

Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self

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Bringing photography back into discussion of Instagram photography

Much of the current writing on selfies, Instagram, or camera-phone photography in general tends to decontextualize these phenomena and analyze them on their own without referring to historical precedents. The medium of photography tends to become invisible, while photographs posted on Instagram or other platforms are treated as pure and transparent data, from which conclusions about their makers and their audience are being made (in a social sciences approach), and features like smile scores or gender and age estimates are being extracted and analyzed (in a computer science approach). What is still missing, and what we propose to bring back into focus, is more attention to the medium of photography as such. There was photography before mobile phones, and photography was shared socially before Instagram. While the new image-making technologies and image-sharing platforms, no doubt, change our definition of photography, much of what is being interpreted as “new” has roots in photographic practices of earlier decades. We believe that adding such historical perspective would expand our understanding of present-day cultural phenomena and let us analyze them as part of historical

continuities. **It is time to bring photography back into our discussion about photography in social media.**

Social sciences and media studies provide theoretical ideas and research methods for studying areas such as identity construction and performing the self in social media, often drawing conclusions from photographs posted online, including, but not limited to, selfies on Instagram.¹ Computer scientists treat social media photos as an easily accessible data that can be analyzed algorithmically. For example, scholars have detected the most popular subjects of Instagram photos and also popular types of users (in terms of which subjects occur together in user galleries.)² What these classifications could tell us about the development of popular photography, however, remains unclear. A team of researchers from computational social science have recently published an analysis of selfies using datasets containing millions of photos.³ A humanities perspective could add further interpretations to such analysis and place the selfie in a broader narrative of history of popular photography. This article is our attempt to combine a humanities perspective with social sciences and computational methods in order to understand the selfie. In the first part of the article we highlight the role of peer networks of photographers in the historical development of popular photography before Instagram and the

¹ See, for example, Zizi Papacharissi, ed., *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2011). A great summary of most recent debates on the selfie can be found in Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym, "What Does the Selfie Say: Investigating a Global Phenomenon." *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1588–1606.

² Yuheng Hu, Lydia Manikonda, and Subbarao Kambhampati, "What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types" (paper presented at International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media 2014), accessed December 14, 2015, <http://www.aaai.org/ocs/index.php/ICWSM/ICWSM14/paper/view/8118>.

³ Flávio Souza et al., "Dawn of the Selfie Era: The Whos, Wheres, and Hows of Selfies on Instagram," in *Proceedings of the 2015 ACM on Conference on Online Social Networks (COSN '15)* (New York: ACM, 2015), 221-231.

selfie. Meanwhile, in the second part we discuss selfies that circulate within a contemporary peer network of photographers on Instagram. Many of these selfies, we argue, belong to a sub-genre of popular photography that we call competitive photography. This term allows us to distinguish the images we study from other types of photography such as amateur, personal or vernacular.

Here comes the new photographer... again!

In an article for *American Photo* magazine, Jordan G. Teicher recently introduced several very young photographers who have reached a notable level of recognition while having no professional or artistic training besides browsing Instagram feeds and taking pictures with their phones. For example, Pablo Unzueta was 20 and still in college in April 2015 when he was invited to contribute to the *New York Times* Portfolio Review, while David Ingraham within five years from joining Instagram has “got representation, gallery shows, and publication in magazines.”⁴ Does that mean that today’s teenager with an iPhone can make as good photographs as educated and experienced magazine photographer of yesterday? “As long as you can point your camera and snap a shot, you can be a photographer. But is this devaluing the art of photography and photographers in general?” wonders artist Cai Burton.⁵

It is clear that image-making and image-sharing on social media is becoming **part of general literacy**, like it already happened with personal computers and the Internet in the 1990s. Photography is the new literacy of what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls the “global majority”—the

⁴ Jordan G. Teicher, “How Instagram Changed Street Photography,” *American Photo*, May 4, 2015, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://www.americanphotomag.com/how-instagram-changed-street-photography>.

⁵ Cai Burton, “Is Instagram Killing the Art of Photography?” *Rife Magazine*, April 28, 2015, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://www.rifemagazine.co.uk/2015/04/is-instagram-killing-the-art-of-photography/>.

young and urban population of the world. It has democratized visual culture and at times serves as an outlet for social activism.⁶ And this majority is growing fast—in December 2014, Instagram announced 300 million users, while in September 2015 the service had already 400 million users worldwide.⁷ To know how to communicate via photographs shared on social media is becoming a basic social skill.

Related discussions about the new communicative functions of photography emerged in the late 1920s. “Here comes the new photographer,” optimistically announced Werner Gräff in 1929, inspired by the possibilities of portable cameras such as first *Leicas* to create visually captivating photographs of practically anything.⁸ Franz Roh at the same time postulated that “not to be able to handle a camera will soon be looked upon as equal to illiteracy.”⁹ Roh proposed that photo literacy will go through the same historical processes as reading, writing, typing and other communication skills:

“In 1900 the typewriter was found only in remote special offices, today it is in use in all establishments, and tomorrow, meanwhile having become cheaper, every pupil will have one, whole classes of tiny children will drum in chorus on noiseless little typewriters. The camera will likewise soon have passed those three typical stages.”¹⁰

⁶ Nicholas Mirzoeff, “In 2014 We Took 1TN Photos: Welcome to Our New Visual Culture,” *The Guardian*, July 10, 2015, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/10/2014-one-trillion-photos-welcome-new-visual-culture>.

⁷ Drew Olanoff, “Instagram Hits 400M Users Just 9 Months after Announcing 300M,” *The Tech Crunch*, September 22, 2015, accessed November 25, 2015, <http://techcrunch.com/2015/09/22/instagram-hits-400m-users-just-nine-months-after-announcing-300m/>.

⁸ Werner Gräff. *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* Berlin: H. Reckendorf, 1929.

⁹ Franz Roh. “Mechanism and Expression” (1929), in Alan. Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 156. NB: there are no capital letters in the original.

¹⁰ Roh, “Mechanism and Expression,” 156.

Roh's prediction about the development of personal computers is uncanny—today “whole classes of tiny children” indeed “drum [...] on noiseless little typewriters.” The same can be said about his predictions about photography—although today we may not even realize that we all are photographers, as taking and sharing images often is seamlessly integrated within work and leisure contexts, and our everyday behavior. We can speak of a certain democratization of the medium—much of the knowledge and skills that earlier were in the hands of professionals, specially trained individuals who also had access to exclusive equipment, now are available to non-professionals. Yet making “good” pictures still requires a certain amount of leisure time and dedication. The stream of polished and professional-looking photographs, what Ben Davis aptly calls “Instagram's effortlessly artful images,”¹¹ does not come out of people's iPhones as effortlessly as it might appear on first sight.

Instagram and competitive photography

For many Instagram users, the main goal is to get more “likes,” to make images that will be “successful” and “popular,” and this task requires having advanced level of visual literacy. How to describe such practice? It clearly falls outside the range of activities recognized as art as well as professional photography. It is not photojournalism or commercial photography, not the high art of art museums, and also not the naïve amateur or family photography. To distinguish this from other practices we will introduce a new term: **competitive photography**.¹² To

¹¹ Ben Davis, “Ways of Seeing Instagram,” *Artnet News*, June 24, 2014, accessed November 16, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ways-of-seeing-instagram-37635#>.

¹² The term was first introduced in an earlier article: Alise Tifentale, “Defining Competitive Photography,” Research Blog at www.alisetifentale.net, January 18, 2016, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.alisetifentale.net/research-blog-at/2016/1/17/work-in-progress-defining-competitive-photography>.

approach the aesthetics of photography on Instagram we first will define this term and establish the history of this type of photography. Competitive photography emerged after World War II as one of the effects of the development of the so-called peace industries (which included photographic equipment and accessories) in Germany and Japan and the related growth of global mass market for photographic goods.¹³ Competitive photography is aimed at the audience consisting of a peer group of more or less like-minded photographers, and the images circulated within this group are discussed and evaluated primarily on the basis of the mastery of photographic technique, aesthetics, and creativity (unlike, for example, family photography that is circulated among relatives and which is discussed in terms of events and people depicted). Although the means of making and sharing images have radically changed since the 1950s, the category of competitive photography thrives also today and includes also a segment of Instagram photography and selfies.

First of all, competitive photography is and always has been a highly skilled and highly aesthetic practice. Its practitioners often have called it “art photography,” or “photographic art,” as in the name of the global organization, the International Federation of Photographic Art (Fédération internationale de l’art photographique, FIAP), founded in 1950.¹⁴ Second, this photography is always made for public display—it is produced to be shown in juried exhibitions, to be published in specialized photography magazines, to compete for recognition and prizes, or to be posted online and to compete for “likes” in the case of Instagram. Third, it always exists in

¹³ See, for example, Patricia A. Nelson, “‘Peace Goods’: The Impact of War and Peace on Photographic Innovation,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, forthcoming in 2016.

¹⁴ See, for example, the official magazine of the International Federation of Photographic Art, *Camera* (published by publishing house C. J. Bucher, Luzerne, Switzerland, in German, English, and French, and circulated worldwide) and especially its issues from January 1950 to December 1966.

an international milieu, whether it would be the international juried exhibitions of photography organized by FIAP in the 1950s or the online borderless environment of Instagram in 2015. Finally, in terms of photographic form, this kind of photography tends to be sophisticated but conservative—it closely follows textbook prescriptions and conventions of a chosen visual paradigm.

The term competitive photography brings into focus a large segment of photographic practices, contemporary and historical alike, which so far has escaped the attention of scholars. History of photography has been focused on two major areas: avant-garde art photography and amateur photography. Competitive photography occupies a liminal space between these two areas. First, competitive photography can be “art,” but it exists outside the elite circles of advanced art that make up the 20th century canon.

Second, competitive photography is also “amateur,” as the makers of competitive photography do not directly benefit financially from their photographic work and they do not necessarily function as established artists or professional photographers doing work for hire. Yet the use of the term “amateur” would be misleading for several reasons. The term “amateur” is strongly associated with the salons of photography of the 19th century, Pictorialist photography, closed groups like the Linked Ring Brotherhood or Photo-Secession, and “amateur-artist” photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron. Unlike modern competitive photography, this historical “amateur” photography was an elitist pastime, limited by class boundaries.

Competitive photography, on the contrary, transcends class—it rather follows the global market of photographic goods, whether it is the worldwide distribution of *Rollei* and *Leica* cameras in the 1950s or *iPhones* in the 2010s. Furthermore, when the term “amateur” is used with reference to contemporary culture, it can imply a substandard quality of work and lack of technical skills

or aesthetic sophistication, which is not the case with competitive photography. Furthermore, the term “amateur” often has strong connotations with “anonymous,” “unskilled” or “naïve” photography of the family album or the snapshot.¹⁵ Another, similar term “vernacular,” when applied to photography shared online, also suggests an unskilled activity.¹⁶ Meanwhile, competitive photography is conscious and educated, aesthetically sophisticated activity, and its practitioners are well aware of the cultural context and meaning of their work. The images are explicitly made for public display and critical evaluation of their technical and aesthetic qualities.

Competitive photography always has a collective, social nature. **The main feature of competitive photography is likeability**—most importantly, by one’s peers and only secondary by wider audiences. It is photography for photographers. Historically, in the international exhibitions of photography organized by FIAP in the 1950s and 1960s, prints made by one country’s photographers often competed for awards distributed by a jury of photographers from other countries. On Instagram, one user’s photographs compete for the attention and “likes” from other like-minded Instagram users, regardless of their geographical location and nationality.

What is likeable? The answer will be different for different audiences. In general, the peer review process seems to prefer well-crafted, aesthetically accomplished photographs whose content is generally positive and affirmative of certain taste or style. For example, a montage of all landscape and nature-related photographs from the catalogs of the first seven FIAP biannual

¹⁵ See, for example, Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Douglas R. Nickel, *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998); Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Jean E. Burgess, “Remediating Vernacular Creativity: Photography and Cultural Citizenship in the Flickr Photosharing Network,” in *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy*, ed. Tim Edensor et al. (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 116–126.

photography exhibitions (1952–1964) clearly shows a strong preference for expressive geometric shapes (Fig. 1).



Figure 1
Example of competitive photography. Montage of all landscape and nature-related photographs from the catalogs of the first seven biannual photography exhibitions organized by the International Federation of Photographic Art (1952–1964). Thumbnails are organized in chronological order starting from top left.

Peers—fellow photographers seem to approve of pictorial qualities, and not to be concerned about making a critical or political statement. Art and photography historians, on the contrary, tend to seek out and elevate work that is critical about the medium itself (like Edward Ruscha or Robert Smithson) or reveals unpleasant truths about the society (like Susan Meiselas or Boris Mikhailov). The primary audience of typical non-competitive photography (Fig. 2), such as family snapshots, consists of relatives and close friends of the person who took the photographs. These photographs appear more formulaic and repetitive in terms of composition

because their audience is interested mostly in what is depicted in these images, not how. But for competitive photographers on Instagram, “how” is equally important as “what.” When they include selfies in their feeds, these images are supposed to make also **an aesthetic statement**. These Instagram users aim at being recognized by their peers for their skillful and creative photographic work, not only for the autobiographic or anecdotal content of their selfies. This marks a distinction between selfies made by competitive photographers and selfies made by celebrities, models, and reality TV stars. For example, it is obvious that Kim Kardashian’s selfies can get more than a million “likes” within a couple of days. But it is also obvious that the attention is not centered on her skills as a photographer. In this article, we are primarily addressing selfies made by competitive photographers who seek recognition for their photographic skills and creativity.



Figure 2
Example of non-competitive (or “home mode”) photography. Montage of anonymous found family photographs from the collection *Look at Me* (<http://look-at-me.tumblr.com>). Thumbnails are displayed in ascending order according to the number of persons in the photographs starting from top left.

Competitive photography is a game of rules

Arguably people learn the art of making likeable pictures from other photographers. For example, in the 1950s, globally circulated photography magazines such as the official FIAP publication *Camera*, published advice from well-known photographers. Today the teachers are semi-anonymous bloggers who post their well-crafted photos on Instagram and their portfolio sites, write blog posts offering advice, and also make videos for YouTube explaining their techniques. Other online resources teach how to make good selfies, ranging from serious

photography websites to entertainment portals.¹⁷ In this article, we are interested in the format and language of general tutorials of competitive photography because they are concerned about the photographic form which can be applied to any content, including selfies. By analyzing this language, we want to trace the historical continuity in competitive photography as well as emphasize that the same aesthetic (or photographic) concerns are valid across many sub-genres of competitive photography on Instagram, including, but not limited to, the selfie. In other words, the selfie is not an independent and unconnected social phenomenon, but belongs to a larger segment of popular photography that has its historical roots.

At least two similarities stand out if we compare the language of the articles in *Camera* magazine from the 1950s written by famous photographers such as Willy Ronis and Henri Cartier-Bresson and the contemporary online “how to” posts. First is the binary language of such articles—there is always a “right” way to do things and the “wrong” way. This language usually is very technical, with references to optics, physics, psychology, etc. It rarely deals with the content of the images, but always with the form and technique. Second, there are simple rules and guidelines to follow to make your photograph “good” and likeable. There is no room for experiments or challenging the status quo. There is no magic, or, rather the magic is in numbers, gridlines, proportions, etc. **To make likeable pictures, you must follow the rules.**

For example, photographer Willy Ronis wrote: “Luckily, photography – as a means of expression – is based on a certain number of generally accepted rules.”¹⁸ To become a successful competitive photographer, one would want to follow these rules, and most of the time they are

¹⁷ See, for example: David Peterson, “How to Take a Great Selfie,” *Digital Photo Secrets*, 2014, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://www.digital-photo-secrets.com/tip/3743/take-great-selfie/> or “How to Take Good Selfies,” *WikiHow*, undated, accessed March 11, 2016, <http://www.wikihow.com/Take-Good-Selfies>.

¹⁸ Willy Ronis, “Natural and photographic vision,” *Camera* 12, 1954, 567.

explained in a simple step-by-step manner. Imperative mood is omnipresent, and writers address the reader with words like you “should” and you “must.” For example, Henri Cartier-Bresson in a 1954 article discouraged experimentation and exploration, rejected cropping (“it means death to the geometrically correct interplay of proportions”) and criticized unusual camera angles (“the only valid angles in existence are the angles of the geometry of composition and not the ones fabricated by the photographer who falls flat on his stomach”).¹⁹ Meanwhile, Heinrich Freytag in another article outlined the steps for achieving success in photography competitions, and most of them would be valid today as well—just replace the word “prize” with “likes,” and “competition” with Instagram:

“It is the clear and easily understandable pictures and not the experience associated with [taking them] that win the prize. In competitions, pictures full of peace and sentiment are pushed aside by bold and striking compositions that appeal more directly to the imagination of people. Photographs that are expected to win a prize in a competition should have something conspicuous, something of the nature of a poster, as for instance the cover pictures of illustrated papers.”²⁰

Does following these rules lead to making identical work? Even within a set of pictorial conventions, there is enough room for individuality and creativity, as we can see from a montage of landscapes appearing in the catalogs of FIAP biannual exhibitions (1952–1964) (Fig. 1).

If instructions by Cartier-Bresson, Freytag, or Ronis were laid out in more or less captivating prose, then the advice regarding Instagram photography often takes the highly

¹⁹ Henri Cartier-Bresson, “The Moment of Truth,” *Camera* 4, 1954, 176.

²⁰ H[einrich] Freytag, “Success in Photographic Competitions,” *Camera* 4, 1954, 184.

succinct form of bullet-pointed list of do's and don'ts, familiar to everybody from the style of *Powerpoint* presentations. For example, a list of 29 tips collected from successful Instagram users include some that would sound outrageous to Cartier-Bresson—like “turn on the grid feature,” whereas many others repeat the same ideas that have been taught since the 1950s: “keep an eye out for moments,” “use your eyes before you use the lens,” “keep your Instagram feed consistent,” “aim for quality over quantity,” “embrace bad weather,” “shoot from different angles,” and, finally, “keep your edits simple.”²¹ Akshay Chauhan, self-described as “visual communication and user experience designer,” sums up many pieces of advice and presents just ten rules to follow in order to make one's Instagram account to stand out. Among those are “Composition (Rule of third, contrast and silhouette, shapes, and framing),” “60–80% Rule (Keep key elements within 60–80% of the frame),” “Don't forget colors (Use colors for contrast, boldness etc.),” and “Minimalistic Images (Minimal elements in the images make it recognizable to the brain super fast, which I know from Semiotics. In a nutshell icons are easier to recognize than their real counterparts”).²²

All these writers would agree that **finding one's own style is an important feature of competitive photography**. In case of Instagram, having a “style” implies that a user's image feed looks coherent in terms of formal features (achieved, for example, by applying a single filter or only a few ones consistently, sticking to a chosen color scheme, using one type of composition such as close-ups, and so on) as well as subject matter. To have a style

²¹ Kyli Singh, “29 Instagram Hacks from People Who Take Really Good Photos. Make your feed look like that of a professional photographer,” *The Huffington Post*, November 12, 2015, accessed December 4, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/instagram-hacks-from-people-who-take-really-good-photos_563a8148e4b0411d306f8393.

²² Akshay Chauhan, “Instagram Aesthetics for artists, designers, and rest of the world” (blog post), November 11, 2014, accessed December 4, 2015, <https://medium.com/@akshayspaceship/instagram-aesthetics-2c15573b221d#.lfz5b1egf>

in this context means to use the selected elements systematically and repeatedly, thus making one's photographs recognizable. For example, Nadine, who describes herself as "a communications geek turned blogger" claims that "one of the fastest ways to gain followers on Instagram is to establish a cohesive look for your Instagram feed."²³ Sophie, a jewelry designer and author of "a creative lifestyle and travel blog," notes that "the most successful Instagram accounts have a clearly defined aesthetic that applies to every photograph they share."²⁴ In the second part of the article, we will discuss how some competitive photographers on Instagram apply these principles of "a clearly defined aesthetic" in order to expand the concept of the selfie and create new sub-genres of popular photography.²⁵

²³ Nadine, "How to Establish Your Instagram Aesthetic," *Blogbrighter*, April 8, 2015, accessed December 4, 2015, <http://blogbrighter.com/establish-your-instagram-aesthetic/>.

²⁴ Sophie, "How to Curate Content for Instagram", *The Private Life of a Girl*, April 2015, accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.theprivatelifeofagirl.com/2015/04/how-to-curate-content-for-instagram.html>.

²⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the leading styles of Instagram photography, see: Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, December 2015–February 2016, accessed March 17, 2016, <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>.

Competitive and non-competitive photography on Instagram

What proportion of Instagram's individual authors are competitive photographers? Since 2012, in our lab (Software Studies Initiative, softwarestudies.com) we have been downloading and analyzing (with the help of computer algorithms) large samples of Instagram photography—over 14 million images shared in 16 large cities worldwide during 2012–2015. Our analysis suggests that a larger part of people using Instagram during this period are not competitive photographers. Instead, they follow a “home mode” of the 20th century photography. Home mode is a concept developed by Richard Chalfen in his 1987 book *Snapshot Versions of Life*. As summarized in a study of Flickr users, “Chalfen’s ‘home mode’ of communication showed that consumers typically share images—photographs, video footage—of traditional subjects such as birthdays and family holidays. He termed the participants in this home mode the ‘Kodak Culture’ who typically comprised family and friends and **knew the people in the images.**”²⁶ Of course, there are also many differences between the 20th century home mode (see Fig. 2) and Instagram’s non-competitive photography.

²⁶ Quoted in Andrew D. Miller and W. Keith Edwards, “Give and Take: A Study of Consumer Photo-Sharing Culture and Practice,” *CHI – Conference* (2007), 347. Emphasis ours.

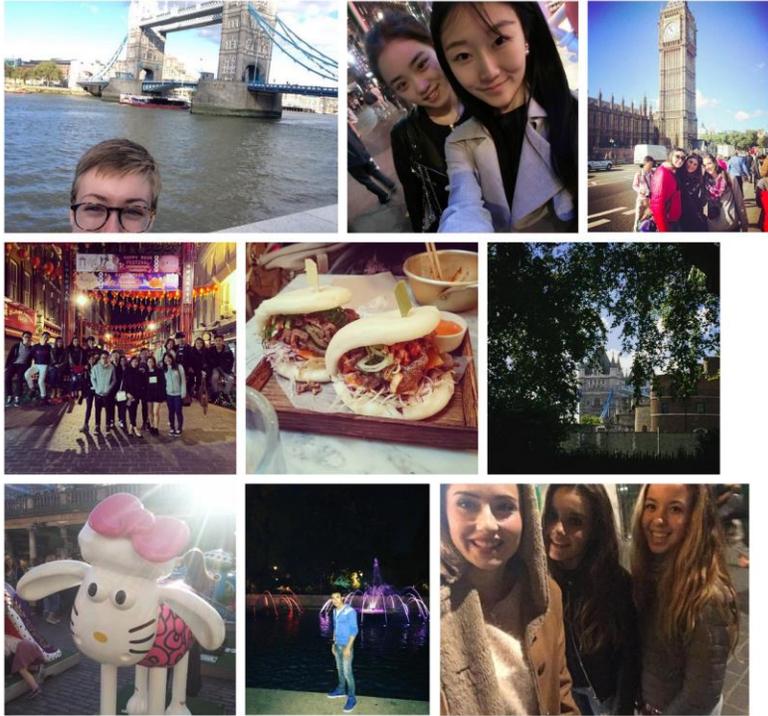


Figure 3
Examples of “home mode” photography on Instagram.

“Traditional subjects” now include food, selfies, parties, etc. The demographics of both photographers and people we see in their photos also has changed—in many places, the majority of Instagram users and subjects are people in their twenties and thirties living in urban areas rather than suburbs as in 1960s. But the essence of home mode remains the same. The majority of Instagram authors capture and share photos that are of interest to the author, her/his friends and family, and perhaps expanded circle of acquaintances, as opposed to complete strangers. These authors are not trying to get tens of thousands of followers, nor do they share only their very best photos. Instead, they use Instagram for documentation and communication with people they know (Fig. 3). They may be happy if their photos get many “likes” and they do not mind getting more people to follow them and comment on their photos—but this is not their primary purpose. And just as with non-competitive family snapshots in the middle of the 20th century, the main value of Instagram’s non-competitive photos is emotional rather than aesthetic.

Here is some data from one quantitative study that supports this conclusion. A study of Instagram young users in the U.S. in March 2015 asked users how many followers they have. 39% of users did not know; 25% reported having 0 to 100 followers; and 11% reported 101 to 200 followers. In other words, 75% of the users either had small numbers of followers or did not even care who follows them.²⁷ (Of course, since as of 2015, 70% of Instagram users were outside of U.S., the patterns in other locations may be different.)

Since neither this nor other studies provide numbers of Instagram non-competitive vs. competitive photographers, we did our informal count. We used a random sample of all geotagged photos shared in the center of London during one week September 2015 (see selfiecity.net/london/). 80% of the photos were not sophisticated from the point of view of professional photography. Their authors apparently cared about the subject of the photo and not its aesthetics. But the remaining 20% of the photos had interesting compositions, careful control of grey scale values and colors, sufficient sharpness and other signs of serious intention to make visually appealing photos that will be liked by other Instagram users. This 80/20 split between non-competitive and competitive photography may be different in other cities, but at least it suggests that the latter has a significant presence on Instagram.

Competitive photography and anti-selfie genre

Understanding that Instagram has both non-competitive and competitive photos and that the latter numbers are significant allows us to develop a new perspective on the selfie genre. As we will argue below, many selfies serve different goals than the normally assumed self-

²⁷ “Average number of Instagram followers of teenage users in the United States as of March 2015,” *Statista.com*, accessed January 23, 2016, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/419326/us-teen-instagram-followers-number/>.

representation. We will also discuss a parallel genre developed by competitive photographers that we call **anti-selfie**.

Are all selfies really self-portraits? Our lab's explorations of millions of Instagram photos worldwide between 2012 and 2015 and the work on *Selfiecity* project where we compared selfies from six global cities (selfiecity.net, 2014; selfiecity.net/london, 2015), suggest that many so-called selfies are not self-portraits in traditional art-historical sense. They do not show **a person isolated from their environment**, as both self-portraits and portraits often did historically (think for example of self-portraits by Rembrandt and van Gogh). Instead, they are **records of events, activities, experiences, and situations that include the photo's author**. The background of a typical selfie photo identifies the place, and shows the activity and the ambience of this place. In this way, the person(s) in the selfie become part of a situation, rather being shown in isolation.

How many of these "situation selfies" are on Instagram? Are they as popular as people think? Our *Selfiecity* project was designed to compare people's expression and face positions in the selfie photos shared in different cities around the world: Bangkok, Berlin, New York, Moscow, Sao Paolo, and London. As part of this research, we also identified the percentage of selfies in these locations. We collected images two times. First time, we downloaded all geolocated Instagram photos in the central 5km x 5km areas of five cities during the same week in December 2013. Later, we used the same method to collect photos from the center of London during a week in September 2015. For each city, between 100,000 and 200,000 photos were collected. We then used a combination of computational and manual methods to select the selfie photos from these collections.

We found that the rate of selfie photos just showing one person was between 3% and 5%, depending on the city. In the case of London, we also counted selfies that were showing two or

more people. Their rate was a little higher: 5.7%. Together, these two selfie types add up to 10%.

This analysis shows that the perception of Instagram as the premiere “selfies medium” is not correct. In six cities we analyzed, only approximately 1/10 of Instagram photos are selfies. It is also important that there are at least as many selfies showing two or more people as selfies showing one person. This finding further supports our thesis that selfies are records of activities and experiences that include photo’s author, as opposed to her/his “narcissistic” close-ups isolated from any context.

In group selfies, the subject is the experience of two or more people being together in some place and sharing an experience. But even if selfie photos only show a single person, most of them show a larger space inside or outside, so we also see the person in a situation as opposed in isolation. (According to computer measurements of 3200 single selfie photos shared in five global cities in December 2013, the average width of person’s head is only 45% of the photo’s width. This means that the majority of these single selfies include a large background area.)

However, this is still not the full story. Since we re-conceptualize a selfie as a photo showing person(s) participating in some situation, being present in some space, or having an experience, are there other kinds of photos that fit this concept? The answer is yes. We found a new, not yet discussed genre of such photos, very frequently used by competitive photographers. We call this genre **anti-selfie**.

Normally we think of a selfie as a photo that shows a person looking towards a camera, so her/his face is visible. However, this is just one instantiation of “person/people in a situation/experience” image type. In anti-selfie genre, a photo shows person’s body but not her/his face. The examples of such photos are shown below (Fig. 4).

One variation of this genre shows the author of the Instagram account in a landscape or another space photographed by somebody else from the back. Another variation shows the author's free hand pointing (or making some other, often comical, gesture) to a landscape or city space. Yet another variation shows hands or other parts of the body as part of an arrangement of objects. The person may be the author of the account or somebody else photographed by this author. By not displaying the author's face, these photos clearly signal their goal—to show person's **participation in a situation or an experience**. By including a part of the body of a person who is in this situation / experience cut by a frame, **a photo includes you in the experience**. You are not the disembodied eye observing the world from the distance as in Renaissance perspective, but the body that is part of the pictured world.



Figure 4
Examples of “anti-selfie” genre on Instagram.

Creating effective “participation anti-selfies” represents a sophisticated understanding of Instagram as a visual blogging medium. It is a good example of how competitive photographers on Instagram approach and use it differently than non-competitive authors. For a competitive photographer, the Instagram gallery is a carefully edited presentation of their **personal** experiences, feelings and ideas—as opposed to a space to document themselves and their friends, or display visually interesting photos of any subject. In contrast, a competitive photographer shows **the world experienced though the first person point of view**. A coherent and unique visual style used for all photos of such photographers is a mechanism to emphasize and mark this

individually. The uniformity of style acts as a visual sign for a single consciousness experiencing the world in a unique way. In other words, Instagram is used as a visual blog that presents visually interesting **life** of the account author—as opposed to visually interesting **photos** by an invisible photographer behind the camera who may have very different lifestyle, unrelated to what her/his photos show. In other words: anti-selfies on Instagram are **not photographs of something** out there; they and author’s life are supposed to be the same in terms of values, interests and aesthetics.

Non-competitive authors on Instagram, who use the medium for documentation and communication with people they know, typically do not create anti-selfies. Instead, in their images the photographer is either completely removed from the scene (she is an invisible observer of objective reality) or, on the contrary, she/he becomes the subject of a photo, as in standard camera-facing selfies. In contrast, competitive authors emphasize their personal and subjective experiences of, and participation in, the situations by using their body as parts of their photos. Note that such photographs can be captured by the author of the Instagram account or by a third person. This does not matter. Normally anti-selfies are juxtaposed in author’s Instagram gallery with other photos of various subjects taken by the author. Both types of photos function in the same way: as records of author’s experiences over time. In fact, these Instagram galleries are structured like modern fiction films: some shots show the hero, while others do not—and together, they construct a coherent story as seen by a narrator. In films, such narrator can be an outside omnipresent consciousness, or a person in the story, referred to as “viewpoint character.” The Instagram’s visual narratives represent the second type of narration, with the account’s author functioning like a viewpoint character.

Many discussions of photography and other types of visual culture including user-generated content often rely on professional—amateur distinction. In this article we introduced a different pair of concepts: competitive—non-competitive. We believe that analyzing photography history and present such as Instagram’s visual universe using these new concepts allows us to notice phenomena and patterns that traditional professional—amateur distinction hides. The analysis of presentation of self in online digital photography is a case in point. We can now see that the selfie genre is complemented by an “anti-selfie” genre that presents the self in a different way. The two genres correspond to different understanding and uses of Instagram by non-competitive and competitive photographs.

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