocal exchanges, 3) these visual gifts purposefully display visually pleasing content to fulfil self-interest dimensions (social rewards, gratification and reputation). These critiques of the digital social exchanges question the authenticity of the digital content being produced on the Instagram platform. What are the strategies used by media users to accumulate social



capital and encourage reciprocal exchanges within their community? May these strategies impact on the authentic nature of the digital gift?

All the respondents mentioned their desires to try to post the best parts of their life using terms such as “*cool enough to post*”, “*an Instagram worthy post*” and “*fancy enough to post*”. The incentive to post visually pleasing content demonstrates the participants’ awareness that the Instagram community favours sophisticated content. Media users actively limit their postings to maintain the acceptable qualities and be rewarded socially by reciprocal exchanges. Individuals innately want to conform to norms; their actions become idealised in the hopes of social acceptance. By participating to the social exchanges, the media user creates an online identity, which is used to create his/her friendships with others; the user is thus participating in the selective process of identity formation (through food posts). This is a great example of Goffman’s concept (1959) of Impression Management, where individuals automatically present themselves in a favourable way. In the context of this research, Goffman’s term impression management presents the constructive images that media users share to their audience in order to encourage a positive outcome. Therefore, the images that are daily posted, have a fair amount of thought, strategy and effort behind them in order to collect social rewards.

The sample of media users are reluctant to idea of sharing ordinary pictures on Instagram. Sherine, for instance, argues that she produces digital content that only “*makes her look good and sparks admiration*”. To do so, the participants engage in a theatrical display that they create to express what is characterised as “cool” and what the community wants to see. Goffman’s work (1959) adopts a dramaturgical approach, developing the theatre as metaphor for analysis of the interaction order, he argues that individuals attempt to create and highlight the positive ideas of self in interaction with others and this can be noted throughout this research. This model of the theatrical performance as a means of understanding how individuals develop and present themselves to others is relevant for this study’s context. This approach which focuses on the techniques individuals use to convey impressions and create their selves enables to analyse the work of the gift. Consistently, users’ reactions to the photo-elicitation activity assert that posting visually unattractive pictures is not part of their social practices. Fourteen out of the fifteen participants were adverse to the idea of posting an ordinary picture of their Monday night dinner made with leftovers. Sherine’s citation speaks for the majority, when she suggests:

*“On Instagram I post nice looking dishes, dresses, weddings, restaurants, family and friend times when we eat together, my animals... My profile displays everything that I like to be associated to, and what’s cool enough to be posted”.*

The pictures that Sherine shares have one common point: they are all carefully filled with fantastic looking food posts, beautiful sceneries, group pictures and overall good vibes. As it is the case with most participants, these carefully cropped and filtered photos are wisely chosen and adapted to fit the Instagram requirements. What does Sherine infer when she says *“cool enough for me to post”*? The Instagram platform is a contrived notion of perfection in order to attract attention. Within the Instagram community, it seems vital to share images that indicate a good life, as Chen (2013) explains, where the aim is often to gain reputation or to build a network. Tanya suggests that a good life on Instagram can be *“me eating some cookies in the backyard”*, *“a selfie with my friends at a restaurant”*, *“a funny picture of my dog”*. In comparison to Goffman’s concepts (1959) of front stage and back stage, Instagram posts focus on the front stage where individuals present and idealise their character rather than display an authentic version of themselves. The media users tend to provide a shaped and fabricated version of their true identities and experiences.

Pei aims to be perceived as a lively human being, with a happy life on Instagram. She uses strategies behind all images to make her profile consistent. She purposely shares pictures of herself everyday, cooking a different dish, to appear as a good wife with multiple cooking skills and knowledgeable on world cuisine,. In other words, she strategically fills her profile with her creative and perfect looking pictures. The findings demonstrate how media users create an image and manage their appearance depending on the reaction of others. In evidence to this, Pei confesses:

*“More than once have I just burnt myself, or let the pan too long on the stove. But no one knows this and no one will ever taste it! And I always try to add a little something to cover up if it looks burnt, or lacks of colour. And Then of course I edit it with a filter or change the angle. I mean let’s be honest you won’t get any ‘likes’ or comments with a burnt dish! And no one needs to know about the fails!”.*

Pei purposely chooses not to include failures in her Instagram, while Sherine hides the parts of herself that could bring rejection. By doing so, they both develop the incentive

to post content that will be appreciated by most of their friends. They gladly promote the aspects of themselves that they believe will bring them attention. Since, understandably, users attempt to create and exchange content that puts their appearance in the best light, the question of authenticity becomes prevalent in digital social exchanges.

I draw a comparison between Marx's theory (1867) of the fetishism of commodities and the pictures being posted on Instagram. The opportunity to use digital tools enable the media users to exchange visual images that exhibit their lives, selves, experiences. It is a mode of self-presentation via images that takes the form of a commodity (it refers to the transformation of goods, services, ideas, and people into commodities, or objects of trade, see chapter 2, section 1 for more details). The posts thus become objects that are consumed by the media users. Sherine and Pei illustrate this point when they select carefully which post to share with their community. The pictures captured document flattering representation of themselves (edited and performative). Marx (1867) argued that in a capitalist society a worker's meaning is altered which causes individuals to become productive tools rather than human beings. Marx (1867) saw the workers being alienated in capitalist society, he perceived human beings as economic units, and called them *Homo oeconomicus*. His perception is relevant for the digital context, the media users are alienated from themselves once their digital being becomes a production mean that is meant to be consumed. For instance, participating to the digital Instagram community alienates Pei and Sherine, who mold themselves to exhibit the representations that are socially expected and desired, taking on the qualities of a commodity. Pei and Sherine's discourses echoe Turkle's point that identities in the age of the Internet involve simulation, experimentation, and taking others at "interface value" (1995: 23). The users simulate and manage their self-presentation on Instagram as a utility to maximise social benefits ('likes'). The respondents therefore participate in transforming their identities into exchange values for profits (by placing value on how many 'likes' they obtain). In other words, users are actively producing content and consuming the content they produce at the same time. When users are aiming to get 'likes' as a commodity, the images sell appearance rather than substance, in which a sense of alienation is palpable. The self-interested and utility-maximising media users demonstrate how authenticity of contents moves towards simulation of contents. Through this conceptualisation, the media users can be epitomised as *Homo oeconomicus*, whose ontology relies on self-interest exchanges being achieved by their participation to the digital sphere.

On the basis of my empirical material, ‘likes’ are crucial and constitute a way for users to be validated by others. The participants are aware of the type of pictures that generate the most ‘likes’ and so purposely aim to limit their social exchanges to a strict selection of posts. These selected and edited posts are produced to convey the desired image by promoting the ‘bright’ side of their days. As Susan and Pei mention:

*“Sometimes I post pictures of my food that I took few days or weeks ago and I just post them at some point and pretend it’s what I ate today. I mean it’s just to post something really... It is not fake because I had it... but it’s not completely true either. No one wants to see the ugly porridge bowl I made yesterday. But they will ‘like’ the colourful pancakes from Tuesday!”*. Pei

*“I actually don’t eat everything that I post, I would cook it, yes, take a nice picture and give it to my brother and pretend it was delicious”*. Susan

Pei’s digital practices confirm that she seeks inclusion and acceptance by her friends and community (Tobin *et al.* 2014; Bazarova and Choi, 2014). Both participants’ quotes shed light on an interesting social practice of exchanging staged pictures of supposedly perfect life. Both Pei and Susan reveal the truth behind those pictures and how they usually do not accurately depict how it looks like. These two participants express the incentive to produce flattering pictures so that they ultimately gain social rewards in return. Studies demonstrate how individuals gain popularity, boost social trust and strengthen their social capital by using social networking sites such as Facebook (Ellison *et al.* 2007; Mansson and Myers, 2011; Oh and Syn, 2015; Valenzuela *et al.* 2009; Stapleton *et al.* 2017). The current study presents similar results, Instagram users want to post contents that result in the most ‘likes’ and comments to sustain their capital and maintain their reputation. All the participants acknowledged that in order to be socially validated, they must post content that is ‘Instagram worthy’ and that fits the Instagram lifestyle.

*“Also, I often post indulgent food, like gooey cakes and cheesy dishes. I think they look cool and these are like the popular things to post. I actually don’t eat everything that I post; I would cook it, take a nice picture and give it to my brother. I would still say they taste amazing though. And then I would eat my boring veggies later on”*. Susan

As with the majority of the participants, Susan shares fabricated images that are not representative of what she really is doing. Therefore, she is aware that her posts are not accurate reflections of herself. She further elaborates that many things are “*staged*” and “*not true*”, however she still posts them because it looks good and people ‘like’ it. Susan showed me some colourful creative food pictures on her Instagram that make other users travel around the world. Yet, she told me she always takes her pictures from the same spot, her kitchen table. As Gentile *et al* (2012); and Burns (2014) expose, online identities are not completely fabricated, but they are manipulated with the intention of creating the best self-reflection. Susan pretends to lead a lifestyle for the sake of displaying popular content, by posting indulgent pictures on her profile. The authenticity of her posts is counterbalanced by the theatrical staged self-promotion. Media users seem to put on mask defying the reality of their lives. While media users enthusiastically use the platform to display the desired portions of their lives, they engage in performing actions to create imaginary impressions – thus playing out desired experiences. Anya reinforces this idea:

*“I only post pretty pictures, for instance when I cook homemade food or go to some fancy restaurants. But for sure, I would never post an ugly picture or video on my profile. No one cares if I eat a random piece of processed bread with jam and butter”.*

Anya only shares her accomplishments via her posts. The results of the current study demonstrate that the participants present an image and display information they want others to see. Consequently, they may exclude anything deemed damaging to their reputation, engaging in a selective disclosure to project their desired lifestyle through visual conversations (Gentile *et al.* 2012). With both social alienation and commodity fetishism in mind, the empirical findings of the study therefore show how the users’ Instagram profiles become objective relations of images, through which they allow representational signs to define their identity. Their digital representations turn into a commodity, that is judged by others who can enjoy and recognise these disguised gift. The media users commodify themselves through their profile as if it is a brand image that needs to be constantly validated (Skågeby, 2008; Schwarz, 2010). The meaning of self-commodification involves the reorganisation of the users’ image that can be well illustrated by the practice of personal branding, a strategy of involving economic gain

(here social gain in ‘likes’ and comments). Boyd and Ellison suggest that social networking site (such as Instagram), “serve as important identity signals that help people navigate the networked social world, in that an extended network may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles” (2008: 219). This research claims that Instagram supports an economy of recognition where the media users perform strategies of representation and simulations by selecting and editing authentic representation. In this economy of recognition, the media users share a selection of images turned into a commodity, consumable by others.

All of my respondents are aware of the implied norms on Instagram, for instance, Anya knows what kind of pictures are deemed acceptable and the ones that are likely to receive most ‘likes’. She knows what type of content engages people and fosters people to reciprocate ‘likes’ or comments. As Goffman (1959) suggests, a person attempts to produce and display the positive ideas of self in interaction with others. All participants avoided sharing “ordinary”, “irrelevant”, “boring” posts in their identity construction on Instagram. Thus, in order to receive the most ‘likes’ and comment, the media users engage in performing strategies. The common practice of all the participants is to show the best of themselves via their social interactions with others. They think strategically, for instance Tanya confesses,

*“I actually went to this restaurant and choose this dessert because I knew it would look better than the other dessert on my Instagram feed. I mean it’s about what will look the best once edited. Honestly if I did not plan to take a picture of my dessert I would have probably not taken this dessert”.*

Instagram enables its users to craft a digital identity as a performed action with the implicit intention of generating self-enhancement and promotion (Moon *et al.* 2016). Being able to edit the pictures and to add bright colours turns out to be a strategic move for fostering reciprocal exchanges. For Tanya, Pei and Sherine editing features allow them to beautify their pictures by adjusting colours, filters, brightness level, sharpness level, the saturation and the fadedness. Tanya explains that she can play with the editing and make her food pop up even more by adding shadows. She uses the filter ‘Hudson’ most of the time and she says that it always looks “amazing” because it intensifies the colours. Further, Marie claims that she prepares the setting ahead of time and put away things like dirty knives and also cleans the kitchen counter table. She also makes sure the

background of her picture is neat and bright. She argues that it is simple to manipulate food pictures.

In accordance with Lieberman's study (2013), the participants of this study argue that they edit pictures in order to be admired and validated. Instagram makes it easier to produce an improved image that might not be consistent with the reality and thus enable individuals to conceal authenticity for reasons of impression management (Burns, 2014; Manovich, 2016). Similarly, Moon *et al.* (2016) argue that Instagram enable individuals to express and improved self-presentation online and create improved stories when sharing pictures, thus allowing them to perform impression management. This is relevant in this study as the respondents' narratives provide knowledge of the unrealistic contents being created and shared in comparison to physical contexts. Media users hide themselves by creating an online persona they want others to see and admire. The content created, the 'likes' and the comments left on the posts are means of eliciting support and admiration.

The economy of recognition thus leads to spaces of identity performance, whereby media users only seek others' comments and approval. Although Goffman's work (1959) on presenting the self in everyday life was written seventy years ago, it takes on full significance to comprehend that the concept of performance on a stage is also applicable to the theatre of digital platforms. Self-interest motives drive the *Homo oeconomicus* media user to post pictures in a digital sphere promoting narcissistic tendencies. Turkle (2011) explore a culture of narcissistic media, where she posits that smart phone users are losing the art of human interaction. This notion leads to understand the emergence of a self that is moulded by what respondents want others to see of themselves, which aims to receive praise and self-esteem enhancement once posting a picture. Turkle explains how technological tools enable individuals to use others for them own benefits, "You can take what you need and move on. And, If not gratified, you can try someone else" (2011: 177). Technological tools combined with the Instagram self-oriented space give reason to the media users' narratives that demonstrate in many points narcissistic and obsessive-driven behaviour. Given these findings, the results concur with previous research conducted on Facebook (Ellison and Lampe, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Vogel *et al.* 2014), individuals use social networking sites to engage with others via improved presentations to enhance their self esteem and gain acceptance. The media users expose

their need for constant support and social approval achieved through commodified pictures. Their posts are edited and moulded by the social system of which they are products. In Tanya and Anya's cases, their attitudes suggest a relentless pursuit for validation and recognition. The simulation and disguise of the digital gifts reveal their vulnerable sense of selves dependent on others' judgment. 'What others think' lead them to embrace a narcissistic need for acclaim and recognition. This draws attention to a 'dark-side' of the digital social exchanges, that are simulated and commodified by obsessive driven individuals.

Exploring what exactly to avoid when sharing on Instagram reveals how users strategically manage their Instagram profile and its content. Individuals limit their exchanges to positive and meaningful pictures in order to generate social interactions and reciprocal exchanges. The majority believed that they expressed a relatively accurate identity on Instagram whilst avoiding a more honest impression of their social reality. Goffman (1959) asserted that society is governed by rules to which members conform. The respondents carefully conform by selecting their posts on Instagram with the aim to reflect the desired side of their personal lives, yet they withhold information that is asynchronous with their desired self.

Deviant behaviour is only seen in Joe's profile, when not conforming to the norms that govern the Instagram platform, he claims

*"we all want to be extra. Instead of sharing what is real about our ordinary and actual lives, we attempt to create scenarios of things that did not really happen the way it actually did. I posted this because I just wanted to be real on Instagram."*

Joe divulges on "*the real side*" of his life by showing "*the boring food*" that he eats during revision week, as he describes it. Unlike Joe, all the participants declare spending a lot of time and effort in capturing seemingly "natural" images. Instagram is therefore seen as a platform used to trigger social exchanges by displaying misrepresentative content. Most of the participants claim to attempt at communicating a desired content, which provides most of the time deceptive content.



*“I post everyday. It might look like if I don’t spend a lot of time on posting, however I actually take several shots before selecting the perfect one. In reality, that ice-cream picture probably took me nine attempts, and these Sunday crêpes may not be an accurate depiction of how I usually make my Sunday crêpes in real life.” Marie*

Such findings confirm Mauss’ thoughts (1954: 77) that “the producer who carries on exchange feels that he is exchanging more than a product of hours of working time, but that he is giving something of himself – his time, his life. Thus he wishes to be rewarded, even if only moderately, for this gift. To refuse him this reward is to make him become idle or less productive”. The participants seem to beautify their social exchanges which makes it difficult to find authentic identities on Instagram. Paradoxically, the media users notify their desire to be perceived as authentic even if they post misleading content. A fetishism of authenticity can be palpable as the media users fabricate a labour of appearances and signs. It is a representation of a consumption of fabricated experiences associated with food. Through signifying practices, Marie’s pictures become commodity signs formed at the locus between a digital content and a representation of a consumption of fabricated experiences. Following Marie’s quote, her intention is to show others a seemingly casual and effortless Sunday recipe. By doing this, she attempts to hide all the work done for this gift (preparation and posing), to make it look natural, candid and not premeditated. Posting this natural documentation intends to appear off-the-cuff and to hide an outperformed and orchestrated shot. The authenticity is indeed blurred with a staged picture, that actually required time and several shots. Marie’s post can be viewed as a simulation of reality that cause a disillusioned representation of herself. The respondents’ identities on Instagram are moulded to fit the ‘perfect Instagram shot’ for others to view, and acknowledge. The digital pictures therefore turn into commodities used to enhance their identities.

Marie’s discussion about her Sunday crêpes is closely related to Goffman’s theory of the front and back stage (1959). Marie aims to take pictures as a performative work and she engages in impression management. As a result, she aspires to the realisation of a desired self (Goffman, 1959). Marie’s shared pictures can be interpreted as an on-going front stage performance, where she tries to maintain positive impressions with still the desire to appear natural to others. Her practices of posting reflect the manner she defines and

presents herself, to the world and herself, through a collection of selected and edited posts. Consistently, my participants express their reluctance to post the realistic shot of their Monday night dinner and their uncreative butter-jam toast. This reluctance may be explained by the fact that not providing a perfect image on Instagram discourage reciprocal exchanges. They create an image that resemble a true backstage by hiding their backstage. The respondents then display a staged front-stage and they purposely hide any backstage posts deemed uncreative, irrelevant or ordinary in order to be consistent with their desired image that is constructed.

Furthermore, an interesting pattern has been identified amongst female participants of this study. They reveal being self-conscious about the posts they exchange. Besides, they emphasise their desire to appear in a certain way to be socially validated. The female participants used terms to describe the posts they exchange on their profile such as *“feminine-looking”*, *“pink cake”*, *“girly outfit”*, *“delicate food”*, and *“colour-matching”*. The findings correlate with Haferkamp and Kramer’s (2011) study that establishes the belief that female media users place value on the ideal image of women and focus on the appearance qualities of the pictures. The female respondents of my thesis notice that pictures of feminine connoted posts, (such as pictures of pink cotton candy, wedding cakes, mocktails, high-teas, or home made dishes accomplishments), receive positive reactions from others. Consistently, the photo-elicitation confirms that female participants post pictures that objectify them. The implication is that female participants post content in order to display ideal women qualities, it is a form of self-objectification that meets the hegemonic ideals of femininity. This explains why Susan and Tanya feel inadequate when posting an image that does not reflect an ideal of femininity. Subsequently, as their selves is objectified through consumptive digital exchanges, the exchanges enable them to to promote and perform themselves in a digital culture obsessed with the image they display of themselves. The desire to achieve self- interest premises lead female participants’ posts to be objectified, as commodities infused with social characteristics. The users are standardised and alienated to fit a mould while providing disguised gifts.

The platform offers several variables accessible to the users to customise, edit, transform and produce visually pleasing content. However, the community is expected to deliver content that meets the social norms, to fulfil self-interest dimensions, even though this

means that media users end up misrepresenting themselves. This notion distances itself from altruistic behaviour and authenticity in social relations. The platform offers several variables accessible to the users to customise, edit, transform and produce visually pleasing content. The *Homo oeconomicus* thus represents an unfolding human catastrophe, hidden behind digital exchanges, that depict the narcissistic and obsessive-driven individuals, hungry for social capital gain. The mainstream media leads its users to loneliness experiences where they lose their sense of self to produce commodified products. Not putting enough effort onto their social exchanges and post can have negative outcomes on potential 'likes', social interactions and capital gain. The media users' effort recalls Marx's notion of labour (1867) to produce commodity value in relation to capitalism and exchange value. The social media platform raises therefore concerns about how individuals objectify and commodify their digital selves. The empirical material leads to a reflection on the nature of the social exchanges in a digital community where social exchanges are visible, manipulated and constructed.

The second section of this chapter describes the strategic and mechanical types of exchanges that flourish on the Instagram platform. A form of gifting in the platform is performed with the aim of both avoiding social drama (or referred to as 'anticipated gifting') and seeking social gratification. How is this kind of gifting affecting the nature of the digital social exchanges? Are these social exchanges driven by self-interested premises or are they compelled by unselfish interests to fulfil social roles?

Initially the discussion is focused on the anticipated forms of gifting used to ensure harmony and to maintain a symmetrical structure of social exchanges. The media users voice their desire to achieve exchanges so as to maintain balanced relationships and to fulfil personal interests. The findings unravel the strategic and anticipated forms of social exchanges where these are performed with clear calculation, and so blurring the distinction between gift exchange and commodity exchange.

## 2) Sincere and Spontaneous Gift-giving Practices?

Given the staged nature of digital posts and the strategies used to beautify posts that aim to strengthen one's social reputation and capital. It is therefore essential to uncover how media users manipulate reciprocal exchanges to achieve mutual recognition. The media

users enter into a complex system of social exchanges through the acts of giving and receiving that can be both calculated and unspontaneous. This thesis reveals how self-interested media users attain social benefits via insincere ‘likes’ and comments (social benefits refer to the social rewards and gratification discussed in chapter five. For more details, see chapter five, section one). The exchanges become mechanical with the sole aim of soliciting return-actions.

Media users skilfully manage their postings by using tricks: they post sophisticated content at an optimal time and at a measured frequency. These ‘tricks’ are applied to seek social status and accumulate gratification so as to solicit returns from a social community. This research suggests that kinds of social gratification, capital and status drive participants to strategically invest effort to achieve mutual recognition. I draw heavily on research from offline communities to show that gift-giving is closely linked to norms of reciprocity (Belk and Coon, 1993). For instance, Sherine has over 900 followers, and she explains how she is always “*the first one*” to comment or ‘like’ her friends’ posts. She is assiduous about the way she reciprocates, as she is reactive. Her profile displays hundreds of pictures having each around 600 ‘likes’, and almost all of her followers follow the norm of reciprocity when she posts (that is to say, they reciprocate when she posts). Reciprocity, as Skågeby mentions, is “the motivation or process of returning gifts to treat others as you have been, or wish to be, treated yourself” (2010: 171). By ‘liking’ and commenting on their posts, she intentionally solicits a return, once her turn to post comes. This reveals the hidden work performed by Sherine to reach social recognition and utility maximisation. These hidden practices may be thought of as the backstage-self or “who Sherine is when she thinks no one’s looking”. The backstage can be seen as a metaphorical curtain where Sherine hides behind when she conscientiously ‘likes’ and comments others’ posts, in order to prepare for future actions and achieve mutual recognition. Sherine exposes the full work and steps associated with gifts when she claims that before posting any content, she would always scroll down her feed to make sure she carefully ‘likes’ each picture before it is her turn to post. This habit enables her to create and maintain a balanced structure of exchanges, and it is a way to reinforce the long-term viability of her reciprocal social exchanges. The participant insists on reciprocating her friends’ gifts prior to posting. The findings provide evidence of several strategies used to ensure reciprocal exchanges that undercut the spontaneous nature of exchanges perhaps normally associated with gift economy. Individuals are not likely to

contribute unless they clearly see the direct benefit that will accrue from their participation, but such benefits will only happen if the community is engaged and willing to step forward and if the giver is able to anticipate without advanced confirmation of return on his efforts.

Participants suggest that posting, commenting, and ‘liking’ are key actions to maintain reciprocal exchanges. The participants demonstrate a rather calculated and constructed way of exchanging in order to solicit returns with more ‘likes’, more comments and ultimately more gratification. Scholars, such as Caillé and Godbout (1998), have further explored the complexity of the social relations of exchange. Conversely, Caillé (1998) reconsiders *The Gift* and argues that ever since Mauss, the gift must be comprehended as a constant oscillation between freedom and obligation, utility and symbolism, interest and renunciation. Furthermore, the system of *The Gift* is paradoxical, as Osteen (2002:14) claims: “Gifts at once express freedom and create binding obligations, and may be motivated by generosity or calculation, or both”. Even though gift-giving contains deep ambiguities, the users explicitly present the motives that lie behind their gift-giving practices and so distanced from altruistic motives. According to Caillé, nobody gives without interest, this can either be an interest for something or for someone, and he indeed argues, “[If] there is no interest, nothing to be sacrificed, there is no perception of the potential gift to be given” (2006: 55). Legitimately, the media users have understood that they must interact with others, to obtain the rewards they want. The users therefore rigorously post and acknowledge posts, whilst having in mind the firm idea that these investments “will obviously be” reciprocated by their friends, as Tanya suggests.

The non-economic nature of anthropological gifting, as emphasised by Mauss (1954), is one that is often associated with spontaneity and generosity. According to Mauss, the gift is neither part of an exchange of equivalent value nor an act of disinterested benevolence. Nevertheless, compelling evidence points to the conclusion that users view social exchanges (posts, ‘likes’, comments) as a form of commodity within their digital exchanges as form of mutual recognition. The term ‘a-economic’ by Romele and Severo (2016) can thus be used to define the mutual recognition between media users of the Instagram platform. The ‘likes’ and comments that form the circulation of gifts, present the interplay between the gift exchange and market economy. On the same page, this study also supports that digital gifts do not have to do with goods exchange, but rather

with mutual recognition. The media users highlight the concept of mutual recognition. As Marie argues:

*'I 'like' people's posts because I know that later they will 'like' back my content. So I always scroll down and 'like' them all'.*

This kind of media user uncovers the complexities of the gift that interferes between gift exchange and the market economy of mutual recognition. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that the lapse of time between gift and counter-gift differentiates a market transaction from a gift. According to this idea, it can essentially be said that a gift is merely an indirect, delayed exchange of goods or services. Within the context of the market, transactions are contract-based, while within gift exchanges, maintenance of the relationship between the two parties is paramount. These poles are sustained, on the one hand, by classic and neoclassic economic theory, and their utilitarian attachment to the *Homo oeconomicus*, and on the other, by sociological theories with a structuralist imprint and their image of the *Homo sociologicus*. According to Marie's idea, the Instagram platform ensures mutual recognition exchanges. She firmly claims that some media users will reciprocate in order to maintain balanced exchanges. The findings echo Cheal's thoughts (1988) on the gifts that are often symmetrically reciprocate (the worth of the gift given will balance with the worth of the gift that the sender may receive at another time).

The digital gift can not be associated with the notion of anti-economic but rather with the quality of engaging and continuing a procedure of mutual recognition. The posts, 'likes' and comments are the forms of mutual recognition that sustain social bonds. This is evidenced with Joe claiming *"I toss a 'like' or comment something so that this will bring me to their mind"*. Joe explicitly expresses how he 'like' a post for his own benefit, with the only intention to solicit a return. It distances from the altruistic and self-giving behaviour, which represent the virtue of unselfish generosity of the Maussian gift economy. A gift, although freely given, represents a challenge to the recipient that must involve a response, which is aimed at generating a return. The exchange firstly confirms the relationship between Joe and his friends, and is also the driving force for reciprocity. Joe's action starts an exchange that implies a continuation, a return gift as a form of recognition. This idea echoes Bourdieu who argues that "a riposte accords equality in honour" (1992: 100). Indeed, Joe points out that showing interest to someone else, will be likewise returned. As the two parties do not wish to be in a position where they feel

indebted, they consequently try their best to maintain a symmetrical relationship whereby both benefit in a balanced symbolic structure. The media users employ strategies (in order to ultimately prompt a return) that cannot be defined as acts of selfless generosity but rather instead ensure mutual recognition.

Another example raised by the media users illustrates this argument. Tarek, Marie, Joe, Pei, Jane, Eric and Tanya point out the notion of time as a variable that must be taken into consideration when posting. Reciprocity via a 'like' or a comment helps to understand why media users behave the way they do and what do they have in mind when they reciprocate. They engage in a series of strategies of posting that informs their calculated and controlled behaviour in the platform. This study presents that posts are time-sensitive currencies in a community that relies on the memories of the past records of 'likes' and comments. The media users engage in a performative work where they put effort in providing frequent posts, of sophisticated content. They also need to stay up-to-date and to ensure the reciprocity of exchange. These practices present the blurred line between gift and market exchange, through which users aim to accumulate personal satisfaction and recognition at all costs (creativity, reactivity, punctuality).

Firstly, the media users put an emphasis on the incentive to reply in the form of 'like' or comment as fast as they possibly can. It seems that the digital gift must be reciprocated quickly in order to prove commitment to the friendship loyalty. These immediate gratifications are much appreciated by the media users who, in return, are willing to reciprocate. Joe argues:

“When someone posts something I would ‘like’ it immediately when I see it, I won’t wait and be *like ‘I will check again later’ because there’s no point. That person will probably post something else later anyways. I mean when I post something I ‘like’ to have immediate response, I don’t want people to ‘like’ my content from 3 days ago, there’s no point. And It just shows they don’t care or keep up with me, because it’s not like if they didn’t log in for the past three days!”*

Repaying one’s gift immediately is a variable that must be taken into account and perhaps even used as a strategy to ensure the cohesion of the community. Joe further explains that failing to, can be perceived as offensive to a close friendship. On Instagram, the more time passes by, the less valued the exchange is. The relationship is put on hold and can

lead the giver into thinking whether the recipient is ignoring him if he does not reply within a certain lapse of time. To maintain symmetrical relationships of exchange, it seems to be vital to quickly react and to show interest in order to support the relationship.

Secondly, another form of anticipation stems out from the participant's narratives. The notion of 'Prime Time' has been raised eight times throughout the interviews. As Anya suggests:

*"Prime Time refers to the optimal time you should post in order to make sure the most people sees it and therefore 'like' and comment on it".*

Posting during prime-time is a strategy used by the media users, the gifts are anticipated and denote a form of calculation, which is at odds with the disinterested theoretical grounds of the gift economy. Anya further explains that Sunday, Monday and Thursday nights are the optimal times to post since it generates the most 'likes'. She points out that she usually posts on Sundays between 5 and 9 pm, because she knows that all her friends are at home, checking their phones. She claims:

*"The optimal time for me is 8 pm, because I like to post when its prime time but not too early to make sure I still get the most attention from the prime timers too."*

Although media users come from different geographical areas, uploading content during Prime Time nights is a popular practice. This reveals clear calculation and challenges the social practices of the small-scale societies, in which gift-exchange was at the basis of their entire economic system, where goods were traded without clear calculation of who has given what and how much to whom. Hence, the distinction between the gift exchange and the commodity exchange is blurred. This practice defines a system of exchange that is "purely economic", as Bourdieu argues when describing the market system of exchange in which "the interested calculation which is never absent from the most generous exchange can be more and more openly revealed" (1992:115). Kevin further illuminates the idea that when people comment and 'like' his posts, he gets an ego-boost which explains why he purposely posts during specific time range and anticipates which post comes next, and at what time, so that he accumulates personal social rewards. To seek publicly value through social media has been acknowledged by Lampel and Bhalla (2007). The Instagram platform is shown to be a brilliant tool to receive validation and



to foster mutual recognition. Bernadette discusses how strategic she is with her Instagram profile: she would keep some extra pictures in her albums to post on Prime Time days when she doesn't do anything and has nothing to post so that she pretends she is doing something and receives Insta-gratifications even on her "*boring days*". This dynamic proves that media users use strategies and anticipate their actions.

Thirdly, several participants mention that they engage in a posting strategy by controlling the frequency of their posting. Finding the right balance for posting enabled them to get the most out of their followers' engagement. Marc, for instance, expresses his worries for being too "*monotonous*" "*repetitive*" if he posts too frequently or for being "*unnoticed*" if he does not post enough. He suggests

*"I won't post too many pictures because then I won't get as many 'likes' per picture otherwise, so I'd rather save some pictures for later".*

The digital presence of the users needs to be balanced as giving too much and too often is not an adequate behaviour and ultimately results in the decrease of social rewards. At its most basic level, a gift is an offer of an object or services between two or more parties without immediate overt demand or expectation of recompense (Kollock, 1999; Osteen, 2002). Nevertheless, the empirical findings prove that digital gifts diverge from the initial understanding of the gift, as media users ensure fast reciprocity and expect returns. Not only do users post on during prime time to collect more 'likes', but some users would also switch their account from private to public in order to accumulate even more 'likes' from random users. Eric suggests:

*"And sometimes even before posting, I would think about whether I should put my profile public the first hour to make sure I get some 'likes' from random people just to make sure I have some 'likes'."*

Participants seek validation, even from complete strangers, demonstrating that users constantly seek to sustain social capital by creating more opportunity for mutual recognition. The nature of reciprocal exchanges gives an explanation as to why remaining committed to digital interactions is key for discernible individual gain. Appadurai (1986) noticed that gift-exchange is not only about generosity but also a matter of self-interested calculation. The study supports the idea that digital gift-exchange is not that different

from market exchange, because both of them utilise the same rational, self-interested premises. In social science, commodity-exchange usually stands for economic rationality and commercial profit making, while gifts are acknowledged to be carriers of social concerns and moral obligation. Nevertheless, the empirical findings of my study suggest that the digital social practices of exchanges bear similitudes with the market system. Utilitarian perspectives view that markets produce exclusively material values, while gifts produce human values, such as friendship and trust (Godbout, 1998; Bourdieu, 1990). However, another perspective could argue that networks of market exchange are not only organised around the idea of profit, but also help to foster human relations. This research suggests that the market economy contains a rather significant amount of transactions that are based on the principle of reciprocity and resemble that of the gift-economy. If the Instagram digital sphere of exchange expresses in some degree the logic of the *Homo oeconomicus*, it is essential to note how social networks incite opportunism. When describing the market type of exchanges, Bourdieu mentions that individuals use “tricks and frauds” that are commonly used in exchanges (1992:115). These tricks can be found within the digital community system of exchanges, in which media users employ strategies that aim to instantly solicit a return-action. The question is therefore how sincere are these exchanges, if driven by strategic motives? By using artifices, by ‘liking’ all their friends’ pictures or by calculating the optimal time for posting, the users portray constructed and unspontaneous ways of exchanging. The way media users solicit return-action and a symbolic reward differs from the Maussian vision of gifts. In the digital platform, the function digital exchange is not only to reproduce and maintain the social bonds between partners, but also for self-interest.

The section moves on to discussing the ‘overfriendly’ nature of gift exchanges, which questions the sincerity of gift exchange in the platform. The social responsibilities and social obligations to reciprocate thus lead media users to feel pressured. They engage in mechanical and emotionless reciprocal exchanges to avoid social drama. Indeed, as the platform exhibit social interactions, media users control, calculate and thus anticipated forms of gift-giving. The empirical findings show that media users acknowledge using strategies to generate ‘likes’ and comments, which lead to insincere type of exchanges. Instagram is a tool not just used for ‘liking’ pictures, but more so to ‘like’ people. Indeed, no matter the content, the users tend to show support because they are obligated to ‘like’ or comment their friends’ posts. This dynamic refers to

‘overfriendly’ social exchanges. This dynamic is translated via exaggerated encouragements, compliments, greetings, praises and ‘likes’. Media users’ motives to establish some kind of relationship drive them to amplify and inflate what they exchange on the platform especially via comments. This dynamic reflects on how social exchange is indeed transacted to serve a moral purpose, to produce a friendly feeling between the giver and the receiver (Mauss, 1954). Nevertheless, many participants mentioned the term ‘fake’, and it refers to the idea that the digital users are not always sincere in the way they exchange and interact on the platform with each other. To some extent, the digital community can be linked to the *moka*, which is a highly ritualised system of exchange in Papa New Guinea. It refers to a concept of gift economy in which social status is achieved by reciprocal gifts (Gregory, 1982). The result of this anthropological concept is to give larger gifts than the one received. When reciprocating, the donor gives extra which represents an interest on an investment. Similarly, to the *moka* gifts, digital media users anticipate by ‘liking’ and commenting their follower’s posts to prove interest in the hope of mutual recognition. (see chapter 2, section 1 for more details on the *moka* exchange).

The *moka* reminds Sherine’s narrative discussed in the first section of this chapter. Her narratives revealed that she spends a lot of time ‘liking’ and commenting all her friends’ post before she posts personal pictures. This practice demonstrates how Sherine adds *moka* to her gestures by giving more than what she receives, to place others in debt. Digital gift-giving becomes about being ‘being extra’ in terms of giving to increase the number of reciprocal exchanges. *Moka* exchange is not altruistic but rather intends to increase one’s prestige. The media users use the *moka* reasoning when sharing with others to establish a relationship by placing them in debt, which is what distinguishes *moka* from a gift with no expectation of return. The media users take into consideration their self-interest premises which lead them to be extra (overfriendly) and practice ‘fake’ giving.

Jane acknowledges that it is “easy” and “stress-free” to ‘like’ and comment on your friends’ pictures to prove you are a good friend, even if you actually don’t care about what they did. I then asked Jane to elaborate and explain what she has to prove exactly and to whom? She argues that on Instagram “you must ‘like’, encourage, congratulate your friends’ pictures but also people that are not really your friends because everyone sees everyone’s actions”. In correlation to what is discussed in the first section of the

chapter, the display of social interactions on the platform put the media users on stage. This dynamic recalls Goffman's stage performance concept (1959) in a way that since the media users know they are being watched, they purposely create a 'front' where they constantly praise, encourage and support others because they know these exchanges are being visible. The backstage behaviour has been revealed during the interviews where the media users confessed to often 'liking' and commenting just to be "nice", yet that in a real life face-to-face situation they would probably not even say anything.

Then, in order to further assess the sincerity of the exchanges and the extent to which these are whether performed, staged or calculated I asked the media users the following question: "Do you make an intentional effort to 'like' people's Instagram posts that 'like' yours?" All the participants confirmed that they make an effort and that they also comment on their posts too as part of the *Instagram-rule*. To evidence this, Tanya highlights:

*"I give support 'likes' to my closest friends on Instagram even though I couldn't care less about their picture, I still always give my support 'likes' ... even if I'm sure they all know I don't even read their captions."*

The large majority of Instagram users have formed unspoken alliances with each other to ensure they each rally enough 'likes' to make their posts stand out. Tanya makes it clear when she says *"It does not matter if someone genuinely enjoys my posts or does not, the only thing that matters is that my Instagram pictures are popular"* Tanya's words lead to question the sincerity of social exchanges and to identify the true motive under giving encouragements and countless 'likes'. The fact that media users know they are being watched creates an environment where they perform insincere exchanges by calculating their social exchanges. Since the exchanges can be public and Instagram is made up of frames that give meaning to actions and behaviours in specific contexts, the users reveal that they want to be seen as "the good and supportive friend". Reciprocity, on the platform, is part of their self-presentation since it is a visible act by others. Sherine further documents on the giver's point of view, saying *"I feel pressured to comment on certain posts or 'like' them because otherwise people can get offended that I didn't. Also, if I don't 'like' this girl's post, some people would notice it and start gossiping about us. So*

*I'd rather 'like' it even if I don't really like this person. It avoids drama and unnecessary gossip."*

Marie discusses how important it is to reply to friends and greet them as to ensure friendship bonds publicly, she also uses the rhetoric of social drama. She suggests, "*It is all about acting sometimes and if you do not do it, then it is weird because everyone would notice it and be like 'why her friend didn't comment on her picture?' Aren't they friends anymore?*"

The infrastructure of Instagram, where reciprocal exchanges are the dominant modes of interaction, invites media users to 'like' and comment (with the aim to show affection, to solicit a return or both) The quotations above from Tanya, Sherine and Marie show how digital exchanges are exhibited performances. Sherine and Jane both highlight the social pressure and stress that they undergo. These exchanges are not always genuinely intended but rather socially expected forms of indebtedness. As Sherine suggests, she needs to constantly be friendly even though it means putting a mask on what she really feels, to avoid social drama. By having in mind a potential return-action, media users are overfriendly and give encouragements that are socially expected. It is thus crucial for the cohesion of the community but also speaks of the lack of genuine exchanges and the presence of mechanical exchanges. Since people check on each other's exchanges and moves, there is a constant pressure to act and behave in a certain way to maintain alliances.

On this platform, the users act in a certain way because they know they are being watched. This idea can be linked to the concept of catopticon, which derives from the panopticon (an architectural figure of power and total surveillance in modern society). The catopticon is a reversed panopticon, it is an architecture that allows everyone to communicate with each other and watch each other (Ganascia, 2009). The social practices performed on Instagram rely on a system in which people "check" and "notice" who does what to whom and when. For instance, Marie explains that she knows who 'liked' her last posts and who did not. She admits that she checks if her friends 'like' her pictures. Marie's practice of keeping records of her reciprocal exchanges explains why media users are pushed to reciprocate mechanically as they are being observed. This virtual catopticon reflects inflated exchanges that are being watched and judged. This clarifies why media users are not always genuine in the way they exchange. For instance, Anya suggests:

*“It’s all about doing it for yourself... We all know its fake, but still we all do it. For instance, I knew my friend was going to post this picture because she private messaged me right before and asked me if I like it, I said yes, but when she posted it, I still ‘liked’ it on her profile and posted a comment as if it was the first time I saw the picture”.*

The backstage reveals that media users do not always reciprocate to genuinely support their friends’ experiences, but rather to confirm social bonds in an overfriendly manner. This consequently sustains alliance of reciprocal actions and makes visible their self-presentation of being “a good friend”. As most exchanges are publicly visible, there exists an element of public pressure to acknowledge each other. The platform gives the media users the opportunity to have a control over the impression of reality they convey to others. The backstage is where the media users learn how to manage their digital selves, with the idea of projecting a particular impression of reality, that lead to insincere gestures. The media users’ obsessive behaviours to perform social exchanges thus foreshadows anxiety and uncertainty that tease out the ‘dark side’ of digital social exchanges (Marcoux, 2009).

The empirical findings show that media users follow strategies (such as creating specific content; posting at an optimal time and frequency; anticipating posts and reciprocal acts; and acting over-friendly) so as to maintain cohesion and avoid conflict. These strategies inform the structure of exchange of the community, one that is constantly seeking validation and mutual recognition. In this environment, ‘likes’, posts, comments can be deemed insincere and so lack of spontaneity. Some reciprocal exchanges can be defined as mechanical, whereby users mindlessly interact for the sole purpose of soliciting a return. The contents are constructed, and the social exchanges between users are calculated and performed on a front stage. At a deeper level, the study reveals that gift-giving practices are inevitably calculated, since media users seek social status and social gratification in exchange to their participation. However, what happens when an exchange is not reciprocated and the users fail to maintain balanced relationships? What is the anticipated form of gifting revealing with regards to the ties and cohesion of the community?

## Chapter 7: A community threatening social relationships?

Chapter six provides a synthesis on digital gift-giving practices combining the notions of indebtedness, social capital and the obligation of reciprocity. As previously discussed, the media users exchange content with the aim to interact with each other, feel socially validated, maintain balanced relationships and boost their social capital. Nevertheless, the respondents have expressed discomfort and a constant social pressure from the community that compels them to act in certain ways in order to conform to the *Insta-rules*. The sources of this discomfort stem from the ongoing social pressure to achieve symmetrical exchanges, and the high expectation to create sophisticated content to trigger friends' attention and obtain social validation. This discomfort has been translated into anxiety, jealousy, rivalry and loneliness, resulting in palpable weakened relationships between media users. This chapter demonstrates therefore how individuals use the platform so as to strengthen their relationships but that inversely can negatively affect the media users' social experiences and interactions. Such a phenomenon thus discloses weak

ties concealed behind overfriendly social exchanges, insincere comments and unspontaneous gifts. Are digital interactions benefiting the media users or can they be detrimental to their relationships? What happens when the media users do not receive any reply back to their contribution or when the number of 'likes' do not meet their expectation? It seems essential to understand the relationships that are being generated by the digital social exchanges. Mauss (1954) argued that, whilst the gift system of exchange enables and fosters social relationships, it has, nevertheless, the propensity to be expressed as an agonistic relationship that promotes rivalry and destructive forms of behaviour. The clearest manifestation of such agonistic behaviour is the *potlatch*, or as Mauss refers to it "the system of total services" (1954: 77). Within this rhetoric on the platform, this notion can be referred to as *Insta-Potlatch*, in which, the social solidarity and gift exchange system build a social gravity that create social currencies and engage individuals in gift-giving.

Digital platforms where people tell stories, 'like', comment and share ideas seems to also be a place where anxieties, rivalries and backlashes are produced (Skågeby, 2008; Schwarz, 2010). A much 'darker side' (Marcoux, 2009) of gift-giving is discussed in this chapter, the study's empirical findings show how exchanging on the Instagram platform can lead individuals to experience feelings of indebtedness, rivalry, anxiety, jealousy and loneliness, causing them to limit their digital interactions and even cease their digital involvement and exchanges. The gift economy and its forms of digital exchanges are perhaps not beneficial for all media users' wellbeing and relationship sustainability. The quality of these digital bonds becomes therefore questionable and the participants' narratives draw my attention on the harmful outcomes of the digital exchanges. The digital sphere is associated with self-promotion, calculated and unspontaneous exchanges that lead media users to maintain their relationships for public display motives rather than true attachment and care. This chapter reveals the consequences of the mechanical digitised exchanges, which can create tensions (rivalry, anxiety, jealousy), produce weak bonds and encourage misinterpretations and forms of social comparison. The respondents can therefore experience fairly negative outcomes from their digital involvement which force them to set a limit or to even leave the community.



### 1) Cases of asymmetrical exchanges: the cause of anxiety

Previous chapters highlight that social exchanges tend to be symmetrical. The empirical findings provide insights on how media users endorse the role of “the good friend” by giving support ‘likes’ and by commenting on digital posts. Symmetrical reciprocity suggests that there is a kind of informal balance operating, in which, favours have to be reciprocated (Mauss, 1954; Schwartz, 1996). The empirical findings of my study demonstrate that media users want to ensure reciprocity and to maintain a neutral position towards their debt balance. Chapter six has indeed reviewed the media users’ moral obligation to return the gift, which leads them to anticipate their actions and to adopt strategies so as to avoid being morally indebted and to ensure the wellbeing of their social relationships.

Anxiety is defined as an emotion characterised by a discomfort when an individual is in a social interaction that involves a concern of being judged by others (Jacobs, 2012). In the context of this research, anxiety results from the absence of recognition from other users in the form of ‘likes’, comments that promote social bonds and solidarity. Beyond the intrinsic satisfaction that comes with contributing, there is an inner calculus to maximise social benefits and obtain social validation. The principles of imbalanced relationships reveal outcomes that can be harmful, and constitute a threat to the sustainability of the digital relationships. The media users highlight the need for an ongoing participation (posting, replying, commenting, ‘liking’) from both parties for the relationship to remain viable. The media users’ narratives expose how they feel anxious about their social exchanges and how they control each of their moves.

Chapters four and five reveal the positives of gift-giving on the Instagram platform in terms of the creation of bonds and self-expression. Nevertheless, as several past researchers suggest, social network sites create complex sets of social interactions causing mismanaged expectations and detrimental effects on the media users (Anderson *et al.*, 2012; Turkle, 2011). This thesis agrees with the research conducted by Clark *et al.* (2017), which suggest that online social relationships in modern culture can correlate with loneliness, isolation and social comparison. This research also confirms the presence of self presentational concerns and feelings of anxiety when sharing experiences on social

media (Barasch, 2018). According to the RSPH and YHM (Royal Society for Public Health and Young Health Movement) review (2017), the Instagram platform is ranked as the worst application for people's mental health. The review discloses seven measures in which the platform is rated negatively (particularly its impact on body image, fear of missing out and feelings of anxiety, depression and loneliness). The empirical findings of this study confirm the idea that media users experience anxiety, stress and self-doubt when reciprocity is absent. Nevertheless, it is important to go further and explore how anxiety and the absence of reciprocal exchanges affect the media users' relationships. As Anya suggests:

*"I feel content when people interact and respond to me. I definitely feel less anxious and less like a loser when people 'like' what I do. I usually try to upload everyday and check every couple hours because other wise I would clearly miss out on what's going on."*

My findings provide evidence that positive interactions, social support, and social connectedness on Instagram provide happiness and satisfaction to the media users. Thoits (2011) argues that everyday support received from strong ties is what promotes well being, it confirms the recipients' sense of mattering to other individuals and it sustains a sense of self-worth. This thesis nuances the dichotomy between weak and strong bonds that is palpable in the online relationships. Strong ties require commitment and attention, while weak ties require less responsibility and reduces pressure of reciprocity (Granovetter, 1983). Weak ties are more distant acquaintances, which are nonetheless valuable assets to fulfil the respondent's social capital since the platform helps sustaining large numbers of such ties. Even though both, strong and weak ties, play a role for Instagram exchanges, these parameters characterising the respondents' relationships indicate how bonds affect differently patterns of exchanges and reciprocity. This thesis reports how asymmetrical exchanges and feelings of anxiety can be differently fostered by weak or strong bonds. An evident range of opportunities as well as constraints within which people operate, from both weak and strong bonds, explains the formation of symmetrical exchanges or its absence. On the other end of the spectrum, the media users shed light on less appealing outcomes of social exchanges and asymmetrical interactions, leading media users to experience self-doubt and anxiety when participating on social media.

Establishing symmetrical relationships via comments and ‘likes’ are vital for the well being and sustainability of the media users’ relationships. The construction of their relationships and the construction of their digital selves result from social interactions (Van House, 2007). This aspect is shown amongst my sample of users who construct themselves and their social ties according to interactions and reciprocal performances. This notion echoes Tong and Walther’s research (2011) that explains how social platforms offer a variety of affordances and resources that increase and alter relational maintenance performance. On Facebook for instance, leaving a comment on a post is a relationship maintenance signal and stands for the individual’s commitment towards a relationship (Tong and Walther, 2011). This research demonstrates that the absence of validation in form of ‘likes’ and comments may cause differing degrees of anxiety and may impact negatively a relationship. Media users’ narratives reveal that they are being emotionally impacted by the absence of reciprocity that produces imbalanced relationships. The reasons why media users hold such an important grip on reciprocal exchanges is because they gain value (*Insta-gratification*) through these exchanges. Joe confirms this notion when he discusses the reasons why he engages on the platform:

*“(...) If I was only posting for myself and not having any ‘likes’ or comments, I am not sure I would continue more than a week or two. Of course I post for myself... but I also enjoy to show to people what I am doing, what I like doing, what I eat... it would be sad if the ‘like’ button was missing on Instagram”.*

Along with Anya, Joe points out that the construction of the self and his social relationships arise from his social interactions that impact on his well-being and happiness. All participants declared feeling happy when receiving ‘likes’, whilst feeling unsatisfied when exchanges were asymmetrical. This idea correlates with the research led by Tobin *et al.* (2014) who present that media users who do not receive ‘likes’ feel bad about themselves. Joe is aware that the ‘likes’ he receives help him feel proud of himself, accomplished and socially recognised. He notifies the vital role of the ‘like’ button which provides him personal gratification comparable to a social currency that helps him feel good and worthy. Asymmetrical exchanges can thus prevent media users from obtaining social validation and may lead to the experience of anxiety and stress. A good example to illustrate this idea is provided by Susan who explains:

*“I am worried when I don’t get ‘likes’, this is why sometimes I remove my pictures, because it makes me feel like a... it makes me feel unloved”.*

As the majority of the media users emphasised, such as Joe, Anya and Susan, they expressed feelings of dissatisfaction when not receiving enough ‘likes’. The users tend to rely on social interactions in order to feel socially validated. They experience difficulties in distancing themselves from potential imbalanced interactions that would ultimately impact on their mood, make them check, alter or even delete their contributions. How others perceive themselves seems to be a hot topic and taken as a personal issue, with the media users worrying about ‘likes’ and considering social validation as the key for gaining approbation from their friends.

The empirical findings reveal how media users need to be reassured constantly by social validation cues to feel confident about themselves, and have a serene mind. The lack of social validation and reciprocal exchange leads media users to doubt themselves as they want to be recognised as a live node in their community. The media users’ narratives enable me to identify insecurities created by an insufficient number of ‘likes’ and their constant pursuit of social benefits.

*“If no one double tap ‘like’ within the ten first minutes; I would take down my picture. After posting a content, I check several times hoping for some replies. So... If I don’t get any, I start to stress out and I’d rather delete my content”, says Marie.*

This rhetoric exposes the urge for symmetrical exchanges. The gratification of being validated and recognised socially through the accumulation of ‘likes’ removes fear from being socially ignored or unnoticed. Nevertheless, as the respondents point out, this environment leads towards uncertainty of reciprocal exchanges. The idea of the gift presented by Mauss reveals that social exchanges of ‘little gifts’ in ordinary life presuppose an improvisation and constant uncertainty. As Marie posits, her attempt to share her experiences on the social platform denotes a palpable fear of being ignored and risk of unreciprocated exchange. Turkle’s work and use of term “Alone Together” (2011) is the result of years of empirical research looking at how individuals interact and

socialise on digital networks. Her findings suggest that technology gives the illusion that individuals have more control, however she explains that technology is actually controlling them. Turkle (2011) uses the example of Blackberries emails to show how individuals adopt a compulsive behaviour within the online realm. Similarly, Marie's behaviour denotes a fear of not being validated, which drives her to compulsively check her phone. The fluid social media realm inhibits the control of definite reciprocal exchanges which thus result in uncertainty of reciprocity and a fear of being ignored and neglected.

Whether Marie seems convinced that her filtered photo of cheese, crackers and wine tray looks good, it is actually the 'likes' that determine the value to her picture (evaluating the worth of the good). If she receives no 'likes', the social pressure becomes unbearable for the media user who engages in a repetitive practice of checking his/her profile and worries until the 'likes' accumulate. The Instagram platform provides an uncontrolled environment that triggers its users (Anyia, Joe, Susan and Marie) to feel worried about the uncertainty of reciprocal exchanges. Social expectations and uncertainty of reciprocal exchanges affect the respondents, who, whenever they post, are concerned about their presentation. For instance, Marie knows what to post and how to post, to reduce anxiety and to trigger reciprocal exchanges in an environment that is uncertain. Similar to an individual who performs *potlatch* to gain capital, Marie wishes to express wealth via sophisticated posts to be socially validated (the *potlatch* defines the individual's place within society by an accumulation of property that symbolises wealth during the ceremony). The aim for the media users is to gain capital, honour and prestige whilst reducing the likelihood of rejection. The term *Insta-potlatch* can be used to describe this intense and accelerated cycle of digital exchanges via posts, 'likes' and comments. The respondents give importance to digital exchanges in a fanatic way, they track the numbers of 'likes' and comments and assess how long it takes to acquire them. The respondents work on a framework of mutual giving, which allows them to gauge how socially recognised and validated they are. More than a simple sign of approval and popularity, the 'likes' become the reasons why media users get anxious. This notion is illustrated by Andrew who claims:

*“If I don’t get replies after an hour, I get annoyed especially if I open up and it is something a bit more personal in nature, it triggers a desire to get the ‘return the favour thing’”.*

Andrew reveals his intention to collect ‘likes’ when he posts a “*more personal*” content. He explains the crucial role of ‘likes’ to maintain symmetrical digital exchanges, and achieve recognition. It seems that media users live with the torment of having an unpopular post on their profile, where their vision is geared towards looking at how many ‘likes’ or comments a post has received. A fear of non-response is therefore built up, defined by the social media metrics that delimit the users’ social capital. Media users are constantly managing their profile in a way to maximise benefits, but at a costly price of their own emotions. Metrics help create the hierarchies that are embedded in social networks. This hovering awareness of popularity and reputation fosters the rise of anxiety and self-doubt.

As previously discussed, posts become less about communicating the reality of a moment to other users. Instead, it becomes a matter of sharing a constructed reality. The findings of my research recall Barasch’s study (2018) that discusses how sharing on social media diminishes individuals’ enjoyment of their experiences by increasing anxiety or self-presentational concern. Barasch (2018) exposes that individuals select meticulously the pictures they share on social media and reveals that the anxiety of sharing overpowers people’s enjoyment of their own experiences. Throughout the interviews, anxiety was a palpable feeling when media users post, ‘like’ and comment a content. The participants’ narratives reveal a strong focus on their digital presentation and image, alienating them further from spontaneous social interactions with their community. The platform offers tremendous opportunities for social interactions to flourish, however the superficial exchanges and the perpetual quests for ‘likes’ show a deep instrumentality. Within this dimension of instrumental gifts, namely put forward by Andrew and Jane (quoted below), the respondents engage in reciprocal exchanges in part because they want others to do the same. The respondents admit that they focus on the potential benefits reciprocal exchange provide them. ‘Likes’ trigger a reward cycle and the more the media users obtain them, the more they want them. This explains therefore the common practice of tracking and checking the digital ‘likes’ and comments. The respondents enlighten how technology mediates their relations, the network encourages self-interest and

instrumental exchanges that lead its users to think of others users as manageable social capital boosters or resources to be exploited. Based on this, Turkle (2011) highlights the power of technological devices to shape relationships in our contemporary lives, she explains how individuals want to control over where they put their attention. They pay attention to what interest them by controlling the selves that they want to be. Furthermore, she explains how individuals are able to edit, delete and retouch. Human relationships get sacrificed by technology, where interactions are anticipated, managed and expected. On Instagram, the cycle of exchanges and interactions is instrumentalised, which characterises the *Insta-potlatch*. Maintaining reciprocal exchange therefore requires the media users to provide sophisticated pictures, and on top of that, to ‘like’ other’s posts. They have high expectations from their community which result in the downward spiral of dissatisfaction and anxiety. For instance, Jane claims:

*“Well sometimes I am like, please validate it, and I will also ‘like’ yours, and we’ll take turns saying how cute the picture is. But When I ‘like’ someone’s picture or comment on it and I get no answer, it makes me feel stupid. Same if for instance I post something and I don’t get ‘likes’, what’s wrong with me? That’s why sometimes I scroll carefully through my profile and decide on which ones I should take down”.*

Jane uses the term “*taking turns*” which emphasises this idea of instrumental exchanges and high expectation of returns. She admittedly revisits her profile frequently. Often times finding herself re-evaluating her previous posts, looking for flaws or imperfections. This practice confirms once again how meticulously selected the content being shared is, but it also documents on the media users’ psychological distress. Social media posts can set unrealistic expectations and create feelings of inadequacy as it is the case for Jane, who checks her profile and wonders what is wrong with herself.

This section has reviewed the detrimental effects that unbalanced interactions and the absence of reciprocal exchange can have on media users. Not meeting the users’ expectations of ‘likes’ or comments reveals patterns of anxiety and stress. The thesis reveals an interesting shift that online relationships produce complex interactions giving opportunities for miscommunications, so leading individuals to experience a greater sense of isolation. The next section uncovers the detrimental outcomes that the Instagram

platform can have on its users. My empirical research has similitudes with previous research based on the Facebook platform. Facebook has been the focal point for much research (Krau *et al.* 2002; Ellison *et al.* 2007) in understanding social networking and relationships. Past researchers have raised the downfalls of participating on a platform which correlates with feelings of loneliness, isolation, envy or dissatisfaction (Campbell *et al.* 2002; Chou and Edge, 2002; Krau *et al.* 2002; Kross, 2013; Clark *et al.* 2017; Stapleton *et al.* 2017). My sample of media users has communicated a range of stories and experiences in which they narrate bonds being weakened and damaged because of jealousy, social comparison and misunderstandings.

a) Jealousy

In this research the term jealousy is used to define certain feelings experienced by the media users on Instagram. For instance, by posting pictures of sophisticated lifestyle and luxurious experiences, the poster can elicit feelings of jealousy and envy from the receiver. Envy can be defined as “an unpleasant and often painful blend of feelings [...] caused by a comparison with a person or group of persons who possess something we desire” (Smith and Kim, 2007:49). My study reveals that the use of Instagram can cause envy, jealousy and comparison between the media users.

Several users’ narratives correlate with studies on Facebook (Haferkamp and Krämer, 2011; Chen and Lee, 2013) which point out that individuals can feel unsatisfied from what they receive or see on their social media platform. To illustrate this point, Susan expresses how Instagram has weakened some of her relationships. She explains her disappointment when she saw pictures of her group of friends, reunited to celebrate the end of the exams. Susan claims:

*“I was not invited... I mean obviously if I did not have Instagram I would have never been aware of it and I be feel totally fine today. But it actually hurt me to realise they did not invite me, they posted the dinner table... They did not invite me to the dinner, which means they forgot me, so they don’t really like me?! I just thought we were a group of friends. After this, I definitely hanged out with them less and made new friends at university”.*



Susan can assign the cause of her sadness to her friends' posts that made her doubt the quality of her friendships. Similarly, Sherine explains how some interactions on Instagram impact on her relationships and upset her. It is a feeling of jealousy that is expressed by Sherine, due to digital interactions and contributions which tend to create tensions and discomfort, she claims:

*“Also if I see one of my friends ‘liking’ a picture of the guy that I like, or if the guy that I like does not ‘like’ my picture but ‘likes’ my friend’s then I would be really pissed at my friend. It’s just like why would you ‘like’ her picture and not mine?”*

In accordance with Elphinston and Noller (2011) who point out that Facebook is an environment that promotes jealousy and envy, the use of Instagram can create a negative strain on relationships. Within this rhetoric, Sherine claims that she checks her friends' activity on a daily basis and she witnesses interactions that irritates her. The Instagram 'like' (characterised as a positive act to show appreciation), leaves a bittersweet taste for Sherine (she saw the person she “fancies” giving validation and attention to another girl). In a platform where self-worth depends on the 'likes' media users receive, they are deeply affected when they do not receive *Insta-gratification*. Furthermore, another pattern of jealousy is identified, Andrew, indeed explains why he gets jealous:

*“I would try to ‘like’ because they are my friends, but sometimes you know when it’s the third picture they post on the beach with their cocktails... I am just like ... screw you! That moment when you see amazing pictures, nice restaurants, true love, beautiful beaches... You are just feeling jealous. I mean I am not talking about my close friends but others... So you just end up stalking but you pretend you didn’t see it because its just annoying... hard to explain”.*

In chapter four and five, I have discussed how several media users share content to display their good taste, skills, social status via certain foods, or via the use of filters to beautify their culinary experiences. Images of friends enjoying holidays, documenting on their happy lives, are enough for Andrew to feel jealous. Jealousy stems from the power, status givers convey, through their seemingly perfect pictures. Looking at photos of good-looking people at a trendy restaurant, on vacation, can create a state of envy and

resentment (Tandoc *et al.* 2015). In accordance with Krasnova *et al.* (2013), Instagram, similarly to Facebook, is an environment where users can envy others' lives and experiences. Andrew admits that observing certain photos is envy-inducing, and triggers negative feelings towards other individuals. Jealousy may lead to tensions and make users unfollow, unfriend or purposely not 'like' content. This phenomenon is discussed by Eric and Tatiana:

*"Couple months ago I was not really doing well in my job, I gained weight and there's actually a guy I unfollowed (that I knew from high-school) because he was constantly posting about his strict and healthy diet and also posting pictures of himself flexing... I got sick of it... I mean now that I think about it I was probably just bitter and jealous..."*. Eric

*"Sometimes when I am alone, or bored and I see some friends posting pictures where they look stunning, have the time to cook and post their healthy meals... I don't 'like' because I am jealous. And I mean I do it on purpose because I would go and creep but never 'like' it"*. Tatiana

Eric's rejection of the dynamic of exchange made him end his friendship. Eric, Sherine and Tatiana express hostility and contempt towards specific digital contents or exchanges posted by their friends. The media users feel jealous of their acquaintances or close friends depending on the situation and context. What is noticeable is that the feelings of jealousy or envy are more evident between acquaintances. The respondents (Andrew, Sherine, Susan, Eric, Tatiana, Tanya) emphasise that if the content they receive triggers envy or jealousy, they are tempted to ignore, 'creep' or 'stalk' the content. Respondents may be envious and resentful of those who display their extraordinary experiences which results in asymmetrical exchanges. However, if the poster is a close friend, the respondents reciprocate the exchange to honour their friendship and support their friend. For instance, Andrew distinguished his strong bonds to his weaker bonds, when he claims *"I mean I am not talking about close friends but others"*. Drawing from Granovetter's (1973) distinction between strong and weak bonds, the media users feel less liable to reciprocate their weak bonds' exchanges than their stronger bonds' exchanges. The respondents' stronger ties are usually close-knit of ties that are the ones meant to supply

support. These ties require commitment of time and attention. As the respondents in my research have more than two hundred followers, they are confronted therefore to a large number of sophisticated posts and interactions (from both close friends and acquaintances), that can increase potential negative feelings. The respondents' reaction therefore depends on the quality of the relationship. Weaker bonds' posts may trigger envy and jealousy that result in asymmetrical exchanges. While stronger bonds' posts are usually reciprocated and validated.

Posting enjoyable experiences (vacations, restaurants, gourmet food, family gatherings) can trigger negative emotions and result in jealous friends who can ultimately unfollow, and reject symmetrical exchanges. Throughout the respondents' narratives, there is a malignant discourse of a voyeuristic practice when they engage in "*creeping*" and "*stalking*". The visual aspect of Instagram triggers jealousy, and encourages the media users to "*stalk*", "*creep*", "*watch*" which affects the symmetry of exchanges especially when users are not close friends. Instagram allows respondents to interact with a larger network, however the symmetry of exchange is not absolute. It seems that some respondents (for instance Andrew and Tatiana) watch others' *Insta-potlatches* from the outside without participating or interfering. They get satisfaction from watching a *potlatch* between others, being voyeuristic and suspicious. The practice of 'creeping' and 'stalking' presents a notion of 'gap' between givers. This 'gap' can be conceptualised by using the *moka* practice. The 'gap' is the end result of a *moka* system that put the receiver in a *Rubbish Man* position (Gregory, 1982). Andrew and Tatiana feel that they are not able to reciprocate and engage in the competitive spirit of sophisticated and polished posts on Instagram.

To illustrate this point, I asked Tatiana the following question: "*if you were also on vacation having a great time, would you still react the same and not 'like' their posts?*" She replied "*probably not...for sure I would post too! It would be better than my last post from Five Guys*". The reason why Tatiana does not 'like' certain pictures is because she senses a 'gap' between her contributions and others' which leads to an asymmetry of social exchange. There is indeed a contrast between a post of a burger and a post of a white sand beach with cocktails and a bruschetta platter. The findings support the idea that users can be dissatisfied after viewing certain picture. Such findings predict social comparison behaviour and support the idea, presented by Haferkamp and Krämer (2011),

that dissatisfaction appears when users do not believe they can attain the level of physical beauty seen on other users' profile, hence, they do not contribute. The respondents' narratives (Andrew, Eric, Tatiana, Sherine) reveal that they are tempted to not 'like' a content especially when there is too much of a 'gap' between what they post and what other users post. This triggers the respondents to engage in a voyeuristic practice instead of reciprocating, which therefore, results in asymmetrical exchanges. The respondents prefer to watch others' *Insta-potlatches* since they cannot compete with such contributions. Since the media users experience jealousy, they become reluctant to reciprocate which can jeopardise the relationships. Susan, Sherine, Andrew, Eric and Tatiana explicitly express hostility and annoyance.

#### b) Comparison

In this research, the term social comparison is used to define digital media users who compare themselves, their experiences and their digital profile to other users with positive characteristics (sophisticated pictures and hundreds of 'likes'). Social comparison causes media users to feel inadequate and experience negative affect.

The empirical material uncovers that some media users tend to be judgmental when they scroll through their friends' posts. These respondents tend to seek approval from other users while comparing themselves to some of them. It is demonstrated that some respondents' Instagram feeds generate unfavourable social comparisons. These empirical findings correlate with previous research conducted on Instagram, Stapleton *et al.* (2017)'s study examines the relationship between self-worth, self-esteem and Instagram use in 237 young adults between the ages of 18 and 29. They point out that people who based their self-worth on others' approval tended to engage in more social comparison on Instagram, and that people who engaged in more social comparison on Instagram ultimately had lower self-esteem. Andrew admits feeling miserable when he compares himself to some of his friends, who have more 'likes'. Furthermore, Marie supports Andrew's narrative when she suggests:

*“I feel like shit when I see the pictures of this friend with her makeup done, drinking a healthy smoothie all the time while I am here still in bed.... And I am just thinking why does she get so much attention? And I don't... and then you just start to hate the world and this girl in particular!”.*

Marie is vulnerable to unfavourable social comparisons on Instagram. It is evidenced that when Marie and Andrew browse on their Instagram feeds, it leads them to lower well-being. They constantly seek external validation to feel better and be socially recognised. The practice of ‘stalking’ is associated with lower life satisfaction, mediated by upward social comparison, or envy. Since Instagram is an imaged based platform, it becomes easy to observe explicit and implicit cues of people being happy, rich, and successful, causing media users to compare their imperfect lives to others’. A picture can indeed strongly provoke instantaneous social comparison, so generating feelings of inferiority. When media users start to compare themselves to another person’s life, they are engaging in a psychological phenomenon called ‘relative deprivation’. Davis (1959) explains that relative deprivation is experienced if an individual wants X, he then compares himself to similar others who have X, and he feels entitled to X. The empirical data of this research reveals that the platform is not only a place to sustain bonds and show what the media users are doing, but also to prove their self-worth so as to gain love, attention and validation. Marie and Andrew compare themselves to others because the approval of others matters for their self-worth. Studies have indeed reported that social media users with low self- esteem tend share pictures as self-promoting tools (Mehdizadeh, 2010). The study demonstrates that when media users see beautiful photos of their friends on Instagram, one way to compensate is to post better photos. The media users seem to get further and further from reality to achieve social validation by sharing a reality with no meaning. The media users struggle to share real-life imperfect posts because they are involved in a vicious circle of comparison. Susan explains this phenomenon; she claims:

*“When I see my friends posting a certain type of picture, I would be influenced to do the same. I mean we are a group of friends from high school and I guess I tend to compare myself a lot to these girls, even if I am not as good as them (...) because they have way more ‘likes’ and followers than me”.*

The empirical material suggests that ‘likes’ define the media users’ value and affirm their social validation. Hélène describes how she often engages in a comparison with others when she scrolls through her feed and sees her friends’ contributions. She mentions:

*“(…) when you look at someone’s ‘likes’ on a picture, you can see if the person is better than you. I do it with my friends, I just check ‘who has what’ compared to me- why she has more than me? (...) It just annoys me sometimes when I see that she would get more ‘likes’ than me when we post the exact same picture”*

Consequently, Hélène reveals that she checks the number of ‘likes’ she receives and then, also checks her friends’ ‘likes’. In a way, Instagram is a form of voyeurism promoting platform, where it becomes easy to watch others and compare oneself to others. In accordance with previous studies, when the respondents compare themselves to much popular users, it triggers feelings of inferiority and envy (Krasnova *et al.* 2013). The idiom “keeping up with the Joneses” which refers to the comparison to one's neighbour as a benchmark for social class, is adapted to the digital environment. The comparison with other users of Instagram triggers social status anxiety. Instagram brings all the respondents closer to the upper echelons through instant gratifications yet instantaneously back down to their reality. They edit ordinary photos into magazine-pictures with impressive filters promoting comparison with a falsified perfection. This phenomenon recalls Campbell *et al.* (2002) study, in which the pursuit of social validation defines individuals as self centred and egocentric individuals.

#### c) Misunderstanding

Furthermore, misunderstandings, confusions and misinterpretations are identified as reasons that can potentially harm the sustainability of the media users’ relationships. Marie explains how a misinterpreted content has created tensions and caused her friendship to perish. She argues:

*“A year ago, I ‘liked’ the picture of a friend who posted herself and her dog. I did not know he died the day before and I did not really read the caption where she mentioned it, I just ‘liked’ it. And I remember that this friend was a bit upset*

*at me for not sending a message or calling her. I mean I had no clue! But since I 'liked' the content... It was obvious that I saw the post...She stopped replying to my messages and was really cold and its only couple weeks later that we started to talk again and she told me about it. I felt stupid".*

Marie's story proves how 'liking' can be a devious practice, especially when the content is about a sensitive subject. Marie was far from guessing her friend would share a loss-related post on Instagram. Not only is there a greater capacity for misunderstanding on the digital platform, but these can escalate and create tensions leading users to unfriend, unfollow and unlike others' content. A deviant behaviour on Instagram can be explained by a conduct deviating from the normal conduct (Becker, 1963), that is to say in this context, a conduct which does not follow the *Insta-rules* or codes. Posting a negative experience, as well as 'liking' this post can be interpreted as 'deviant'. As Becker suggests (1963), deviant is a flexible and fluid term, it is not fixed since it depends on the interpretation by the individuals. It is a relative term since a behaviour interpreted as 'deviant' for digital exchanges might not be deviant for offline social exchanges. It is thus socially constructed in the digital community, the Instagram codes and rules of reciprocity are conveyed with shared meanings, orientations, and assumptions. If a user goes against the social norm of posting sophisticated pictures that display fantastic experiences, and posts instead unflattering pictures, or undesirable experiences, then, he/she is seen as deviant. It seems that Marie was not expecting to see a death-related post on Instagram. Interestingly, it seems that Marie blindly 'liked' the post, as she felt the immense pressure to 'like' her friend's pictures. Although Marie did not read the content, she participated in the economy of 'liking'. The social power, and the agents of conformity of the digital community are so powerful around Marie that she mechanically 'likes' contents. By 'liking' her friend's picture, Marie reveals an insidious violence of the gift economy that comes from acts of generosity and kindness. The *Insta-rules* enforced in the community encourage the users to reciprocate by 'liking' contents and to post the bright side of their lives. 'Liking' can therefore be perceived as a deviant practice, however it is the use of Instagram that triggers this practices rather than the platform itself.

Furthermore, the interpretation of the gift can be ambiguous and therefore leads to tension. Anya expresses these tensions she scrolls through certain posts. She rhetorically asks herself:

*“Shall I ‘like’ this post or not? It feels wrong if I ‘like’ this post, but at the same time, there’s no dislike on Instagram. So what am I supposed to do? And you wonder if the person is joking about it or perhaps she feels sad. You never know about one’s real emotions... So you just guess and hope for the best”.*

Anya is ‘liking’ in a mindless way, she gives ‘likes’ just for the sake of it. Although the ‘liking’ practice attempts to show care and appreciation, it can also create a false sense of connectedness with nonverbal cues that lead to confusions. According to Anya’s narrative, Instagram poorly transmits emotions compared to face-to-face interactions. Some exchanges provide the illusion of careless replies, or messages lacking empathy than what is intended. To illustrate this example, Jane and Eric argue:

*“Also, one time my friend posted a picture to announce she got engaged and at that time I was away and did not have access to the internet. Probably a week later, I got a message from another friends telling me that my friend who got engaged was a bit upset since I did not congratulate her. I mean obviously people expect me to be always online because I usually post every single day, so she probably thought I ignored her, but in fact I was jus away”.* Jane

*“You just always expect the person to reply fast so when he does not, you can assume many things which can bother you. Like if I tag a friend 3 to 4 times in a row and he doesn’t answer, then I will stop interacting with him. I mean he can be busy but... I don’t know this. So for sure its always easier to assume the worse when you have no clue”.* Eric

The gift economy of digital media is not limited to the digital sphere, it creates an environment of creepers; *Insta-potlatches*; deviant behaviours and ‘likes’ which seem to affect offline relationships and bonds. A form of social conformity is created, and if a user does not reciprocate, it does not just negate his participation from social media, but it also impacts outside social media. This is the case for Marie and Jane’s relationships



with their friends: Marie's deviant reciprocal exchanges and Jane's lack of digital exchange. These examples demonstrate that digital interactions can damage close relationships. Misinterpretations and assumptions can appear if the media users defy the social norms and Insta-rules (absence of instant reciprocal exchange, undesirable/unpleasant posts). Whilst the absence of verbal cues can negatively impact on the quality of the communication on Instagram, this empirical research suggests that misunderstandings can happen with people involved in close relationships.

## 2) Consequences of an unattractive economy (deletion, unfollow, limitation of social exchanges)

My empirical findings demonstrate that media users can be deeply affected by digital interactions. Several respondents express sadness, disappointment and loneliness resulting from digital exchanges. Although Instagram strengthens bonds, sustains relationships and boosts social capital, it also pressures them to reciprocate. If the giver (or receiver) fails to reciprocate, relationships become imbalanced causing the anxiety of indebtedness. Marcoux claims "It is important to recognise that withholding requests for gifts, services, and favors from significant others can be a driving force for using the market" (2009:681). Can media users cease their participation to the community and thus confirm Marcoux's arguments on the gift economy?

Considering the gift-giving economy on one side and the digital sphere on the other side, this research demonstrates that the combination of both does not always favours the sustainability of relationships. Marcoux (2009) argues that the gift-giving economy tears offline relationships apart by creating indebted feelings, and this is confirmed by my findings that show that the digital sphere can damage relationships.

Some of my respondents (Marie, Susan, Tarek, Tanya, Anya) provide significant evidence of the unattractiveness of the gift economy that incites them to delete their Instagram pictures or cease their social exchanges. This form of escape echoes Marcoux's findings that highlight that individuals turn to the market to free themselves from the constraints of social norms. Marcoux's research (2009) points out how guilt and

indebtedness affect people's attitude, which exposes a 'dark side' of gift-giving practices in real life social exchanges. The empirical findings of this research present the detrimental effects (anxiety, jealousy, rivalry, misunderstandings, confusions, indebtedness, asymmetrical exchanges) linked with digital gift-giving, and so limiting the users' participation. Furthermore, the digital media users seem to be disillusioned and constrained in their reciprocity relations. As a receiver, reciprocity must be achieved in order to remove any feelings of indebtedness; and as a giver, reciprocity needs to be completed in order to avoid feelings of anxiety. As a result, if reciprocity is not achieved, the motives to delete their contribution become palpable.

The moment when media users contribute, they expect others to reciprocate. If not, they become the victims of their own socially invalidated posts. This feeling tends to be unbearable for some media users who effortlessly delete their contents (for instance Marie, in the first section of this chapter). Ceasing one's participation (by removing their posts or deleting their account) from the gift economy, formerly meant to strengthen bonds, has been a common practice for several media users. Anya addresses this notion:

*"Once you are on Instagram, its like if you have to post. You have to participate. Otherwise you are out of the loop, and also you want people to notice you (...) And it just became annoying to pretend to care and 'like' others' posts that I don't even see daily... And I just thought it was such a waste of time, to post pictures, edit them... I don't need people's approval (...) There has been times where I felt pressured to edit a photo a certain way, to make it 'Instagramable'. It's stupid and I got sick of it. The only reason why I came back is because I thought I was missing out things... but I realise it is mainly insignificant things anyways and you are lonely on your phone no matter what. So now I just try to not take it that seriously anymore".*

Anya raises the interesting pattern of loneliness and false sense of closeness, which has already been a topic of research conducted by Kraut *et al.* (1998); Kross (2013) and Clark *et al.* (2017) who concluded that internet use positively correlates with depression, loneliness, and stress. Loneliness indeed is a common discourse used by the respondents. The respondent can have a rich network and still feel incredibly lonely. Anya's narrative and use of terms: *"have to post"*; *"have to participate"*; *"felt pressured"* shed light on

the responsibilities associated when taking part in the digital community. This regime of sharing their experiences and the pressure to reciprocate, entrap the respondents. They develop the constant need for validation and recognition from others, which lead them to use reciprocal interactions as ‘small bits’ to support their fragile sense of self. They believe that sharing makes them feel less lonely. However, it is actually the reverse, they end up feeling isolated when digital exchanges are absent. If the users do not collect the desired number of ‘likes’ or comments, they feel ignored, neglected and lonely.

This idea of loneliness is discussed by Turkle (2011). She discusses how individuals become used to be “alone together”, technologies clean up relationships to make them smooth just as the pictures that are being edited and filtered on Instagram. She explains how bits of online interactions (texting language, ‘likes’ or comments) do not add up to a real conversation. Digital exchange is shaping new ways of interactions, the respondents use technology to gain social capital, to feel gratified and part of a community. It is appealing for individuals to participate in the digital gift economy as it gives them the illusion that they have a myriad of listeners. Nevertheless, the media users’ narratives show a paradox of the digital gift, which on the one hand sustains their bonds, but on the other hand creates weak and vulnerable ones. Anya stepped back from her digital involvement and explicitly reveals how her participation in the platform socially pressures her and raises concerns. The gift economy, bridging people together, is therefore also making them lonely and impacting on both the way and the content they exchange. I refer to this phenomenon as *Insta-paradox*, which derives from the term ‘Internet Paradox’ by Kraut *et al.* (1998).

Early research on Internet suggests that the Internet creates a lonely crowd by isolating them from the real world. The *Insta-paradox* is a term to describe the inconsistent and contradictory impact of the platform on the digital users’ social relationships and psychological well-being. This research further correlates with Marcoux (2009) who highlights the ‘dark side’ of gift-giving with its social indebtedness inherent in the gift-giving process that can produce negative feelings. Marcoux argues “People use the market to free themselves from the straitjacket of social expectations—from the sense of indebtedness and emotional oppression—which constrains them in their reciprocity relations inside the gift economy” (2009:671). On the same page, Eric illustrates the notion of paradox when he describes the practices of sharing on Instagram:

*“I just realised that at some point I can’t stand seeing fake pauses, fake captions, ridiculous faces for the sake of getting ‘likes’. So I am always tempted to unfriend couple people because I just do not feel like ‘liking’ what they are doing. I know these people since high school... I mean... Are we Hollywood actors? Famous chefs? Famous clothing designers? Sometimes I take a break from their stupidity and go missing. I don’t need to hear about them that much”.*

Eric and Anya both evoke the negative impact of digital exchanges (such as the fake sense of closeness due to social rules and the pressure/obligation to reciprocate). Eric has enough of his digital friends’ lack of genuine posts and refuses to take part in this cycle of exchange. The only way he can get out of this problematic situation, is, according to him, to delete them off or to limit his own involvement in the community (when he mentions *“I go missing”*). Most respondents’ narratives raise the numerous detrimental, fake and unspontaneous exchanges. In this image-based Instagram culture, the respondents do not really live experiences; they live them to report them. They are editing themselves rather than actually being themselves. This practice is alienating. Rather than sharing a genuine experience, media users would alter it, and rather than valuing each other’s gift, they would emotionlessly acknowledge or ignore it. In the digital society, the pressure to conform to the social constructs of relationships is not accepted by all the respondents, who prefer to leave the community instead of conforming to standards they dislike. Some media users consider the nature of these exchanges fake, which is the core reason for their reluctance to participate in the sphere. Pei illustrates the ‘dark side’ as she turned away from the gift economy. For instance, Pei mentions:

*“I just got fed up at some point and I had to spend more time on my exams, I did not have time to post perfect looking pictures and check my phone every couple hours to see if I got enough likes”.*

My empirical findings demonstrate that, often times, users have expectations prior to posting content, setting themselves up for potential anxiety or feelings of inadequacy, in the case of an underwhelming viewers’ response. They live in accelerating contradictions of happiness and anxiety that either boost their social capital or feelings of loneliness. Digital gift-giving reveals paradoxes in which media users tend to enjoy the short-term,

dopamine-driven feedback loops but soon realise that it damages their bonds. Their digital interactions are driven by ‘likes’ and comments but lack civil discourse and real information. Ultimately, the digital exchanges increase the frequency the respondents exchange with strong or weak ties. It gives the illusion of being a network of close-knit ties that provides support, nevertheless it also requires a large commitment of time and attention; because of the need to reciprocate out of obligation and indebtedness. The paradox of Instagram reveals that the platform establishes and sustains a large number of ties but also threatens them.

The use of Instagram makes enables its users to maintain bonds with their network. The respondents do not limit themselves to strong ties and relatively strong ties but instead, they get diluted with weaker bonds/ exchanges. It is clear from the results of the current study that the digital exchanges’ expectations and commitments can impact negatively on the media users, who cultivate weaker bonds through unspontaneous, obligated and indebted-driven performances. The benefits of maintaining bonds on Instagram seem to be both complex and contradictory as opposed to simply ‘liking’ friends’ pictures and posting content. Bridging a connection requires time, commitment and devotion but also drags the users through a series of detrimental socialising effects.

The notion of the ‘Insta-paradox’ enlightens the ambivalence of the Instagram platform. It is a term that uncovers the nature of the benefits associated with Instagram and exposes the feelings media users’ experience when involved in digital interactions. On the one hand, the platform provides currencies to reinforce social bonds, while on the other it disconnects users from who they are in order to fit in a social mould. They lose their essence and become alienated from their contributions. On the surface, the exchanges are alienable, impersonal, anonymous, and items are devoid of social moral consideration; however, the findings suggest that social obligations are omnipresent in the community. Within the general debate of what it means to be a participant on digital media, researchers have pointed out the paradox from which a controversy of being simultaneously permanently connected while ultimately feeling alone emerged (Kraut *et al.*, 1998; Valenzuela *et al.* 2009; Krasnova *et al.* 2013; Tandoc *et al.*, 2015). The term insta-paradox allows a description of new theories and approaches to unlock the full socio-anthropological potential of Instagram. The findings shows an ambiguous system and extend the field of paradox and social media. Instagram brings all users close to an

upper echelon through instant gratification, yet instantly back down to their reality. Within the term ‘insta-paradox’ exists the devious practice of liking, which is an insidious violence on kindness that further emphasises the aspect of paradox within the community. The regime of sharing, combined with the pressure to reciprocate, entraps media users in the illusion of connectedness with a myriad of listeners. However, the findings put forward the media users’ isolation and their desire to use small bits (‘likes’, comments) from their community – in which they can feel lonely – to support their fragile sense of self. The perpetual quest for ‘likes’ shows a deep instrumentality, as users are led to see others as manageable capital boosters. They have high expectations which result in the downward spiral of dissatisfaction and anxiety. The climax of the term insta-paradox emphasises the insidious violence of the gift economy that comes from an act of generosity and the desire to bond with others.

Media users seem to realise the negative effects of the digital gift-giving and its notion of indebtedness, which spotlight the paradox of Instagram. Not all tasty dishes look good, and so, is the digital gift platform an appropriate sphere to flourish bonds? Are the digital friendships as ‘fake’ as the media users’ staged food pictures? Chapter four, five and six provided meaningful data on food-related posts to understand the meanings and values attached to digital social exchanges. This data has been essential for this last chapter to comprehend the structural set of social relations in the digital sphere. This last chapter has therefore been moving away from the specific focus on food which was essential for the understanding the digital exchanges of the gift economy. Media users curate their lives around this perceived sense of perfection and are rewarded from short-term signals (such as ‘likes’, comments); they conflate ‘fake vicious appreciation’ with value and truth. This phenomenon leaves the media users feeling empty and lonely in the constant pursuit of social validation. The short-term dopamine, created via contributions, posts, ‘likes’ and comments, can entail comparison, confusions, misunderstanding, indebtedness, jealousy and envy.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

The following chapter sets out to conclude the present study. Before discussing the theoretical contribution of my research, the chapter outlines a summary of key findings. I then move into a discussion about the limitations of the study. To finish, I conclude my thesis by giving recommendations for future studies.

### Introduction:

The use of the digital platform Instagram, brings social exchange practices to the fore. As it is essential to update the work for the advent of new technologies, this qualitative research uses Mauss' work (1954) to comprehend the dynamics of social exchange on Instagram. In the second chapter, research questions were raised to explore how social relationships are maintained, disrupted, challenged or enhanced via digital media as an increasingly pervasive interface for the practices everyday life. These questions were addressed by conducting fifteen personal interviews, combined with a netnographic research. While gift-giving is a key practice that strengthen bonds in societies, the research reveals that digital interactions impact both positively and negatively individuals' sociality and individuality. This conclusion is divided in the following parts: A summary of the key findings, moving on to a discussion of the social relationships that are established by digital gift-giving practices in the Instagram community, followed by an evaluation of the ambivalence of digital gift-giving practice.

### Summary of findings

The visual-based platform Instagram, provides alternatives for individuals to develop their relationships in a non-face-to-face environment. Instagram serves as a tool for individuals to maintain relationships and produce social capital. The platform's affordances encourage bonding, thanks in no small part to the various ways in which to interact via 'likes', comments, tags or posts. The evidence presented implies that media users use food to communicate about themselves, to trigger interactions, to display memories and manage their identities. The filtered pictures of food on Instagram enable the media users to fabricate and edit groomed version of their lives. The experiences shared are improved, altered, and often present the best side of the media users' lives. Being able to post sophisticated pictures not only enables them to manage their identity, but it also triggers social interactions, social gratification, peer recognition and social rewards. The data yields some interesting results on the mechanisms of exchange and presents how the gestures of posting, 'liking' and commenting, are ingrained in the digital community. Additionally, these findings have enabled me to create terms to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of exchanges and their outcomes: the *Insta-Paradox*; *Insta-Gratification*, the *Insta-Rules*, the *Insta-Game* and the *Insta-Potlatch*. The combination of the prefix 'Insta' followed by a noun encapsulates and characterises the dynamics of communication and social interaction of the digital users. The following section outlines these terminologies, that contribute to the knowledge gained thanks to the research.

This conclusion is based on six themes that result from the coding process. The first theme, *reciprocity*, refers to the media users' ability to post, 'like' and comment on Instagram, to reciprocate digital contents. Digital media communities, similar to archaic societies, develop and sustain their relationships based on reciprocal exchanges, mutual recognition and solidarity (Sahlins, 1972). In the digital sphere, reciprocity relies on a set of responsibilities and obligations that ensure the exchange and guarantee a gift with a return. These social responsibilities and obligations underpin moral standards and expectations to conform to the community's rules of exchange and to thus ensure social stability. The media users emphasise the importance to validate other users' content, and



support them via ‘likes’ and comments. The *Insta-game* refers to the practice where individuals interact with the aim to maintain social cohesion; they ‘like’ each others’ content and return the favour to maximise the benefits. On a deeper level, the *Insta-game* represents the mechanical dynamic of reciprocal exchange that is essential to boost social capital and create a sense of belonging in the community. The motives for perpetuating the *Insta-game* lies in avoiding feelings of social pressure and indebtedness. The findings thus provide evidence that reciprocal exchanges undermine the spontaneity, authenticity and sincerity of giving or acknowledging digital contents. Social ties and relationships are dependent on the three steps of reciprocity (giving-receiving-reciprocating) performed routinely by users who anticipate their own contributions and wish to gain gratification in the future.

The second theme, *social capital*, is a key notion in this research. Thanks to Instagram, users are able to post pictures about their activities, habits and lifestyles. The evidence I present is that individuals use the visual-based platform Instagram to maintain contact with their friends and wider network, and to “know what’s up” by scrolling down their feed. Besides, individuals take part in digital communities and share pictures as a means to gain social capital and obtain peer recognition. The media users build a pot of credit by giving, receiving and reciprocating thanks to sophisticated posts that inform their personal habits, status and capital. This study highlights that gift-giving in the digital community reveals a certain competitiveness in this regard amongst its members, in which social status plays a central role. The term *Insta-potlatch* pays tribute to the hierarchical society in which users tend to beautify and stage their experiences to ensure *Insta-gratification* and boost their social capital. Users’ prestige is linked to what is being posted and reciprocated. The results highlight the fact that Instagram enables its users to acquire power and social status thanks to their back-and-forth exchanges that garner social status and elevate media users up through the social hierarchy. The perceptible competition in the community therefore justifies why users engage in the meticulous selection of the social experiences they share on the platform, to gain *Insta-gratification*, and peer recognition through ‘likes’.

The use of images plays an important role, and this is appreciated in the third theme, *identity*. Many of the respondents point out that the use of a visual medium allows them to express themselves due to images being more effective than text. Food-related content

indicates how individuals use certain content with meanings and associations to display a sophisticated, nuanced image of themselves. Certain foods are therefore prioritised for certain users to convey a message, as well as certain hashtags, and filters in order to present improved experiences. All fifteen respondents claimed that the platform enabled them to focus on certain aspects of their identity, aspects which were mainly positive. Of particular significance is the revelation that many users edit, crop, alter, modify, and generally improve the content they share in order to create and perform their sense of identity. Essentially, I show that individuals develop the desire to appear authentic, natural and unedited through candid poses and settings which are in reality highly edited and choreographed. Individuals project therefore their personality, habits, hobbies, preferences, religious beliefs on Instagram using food-related contents.

The fourth theme, *indebtedness*, demonstrates that the social obligation to give back is omnipresent in digital communities. As a result, the study highlights the importance of posting, ‘liking’ and commenting on pictures in order to show support and appreciation. Essentially, it indicates that the media users feel entitled to ‘like’ as a sign of acknowledgement and approval. If the users have not reciprocated yet, they feel indebted, and express a need to give back. When the bond is strong, the feelings of indebtedness increases, consequently, users feel further obliged to reciprocate.

*Social rules* are the fifth theme where, in the context of Instagram, a socially expected behaviour stems from the respondents’ narratives. From posting sophisticated pictures to ‘liking’ your friends’ contents and commenting on your closest ones: the role of a digital media user within his community reveals intangible social codes and rules to maintain social cohesion and order. I refer to the term *Insta-rules* to represent the way in which individuals conform to the standards and norms of exchange on Instagram. The findings therefore advocate that digital interactions are methodical and codified.

During the research process, a contradiction became apparent which was manifested in the last theme: *Loneliness*. This sixth and final theme contributes to a more general conclusion that evolved throughout the research process. All fifteen respondents claimed that the visual-based platform enabled them to exchange in a cost-free manner, communicate at the snap of their fingers, and maintain both strong and weak ties by simply scrolling. However, several respondents also expressed frustration and irritation which ultimately lead them to experiment feelings of loneliness and isolation. The social

rules of reciprocity, combined with the need to post ‘Instagram worthy’ pictures and the drive to accumulate ‘likes’, can lead users to reject and be rejected by the system. Additionally, while respondents tend to dismiss the belief that Instagram could damage their relationships, it is the in-depth analysis of their narratives that showed a perceptible irritation over individuals being too perfect and flawless, hence forms of jealousy and social comparison appeared. As a result, the term *Insta-paradox* warrants a greater understanding in the sense of how digital tools create a paradox within social connectedness. Mixed findings are reported regarding the role that social media plays in fostering social connectedness, which indicates that Instagram users may experience both positive and negative outcomes. This paradox lies in the fact that, on the one hand, Instagram elevates the ease in which users may form social capital and maintain relationships, but on the other, it can create a source of alienation and misunderstandings. Digital interactions can lead users to experience a false sense of closeness, disappointment, loneliness and anxiety.

### Critical discussion of the literature and Contributions

This research offers several contributions which yield a greater insight into the appreciation of the digital interactions from media users’ lived experiences.

Firstly, this research reveals that different means of exchange maintain social relationships and demonstrates that the gift practice is vital to the exploration of contemporary digital societies. Secondly, it identifies the digital media users’ motives to exchange and understands the inner social fabric of the codified digital community. Finally, this research becomes more aligned with technological capabilities, and shifts the discussion of gift-giving practice from a generous act to one of a self-interested act. The following section is divided into two sections of theoretical contributions: the first section evaluates the nature of relationships in the digital sphere, while the second discusses the ambivalence of digital gifts.

1) Evaluation of the nature of social relationships that are established by digital gift-giving practices:

This section of the conclusion is dedicated to present the nature of the social bonds that are created and maintained by the three-step process of giving-receiving-reciprocating in the digital community, as conceptualised by Mauss (1954). Using the Maussian framework to better understand and conceptualise digital exchanges has provided a thorough understanding of the mechanisms of exchange, the motives and outcomes of individuals' participation in digital communities. The Maussian framework draws upon an understanding of social exchanges on community bonds, cohesive exchanges, altruistic motives and reciprocal obligation. In a Maussian gift economy, interpersonal relationships and the status of the object within that relationship has a different set of dynamics than the commodity economy. The users of the digital environment reveal patterns of an economy close to market types of exchange, led on the premise of self-interest. Using the theoretical works from other theorists: Goffman (1959), Bourdieu (1977), Marx (1867) and Marcoux (2009) have enabled the study to provide a thorough understanding of the digital gift exchange, elaborate a critical stance, and assist the Maussian approach taken by this research. The study has made the case for using each scholar's ideas with the specific purpose of uncovering the dynamics of social exchange on Instagram. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach extended the understanding on the digital presentation of the users and the the digital culture, in which social validation and recognition lead individuals into the creation of a polished version of their lives. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of social capital has been valuable to understand the way digital technology creates a space for socialisation and forms of social capital. Digital users are performing their identity to attain status and thus acquire social capital through digital exchanges (post, comments, 'likes'). Additionally, Marx's (1867) work has been a philosophical anchor to guide the research discussion and help meet the research questions of this study. Applying Marx's theory of commodity fetishism to the digital media has allowed to encapsulate a form of labour and highlight the commodified aspect of digital interactions. Marcoux's (2009) innovative work helped the discussion to highlight the troublesome feelings of perpetual obligation that lead individuals to turn toward the market. It has enabled my research to widen the scope of knowledge on gift

economy and highlight the way digital users expressed a sense of indebtedness and emotional oppression from digital exchanges. Collectively, these scholars have considerably helped understand the role of digital media interactions on individuals.

a) market-gift economy with socio-economic users

In a capitalist economy, the distinctions between social and non-social relations, product commodities and social relationships are clear. The research provides evidence that the Instagram users objectify themselves in order to enrich their capital, hence cultivating the habit of editing and adjusting their posts. The users meticulously fabricate content and manage social relationships in a similar manner to market-based contracts.

In accordance with Mauss' vision of the gift, the digital exchanges are perpetuated back-and-forth between givers and receivers based on the obligation to sustain the cycle of giving and receiving. Digital gestures are polysemous, which means that in the digital sphere, interactions can be fostered by altruistic or self-interested motives (or both). Digital media users are therefore engaged in an economy, in which they maintain relationships and boost their social capital in a manner that comes at a cost. The exchanges become less about sharing spontaneous life-moments or experiences with others, but rather about sharing controlled snapshots and reciprocating calculated 'likes' to guarantee benefits in the future. This idea brings forward the the notion of deferred benefits (future 'likes') which contradicts the instant or the instant gratification of social exchanges. In other words, the photo-sharing app accentuates anticipated forms of exchange from which individuals expect greater rewards in the future. This phenomenon presents the economic system of the digital platform and recalls the "spirit of deferred gratification", which is a distinction of capitalism (Ellis, 2015:207). Although the digital tools provide new environment and context to communicate, the ancient patterns of social exchanges are appropriate and adequate to understand social relationships. The platform reflects the obsessive behaviour of media users to ensure reciprocal and balanced exchanges. The users conform to the codes and *Insta-rules* of the community, in order to feel accepted and be *Insta-gratified*. The motives to give and receive therefore reveal the complexity of digital exchanges and the meanings of digital interactions. Digital exchanges reveal a community relying on social contracts to achieve benefits from each

side (both givers and receivers). The platform therefore pushes *Homo sociologicus* towards *Homo oeconomicus*, in which social contracts and debts constitute the core elements of the exchange. As Mauss predicted (1954), *Homo oeconomicus* is present in the modern societies. The findings provide evidence that the acts of posting, ‘liking’ or commenting can be a gesture of generosity as much as it can be an act of enslavement, whereby the receiver is pressurised to recognise the gift. This is important to highlight as it shows that gift-giving practice does not provide an escape from the commodifying logic of capitalist exchange, and leads instead towards social indebtedness. This thesis indicates that the digital gift economy resembles a social contract-based system. Although gift-giving is often treated as a valorised alternative to commodity exchange and is praised for its humanisation of relationships, a ‘dark side’ was perceptible in digital communities when users felt indebted and lonely.

#### b) Digital fetishism and labour of social exchanges

Marx’s (1867) critique of the commodity is an essential foundation of the socio-economic analysis of the capitalist mode of production. Drawing from Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism (1867), I applied this to the current social media culture in order to further illuminate the nature of the digital exchanges between the media users, and analyse the meanings attached to digital posts, ‘likes’ and comments. The results show that media users control their mediated sociality by sharing improved representations of themselves through food-related posts. These intangible exchanges become fetishised collections, comparable to the essential condition of commodity fetishism.

In this way, it is relevant to consider digital posts as a display of improved lifestyles and ameliorated experiences that provide social recognition, belonging, and validation, and thus take on a fetishistic character. This insight contributes to extend our understanding of the digital gestures as objects of commodity fetish where the digital interactions take on a trade value. Digital exchanges are performed and fabricated labour that structures the social digital community. Hence, the media users are alienated from their labour-products as commodities; they engage in sharing-commenting-liking to maintain their social relationships that become relations between things, and where the market exchange of commodities takes on the character of social relations. Typically, the purpose of posting is to enable users to manage their identities and selves. This is a clear transition

to Goffman's (1959) notion of impression management, which has helped to guide this research and conclude that Instagram is an evolved form of the fetish. In the same vein as previous work (Burns, 2014; Gentile *et al.* 2012; Moon *et al.* 2016; Lampel and Bhalla, 2007) the study reveals that individuals are able to manage identity on social media; the media users are extremely cautious in what they disclose about themselves and how they act in the digital sphere. It is an economy where digital exchanges can be fabricated, pictures can be staged, and reciprocal actions can be anticipated, leaving little room for spontaneous and authentic exchanges. This means that individuals are highly skilled market actors with a keen sense of the promotional capacity of the moments in their lives, with skills at framing those moments as desirable, and with the capacity to monitor performance.

Value is extracted from the commodified human experience mediated by the digital labour of posting, 'liking' and commenting. The performant labour of these intangible digital commodities, as exchanged within social media networks, follows an economic logic. The users devote their attention to posting pictures and 'liking' other users' content to ensure that the law of reciprocity is established. Social relations are dependent on digital 'likes' to express support and appreciation (Tong and Walther, 2011; Tobin *et al.* 2017) while users' social validation is dependent on the quality of their posts. The labour of digital exchanges presents therefore forms of utilitarian motives. In accordance with Bourdieu's argument, the Instagram economy follows a system in which "the interested calculation which is never absent from the most generous exchange can be more and more openly revealed" (1977:173). Consequentially, on Instagram, the relationships between individuals can be presented as relations between objects. The exchanges are similar to contract-based exchanges where digital gestures can be translated into fetishistic commodities. The digital media platform showcases social exchanges that can be perceived as labour commodities that alienate individuals.

## 2) [The ambivalence of digital gifts](#)

The digital gift itself combines several benefits and disadvantages at once. Perhaps this idea can be linked back to the ambiguity of the etymology of the word 'gift', which, in Germanic, assumes a double meaning of either 'present' or 'poison'. This pronounced

ambiguity of the word ‘gift’ describes a practice of contrast. Different forms of obligations and responsibilities emerged from the digital gift economy, which leads individuals to experience feelings of social pressure, indebtedness and loneliness.

Gifts are viewed as belonging to an economy of uncertainty, an act of public morality rather than private calculation. These transactions evidence the nature of the relationship as ‘tie-signs’ (Goffman, 1959). The exchange of gifts confirms that the media users’ relationships are anchored within a framework of mutual recognition. In line with Mauss’ idea, there is no free gift, a gift comes with obligation characterised by a moral act rather than calculation. This idea is echoed in the digital economy of Instagram, in which gifts are reciprocal acts and maintain order between individuals. Strategic interactions maintain bonds and shed light on an economy of debts and the notion of social recognition. The digital exchanges are embedded in a culture defined by the services and favours that demonstrate the social expectations and consequences created by the members of the community. In the same vein as Caillé (2005) on the hybrid nature of the gift as lying between freedom and obligation, Instagram can be considered a platform shaped by self-interest- and sympathy-related motives, where the obligation to give is paradoxically intertwined with the obligation to be free by recognising others and consequently obliging others to do the same. In this mutual recognition process, calculative impersonal self- interest tendencies are often noticeable.

a) [From wired to marginalised](#)

This study provides compelling evidence that the digitally mediated forms of exchange present an economy that is highly ambiguous. The media users are simultaneously together and apart, maintaining relationships based on mechanical exchanges and edited experiences. It can be argued that Instagram both strengthens and undermines the social bonds between individuals. The platform gives the opportunity for its users to link to each other, share their lives and learn about others; however, these exchanges are highly controlled, altered, orchestrated, and for some insincere. Although the users can maintain bonds, the research shows that digital interactions can easily be sources of anxiety and



loneliness. The study reveals that digital interactions can cause anxiety and impact on the users' psychological well-being. Findings prove that users can feel jealous and unhappy after being confronted with certain interactions or pictures. The isolation and loneliness felt by some media users are closely linked with their objectified position in the digital community. Hence, the users can engage in 'stalking' activities (passive observation) and develop feelings of insecurity which result in an increased relative deprivation. Ultimately, the most vulnerable users delete their post when the 'gap' is too important and thus are unable to contribute, taking the position of *rubbish men/ women*. If the media users are unable to reciprocate, they can thus easily be marginalised, losing *mana* and social capital.

Furthermore, this thesis reveals deeper social complications when media users delete their content to free themselves from the tensions associated with gift-giving exchanges. The digital media can therefore make media users lonely; as they try to escape the Instagram reciprocal norms, by either deleting their contributions or 'stalking' others' contributions. The research results concur with Marcoux's (2009) analysis of offline social exchanges and gift-practices, in which he highlights that individuals escape the gift economy and move toward commodity exchange as a preferable form of economic distribution. The use of digital media can have a harmful impact on individuals (feelings of envy, jealousy, loneliness, frustration), leading them to delete their contribution, leave the community or reduce their use of the platform. The findings thus signal that gift-giving is double-sided; users frequently perceive the platform as a useful way to maintain relationships and boost their own capital, however, it can be a stressful environment which may, in the long-run, endanger the relationship's sustainability and their own wellbeing. It seems that the digital platform impacts relationships growth and sustainability, either positively by strengthening bonds, or negatively by weakening bonds and creating vulnerable ties.

Furthermore, the analysis of the data shows that the media users simultaneously experienced feelings of togetherness and of loneliness through their digital participation, a contradiction from which the terminology *Insta-paradox* derives all its meaning. Addressing the Instagram paradox, the present study contributes to past research by extending the field on the Internet paradox (Kraut *et al.* 1998). Behind cost-free exchanges, emojis, red heart 'likes', etc., is a reality of self-concern and desire to fit into

the socially expected mould of Instagram. The feelings of loneliness, anxiety and indebtedness present in the digital sphere contradict the initial purpose of the digital community's original intention to provide social support, maintain bonds and reach hundreds of people at once (Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007; Seidman, 2013; Mantymaki and Islam, 2016).

Finally, my recognition of the paradoxical effect of gift-giving in the digital platform is consistent with a contemporary body of the literature on the paradoxes and contradictory effects of SNSs (Valenzuela *et al.* 2009; Krasnova *et al.* 2013; Tandoc *et al.*, 2015). The gift economy shows an ambiguous social system that combines simultaneously being both together and apart. There is a reinforcement through digital togetherness, but there is also a palpable social stratification. There exist forms of violence taking place within the gift economy where individuals tend to use symbols against others to state their power, gain social capital and gratification. This idea contributes to a broader understanding and conceptualisation of reciprocal exchanges and the manifestation of symbolic violence: Instagram entangles users in social obligations and social pressure to reciprocate which is a symbolic violence. The notion of symbolic violence is presented by Bourdieu (1997) as the mechanism of establishing relations of domination. The reciprocal exchanges on Instagram can be invisible manifestations of symbolic violence as a mode of domination which acts upon media users. The symbolic violence can be presented as embedded in the dynamics of reciprocal exchanges on the digital platform which shapes social experiences. This thesis argues that posting, 'liking' and commenting can be acts of generosity as well as taking the forms of enslavement. I argue that exchanges are fetishised collections of improved and controlled contents. Individuals are highly skilled calculating actors trapped in the tyranny of 'liking' that ultimately reveals a fake sense of closeness. Transactions are based on generosity but also on the basis of the economy of recognition, where reciprocal exchanges are expected and required to maintain bonds.

This study confronts some of the dynamics that are taking place and reveals that the gift economy presents the illusion that things are in neat boxes, when in reality, individuals feel indebted and want to escape an economy of marginalisation that alienates them.

### b) The Tyranny of the ‘likes’

The study extends the field of research on the ‘dark side’ of the gift economy (Marcoux, 2009) and indicates that individuals experience feelings of indebtedness in the digital platform. The research concludes by highlighting the difficulty of receiving gifts, but also uncovers the struggle to deal with the pressure to reciprocate to others’ favours.

The digital involvement has been analysed in this study in terms of its ability to boost social exchanges and social capital. The exchanges, although being online, do bring a sense of belonging and acceptance towards a social community. Nevertheless, there is a palpable bitter taste underlying this economy in which individuals constantly feel pressured to reciprocate, and give back. Digital users have indeed shed light on a range of *Insta-rules* that reveal the less appealing outcomes of exchanging in this sphere. The digital gift, similar to the archaic gift, is, “apparently free and gratuitous, nevertheless constrained and self-interested” (Mauss, 1954:4). To return a gift (via ‘likes’ or comments) perpetuates the relationship between users; the failure to return a gift may damage the relationship and the promise of any future gifts. The notion of debt has been a prevalent topic of the digital exchanges and is the result of social tensions in the digital sphere. The study confirms the idea that giving too much, too little, or too late can strain a relationship to the point of dissolution (Sherry, 1983). The study identifies the codes and rules of the Instagram community to fully embrace the benefits of gifting. For instance, ‘liking’ and commenting processes mirror the relationship status and the willingness to invest in relationships (Tong and Walther, 2011). Not acknowledging a gift by “liking” or commenting is a form of rejection, and is perceived as a form of selfish act. I also introduce the idea that users need to be socially validated, therefore they heavily depend on reciprocal exchanges from both weak and strong ties. These little gestures, although not tangible, are paramount to the users’ social capital. In the digital sphere, there is a common thought that once individuals obtain something from someone, individuals need to reciprocate. Consciously, the thought of reciprocity triggers individuals to return the favour as an escape from guilt and debt. The study confirms the idea that users are expected to reciprocate to their strong bonds’ exchanges to ensure social cohesion. My findings provide empirical evidence that strong ties require commitment and attention, while weak ties require less responsibility and thus reduce the

pressure of reciprocity (Granovetter, 1983). Since little is known about social relationships that are maintained through the use of digital tools, this thesis has applied the lens of digital exchange to explore the way(s) in which relationships are maintained and social capital boosted in social media.

This research contributes to the digital consumer research field and has identified that the platform is useful for individuals to maintain their relationships with family, friends and acquaintances under certain conditions. This thesis examines different situations pertaining to social interactions within the digital community, and theorises that relationships can be maintained superficially by unspontaneous ‘likes’, posts or comments. The empirical findings suggest that media users become trapped in the tyranny of accumulating ‘likes’ as opposed to few qualitative, genuine exchanges. This research concurs with the traditional views developed by Kraut *et al.* (1998) concerning online relationships, which were described as relatively weak. The prospects of the social media platform have made relationships shallower, in which an economy of ‘wannabe cool posts’; heart shaped ‘likes’ and comments sustain social exchanges. It seems difficult to claim that digital interactions reflect genuine exchanges since both exchanges and contents can be staged, anticipated and performed. This discovery thus leads one to question the quality of the bonds maintained by reciprocal exchanges in the media. Although individuals use digital tools to interact easily, to enjoy a nomadic communication (Creeber and Martin, 2009); this thesis outlines the circulation self-interested interactions, that present a fake vicious appreciation of disguised gifts. Concordant with the assumption that media users are calculating actors, they perform strategies to solicit a return-action. The media users focus on the display of a perfect self and become obsessed by the short-term signals (*Insta-gratification*: ‘likes’, comments) that gives them a false sense of social validation and false sense of closeness, which may lead them to loneliness and dissatisfaction. Although the patterns of commodification cause the actors to develop calculative agencies that present a *Homo oeconomicus* logic, it is wrong to generalise such calculated exchanges to all exchange situations that occur in the digital platform. Such a self-interest perspective does not take into account the digital exchange that are altruistic and genuine.

In the economy of recognition, posting content takes the form of a commodity that leads users to be interested in what others provide them. It is the hegemony of an economy of

rationality where individuals maximise the benefits of their involvement. This system encourages the achievement of self-interested matters where the practice of calculation is common. Media users value things instead of relationships and they use strategies to collect rewards and increase their social capital. Their labour is commodified in an individualistic hierarchical society. In the economy of recognition, users need to put effort into sociability and the expenditure of time and energy to acquire and maintain their capital. This economy promotes a fake sense of closeness, as individuals are entrapped and become victims of their own socially invalidated posts. Instagram supports an economy of recognition as posts are edited and moulded into a social system where the users are the products. Their strategic and rational motives denote their desire for social capital, social inclusion and acceptance. The need for constant support and approval is palpable once the labour of appearance is being fabricated in a seemingly effortless manner. These orchestrated exchanges demonstrate the ongoing frontstage that lead media users to fit social moulds. The aim of the users is to ensure they provide a riposte as this signifies a certain 'equality' in honour. The mechanical exchanges ensure social cohesion.

Instagram shapes social culture through captured moments, experiences, 'likes' and comments, that affect individuals in both positive and negative ways. Instagram enables individuals to constantly update and share content with their friends with little effort, but with a risk of insincerity. The Instagram platform reveals that qualities of deep and emotional relationships are veiled by a convenience/insincerity tension.

Instagram has an impact on the users' social lives and means of communication that can lead them to misconceptions about themselves and their relationships with others. Individuals tend to post experience to collect 'likes' and comments, however, it needs to be 'cool', 'stylish', 'trendy', where aestheticism comes first. This evidences how digital interactions rely on an exhaustive exhibitionism of a new genre. The implications of such findings show that individuals may get caught up in vicarious experiencing of other users' lives at the expense of experiencing their own lives. Individuals creep and stalk each other while using filters to improved their presentations. The lunar environment in which these interactions take place, displays superficial contents that can be edited. Users easily turn into their device in order to fulfil a social need of instant gratification and sense of belonging.

Instagram offers essential material to sociology and anthropology, nonetheless with some theoretical and methodological issues. Regarding the theoretical issue, a scarcity of empirical research being conducted on Instagram is immediately noticeable, as the majority of related studies have focussed on the niche phenomenon of selfies (Manovich, 2016). However, selfie posters are only a portion of Instagram users, hence this research contributes to new theories and approaches aimed at unlocking the full socio-anthropological potential of Instagram. By exploring food posts, this research has allowed a deep exploration of everyday practices and social exchanges to be undertaken through the medium of this platform. This research contributes to the opening of new lines of research into the field of Instagram studies from a rich methodological perspective that combined interviews, netnography and the use of photo-elicitation exercises.

One of the main contributions of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)-type research has been to highlight how seemingly rational, economic, and individualised consumption practices are underpinned by fundamentally cultural, social and political processes, and that it is these dimensions of material culture that give both consumption and markets their significance, meaning and value. No matter how much consumer societies appear to adapt, change and morph, whether through technology or ethnic change, these underlying processes of obligation, duty, shame, social cohesion and social recognition re-emerge in new, contemporary forms. This is the real legacy of Mauss (1954) for consumer research, that the idea that consumption is fundamentally about social relations rather than, say, ‘material needs’ or ‘want satisfaction’. Mauss’ insights (1954) do of course date, but I feel that they nevertheless retain an important value to consumer research today. My contribution is to show how these core cultural processes re-emerge or are reconstituted within digital culture. Even though the social life and cultural practices in Polynesia are so different to modern Western capitalism, my research shows that Mauss (1954) would recognise the similarities that I show in my data – I think a Polynesian might as well.

This section aims to conclude the study by answering each of the research question with proper and relevant information findings.

## RQ 1- How the experience of involvement in the digital community form gift exchange practices?

Being involved in the Instagram platform triggers individuals to communicate and exchange instantaneously with other users. According to the findings, participating to the platform allow media users to be involved in others users' everyday life. This digital participation enabled the users to post, comment and 'like', which foster interactions of giving and returning. Mauss' three-step process (giving-receiving-reciprocating) echoes therefore in the digital context, where individuals are able to produce and enact forms of social life. Although the digital technology differs from the nature of ceremonial and market exchanges in pre-modern societies, this thesis argues that, the key sociological concept of reciprocity runs the dynamics of the visual-based interactions on Instagram. This thesis demonstrates that on Instagram, value becomes associated with particular objects of exchange that trigger reciprocity. A digital post thus resembles as a gift as it carries a symbolic meaning, that is manifested to the recipient. The research identifies particular forms of social obligations and responsibilities involved with social exchanges that further demonstrate gift-giving qualities inherent in the digital community. By meeting or avoiding these obligations, the social fabric between media users is created, maintained or damaged.

Food serves as a medium of exchange which ultimately allows Instagram to be a platform of gift- giving practice. By exploring digital contents, the research has unveiled and understood the culture and the social interactions taking place in the Instagram community. This research presents how social affordances afford for social structures and create forms of social practices by both enabling and constraining sociality in certain ways. The study concludes that posting a picture, 'liking' a picture or writing a comment under a post participate to create a social environment that gather users together while encouraging social exchanges. Although digital media shapes different behaviour, I believe Mauss' view provides a conceptually sophisticated, adequate and reality congruent account of the gift exchange practices. This research proves that Mauss' theoretical framework can be applied in different setting and time scale to interpret social patterns. The exploration of media users' involvement on Instagram has contributed to encode social events, emotions, narratives and discourses that offered a glimpse into individuals' everyday habits, private moments, front and back stage when interacting

with each other. The core cultural process has been explored and the research draws a parallel between online and offline interactions that are ultimately enmeshed. Following the pioneer thoughts elaborated by Mauss on gift exchange, this research puts forward the digital ‘get-together’ nature of Instagram that is being compared to a *potlatch*, presenting the nature of the exchanges in the digital community.

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RQ2- What do digital interactions provide to the media users’ sociality? Are the dynamics of exchanges in the digital community improving social relationships and boosting social capital?

The research concludes that reciprocity is a key concept to understand social patterns of the digital community of Instagram. Although the properties of the digital technology create different social practices, this thesis determines that the concept of reciprocity is crucial to understand media users’ involvement in the digital media. The findings show that media users objectify their food posts through rituals of exchange, which enable them to enrich their social capital. The analysis of the forms of exchanges have identified the social rewards that are gained, and they revealed the social obligations that are enforced on Instagram. The findings highlight that the digital gestures (i.e. posting, commenting and ‘liking’) act as social currencies that reinforce social bonds. The study presents the power of these contributions to maximise the media users’ social participation, connectedness, and well-being. The social and technical affordances of Instagram enable individuals to invest in and extract social resources from their involvement in the platform. These resources can be captured by the social capital concept, which encompasses the assets embedded in the users’ digital reciprocal exchanges. The research presented the scope of the posts, ‘likes’, and comments as a way to enrich individuals’ social capital. Not only have ‘likes’ been introduced as a form of currency to express gratitude, but they also serve as form of acknowledgement to reinforce social bonds. Instagram creates an environment of meaningful communicative exchanges, that enable users to create value and earn social recognition which stimulates their sense of



belonging. Particular attention is given to the ‘likes’, identified as metrical units that afford an infrastructure of mutual recognition and embody potential social capital benefits. One can understand the hierarchical structure of the platform through the conceptualisation of a digital *potlatch*, which provides the means for individuals to harvest social status. The findings highlight the importance of actively managing, grooming, and maintaining one’s network, suggesting that social capital is developed through small but meaningful effort on the part of users. As a result, they engage in ‘liking’ other users’ posts, congratulating, and reciprocating fast digital gestures. There is a risk that social capital might impose constraints that under some circumstances can outweigh the benefits of reciprocal exchanges on the media users’ sociality. Media users are caught in a reputation contest, from which a false sense of connectedness can be palpable. The paradox of Instagram reveals that the platform establishes and sustains a large number of ties but also threatens them. It also showcases users’ quest for social gratification, that can lead individuals to feel ignored or neglected if the reciprocal exchanges are symmetrical. Similarly to Mauss’ ceremonial gift exchanges, individuals have demonstrated intention to produce and nurture bonds on Instagram. The study presents the competitiveness of gifting online in which individuals compete for recognition and social capital. Instagram thus acts as a built-in reward system where individuals celebrate abundance echoed by the sophisticated nature of the online posts.

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RQ3 -Are forms of obligation, or responsibility associated with participating (posting, commenting, ‘liking’) in the digital media platform? Is social indebtedness resulting from being involved on Instagram?

This study confirms that reciprocity is a socially expected behaviour in the community of Instagram. Giving and receiving form social contracts and debts that are crucial for the balance the media users’ relationships and well-being. The findings underline the strong desire to maintain symmetrical relationships and reciprocate back and forth (taking turns) to avoid being neglected, ignored or alienated from the social sphere. The research reveals the patterns of loneliness and false sense of closeness threatening the relationships’

sustainability both online and offline. Media users feel therefore indebted to give back to honour their relationships to prove their willingness to invest in a relationship. The findings present that individuals feel pressured to return social gestures in the expected chronology of events (respect the Instagram etiquette which to reciprocate first before giving back) and reply in the form of ‘liking’ or commenting as fast as they possibly can.

The act of posting a content or liking one reveals a sign of power from which hierarchical structures can be subverted. The dominant act of exchanging contents online empowers the users while demonstrating the fragility of power hierarchies. The research presents the obligation marker associated with online posting, social rules are expected by both givers and receivers. The nature of the ceremonial exchange encourages an invitation to contribute through unspoken contracts. The findings demonstrate that the different forms of return are dependent on the affiliations and the exchanges are incidental to the value of the relationships. Detrimental effects (anxiety, rivalry, misunderstanding, confusions, indebtedness, asymmetrical exchange) limit the media users’ participation leading them to escape to free themselves from the constraint of social norms. The research highlights the struggles of the unpaid economy, in which users tend to anticipate reciprocity in order to avoid debt feeling and free themselves from the pressure to reciprocate. This study highlights that the digital social practices of exchanges bear similitudes with the market system and highlights the utilitarian perspectives of the users to produce material values. This has been evidenced by lack of genuine exchange, led by the pressure to conform to the Insta-rules. This pressure is palpable in the community of Instagram users, which leads individuals to cease their participation. It is an economy of recognition that leads individuals to undertake the constant pursuit of social validation. This economy is driven by gifts that can be perceived as a form of aggression, as a gain of profit or a selfless act of generosity. It is essential to raise the point that the economy of recognition can have negative impacts on individuals’ relationships, both online and offline. The economy unveils the paradox of the short-term dopamine illusion of connectedness. Gifts are given to humiliate, challenge and obligate others. The Instagram economy illustrates the implication of gifts in a competitive system is generative of social inequalities.

#### Limitations:

Although the qualitative research methods of this research were appropriate for obtaining the media users' thoughts and experiences, both netnography and personal interviews have limitations. However, the multi-method approach has minimised any risks of inaccuracy and inconsistency.

Additionally, my sample included participants from 20 to 32 years old, mainly students and early career workers, which may reduce the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, young individuals are an appropriate group to study Instagram social exchanges as they have been raised with Instagram and can be viewed as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). Although the gender of the participants was not a prominent factor in this analysis, having a more balanced distribution may be considered an ideal in analysing results. A balance of gender within the research and incorporation of more male-identified Instagram users may produce different results. Furthermore, although the sample in this research included participants from different geographical areas and socio-economic backgrounds, the number of participants was limited. Using a larger sample of participants may have implications for my research findings.

Finally, another important limitation that may have influenced the research findings is the self-report data. As I have gathered data based on interview narratives, this data may reflect several potential sources of bias that should be noted as limitations. For instance, social desirability, selective memory and exaggeration; however, the media users' netnographic data did not significantly differ from the self-report data of the interviews I conducted.

### Future research:

In a time when digital media platforms are increasingly dominant in people's social lives, this thesis provides valuable insight into individuals' communication means and exchange. Continued research into the dynamics of social networking sites is critical to help researchers understand the consequences of digital tools on society's exchange practices.

Undoubtedly, future research will need to explore the connection between digital media, social capital and indebtedness further. These findings pave the way for future research

to explore individuals' subjective experiences when using the various forms of social media. Due to the time limit and the scale of the study, the evidence gathered in this thesis may only have captured the 'tip of the iceberg'. It is important to undertake further research to measure the extent to which digital exchange is of benefit to the sociality of its users on other social media platforms. As a proposal for future research, it would be interesting to enquire into another social media platform, such as Snapchat, created in 2011, on which there is limited research. This platform has different features than Instagram, where the users send 'snaps' to select recipients, but which are then deleted after a specified amount of time. Since a Snapchat user usually adds a user with whom he/she already shares a connection in real life (via phone number or email), it can be argued that individuals using this app share closer relationships with their friends (Duggan, 2013). It would be interesting to explore the patterns of social exchanges and whether users feel indebted or express feelings of anxiety when using this social app. As the majority of the content being shared on Snapchat is ephemeral, it is an intimate platform, so it would therefore be interesting to assess the notion of social capital (as relationships are more likely to be with close friends and family members). This research has put forward how the level of involvement is different with regards to weak versus strong bonds. It would therefore be interesting to explore the notion of indebtedness in a community where the majority of exchange is with strong connections, such as on Snapchat. Consequently, as the exchanges are ephemeral, it could be highly compelling to explore the notion of impression management. For example, it would be interesting if future studies included content analysis of what individuals share on Snapchat and for what purposes.

Another way to approach the topic might be to conduct a comparative study of Instagram users with Snapchat users or Facebook users. It would be interesting to compare the dynamics of exchange on these different platforms. This could indicate that the dynamics of exchange differ from one platform to another depending on the features available on the platform. Further research is needed to determine the unique consequences of the use of Instagram in comparison to older and newer social platforms.

As Instagram creates openings for further visual research, it would be appropriate to conduct a longitudinal study with a larger sample of informants. The Instagram app might be interesting to make enquires about self-presentation. The "Instagram life versus

reality” trend is a current debate in popular culture, where users’ realities often clash with their Instagram pictures. It is possible that my findings pave the way for the development of the ideas of idealised digital lifestyle or identity performance. This data might provide key insight for researchers looking to learn more about the dichotomy that exists in the way individuals present themselves in contemporary digital society.

I would suggest future research to use this study in order to further explore the link between digital exchanges and the quality of the relationships produced offline. The digital interactions are not completely separated from offline social relationships. Digital participation can impact both positively or negatively on the user’s online-offline social contexts.

## [Appendix](#)

Theoretical Propositions	Empirical study
<b>Chapter 1:</b> Problem statement and purpose Research objectives	<b>Chapter 3:</b> Research Methodology and Design Discussion of research strategy

Framework of research Structure of thesis	Selection of research Methods
<b>Chapter 2:</b> Literature review Definitions of theories Empirical studies	<b>Chapter: 4-5-6-7:</b> Findings Conceptual analysis

Appendix 1 Thesis structure



<b>Chapter 8:</b> Conclusion, Contribution, Limitation and Suggestion for future studies
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Name	Age	Occupation	Gender	Nationality	Followers
Joe	24	Engineering student	Male	British-Jamaican	430
Hélène	24	Marketing consultant	Female	French	310
Bernadette	27	Salesperson	Female	British-Irish	240
Sherine	21	Medical student	Female	German	920
Pei	29	Law graduate	Female	Singaporean	350
Kevin	26	Personal trainer	Male	French	780
Eric	25	Project manager	Male	French-British	420
Tatiana	25	Fashion sales manager	Female	French	770
Tanya	20	Law student	Female	Ukrainian	600

Jane	22	Business student	Female	British	880
Susan	22	Art student	Female	British	280
Tarek	32	engineer	Male	Tunisian	300
Marie	23	Linguistics student	Female	French	550
Anya	21	Art student	Female	Canadian	800
Andrew	23	Architect student	male	Canadian	650

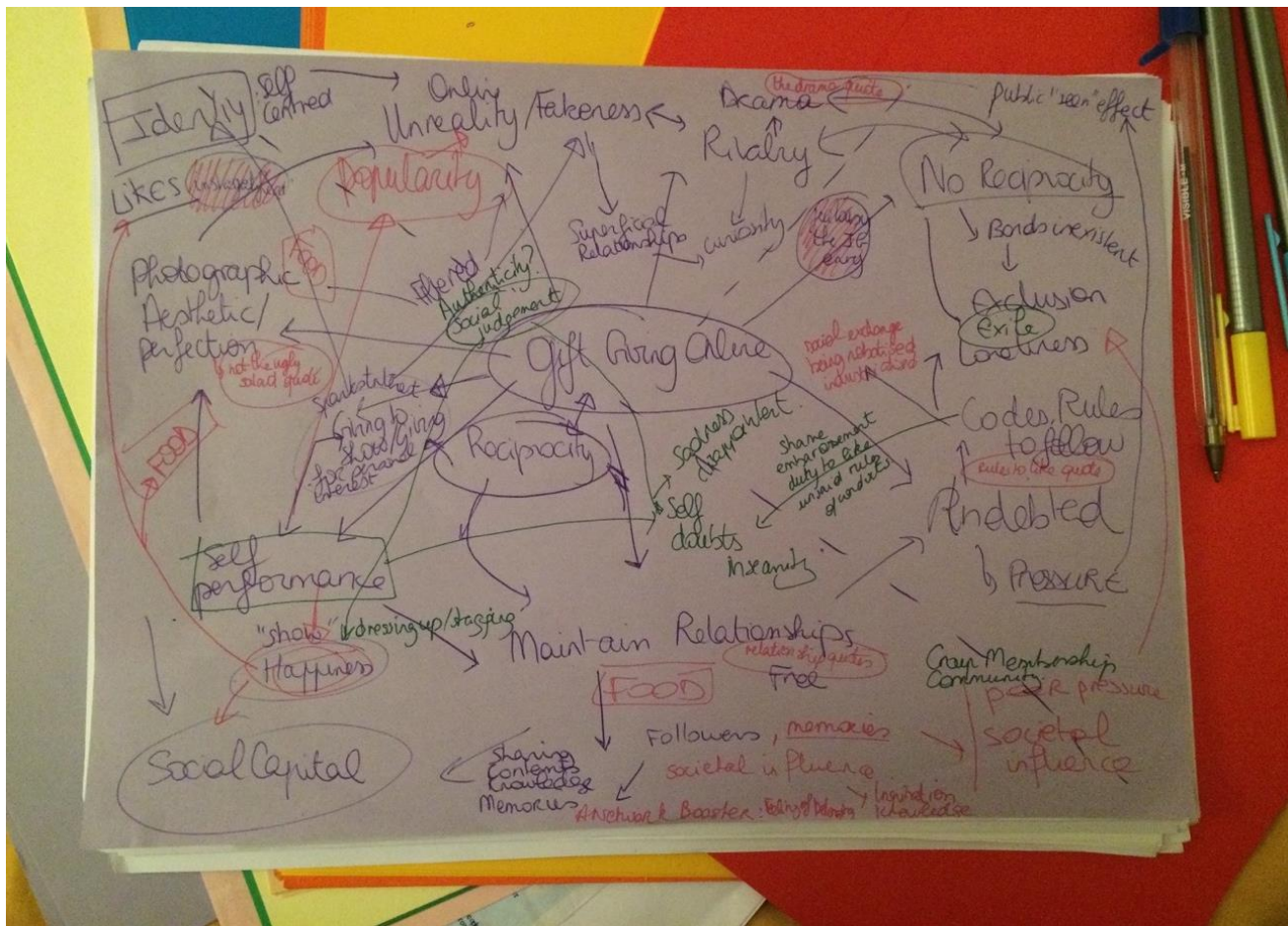
Appendix 2: Table of theme and theoretical framework

Theoretical framework	Empirical findings
Threefold process: Giving-Receiving-Reciprocating Social cohesion- maintenance of bonds (Mauss, 1954)	Posting-‘liking’-commenting: Insta-game Social cohesion, Economy of recognition, mutual recognition
Impression management (Goffman, 1959)	Visual media encouraged display of self Insta potlatch- digital self-objectification
Commodity fetishism (Marx, 1849)	Posts are commodities- Users are fetishised
Obligation to return (Mauss, 1954)	Social expectation to ‘like’- Insta rules
Balanced reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972)	Economy of recognition- mutual recognition
Indebtedness- Escape of the gift economy (Marcoux, 2009)	Debts- Escape by deletion of content.
Facebook Paradox (Kraut et al, 1992) Paradox of social media (Chen and Lee, 2013; Donath and boyd, 2004; Ellison et al, 2007; Tandoc et al., 2015)	Insta-Paradox- bonds damaged and weak Superficial ties-fake disguised gifts to avoid debts and drama Social anxiety

Loneliness (Turkle, 2011); (Marx, 1849) Envy, Dissatisfaction (Stapleton et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2002; Krau et al, 2002; Chou and Edge, 2002); (Kross et al., 2013)	Digital marginalisation- alienation Misunderstanding, jealousy, envy, 'Instagram perfect lifestyle'
Social capital (Bourdieu, 1986); Social rewards and gratification on SNSs Rheingold, 1993; Hars and Ou, 2002; Tong and Walther, 2011; Cheikh-Ammar and Barki, 2014; Tobin et al., 2014; Lee and Lee, 2017	Social validation, gratification, social rewards, 'Likes', peer recognition
Potlatch, Moka, Rubbish Man, Big Man (Mauss, 1954)	Prestige, social status, 'Likes', filters, contributing and avoiding the 'gap'
Social media use linked with relationship maintenance (Donath and Boyd, 2004; Valenzuela et al., 2009)	Maintain bonds beyond geographical barriers Social cohesion
Weak/Strong Bonds (Granovetter, 1973)	Weak bonds are vulnerable Maintain strong bonds and relationships

Appendix 3: Table of theme and theoretical framework





Appendix 4: Analysis step- Brainstorming diagram example

8 encourages exchange!

Bonds

Rule of Strong Bonds

Yeh because I can go and talk to them especially if they went to Disney, I might feel more motivated to messaged them ask 'how was your trip to Disney world'. Because for people who live far away it can maintain and help to keep it going.

relationship Main brance  
Bonds & friendships maintained over geographical distance.

So then, do you actually like all your friends picture?

All my close friends. yes. → Friends Vs Acquaintances.  
Strong Vs Weak.  
↳ A social rule to 'like'.

What if the picture is not that good?

I would still like it. if I find out that I go onto their page and I didn't like a single picture I would start going through all their picture, and like all their pictures. Like a liking streak.

↳ Like ↳ Social expectations on IG → proof of friendship  
→ 'liking' is meaningful

Why?

Because I don't know it's just .. its like an obligation you have on the Instagram community...

If you are considered like one of my best friends. I would like all your posts. its like the unset rule, you have to do this. you have to like them. Like if I post a picture and see that my close friend didn't like it I would be like 'why didn't you like my picture' ... Its just a little thing you know... Like I would notice definitely who didn't like it.

→ ppl who don't are not friendly worth?

Social pressure -

Commenting takes a lot though for me to do ... Like you have to be a really really good friend or close family members for me to comment on your picture.

→ commenting Vs Liking  
Commitment is different!

so commenting means you have an even closer relationship..?

Bonds are maintained by those digital gestures.

Yes.. yes.. So I think in my order it would go: liking posts (just for absolutely no reasons, just because you are my friend), commenting on their posts (because you are one of my best friends and I see as being friends for our entire life).

↳ Liking Vs Commenting

I feel like online with my close friends, online is just that.. we are not going to have a 'full' conversation online. For example like if my close friend put up a picture of a guy she is dating, online I would double tap that and comment like 'oh so cute' or something stupid like this. but like i'm not gonna comment and be like 'how the relationship going, how is his

↳ Rules, codes with certain friends. Inside jokes are fine but nothing more.

Appendix 5: Coding Example 1



Ok, so it is just because when people can see then you have to play a role?

Yes I have to put on another face or another part of me. *staged - another side of herself when there is an audience*

So why do you actually do this? Why not just stop following the person?

Yes I think its all social pressure.. because nowadays it's hard to find privacy so you can't do anything without having someone be like 'what is happening between you guys'. So to avoid that conversation, I'm just like let's follow each other and keep you there.. *social pressure*

Is this curiosity? *social drama*

People are VERY VERY curious on social media... curious to the point that people would go to you followers and your pictures, and would see (who likes) your pictures. So if I have a crush and I know we have mutual friends, and I would go to that mutual friend's picture, and I would see if my crush liked her pictures. *Obligation - social pressure on her -> she has to follow to avoid conversation*

Oh wow.. Okay you can literally 'spy' on people's actions then.. *stalking activity*

For you is there a difference between online and offline relationship? *amplification - catastrophic -> everywhere*

No.. with my friends no, with acquaintances yes. So sometimes with acquaintances of mine, I have to put on a show. And be like 'oh you look gorgeous' and then in reality I would probably not talk to them... With my friends, no we act the same way we do on Insta direct or Instagram that we do in reality. I think mostly because most of my posts on my Instagram are things that my friends feel connected... about my lifestyle, friends.. *Acting with certain other followers*

Or its things when I am with them, like 'hey throwback to that time when I was with this person or this one'...

We also make fun of each other just as much as we do on Instagram or in real life.

So you said that on Instagram you would comment 'oh you look fabulous' but in reality you wouldn't comment, why that? Why online you would do it? *the 'checking' creeping stalking pattern*

Because more people can see online then they can see it reality. *A platform of the Visual Stalking*

So you do it because people can see what you do?

Yes so like.. for instance you have a café: and there is an online café. All the people that are online that you follow are in one place and all the people that you follow are in another place. Café one online. Café two offline. In the online café everyone can see what you are up to, in offline everyone is onto their own thing, so they can't see what they are up to. *Obligation*

So when I am online and I comment on one of my friend or acquaintances' pictures, all the followers can see it, so they will be like 'okay this girl likes this picture', 700 people would be like 'what is she saying?'. In reality, guarantee you that all 700 of these people could care less because everyone is so busy in their own life. *the mask of exchange the expect to reciprocate because online a space of observers*

Appendix 6: Coding Example 2

## Interview Guide:

### ***WARM UP***

Could you please present yourself and describe the relation you have with food.

Could you please give me culinary references you like? Could you please give me the names of the applications you use?

### **Understand the interviewees's perceptions of the digital communities**

What do you think about the digital exchanges between you and other users?

How would you describe the relationship you have with you followers?

Do you consider online interactions as part of your social life habits?

Do you think that participating online is part of today's way of socialising?

### **Explore the interviewees participation in the food digital media**

How would you define the food you post in your digital account? (type, identification)

Would you say that the food related content that you post, share or create reflect your personality?

Can you explain further what makes you post, comment, 'like' a content in the community?

How do you feel exactly when another community member replies to a content you posted? or is in contact with you?

What do you obtain from a picture hitting the 'likes' records and comments on your profile page?

## **Examine the dark-side of the digital communities in a food related environment**

Do you consider your participation in the media as part of your leisure time?

Do you share personal content with your community?

What is the feeling you get when no one likes your post? or no one comments?

Do you make an intentional effort to 'like' people's Instagram posts that 'like' yours?"

How do you react when people criticise the media content you posts?

Do you always reply to all your followers? why, how?

Do you sometimes feel like its a waste of time and energy? Other feelings?

Do you delete/ ignore/ block some users? Why?

### **ACTIVITIES:**

**iPad activity** (Perceptions): Explore the way people react to digital representation of food posts:

-How would you describe this picture (picture 1: dark, unappealing food picture) ?

Would you share it on your page? why not?

-How would you define this picture (picture (2) that appears on their profile)? How do you think the person behind this picture is? Which personality traits of the giver is conveyed to its viewers?

- What about this picture? (picture 3: appealing food picture, bright colours) Does it make you want to watch it? Taste it? Share it Cook it? Comment it?

- Could you please tell me who's pictures did you like/comment today and explain me what motivates you to like/comment it? What type of food was it? Do you like that or is there another reason why you liked this picture?

-Would you rather post a picture of a pie that looks amazing but taste 'okay' or a picture of a pie that looks 'okay but tastes amazing? Why? So taste or appearance comes first?

Photo Elicitation Activity:



*Picture Activity number 1*



*Picture activity number 2*



*Picture activity number 3*

## Consent Form:

**Researcher:** H  la Hassen      hh194@le.ac.uk

**Supervisors:**    **Prof. Jennifer Smith Maguire**      **jbs7@le.ac.uk**

**Prof. James Fitchett**      **j.fitchett@le.ac.uk**

## Participant Copy/ Interviews

You are being invited to participate in a research project which has the purpose of exploring social relationships and exchanges in the digital environment. I am looking for an in depth understanding of the social interactions in the digital food media (Pinterest, Instagram).

If you wish to participate in this research, you will be asked to sign this form. This consent form will provide you with information about your rights as a research participant and what the study involves. Please take time to read the information provided in the consent form below.

1. This is an academic research and a compulsory part of the procedure requirements in which the researcher H  la Hassen is currently enrolled. The data collected from this interview will be used solely for PhD research and future academic research publications.
2. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse participation. If you do decide to take part in this study, you are still free to withdraw at any time, or skip any questions you do not wish to answer.
3. The interview will take approximately 1 hour. You may also request to have the interview broken into separate and smaller time frame to suit your timetable.

4. Your confidentiality will be respected. Only the researcher and her supervisors, Dr Jennifer Smith Maguire and Prof. James Fitchett, will have access to your answers. In the event of publication of this research, no personally identifying information will be disclosed. There will be no public use/access without your prior written permission and all data will be anonymised before reporting to an audience beyond the researcher's supervisors.
1. In order to help me remember what you have said, the interview session will be recorded using an audio-recorder with your permission. The interview will then be transcribed. The transcript and notes may be indexed and held by the researcher and her supervisors.

*Please Initial Box*

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information listed in the Consent Form( )
1. I have granted permission for the interview to be recorded ( )
1. I have read this form and I freely consent to participate in this study( )

---

---

---

Name (Interviewee)

Date

Signature

---

---



---

Name (Researcher)

Date

Signature

Consent Form:

**Researcher:**    **Héla Hassen**    **hh194@le.ac.uk**

**Supervisors:**    **Prof. Jennifer Smith Maguire**    **jbs7@le.ac.uk**

**Prof. James Fitchett**                    **j.fitchett@le.ac.uk**

**Participant Copy/Observation**

You are being invited to participate in a research project which has the purpose of exploring social relationships and exchanges in the digital environment. I am looking for an in depth understanding of the social interactions in the digital food media (Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram).

If you wish to participate in this research, you will be asked to sign this form. This consent form will provide you with information about your rights as a research participant and what the study involves. Please take time to read the information provided in the consent form below.

1. This is an academic research and a compulsory part of the procedure requirements in which the researcher Hela Hassen is currently enrolled. The data collected from this interview will be used solely for PhD research and future academic research publications.
2. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse

participation. If you do decide to take part in this study, you are still free to withdraw at any time, or skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

3. Your confidentiality will be respected. Only the researcher and her supervisors, Dr Jennifer Smith Maguire and Prof. James Fitchett, will have access to the data. In the event of publication of this research, no personally identifying information will be disclosed. There will be no public use/access without your prior written permission and all data will be anonymised before reporting to an audience beyond the researcher's supervisors.

*Please Initial Box*

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information listed in the Consent Form( )
1. I give permission to the researcher to observe my digital account and activity ( )
1. I have read this form and I freely consent to participate in this study( )

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Name (Interviewee)

Date

Signature

---

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Name (Researcher)

Date

Signature

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