

# Introduction

This is not a book specifically about photography, which at first glance might seem quite odd when reading about Instagram. After all, Instagram is synonymous with the mass popularization of mobile, app-based photography. Filters and square frames, part of Instagram's initial affordances, made millions of people armed with nothing more than an iPhone feel like they were crafting photographs that suggested the professionalism of paid photographers (regardless of whether these feelings were justified). Each Instagram filter certainly alluded to a way of manipulating and crafting a photograph to imbue it with a specific meaning. And yet, the most used Instagram filters soon became clichés, often suggesting that the Instagram user was trying too hard to make their image speak in a way it simply could not.

Rather, in this book, we argue that Instagram should best be understood as a conduit for *communication* in the increasingly vast landscape of visual social media cultures. We argue that the visual image, video and other combinations of these elements in Stories are first and foremost about communicating with one another. Instagram is a social media platform, but, we argue, the *visual* focus is particularly important in the success and relevance of the platform. As Instagram has grown from an iPhone-only app into a vast platform owned by Facebook, it has also had to wrestle with being a space where communication and commerce have overlapped, from the appearance of advertising to the rise of Influencers and a new class of content creators who strive for authenticity on a platform best known for selfies and self-representation.

Moreover, as the platform amassed over a billion users, platform-provided filters have given way to socially-driven norms and what we argue is the templatability of visual social media on Instagram.

We argue that Instagram is more than an app, more than a platform, and more than a jewel in the Facebook ‘family’. Rather, Instagram is an icon and avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures, whether on Instagram itself, or through the many ways the material world has sought to become ‘Insta-worthy’ in redesigning practices, cultural institutions and material spaces. Facebook wants it to be an Instagram world out there and this book examines to what extent that desire has succeeded, how Instagram has changed over time, and what elements of Instagram matter the most.

### **Scroll Down: What’s Below?**

Chapter 1 focuses on the politics and operation of Instagram as a platform. Politics, here, does not mean national political systems, but rather the way that decisions are made about the way Instagram works, how it is built, how content is framed, how moderation works, what boundaries and rules govern the platform, and how all of these change over time. The chapter explores the early history before Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger realized they were building an app focused on photos, through competition with Hipstamatic, Picplz, Snapchat and TikTok. We examine how Facebook’s purchase of Instagram slowly reshaped the platform, and how major changes such as including Stories radically changed how Instagram is used. We also examine how rules and boundaries in terms of content and moderation have developed and changed over time, including moments when this process does not work as well as it should, and Instagram’s insistence that it can refer to all of its users as a singular community, despite the many different and at times opposing perspectives this must contain.

The chapter ends by examining the departure of Instagram's founders in 2018, and the many challenges the platform faced in 2019, from evidence that it is utilized for political manipulation to broader community concerns about failures to protect young people from harmful content.

Our second chapter explores the role of aesthetics – the visual look, feel and design – of Instagram and the way this has changed. Early Instagram, from the icon to the filters, was built on bringing a retro-aesthetic to everyday visual photography and communication, yet from the beginning was reworking what photography meant on the app, pushing a new photographic vernacular of the everyday. Over many iterations, Instagram slowly grew its options, from new filters, to allowing more manual editing of each photo whether filtered or not. At the same time, Instagram's own aesthetic, visible in its icons and interface, grew and changed, with notable ruptures including the shift from the recognizable brown polaroid-derived icon to the rainbow one, and that fateful moment when Instagram's interface stopped using a camera icon to indicate new content being made, replacing it with a plus sign in a box, demonstrating a long journey from the original core function of photography. Similarly, the square frames synonymous with Instagram stopped being mandatory, while the introduction of Stories introduced new interest in vertical images and vertical video to the extent that this shift eventually underpinned the launch of IGTV. The aesthetic norms of selfies shaped, and were shaped by, the Instagram platform as well. The three key ideas featured in this chapter are thus: visual aesthetics, including genres and tropes of content and visual normalization; user practices and norms; and audiences and motivations for Instagram use.

Chapter 3 situates Instagram within the broader ecologies of mobile, social, visual and locative apps and platforms. Instagram has always had keen competitors in the visual social media space, including Web 2.0 elder Flickr to a range of visual apps today from Snapchat to TikTok. Third-party

apps also rely on Instagram, such as editing and transformation apps, from beautifying selfies to artistic re-renders. Instagram also has its own emerging ecology of related apps: Bolt, a direct-messaging app similar to Snapchat that was only released for six months in a few countries before disappearing; Hyperlapse, which introduced a new sped-up video aesthetic; Layout, which allows basic image collages (similar to many other third-party apps); Boomerang, Instagram's 2-second looping video app and answer to animated GIFs; and IGTV, Instagram's attempt to take on YouTube by popularizing the vertical video format. This chapter also argues that within the Instagram ecology, space and time are being reconfigured and remediated relative to Instagram itself; time is no longer measured, for example, by dates and times, but in relation to Instagram's Now, so images were shared 10 seconds, or 5 days ago, with no specific date or time beyond that.

In chapter 4 we turn to the economies and economics of Instagram. While Instagram did not launch itself as a place for commerce, or even have advertising for the first few years, this has radically changed over the past few years. We consider how social media Influencers commercialized Instagram, making it into a marketplace for attention and commerce, and the social norms which emerged long before Instagram's official tools were released to, for example, mark a post as paid sponsorship. We examine Influencers' social and cultural strategies for driving up client demand on the app and engaging followers; some vernacular strategies for gaming savvy Instagram use in the midst of changes in the platform over the years; and challenges that have emerged as Instagram became an ecology of economies. We examine the centrality of the selfie as a marker for Influencer economics, and how this has broader implications for the way selfies are viewed, along with strategies Influencers utilize to remain relatable and seemingly authentic despite the rush to commercialize.

The diversity of cultures and groups on Instagram is the focus of chapter 5. Rather than there being a

singular understanding and use of Instagram, many different approaches, understandings and vernaculars are visible in the way different groups use the platform. Instagram is best understood in terms of the multiplicity of cultures that are not delimited by specific demographic categories. Young people in different regions are particularly likely to develop their own, specific, often niche uses, which often include short-hands and norms not easily understood by others. Politicians across the globe are turning to Instagram to engage with their citizens, sharing their thoughts and lives, with notable examples such as Singapore's Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, and US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Cultural diversity is also visible in the way that cultural, social and domestic spaces and institutions are responding to Instagram. Instagram-specific museums and galleries are emerging where every space is a perfect selfie opportunity, while traditional galleries and museums are carefully crafting opportunities for visual interaction even amongst traditional art. Restaurants, cafés and bars are ensuring they are Insta-worthy, from the design of food and drinks to art and ambience design. Even homes are now being built with the angles and aesthetics crafted to allow ideal Instagram impact every day.

Chapter 6 examines the impact of Instagram over the entire lifespan, from birth to death. While Instagram's Terms of Use prevent anyone under 13 years of age using the platform, Instagram is nevertheless filled with children. Even before birth, the sharing of ultrasound photos to announce a pregnancy is a normalized social ritual. The debates around sharenting illustrate that the question is not whether to share images of children, but when and how often. Parental and child influencers diversify the representations and discussions of parenting and childhood online, but when advertising and sponsorship are involved, they raise difficult questions about the line between representation and exploitation of children. At the other end of life, mourning and selfies at funerals

shows that Instagram has opened up new spaces for grieving and celebrating life and, despite moral panics in the press to the contrary, these practices respect and cherish the dead. This chapter also examines the cold reality of what happens to someone's Instagram data after they die. Ultimately, this chapter argues that all Instagram users co-create each other, and in the case of children and the deceased, it is very clear how Instagram users are representing and telling the stories of other people in the posts, comments and Stories they share.

Our final chapter pulls all of the threads together, examining the cumulative impact of the platform: from the Everything of Instagram, to the Instagram of Everything. We look at the materialization of Instagram in everything from stickers and posters to Instagram-themed cameras and bespoke app integration in new phones. We examine the impact of Instagram on popular culture more broadly, and interrogate the phenomenon of virtual Influencers, digital amalgams of design, storytelling, communication and art who command large Instagram audiences but do not exist in the material world beyond the platform. We argue that Instagram use has shifted from a focus on filters, to an era of templatability, where new aesthetic and communication norms are established by celebrities and Influencers that ripple through the platform, establishing the fleeting vernacular norms of the day. We conclude, dabbling in alliteration, and suggest a framework of eight 'A's to understand the future of Instagram: affordances and algorithms; aesthetics and affect; attention and audiences; and agency and activism.

### **Over to You: Instagram the Instagram Book!**

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