Turning the tables on Instagram

Is posting pictures of delicious eats to Instagram really just a way to say “My life is better than yours”?

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Last year, American celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain opened up to a tabloid about one of modern life's most common social practices, or — depending on whom you're talking to — one of its biggest transgressions. When asked what he thought about “food instgramming” — photographing your meal at a restaurant and uploading the pictures onto social media—he explained that while he does this “all the time,” he isn't particularly fond of the practice. “It's a dysfunctional, even aggressive practice,” he said. “Why do we Instagram pictures of our food? To make people feel really bad. You don't want people eating dinner with you when you Instagram a picture of your food. You want them to be eating a bag of Cheetos on their couch in their underpants. It's a passive-aggressive act.”

In other words, much like other popular online pastimes—posting jealousy-inducing travel photos to your Facebook page or pictures of the diamond ring your fiancée just gave you — Instagramming your food is an easy, detached way of saying, “My life is better than yours.” Bourdain's philosophy on this subject may be highly cynical, and a bit snooty, especially for a man who has the luxury of being around photo-worthy culinary masterpieces all the time. But he's not alone.

Last week, an anonymous poster claiming to be a Manhattan restauranteur argued in the “Rants and Raves” section of New York's Craigslist page that photographing food at restaurants is not only rude and self-indulgent, but a blight on customer service. The poster, who has since deleted his now-viral rant (it racked up more than 750,000 shares on Distractify in one weekend), claimed to have studied security footage at his midtown restaurant from the last 10 years, and concluded that smartphone use at the table has drastically increased wait times in his restaurant, to the point where some customers were so busy looking at their phones and photographing their food that when they were finally ready to take a bite, their food was cold and the server had to reheat it.

According to his survey, “26 out of 45 customers spend an average of three minutes taking photos of food;” and “14 out of 45 customers take pictures of each other with the food in front of them. This takes, on average, another four minutes, as they must review and sometimes retake the photo. Nine out of 45 customers sent their food back to reheat.” The whole food-photo ordeal, he alleged, can add, on average, up to five wasted minutes of a server's time.

Whether any of this is true we will likely never know.

Matty Matheson, the executive chef at Toronto's popular Parts and Labour restaurant, acknowledges that smartphone and Instagram use sometimes delays service in his restaurant. "I see customers tell servers to ‘come back to us' because they’re on the phone," he says. But he argues that the positives generally outweigh the negatives. Instagram is, after all, free publicity for any business.

What's most interesting, however, in this extremely low-stakes debate isn't the dubious data presented by an anonymous Craigslist poster, but the enormous popularity of the post and the speed at which it was shared. Clearly, fictitious or not, people were excited by the notion that public smartphone use had disrupted life as they knew it. There was a possibility that their annoyance with amateur Internet food photography had suddenly been validated by cold, hard facts. So, of course, they did what any mature social media-wary people would do in the year 2014: They shared the story on social media.

Instagramming your food and digitally documenting the finer things in life may be passive-aggressive, as Bourdain claims, but so is modern Internet life in general. The truth is that we've all turned inward — not just those of us who ignore our dates while we photograph food, but those of us who have a problem with the ubiquity of public smartphone use, too. Some of us may believe social media is inherently anti-social and destructive, yet it appears that the only forum where we feel truly comfortable expressing this discontent is on social media itself. (There is no greater proof of this irony than the huge success of British writer Gary Turk's short film Look Up, about the dangers of excessive social media use. It now has more than 44 million views on YouTube and 44,000 comments.) Rarely do any of us, ballsy enough to take on the habits of the young, tell a friend or a stranger that his incessant instgramming — at the dinner table or anywhere — is a rude, annoying waste of time. A more interesting and prudent study might be one that determines how many customers actually say something — in real life — when the practice annoys them.

Whether we like it or not, etiquette has undergone a radical makeover in the last five years. However, the biggest loss we've suffered as a social civilization may not be manners or the art of conversation, but the art of public confrontation.