

Charlotte Jones
Media Cultures
Professor Sewell
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Insta-Worthy:
An Analysis of Female Teenage Interaction with Instagram
And its Significance for Monetization

Instagram self-describes as “a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures.” Indeed, Instagram has drained smartphone users’ batteries since its October 2010 launch. Garnering one million users in two months and ten million nine months after, “insta-worthy” and “insta-grammable” have become colloquial terms accepted by the majority of technology aware individuals. People no longer primarily associate “Walden” with Thoreau and “Kelvin” with temperature as these filter names creep into the average user’s lexicon. Yet who is this average user that is driving the expansive “Instagram” culture that includes outside apps to edit photos and track followership and likes? Teenage females’ interactions with Instagram display a complex relationship of human and media communication that reveals a socially aware culture of image building. Spending countless minutes editing different filters over one photo and making the photographer take a couple more versions of the same scenario to get the “perfect” photo is common practice in the female teenager’s world and deserves a detailed analysis. The large emphasis placed on perfection and social approval reveals teenage females’ desire to be aesthetically enviable and provides lucrative opportunities for Instagram’s potential monetization.

Instagram was created as a platform for editing and sharing photos. Its founders, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger wanted to dispel the myth that good photos could only be taken by professionals with specialized education and equipment (Instagram). Spelled out on Instagram’s FAQ website page, the founders had three points in mind:

1. Mobile photos always come out looking mediocre. Our awesome looking filters transform your photos into professional-looking snapshots.
2. Sharing on multiple platforms is a pain - we help you take a picture once, then share it (instantly) on multiple services.
3. Most uploading experiences are clumsy and take forever - we've optimized the experience to be fast and efficient (Instagram).

The execution of these goals creates a platform that integrates itself seamlessly within people's lives, most relevantly the C-generation's. While the C-generation's birth years are debated, its members are bound together by their pervasive desire to create, curate and connect – principles that directly parallel Instagram's previously stated founding goals (GENERATION C). Instagram allows for individuals to create their own content and curate their newsfeed by choosing whom to follow. Lastly and most straightforwardly, Instagram allows for the C-generation to connect with one another by following, liking and commenting on each other's posts. Jessica Clark and Patricia Aufderheide explicate this media interactivity in *Public Media 2.0* by detailing the modern transition between the traditional broadcast model and today's interactive network. Instagram is an illustrative example of furthering the Public Media 2.0 model due to its many-to-many publishing structure. However while people champion Instagram today as a social media and communication tool, users preferred using Instagram as a simple photo editor at its inception. Users would layer different filters over the same photo, keeping all the versions in their profile. The concept of having followers and liking posts was unusual. Users took photos that highlighted a detail or image that *they* found particularly interesting. Their Instagram accounts were not tools to garner social approval and the images they Instagrammed were not chosen for others to "like."¹ However teenagers started utilizing "hashtags" that when

¹ See Appendix Image 1 and 2

used and clicked on, displayed all photos to which Instagram users had assigned that hashtag.² Hashtags make photos visible to the larger Instagram community and therefore the photo may receive “likes” from people that are not following the instagrammer. Soon hashtag communities such as #instapopular #tenlikesfortenlikes #followforfollow began to appear in Instagram culture as teenagers began to use followers and likes as quantitative markings for popularity and acceptance. While teenage boys also utilize hashtags, females dominate overall Instagram user demographics, constituting sixty-eight percent of membership and therefore the use of “hashtagging” (Smith). As more individuals jumped onto the Instagram bandwagon, more people became friends’ followers. Additionally as more people utilized hashtagging, more people could access and like individuals’ photos. As a result, the average amount of likes significantly rose, and correspondingly the gravity placed on receiving a certain amount of likes.³

In a survey of my own creation that garnered over one hundred females’ responses, I asked the question, “How many likes do you consider ‘good’?” While this question might appear absurd to anyone other than a female teenage girl, only one responder questioned the prompt. Ninety-Nine others gave a variety of responses. Indeed when discussing Instagram within the female teenage community there is a variety of questions that taken at face value seem unusual. Yet this specific demographic responds almost universally without skepticism to these questions. Through the surveymonkey I wanted to explore female teenage interaction with the app and the surrounding culture that rises from their use. In response to my question concerning “likes” some girls drew attention to how many followers one has in relation to the likes while others commented that “as long as it is over 11 likes” or “as long as I get double digits” they are satisfied. Instagram’s liking structure is such that once a photo has received eleven likes, the

² See Appendix Image 3 and 4

³ See Appendix Image 5, 6 and 7

photo displays a number instead of the names of the “likers.” As the survey shows, this tipping point is essential for teenage female satisfaction with her Instagrammed photo. Yet breaking down the responses into categories based on age reveals a compelling trend. Twenty-two year old users satisfaction level averaged thirty likes per photo while fifteen and sixteen year olds respectively prefer seventy-five and fifty-six. This increasing trend for amount of likes reveals increasing trends of user subscription, interaction and “likes” significance. Piper Jaffrey corroborates this indication of increased teenage interactivity with its study in Spring 2014 titled, “Taking Stock with Teens, A Collaborative Consumer Insights Project,” which reveals teens’ preferential transition from Facebook to Instagram.⁴ While just last year 33% of teens ranked Facebook as their most important social network, that number dropped ten percentage points, falling beneath Twitter and Instagram (Collaborative Consumer Insights Project) in 2014. Instagram effectively swapped places with Facebook, rising from 17% to 30% in the span of one year. Teenage girls are propelling this transition and furthering media’s transition into segmented snapshots of peoples’ lives. Piper Jaffrey reveals that teenagers are unsurprisingly spending increasing amounts of times plugged into their mobile devices, and my survey shows that Instagram is not going ignored. Forty-four percent declared they check Instagram “Whenever I’m bored on my phone” while an additional forty-one percent check their feeds “several times a day.”⁵ While only three percent of respondents said they publish Instagrams on a daily basis⁶, a mere six percent do not integrate Instagram into their daily routine. As a result, the accounts people follow and the photos that make up their newsfeed constitute a large part of every individual’s Instagram experience. Because of this, Instagram has effectively transitioned from

⁴ See Appendix Image 8

⁵ See Appendix Image 9

⁶ See Appendix Image 10

being a creation tool built for personal enjoyment to a connection device that allows and demands involvement with snapshots of friends' and followers' lives.

Due to this emphasis on others' published content and their ability to like, comment, and judge, Instagram etiquette is acknowledged and widely referred to within the teenage female sphere. Because of this, it is not surprising that eighty-four percent replied affirmatively to "Have you ever not Instagrammed a photo because you think it will be obnoxious?"⁷ This supermajority exposes the meaning teenage girls place in others' reactions and interpretations of their Instagrammed photos. Teenage girls walk the fine line between wanting to be perceived as attractive, popular, cultural and artistic and not wanting to be seen as self-promoting narcissists. In response to a question probing why she wouldn't Instagram a selfie,⁸ even if she thought she looked great in it, one eighteen year old girl states, "I would be self conscious that people would judge me for it and that I would look self absorbed." When asked what subject girls liked to Instagram the most, explicitly vain photos including selfies and photos of the sole individual ranked low on the list. Conversely, forty-four percent of respondents stated they liked to Instagram photos of the user and her friends the most. Unsurprisingly this illustrates teenage girls' penchant for societal approval and popularity.

Instagram's functional purpose to connect and interact directly parallels and affects its content. Indeed, a recent Instagram update created the ability to "tag" fellow users in photos and therefore automatically compile a user's history of past tagged photos on her profile. Experience oriented subjects ranked high on the surveymonkey's list with "travel," "special events" and "food" surpassing photos depicting "nature," "family," "college campus," and "romantic

⁷ See Appendix Image 11

⁸ Selfie: A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website (Oxford Dictionary)

partner.” Born from teenage girls’ general desire to capture and publish scenes from experiences comes the colloquial, “instaggramable.” This adjective denotes an experience or subject worthy of being captured, filtered and released into someone’s Instagram news feed, typically signifying that others will acknowledge its aesthetic beauty and reward the individual with a like. A similar expression is the recently burgeoned saying, “pic or it didn’t happen.” At its heart this adage pokes fun of teenage girls’ alleged obsession with documenting experiences. However it ultimately serves as a symptom of a larger phenomenon: that of seeking physical and quantitative validation through photo documentation and likes. Theorist Alison Hearn elucidates this observation in her article, “Image Slaves” by analyzing peoples’ desire to star on reality TV shows. She states, “We live in the age of phantasmagoric capital...where image, not information, is the driving force in the market.” She goes on to say that “Workers understand that our labor involves self-production in the form of persona... we, ourselves, must also consciously self-present in concrete and meaningful ways” (Hearn). Hanna Krasnova of Humboldt University Berlin relates this self-presentation to Instagram by addressing the potential risk of self-deprecation. She has coined the term “envy spiral” which relates specifically to social media and image publication. She says:

If you see beautiful photos of your friend on Instagram...one way to compensate is to self-present with even better photos, and then your friend sees your photos and posts *even better* photos, and so on. Self-promotion triggers more self-promotion, and the world on social media gets further and further from reality (Winter).

It is this self-production and curation compounded with Instagram’s connectivity that spurs teenage girls to transform into the subject of Hearn’s title. Hearn insists that in the real world, “It’s just as important to ‘be seen’ as a good nurse, executive, flight attendant, as to actually do the tasks that make up the job” (Hearn). Elaborating on this logic is Aaron Doyle in his article, “‘Cops’: Television Policing as Policing Reality.” Doyle contends that the TV series,

Cops, distorts reality's representation through meticulous curation and editing (Doyle). This argument applies to the Instagram platform due to the time girls' spend on editing their photographs. Eighty-three percent of girls I surveyed reported they have asked friends for filter advice⁹ while nearly eighty percent have used an outside editing app in addition to Instagram's built in filters. Just fewer than twenty percent stated they always use an outside editing app of which there are many including Afterlight and PicStitch. This scrupulous curation reveals teenage girls' partiality to manipulate their image to follow a higher standard. Following these two theorists, one can understand the appeal of instagramming a photo of a delicious meal, a sharp outfit or a thrilling vacation. Teenage girls' interactions with Instagram are not only about showing what one is doing, but sculpting and displaying a curated image and reputation of themselves for others to authenticate. One nineteen-year old girl states:

A like is a kind of validation of personal value that has few equivalents in face-to-face interaction. The ease of offering a like means that an individual can receive repeated and instant gratification for "putting themselves out there," while in day-to-day interaction, forging the connections that constitute putting yourself out there or offering a compliment are much "scarier" and more effort intensive.

Indeed the surveymonkey showed that the lack of such corroboration – an inadequate amount of likes – results in deletion of the posts. In fact my survey shows one third of users have "deleted a photo because it wasn't getting enough likes."¹⁰ This significant dependence on external approval unearths teenage girls' increasing proclivity to not only engage with others' media products, but to have others extensively engage with theirs.

While this engagement could proof harmful to teenage girls' self-esteem and preoccupation with documentation, this constant interactivity and attention proves to be a feeding frenzy for advertisers, companies and brands. Instagram's high levels of interactivity

⁹ See Appendix Image 12

¹⁰ See Appendix Image 13

make it the most valuable social media platform on a teenage girl's mobile device. With ninety-four percent of respondents integrating Instagram into their daily routine, there is no other media platform that absorbs the same fixated attention that Instagram captivates. Two nineteen-year old females declare that when they check Instagram, they scroll through their newsfeeds until the last photo they saw on their previous check-in. One states, "I always try to get to the last photo I looked at. I feel this odd pressure to not miss anything!" while the other says, "I always scroll all the way down too, even if it means I'll wait until I have time to look at them all" There is no Instagram TiVo. There is no way to skip past advertisements. An individual's followers' Instagrams are all equal, meaning there is no hierarchical system that ranks best friends' photos first. Research conducted by L2 Think Tank reveals that Instagram "boasts 15 times more engagement than [Facebook] and more than Twitter or Google+" (Dishman). This holds significance because once a user has entered Instagram, everyone that has posted within the last time she checked it will grab her attention. This essentially forces the user to at least visually acknowledge a published image or caption, an effective strategy historically used by advertisers called subliminal messaging.

Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012 for one billion dollars when it had thirty million users. Today with 200 monthly active users (Expandedramblings) Forbe's contributor Eric Jackson declares that, "this was the best Internet acquisition ever" (Jackson). Jackson acknowledges that popular mobile applications WhatsApp and Snapchat have substantially higher numbers of content shared per day than Instagram. Yet he argues, "Instagram...differs greatly from the WhatsApp and Snapchat apps in that it appears to be much more monetizing-friendly" in addition to its "growing like a weed" (Jackson). Another Forbes contributor on "fashion, retail and e-commerce" Lydia Dishman states that, "it's clear that Instagram is the

channel to tap for retailers that truly want to make an impression in omnichannel selling” (Dishman). She explains the large trend towards retail “personalization,” and points out that “Instagram offers brands a way to direct message shoppers as well as a two-way customer service channel” (Dishman). Instagram gives retailers the ability to be both transparent and authentic in their communication, in addition to providing the “inside scoop” on their company’s operations.¹¹ Many companies create official accounts that feel like any other friend the individual follows by posting goofy co-worker shots or quippy quotations to eradicate the impersonal corporate voice.¹² Yet retailers have begun to move beyond simply connecting with their target audiences towards a model where the consumers connect with them. Coach, Starbucks and Sharpie have mastered successful campaigns and user integration, often “regramming” user submitted photos as their own publication material (Austin). This strategy inspires enthusiastic brand loyalists, the necessary ingredient for a successful modern company. However, for Instagram to be profitable, CEO Kevin Systrom and director of business operations, Emily White are turning towards integrating traditional media into their new publication platform. When interviewed for fastcompany.com, White stated, "If people see super spammy ads in their feeds, it's going to be destructive to the experience" (Carr). Instagram declares that their "aim is to make any advertisements you see feel as natural to Instagram as the photos and videos many of you already enjoy from your favorite brands" and that they strive to make them "enjoyable and creative in much the same way you see engaging, high-quality ads when you flip through your favorite magazine" (Carr). Instagram implemented advertisements in November 2013, yet when teenage girls' are asked their opinion of them, they have none. This is because they haven't even noticed them. When asked what she thinks of Instagram ads one

¹¹ See Image 14

¹² See Images 15 and 16

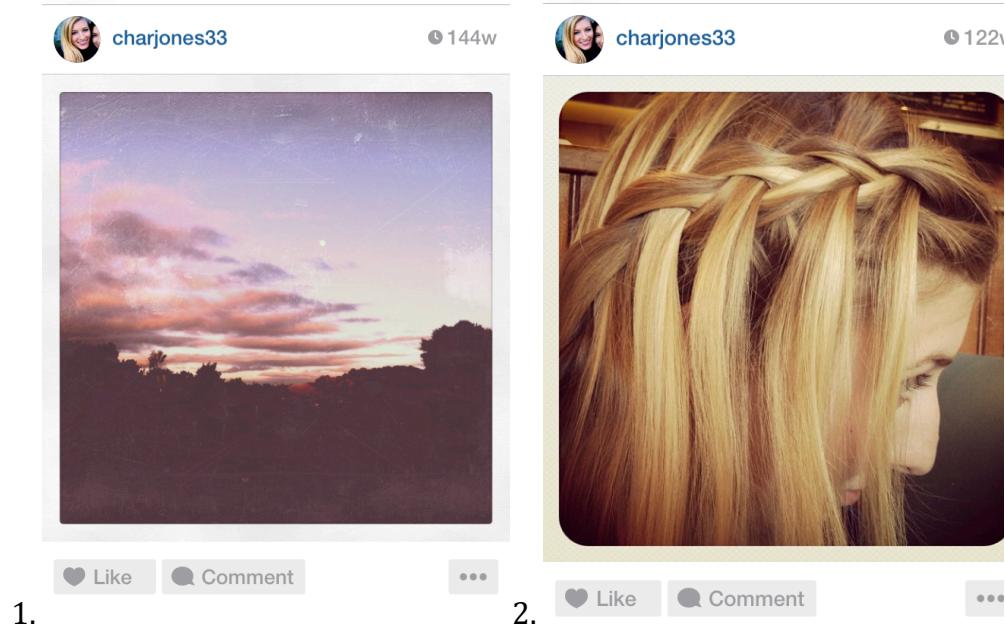
eighteen year old girl responds, “I would find them extremely annoying,” inferring they have to yet to exist. When asked if she has ever noticed Instagram ads one girl says, “no, never” only to remember she had seen one Taco Bell advertisement once her memory had been jogged. In an official Instagram blog post, the company stated that the ads would be “relevant, tailored to your interests based on ‘information about what you do on Instagram and Facebook’” (Carr). This specialization combined with keeping company sponsored Instagrams in line with the images teenage girls’ typically Instagram could provide the perfect platform for subliminal messaging and brand awareness if used correctly. Burberry, Levi’s and Ben and Jerry’s have created clever advertisements that do not feel corporate or dictated.¹³ Yet as advertisements expand to more brands and Instagram potentially loosens its meticulous oversight, there is potential for users to resent the infiltration of advertisements in a previously inviolate platform.

Brands targeting female teenagers should use Instagram to increase loyalty, awareness and sales. As Instagram membership continues to rise and intensive daily integration remains, it is quickly becoming a necessity for every brand to build a genuine Instagram followership. Because females’ interactions with Instagram revolve around social acceptance, awareness and image building, brands that cater to those needs will find a readily accepted niche through Instagram. Instagram provides an opportunity for clientele to familiarize themselves with corporations, making companies more similar to friends than conglomerates. Because teenage females enter Instagram primed to observe, like, comment and admire, brands’ integration into this platform has none of the negative associations that television advertisements have. “Commercial” is a nearly dirty word, but Instagram is associated with the adrenaline rush of a popular photograph. There is a possibility that Instagram’s ingenious strategy of hiding

¹³ See Images 17 and 18

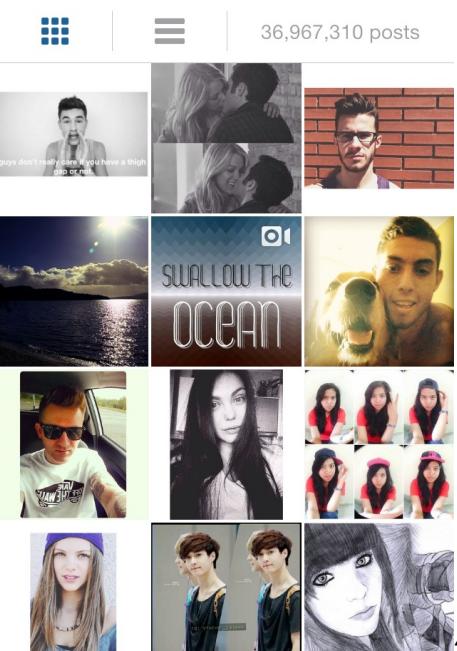
advertisements will be critiqued for tricking the user, but if brands can create content teenage females enjoy, both parties will benefit. Female teenagers' participatory culture with Instagram provides a lucrative opportunity for brands to interact with consumers and to feed girls' desire to seek beauty every day through experience documentation.

Appendix





#AWESOME



3.

4.

36,967,310 posts

Users Hashtags

#awesome 36,967,310 posts >

#awesome_shots 1,442,380 posts >

#awesomeness 1,413,446 posts >

#awesomeday 279,487 posts >

#awesomenight 217,196 posts >

#awesome_hdr 216,062 posts >

#awesomesauce 175,676 posts >

#awesomeshots 132,445 posts >



12 likes

charjones33 #holi

birdie96 Did this already happen? Thought it was this April??

charjones33 Haha no worries this was just a



75 likes

charjones33 SSC takes paly prom @sirbriankerry

view all 11 comments

skalkat Sho blonde



101 likes

charjones33 Ay diós

skalkat OMG where are you

skalkat Take me

charjones33 Bonitavall Sur de España

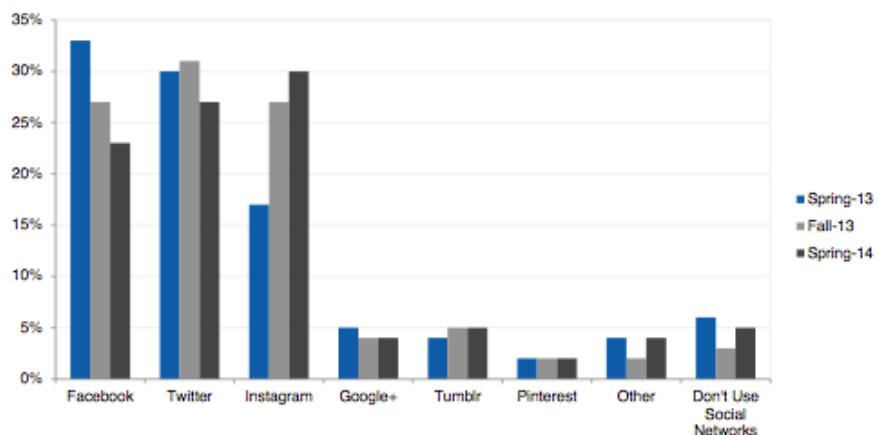
5.

6.

7.

Jones 12

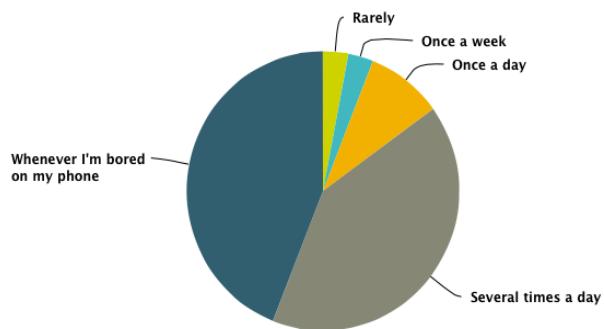
Instagram Most Important Social Network For Teens



8.

How often do you check your instagram feed?

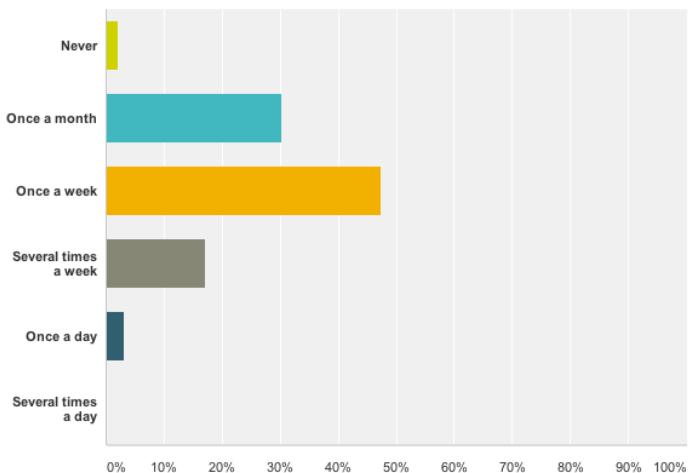
Answered: 100 Skipped: 0



9.

How often do you instagram photos?

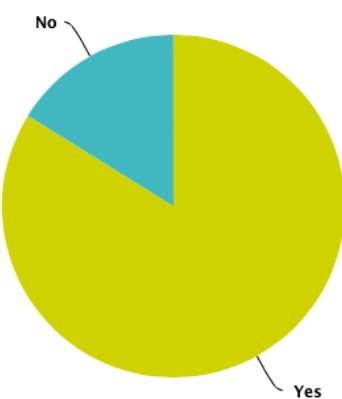
Answered: 99 Skipped: 1



10.

Have you ever not instagrammed a photo because you think it'll be obnoxious?

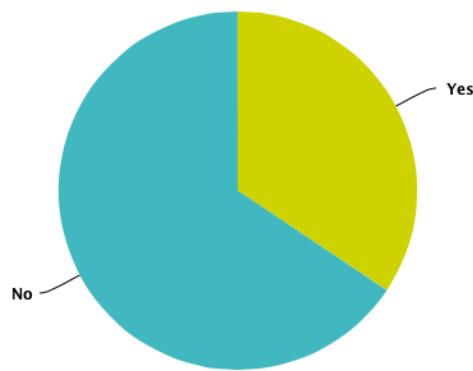
Answered: 99 Skipped: 1



11.

Have you ever deleted a photo because it wasn't getting enough likes?

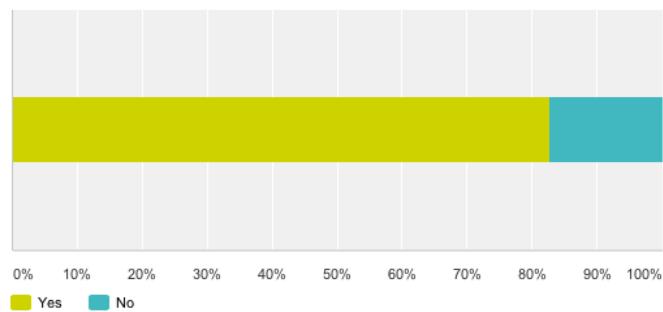
Answered: 96 Skipped: 4



12.

Have you ever asked your friends for filter advice?

Answered: 99 Skipped: 1



13.



nastygalcareers
📍 Nasty Gal HQ

⌚ 1w



♥ 393 likes

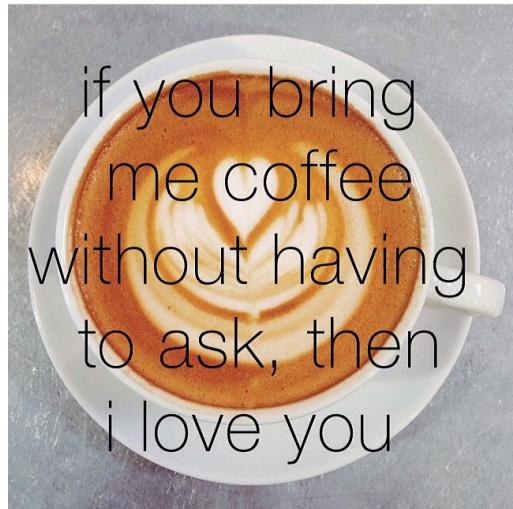
↪ nastygalcareers @longshotcoffee in the house! #TGIF ☕️ 🍞

14. it's just that one thing @chuweee one day I want to work here



revolveclothing

⌚ 1w



♥ 4442 likes

↪ revolveclothing ☕️ ❤️

view all 362 comments

eliserodriguez @catherinevatorec

[View Post](#) [Comment](#) [Share](#) [Save](#) [Report](#)



refinery29

📍 Central Park - Gapstow Bridge

⌚ 1w



♥ 5140 likes

↪ refinery29 The #NYC skyline is looking mighty tasty today. #centralpark #rocketpop

view all 51 comments

sntraver @foodintheair

16.



benandjerrys

Sponsored



benandjerrys Shark Bait

17.

Like

Comment

•••



levis Sunset on the rails with Station To Station (@StnToStn) on our way to #MakeourMark in San Francisco.

18.

Like

Comment

•••

Jones 17

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