Designing and Living Instagram Photography: Themes, Feeds, Sequences, Branding, Faces, Bodies

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http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image

Figure 1. Sample of Google Image Search results for "Instagram aesthetics," accessed 12/24/2016.
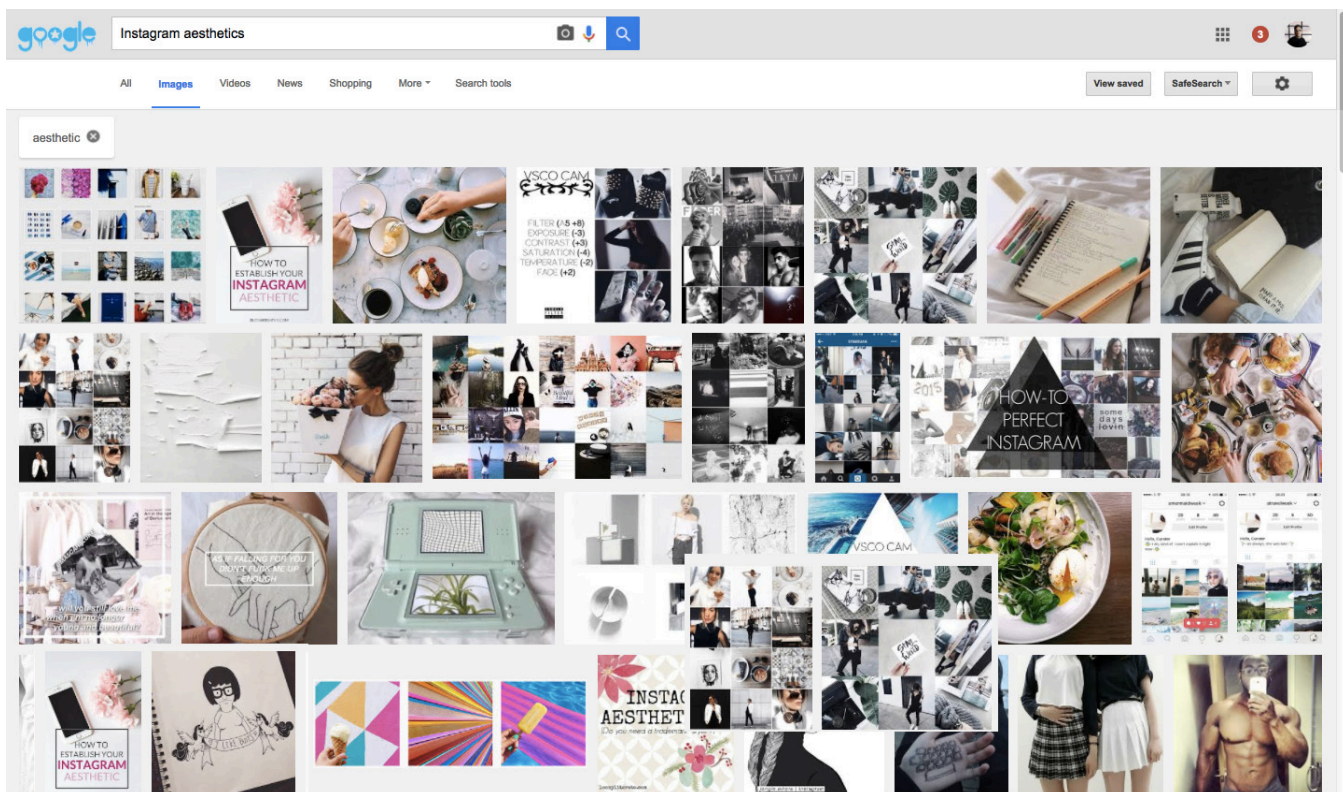
1a – first page of search results
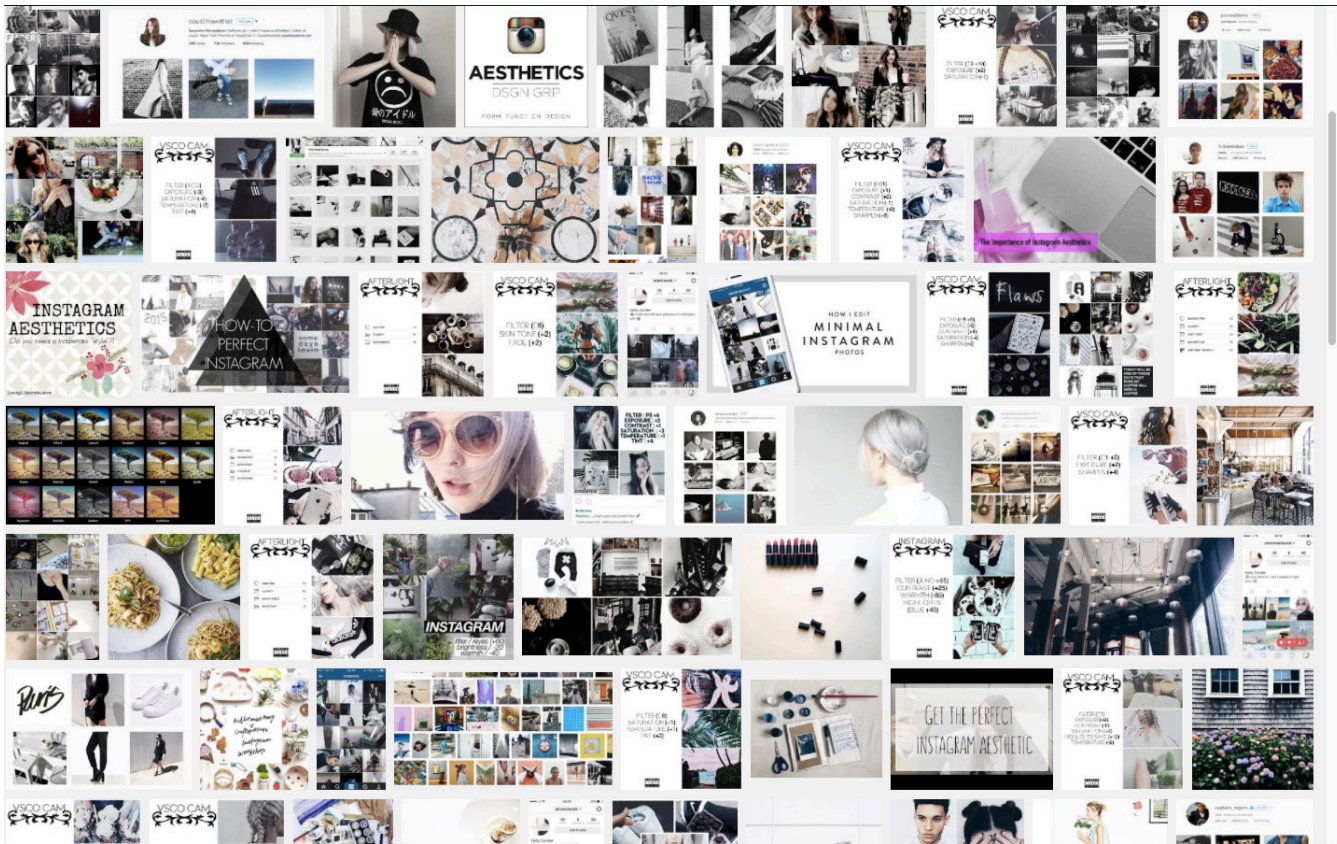
1b – second page of search results

"I caught the tail end of punk, when the Pistols were already disbanded, and less revolutionary but still decent bands like the Stranglers, The Fall and Pete Shelley's Buzzcocks were spitting and being spat on, and shouting out against boredom and bad pop music. At the time, my small village in Lancashire was also home to slightly older greasers (or smellies), rather impoverished New Romantics, a few Northern Soulers, some Two-toners, a tiny band of latterday hippies in Afghan coats, some electronic music fans, and a couple of narcissistic Roxy Music idolaters."

"When I walk through that village now, or the town where I live – Totnes – or, indeed, London or Manchester, I don't really see any tribes except, perhaps for raven-haired emos and leather jacketed rockists. What I do see is a single look. It goes by various names, but hipster is the most common. Its dress code is "funny" or "unique" T-shirts, trousers with tight calves, perhaps an ironic tweed jacket, perhaps branded archless pump and perhaps a WG Grace/Taliban beard."

"The causes for this flattening of society are myriad. Social media encourages gang conformism with its "like" buttons and "retweets". Amazon and other retail websites have honed algorithms that coopt trends, so that when someone reveals they like, say, Sonic Youth, it is assumed they must like Firehose or Dinsoaur Jr – effectively short circuiting choice. There is also the phenomenon of "retromania" and the way digital media encourage consumers to access everything all at once. Fashion and music are no longer linked to a moment or an event."

Chris Moss. Why don't young people want to be part of a tribe any more? *Telegraph* (UK). 26 May 2015. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/fashion-and-style/11624401/Why-dont-young-people-want-to-be-part-of-a-tribe-any-more.html.

"The dizzying growth of metropolises (megalopolises, rather) as demographers inform us, can only foster the development of 'villages within the city.'"

"We are, and it is characteristic of the contemporary cities, in the presence of mass- tribe dialectic; the mass being the all-encompassing pole, the tribe being the pole representing a particular crystallization."

"Without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it ["urban tribe"] refers to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and it is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that appear and form."

Michel Maffesoli (1988). *The Time of the Tribes – The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, trans. Don Smith, Sage Publications, 1996.

Today people and companies around the world capture and share over two billion photographs every day. These activities have many different purposes; the photos may follow different styles; and the platforms / communication media in which they circulate (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, WhatsApp, Line, Tumblr, etc.) also differ significantly. This chapter focuses on particular type of popular photography that I call *Instagramism.*

I use this term as an analogy to modern art movements such as futurism, cubism, surrealism etc. Like these earlier –isms, Instagramism offers its own vision of the world and its visual language. But unlike modernist art movements, Instragramism is shaped by millions of authors connected by, and participating in, Instagram and other social networks. (Photo editing app VSCO considered to be the standard among sophisticated Instagrammers had 30 million active users in the beginning of 2016.)

They influence each other and share advice on using mobile photo apps to create, edit, and sequence photos to be shared on Instagram. In the previous chapters of the book I already analyzed some aspects of Instagramism. (See also analysis in "Rules of the Photographers' Universe" by Alise Tifentale, 2017). In this chapter I continue this analysis.

A note about the two terms that frequently appear in this chapter: *aesthetics* and *class.* The words "aesthetics" or "aesthetic" are used prominently by Instagrammers and authors of advice posts and videos. For example, the search on YouTube for "instagram aesthetic feed" returns 7,200 videos, while the search for the phrase "Instagram aesthetic" on Google returns 144,000 results (both searches performed on 11/22/2016).

When I talk about *Instagram class*, I am not referring to a class in economic sense or to a hierarchy of groups in society based on wealth, education, prestige or other factors. Instead, I use this term to refer to millions of young people in many countries who use Instagram in systematic ways to create visually sophisticated feeds. Typically, they edit the photos in third-party apps such as VSCO in addition to the basic Instagram app.

Karl Marx's concept of *means of production* is useful here because Instagrammers can be said to own the means of *cultural production*. This means, however, not only simply owing mobile phones and apps but more importantly having *skills* in using these apps, understanding Instagram's rules and strategies for creating popular feeds, and being able to apply well these strategies in practice. Importantly, Instagrammers do not have to always sell their skills to "capitalists" – instead, they mostly use their skills themselves to have meaningful and emotionally satisfying experiences, to meet like-minded people, to maintain human relations, or to acquire social prestige.

Using these skills also creates *cultural capital* (Pierre Bourdieu's term) measured by numbers of followers or respect in the community. This cultural capital can be translated into economic capital if an Instagrammer starts working with advertisers and marketers to promote products in her/his feed, or if her followers purchase goods or services via the linked blog or website.

Since content creation skills and understanding of the digital platforms and styles of expression and communication is what matters here, Instagrammers can be also thought of as *knowledge workers* in a *knowledge society* (Peter Drucker coined the term "knowledge worker" in 1957, writing that "the most valuable asset of a 21st-century institution, whether business or non-business, will be its knowledge

workers and their productivity." See Drucker, 1959). However, I would like instead to propose different terms: *aesthetic workers* and *aesthetic society* (i.e., the society of aesthetically sophisticated consumer goods and services). In such society, production and presentation of beautiful images, experiences, styles, and user interaction designs is central for its *economic and social* functioning. Rather than being a property of art, aesthetic is the key property of commercial goods and services. (Thus, *aesthetic society* is not the same as *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord, 1967).

Aesthetic society values *space designers, user experience designers, architects, photographers, models, stylists, and other design and media professionals*, as well as individuals who are skilled in using Instagram, other social networks and blog platforms, and media editing, creation, and analytics tools. "Using" in this context refers to *creating successful content, promoting this content, communicating with followers, and achieving desired goals*.

Aesthetic society is also the one where urban / social media *tribes emerge and sustain themselves through aesthetic choices and experience*. In the words of Michel Maffesoli who developed analysis of "urban tribe" already in 1980s, "it refers to *a certain ambience*, a state of mind, and it is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favor *appearance and form*." And the ambience and state of mind, as I argued in Chapter 3, is exactly the "message" of Instagramism. If in the modern societies carefully constructed aesthetic lifestyles were the privilege of the rich, today they are available to all who use Instagram, VSCO, or any other of 2000+ photo editing apps, or shop at Zara which offers cool, hip and refined styles in its [2200 stores](#) in 88 countries (2015 data).

Three Types of Instagram Photographs: Casual, Professional, Designed

The analysis in this chapter relies on the concepts I developed in chapters 1 and 2 of *Instagram and Contemporary Image*. If you already read these chapters, you can skip this section. For readers who did not read them, I will summarize these concepts here.

I look at three popular types of photos shared by people on Instagram and other popular media sharing networks. I called them *casual, professional*, and *designed*. (My discussion of these types is based on quantitative analysis in my Cultural Analytics Lab of 16 million geo-tagged images shared on Instagram in seventeen global cities in 2012–2016, as well as my own observations as an Instagram user. Certainly, there are other types; moreover, since social media platforms, their users, and their content keep evolving, I do not want to make claims about applicability of my analysis to every geographical location, or other periods outside of 2012–2016.) The main purpose of *casual* images is to document an experience, a situation, or represent a person or a group of people. A person who captures and shares a casual photo does not try to control contrast, colors, and composition. Representative function dominates over aesthetic function. Historically these images continue the practices of color "home photography" that develops in the 1950s as the costs of color film processing decreases.

Professional photos are created by people who are explicitly or implicitly aware of the rules of "professional photography" that also develop during the twentieth century. The authors of these photos

try to follow these rules, conventions, and techniques, which they likely learn from either online tutorials, posts, videos or classes. Thus, in my use the term "professional" refers not to people who earn living from their photography but to photographs that follow particular aesthetics.

My third *designed* type refers to photos that adopt the aesthetics that go back to a different tradition of modernist art, design and photography of the 1920s. It was further developed in commercial fashion, advertising, and editorial photography of the 1940s–1950s. Note that I use "aesthetics" to refer to a combination of visual style, photo techniques and types of content, because in Instagram photos they usually go together. These aesthetics (there is more than one) follow their own conventions, but because they emerged very recently, they may be still less fixed than that of professional photographs. One significant difference between professional and designed image is the treatment of space. Professional photos often show deep space, exaggerated by composition, blurred backgrounds, and choice of subjects. In contrast, designed photos often create a shallower or flat space with strong two-dimensional rhythm more similar to modernist abstract art and design. If landscape and cityscape genre exemplifies professional photo aesthetics, still-life and "flat lay" genres exemplify design photo aesthetics.

I use the term Instagramism to refer to the aesthetics of designed photos on Instagram and other platforms. I proposed that the key aspect of Instagramism is the focus on *mood* and *atmosphere* rather than *representation* or communication of *emotions*. I also proposed that Instagramism does not dramatically oppose "commercial" and "dominant" imagery and genres such as *lifestyle* genre of photography and videography. Instead it establishes small and subtle *distinctions* from this imagery in terms what is shown, how it is shown, and for what purpose. In contrast to the often binary differences between "high" and "low" cultures, or the clear oppositions between "mainstream" culture and "subcultures" during the twentieth century as analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu, Dick Hebdige and others, Instagramism uses alternative mechanism. In this it participates in the larger aesthetics movement of the early twenty-first century also exemplified in "normcore" style.

High/low and mainstream/subcultures distinctions corresponded to class differences in income, types of occupations, background, and education. In contrast, I see *Instagramism* as the aesthetic of the new *global digital youth* class that emerges in early 2010s. This class partially overlaps with the global *Adobe class*.

Adobe Class is my term for young professionally educated creatives working in design, video, social media or fashion. Adobe Creative Cloud software dominates the market for design and media authoring. There are over 8 million registered software users worldwide as of 09/2016. We can alternatively refer to Adobe Class as *Behance Class*. Behance.net is the leading global portfolio sharing platform. It is owned by Adobe and integrated with Adobe media creation software, so a designer can directly share her/his work on Behance from Adobe applications. Behance reported that it has six million registered users at the end of 2015.

Our junior lab researcher Zizi Li contacted twenty-four Instagram users who have feeds of well-designed photos to ask if they had any formal education in art, design, photography or any other creative fields, or if they work in any of these fields at present. Half of the responders had such education and/or positions; the other half did not.

Figure 2. Selected pages from Behance 2015 Year in Review report.

Figure 3. Behance.com home page (accessed 12/24/2016). The pull down menu shows creative fields categories available for members to share their portfolios.
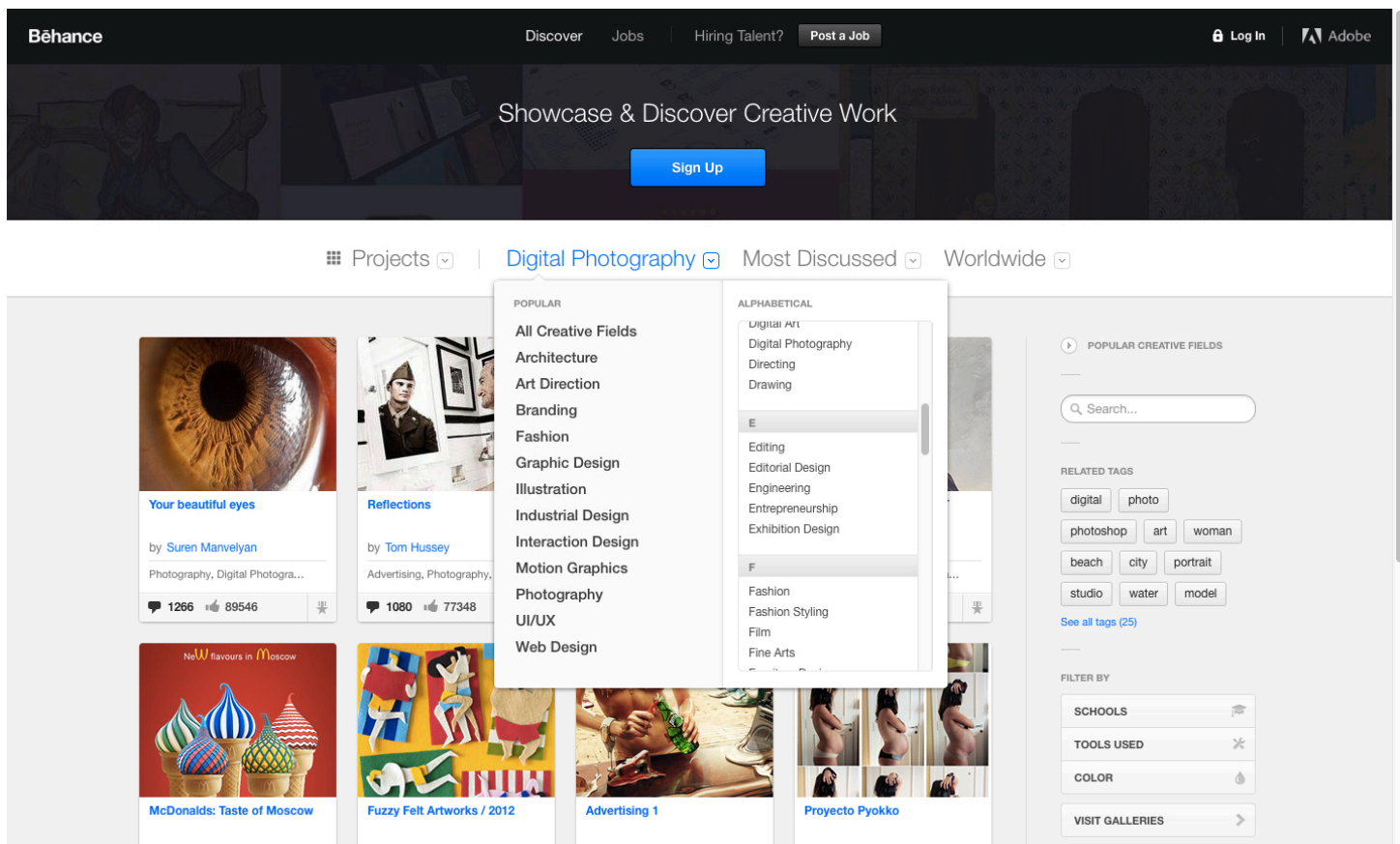
Instagramism vs. "Normal" Photography

I noted that Instagramism does not dramatically oppose commercial visual aesthetics. For example, browsing stock and microstock photography sites such as Shutterstock, 500px, and dozens of others (Schreiber, 2016) we see many photos in lifestyle or food categories that are very similar to many personal photos on Instagram.

But how is the aesthetic of Instagram designed photos related to aesthetics of casual and professional photo types? In modern society where many aesthetics, styles, and cultural choices co-exist, they often have to define themselves in opposition to each other. In contrast to earlier human societies which often were completely isolated, modern culture is *structural* in Saussure's sense. Because many types of cultural "positions" (i.e., aesthetics, ideals, sensibilities, ideologies, interpretations) co-exist, their creators and promoters have to define them in opposition to each other. More generally, we can say that they are being deliberately positioned sufficiently far from each in a *cultural competitive landscape.* (The metaphor of a landscape containing a number of cultural items situated at particular distances from each

other is not my invention. Marketing research uses a set of methods called *perceptual mapping* to analyze and diagram customer perceptions of relations between competing products or brands. Relative positions and cognitive distances between any cultural artifacts, authors, genres, styles and aesthetic systems can be also analyzed and visualized using this approach. In many projects of our lab, we visualize results of computational analysis of characteristics of large sets of cultural artifacts as such maps.)

So how do you define aesthetics of designed photos using Instagram affordances? How do we create Instagram *cool*? By opposing popular image aesthetics, i.e. the types of photo conventions what we think of as *normal, mainstream, popular*. (Historically the term *cool* and a related term *hipster* became popular in the 1960s, when they were opposed to the term *square* that today is not used that often. See Wikipedia, 2016a.)

For example, if *casual* portraits and self-portraits (e.g., selfies) show full figures of one or more people arranged symmetrically in the center, *designed* photos instead show parts of bodies away from center cut by a frame (think of Degas). They also avoid showing faces directly looking into the camera (see my discussion of "anti-selfie" genre in Tifentale & Manovich 2016).

Similarly, if *casual* and *professional* photos favor landscapes and cityscape genres and often exaggerate the perspective and sense of deep space, *designed* photos flatten the space and use large areas empty of any details. (In terms of lenses or zoom levels, this is the opposition between *wide angle* and *telephoto* view that flattens the space.)

The strategies such as faces and bodies cut by frame and flat space align designed Instagram photography with the first generation of "mobile photography" – Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy and other New Vision photographers of the 1920s and early 1930s. They created the visual aesthetics of "making strange" by practicing visual strategies that similarly opposed the popular taste, i.e., symmetrical compositions, full figures and faces looking into the camera. Using the affordances of first compact 35mm Leica camera released in 1925, New Vision photographers developed a different visual language: looking at the subject at a 60 to 90 degree angle from below or above; diagonal compositions; showing only parts of objects and people cut by a photo frame; using high contrast and geometric shadows that flatten the shapes and space and interfere with shape perception. In other words, they were making photography that was *defamiliarizing* the familiar reality, thus creating a visual analog of *ostranenie* effect that Viktor Shklovsky described in 1917 in relation to literature. And, as many other avant-garde visual movements of the 1910s and 1920s, they were *making perception difficult* – by not using visual strategies of "normal" photography. That is, I think that simply understanding the content of many of their photos required more cognitive effort, since the compositions and subjects of these photos did not immediately trigger familiar cognitive frames. (Of course, as these strategies were gradually adopted in commercial design such as magazine covers and layouts, they became cultural stereotypes that are predictable and therefore easier to recognize and process cognitively. On the role of stereotypes, "exposure effect," and "cognitive fluency" in cognitive processing of design, see MacKay, 2015.)

Figure 4. Examples of strategies used in designed Instagram photography. Selected photos from Instagram feed @recklesstonight (Kiev, Ukraine) shared during October - December 2015.
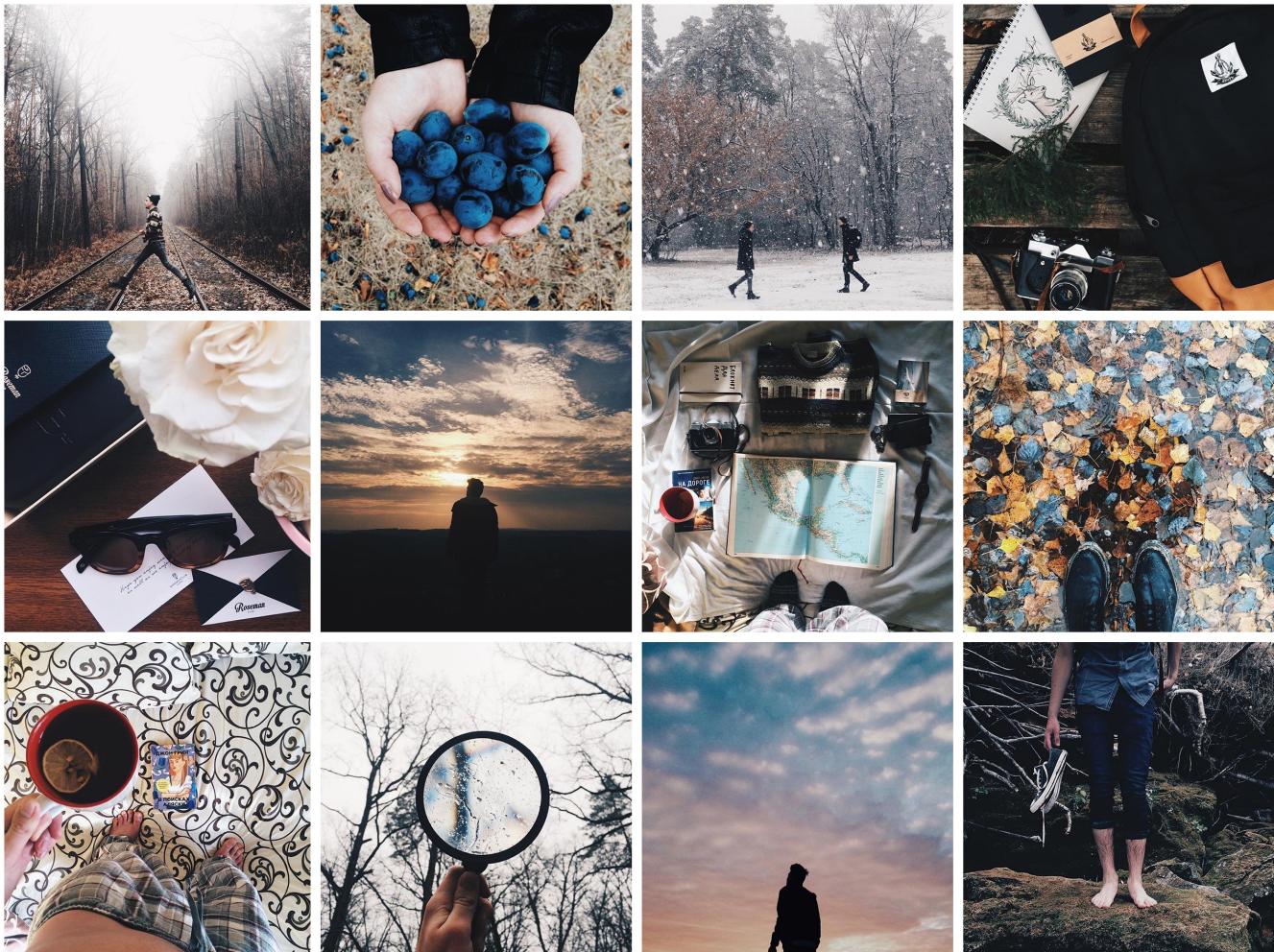
Casual and professional photos adopt a set of visual conventions to document events, people, and situations that follow accepted social norms – for example, taking a group photo at meetings, conferences, and trips. Designed photos express urban/hipster sensibility that opposes these norms. This opposition is constructed using another set of norms – that of contemporary (2010–) design culture. How does this work?

The creators of designed photos find or stage unique moments, feelings, and states of being – in space, in time, with other people, with objects important to them. But rather than directly negating square reality through a strong alternative aesthetics (as hippies did in the 1960s), contemporary Instagram hipsters are often happy to subscribe to the styles of global consumer minimalism. Their Instagram photos and feeds (this term refers to all photos added by a user to her/his account over time) represent our current historical period where the twentieth century opposites – art and commerce,

individual and *corporate, natural* and *fabricated, raw and edited* – are blended together. The *Instagram hipster* effortlessly navigates between these positions, without experiencing them as contradictions.

Figure 5. Part of the article in businessinsider.com (2015) that discusses historical origins of *flat lay* Instagram genre. Left flat lay used to a magazine. Middle and right: examples of flat lay genre from Instagram. Source: Megan Willett, "Everyone's obsessed with 'knolling' their stuff and putting the photo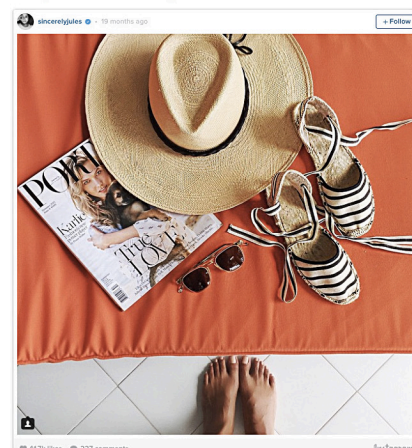s on Instagram," businessinsider.com, May 14, 2015. http://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-flat-lay-trend-knolling-2015-5.
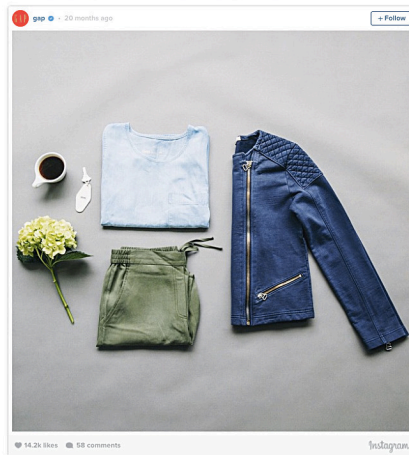
Faces and Bodies

Now, let's think about the frequent subjects of designed photos. I listed some of these subjects in Chapter 2 of my *Instagram* book (Manovich, 2016). They are "spreads" or "flat lays"; photos of separate objects, parts of a body arranged with the object spreads or separate objects; parts of a body (such as hands holding objects or pointing) with landscapes or cityscapes; a full body positioned towards the edge or corner in a scene.

Is there any common pattern in these subjects? Yes: it is the *presence of Instagrammer's body in the designed photos.* But these representations do not follow the mainstream portrait conventions – instead, they deliberately oppose these conventions. Hands, fingers, feet or complete figures that are shown in *situations*: waking up, enjoying a relaxing coffee moment, surrounded by objects, pointing towards the landscape or objects in the cityscape, from the back, and so on. This set of strategies does not appear in the commercial and advertising photography published today or earlier in the twentieth century, and it also did not exist in New Vision photography.

My suggested interpretation of these Instagramism strategies is the following. The Instagram author is not a Renaissance or Modernist observer situated *outside of the scene* s/he records according to

perspectival rules. Instead, she is *in the scene, in the situation, in the moment*. (See the section on "anti-selfie" in "Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self," see Tifentale & Manovich, 2016.)

To achieve this effect, often somebody else has to photograph the author in the scene. This is similar to a third person narration in literature, or a third person view in video games, when the virtual camera is positioned behind the character the player currently controls.

And in a certain sense, hipster life as recorded/staged in a series of Instagram photos is similar to video games which use first person/third person narrator. In the case of Instagram, the narrative is about the author travelling through the game world, encountering other people and objects, participating in interesting situations, and having emotionally satisfying experiences. Like a person navigating worlds in a game – and unlike a tourist observing from a distance – contemporary Instragrammer is immersed in the experiences, moments and situations. (On the concepts of immersion and presence in the study of video games, see Denisova & Cairns, 2015.) And if a tourist is looking for the unique and exotic, the Instagrammist often enjoys the familiar and even everyday: being in the favorite cafe in the city she lives in, visiting favorite places in that city, or simply being in her well-designed apartment or even one aesthetically controlled corner of the apartment. Instead of only showing her experiences when she travels to far away locations, being in her everyday space is the most important subject! Thus, it is about *interior lifestyle* rather than tourist view outside – although certainly Instagram also has the popular *nomad* theme as a well, presenting a diary of a person who never stays too long in one area.

The original use of the hipster term in the 1940 was associated with hot jazz. This association, in turn, allows us to better understand the meaning of hipness in Instagramism. Lives of Instagrammers as presented in their feeds can be compared to *unique improvised experiences* of jazz players opposed to *planned and routine life* of "squares."

Today, the enhanced contrast, saturation and/or colors, the use of diagonals, the appearance of objects and bodies cut by an image frame in designed Instagram photos are signs of the immersion, and of *life as improvisation*. In choosing and representing (or staging and designing) such style of existence, Instagram authors echo the behavior of the original American hipsters of 1940s–1950s:

> The hipster world that Kerouac and Ginsberg drifted in and out of from the mid-1940s to the early-1950s was an amorphous movement without ideology, more a pose than an attitude; a way of "being" without attempting to explain why… The division was *hip* and *square*. Squares sought security and conned themselves into political acquiescence. Hipsters, hip to the bomb, sought the meaning of life and, expecting death, demanded it now.
> (Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945–1960*.)

Of course, looking at many examples of contemporary Instagramism, it is possible to argue that "life as improvisation" the authors show is completely staged and planned by them. But the reality is more complicated. The boundary between authentic and staged, improvised and planned is not always clear. For example, if the author does some basic edits to the captured photos, increasing a bit brightness, contrast, and sharpness, at what point do we declare this photo to be "calculated" rather than "authentic"?

Instagram Themes

As Instagram continued to attract more and more users, and as brands discovered Instagram, many authors learned that they can use their feeds as advertising for their small business or freelance work, or as a way to supplement their income by promoting products sent to them by companies, or to completely support themselves by becoming *influencers.* As this happened, the number of photos and feeds that are carefully planned has quickly increased. Multiple evidence suggests that this shift took place during 2014–2015.

One very strong example of this *structuration of Instagram* is the emergence of *strong rules* one has to follow to attract many followers. The first rule: develop a particular *style* and always use it for all the photos in your feed.

By 2015, we see even more structure. In addition to earlier term *style*, another term becomes popular dominating "how to" advice, posts, and help videos: a *theme.* A theme may combine certain subjects, a particular color palette, and contrast choice.

Using Google Trends and a search phrase "instagram theme ideas," I found that the global web search traffic for this phrase started to increase in January 2014, and then flattened by June 2015. YouTube has hundreds of thousands of "how to" videos about Instagram editing, strategies and theme ideas. I have searched YouTube on 11/19/2016 for few relevant phrases that appear in video titles. Here are these phrases and numbers of video returned. (Note that to find only directly relevant videos, I have entered the search phrase in quotes.)

"how i edit my instagram photos" – 131,000 videos.
"how i edit my instagram pictures" – 48,600 videos.
"how i edit my instagram photos white theme" – 20,000 videos.
"how i edit my instagram minimal theme" – 6,130 videos.

Figure 6. Screenshots from YouTube "how I edit my Instagram" videos, captured 12/24/2016. In such videos, the presentation often includes shots of an author speaking to the audience, shots showing apps and phone screens, and shots that combine these two subjects (shown here).
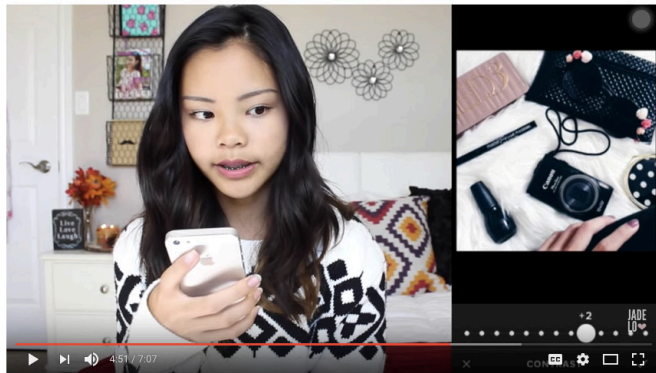
How I Edit My Instagram Photos!
229,239 views   👍 6K 👎 81
Jade Lo ✓
Published on Oct 12, 2015   SUBSCRIBE 156K

How I Edit My Instagram | White Theme
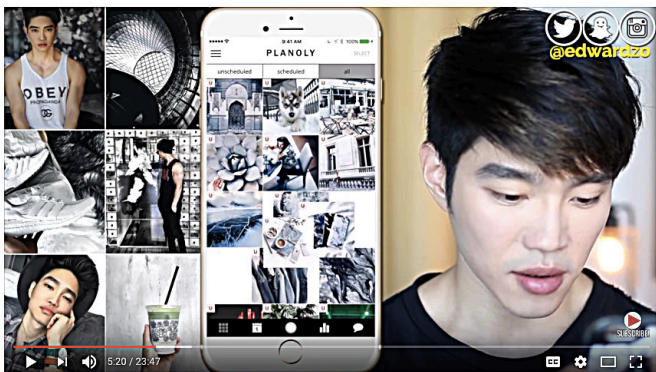173,133 views   👍 3K 👎 60
Levi Rocha
Published on Sep 20, 2015   SUBSCRIBE 21K

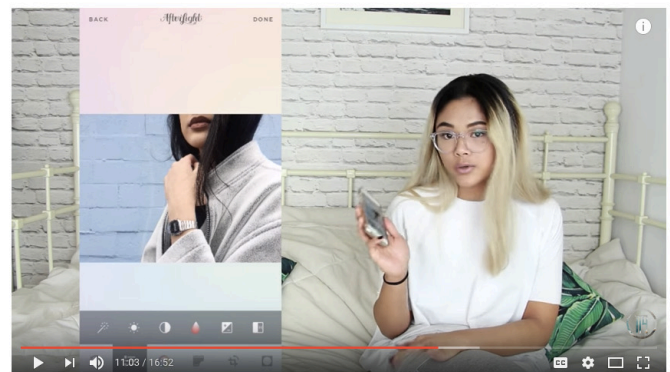5 Instagram Hacks for a Perfect Aesthetic Theme! + How I Edit My Photos
215,051 views   👍 6K 👎 108
EdwardZo
Published on Sep 4, 2016   SUBSCRIBE 72K

TAKING + EDITING INSTAGRAM PHOTOS | ToThe9s
622,209 views   👍 24K 👎 196
ToThe9s ✓
Published on Apr 19, 2016   SUBSCRIBE 462K

Many of these videos are very popular reaching hundreds of thousands of views in a few months after their publication. This partly can be explained by the fact that many videos in this genre feature young female authors. But there are also many popular videos that feature young and equally hip male authors. Here are just a few examples of the videos and numbers of views (as of 11/19/2016):

> "How I Edit My Instagram Pictures + My Theme," published on 07/19/2916, 421,000 views.
> "How I edit my Instagram pictures! | Minimal aesthetic," published on 08/07/2016, 231,000 views.
> "34 Instagram Themes," published on 06/08/2016, 187,000 views.

> Using a theme does not mean that all photos in one feed should be similar. On the contrary, you have to have enough variety but this variety also has to be structured. So this is the second rule of

Instagramism: *establish and follow a particular temporal pattern for your feed*. Never post similar photos next to each other, but instead alternate between a few types in a systematic way. Create an interesting formal temporal rhythm, alternating between compositions, color palettes or other variables. And if the goal of your feed is to feature products, place enough photos of other subjects in between product photos.

Designing Photo Sequences

The mobile Instagram app allows users to view photo in a few different ways. (Details below refer to Instagram app interface in mid 2010s.) Gallery view shows nine photos organized a 3 x 3 grid. The order of photos corresponds to the dates and times they were shared on Instagram, with newer photos appearing first. Scrolling down reveals the earlier photos. Clicking on a single photo in a grid brings a new view. It shows this photo at a larger size along with other information: number of likes, comments, posted date and time. This screen also allows a user to perform a number of functions such as "like," comment, and share. (For the analysis of Instagram interface, see Hochman & Manovich, 2013). Finally, a user also has another view which shows all photos shared by all authors s/he follows. Since this timeline is also sorted by date/time, the photos of a given author appear in between photos of all other authors.

Since the time is such important dimension of Instagram interface and user experience, many Instagrammers design their feeds accordingly as *aesthetic experiences in time*. They employ special *sequencing* techniques that respond to the ways their photos are viewed by others which I listed above.

Given the two rules for "good Instagram feeds," we can divide Instagram authors into two corresponding types. Some control the characteristics of all or at least most of their individual photos, but make no attempt to sequence them in any particular way. Others control both the aesthetics of individual photos and the overall aesthetics of a sequence.

For the latter type of authors (which can be individuals, professional bloggers, influencers, and companies), *the sequence aesthetics takes priority over any individual photos*. No matter how interesting a particular photo is, the author does not post it if it breaks the established rhythm and theme. The blog post called "How to Establish Your Instagram Aesthetic" (Nadine, 2015) explains this:

> Resist the urge to post things that won't fit in. It might be tempting to post something funny or beautiful that doesn't fit in with the look you've chosen. At some point, you'll have a photo you desperately want to post but it just doesn't work. Resist the urge to post it anyway and take to Twitter. Any photos that don't fit in my Instagram aesthetic go straight to Twitter. Sometimes they are photos that followers would truly enjoy but one photo that is outside of your chosen aesthetic might look odd in your feed.

A post called "Reimaging Your Instagram Profile" (Dana, 2015) from another blog gives these suggestions:

Come up with a theme and stick with it. Maybe you love colorful and bright photos, or maybe only black and white photos. Maybe you post drawings, or photos of lovely landscapes. Maybe you like styling posts or taking close ups of objects. This doesn't mean creating the same photo again and again, it just means using that basic idea to inspire your next photo. Find the formula that works for you and that can easily and quickly be adapted to your future photos…*Your formula should help your photos appear as if they are part of a set. Like they belong together*. Try not to break the chain – Breaking the chain of related photos using your formula is sometimes difficult. You don't have to post every single photo you take, just the ones that are superb… so try to at least make those ones match the rest.

One male Instagrammer explained in an interview in 2014 how he used small photo printouts to design the sequence of his photos before starting his Instagram account. He quickly gathered over 50,000 followers purely on the strength of his individual photos and his sequencing. I am highlighting this author because his feed does not include any photos with popular type content that used to get likes and followers such as spectacular views of exotic landscapes, young females in swimsuits, or pretty female faces. In 2016, it became common among Instagrammers to have two Instagram accounts. The one is for the public; the second is private and used to lay out sequences and see if new photos fit the theme and established rhythm before they are added to the public account.
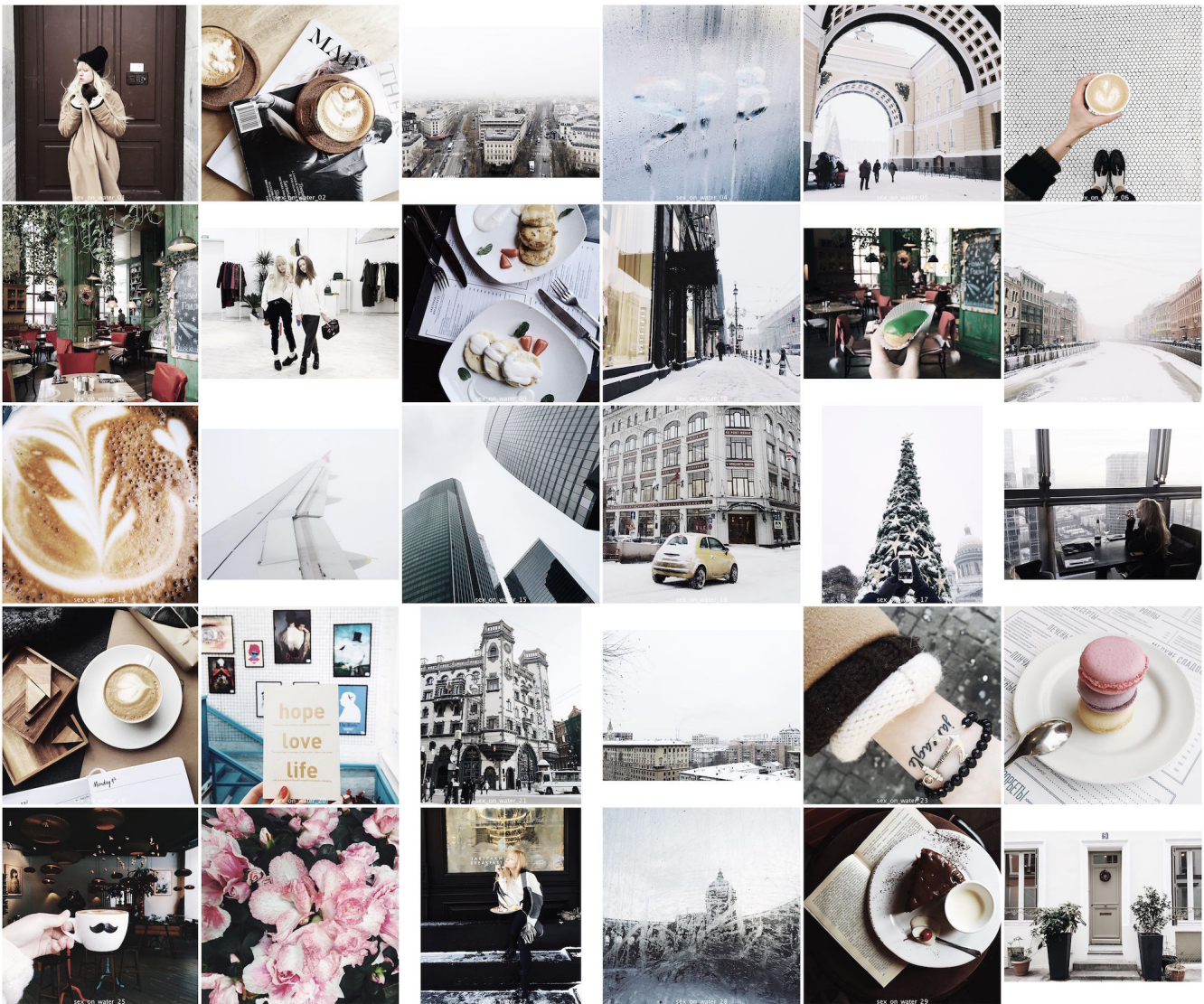
The authors who design both individual photos and their sequences may be considered as the true "Instagram professionals." They do not follow the rules of "good photography" and strategies developed well before Instagram for different photo capture and edit technologies, publication and exhibition platforms, and circulation and feedback mechanisms. Instead, they systematically exploit the specific properties, affordances, advantages, and limitations of the medium Instagram.

Figure 7. Examples of sequence strategies used by three Instagram authors. We selected a sequence of 30 photos posted sequentially from each author account. The photos are sorted in the order they appear in Instagram feed (left to right, top to bottom). Here is basic information about these authors, including number of follows as of number of followers 05/06/2016:

@sex_on_water. Country. Russia (Saint Petersburg) Followers: 48,000.
Self-description: "Evgeniya Iokar. Traveller+Photographer+Blogger+Barista."
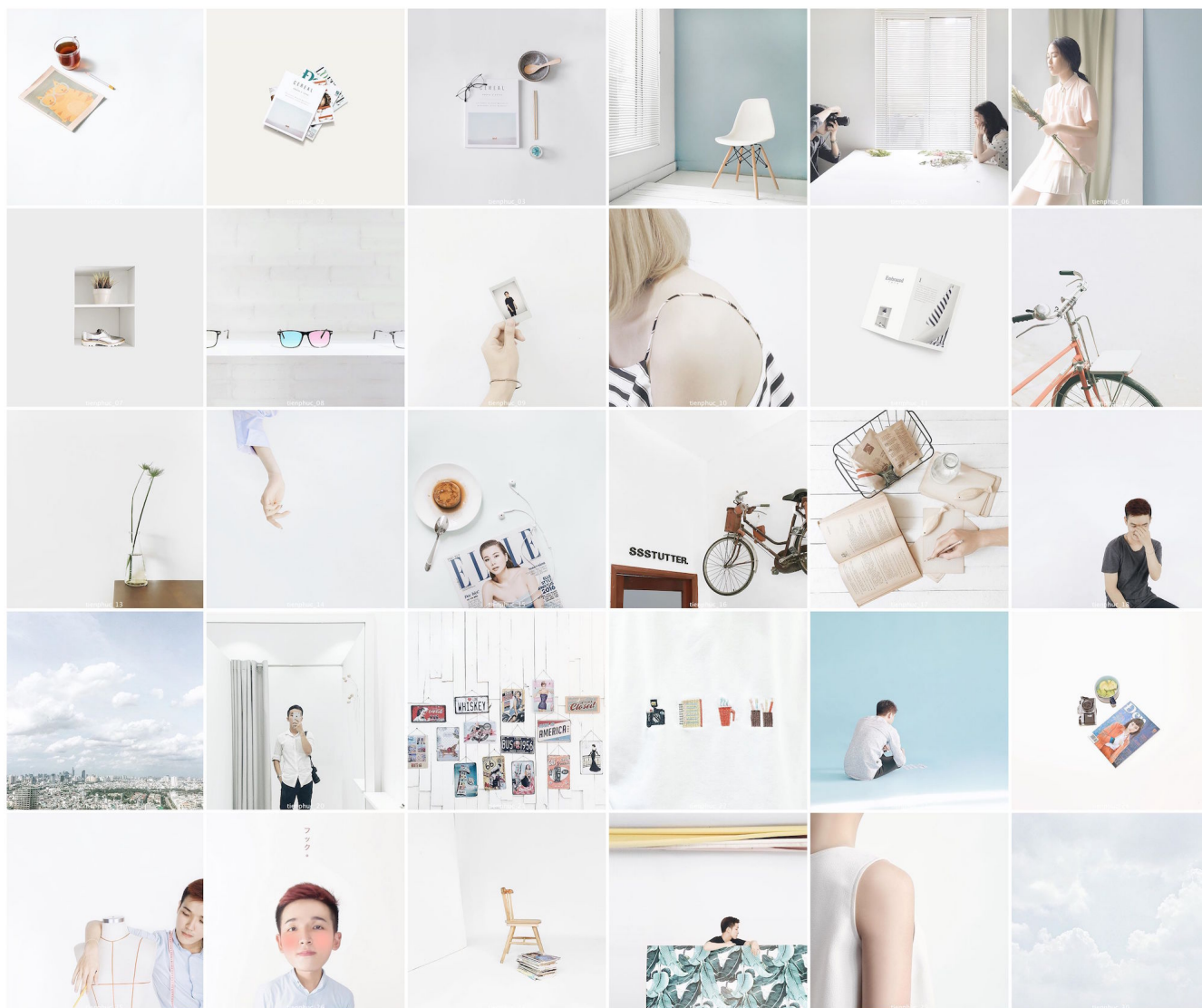
@tienphuc. Country: Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City), Followers: 3815.
Self-description: "Graphic Designer+Photographer." https://www.facebook.com/kenneth.nguyen2295

@zahrada. Country: Japan (Kamakura). Profession: unknown. Followers: 13,000.
Member of Instagram groups: _rsa_minimal, mw_jp ("A community for mobile photography in Japan").

@sex_on_water

@tienphuc
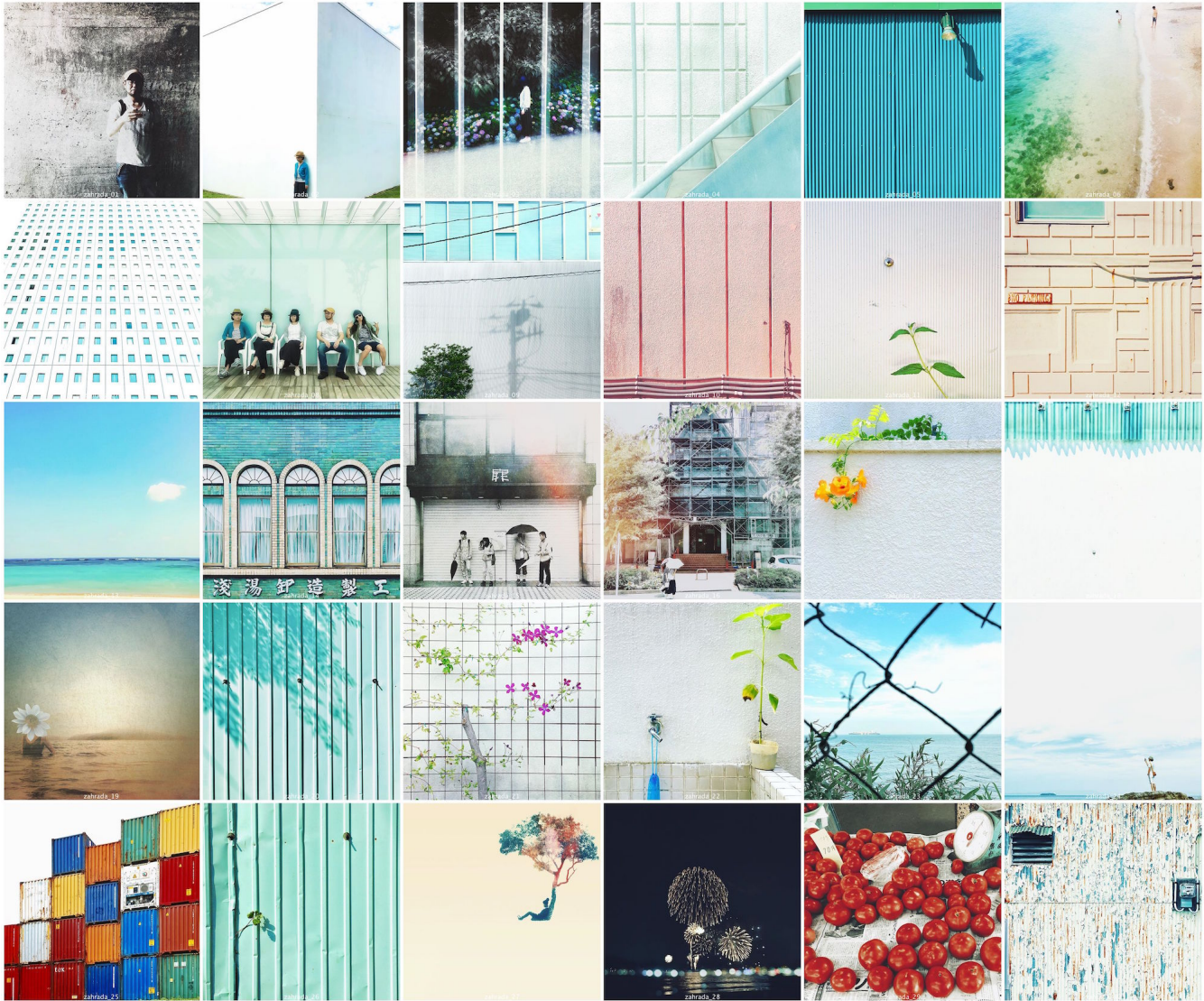
@zahrada

Learning *Instagramism*

For a few years I have been following a number of Instagram authors who have perfectly designed individual photos and sequences of them in their feeds. I suspected that most do not have any art, photography or design school training. The descriptions below their photos, blogs, and YouTube channels linked to their Instagram accounts and occasional statement of ages reveal that many of these authors are in school and some are only 13–16 years old. So they did not yet have a chance to study art or design in a university. And they are not necessary based in larger metropolitan centers – many live in smaller cities.

However, their visual sophistication, the skills in using Instagram, and overall quality of their feeds from my point of view is often superior to that of the big commercial brands or adult, professionally trained image makers. Where do these individual users learn this? A likely explanation is that at least some of these sophisticated young users learn from following and studying others who use the medium well, and by "soaking in" the design principles from numerous well-designed web sites, blogs, apps, and also well designed physical objects and spaces – although for young people who live in many small locations far from larger cities, online resources such as YouTube "how to" videos and blog posts certainly have to be the major, if not the only, source.

The volume of YouTube videos where Instagrammers show how they edit individual photos, explain how to create some theme, and give other advice, and the number of views of these videos also suggest that the number of "Instagram professionals" is very large, and it has been gradually growing during Instagram history. The authors of such videos are also often teenagers or young adults in their early twenties. One popular type of such videos I already mentioned above is "How I edit my Instagram?" (131,000 videos as of 11/20/2016). In this video genre, the author demonstrates the process s/he follows to edit each of their photos before they are posted. The author works on a single photo using a few different apps such as VSCO and Snapseed in a sequence. There are currently hundreds of third party mobile photo editing apps available for both Apple and Android phones, and thousands of articles that review and compare them. Each app is used for particular types of edits, and then a photo is taken to the next app. (For the analysis of similar professional design workflow where project is moved from one application to the next, see Manovich, 2013).

In this way, the author applies a number of edits (which may or may not include applying a filter) both to improve a photo and make sure that it fits with her aesthetic and theme. Another popular type of video is a tour of the author's phone screens showing all her photo editing apps, with explanations of which photo editing app should be used then. Some authors have 15–20 editing apps on their phone. Some are used for almost every photo; others only occasionally to add very particular effects.

In one of "how to" YouTube video from 2014, a young Russian female creator of sophisticated design photos says to her audience: "Find your filters." Her message: Find your own style and use it systematically. Create your own distinct visual identity. Experiment and find your own visual voice. Even though two years later, in 2016, the use of a single filter apparently is not enough, the logic of her message remains equally relevant.

And that is what hundreds of thousands and perhaps even millions of other Instagram creators are doing: learning from each other and from today's highly designed visual environment, and exploring the unique characteristics of Instagram medium. Their designed images and narratives are their unique art and also *life form*. They use the Instagram medium to find people like them, to share their images, feelings and thoughts with global audiences who like what they like, to form groups based on common Instagram patterns (like other bloggers do, too), to plan trips with them, to support each other in hard moments, to share discoveries, and to define themselves.

The fact that they may be copying styles and strategies from other Instagram users, fashion collections, design sites, magazines, and other sources where modern design and hip sensibilities can be

observed does not make them any less *authentic* or less *real*. To them, what is real is *what they feel, their emotions, and their aesthetic preferences that generate a sense of coherence and self.*

Do We Need to "Liberate" Instagram Authors?

Originally a platform aimed at "normal" people rather than professional photographers or companies, Instagram's own popularity transformed it as it grew from 100 million monthly active users in February 2013 to 500,000 million in February 2015 (Instagram, 2016). Facebook bought Instagram in April 2012. The company started to add new features to help businesses use the platform for marketing, advertising, and to "have a dialog with their customers." Other features helped individuals integrate their Instagram posts with their other social networks, which made these posts more valuable as promotion tools.

In June 2013, Instagram added the ability to connect Instagram accounts to Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr (Wikipedia, 2016b). In November of the same year, the company enabled advertising via a new *sponsored post* type (Protalinski, 2013). The first company to use this was fashion designer brand Michael Kors.

A number of important features for business accounts were announced in May 2016. They include analytics and "the ability to turn Instagram posts into ads directly from the Instagram app itself" (Perez, 2016). The analytics feature called Insights shows "top posts, reach, impressions and engagement around posts, along with data on followers like their gender, age and location." According to Instagram, by that time it already had 200,000 advertisers, and these features were designed to allow business users to understand their current and prospective customers, reach more people, and refine their profiles (Perez, 2016).

Many Instagram posts that promote products and brands emulate more personal Instagram aesthetics with its "being in the scene" pathos. The article "Master the 4 Types of Product Instagrams" (Waldron, 2015) describes how to photograph products using these four styles: *flat lay*, *minimalist* ("Showcase a product in a natural setting" but without distracting background), *the first person,* and *the scene.* The descriptions of the last two types are very revealing (Waldron, 2015):

> *The First Person*. Give viewers a sense of being in the moment, by taking photos from a first person angle. It helps promote aspirational dreams relating to the product. Hold the camera in a spot that would resemble what someone would be seeing themselves. Centering the product is a good way to keep it feeling personal and clean.
> *The Scene*. Shoot the product with beautiful scenery and even a storyline in the description for viewers to envision themselves partaking in. It gives life behind the product.

The difference between pre-Instagram advertising photography and these Instagram photo types in that in the former, products or models are presented from the outside, as though looking at the shop window. But in Instagram, products appear as part the author's life. So if the people already identify

themselves with this author's lifestyle and aesthetics, they may also identify with the products presented in this way.

However, as I already noted, the same "product styles" are also used by Instagram authors for non-commercial purpose: to show their favorite objects and their latest fashion purchases, or include themselves in the photographed scene. Does every photo showing a hand holding a pretty cappuccino cup promote it? Of course not. But does it contribute to establishing or maintaining the author's personal "brand," even if this author never sells or promotes anything? Of course yes. And where does the type of photo that shows a close-up of an object or its part, thus "fetishizing" it, come from? This photo type first appeared in advertising around 1908–1913.

Are the Instagram authors who brand themselves through the use of consistent aesthetics and also practice "product styles" trapped in "ideology" (Marx, *German Ideology*, 1845) and "spectacle" (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967) ? Is Instagram's self-*branded self* always a *false self*? Do we need to "liberate" these authors?

In my view, "trapped" Instagram authors are the ones who take photos with what I called professional aesthetics, or aspire or already enjoy their "normal" bourgeois life, and do not question the world as presented to them in advertising and in "news." Their *good photos* express this sense of *conformity*, the desire to be like everybody else, i.e. to *follow the dominant social and cultural norms*. I am using terms like "dominant" and "mainstream" to refer to behaviors, taste, and values that are being held and practiced by a significantly larger proportion of people than any alternatives. This may make these values to appear *natural* and *right*.

In contrast, I see many *designed* photos and Instagramism aesthetics as expressions of a *liberated* consciousness that is critical of the global middle class reality. (Note that the middle class grew substantially around the world after the 1990s, reaching 784 million in 2011 according to a recent analysis, with most growth taking place in Asia.)[1] Instagramism finds meaning in refined sensibility rather than in blind conformity. It can mix and match elements from diverse *style and lifestyle* worlds, without the fear of "losing yourself."

In this interpretation, the authors of many designed photos carry on the original vision of Instagram from 2010. In this vision, "Instagram" was constructed via a set of differences from the "normal" *good photography.* They include a square format and filters that not only beautify photos but can also introduce artifacts, erase details, and add irregular lightness and color gradients that subvert the perfect photo realism of the lens. The *normal photography* at that time meant 3 × 4 image ratio inherited from 35 mm film cameras, having everything in focus, and also showing deep perspectival space in landscapes, cityscapes, and group portraits. These norms were common in both professional and casual photography.

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[1] The figure of 784 million members of global middle class by 2011comes from Kochnar, 2015. A much higher figure of 1.8 billion is reported in Pezzini, 2012. While thing economists do agree on is that the size of the global middle class grew substantially. Kochnar, for example, claims that this size grew from 399 million to 784 million between 2001 and 2011, reaching 200 million in China alone.

Because such norms were most common, and because they were used in advertising, editorial, and corporate photography, their message is *enslavement* to the word *as it exists now*, to *the safe,* and to *the common sense*. The designed and more abstract photos, on the contrary, communicate, in my view, a different message: *having a distance*, being conscious of how social reality is constructed, and being aware of the conventions, norms, and signs of global middle class ideal of our time.

Appropriation, Subcultures, Tribes, Mainstream?

In contrast to the influential analysis of the styles of subcultures in Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), I do not see Instagram aesthetic of *designed* photos as a symbolic resistance. Young Instagram hipsters *do not resist* the mainstream; they *co-exist* with *it*, and are not afraid to borrow its elements or show how much they enjoy commercial products and their favorite brands.

Instagramism is not about binary differences from the mainstream. It is about selection and combination of particular elements, drawn from different contemporary and historical universes, including commercial offerings. (In contemporary visual creative industry, this remix logic was best realized in my view in collections of a number of fashion designers created between 1993 and 2006. Among the top global designers in that period, these were Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, and Jean Paul Gaultier).

Our standard model of modern and contemporary cultures assumes that new styles, sounds, art forms, ways of behavior, and other cultural strategies and imaginaries are typically created by small subcultures and then later appropriated by commercial culture producers who package them into products sold to the masses. Indeed, we can easily evoke plenty of examples of such appropriation stories. The subcultures or cultural movements who figure as original inventors in these stories include European Modernists of the 1920s, Paris Surrealists of the 1930s, Beat Generation in late 1940s in NYC, Northern California Hippies in the 1960s, Hip Hop in the Bronx in the early 1970s, or Williamsburg (Brooklyn) in late 1990s.

Does Instagram hip generation fit into this model? In my view, *Instagrammers are neither the avant-garde creating something entirely new, not subcultures that define themselves in opposition to the mainstream,* nor the *masses consuming commodified versions of aesthetics developed earlier by some subcultures*. (They are more similar to Maffesoli's tribes, but existing in the digital global Instagram "city" rather than as "villages" in a physical city. See Bennett, 1999 for the overview of "subculture" and "tribe" concepts in sociology of culture).

If creation of something *new* by small subcultures or modernist art movements represents a *first stage*, and later appropriation and packaging for the masses represents a *second stage* in modern cultural evolution, than the "cultural logic" of Instagramism represents a *third stage*: Instagrammers appropriating elements of commercial products and offerings to create their own aesthetics. Instagram and other visual global networks quickly disseminate these aesthetic forms worldwide.

As opposed to *the movement of cultural innovation from individuals and small groups to companies and then the masses as described by* *appropriation* *model*, we also now have *other types of movements enabled by social networks*: from individuals and groups to other individuals and groups. The industry *borrows as much from these individuals and groups as it influences them*. (This logic was already anticipated in the emergence of *coolhunting* research in the early 1990s. See Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016.)

On Instagram, one operates in a truly global space not constrained by local physical and geographical reality. Although there are many paid photo editing apps available, both Instagram and enough powerful third party editing apps are free. Among young people in most countries in Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe today, mobile phone and social media use is as a big or even higher than in the developed Western economies (see stats in figures 8 and 9). The same fashion and lifestyle magazines, perfect cappuccino and latte cups, fashion items, and brands of sport shoes can appear in photos from almost anywhere in the world where there are young people who use Instagram. Certainly, because of the differences in income, fewer people in developing countries can afford global brands like Zara or Uniqlo, but there are enough local brands that are cheaper and make products that look equally good.

In physical reality, the local norms constraint how people dress and behave. Compare New York's Chelsea & Lower East Side, Seoul's Garosu-gil, and Harajuku area in Tokyo. You hardly see any color besides black in New York; in Seoul, white/grey/black palette is the norm; in Harajuku, it is combinations of complementary (warm and cold) bright saturated colors and pastels. Each cultural norm offers plenty of space for variations and individualization – Tokyo street fashion was the most extreme well-known example of such variations in the 2000s. *A* *cultural norm constraints choices only on a few dimensions but not on others.* So while my examples focused on only one type of Instagram designed aesthetics that we found in images from many countries, it would be very interesting to investigate other types of Instagram aesthetics that reflect other local aesthetic norms.

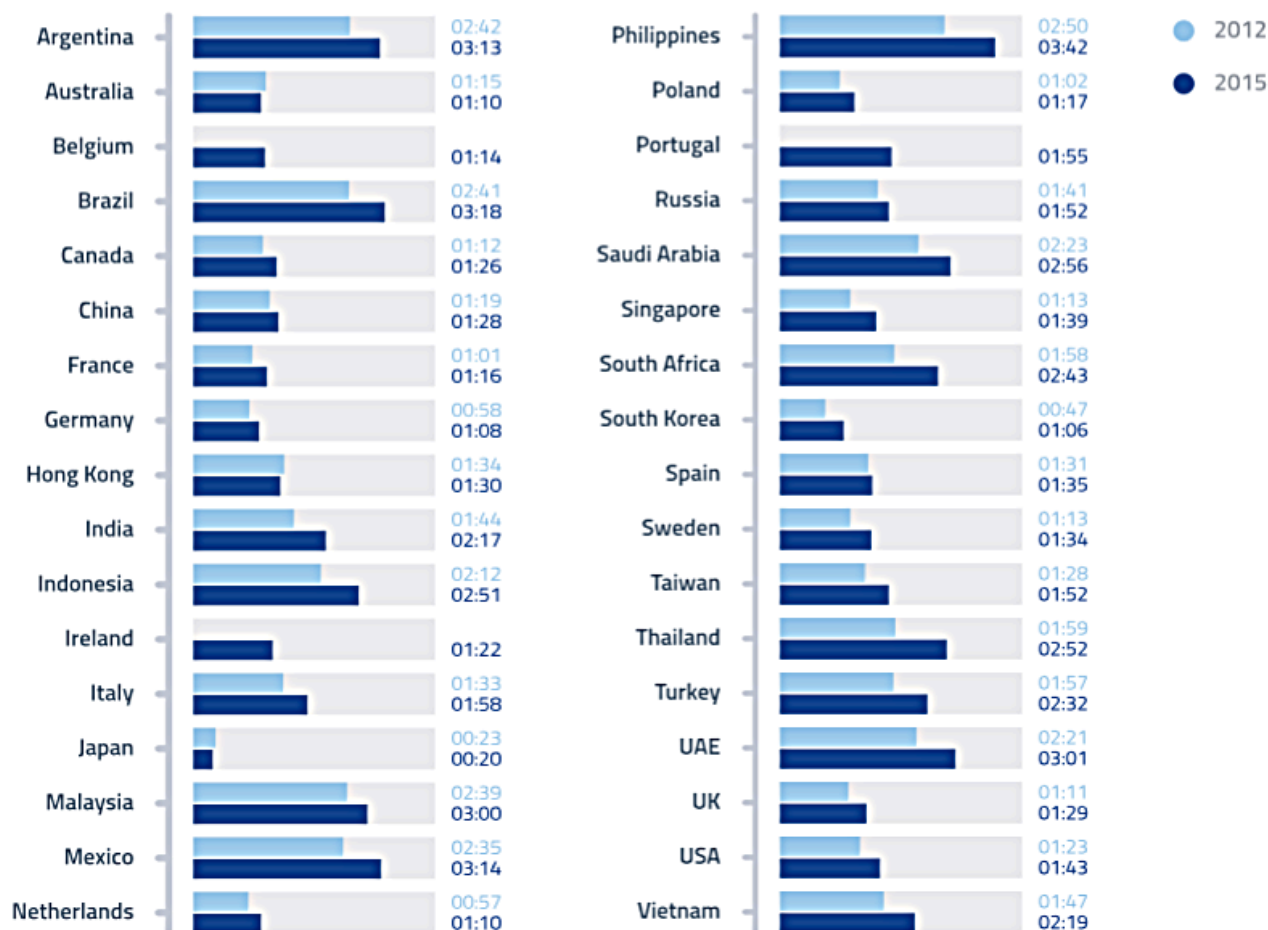I hope my analysis has demonstrated that Instagram today offers a great platform for studying not only contemporary global photography, but also contemporary global cultural evolution and dynamics in general. As the medium of choice for the "mobile" class of young people today in dozens of countries, it provides insights into their lifestyles, imagination, and the mechanisms of existence, meaning creation, and sociality.

Figure 8. Proportions of people in 16-64 age group who have accounts on social networks in 34 countries, Quarter 1, 2016. (22 social platforms are included in the survey). For most recent figures, consult http://insight.globalwebindex.net/social.
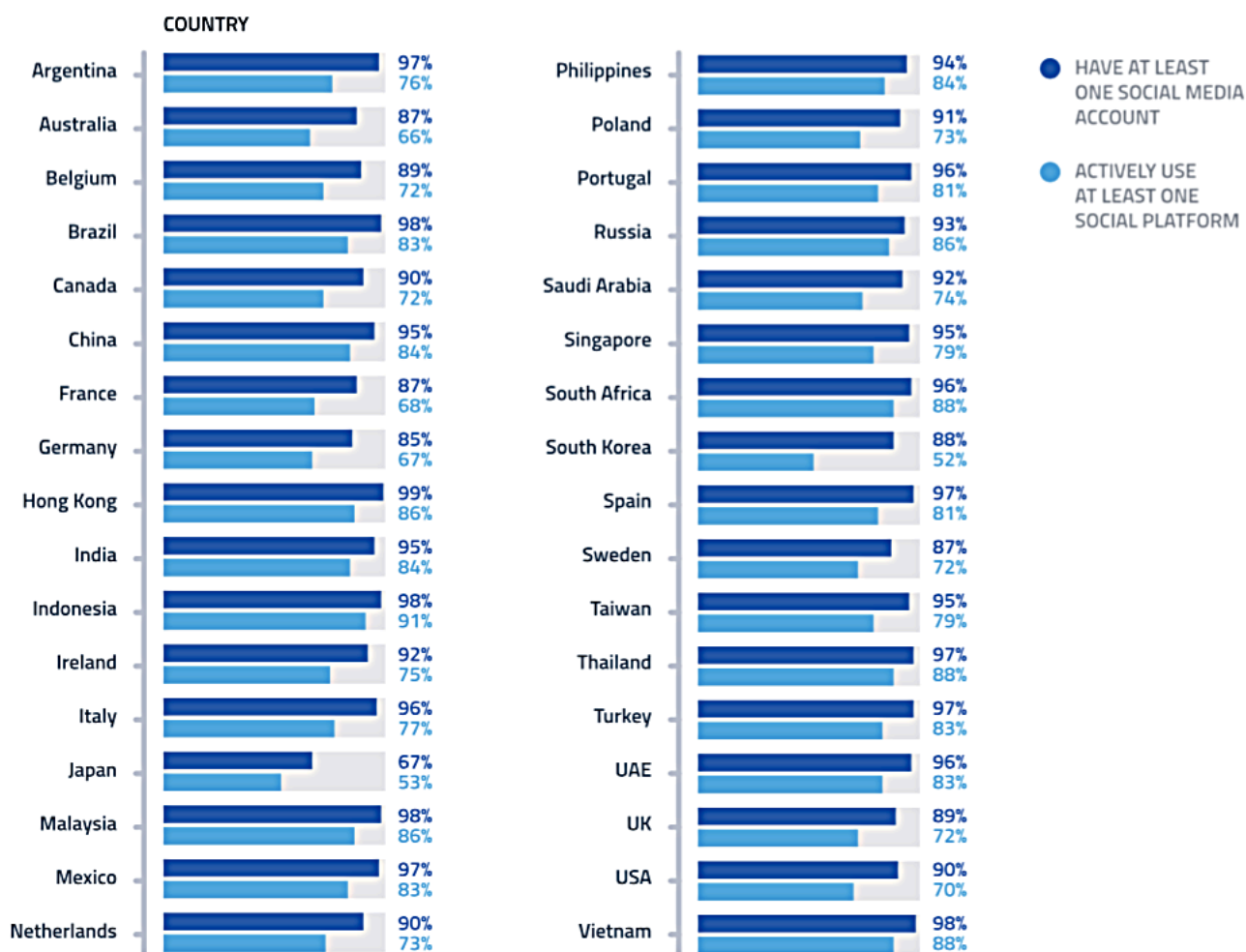
Figure 9. Average time spent on social networks for people in 16-64 groups in 34 countries, Quarter 1, 2016. (22 social platforms are included in the survey). For most recent figures, consult http://insight.globalwebindex.net/social.

TIME SPENT SOCIAL NETWORKING BY COUNTRY

Country	2012	2015		Country	2012	2015
Argentina	02:42	03:13		Philippines	02:50	03:42
Australia	01:15	01:10		Poland	01:02	01:17
Belgium		01:14		Portugal		01:55
Brazil	02:41	03:18		Russia	01:41	01:52
Canada	01:12	01:26		Saudi Arabia	02:23	02:56
China	01:19	01:28		Singapore	01:13	01:39
France	01:01	01:16		South Africa	01:58	02:43
Germany	00:58	01:08		South Korea	00:47	01:06
Hong Kong	01:34	01:30		Spain	01:31	01:35
India	01:44	02:17		Sweden	01:13	01:34
Indonesia	02:12	02:51		Taiwan	01:28	01:52
Ireland		01:22		Thailand	01:59	02:52
Italy	01:33	01:58		Turkey	01:57	02:32
Japan	00:23	00:20		UAE	02:21	03:01
Malaysia	02:39	03:00		UK	01:11	01:29
Mexico	02:35	03:14		USA	01:23	01:43
Netherlands	00:57	01:10		Vietnam	01:47	02:19

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