

# Instagram and Contemporary Image

Lev Manovich

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The PDF can be downloaded from <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>.

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## Preface

Millions of people around the world today use digital tools and platforms to create and share sophisticated cultural artifacts. This book focuses on one such platform: Instagram. It places Instagram image culture within a rich cultural and historical context, including histories of photography, cinema, graphic design, as well as contemporary social media, design trends, music video, and k-pop. At the same it uses Instagram as a window into the identities of a young global generation connected by common social media platforms, cultural sensibilities, and visual aesthetics.

My book is an experiment to see how we can combine traditional “qualitative” approaches of media theory and art history with quantitative analysis that uses “big cultural data” and computational methods. I am drawing on the analysis of 15 million images shared on Instagram in 16 global cities during 2012–2015 carried out in our [Cultural Analytics Lab](#), publications from many other labs, my own informal observations from using Instagram for five years, and my direct observations of mobile phone photography cultures during 2010–2015 in 58 cities located in 31 countries (see full list below).

Media platforms such as Instagram continuously change during their histories. These changes include new filters, new features such as Insights, Stories, and Archive, new ways for advertisers to use the medium, changing capacities of cameras in mobile phones, etc. All of this affect the subjects and aesthetics of shared images. As the number of Instagram users grew from 30 million in 2012 to 300 million by the end of 2014, it became a valuable advertising and marketing medium. The number of Instagram advertisers increased from 200,000 in 2/2016 to one million in 3/2017. Over time, the strategies to create and run successful Instagram accounts have been identified and described in endless articles, blog posts, and videos.

The analysis in this book covers the period from *early 2012 to the end of 2015* and the reader should not expect that all characteristics it describes remain unchanged after that. Instagram keeps modifying and expanding its platform, and its users also change their tactics. The period covered here includes both the time when most people used Instagram spontaneously without deliberate planning, and the later period when the spontaneous and strategic uses co-existed.

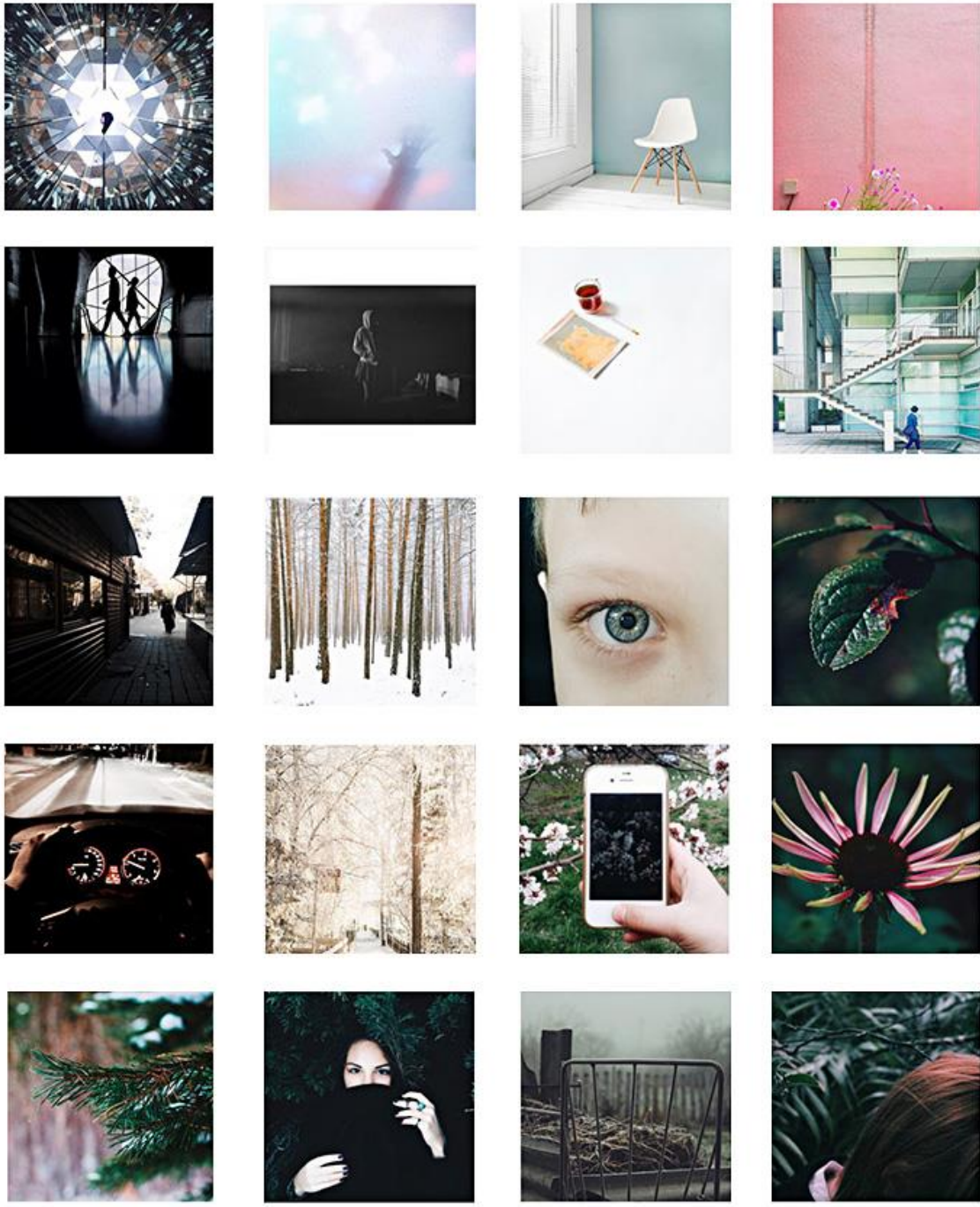
My thinking about Instagram, social media, visual culture, history of photography, and computational and visualization methods deeply benefited from interactions with a number of close collaborators: Alise Tifentale, Miriam Redi, Damiano Cerrone, Nadav Hochman, Damon Crockett, Jay Chow, and Mehrdad Yazdani. Thank you all so much.

Lev Manovich

December 20, 2015 (Pai, Thailand)–July 4, 2017 (Garosu-gil, Seoul, South Korea)

**Images from galleries of Instagram users from Vietnam, China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus**





See Part 3 for discussion. Full size version of this montage is available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/culturevis/27064111290/sizes/l>.

## **Instagram datasets collected and analyzed by Cultural Analytics Lab**

2.3 million images shared during spring 2012 in 13 cities: Bangkok, Berlin, Istanbul, London, Moscow, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, San Francisco, Singapore, Sydney, Tel Aviv, and Tokyo.

650,000 images from one week in December 2013 in five cities: Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, London, São Paulo, and Tokyo.

1 million images from spring of 2014 in three cities: Kiev, Taipei, and São Paulo.

10.5 million images shared during February–July, 2014 in New York City.

150,000 images shared during one week in September 2015 in London.

10.5 million images shared during five months in 2014 in New York City.

### **Joint work with Spin Unit lab who collected the following datasets:**

430,000 images shared during 2014–2015 in St. Petersburg.

800,000 images shared during 2014–2015 in Moscow.

### **Projects that analyze and visualize these datasets:**

[phototrails.net](http://phototrails.net) (2013)

[the-everyday.net](http://the-everyday.net) (2014)

[selfiecity.net](http://selfiecity.net) (2014)

[on-broadway.nyc](http://on-broadway.nyc) (2014)

[selfiecity.net/london](http://selfiecity.net/london) (2015)

[inequaligram.net](http://inequaligram.net) (2016)

[what makes photo cultures different?](http://whatmakesphotoculturesdifferent.com) (2016)

### **Publications:**

<http://lab.culturalanalytics.info/p/publications.html>

## **Cities visited by the author in 2010-2015**

2010:

Amsterdam, Berlin, Breda, Cambridge (USA), Chicago, Coimbra, Dubai, Istanbul, Kiev, London, Los Angeles, Milan, Murcia, New York, Porto, Potsdam, Reno, Rome, Saas-Fee, San Francisco, Seoul, Singapore, Swansea, Utrecht, Venice, Vienna, Vilnius.  
Base: San Diego.

2011:

Atlanta, Charlottesville, Copenhagen, Jeju, Los Angeles, New York, Saas-Fee, Seoul, Washington.  
Base: San Diego.

2012:

Avignon, Beirut, Cinque Terre, Los Angeles, New York, Palm Springs, Paris, Saas-Fee, Seoul, Toronto.  
Base: San Diego.

2013:

Amsterdam, Annandale-on-Hudson, Columbia (USA), Copenhagen, Hague, Hanover, Los Angeles, Lüneburg, Minneapolis, NYC, Philadelphia, Richmond, Riga, Saas-Fee, San Diego, Santiago.  
Base: New York City

2014:

Barcelona, Berlin, Cambridge (USA), Dublin, London, Los Angeles, Lüneburg, Maynooth, Palm Springs, Phoenix, Rhode Island, San Diego, São Paulo, Seoul, Stony Brook, Troy (USA).  
Base: New York City

2015:

Amsterdam, Basel, Belgrade, Berlin, Bilbao, Boston, Cambridge, Kazan, Kyoto, Los Angeles, Moscow, Naberezhnye Chelny, Naoshima, Novi Sad, Pai, Philadelphia, Phuket, Riga, San Diego, San Sebastian, Seattle, Sopot, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Vienna, Warsaw.  
Base: New York City



## Introduction: Instagram Platform as a Medium

December 2015—July 2017

“A photograph is tied to its time—what is good today maybe a cliché tomorrow.”

“I believe that the trend in today’s photography is away from obviously theatrical and staged photograph and toward the more spontaneous and sincere way of seeing.”

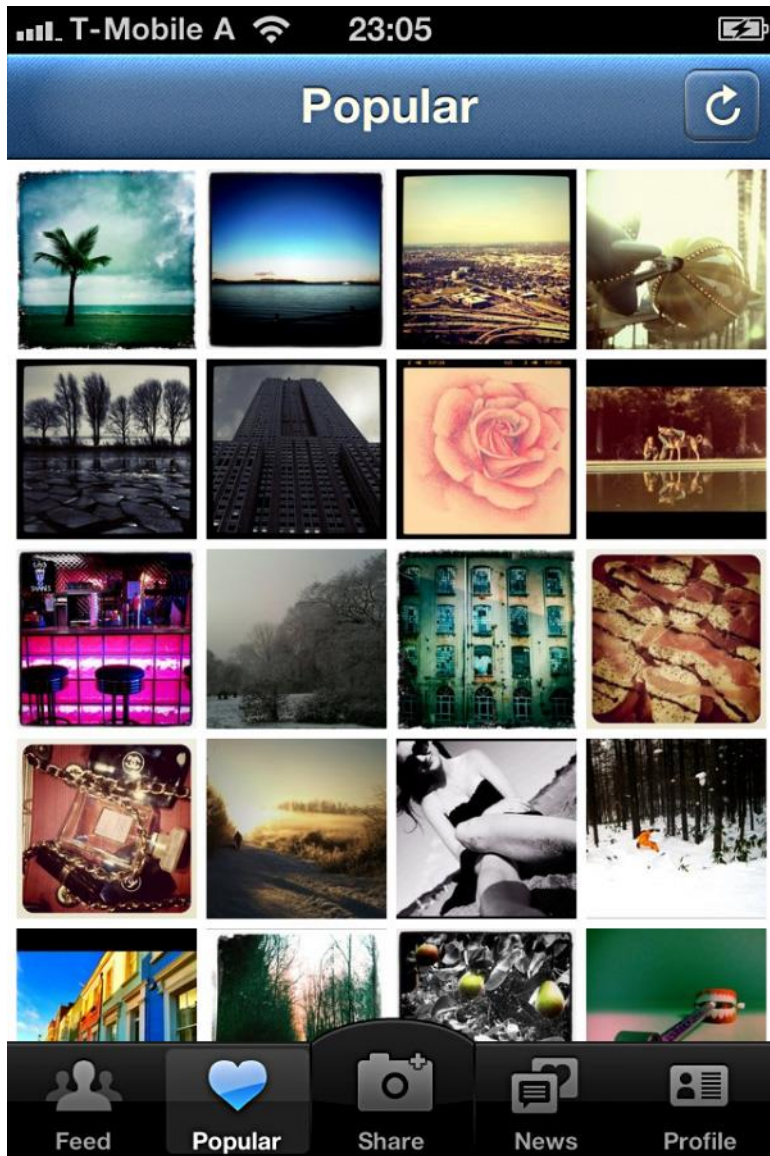
Alexey Brodovitch, “Brodovitch on Photography” (1961), in Charles Traub, Steven Heller, and Adam Bell, eds., *The Education of a Photographer* (New York: Allworth Press, 2006), 133–134.

“First, it should be noted that all of these pictures share a single trait: simplicity. If you take only one thing away from this article, it should be that simple images do well on Instagram. That’s why there are so many popular accounts devoted entirely to minimalist photographs.”

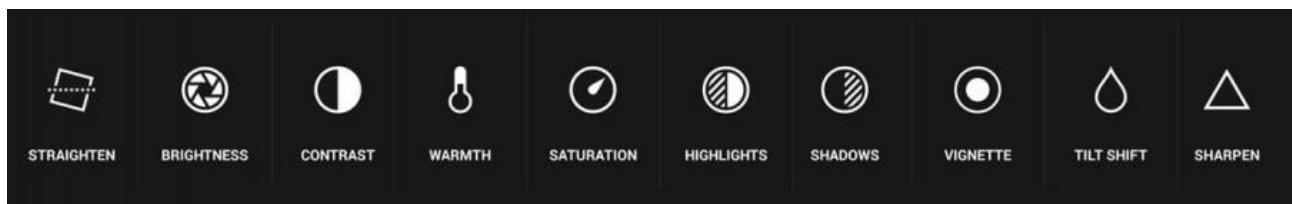
Shutterstock Blog, “14 Secrets to Going Viral on Instagram,” May 11, 2014, <https://www.shutterstock.com/blog/14-secrets-going-viral-instagram>.

“Always think of Instagram as an artist’s canvas. Imagine that your feed is not a collection of photos, but a painting of an abstract artist. Now think about where are the color highlights in this painting. They should not all be in the upper right corner, or bottom left corner. If they are distributed across the whole feed, this looks very organic and cool, and attention of the viewer does not concentrate just on one side. Dissociate yourself from the contents of your profile—selfies, or cups of coffee. Just think of it as a big beautiful painting. It is necessary that viewer’s attention does not go towards just one corner, but to the painting as a whole. Capture a few images and use the appropriate app (Snug, Preview, UNUM) to distribute them around your feed in such a way that all green color is not in one corner, but some is in the right side, some is in the left side, some is below. Play with your photos and organize them in different orders. You will immediately see how your gallery will look very different.”

Акта Акта, “Как Вести Instagram Как Блогеры?/Инстаграм-Лайфхаки,” June 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlpvBFcKaKQ>. Translations from Russian by L.M.



**Figure 1.**  
Instagram App in 2010.



**Figure 2.**  
Instagram new editing tools after application update in May 2014.

## Does “Photography” Exist?

What is Instagram? Why is it appropriate to focus an investigation of contemporary visual media on a single platform? What advantages, if any, it offers for visual culture research?

Instagram is used in hundreds of different ways by its hundreds of millions of users, so any single answer to the question “what is it” will be insufficient. But we can ask a different question: what is it in the context of media history? This question is more approachable. Here is one way to answer it. Different elements of photo culture that throughout 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were separate, now have been combined in a simple platform. (Similar things happened with music, video or writing—for example, via SoundCloud, YouTube, and Medium). Camera, photo paper, a darkroom, exhibition spaces such as galleries, and publication venues such as magazines exist together in one hand-held device. This single platform medium is remarkable development in the history of modern media. It allows you to capture, edit, and publish photos, view photos of your friends, discover other photos through search, interact with them (like, comment, repost, post to other networks), enter into conversations with photo authors and others who left comments, create photo collections, change their order, etc. all from a single device.

Released as an app for iPhone on October 6, 2010, Instagram came to exemplify the new era of *mobile photography* —as opposed to earlier desktop Internet photography platforms such as Flickr. It ran on [iPhone 4](#) that Apple started to sell on June 24, 2010. This model had 960x640 screen resolution, 5 MP back camera, and VGA (480 pixels) front camera—in other words, it was sufficiently OK to be used as a *mobile networked camera* and as a *viewing device*.

In 2015, 3.4M smartphone mobile subscriptions were reported, with the number projected to grow to 6.4B in 2021, or %70 of world population (according to [Erikson Mobility 2015 Report](#)). On September 2015, Instagram announced in a [blog post](#) that it reached 400 million users, with 75% of them living outside of U.S, and 80 million images were shared daily. According to one [estimate](#), 2.5 trillion photos were shared or stored online in 2016 globally, and 90% of these photos were taken with a smart phone.

Obviously, the much smaller photo universe of professional photographers, studios, and print publications established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century continues to be very active. This universe includes expensive equipment, studios, assistants, photo agencies, clients, competitions, and awards, galleries and museums showing photography and exhibition catalogs, and all the places where commercial photography is used—magazines, catalogs, flyers, newspapers, billboards, ads, websites, etc. This fragmentation of the professional universe makes it harder to study than user-created social media. During the period analyzed in this book (2012-2015), anybody was able to freely download millions of Instagram images and associated data in standard formats using its API. To construct similarly large research samples of photo universe would be much more time consuming since it would involve acquiring and digitizing many separate sources. Consequently, it

now looks *opaque* and *unsystematic* from research viewpoint vs. relatively *transparent, systematic and easy to access* Instagram, Flickr, Tumblr, Pinterest, Weibo, VK, and other social networks and media sharing services.

However, because everybody now has to have a web portfolio, and because clients require images and video for websites, social media accounts, and apps, the older print/studio universe is also “leaky.” Some of its samples and data such as photos, credits, metadata, and conversation do appear online, where they can be scraped or downloaded via APIs and subjected to the same algorithmic analysis as the billions of photos native to social media platforms.

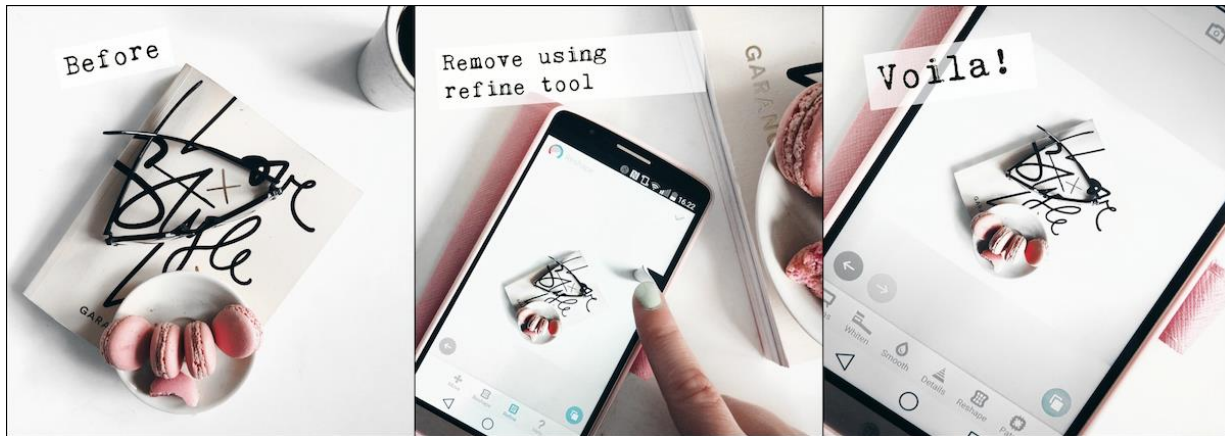
Studying contemporary image culture via Instagram has another fundamental advantage. From the moment Instagram app was released in 8/2010 until today (6/2017), the company did not allow posting of photos to Instagram from any other app. Instagram co-founder Kevin Systrom explained this unique characteristic in the [blog post](#) (05/02/2013):

Since our launch in October of 2010, we’ve focused on building a simple app that has inspired creativity while capturing everyday moments through the lens of your mobile phone. In fact, our focus on building out a mobile-only experience is a unique path that we’ve chosen for many reasons, the most important of which is that Instagram, at its core, is about seeing and taking photos on-the-go... We do not offer the ability to upload from the web as Instagram is about producing photos on the go, in the real world, in realtime.

This makes Instagram the most *pure* visual medium we have today from theoretical and research perspectives. Instead of being concerned with hundreds of different cameras and pieces of professional equipment and endless possible editing operations available in Photoshop and or Adobe Lightroom, we only need to consider one native app that have limited number of controls and filters and one type of camera. Moreover, from 2010 until August 2015, Instagram had another unique constraint: all photos had to be in the same square format.

However, the real Instagram medium is not always as pure as we would like it to be. While the majority of users indeed used Instagram in the way intended by its founders, others have worked around its intentional constraints. Many companies, professional photographers, and photo enthusiasts have been using top professional cameras, lights or other studio equipment, editing the photos in Photoshop or Lightroom, and transferring them to their Instagram accounts via Dropbox, Google Drive, email, or using other methods. The proportion of such photos has been gradually increasing during 2012-2015, but it still remained very small overall. There is also another body of photos on Instagram that have been captured on mobile phones and edited there using third party photo apps such as VSCO, Snapseed, Afterlight, Facetune, etc. These apps offer other editing tools, effects (e.g.,

masks, text layers, automatic face “beautification,” etc.), and filters not available in Instagram app (see **Figure 3**).



**Figure 3.**

Tutorial demonstrating use of brightening tool in Facetune app—removing coffee cup from the upper right corner of a photo. Source: Gunhild Kristiansen, “Perfect Pictures with Snapseed and Facetune,” May 10, 2016, <http://gunhildkristiansen.com/perfect-pictures-snapseed-facetune/>.

Finally, what about “one camera type”? It is true that cameras from the top smartphones released in a given year produce very similar photos in terms of level of detail, so from this point of view it is not relevant what phone model is used. However, not all Instagram users regularly upgrade their phones to the latest models or have resources to purchase smartphones with state-of-the-art cameras. Many of them are likely to use older models, or cheaper models with more basic cameras—in either case, the output of these cameras would differ significantly from current top camera phones. For example, according to a [2014 estimate](#), only %40 of global mobile users overall had smart phones. These numbers varied greatly from country to country: 63.8% in U.S., 47% in Russia, 34% in Indonesia, 26.8% in Brazil, and 20% in India. Unfortunately, Instagram has been stripping away camera metadata, so we do not have information on the camera used when downloading Instagram photos.

As we can see, if we zoom into Instagram medium and start examining closely the camera details and presence of professional and commercial accounts who do not follow Instagram’s suggested way to use the app, the purity of the medium is no longer there. But if we zoom out and consider it in the context of 170 years of photography or other modern media, Instagram looks remarkably consistent. In fact, the boundaries of a single platform media such as Instagram appear to be crystal *sharp* in comparison to the media we had before. In retrospect, they make these other media appear *blurred*—spread out between so many evolving and heterogeneous elements that we are never sure where a medium *is* exactly. What is “photography”? What is “cinema”? What is a “book”? Thousands of

academic conferences will not be enough to generate clear answers to such questions, which look simple only at first.

Think, for example, of studying the world of photography in 1870, 1930, or 1990: what a mess! You have to consider hundreds of different cameras, variations of available films, and photo papers; numerous publications featuring photography; discussions and conversations spread out between many magazines, popular press, and so on; and deal with numerous archives where only very small samples of this photo print universe are stored today, with various conditions for access and various metadata quality. Digitization projects have been helping significantly on the last point, and big digitized historical photo collections now are available from Europeana, New York Public Library, Library of Congress, National Geographic, and other organizations. However, they can only digitize and make publicly available what is already in these collections, i.e. what somebody deemed to be important enough to collect.

Obviously I am being a bit ironic here and I certainly do not want to invalidate all very important work by historians of photography, film, design, and other media cultures, as well as people working in libraries, museums, and archives. I simply want to note how platforms such as Instagram make us realize how incredibly heterogeneous other media were (and continue to be), and how incredibly partial and biased are their samples we have been using to construct historical and theoretical accounts. For example, for one of our lab projects we downloaded *all* geotagged Instagram images (7.5 million) publicly shared in Manhattan during five months of 2014—try to do this with photography in any year of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (See [On Broadway](#) and [Inequaligram](#).)

Instagram's logically simple structure during the period this book investigates—the use of a singular device and the single Instagram app (for the majority of the users) with the same UI (user interface) worldwide, the standardization of image sizes and proportion up to middle of 2015, and standardization of how dates and geographic information are recorded—make us realize the older mediums we are used to discussing as singular entities are really just fictions of our historicizing imagination. Indeed, was ever such thing as *photography*? What do Talbot's [silver chloride](#) photographs of 1830s that required an hour exposure, Man Ray's 1920s photograms that did not use lens, and contemporary 50 MP photographs captured at 1/8000 of a second by cameras that focus automatically on fast moving subjects have in common? (I am not even mentioning today's cameras developed for sciences that can capture information at the rate equivalent to five trillion images per second.) (See **Figure 4**.)



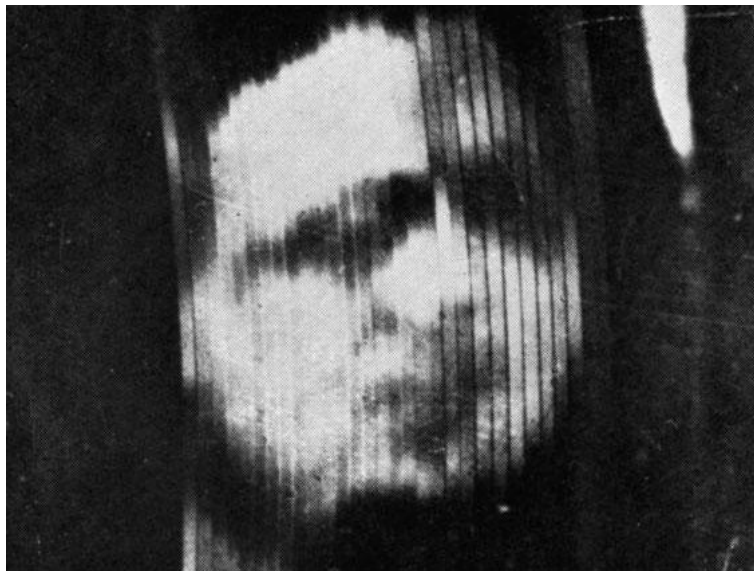
**Figure 4.**  
“Was ever such thing as *photography*?”

4a: The oldest surviving photograph “View from the Window at Le Gras” by Nicéphore Niépce, 1826 or 1827.

4b: “Classic” by Kim Benson, photographed with Canon EOS 70D with 18-270mm lens. Link to [Flickr photo](#) with EXIF metadata.

Or what about the first real-time transmission [television system with 8 x 8 pixel resolution](#) demonstrated in Paris in 1909 by Georges Rignoux and A. Fournier and contemporary 4K / 240 frames per second 100-inch LED TVs? The one thing that they have in common—instant transmission of images over distance—is overshadowed by numerous differences (**Figure 5**). The same is true for the three examples of “photography” listed above. Thus, rather than thinking of *photography*, or *television*, or *film* as a single “medium,” it is more appropriate to consider each as series of separate mediums that are now artificially and sometimes just arbitrary linked together by our histories.

Looking at history of “photography” from this perspective, we find many *Instagram-like platforms*, each characterized by a particular combination of technologies for capturing photos, processing and printing, commercial organization, visual aesthetics and in some cases also favored subjects, and a culture of use (in what situations photos were taken, for what purposes, who was taking them, etc.). Think of popular Polaroid SX-70 camera produced between 1972 and 1981. It created square “instant” photo prints in one size (like photos on Instagram between 2010 and 2015) and created its own vibrant photo culture. Or consider Kodachrome 35-mm slides. The price of the film included processing by a Kodak laboratory which returned a box with 2x2 inch slides. This film was sold since 1936 until 1962—i.e. for 26 years. The film had a distinct color look different from other color films on the market. Kodachrome also created its own photo culture of families and friends gathering to see slide shows (**Figure 6**).



**Figure 5.**

“The one thing that they have in common—instant transmission of images over distance—is overshadowed by numerous differences.” Image transmitted by Baird “televisor” on 26 January 1926. Screen size: 3.5 x 2 inches.



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**Figure 6.**

Kodak photo cultures.

6a: Kodak Instamatic Camera ad, 1968.

6b: Kodak projector ad, 1960.

Given these examples of long historical stabilities in photo history, Instagram platform is certainly fast changing. It does not create a single culture of use but supports many of them. Using 20<sup>th</sup> century terms, we can identify equivalents of amateur, snapshot, professional, advertising, portrait, fashion, product, and other types of photography on Instagram, in addition to new aesthetics and new subjects specific to mobile photography. People look at the photos on their phone alone or together with a friend, or with a boyfriend or girlfriend (which is popular way for young people to spend time on a date, especially in Asia), or in a large group at a party or company event with photos projected on a big screen, etc. Another behavior which Instagram and other social media platforms support is, of course, sharing. Using Instagram app, you can share your photos to Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Mixi, Weibo, VK, and other platforms. This sharing behavior does not have direct historical equivalent in media history as far as I can see.

To summarize our investigation, we started by marveling at the coherence and logical simplicity of Instagram platform which combines many activities together in a single structure—taking photos, editing and distributing them, viewing photos posted by people you follow, discovering other photos, commenting, etc. It is also important that during 2010–2015 Instagram images were constrained to a single square format and the same size, and that the app gave millions of people around the world the same controls for editing these photos. This convergence of functions in a single interface, combined with strong constraints on image aesthetics are key aspects of a media platform as exemplified by Instagram. We then applied the idea of a *medium as a platform* to history of photography, and found other examples of *partial platforms*—such as Polaroid platform (camera + Polaroid film + instant prints) or Kodachrome slides platform (Kodachrome film + easy to use cameras Kodak cameras + Kodak lab processing + slides + a slide projector). They are “partial” because they never brought as many functions together, but nevertheless they qualify as “platforms” because of strong aesthetic constraints they imposed.

Because of a slower rate of technological and market changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of these media platforms remained unchanged for long periods of time. Taking this understanding of media history and looking again at Instagram from its perspective, we realize that in fact its constraints and affordances change much more quickly. So while the convergence of many functions makes a medium more standardized, this effect is upset by the quick rate of change in how these functions operate (and of course every big platform update also introduces new functions.)

Image cultures that develop around technological media are defined not only by raw technologies, the ways they are packaged and promoted by companies, or the ways in which people use these technologies, but also by cultural “languages”—systems of *conventions and techniques* that define the subjects, narratives, editing, compositions, lighting, sequencing, and other image characteristics. A “visual language” represents systematic choices made on every visual dimension recognized as relevant for creators and audiences. Here the word “system” is not meant to invoke structuralism, i.e. the idea that each element is only meaningful in relation to all other elements in the system. Instead, our idea is that the choices on different dimensions do not always exist in isolation, but are systematically connected—or more precisely, correlated. Within a given photographic language, certain subjects are more likely to go along with certain compositions, certain lighting or other particular choices on different visual dimensions. In the case of professional visual languages, these connections exist as explicit techniques or rules that are taken for granted, such as [three-point lighting](#) for studio photo portraits. In the case of vernacular photography, such connections are implied and common-sense (they can be thought of in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of [habitus](#).)

## Theory without -isms

This book considers some of the elements of *the medium of Instagram photography* in relation to the kinds of this medium's affordances mentioned above and histories of photography, visual art, cinema, and design. We are not discussing social, psychological or political effects and uses of Instagram—because many other researchers already study social media from these perspectives, and also because such studies are only valid for particular local contexts. (So far the most ambitious project to study social media use in global perspective is “a global anthropological research project” [Why We Post](#). But the geographic coverage in this project is still tiny—“9 anthropologists spent 15 months living in 9 communities around the world, researching the role of social media in people's everyday lives.”) In contrast, our approach is inspired by a different research paradigm that became common in quantitative studies of social media undertaken in computer science and computational social science: collecting and analyzing a large global sample of posts. (For example, see an analysis of clothing and fashion styles in 44 world cities using 100 million Instagram photos in Kevin Matzen, Kavita Bala, and Noah Snavely, [StreetStyle: Exploring world-wide clothing styles from millions of photos](#), June 6, 2017; and an analysis of 1 billion Facebook photos in Quanzeng You, Darío García-García, Mahohar Paluri, Jiebo Luo, and Jungseock Joo, [Cultural Diffusion and Trends in Facebook Photographs](#), May 24, 2017).

We do not start with any existing theoretical concepts inherited from Marxism such as *capitalism*, *fetishism*, *commodification*, etc. or any other -isms such as *narcissism* (commonly evoked in studies of selfies), or -tion concepts such as *gentrification*. In our view, doing this often prevents researchers from looking at the cultural phenomena in their full diversity and specificity, and instead encourages them to only notice examples that fit such concepts. The theoretical positions to which these concepts belong commonly assume that a researcher or a professional is situated “above” what she or he studies. A Marxist can see through “false consciousness” of the masses; a psychoanalyst can unravel the structures of the patient's unconscious. These positions also assume that there is something wrong with the phenomena being analyzed, and the job of the researcher or professional is to “fix it.” A Marxist wants to liberate masses from their economic and ideological enslavement; a psychoanalyst wants to liberate the patient from traps of childhood dramas.

If your goal is to “liberate” people from any aspect of their current lives, it means that you disrespect these lives. This is not the position I want to take. Consequently, this book does not look at its subjects “critically” or moralistically. I do not judge hundreds of millions of Instagram users for their use of Instagram; I do not criticize people for posting selfies.

I also do not assume that anything in Instagram photo culture is “banal” or “trivial.” In the paper [Has Instagram Fundamentally Altered the ‘Family Snapshot’?](#) by Effie Le Moignan, Shaun Lawson, Duncan Rowland, Jamie Mahoney, and Pam Briggs (2017), the

authors review literature about family snapshots to find such interpretations, and then they repeat them in the discussion of their own analysis of such photos on Instagram:

The family snapshot is historically criticized as mundane, thematically ordinary and lacking originality in composition and subject matter. Our analysis showed that image sharing on Instagram, arguably, accentuates this... These are ordinary, repetitive and highly mundane snapshots of elements of family life. This represents an exaggeration of the visual tropes found in family albums, as opposed to a deviation from them. The images retain the bland, safe and frequently replicated compositions which are so highly critiqued in literature. However, the banality is increased as the images become even more mundane.

I enjoy using Instagram for a number of years, and the position I want to assume is that of an Instagram user who is curious about this medium and wants to know more. Of course, you can argue that any theory is always “above” the phenomena, and the very act of theorizing separates me from normal Instagram users. But this is not that simple. One of the interesting features of Instagram culture (and the same holds for other major social media platforms) is the existence of a truly massive analytical discourse in form of how-to articles, blog posts, and videos (see Part 4 below for a discussion). These articles, posts, and videos are created by Instagram users, marketing experts, journalists, etc. and they often contain insightful analysis of the medium next to practical advice on best strategies. But a presentation of some strategies—what to photograph, how to create an aesthetically coherent theme, when to post, and so on—is anyway already a theory. It states that certain ways of using a medium lead to certain results, and this statement is derived from observing certain types of Instagram accounts (“hipsters,” “fashion bloggers,” etc.) (For an example, see Tiffany Kim, [How Hipsters Make Their Instagram Photos Look So Damn Good](#), [buzzfeed.com](#), June 27, 2015.) From this perspective, many Instagram users also create theory, and many more read (or view) it.

We want to describe characteristics that make Instagram a distinct *image, design, text, narrative, network, software, and social* medium. We focus on characteristics of photos and feeds of larger proportions of its hundreds of million users—rather than quantitatively small groups such as pop celebrities, young Instagram “stars,” companies posting on Instagram about their products, or individuals who post only particular content to acquire large numbers of followers so they can later be paid for including products in their posts. In other words, we are interested in the more common photo types rather than the “outliers.” In the case of Instagram, such “exceptional” users are what most pop media reports have focused on, while “normal” users are not being discussed.

Aesthetically perfected photos (many of which are taken with professional cameras) may dominate the Instagram search screen, serving as its official “face” and creating an impression that Instagram has become the platform where the casual and flawed no longer

exists. We may think that what started as a platform for “producing photos on the go, in the real world, in realtime” (Kevin Systrom, 2013) has in a few years become its opposite—a platform where nothing is in real-time and instead every photo’s composition, colors, details, posting time, tags, and position in user’s gallery are rationalized and engineered. However, downloading and examining large samples of Instagram photos proves that Instagram’s vision lives on, and this is how it is employed by majority of its hundreds of millions of users.

### **Methodology: How to Analyze Visual Culture in the Platform Era?**

The search for “Instagram dataset” on Google Scholar returned 9,210 conference papers and articles (July 15, 2017). A significant proportion of these publications and papers are from computer science. They have analyzed various aspects of Instagram platform and its multiple users using large samples of photos and their metadata. For example, we already cited above the study of clothing and fashion in 44 cities using 100 million photos. In an earlier study, Yuheng Hu, Lydia Manikonda, and Subbarao Kambhampati analyzed most popular Instagram subjects and types of users in terms what subjects they post ([What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types](#), 2014). Saeideh Bakhshi, David A. Shamma, Lyndon Kennedy, Eric Gilbert used a sample of 4.1 million Instagram and 2.5 million Flickr photos to quantify the effect of using filters on their numbers of views and comments ([Why We Filter Our Photos and How It Impacts Engagement](#), 2015). Flávio Souza, Diego de Las Casas, Vinícius Flores, SunBum Youn, Meeyoung Cha, Daniele Quercia, and Virgílio Almeida analyzed 5.5 million Instagram photos with faces looking at temporal, demographic, and other trends. They have also tested three alternative hypotheses about the reasons of posting selfies by considering images for each of 117 countries in their dataset ([Dawn of the Selfie Era: The Whos, Wheres, and Hows of Selfies on Instagram](#), 2015). (If you are not familiar with such quantitative large-scale studies of social media, note that researchers from computer science and computational social science also have published tens of thousands of quantitative papers that analyze characteristics and uses of all most popular social networks and media sharing services, including Weibo, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Pinterest, and Tumblr.) These papers contain valuable and original insights that would be impossible to arrive at by using “armchair” theorizing or small group ethnographic observation.

There has been also many publications about mobile photography coming from art theory, photography studies, and social sciences and they also provide their unique insights that purely computational analysis can’t reach. The most important texts for me in this diverse literature have been Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, [A Life more photographic: Mapping the networked image](#) (2008), Martin Hart, [Ubiquitous Photography](#) (2012), James

Katz And Elizabeth Crocker, [Selfies and Photo Messaging as Visual Conversation: Reports from the United States, United Kingdom and China](#) (2015) and John D. Boy and Justus Uitermark, [How to Study the City on Instagram](#) (2016).

In the research projects and publications of our lab and our collaborators, we combine quantitative computational methods and approaches from media theory, software studies, film theory, and art history. Using such mixed methods, we have investigated different aspects of Instagram such as its interface (Nadav Hochman and Lev Manovich, [Zooming into Instagram City](#), 2013; Nadav Hochman, [The Social Media Image: Modes Of Visual Ordering On Social Media](#), 2015), self-presentation (Lev Manovich and Alise Tifentale, [Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self](#), 2016), the interplay between the everyday and exceptional (Lev Manovich, Alise Tifentale, Mehrdad Yazdani, and Jay Chow, [The Exceptional and the Everyday: 144 Hours in Kiev](#), 2014), and differences in Instagram use between NYC neighborhoods (Agustin Indaco and Lev Manovich, [Social Media Inequality: Definition, Measurements, and Application](#), 2016). This book builds on all this previous work and also my own observations of mobile photography cultures and environments popular with young mobile photographers in over 60 cities in North and South America, Asia and Europe since 2010.

Computational analysis of large samples of content on media platform such as Instagram can quantify many photographic, design, and narrative user strategies and patterns. It can reveal their relative popularity, geographic distribution, their mixture in user galleries, and so on. But in my view, it is better to perform such analysis *after* doing first *non-qualitative observations*, noting and describing the observed patterns, and sketching hypothesis about their possible reasons and effects. In this initial stage, a researcher can rely on her/his experience with the platform, explorative visualizations of images and data samples, and also, ideally, familiarity with media history. This approach is in fact what humanities researchers often follow and then they generate publications — but we do not have to stop there. We can then follow up with a computational analysis of large content sample to test the ideas generated in the first observation/description/theory stage. (Of course, only some ideas can be tested in this way). After the computational analysis another theoretical pass can be done to discuss the results of this analysis, to compare them to the initial theoretical pass, and revise the initial ideas.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, media theoretical analysis often existed on its own, but now it can function as a component of investigation that also uses quantitative methods with large media data, and ethnographic methods to understand intentions, motivations and behaviors of the medium's users. Understood in this way, the goals of initial observation, description and theoretical analysis become to: 1) generate hypotheses that can be later verified, refined or rejected by quantitative computational analysis; 2) discover, describe, and interpret patterns that maybe hard or impossible to study and verify or dispute quantitatively given limitations of the computational methods or available data.

This book offers such *initial media theoretical sketch*. It describes many patterns we observed on Instagram, proposes some theoretical interpretations of what we noticed, and also formulates many questions that can be investigated quantitatively using computational analysis and visualization of large collections of Instagram images and data. Some of the observations in the book are grounded in such analysis/visualization carried out in our lab on millions of images from many locations, or existing computer science publications about Instagram—but many are not. And since we also discuss relevant patterns in history of cinema, design, photography, contemporary music video, lifestyle publications, and stock photography, it would require a big team of researchers, lots of new datasets, and lots of work to verify quantitatively even a portion of all ideas in this book. Not verified by research and data, theory can certainly miss its target many times—but not allowing ourselves to ever think without having data will be even more painful and dangerous.

## Part 1. *Casual Photos*

December, 2015—January, 2016

“Every age has its own gait, glance and gesture.” “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art which other half is the eternal and the immutable.”

Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1860.

“If you see an image you have ever seen before, do not click the shutter.”

“The best way to achieve surprise quality is by avoiding clichés.”

Alexey Brodovitch’s advices to young photographers. (Brodovitch was Art Director of *Harper’s Bazaar* from 1934 to 1958.)

“We navigate the social and the physical world on the basis of aesthetic values...this is an inescapable fact of our human condition... We as designers have to engage with this fact of life.”

Patrick Schumacher, [Facebook](#) comment, 01/13/2016.





**Figure 1.**  
 Color prints and slides from 1956-1976. Millions of such images were captured with mass market point and shoot cameras and Polaroid cameras. In the former case, the film cartridges were developed by photo labs using standard equipment made by companies such as Kodak. Depending on the film type used, the labs returned to consumers prints or slides. The images are arranged chronologically left to right and top down. All images were scaled to the same height. Keep in mind that colors frequently faded over time; early digital scanners used to digitize these photos could have also changed colors, contrast, and lose details. Sources:  
<http://look-at-me.tumblr.com/> (a Tumblr with user submitted vintage personal photos).  
<https://www.flickr.com> (only photos with Creative License are used).

**The “Instant” revolutions in photography**

What do people share on Instagram? And why Instagram is a perfect platform to study popular photography around the world today? Most discussions of Instagram in popular media cover only narrow cases: selfies, celebrities, Instagram “stars,”

fashion bloggers. As photo historian Alise Tifentale notes, “Sometimes claims are made based on outstanding exceptions that catch people’s attention, go viral, and easily become a symbol of the whole phenomenon. Yet such symbolic images are not necessarily representative of larger trends.” Instead, they often are “highly untypical exceptions that overshadow masses of more ‘ordinary’ images.” (Alise Tifentale, [Art of the Masses: From Kodak Brownie to Instagram](#), 2015).

Generalizing the results of a number of our large scale qualitative studies that looked at over *fifteen millions Instagram images* shared during 2012-2015 in sixteen global cities, and taking into account findings from a number of studies from other labs, we believe that at least during that period the majority of Instagram publically shared images show moments in the “ordinary” lives of hundreds of millions of people using the network globally (see [Figure 4](#))—as opposed to be coming from celebrities, Instagram stars, or companies. (While the proportion of such specialized images and accounts is tiny, they get disproportional numbers of followers and likes. See analysis of 1,265,080 images and videos from 256,398 users shared in February and March, 2014, in Camila Souza Araujo et al., [It is not just a picture: Revealing some user practices in Instagram](#), 2014). Thus, Martin Hart’s earlier description of social network photography as “the visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photograph” is appropriate for characterizing the larger part of Instagram photography in 2012-2015 (Martin Hart, *Ubiquitous photography*, 2012).

This does not mean that people share the photographs of the same subjects and that they use the same styles and techniques in every city around the world. This also does not mean that they all understand and use Instagram medium similarly. Our Instagram analysis suggests that the subjects and styles of photographs are strongly influenced by social, cultural, and aesthetic values of a given location or demographic. [Figure 4](#) shows small random samples of Instagram images shared in Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, São Paulo and Tokyo during one week in December 2013. Even comparing these very small samples we can already notice local differences. In 2016 paper [What Makes Photo Cultures Different?](#) we present qualitative analysis of differences in subjects, techniques and styles of photos from these cities using much large image samples. In another example, when we analyzed 3,840 single selfies shared on Instagram in these cities and also in London using face analysis software, we found significant differences in how people pose (see [selfiecity.net](#) and [selfiecity.net/London](#) projects).

The exact content of the “ordinary” can change from place from place, from one demographic group to another, from one subculture to the text. Moreover, while in big international megacities cities like New York, London and Moscow Instagram was used quite widely in 2012-2015 by the locals and by tourists, it is likely that during this period in other world locations it was only used by small groups such as members of culture industry and English speaking young elites. (See

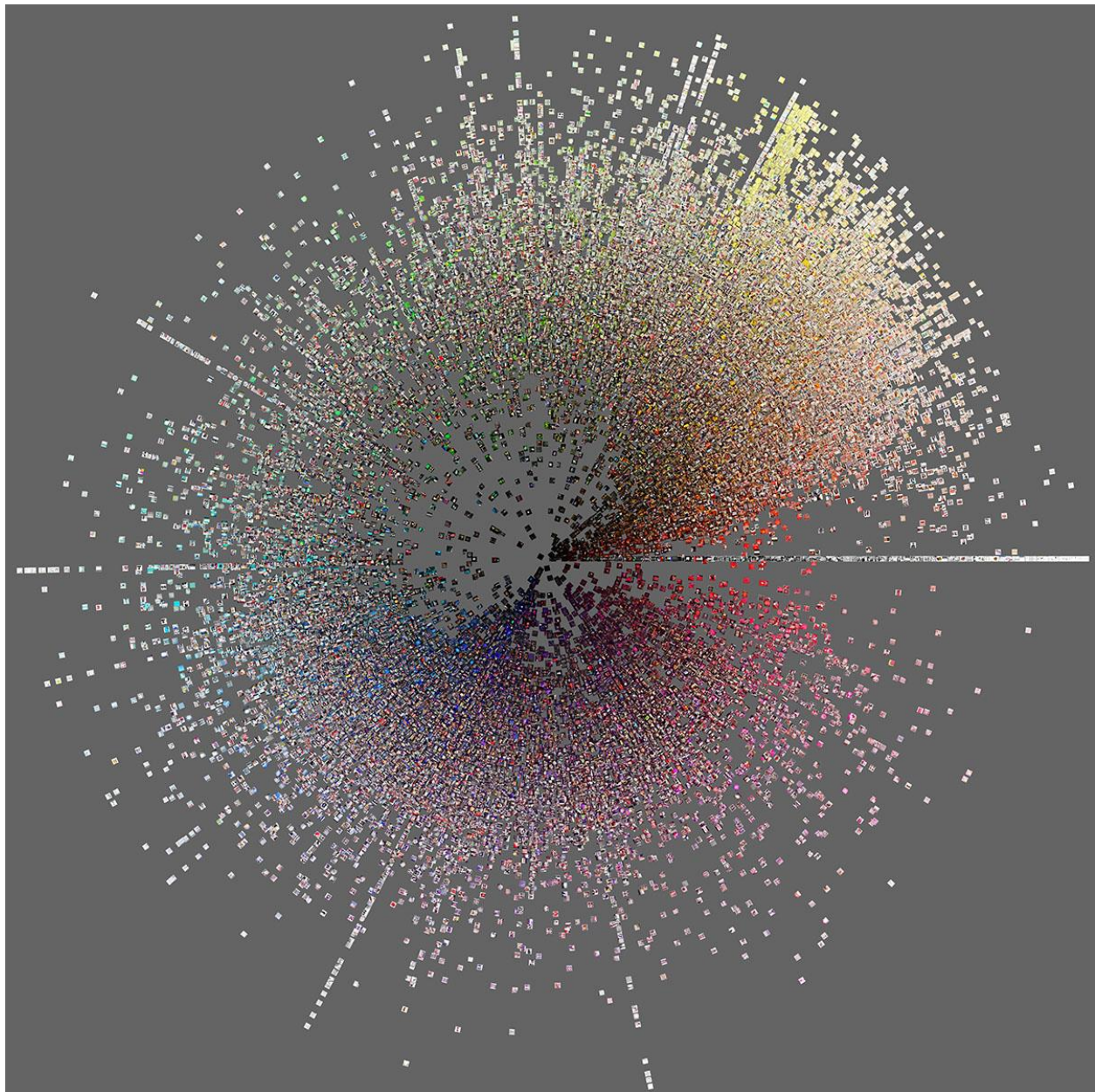
Boy and Uitermark, [Capture and share the city: Mapping Instagram's uneven geography in Amsterdam](#), 2015. Their analysis of 400,00 geotagged Instagram photos shared over 12 weeks in 2015 suggests that even in Amsterdam the platform was used most actively by groups the authors call “vanguard of partying cultural producers,” “vanguard of lifestyle promoters,” and “city image makers”.)

Such differences are very important for any arguments about Instagram photography, or any other social media content. Thus, when we say that “the majority of Instagram images show moments in the ‘ordinary’ lives” of the larger proportion of the platform users, this does not necessarily apply to all users in every location in the world. This majority can be dominated by people living or visiting only some among 175 countries where Instagram was used by 2016. (The numbers showing proportions of Instagram users and images that come from each of these countries so far were not published.) So keep this in mind when you read the rest of this part of this text. Our statements are based on the analysis of large image and data samples from 16 world cities (each with population over 1 million) we worked on over four years, plus informal browsing of many Instagram accounts—but we can’t say anything as definite about numerous of other locations worldwide.

The “ordinary” moments being captured by Instagram users may be important for people to share with their friends (interesting trips, meetings with friends, family events, etc.)—or they can be only of interest only to the author, and therefore look “ordinary” to us because we are not involved in her/his life. And while the use of Instagram by companies and for commercial purposes has been systematically growing, in our study period only a small proportion of Instagram images belongs to domain that that Jonathan Schroeder calls “strategic imagery”—“images intended to persuade, promote, or otherwise perform strategic intentions” (Jonathan Schroeder, [Snapshot Aesthetics and the Strategic Imagination](#), 2013). However, this is not immediately obvious.

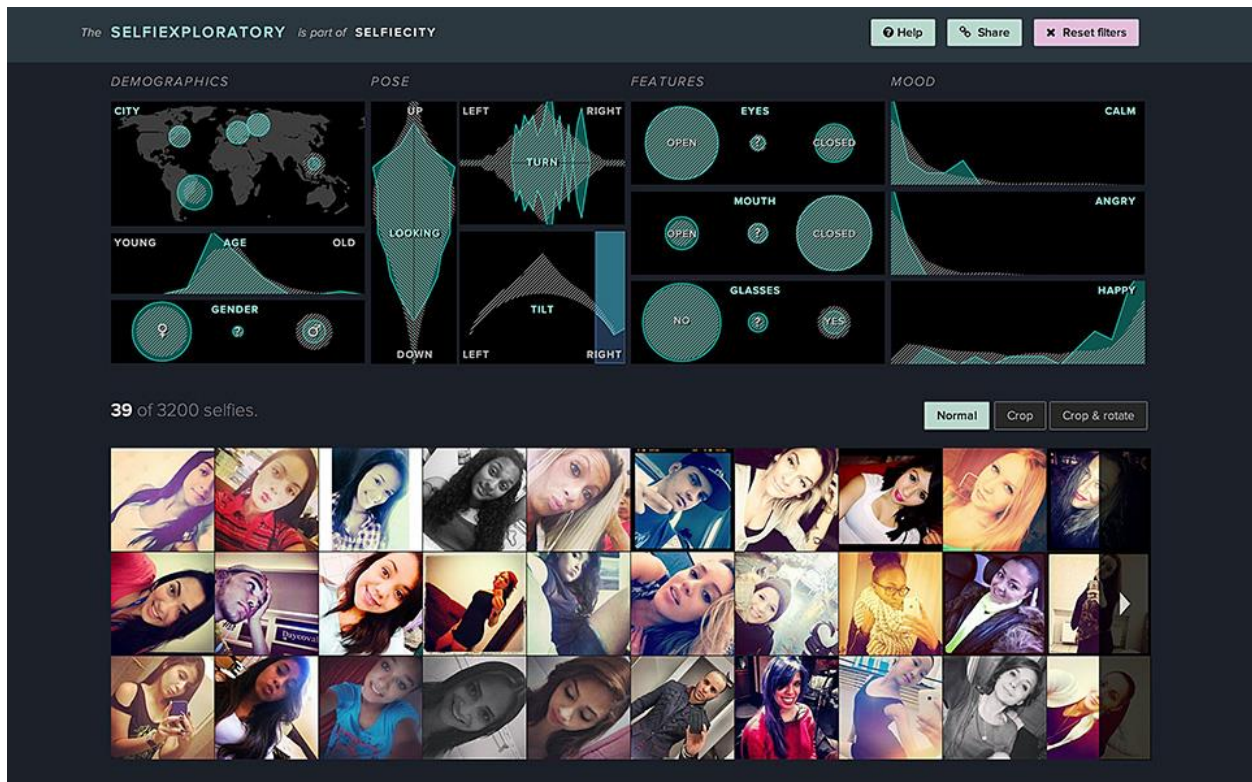
If we research Instagram by focusing on particular popular users or searching for particular hashtags (#photooftheday, #selfie, #kardashian, #fashion\_week, etc.) we will only see particular subjects. While a number of computer scientists have published results of the automatic analysis of large Instagram samples, most often their samples are constructed without considering locations where images were shared, and therefore they hide geographic differences. In our lab, we adopted a different strategy to study large-scale trends in Instagram images while taking into account such differences. This strategy is to download and analyzing *all* Instagram images shared by all users in particular areas during periods of time. The datasets we collected in this way include 2.3 million images shared in 13 global cities during spring 2012; 650,000 images from one week in December 2013 in Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, London, São Paulo, and Tokyo; close to 1 million images from spring of 2014 in Kiev and Taipei; 152,000 images from the

center of London during one week in September 2015; and 10.5 million images shared in New York City during five months in 2014. You can find the analysis of these datasets and visualizations that show tens of thousands of Instagram images together at <http://phototrails.net/> (2013), <http://www.the-everyday.net/> (2014), <http://on-broadway.nyc/> (2014), <http://selfiecity.net/> (2014), <http://selfiecity.net/london/> (2015), and <http://inequaligram.net/> (2016). See **Figure 2** and **Figures 3a** and **3b** for examples of the visualizations and applications created in these projects.



**Figure 2.**

Our [phototrails.net](http://phototrails.net) project that compared 2.3 million Instagram images from 13 global cities. Project team: Nadav Hochman, Lev Manovich, Jay Chow. This visualization compares 50,000 images shared in center of Bangkok (left) and 50,000 images shared in the center of Tokyo (right). Images were shared in Spring 2012. In the visualization they are organized by average brightness (distance to center) and average hue (angle). The high resolution versions are available here: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/culturevis/8628507293/sizes/c/>.



**Figure 3a.**

Screenshot from *Selfieexploratory*, an interactive web application from [selfiecity.net](http://selfiecity.net) (2014). The application allows web visitors to explore patterns in a dataset of 3,200 Instagram selfie images we assembled for the project. The application is available at: <http://selfiecity.net/#selfieexploratory>. Project team: Lev Manovich, Moritz Stefaner, Mehrdad Yazdani, Dominicus Bayer, Daniel Goddemeyer, Alise Tifentale, Nadav Hochman, Jay Chow. Application design: Moritz Stefaner and Dominicus Bayer.



**Figure 3b.**

The map showing locations of all 3,691,003 public tweets with images and geolocations shared in London from November 2012 to July 2014. Designed by Moritz Stefaner for <http://selfiecity.net/london/>, 2015. Collection and analysis of Twitter data: Mehrdad Yazdani.

### **“Home Mode” in Photography**

Our computational and informal analysis and visualizations of the collected images and data—over 15 million images shared in 16 global cities worldwide during 2012-2015—suggest that a larger proportion of people in many countries using Instagram follow a “home mode” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century photography. *Home mode* is a concept developed by Richard Chalfen in 1987 book *Snapshot Versions of Life*. As summarized by Miller and Edwards “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.*” (Emphasis mine. Quote from Andrew D. Miller and W. Keith Edwards, “Give and Take: A Study of Consumer Photo-Sharing Culture and Practice,” <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~keith/pubs/chi2007-photosharing.pdf>, 2007.)

Of course, there are also many differences between 20<sup>th</sup> century *home mode*

and Instagram. “Traditional subjects” now include food, selfies, parties, etc. The demographics of both photographers and people we see in photos also changed—in many places, the majority of Instagram users and subjects are people in their teens, twenties and thirties as opposed to more older authors of personal photos in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 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 perhaps family or expanded circle of acquaintances, as opposed to complete strangers. (Joane Carde-Harde recently argued that camera phones “make friendship rather than family central to snapshot photography.” Carde-Harde, “Friendship Photography: Memory, Mobility and Social Networking,” in *Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography*, eds. Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye, 2013. So perhaps rather than using the term “home mode,” we should use the term “friends mode”.)

These authors are not trying to get tens of thousands of followers, not do they share only their very best photos. Instead, they use Instagram for documentation and communication with people they know. 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. (See [Figure 4](#) for a samples of Instagram photos shared in five global cities in December 2014).

Here is some data from other studies that may support this conclusion. A study by Pew Research Center from August 2015 reported that among Internet users in the U.S, %28 used Instagram; among them, 18-29 age group accounted for %55, and %30-49 accounted for %28. Among U.S. teens, %59 were accessing Instagram (“Mobile messaging and social media 2015,” <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/19/mobile-messaging-and-social-media-2015/>). Another analysis Instagram in the U.S. in March 2015 asked teenage users how many followers they have. %39 did not know. %25 of people reported having 0 to 100 followers; %11—101 to 200 followers, and %6—201 to 300 (“Average number of Instagram followers of teenage users in the United States as of March 2015,” <http://www.statista.com/statistics/419326/us-teen-instagram-followers-number/>).

Together, these studies show that that Instagram in U.S. at that time was used by large proportions of people in their teens, twenties, thirties and forties, and that among the teen users, the majority (%81) had small numbers of followers or did not even care much about the number of followers (Of course, in 2015, %70 of Instagram users were outside of U.S., the patterns in other global locations may be quite different.)

Note that the early study of mobile photography, already popular in Asia years before explosion of global social networks, reached a similar conclusion. The

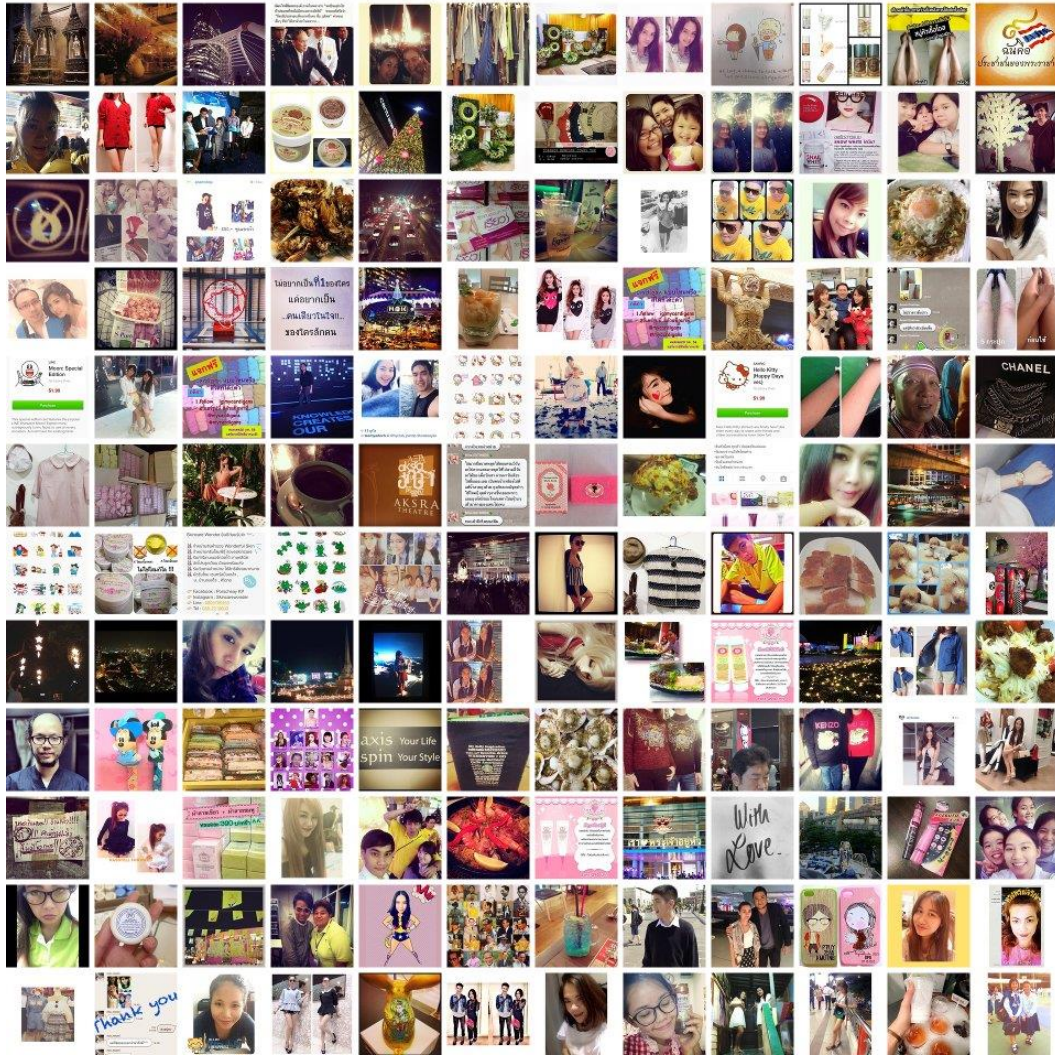
2003 article by Mizuko Ito and Okabe Daisuke was based on detailed case studies of camera phone users in Tokyo. Entitled, "Camera phones changing the definition of picture-worthy," the article is important to quote in length because it also suggests that early mobile photography was used in "home mode":

"In comparison to the traditional camera, which gets trotted out for special excursions and events -- noteworthy moments bracketed off from the mundane -- camera phones capture the more fleeting and unexpected moments of surprise, beauty and adoration in the everyday."

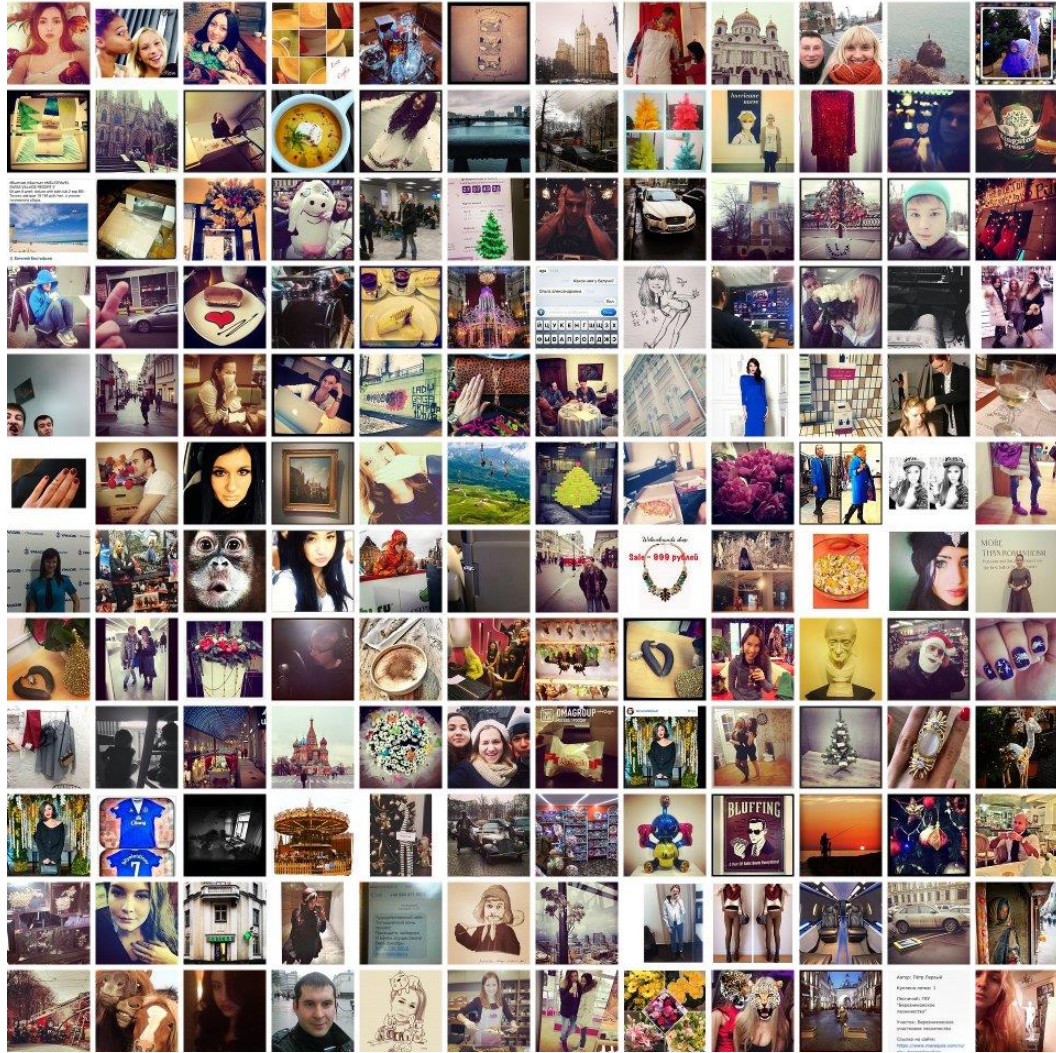
"For example, one 20-year-old college student snaps several pictures a day with her camera phone: a picture of her new haircut to send to a boyfriend; a really large shell that she found on a beach; her pet in a cute pose; or a photo of an interesting view from an escalator at a station that she frequents. These are photos of everyday moments and events that are *newsworthy only to an individual and her intimates*."

"What counts as newsworthy, noteworthy and photo-worthy spans a broad spectrum from personally noteworthy moments that are never shared (a scene from an escalator) to intimately newsworthy moments to be shared with a spouse or lover (a new haircut, a child riding a bike)." (Mizuko Ito and Okabe Daisuke, "Camera phones changing the definition of picture-worthy," *Japan Media Review*, 08/29/2003.)

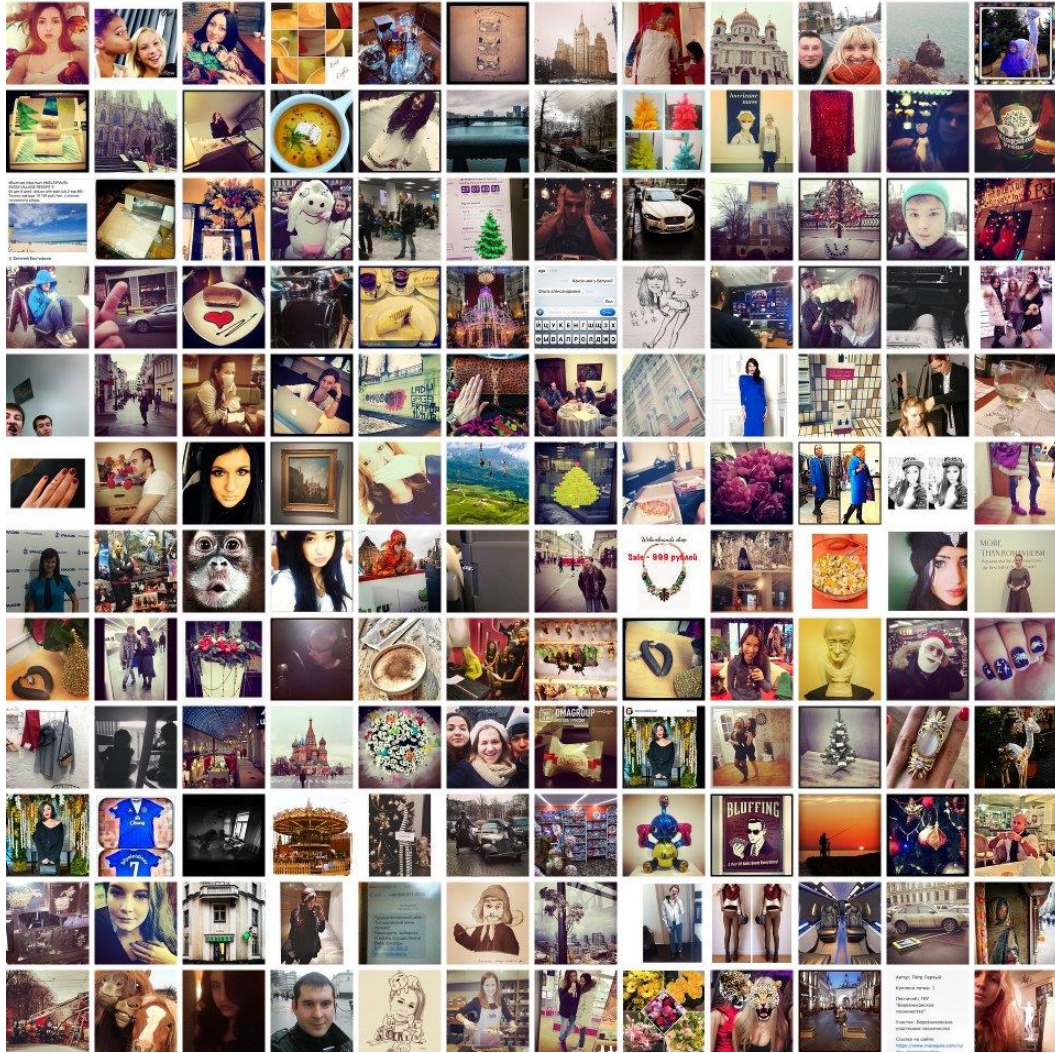




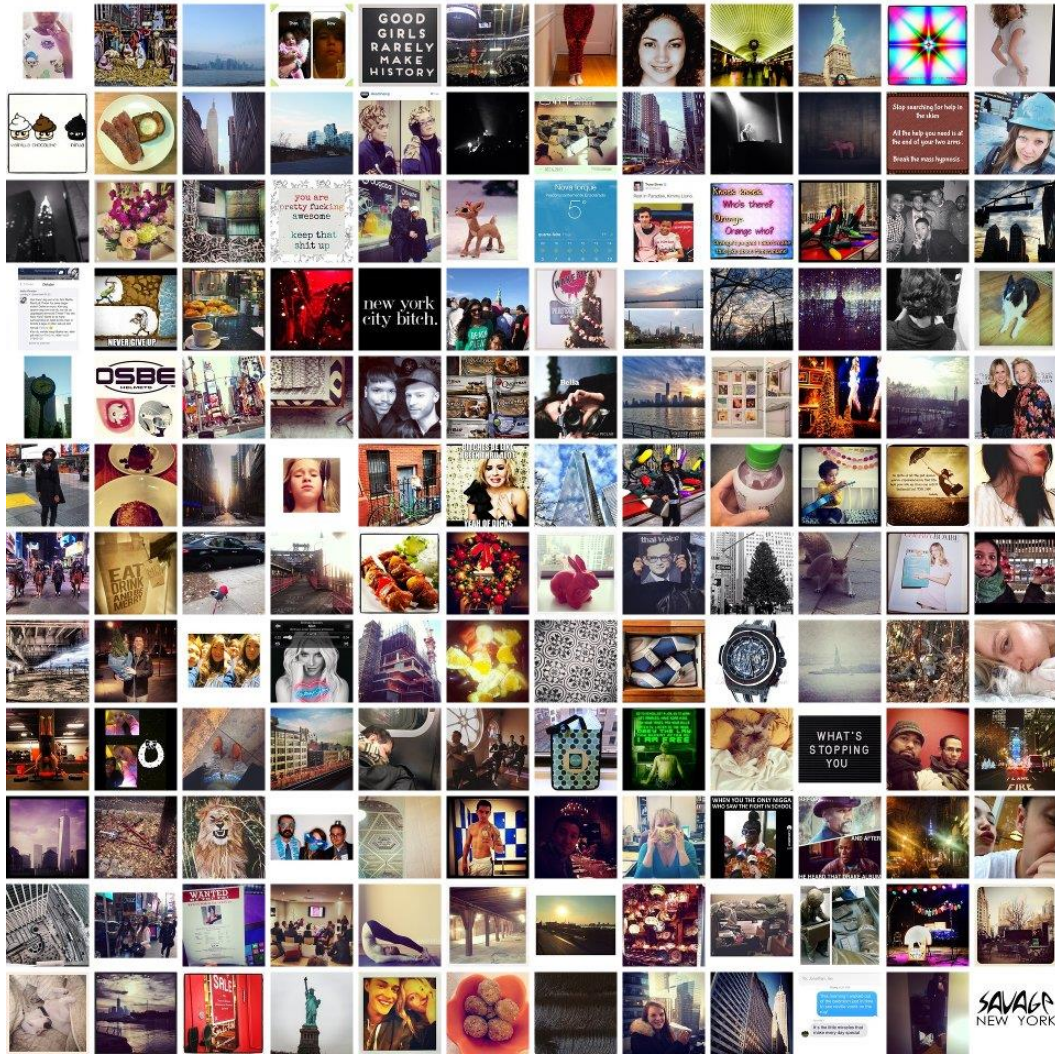
4a—Instagram: Bangkok



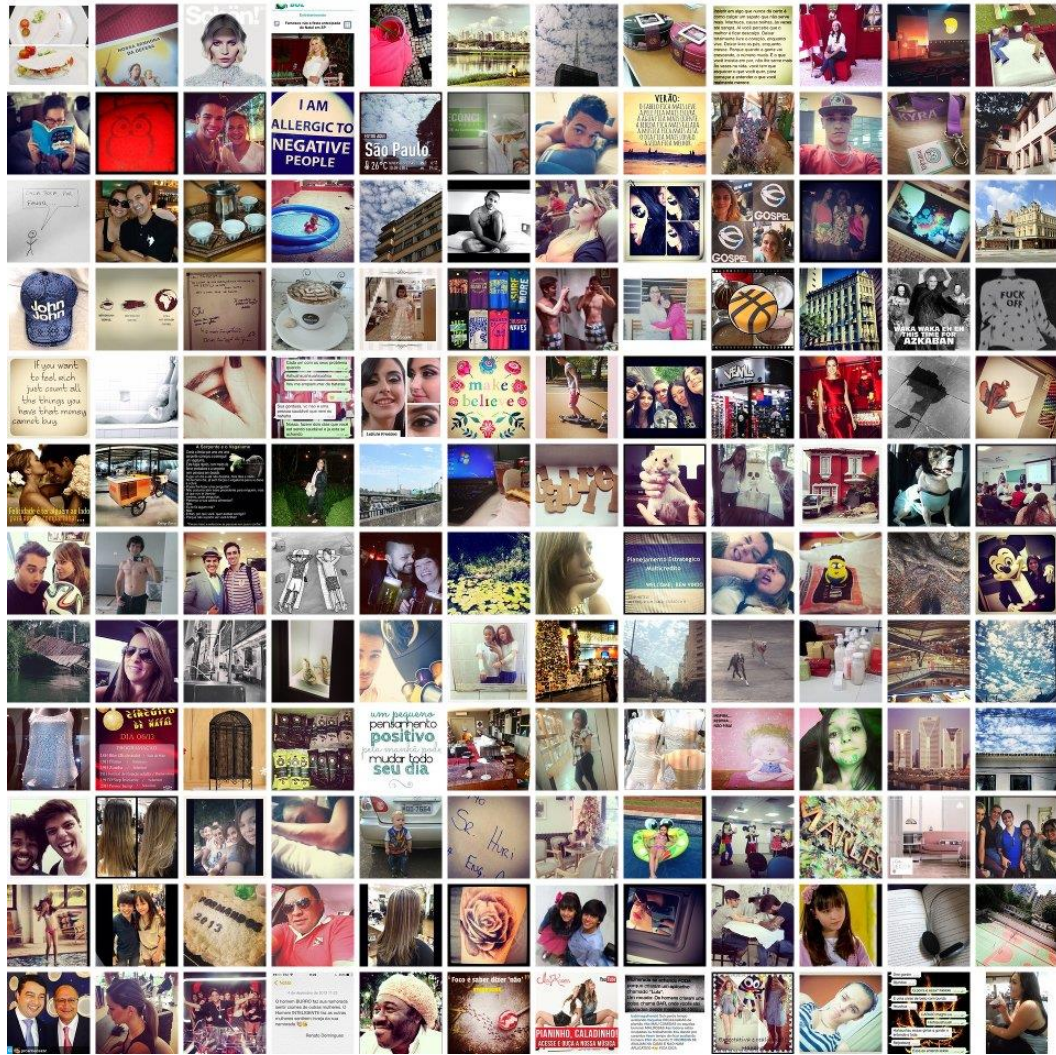
4b -Instagram: Berlin



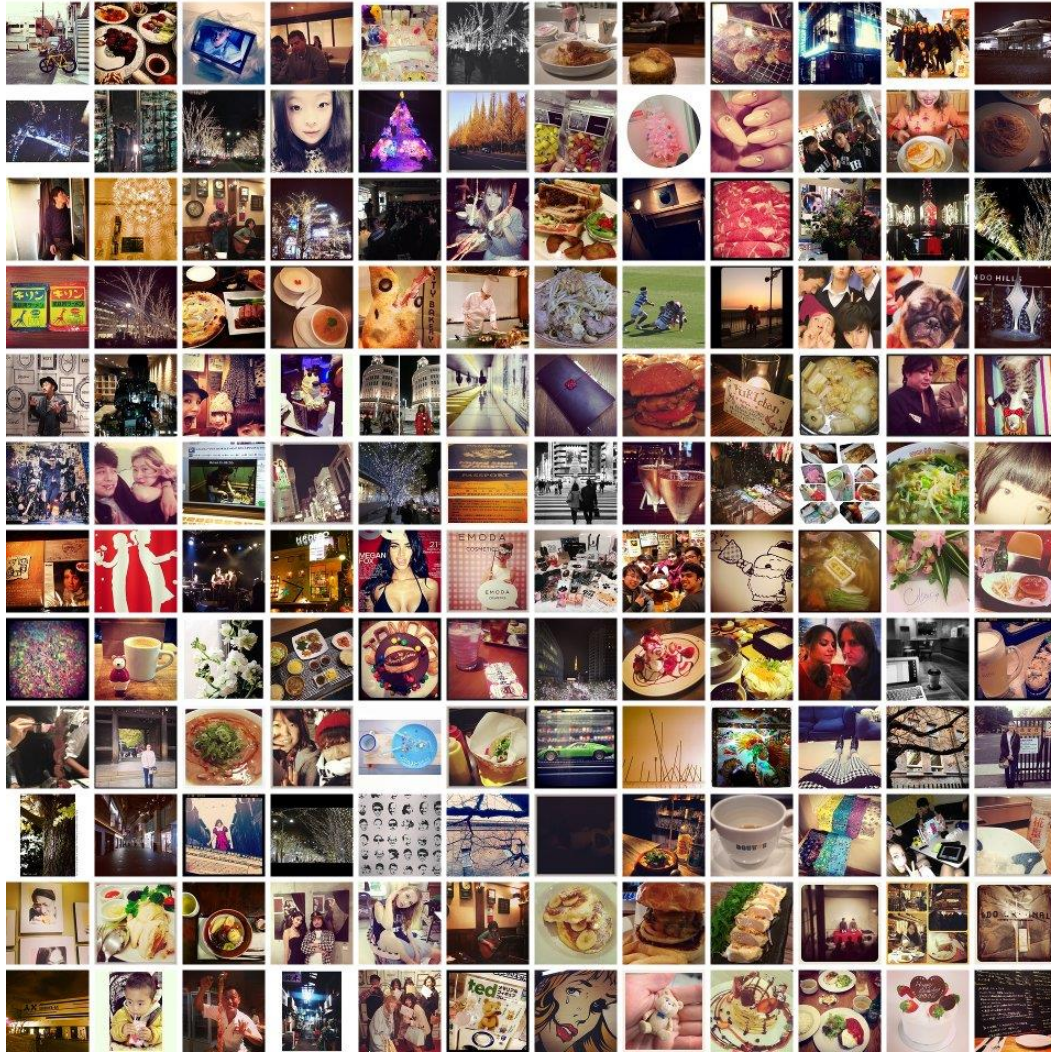
4c—Instagram: Moscow



4d—Instagram: New York



4e—Instagram: São Paulo



4f—Instagram: Tokyo

**Figure 4.**

Samples of Instagram images shared in Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, São Paulo and Tokyo during December 5-11, 2013 between 12 and 2 pm every day. Higher resolution (1920x1920 pixels) of these montages can be download from this Flickr album:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/culturevis/albums/72157662395080273>

To understand what people share on Instagram in different geographic areas, we download and then visualize all images shared in a particular area over a period of time. The montages above show small random samples of Instagram images shared in Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, São Paulo, and Tokyo during December 5-11, 2013. The samples come from the larger data set we created for Selfiecity project (see <http://selfiecity.net>)—all 656,000 images with geolocations shared during that week in 5 km x 5km areas of each city. Note that because only some users make location visible for some of their photos, this may affect the kinds of photos we were able to download using location as parameter. According to the results of the analysis of 5,659,795 images shared worldwide by 369,828 users up to 2014, “more than 18.8% contain location information” (Manikonda, Hu and Kambhampati, [Analyzing User Activities, Demographics, Social Network Structure and User-](#)

[Generated Content on Instagram](#), 2014). Since we only downloaded images with location information, there may be different patterns in the other %80 of images that we can't see in our dataset.

However, our own generalization that majority of people posting to Instagram (in 2012-2015) use it in “home mode” does not cover other *photo cultures* on Instagram which, as we see below, have different goals and use different content. Moreover, it does not tell anything about *visual aesthetics* of Instagram images. And without considering the aesthetics, analysis of content alone is misleading. That is, if we simply count categories of content in a sample of Instagram images (portraits, selfies, food, landscapes, cityscapes, etc.), we will miss the differences between the home mode and other photo cultures on Instagram.

For example, the same images of the *ordinary* subjects—for example, everyday objects, cups of coffee, or person's clothing—can acquire very *different meanings* depending on *how* they are photographed. They may look like random things in a photo background—or be the subjects in the sophisticated, styled composition. A photo showing a person holding flowers may be the result of following established norms of amateur photography (which suggests what moments, people or objects in person's life should be captured and shared, and how these subjects should be photographed)—or the result of conscious use of the strategies from the 20<sup>th</sup> century art and commercial photography (see [figures 17a](#), [17b](#), [17c](#) in Part 3) that explored contrast between shapes and textures of natural and human-made objects. If we reduce photos to descriptions of their content, such differences will be lost.

At the same time, to be meaningful, the analysis of aesthetics has to also include subjects of photos—along with the intentions of a photographer, other context such as tags and photo descriptions, who follows this user and comments—and also history of photography and visual design. To continue with the same example, a photo with unbalanced composition and a subject cut off by the frame maybe unintentional, signaling a very casual photographer. Or it can also represent the work of a very sophisticated Instagram author working with “snapshot” aesthetics previously explored by many famous photographers such as Robert Frank, Nan Goldin, or Wolfgang Tillmans. This difference may be a result from subtle visual choices made by the author—or it can be purely the effect of context (for example, if we see that all user photos have a consistent snapshot aesthetics, we will realize that they are not accidents.)

In short, we believe that photos' content, their aesthetics and their larger context can't be separated in life, and they should not be separated in analysis of Instagram medium. Therefore, we do not think that analysis of visual form as the thing in itself is very useful. In this article, we start by dividing Instagram photos

into a few types based on their visual differences, and then move from this starting point to considering other differences: how people understand and use this medium, how they implicitly follow conventions of photo culture or define their styles in opposition to these conventions, how they construct their self-representations, and how aesthetics, subjects, and techniques function together to communicate meanings and to create emotional effects and bonds between authors of photos and their followers.

## The Importance of Aesthetics

We could have chosen other starting points, of course. So why chose *visual aesthetics*?

1) Just as it the case with all other cultural domains, the aesthetic preferences and choices made by *all* Instagram users—“choice” here means what photos a person likes and who she follows on Instagram, and not only what she herself posts—may function to legitimize their social and economic status. There is a rich literature in the field of sociology of culture that looks at the relations between aesthetic preferences and social status. The two most influential theorists in this area have been Pierre Bourdieu and Richard A. Peterson. (See Pierre Bourdieu, [\*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste\*](#), 1979, and Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, [\*Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore\*](#), 1996. For a reconsideration of Bourdieu’s and Peterson’s arguments, see Philippe Coulangeon and Yannick Leme, [‘Is Distinction’ really outdated? Questioning the meaning of the omnivorization of musical taste in contemporary France](#), 2007).

2) People use particular visual aesthetics and styles to define their membership in subcultures, to signal their “identities,” and to identify with particular lifestyles. (For a good overview of some of the relevant theories, see Benjamin Woo, [Subculture Theory and the Fetishism of Style](#), 2009).

3) Photography, including Instagram’s version, is about making *visual images* that communicate through their *techniques, styles, and visual choices*—and not only content.

4) A significant proportion of Instagram users care a lot about aesthetics. They use Instagram in aesthetically sophisticated and nuanced ways, as we will discuss in detail below.

5) One of the main reasons behind Instagram app very quickly coming to dominate mobile photography was its filters—a very quick mechanism to take any photo and make it look visually interesting and appealing. (See [“How did Instagram become successful”](#) on Quora.) (After Instagram was released in 2010, within days it became number one app in Photo category on Apple iStore in many countries. At the



end of 2015, Instagram was the seventh largest global social network in terms of active users, behind only Facebook, WhatsApp, QQ, Facebook Messenger, Qzone and WeChat. For the numbers, see Sarah Perez, [The Rise Of Instagram: Tracking The App's Spread Worldwide](#), 4/24/2014; <http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>, accessed December 30, 2015).

In other words: if Google is an information retrieval service, Twitter is for news and links exchange, Facebook is for social communication, and Flickr is for image archiving, Instagram is for *aesthetic visual communication*.

While some points in our discussion below may refer only to Instagram and its specific user interface, many other points apply to mobile photography in general, with Instagram representing here this new photo culture. Historically, popularization of photography and growth in the numbers of people taking photos was marked by a number of moments then new smaller and/or significantly easier to use cameras were introduced: for example, Kodak Brownie in 1900, Leica I in 1925, or Kodak Instamatic camera in 1963. (The later made square prints, and this, along with square Polaroid prints, was the inspiration for original Instagram app). The combination of iPhone (2007-) and photo-centered networks as Instagram designed specifically for this new type of “networked camera” (this term is from Alise Tifentale, [Art of the Masses: From Kodak Brownie to Instagram](#), 2015) opened a new stage in photography’s popularization.

In contrast to earlier photo services such as Flickr, “Instagram was meant to be an app for sharing pictures with people, not an app for photographers” ([Sandhya Ramesh](#) on Quora, 4/23/2015). Or, to quote the conclusion of 2014 study that analyzed 5.6 million Instagram images: if Flickr users “share high-quality pictures,” Instagram users share “everyday activity pictures captured by smart phones” (Lydia Manikonda, Yuheng Hu, Subbarao Kambhampati, [Analyzing User Activities, Demographics, Social Network Structure and User-Generated Content on Instagram](#), 2014). (Note that the use of social and media sharing networks, demographics of users and their visual and sharing practices change, so this conclusion may not hold for 2016. In our studies we analyzed samples of Instagram images from 2012-2015, so all details about Instagram in this text refer to this period.)

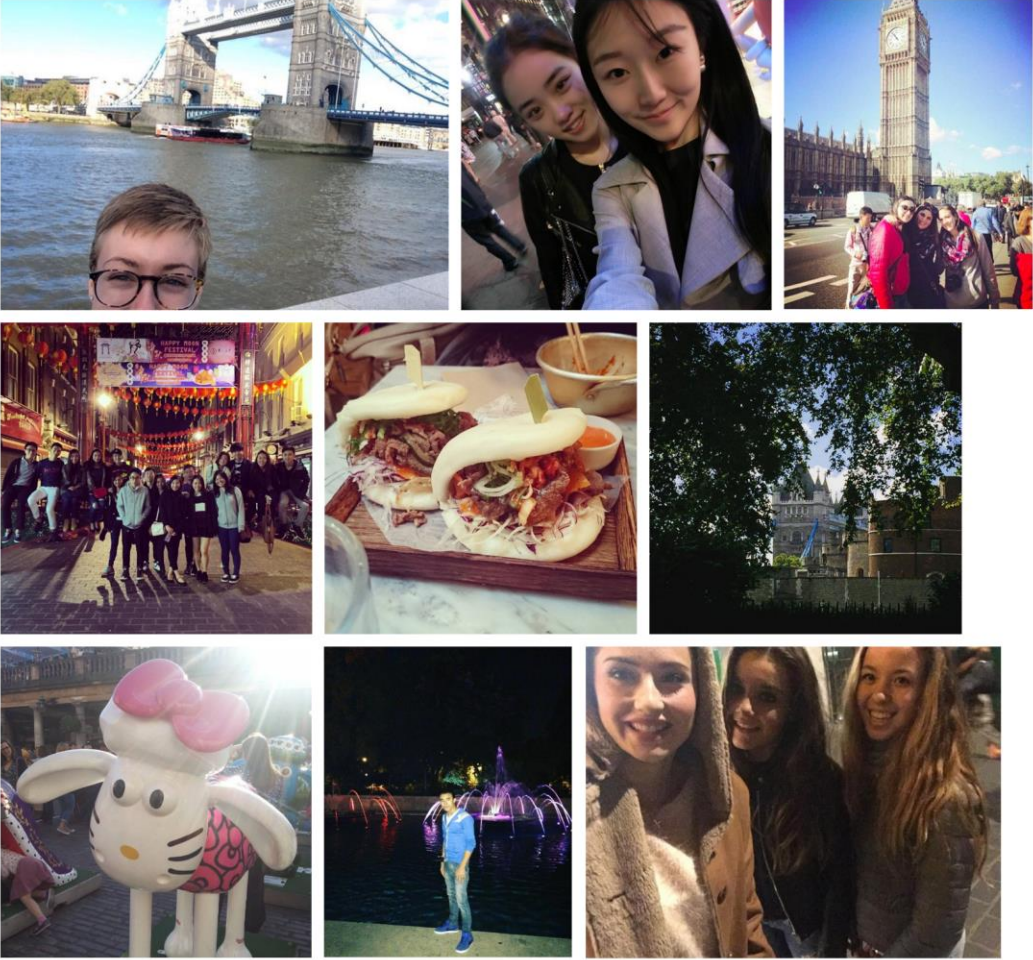
This new stage has its own specific new characteristics. The “network” effect (instant global sharing, getting positive feedback from other users, being able to discuss photos with others, being able to use Instagram on other popular social networks, etc.) are, of course, very important, but they do not cover everything. Many of the answers to the question [what made Instagram so successful?](#) on Quora point out how Instagram filters enabled people to make “bad” photos look “good”; they also name filters as the number one reason for Instagram success. (The earlier app Hipstamatic already used filters but Instagram simplified their use and the

overall experience of sharing photos). This is another powerful reason why analysis of *photo aesthetics* is crucial for understanding our current stage in the history of popular photography—and visual culture in general.

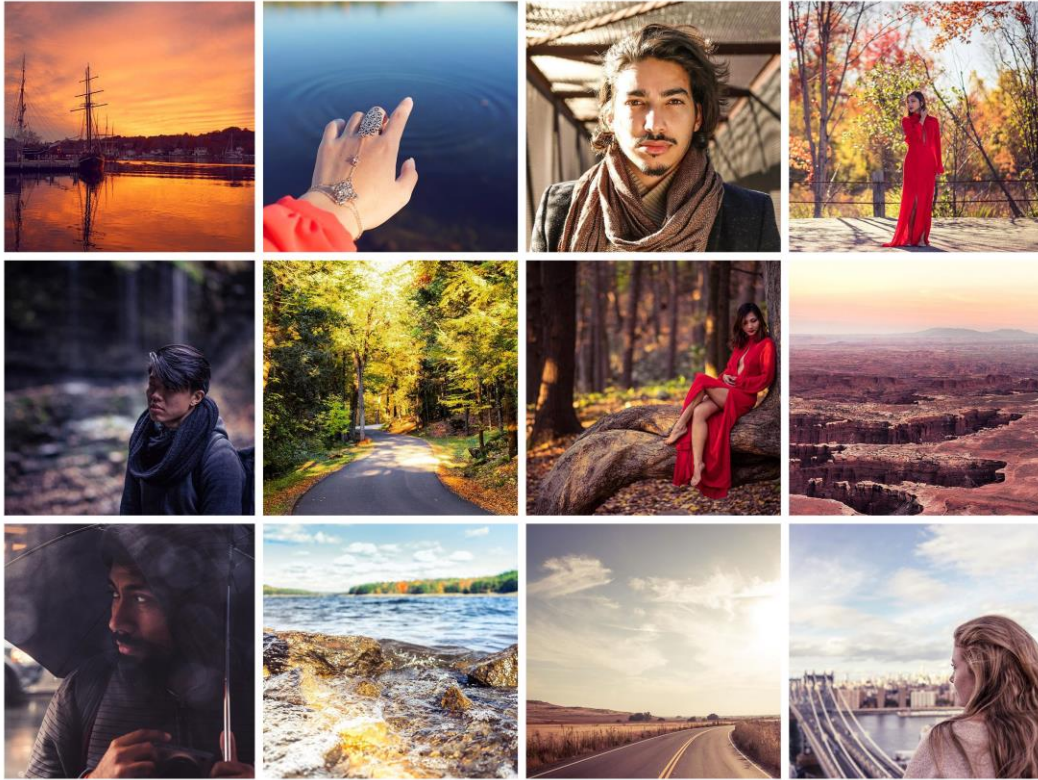
### **Three Photo Types: *Casual, Professional, and Designed***

What are some of the types of Instagram photos today and how they relate to the 20<sup>th</sup> century photo culture, and especially the period after 1960 when color photography become more common? The examples of personal color photography from 1954-1976 are shown in [Figure 1](#).

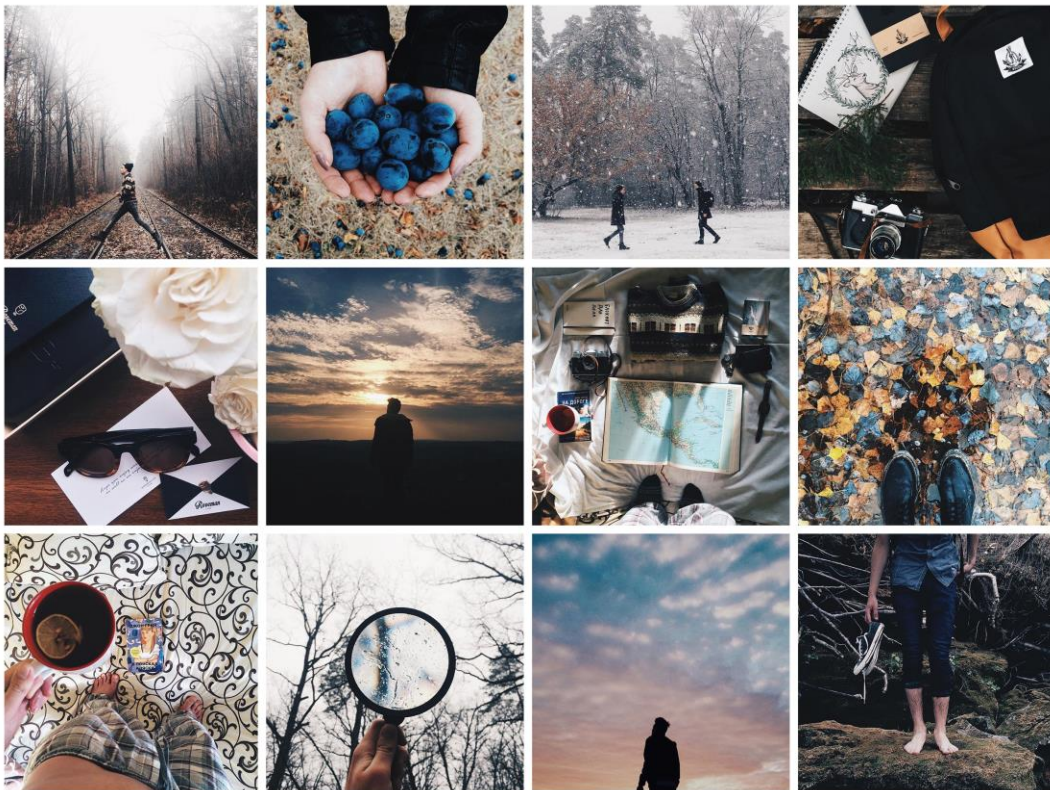
We will analyze what we see as three common types of Instagram photos. We call these types *casual*, *professional*, and *designed*. (The word *styled* is also a good term for the third type). The examples of each type selected from Instagram are shown below in **Figure 5**. (Figure [5a](#)—casual photographs; [5b](#)—professional photographs; [5c](#) and [5d](#)—designed photographs.)



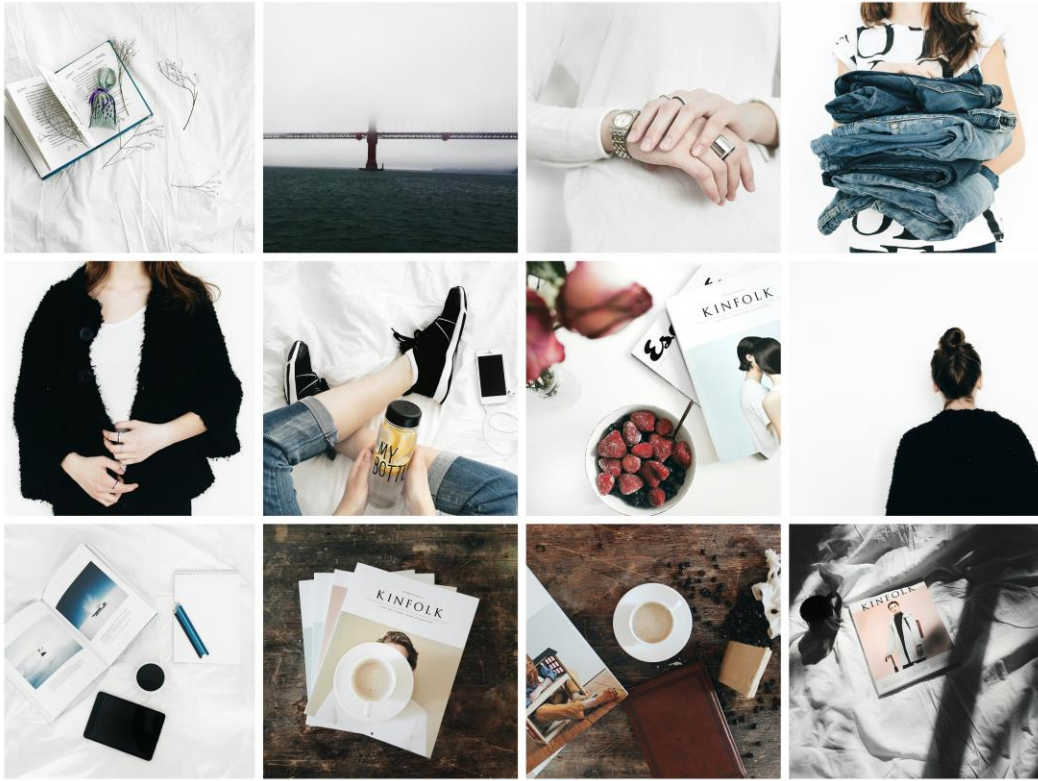
5a—examples of casual Instagram photos (multiple authors)



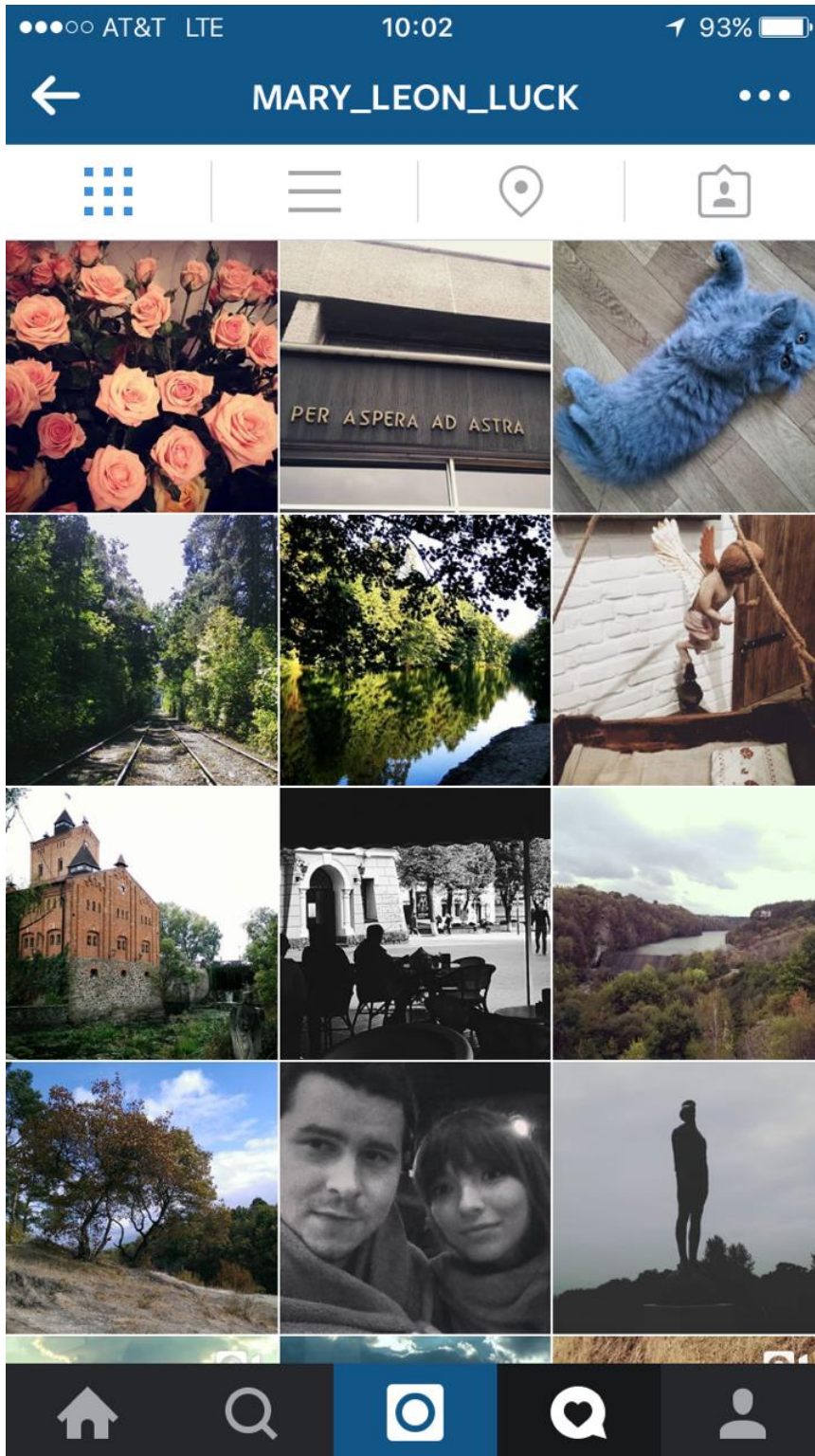
5b—*professional* Instagram photos (single author)



5c—examples of *designed* Instagram photos (single author)



5d—examples of *designed* Instagram photos (single author)



5e—casual photos gallery from a single user.



5f—designed photos gallery with moderate stylization.



5g—designed photos gallery with stronger stylization.



## Figure 5.

Examples of casual, professional and designed Instagram photo types.

**5a.** *Casual* photos selected from 152,000 geolocated images shared on Instagram in 5 x 5km central area of London during 9/21-9/28, 2015. Images were collected for <http://selfiecity.net/London>. Each image is from the different Instagram user.

**5b.** *Professional* photos from Instagram gallery of @neivy (Connecticut, **USA**) during October-November 2015. **869** posts, **11.7k** followers (as of 12/28/2015).

**5c.** *Designed* photos from Instagram gallery @recklesstonight (Kiev, **Ukraine**) during October-December 2015. User account: **123** posts, **52.1k** followers (as of 12/28/2015).

**5d.** *Designed* photos from Instagram gallery of @vita\_century (**Russia**) during February-March 2015. User account: **255** posts, **28.9k** followers (as of 12/28/2015).

**5e.** An example of casual photos gallery from a single user. A screenshot from iPhone Instagram app, 10/15/2015.

**5f.** An example of designed photos gallery with moderate stylization. A screenshot from iPhone Instagram app, 10/15/2015.

**5g.** An example of designed photos gallery with strong stylization. A screenshot from iPhone Instagram app, 10/15/2015.

Both “professional” and “designed” photo type are examples of what Alise Tifentale calls “competitive photography.” (Tifentale, [Defining Competitive Photography](#), 1/18/2016). The difference is whom the authors compete with for likes and followers. The authors of professional photos aim for “good photo” aesthetics established in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so they compete with other authors and lovers of such “classic” aesthetics including many commercial photographers. The authors of “designed” photos associate themselves with more “contemporary,” hip,” “cool” and “urban” lifestyle choices and corresponding aesthetics, so this is their peer group on Instagram.

The casual, professional, and designed types are not intended to be exhaustive and cover every image on Instagram. Note also that these types refer to individual photos on Instagram and not the whole author’s galleries. Some authors consciously curate their galleries to only feature professional or design photos. Many more Instagram users are not as consistent, and mix two or three types. For example, a casual photographer may sometimes take time to create more

professional looking photos, and also, influenced by what she or he sees in other galleries on Instagram, also attempt sometimes to make design photos featuring individual objects or “flat lays.” We leave out from our analysis accounts of companies and brands and individuals directly advertising products or services that are often created with professional photo and studio equipment and professional models. We do not discuss the essential non-visual parts of Instagram communication: tags and descriptions, that are often few paragraphs long—thus inverting original Instagram’s intention to be an image centered medium and instead using it as a blogging medium. We do not look at network characteristics of Instagram, such as connections between followers and users they follow (For this analysis, see Lydia Manikonda, Yuheng Hu, Subbarao Kambhampati, [Analyzing User Activities, Demographics, Social Network Structure and User-Generated Content on Instagram](#), 2014). And finally, given that the content, uses, aesthetics, and technologies of all network media including Instagram evolve, our analysis reflects Instagram use during particular period of 2013-2015.

*We focus on casual, professional, and designed image types because they are useful in revealing continuities and differences between Instagram photography and earlier periods in photo history.* To get an idea about the popularity of these photo types on Instagram, we manually tagged a sample of photos from the larger dataset of 152,000 Instagram photos uploaded by users in the center of London during one week in September 2015. (For details about this dataset, see <http://selfiecity.net/london>). The collected dataset only has publicly shared images where users explicitly selected a location in the Instagram app. As a result, this dataset has very few promotional images by companies, cultural events or places (fashion shows, art galleries,) or celebrities. Almost all images appear to be shared by Londoners or visitors to the city from around the world.

We have manually tagged a sample of our dataset to determine the proportion of casual, professional, and design photos. Here are our findings: casual photos is 80%, professional photos is %11, and designed photos is %9. Of course, these rates can be significantly different in other countries and cities, but given the presence of tourists from everywhere in the center of London from where we collected photos, we believe that the proportions we found are not irrelevant. This motivates the need to discuss these different types of photos rather than treating Instagram as a visual monoculture.

A note about our use of terms. The four common terms used in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to separate types photography are *personal* photography, *amateur* photography, *professional* photography, and *art* photography” (see Martin Hart, *Ubiquitous photography*, page 7). *Personal* photography can be equated with the already described “home mode”: these are pictures aimed for family and friends. *Amateur*

photography refers to activities of people who invest considerable time to learn photo techniques, compete with other amateurs, and participate in photo clubs (popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) or online groups (today), and enter competitions. *Professional* photography is photography where authors get paid; its genres include fashion, celebrity, food, advertising, editorial, portraits, weddings, etc. Finally, *fine art photography* is easiest to define as being in opposition to the other three. The focus is on aesthetic goals and unique style, rather than on following of the conventions of a particular professional genre. Of course, many documentary and professional photographers who worked for magazines also developed their unique styles, while many of the “art photographers” operated within conventions of art photography of their time. When photography started to enter museums, galleries and the art world, many earlier documentary and professional photographers were retroactively presented as “artists.” In general, the meanings of each of these four terms (and parallel terms in other languages) have been changing historically throughout the history of photography, and this makes their use quite problematic if we are trying to place Instagram in historical context, unless we always state what period we refer to.

We consciously avoid using the term “amateur photography” in the discussion below—because historically there have been not one but at least a few rather different “amateur” photo cultures separated by equipment used, the goals of people taking photos and their use, the presence of special amateur organizations, publications and competitions, and so on. In terms of skills, the personal and the amateur also correspond to a continuous dimension from a complete novice to an expert photographer with many years of experience and fully professional photo abilities. The term “professional photography” can be equally problematic. Normally we refer to photographers as professionals if they are selling to, or create their photos for, clients. But what about people who submit their photos to any of the stock photography databases or *microstock* agencies? (Microstock agencies accept photos from wider range of people than traditional stock agencies, and also may sell them for lower rates such as US \$0.20.) For example, in January 2016, a leading microstock company Shutterstock was receiving around 50,000 new photos daily, contributors were paid starting at US \$0.25 per image sold, and anybody older than 17 could apply to become a contributor by submitting a portfolio of 10 digital photos (<http://submit.shutterstock.com/payouts>, accessed 02/13/2016). Such contributors may sell only 1 image per month, or 10, or none. This example shows that today “professional photographer” also become an ambiguous term. We will, however, retain the term “professional”—but only in reference to aesthetics of images, and not whether the person producing them is paid. And finally, although the term “art photography” (or “fine art photography”) can be similarly problematic, we will retain it simply as a useful designation for another sphere of photography

organized around its own conventions and criteria for professionalism and inclusion (“career,” “exhibition,” “photo book,” “personal vision,” etc.)

### **Casual Photos**

The overall purpose of *casual photos* is to visually document and share an experience, a situation, or portray person or group of people. Frequently these goals are combined—for example, a photo may show a group of friends engaged in activity X in place Y in time Z. In that, many casual photos on Instagram are similar in content and function to “home mode” photography in previous periods.

The documentation function was integral to photography from its beginning in the 1830s, but Instagram *intensifies* it. Instagram interface shows the date and time for each photo and exact location both as longitude and latitude numbers and as a point on a map (if a user chose to share the location). Increasing photo contrast, sharpness and also bringing up details in shadows in photos by more visually sensitive users also adds to this intensification effect.

Do casual photos have any distinct visual aesthetics? In these photos, visual characteristics such as contrast, tones, colors, focus, composition, or rhythm are not carefully controlled, so from the point of view of proper *good photography* these are often (but not always) *bad photos*. We can guess that some users are aware of these characteristics but did not want to spend time to control them; others have tried to make good photos but failed, and some are simply unaware. Regardless of the reasons, such photos are primarily documentation records, as opposed to aesthetic objects. Or, to put this differently: the content of casual photos is more important to their users than following the rules of good photography, so a “bad photo” with the important subject is accepted rather than rejected.

In our informal browsing of galleries of random Instagram users, we saw very few users who appear to be completely unaware and only take and share “bad” photos. The majority has galleries that combine some visually unsophisticated photos, and some photos that show some awareness of color and composition. Does Instagram improve everybody’s visual literacy? Do easy-to-use Instagram controls and filters allow even naïve users make decent photos? These are the interesting questions worth investigating empirically. (One interesting trend is the following: the users who share consistently bad—from the visual point of view—photos mostly post their selfies.)

While the casual photos may not have refined visual characteristics of “good photography,” they do follow another set of popular image making and social conventions that define what is worth documenting, and how different subjects should be photographed. Most of these conventions come from the world of

vernacular photography of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, but some have emerged with Instagram (for example, a photo looking down at one's shoes). Individuals or groups of people should appear in the center of an image. In capturing portraits and selfies, full faces should be shown. Landscape photographs should have a horizontal horizon line, as opposed to using strong angles. Food should be photographed from an angle. Certain subjects are worth photographing—sunsets, historical landmarks, tourist attractions such as Times Square in New York, or Big Ben in London. (For example, in our analysis of 10.5 million Instagram photos shared in New York in 2014, %13.5 of all images was shared in Times Square area. For details, see <http://on-broadway.nyc/>).

The conventions of vernacular photography dictate both *what and how*. They filter the visible world and the flows of human lives to select the moments and occasions worth documenting. In this sense casual photography is anything but casual. The images in [Figure 5a](#) show some of these conventions for Instagram casual photography; the images in [Figure 1](#) shows some conventions for personal photography in the analog era. This photo activity can be said to exactly invert the advice that was given by famous *Vogue* art director Alexei Brodovitch to his photo students: “If you see an image you have ever seen before, do not click the shutter.” Instead, creators of photos shown in [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 5a](#) seem to follow the rule: “If you image looks like many images you have seen before, capture it.”

In summary, casual photography follows its own set of rules just as professional and designed photos do, as we will see below. More precisely, rather than using the term “rules” which implies only two possible behaviors—follow the rule or go against the rules—we may instead think of *probabilities*. David Bordwell used the concept of probability to describe film style in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood cinema and the choices made in selecting what and how will be shown in the next shot given previous shots, but we can also apply this concept to still photography and video by individuals. (See David Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures, in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, Columbia University Press, 1986.) That is, we can propose a hypothesis that Instagram casual photos are more likely—in other words, have higher probability—to show some subjects rather than others, and are also more likely to show these subjects in particular ways in terms of composition, point of view, focus, lighting, etc. The same is probably also true for professional and designed photography, but the distribution of probabilities values for subjects, photographic techniques and editing will be different for each type. Given that today mobile phones can hold thousands of photos and also automatically back them up to network services—as opposed to the 20<sup>th</sup> century 35mm still film formats that had only 12-36 exposures and thus encouraged careful planning of every shot—it would be interesting to see if the distributions of subjects and techniques in contemporary

casual photography has a bigger “long tail” (i.e., subjects and techniques use with less probability) than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century amateur non-competitive photography. (For history of film formats for photography, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/35 mm film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/35_mm_film)).

How do photo sharing apps and services such as Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr, their user interfaces, and particular navigation and organization functions affect contemporary photo conventions? And how did designs of 20<sup>th</sup> century cameras and other commercial elements of popular photo culture helped to shape these conventions in earlier periods? These are fascinating questions beyond the scope of this text. One thing we can note is the adoption of controls for a number of scene types that already happened in analog film cameras. Digital cameras of 2000s expanded the number of scene settings offered. Today they may include portrait, candlelight portrait, night portrait, fireworks, food, children, pet, landscape, sports, macro, etc. The dedicated controls for these subject categories both reflect what people like to photograph and at the same time enforce these preferences, making them appear natural. Here, the conventions are literally hard wired in camera designs.

A complementary development in the 2010s is automatic organization of user’s photos into a number of categories offered by photo storage and organizing software such as Google Photos app. The latter classifies photos into People, Places, and Things that for example can include Selfies, Sky, Skyscrapers, Cars, Posters, Skylines, Beaches, Food, etc. (Google Photos sub-categories for *Things* category, Lev Manovich’s iPhone, 01/03/2016.) This automatic classification of photos into familiar categories by software further naturalizes these categories for users of these apps.

Finally, we should note that not all casual photos are taken by casual photographers. Some of them are intentionally created by authors who have professional photo skills but who on purpose want to feature casual photos in their galleries. In photography’s history, the intentional adoption and even intensification of casual look by professional art photographers happened already a number of times—such as, for example, in Robert Frank’s 1958 photo book *The Americans* later credited with establishing “snapshot aesthetics.” While 83 photos in the book often look like happy accidents, Frank selected them from 28,000 photos he took across the U.S. over more than two years. Different types of snapshot aesthetics were developed in the 1960s by Japanese photographers such as Yutaka Takanashi and Daidō Moriyama in the 1960s, by Kharkiv School of photography in Ukraine that included Boris Mikhailov (who referred to his practice as “bad photography”), by the American William Eggleston (credited with bringing color to art photography—combined with the snapshot aesthetics), and many others in the following decades (see **Figures 6a, 6b, and 6c**). (For The Kharkiv School, see Igor Manko, [The Kharkiv](#)

[School of Fine Art Photography.](#))

Today on Instagram, many professional fashion models use casual aesthetics for their photos, for example. In contrast to their super-polished and controlled images in ads and editorials, their Instagram galleries feature “non-essential moments” of their lives (our inversion of Cartier-Bresson’s “the decisive moment”). This does not mean that these images are in reality “unpremeditated, unintentional, spontaneous”—but it also does not mean that they are “staged, planned, calculated.” In contemporary culture (including Instagram), such categories are neither in opposition, nor are they “blurred.” Our intuition is that contemporary cultural subjects and artifacts they and many others produce exist outside of categories are in a different space with its own coordinates, which still needs to be described.

The comparison between personal photos in [Figure 1](#) and examples of different kinds of *snapshot aesthetics* from art photographers in [Figure 6](#) supports such intuition and show that using any simple sets of binary categories oversimplifies things. When taken together, we can say that these art photographers (and these are only a few of many others identified with snapshot aesthetics) opposed both aesthetics of commercial photography of their time and also earlier modernist photography (see [Figure 14](#) and [Figure 15](#) in Part 3) if they lived in the West, or state-approved propagandistic photography if they lived in Communist countries. But taken separately, we can see that each developed a different visual language of the casual.



6a—Robert Frank



6b—Daido Moriyama and Yutaka Takanashi



6c—William Eggleston

**Figure 6.**

Examples of work by well-known photographers referred to as “snapshot aesthetics” practitioners.

6a. Robert Frank, two photographs from the book *Americans*, 1958.

6b. Daido Moriyama, “Man and Woman, Yokohama,” 1969; Yutaka Takanashi, 1965.

6c. William Eggleston, two photographs from 1970 and 1976.

The works of these photographers also make it even clearer that there was *nothing casual* in amateur photography in the same decades ([Figure 1](#)). Remember that users of mass market cameras and films had to rely on the special labs for processing slide film or getting prints, and this was not free and also required additional time and trips. So while certainly mistakes were made and bad photos were taken, the ones that were printed and survive are the successful ones.



(Unfortunately, since today there is no archive of digitized amateur photos from any period in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which is sufficiently big and random, it's very hard to do any qualitative analysis of amateur culture in retrospect, and prove or correct such intuitive evaluations.) The short color film rolls and cartridges were too important to waste on random photos, or on taking many photos of un-edited life before the camera in the hope that one of these photos will turn out great. Moreover, when taking photos of human subjects, the amateurs followed the conventions and arranged their subjects by asking people to stand together, in particular order, smile, etc. In summary, while we may think today of older amateur photography as "casual" and the photos as "accidental," exactly opposite was most likely true. Only with the mass adoption of digital cameras in 2000s more casual photography became possible, because now cameras could store many photos.

Just as with realism in literary fiction, it appears that true systematic "snapshot aesthetics" was only achievable by hard working full time art photographers such as the people mentioned above. To see and capture "reality," they had to invert both the conventions of what and how is worth photographing, and the aesthetics of good photography that call for reproducing the details, having full range of tones, and minimizing film artifacts. But such inversions are not simply binary—because every art photographer (or a group of photographers working in one city and learning from each other) who successfully developed their own snapshot aesthetics went into a different and at least in some ways unique direction.

## Part 2. *Professional and Designed Photos*

January 2016

“We’re really excited to launch our first version of Instagram today, free in the App Store. Instagram makes mobile photos *fast, simple, & beautiful.*”

“Welcome to Instagram,” October 5, 2010,

<http://blog.instagram.com/post/8755272623/welcome-to-instagram.>

### ***Professional Photos and the Rules of “Good Photography”***

Having discussed *casual* photos on Instagram in Part 1, we will now analyze the second common type—*professional* photos. The examples of these photos are shown in [Figure 5b](#). Note that most of these photos are not from photographers who went to photo schools and/or making money from their commercial photography. We are using the term “professional” to refer to the rules of photography codified in the textbooks during the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now repeated in numerous instructional videos, photo blog and websites, and texts used in photo classes. The lists of such rules may differ but what is important for our characterization of professional Instagram photos is that they were fully established *before* Instagram and mobile photography stage. The examples of such rules are the “rule of thirds”; proper exposure that shows details in shadows, middle tones and highlights; use of line orientations that lead the eye into distance or, on the contrary, make subject appear more flat; balanced colors without any color tint dominating. (The pioneering paper that used of computer vision to study of characteristics of photos including the use of such rules and their effect on aesthetic judgements of photos is Ritendra Datta et al., [Studying Aesthetics in Photographic Images Using a Computational Approach](#), 2006. This is now big research area within computer science. For recent examples, see Sergey Karayev et al., [Recognizing Image Style](#), 2013, and Aydın, Smolic, and Gross, [Automated Aesthetic Analysis of Photographic Images](#), 2015. The Datta’s paper have been been cited in [487 other papers](#) by 1/2016, which indicates the scale of this research.)

Of course lots of modern photographers systematically broke many of these rules to develop their unique styles, producing photos that may have low contrast,

dominance of one hue, and other intentional “mistakes.” But breaking the rules required solid understanding and mastery of them in the first place.

As we can see from the examples in [Figure 5b](#), the use of professional rules by Instagram authors does not always produce visually interesting photos. So, in our use, “professional” refers to the systematic use of rules (regardless of whether they fully understand them or just imitate others) of “good photography” by Instagram authors, and not aesthetic quality of the photos or person’s photo training.

Some of the rules of such *good photography* have been already implemented for years in algorithms included in all types of digital cameras, from smart phones to the larger full frame cameras from Nikon, Canon and Sony costing thousands of dollars (plus thousands more for appropriate lenses for such cameras). Leaving settings at defaults settings typically fires these algorithms when a photo is taken. The algorithms focus camera on the detected face or faces, sharpen photo after the capture, balance grey scale and color histograms, apply image stabilization, etc. They also adjust these and other photo characteristics together to fit the automatically detected or user selected scene types we already mentioned above thus offering meta-automation. In these ways, many of the rules that characterized modern professional photography are now applied by cameras automatically during capture, but others such as composition, use of particular line orientations, proper lighting or establishment of rhythm still have to be learned and practiced manually. Since the phone cameras apply some of the rules automatically to all captured photos, this may make the proportion of professional photos on Instagram and other media sharing sites higher than it was overall in the 20<sup>th</sup> century photography.

Some Instagram photographs follow *all* rules of “good photography” – proper composition, focus, greyscale and color balance, and interesting subjects. But many more photos follow only some of these rules, but not all. This can be partly related to the use of automatic algorithms in phone cameras that implement only some rules. For example, a photo may have perfect contrast and balanced colors but bad composition. Or the photo may have interesting dynamic composition but be overexposed.

The example of how rules of good photography from the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continue to function today without change can be found on the website of already mentioned Shutterstock microstock agency. To help potential contributors understand what photos will interest customers, one article on the site summarizes the requirements:

“a. Composition—make sure the subject is well framed and is clearly defined within the borders of the image.

- b. Focus—Is your subject in focus? Use a tripod when necessary or appropriate. Do not always rely on auto over-ride it manually when necessary to ensure a sharp well defined subject.
- c. Lighting—Your subject should be well lit. Use exposure compensation to make sure your image is not under or over exposed.
- d. Inspect all of your images at 100% before submitting them. Our reviewers look at all imagery at this magnification to search for technical problems—noise, critical focus, dust, sensor issues, chromatic aberrations, etc. ...”

Ashley Hefnawy, How To Prepare Your First Shutterstock Submission, January 23, 2014, <http://www.shutterstock.com/blog/how-to-prepare-your-first-submission>.

## The Subjects of Professional Photos and Hierarchy of Genres

Stock agencies developed taxonomy of the subjects of photos (along with video, vector art, and other image types) subjects to help the clients find appropriate photos. For example, on 02/13/2016, some of the categories on iStock website were “couple,” “willpower,” “liberation,” and “independence” (<http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photos/>). Another agency Shutterstock publishes the list of 20 most searched terms; on 12/18/2015, the top five were sky, background, business, beach, and food (the list also included wood texture as number 12, and paper texture as number 18; <http://www.shutterstock.com/photos/>).

While stock photography aims to cover all kinds of content to meet needs of all commercial or non-profit clients, what about other photographs that are highly *professional* (in our use of this term) and, to use the terms of Tifentale and Schroeder, *are competitive* but *not strategic* (they do not advertise, promote or persuade)? What subjects do they favor? While we have not analyzed separately the content of such professional photos on Instagram, we give an approximate answer to this question by considering content of photos on Flickr—which developed the reputation as the site for professional photographers in contrast to Instagram. (One of the answers on Quora to the question “[Why did Instagram become so successful](#)” states: “Flickr , 500PX are too professional for normal people who are not able to share high quality photos.”. So if we assume that Flickr was a good representation of professional competitive non-strategic photography until about 2013, the analysis of content of large samples of photos uploaded to the site should be revealing. (After that the majority of photos uploaded to Flickr started to come from

mobile phones, and iPhone and Samsung started to dominate over the names of DSLR cameras. See Chris Gambat, "[An Independent Analysis of Flickr's Most Popular Tags](#)", 09/06/2015).

In 2014 Flickr released a dataset of 100 million photos with Creative Commons licenses for use by all interested researchers (David A. Shamma, "[One Hundred Million Creative Commons Flickr Images for Research](#)," 06/24/2014.) The use of these licenses most likely makes this dataset a good representation of interests of serious photography enthusiasts, as opposed to photographers who create photos to sell—i.e., exactly the category we are interested in. The photos came with computer generated tags describing images content. Damon Crockett from our lab analyzed the data and found that the majority of photos were created between 2006 and 2013. Here are five top content tags for these photos and their relative frequencies. The frequencies are counted in relation to the top category (set to 1.00):

outdoor—1.00;  
indoor—0.58;  
nature— 0.43;  
people—0.35;  
architecture—0.31

As we can see, the outside *world* dominates ("outdoor," "nature" and "architecture"). and this outside contains both nature and architecture. Searching Flickr for tags describing photos taken with DSLR cameras such as Canon EOS 6D reveals a similar pattern ([Figure 1](#); we borrowed this idea from Gambat, "An Independent Analysis of Flickr's Most Popular Tags"). This suggests that landscapes and cityscapes are the most frequent subjects for serious photography enthusiasts. Why? People as subjects are too particular, too concrete; too private; we the viewers of photos may like the face of one person but not another. Nature and city views are also concrete offering infinite details to the camera, but it is a different kind of universally appealing concreteness. At the same time, all details present in perspectival views offer best opportunity to show off the capabilities of high resolution sensors in expensive professional camera and expensive lenses. In fact, often professional photos of such views show much more detail than a human eye can see from the same point of view, and this *super-realism* is one of the most clear markers of photo professionalism today.



**Figure 1.**

A small sample of images returned by Flickr when searching image tags for “Canon EOS 6D.” This is a professional high-end dSLR camera with full frame 20 megapixel sensor. The camera was released by Canon in 11/2012; the suggest retail price was US \$2,900. Note that purchasing a few professional level lenses to use with such a camera adds another few thousands to the price. Flickr search was performed on 01/19/2016.

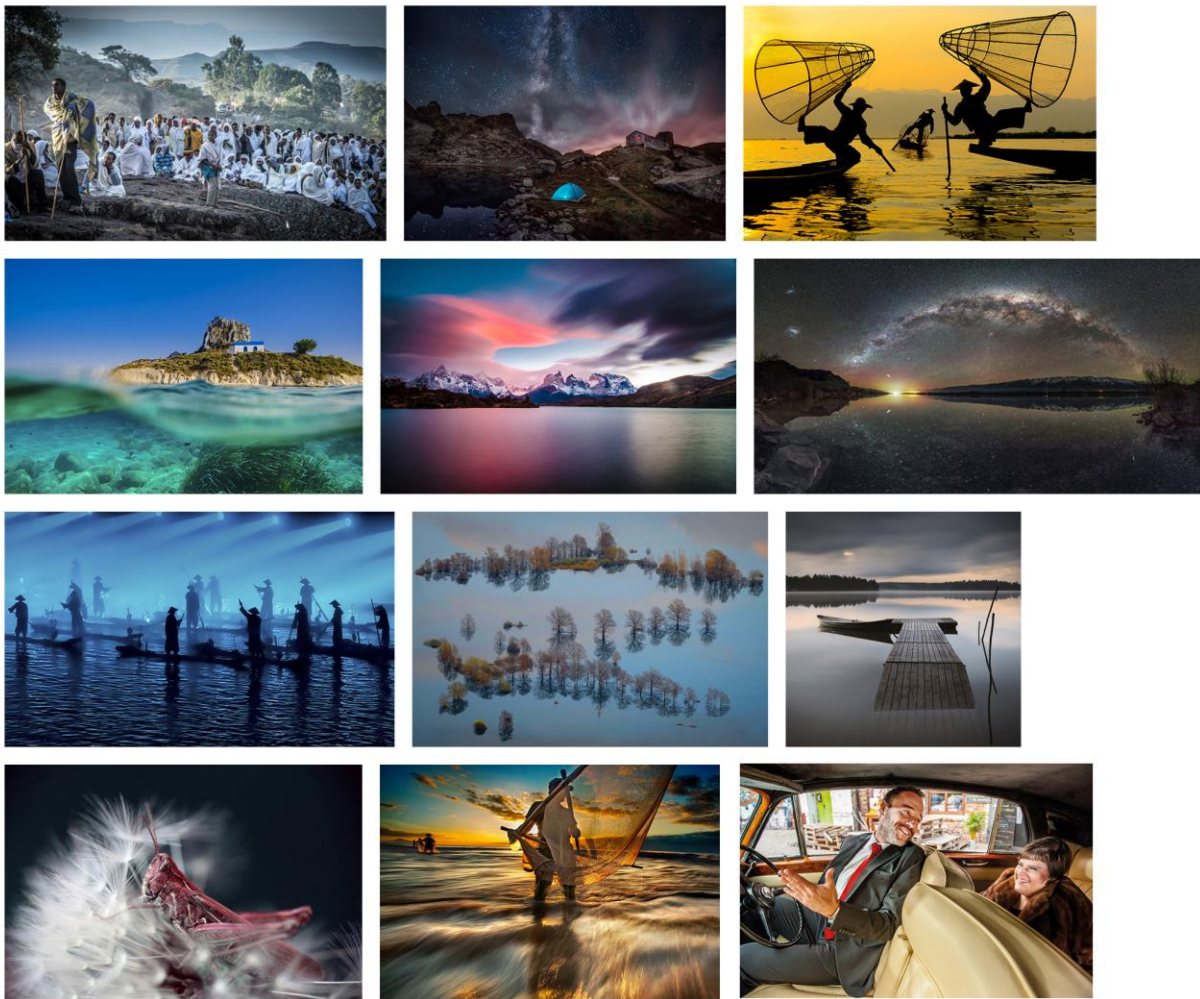
The photos that compete for awards in global competitions such as Sony awards by WPO (World Photo Organization) illustrate well this super-realism and other aesthetic ideals of professional photography today (see [Figure 2](#)). To us, they look very artificial: too staged, too contrived, with too much detail and too perfect colors. In fact, they look like academic paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris salons or mid-20<sup>th</sup> century socialist realism as practiced in USSR or China, or works of classical antiquity that follow exact rules. And just as it is the case with such paintings, the photos that win in Sony competitions also appear to have a strict genre system, with no deviations.

The art academies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century formalized a hierarchy of genres of painting. Here are these genres from highest to lowest ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hierarchy\\_of\\_genres](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hierarchy_of_genres), accessed 01/10/2016):

- allegorical composition,
- history composition,
- portrait,
- scene of everyday life (*scènes de genre* or “genre painting”),

- landscape,
- animal,
- still-life.

While the first two genres are not used today by competition photos, all others have survived. But their hierarchy has changed. Landscape/cityscape genre dominates in terms of numbers of winning photos. The second frequent genre photograph of a person(s) against exotic “national” landscape background or engaged in some activity such as classical ballet. The third genre is an extreme close-up of an insect or a part of an animal with very rich texture and intricate detail. To win in a competition, a photographer also has to stick to particular techniques. For example, the only two allowed camera angles is strictly parallel to the ground or looking up (see **Figure 2**).



**Figure 2.**  
A selection of award winning photographs from Sony World Photography Awards (National Awards), 2015. Source: <http://www.worldphoto.org/national-award-2015>.

## The Subjects of Casual Photos

Now we know something about the *ideal subjects* of professional photos, but what the subjects of casual photos? If majority of Instagram images are such casual photos, then analysis of most frequent tags assigned by people posting the photos can tell us something about what *they* see as the content of these photos, or emotions they think their photos represent. (And this is different from what computer algorithms will see when they analyze photo content.) Among top tags on the day we looked at such list (<http://websta.me/hot>, accessed 01/18/2016), most describe emotions or “people subjects” (we do not consider tags such as #instagood or #followme because they do not tell us anything about the intended subject or emotion). The people subjects include #me (number 6), #fashion (11), #selfie (#13), #girl (15), #friends (17), #smile (21), and #family (29). (Note that this list of top tags aggregates tags from Instagram photos worldwide, so we can’t say anything about the differences among different locations.)

Based on these tag frequencies, we can conclude that casual photography on Instagram is dominated by the human world—in contrast to professional photography on Flickr or in photo competitions dominated by nature/city view genre. This suggests that Instagram’s casual photography indeed is continuous with the “home mode” analog and digital photography in previous decades (see examples in [Figure 1](#) in Part 1). However, more Instagram users are likely to be living in big cities or engaged in frequent trips that include such cities than “home mode” photographers in earlier periods. (While urban population was 746 million in 1950, it reached 3.42 billion in 2007 and 3.9 billion in 2014. In many smaller industrialized countries the majority of people may be living just in one or a few larger megacity areas.) And because most of these users live in major cities, more Instagram photos are likely to show activities and people in urban places, rather than at “home.”

Another important difference between Instagram’s version of home mode photography and its earlier versions in consumer film cameras from the period of 1960-2000 is what is considered worth photographing and sharing. Already in the early analysis of camera phone users in Japan published in 2003, the authors found that “camera phone users elevate otherwise ordinary objects and events to “photo-worthy” occurrences” (D. Okabe and M. Ito, “Camera phones changing the definition of picture-worthy,” 2003; the quote is from Miller and Edwards, “Give and Take.”) This can be explained by people having their phones with cameras always with them and at the same time not having to worry about how many shots are left in their camera film cartridge.



Thus, what may appear to us as the “ordinary” in the original home mode photography was actually not ordinary at all, because only certain non-everyday situations were considered to be worth recording on film to create prints or slides. And in its own turn, the new “ordinary” of camera phones in early 2000s may appear to us today as pre-calculated, since now Instagram sets the new standard of the “ordinary.” Which means that future social imaging technologies will at some point also change how we look at Instagram images from 2010-2015—and what looks today as the “final ultimate ordinary” will also as highly selective.

In addition to looking at tags authors assign to their casual Instagram photos, we can analyze the subjects of photos in a different way—by applying computer vision algorithms that detect objects and types of scenes. We collaborated with computer scientist Miriam Redi working on analysis of aesthetics and content of photos on social networks, including Flickr and Instagram. She used the state-of-the-art computer vision techniques to detect the presence of 1000 different subjects and types of scenes in 100,000 Instagram photos from Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, São Paulo and Tokyo. (This dataset contains 20,000 photos per city randomly selected from all geotagged images shared in central areas of these cities during December 5—December 11, 2013. The larger dataset was assembled for [selfiecity.net](http://selfiecity.net)). To make comparisons between cities easier, Alise Tifentale from our lab organized 1000 subjects into 14 general categories. **Figure 3a** shows the proportions of photos for each city in six of these categories: body and people; food and drinks; clothing and accessories; nature; architecture and furniture. (For more details, see Miriam Redi, Damon Crockett, Lev Manovich, Simon Osindero, [What Makes Photo Cultures Different?](#), ACM Multimedia 2016.)

city	Body and people	food and drinks	clothing and accessories	nature	architecture	furniture
<b>Tokyo</b>	19.0	49.6	12.7	18.0	15.5	28.9
<b>São Paulo</b>	25.8	11.9	21.8	16.5	12.9	14.8
<b>Moscow</b>	22.0	8.4	15.2	25.0	21.1	19.5
<b>Berlin</b>	15.3	12.4	9.9	28.4	39.7	24.2
<b>Bangkok</b>	18	17.7	40.3	12.2	10.8	12.6

**Figure 3.**

Results of computational analysis of subjects of 100,000 Instagram photos shared in Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, São Paulo, and Tokyo. For dataset details, see <http://selfiecity.net/#dataset>.

3a: Proportions of photos in six content categories: 1) food, 2) drinks and meals; 3) clothing and accessories; 4) nature; 5) architecture, 6) furniture. The numbers are shown as percentages, adding up in each column to %100.

3b: Proportions of photos in a larger set of 14 subject categories.

The differences between the cities are quite substantial. For example, in Tokyo, %43.6 of all photos are “food and drinks” category, while in Moscow its only %8.3. “Clothing and accessories” is %40.4 in Bangkok, but only %9.9 in Berlin. “Architecture” is %39.7 in Berlin but only %10.8 in Bangkok. This analysis that uses state of the art computer vision techniques shows that the content of Instagram photos changes significantly depending on the city.

But even within a large city, the popularity of different topics may also change from area to area. In our lab, computer scientist Mehrdad Yazdani calculated the frequencies of tags users assigned to 661,809 Instagram images they shared along 13 miles of Broadway in Manhattan during 2/2014-7/2014. (For details of this dataset, see <http://on-broadway.nyc/>. We first collected 10.5 million geotagged photos shared in NYC, and then filtered this collection to only leave photos shared along 100m wide corridor around the length of Broadway). Since Broadway crosses all of Manhattan, using this slice allows us to see differences between interests of Instagram users in a variety of the city areas (see **Figure 4**).

<b>Chinatown</b>	<b>Soho</b>	<b>Washington Heights</b>	<b>Inwood</b>
<b>Area: Leonard street to Canal street</b>	<b>Area: Canal street to Houston street</b>	<b>Area: 155th street to Fairview Ave</b>	<b>Area: Dyckmann Street to 9th Ave</b>
nyc	nyc	nyc	nyc
newyork	soho	washingtonheights	inwood
NYC	newyork	love	uptown
fashion	NYC	newyork	fashion
tbt	fashion	tbt	naillounge
love	manhattan	manhattan	handmade
manhattan	love	kraftwerk	ny
tribeca	tbt	uptown	cute
style	newyorkcity	NYC	whiskey
newyorkcity	art	fashion	love

**Figure 4.**

Top 10 tags assigned by Instagram users to the images they shared in selected parts of Manhattan crossed by Broadway. The top row shows the names of these parts; the second row shows their south and north boundaries. After that, top 10 ten tags are shown, sorted by frequency.

Just as in the other cities we analyzed, the tags that identify a city always appear among top tags—here these are #nyc, #newyork, and #manhattan. Other tags such as #love and #tbt are part of Instagram’s “global language” which is used everywhere. But other tags only appear in particular parts of a city, and they capture the specific places and interests of people who are residents or visitors to these areas: #art in Soho, #kraftwerk in Washington Heights, #naillounge and #handmade in Inwood.

Together, such results indicate that just as Instagram photos have different types of (intentional or unintentional) aesthetics such as *casual*, *professional*, and *designed*, their popular subjects are also *not* universal, but change from area to area. (Note that the analysis of subject categories using both tag frequencies and computer vision we used above did not yet consider these aesthetics. Of course, they can also possibly change with location, and other important aesthetics may also exist in different geographic areas—and such questions would be important to investigate empirically).

***Designed Photos***

The third common type of Instagram photos (and a different example of competitive photography on Instagram) we will now discuss in detail are the images we call *designed*. These are photos that have been arranged and edited to have a distinct *stylized look*. While retaining the basic properties of *modern photography* (scene shown in perspective produced by light focused by the lenses), these images also have characteristics of modern *graphic design*.



pages is about close-ups, shallow spaces, big areas in one color, and most or all of photos with little or no details. First privileges open landscapes; the second privileges details of objects and close-ups of faces and bodies. In the first, compositions are perfectly symmetrical; in the second, they are asymmetrical. The first is about perspective; the second is about flatness. In professional photographs, we see complex lines and curves of outdoor landscapes; in designed photographs, the dominant lines are perfectly strict—because these photos often show the designed environment, as opposed to nature.

### **The Reality Effect in Photography**

This quick comparison captures many key differences between professional and designed photo aesthetics, but we can go further. To do this, we will try first to systematically describe visual properties of professional photographs and graphic design images as these two visual cultures developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The authors of many professional photographs use a number of techniques to build the aesthetics of *photo-realism*—that is, they control or chose appropriate natural lighting, exposure, and use editing to achieve certain effects that we identify with “realistic photography” in the current historical period. We say “current” because in our view photo-realism aesthetics change historically. In each period they are affected by state of the art in photo technology as well as by the period’s cultural taste. Therefore, what we consider as ultimate photo-realism today may look unrealistic and convention-driven in ten or twenty years from now.

Here are some of the characteristics of *realistic photos* in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century:

- 1) High level of details distributed throughout the image space and also across grey scale, with some level of details in darks, mid-tones and highlight areas;
- 2) easily readable 3D space—the ease created by composition, and choice of the point of view;
- 3) clear differentiation between main subject and background for particular genres such as portraits, models, and product shots.

Some of these choices (i.e., 1) are consistent with how we see the world naturally. Others (i.e., 2) are aligned with specific properties of perception such as perspective, but they *intensify* these properties (for example, including a number of lines that converge towards a vanishing point to make perspective easier to recognize quickly). Still others (i.e., 3) are only activated in particular genres but not others.

Realist photos may also include additional effects that are purely artificial constructions. The perfect example of this is *bokeh*—“the aesthetic quality of the

blur produced in the out-of-focus parts of an image produced by a lens” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bokeh>, accessed 02/17/2016.) Bokeh is always discussed when people review and compare new photo lenses for dSLR and Mirrorless cameras, and it is very important to professional and serious amateur photography aesthetics. (See examples in [Figure 12](#).) According to one photo textbook, “Differences in lens aberrations and aperture shape cause some lens designs to blur the image in a way that is pleasing to the eye, while others produce blurring that is unpleasant or distracting—‘good’ and ‘bad’ bokeh, respectively” (Harold Davis, *Practical Artistry: Light & Exposure for Digital Photographers*, O'Reilly Media, 2008, p. 62). Bokeh exemplifies how photo-realism is a constructed style, as opposed to only being a faithful (or intensified) representation of visible reality that follows same principles as human perception. (For a relevant analysis of how fiction writers construct “reality effect,” see famous text by Roland Barthes *The Reality Effect*, 1968.)

## Part 3. Instagramism

May 2016

(I am grateful to Danabelle Ignes for pointing out to me the global influence of Kinfolk and its effect on Instagram aesthetics. Ashleigh Cassemere-Stanfield noted the similarities between many Instagram photos and certain categories in stock photography on 500px such as still-life and food. Zizi Li, the 2016 summer intern with our lab, have created a list of Instagram users with strong visual aesthetics from Asian countries, and I have used this list for examples.)

### What is Style?

In Part 3 we started discussion of *designed photos* on Instagram, but there is lots more to cover. Let's continue.

How do we characterize a *style* in general? And, in particular, the contemporary aesthetic that was born in early 2010s and can be seen today in numerous Instagram photo that we referred to as *designed photos*? And are there any differences today between *commercial* and *personal* photography even when they feature the same subjects and the same attitude? Can a style be defined through *a list of features*, or is it a larger *gestalt* that cannot be simply detected by finding images that have some of these features?

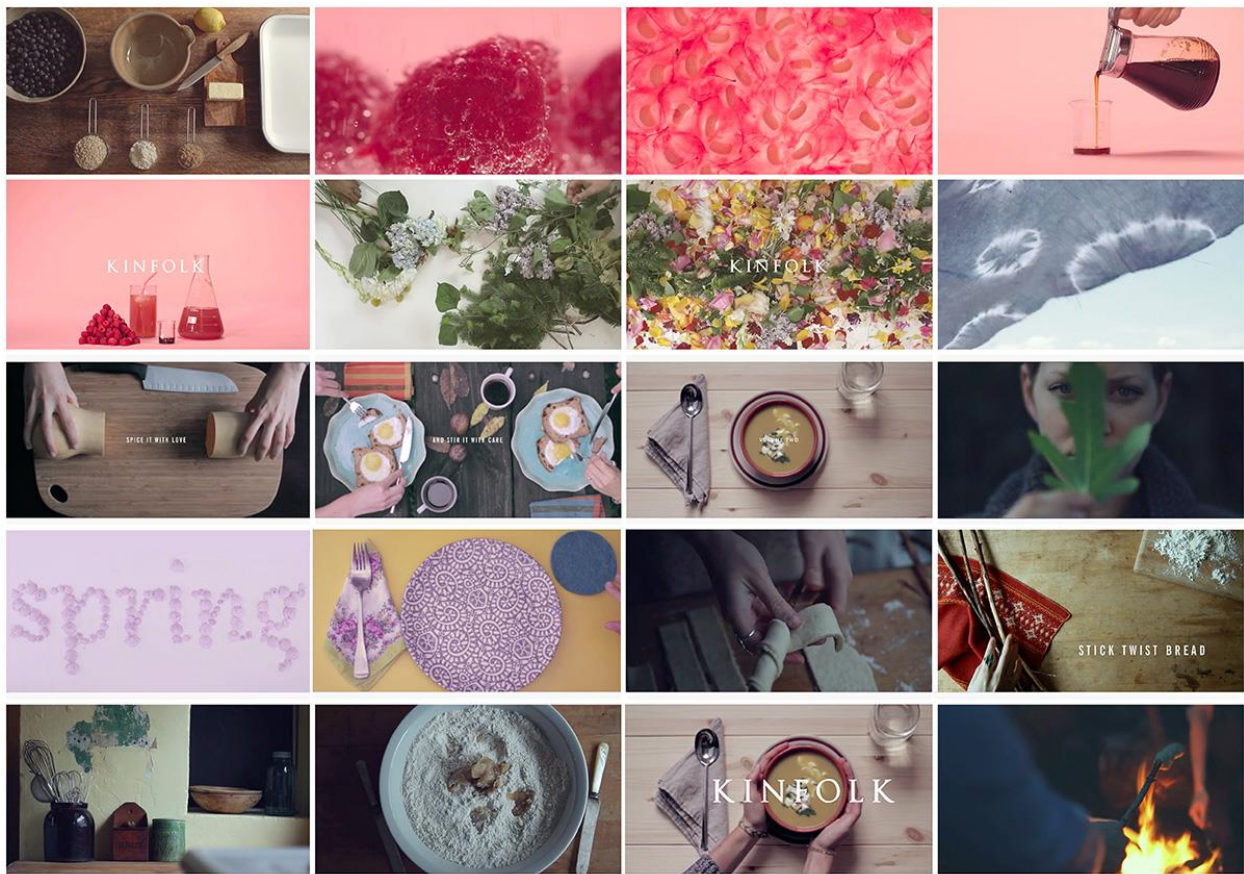
Look at the beautiful short films (2012-) from the “slow lifestyle” cult magazine *Kinfolk* (<https://vimeo.com/kinfolk/videos>) (**Figure 1**). They perfectly exemplify a visual cultural form that can be also seen in numerous Instagram photos created by young visually sophisticated users around the world. It also appears in some—but far from all—contemporary lifestyle and fashion commercial photography and cinematography.

We can call this form *photography+design*.

Or, in the case of short films or video shots, *cinematography+design*.

Or we can just make it a single (but pretty long and not really practical) term: *design + cinemato/photo/graphy*.

My use of “+” or “/” as opposed to “and” is deliberate. The aesthetics of modern 2D design and modern photography / cinematography are blended here so much that we cannot just talk about media “meeting” together. Instead, we have a blend.



**Figure 1.**

Frames from selected Kinfolk films. Source: <https://vimeo.com/kinfolk/videos>.

What is more important in this style—design or the camera? Arranging the objects, the bodies, the spaces and orchestrating colors, textures, hand movements, etc.? Or choosing the right lens, the right point of view, and applying the right color filter to the image or the video? The flatness of surfaces (design) or three-dimensionality of spatial details (camera)? It is impossible to say. This is why I think we are dealing here with a distinct form. It was first developed in advertising photography in 1930s. It was adopted by professional graphic designers in 1990s, thanks to Photoshop. It was next extended to moving images, thanks to After Effects software. And after 2000, it was adopted by millions of your creative teenagers and young culture professionals, thanks to Instagram.

This form is a *gestalt* made up from two types of skills and media traditions, rather a mechanical joining of the elements. (In my book *Software Takes Command*, I

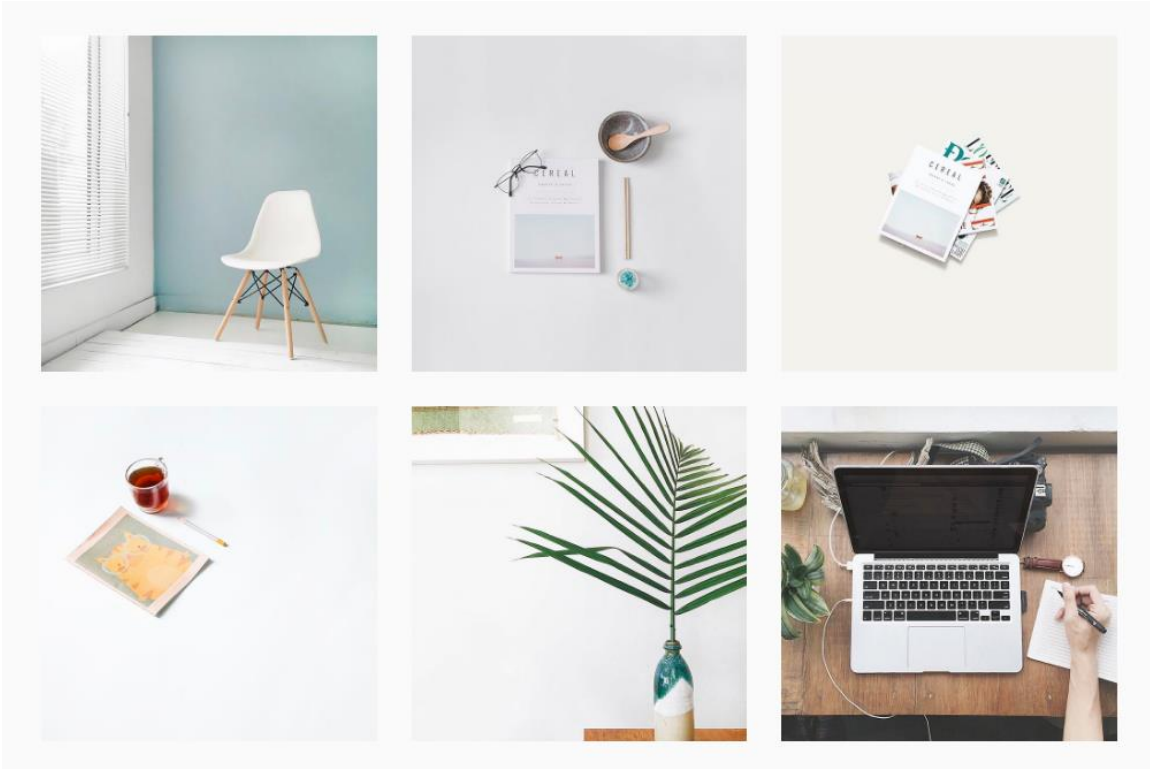


offer detailed analysis of the earlier version of this form as manifested in motion graphics in the late 1990s. The term used in that book is “hybrid.”)

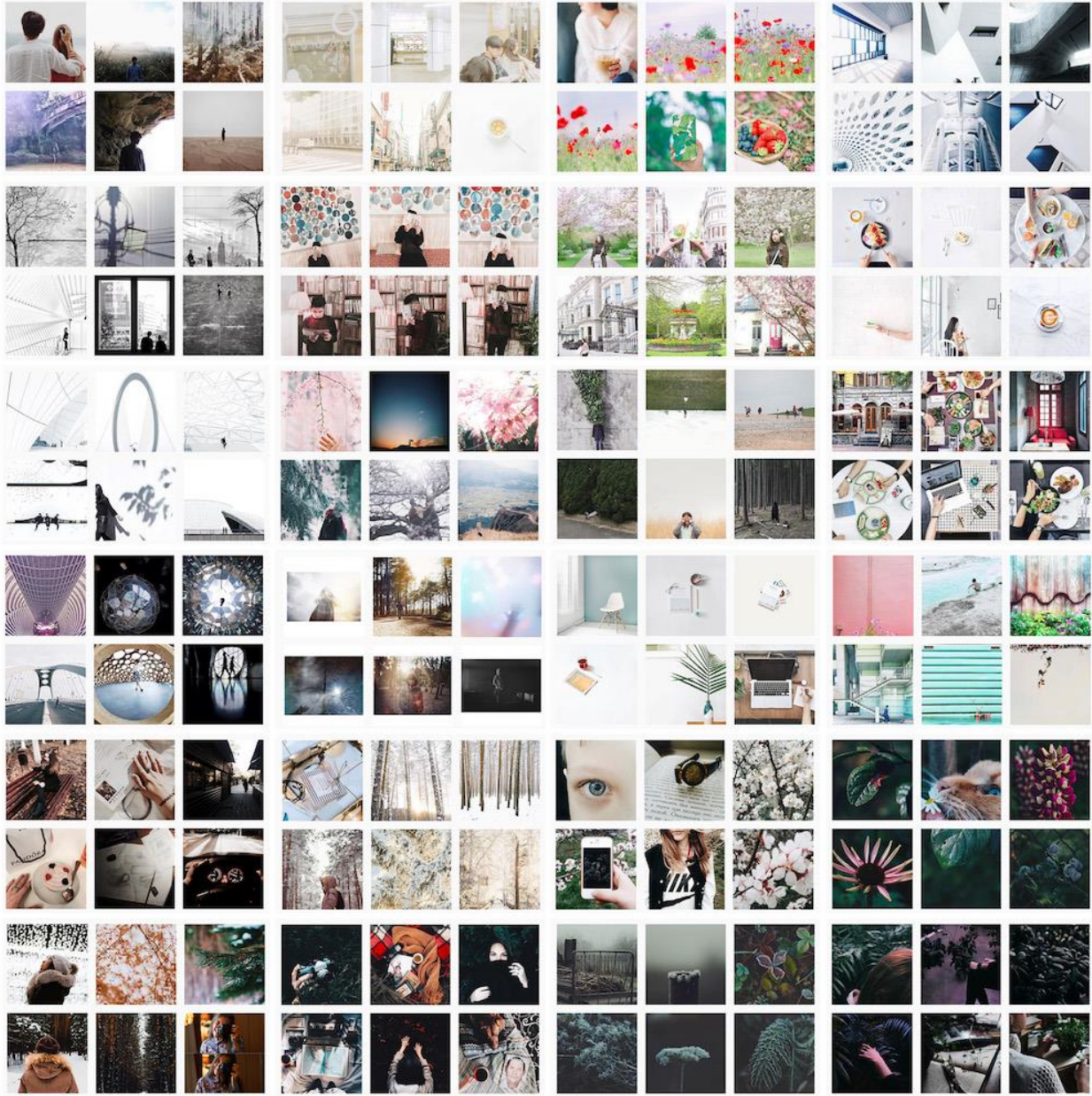
There are many other instances of this form today, if we are only concerned with its formal dimensions—i.e., saturated or faded color, use of empty areas and textured areas, etc. In fact, lots of graphic designs and websites use the same aesthetics. But in the case of Kinfolk and many Instagram images (illustrated by a selection from 24 users from 8 countries in the montage in [Figure 3](#)), we are dealing with something else. The media *form* that combines lens image capture and design techniques goes along with particular *content*. And together, these elements create particular “sensibility,” “attitude,” or “tonality.” Perhaps the word which captures this best is Russian *состояние*—but unfortunately it does not have a precise English equivalent. (Another Russian word *образ* commonly used today to refer to the image with cultural or historical associations you create through fashion, hairstyle, makeup, and accessories is also useful.)

I am going to refer to this combination of a media form and particular content as *Instagramism*. (While I could have continue to use the term “designed photos,” I wanted another term that would situate such photos not within histories of photography, design and visual culture—as we did already in Part 2— but rather within the histories of social, economic and cultural ideologies and corresponding ways to conduct one’s life. Something with *-ism*.)

But why “Instagramism”? Instagram was started in 2010, and Kinfolk in 2011. Instagram was different from then existing photo-sharing services because it came with filters and other simple image editing tools available in its mobile app. And this democratized making good-looking images. Gradually, Instagram was also adopted by millions of young, sophisticated people around the world to display their photography, narrate their ideas and experiences, and connect to each other.



**Figure 2.** Selection of Instagram photos shared by @tienphuc\_ (Vietnam).



24 Instagram users, 6 images from each user arranged in 3x3 grid.  
User name, country, city (if listed in user's profile).

to\_ya / Japan / Tokyo  
 demo\_yaru / Japan  
 qdqi / China / Shanghai  
 k\_a\_r\_n\_g / Hong Kong  
 elenora.a1 / Russia / Rostov-on-Don  
 inkip.photo / Russia / Buryatia / Ulan Ude

triph009 / Vietnam  
 duong\_san\_loc / Vietnam  
 kohhhhi / Japan / Fukuoka  
 sora\_ame / Japan  
 katrikonstant / Russia / Yakutia  
 rocklononight / Ukraine / Kiev

by\_jinyoung / Korea  
 halleystan\_ / Vietnam  
 koyoon / Japan  
 brenchuc\_ / Vietnam  
 lavmeor / Ukraine / Kiev  
 victora\_photo\_ / Russia / Ryazan

daniulic / China / Shanghai  
 hanchippo / Vietnam / Hanoi  
 reitstrungui / Vietnam / Hanoi  
 zabrada / Japan / Kametake  
 lubanagordukaya / Belarus / Minsk  
 vila\_century / Russia

**Figure 3.** Sample images from 24 Instagram users from 8 countries: Vietnam, China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. 6 images from each user is shown. Some of the images are shown at larger size throughout this book part. Full size version of the whole montage is available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/culturevis/27064111290/sizes/l>.

But how did young global Instagram users learn to use these tools (along with staging or choice of a scene, of course) to express particular attitudes? In 2010, *Wallpaper* magazine (“the world’s most important design and lifestyle publication,” according to a [Wikipedia article](#)) was already 14 years old, and the first “design hotel” by Philip Stark and Ian Schrager was 22 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royalton\\_Hotel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royalton_Hotel)). Both minimalist and mid-20th century modernist aesthetics were already widespread globally. However, *Kinfolk* developed and popularized a new aesthetics. It had a real effect on growing Instagram, and Instagram users popularized it further. This has been acknowledged by more than one commentator:

“The *Kinfolk* look has become so influential that every over-styled, washed-out Instagram photo of a succulent or a cup of coffee is now deemed to be part of its visual bandwagon. (Dan Howarth, interview with *Kinfolk* co-founder Nathan Williams, <http://www.dezeen.com/2016/03/02/kinfolk-magazine-interview-founder-editor-in-chief-nathan-williams-instagram/>, March 2, 2016.)

“*Kinfolk* also came into existence just as we started using platforms like Instagram aspirationally, translating the aesthetics of the glossy print page onto the even glossier screen and making them our own in the process.” (Kyle Chaka, “The Last Lifestyle Magazine: How *Kinfolk* created the dominant aesthetics of the decade with perfect lattes and avocado toast,” <http://www.racked.com/2016/3/14/11173148/kinfolk-lifestyle-magazines>, March 14, 2016.)

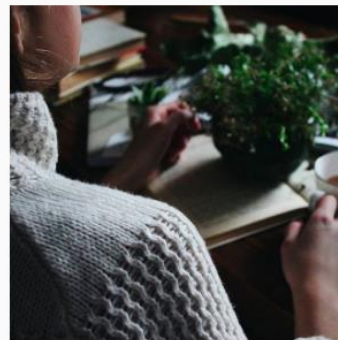
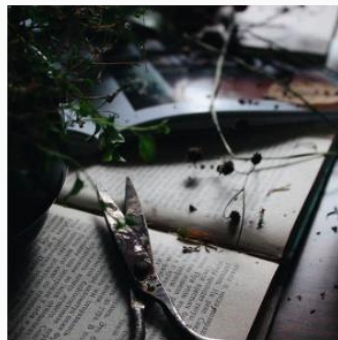
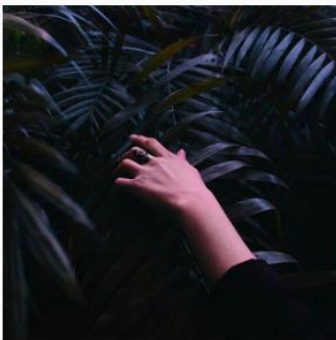
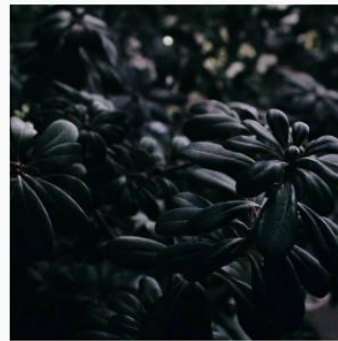
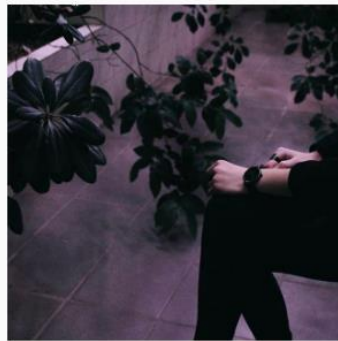
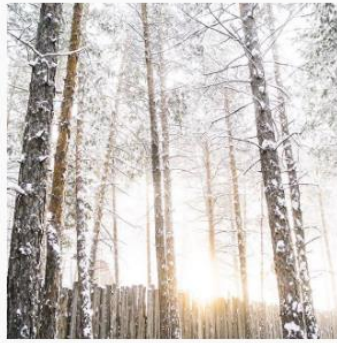
Of course, many other magazines and web platforms now also use *Kinfolk* / Instagramism aesthetics and “attitude.” Searching Instagram, I found around a million photos tagged with various *Kinfolk* related tags: #kinfolk, #kinfolklife, #kinfolkmagazine, #kinfolkrossia, and so on. Among the cities worldwide (choosing only from the ones I visited since 2010), the ones which have this aesthetics the most in my view are Seoul, Riga, Tallinn, Berlin, and downtown Los Angeles—although practically every megapolis now has its “design / hip” places and districts. In choosing these particular cities, I am not simply thinking of the abundance of cafes and restaurants with interesting design, ambient bars in unusual locations, small design and lifestyle shops, and other places where we are expected not only to hang out and browse, but also to spend some money. More important are the atmosphere and the feeling (*состояние*) you have while walking around these cities—the result of their architecture, urban structure, rhythms, the numbers of

young appropriately dressed and behaving young people around you, the looks on their faces, the ways their bodies move, and the way they occupy space. (That's why New York, Brooklyn, Paris, and London can never qualify to be top Instagramism cities even though they have plenty of the right places—they are simply too crowded and too fast.) Because of these other factors, I do not think that we can reduce Instagramism to a simple list of dishes, drinks, products, filters, and effects such as “latte,” “avocado toast,” or “washed out” (which is what writers I quoted above seem to suggest.)

So let us now look more closely at Kinfolk films and Instagram photos expressing Instagramism aesthetics and sensibility best. (They seem to come from Russia, Ukraine, Vietnam, and Japan). What is really going there?

The Instagram examples shown in [Figure 3](#) cover a wide range—from geometric and high-contrast spreads of objects and foods to blurry or low-contrast images of nature. The first kind is very close to Kinfolk photography. It is about *предмет* (Russian for “things”). The second is more about *состояние*. In the first, objects stand out from background which is often pure white. In the second, even if objects are present, they do not attract attention.

However, we have to remember that in an Instagram gallery interface, any image always appears next to others. Look at the selection of six images shared by user [@by\\_jinyong](#) ([Figure 4c](#)). It shows that the meaning of a particular photo in Instagram changes depending what photos are around it in the user's gallery. The user highlights the coffee cup (top left), mobile phone (bottom center), and a basket of fruit (bottom right) by blurring the background. So in another context these three photos would be about “things.” But in this particular context, they became about the mood established by the other three photos of the flowers in the field.



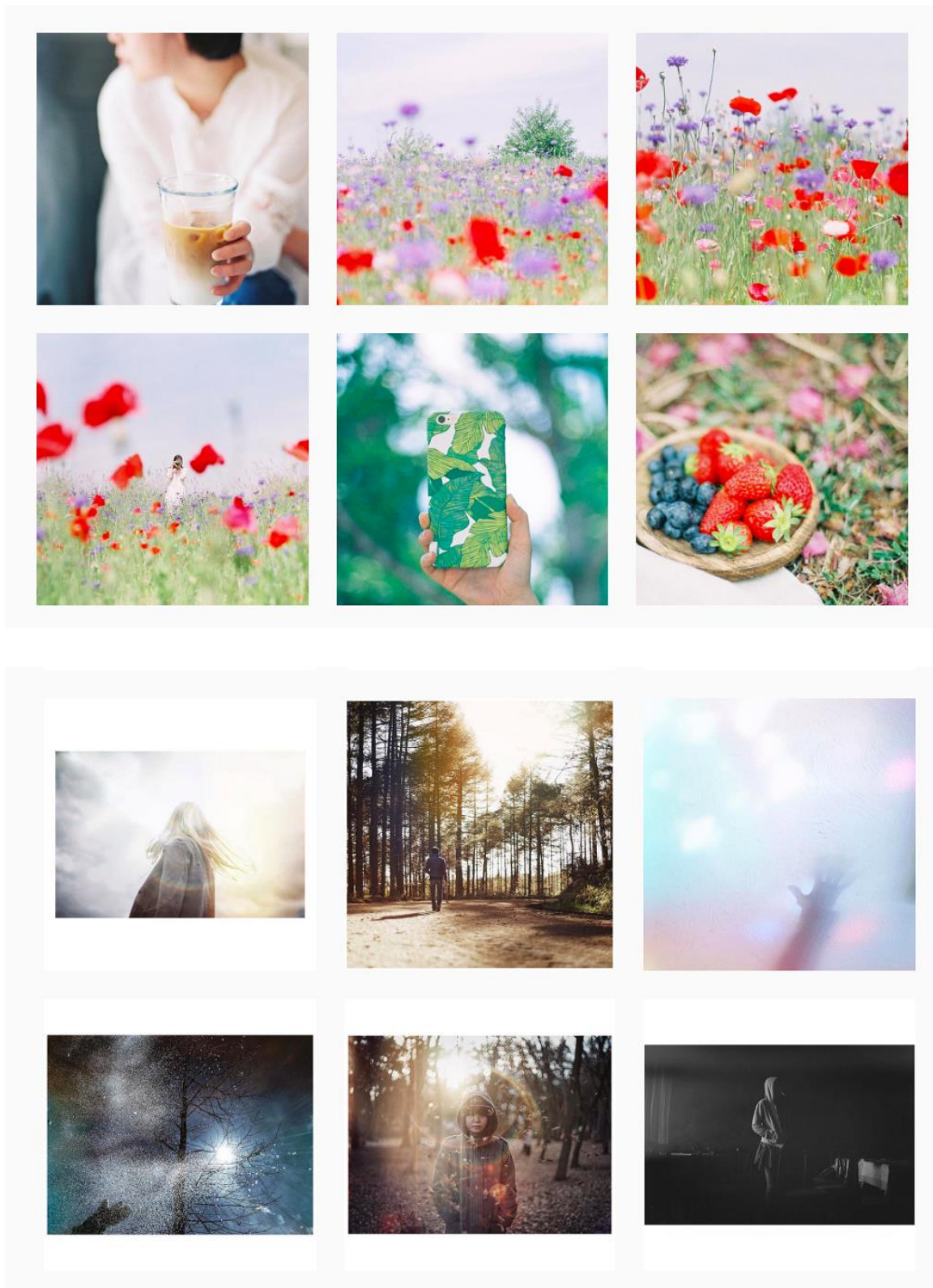


Figure 4. Selection of photos shared by four Instagram users (also shown in [Figure 3](#)).

Top to bottom:

@katrinaconstrant (Russia, Yakutia),

@vita\_century (Russia),

@by\_jinyong (Korea),

@sora\_ame (Japan).

There are other differences between Kinfolk and Instagram aesthetics created by young sophisticated users from many countries—but I am more interested in their common features. Having defined *Instagramism* above as a “combination of a media form and particular content,” let’s now expand our analysis by bringing in other terms, such as “narrative.”

Instagramism does not care about “*telling a story*,” and it does not feature proper “subjects” (in the sense of “subject of a photo”). Certainly, Kinfolk and Instagram video and photos show very concrete things: textured walls, human hands, flowers, bodies moving along designed trajectories, people looking into the landscape from a corner of a frame, etc. But at the same time they *blur*, so to speak, the semantic function of a representation. They are *not about showing, or signifying, or registering, or narrating, or convincing*. And they are *not about conveying a “feeling”* either, this would be too simplistic. Really, what is the “feeling” expressed by a close-up view of textured objects arranged on a table, or a hand holding a cappuccino cup in morning light? Can you name these “feelings”? And finally, they are *not even about “style.”* Well-dressed people and design hotel rooms do have “styles.” Not photographs or videos.

### **Refusing to “tell stories”: Art Cinema and k-pop Music Videos**

Having rejected all easy terms, what do we have left? I believe that the 20th century film theory and criticism were struggling with the same problem, and they did not solve it. After you take out narrative, editing, acting, and cinematography, how do you call the film “meat” that is left? (Of course only some directors had this “meat,” most others were happy to use stereotypes). People writing about cinema sometimes used the term *mise-en-scène*. For me, this term names a difficult intellectual problem rather than a solution. Here is definition of *mise-en-scène* from 1960 provided by one of the founders of *Cahiers du Cinéma* (quoted in <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mise-en-sc%C3%A8ne>): “What matters in a film is the desire for order, composition, harmony, the placing of actors and objects, the movements within the frame, the capturing of a moment or look... *Mise en scene* is nothing other than the technique invented by each director to express the idea and



establish the specific quality of his work.” This start is exciting but then the writer gives up, reducing *mise-en-scène* to a tool used by a “director to express the idea.” Really?

Although the term *mise-en-scène* does not provide us with a clear definition of Instagramism, it does point us in the right direction—the 20th century cinema. Certainly, some of the 20th century film cinematographers, art directors, and directors pioneered Instagramism in some of their films—to name only cinematographers, think of Sven Nykvist (cinematographer of Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*) and Georgy Rerberg (cinematographer of Tarkovsky’s *Mirror*). (Instagramism here refers not to any particular narrow aesthetics, but rather construction of scenes and images that are atmospheric, visually perfect, emotional without being aggressive, and subtle as opposed to dramatic.)

(Note: In addition to particular cinematographers and photographers, we can also find great examples of Instagramism sensibility in the history of painting: oil paintings by Balthus, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Utrillo, Robert Falk, and monochrome works on paper by artists from China, starting in the Song dynasty, and subsequently also in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.)

However, even the most atmospheric, visually perfect, and subtle feature films and 20th century commercial photographs with the same qualities were ultimately doing something else. Even the most artistic commercial photography had to help sell something. And even in the most poetic and individualistic art cinema, purely poetic non-narrative shots and sequences were embedded into larger “stories.” These “stories” had people (i.e., actors) talking to each other, moving in vehicles, walking in and out of modern buildings, and performing other “actions.” They had “establishing shots.” They employed “costume designers,” and “makeup artists,” and used “scripts.” All these horrible terms describe the forces that never allowed feature films to become %100 poetic.

I can think of only a few exceptions—the feature films that “got away,” refusing to “tell stories.” Or, at least, in these films the prose of the narrative did not take away poetry from the visual. Not surprisingly, most of these were made in the USSR, where in some cases some directors were able to use very professional state film system and big budgets to make very personal films. These are Sergei Parajanov (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, 1965; *The Color of Pomegranates*, 1969), Marlen Khutsiev (*I am 20*, 1965; *July’s Rain*, 1967), Mikhail Kalatozov (*I am Cuba*, 1964), and Elyor Ishmukhamedov (*Tenderness*, 1966; *Lovers*, 1969).



**Figure 5.**

5a: stills from *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (Parajanov, 1965) and *The Color of Pomegranates* (Parajanov, 1969).

5b: stills from *Red Desert* (Antonioni, 1964).

In contrast, their counterparts in Western countries had to rely on 8mm or 16mm format, and had no budget, studios or real actors—and as a result, Western experimental cinema was often abstract. Indeed, would you be scraping lines on film stock (Len Lye), filming rotating disks (Man Ray) or using other tricks of avant-garde cinema, if you had access to the same actors, cinematographers, and production crew as Tarkovsky?

In my personal view, the only Western feature films where visual poetry is as important as narrative were Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *Last Year in Marienbad* (1960), Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), the first part of Bergman's *Persona* (1966) and Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967). (The stills from two films by Parajanov and Antonioni's *Red Desert* are shown in **Figures 5a** and **5b**).

I recently watched again through the most well-known Godard's films of the 1960s, and they all now look surprisingly narrative-driven. And despite all their remarkable visual poetry, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and Agnès Varda's *Cléo*

*from 5 to 7 (1961)* also are real narratives—or maybe they just did not pay the same attention to design of every frame as other directors mentioned above.

Of course, if we also consider the 20th and 21st century short films and documentaries, the list will be quite long. And if we start counting motion graphics and music videos produced since the late 1990s, it will become enormous. For example, hundreds of k-pop music videos produced in the last few years have excellent visual design. And here are some recent (2014-2016) Russian and Ukrainian music videos with equally strong visual aesthetics and contemporary “cool” sensibility and attitude typical for the Instagram generation:

*Quest Pistols Show*—Санта Лючия:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6a\\_mLhifqc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6a_mLhifqc)

*Выходной* by MONATIK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wR-jxJ9II78>

*Тише* by Анна Седокова и MONATIK:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dr\\_gCwjaoCI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dr_gCwjaoCI)

*Песня 404* by Время и Стекло:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeRCDH\\_zUnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeRCDH_zUnU)

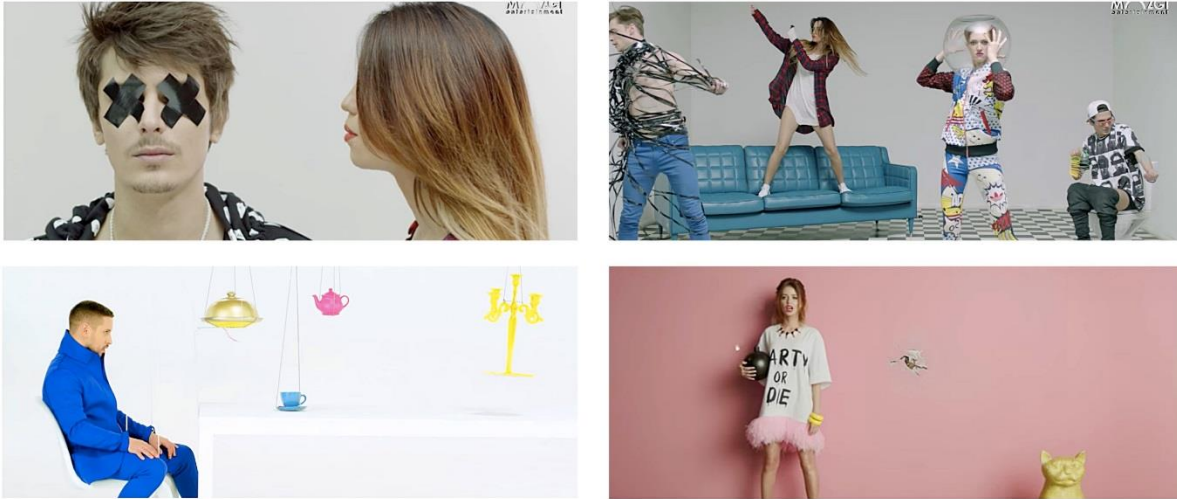
*Имя 505* by Время и Стекло:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3Go8ub9a1k>

*Май* by Клава Кока:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h\\_7xH2D6Mxs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_7xH2D6Mxs)

Stills from three of these videos are show in [Figure 6](#).



**Figure 6.**

Stills from four music videos from Russia and Ukraine.

First row: *Имя 505* (Время и Стекло), *Тише* (Анна Седокова and MONATIK).

Second row: *Тише* (Анна Седокова and MONATIK), *Имя 505* (Время и Стекло).

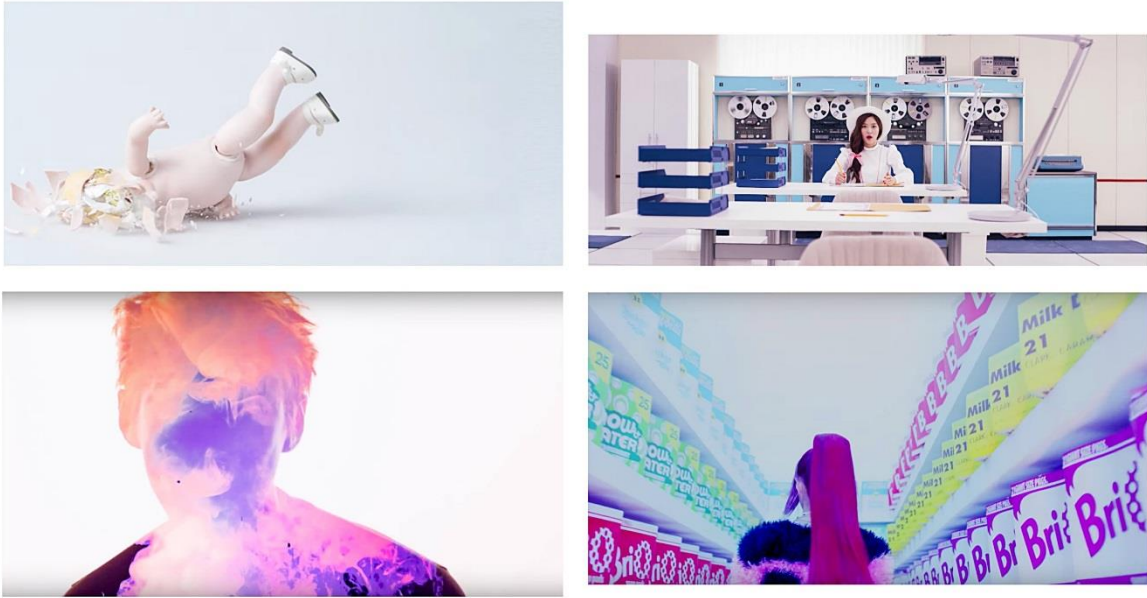
For yet another example of a “convergence” between pop music and design, consider the following. A number of K-pop albums [received top awards](#) from the most prestigious global design competitions (Red Dot Design and iF Design Awards) in design and packaging categories. The groups include Girls' Generation, Super Junior, SHINee, f(x), and EXO. (See Samantha Marie Lifson, "Top K-Pop Groups Win International Product Design Awards For Album Covers," January 28, 2016, <http://www.kpopstarz.com/articles/267544/20160128/if-product-design-awards-album-covers.htm>.)

[Figure 7](#) demonstrates design sophistication in recent K-pop videos. The view numbers refer to YouTube videos published at official YouTube accounts by the groups or their management companies:

*Dumb Dumb* (Red Velvet). Published on Sep 8, 2015. 38,699,981 views (as of May 31, 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGdbaEDVWp0>

*The 7th Sense* (NCT U). Published on Apr 8, 2016. 11,437,989 views (as of May 31, 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UGMDJ9kZCA>

*Gotta be You* (2NE1, 2014). Published on May 20, 2014. 29,920,040 views (as of May 31, 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdkTgwffmdo>



**Figure 7.**

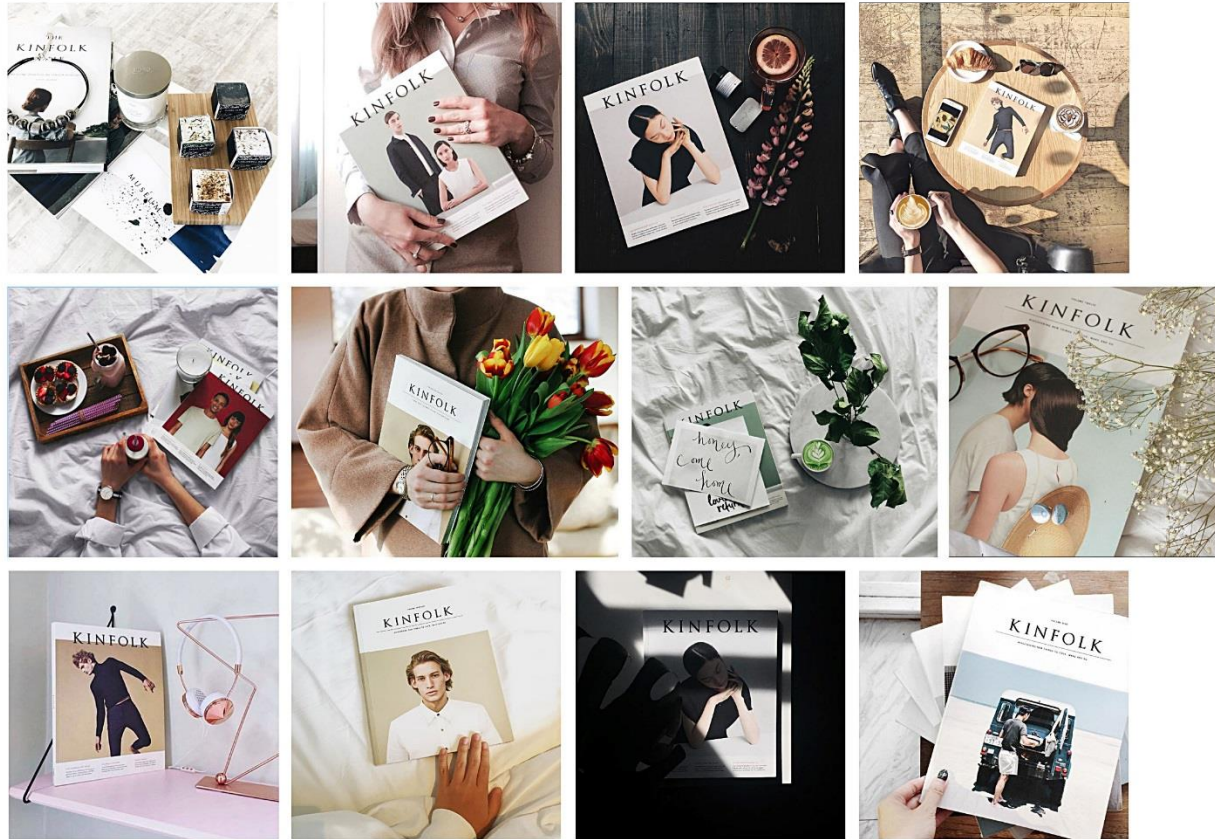
Stills from three K-pop music videos.

Top row: *Dumb Dumb* (Red Velvet, 2015).

Bottom row: *The 7th Sense* (NCT U, 2016), *Gotta be You* (2NE1, 2014).

## Instagramism and Contemporary Cultural identities

Having explored relevant examples from the 20th century cinema and contemporary music videos, let's come back to Instagram of today. Best images created by young Instagrammers practice something we can also call "poetic design" (referencing here "poetic realism" movement in cinema, minus the narratives). What are some of the countries that produce the best "poetic design"? It is hard to answer this without a large scale computational analysis of many millions of Instagram images, but here is one hint. Kinfolk has (or had) international editions in Russia, China, Korea, and Japan. Indeed, we keep finding great examples of Instagramism aesthetics among users from these countries. Not surprisingly, some of their photos repeatedly feature Kinfolk magazine (see [Figure 8](#)).



**Figure 8.**

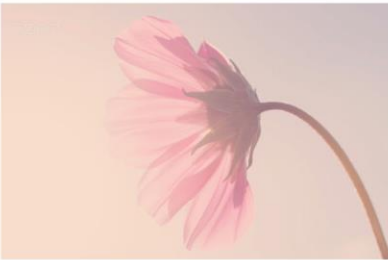
Examples of Instagram photos different users that feature *Kinfolk* magazine.

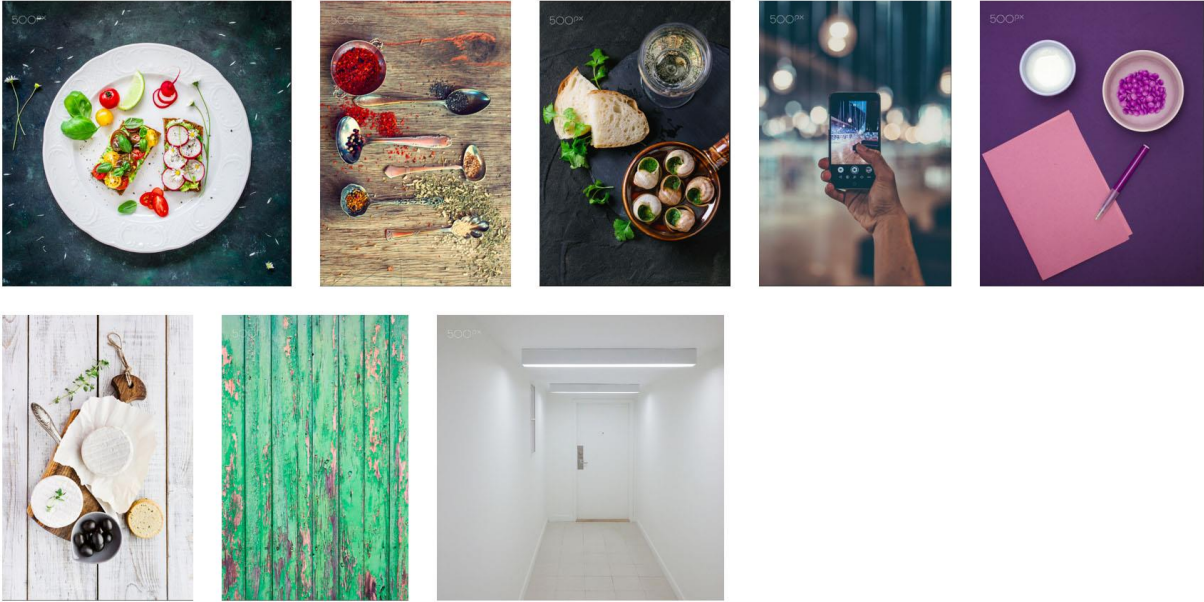
Let's look at the sample of photos from 24 Instagram users in [Figure 3](#). Although some of these photos may look like commercial lifestyle or fashion photography, they do not focus on objects so directly. They do not "sell" them to us. They also do not feature perfect model bodies. The atmosphere and mood are more important, and the "props" (objects, bodies) are less important.

We can sometimes find lifestyle or fashion photography which is very, very close to poetic design on Instagram. The boundary is almost invisible, but I do believe that it exists. And *the subtlety of this boundary itself is an important sign of how culture works today*. "Independent" and "commercial" or "art" and "design" are not separated in clear ways like they were during the 20th century. But this does not mean that they have completely merged.

**Figures 9a, 9b** and **9c** shows selections of Instagram-like images available for sale from stock imagery portion of popular 500px photo sharing site (<https://marketplace.500px.com>). I have spent some searching through the website and browsing the results to select the photos that are as close as possible

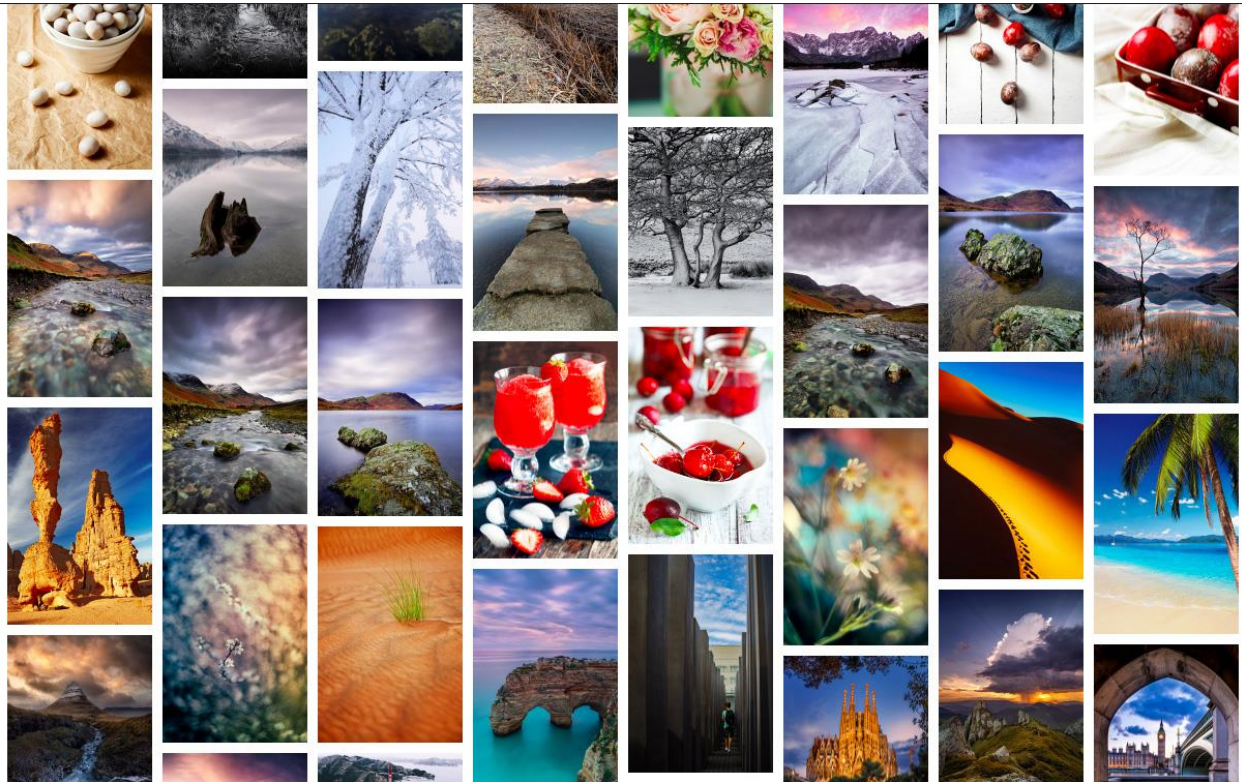
aesthetically to Instagramism sensibilities. These particular photos certainly could have come from Instagram users who are not trying to monetize their accounts.





**Figure 9.**  
Selection of “Instagram-like” images from 500px.

To give you a sense of more typical stock imagery from 500px, I have entered “Browse latest content” (with “no people” option selected) on marketplace.500px.com and saved the screenshot ([Figure 10](#)).





**Figure 10.**

Screenshot of images displayed by marketplace.500px.com after selecting “Browse latest content” (with “no people” option selected) at 11:25pm, May 31, 2016.  
<https://marketplace.500px.com/>.

As we can see, the distinctions between “Independent” and “commercial” still exist—although a significant proportion of photos can function equally well in either category. And this is no longer the question of “commodification.” The “independent” and “commercial” continuously influence each other and borrow from each other.

This discussion and examples suggest the following. If want to understand the specificity of the contemporary cultures, we cannot use the 19th and 20th century concepts such as mainstream and experimental, late capitalism, fetishism, narcissism, commodity, appropriation, etc. They are too broad to capture the small differences between different cultural situations and sensibilities that matter today. To put this differently: when cultural trends emerge and become popularized faster than before, people’s answer is to develop small variations, rather than trying to make something really very different (modernist “make it new.”)

**Cultural identity today is established via small variations and differences**—and also hybridization among already established positions. (For example, if the first part of the 20th century was about radically conflicting “isms”—cubism, suprematism, surrealism, etc.—then the 21st century so far is about variations on single larger trends such as minimalism in design.)

Note, however, that there are limits to how many distinct cultural identities are possible. If you describe yourself as “traveler, blogger, photographer” (as many Instagrammers do), you immediately position yourself within a really big “Instagram class.” Instagram contains over 100 million photos with tag #travel, 27 million photos tagged #photographer, and 18 million photos tagged #blogger (numbers as of May 31, 2016). You can, of course get, more specific, but again numbers are massive. Here are examples of such tags from photos of a few users I showed in [Figure 3](#):

#geometry—2,061,435 posts  
#minimalmood—1,022,493 posts  
#flatlay—991,444 posts  
#shadowhunters—972,219 posts

Wikipedia article [List of subcultures](#) lists 126 different subcultures (many of these are specific to Japan). Among those listed, we find *bōsōzoku*, “a Japanese youth

subculture associated with customized motorcycles”); *demoscene*, “a computer art subculture that specializes in producing demos”; and *furry fandom*, “a subculture interested in fictional anthropomorphic animal characters with human personalities and characteristics.” This sounds like a lot of choices, but it is not enough to create a unique cultural identity. If a young person identifies with any subculture, this excludes her/him from the “mainstream” (if it exists in given place) or a few common identities. But at the same time, the person now belongs to another group, i.e. the chosen subculture. So instead of creating a unique identity, the person gets locked in a group identity.

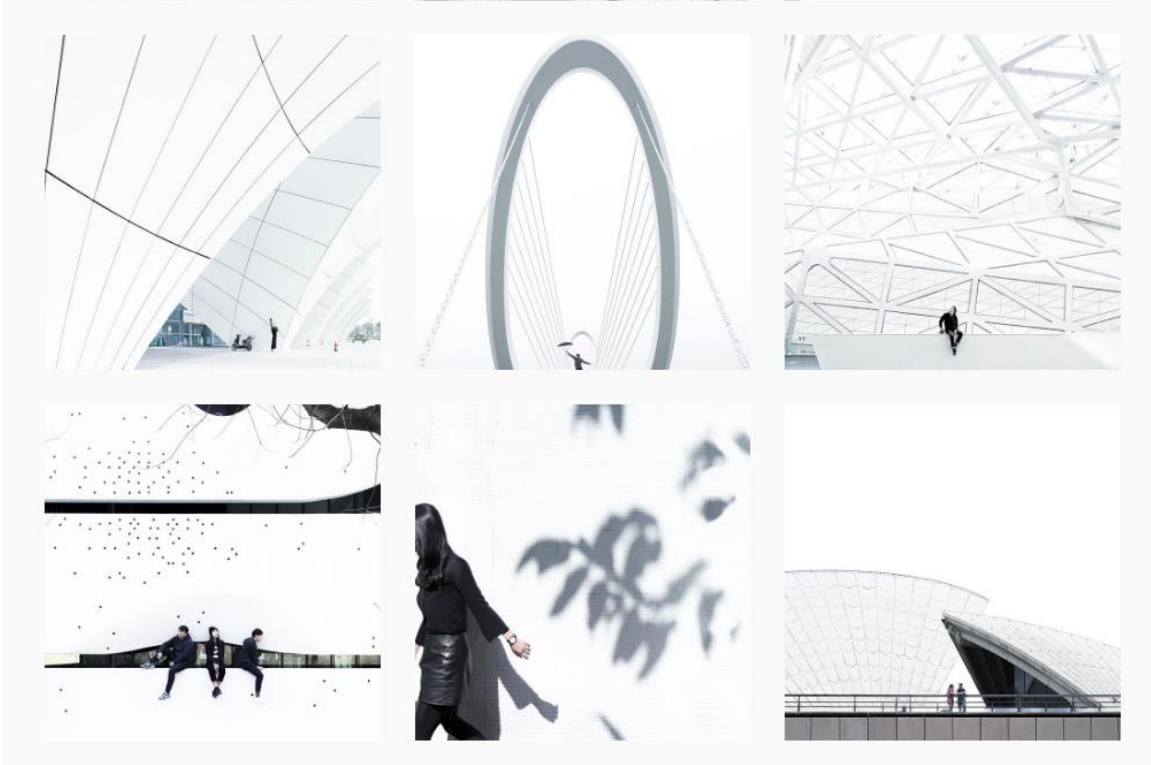
Does music offer more opportunities for self-definition? A well-known project *Every Noise* maps music genres “based on data tracked and analyzed for 1460 genres by Spotify (<http://everynoise.com/engenremap.html>). They range from broad genres such as “electronica” and “hip hop” to national variations such as *Slovak pop* and *Australian hip hop*. This suggests that music does offer more categories. It is important to also note that creation of new genres by combining already existing one is a key mechanism of modern music evolution, and such mechanism keeps generating new varieties.

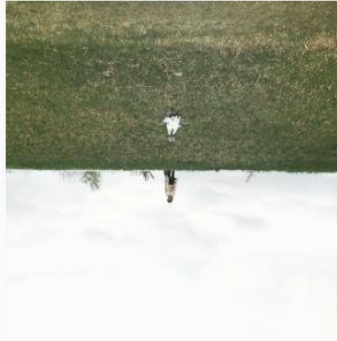
However, in my view, photography today—and Instagram platform in particular—gives young people at least as much power in crafting unique identities as music. And in comparison to writing music, Instagram is much easier to use. To establish a visual style, chose particular subjects and compositions for your photos and use Instagram or VSCO app to apply the consistent edits, filters, and presets to all of them. Between different subjects, compositions, color palettes, contrast levels, and other adjustments and filters, the number of distinct styles that can be created is very large—as demonstrated by selections of users’ photos shown in [Figure 3](#). (Of course, creating really unique and really amazing photos still takes lots of time and practice. VSCO possibilities in creating different looks are demonstrated in the post “50 VSCO Cam Filter Settings for Better Instagram Photos” and on many Pinterest boards such as “VSCO Cam Filters.”) (<http://www.hongkiat.com/blog/vsco-cam-filter-settings/>; <https://www.pinterest.com/fadhilla18/vsco-cam-filters/>.)

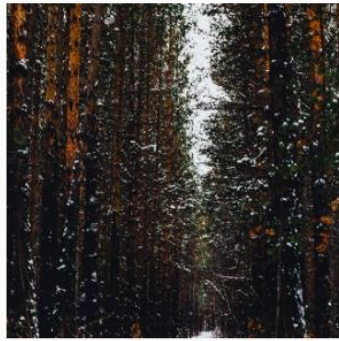
Given this analysis, I want to make my earlier statement “*Cultural identity today is established via small variations and subtle differences*” more precise. “Subcultures,” food preferences, and fashion styles give people basic tools to establish and perform their cultural identities. However, digital cameras and editing and publishing tools as exemplified by Instagram provide the crucial mechanism to further refine and “individualize” these basic identities.

How individual can they get? In a network culture of Instagram where people can see each other images and use the same editing tools it may be very to achieve complete uniqueness—but at least you can develop a visual presence which is “sufficiently unique”—something which does not fit into common types and can’t be

captured by a single or a few hashtags. In fact, many of the users I selected for [Figure 3](#) do not use any tags for their photos, because they probably do not want to be “labeled” and compared to others.







**Figure 11.**

Selection of photos from five Instagram users (also shown in [Figure 3](#)).

Top to bottom:

@k\_a\_r\_e\_n\_g (Hong Kong),

@koyoox (Japan),

@bnphm0609 (Vietnam),

@nekip.photo (Russia, Buryatia, Ulan Ude),

@viktoria\_photo\_ (Russia, Ryazan).

*To continue with our investigation of Instagramism, let's look at the self-description of Kinfolk magazine to see if it can help us to better understand the aesthetics of their films, as well as seemingly similar aesthetics on Instagram:*

*"Kinfolk is a slow lifestyle magazine published by [Ouur](#) that explores ways for readers to simplify their lives, cultivate community and spend more time with their friends and family. Founded in 2011, Kinfolk is now the leading independent lifestyle magazine for young creative professionals and also produces international editions in Japan, China, Korea and Russia. Published quarterly, Kinfolk maintains a vibrant contributor base from Copenhagen to Cape Town. Ouur is a lifestyle publisher and agency creating print and digital media for a young creative audience." (<http://www.kinfolk.com/about-us/>, accessed May 27, 2016.)*

Very interesting! But why does simplifying one's life and spending more time with friends and family end up looking so intensely beautiful in Kinfolk films? Why the result is something which blends aesthetics of minimalism from Asian pen and ink paintings, Scandinavian aesthetics of clarity, simplicity but also rich natural textures, and colors produced by VSCO filters? The possible answer suggested by Kinfolk self-description is that its films and photography are doing two things simultaneously: creating the idealistic, almost utopian picture of perfect "slow lifestyle" while at the same time feeding the need of their readers—"young creative professionals"—to be visually stimulated and inspired by "good design." So when you are looking at Kinfolk, you are benefiting both personally and professionally.

But what about all the Instagrammers globally who seem to favor very similar aesthetics, even if they are not young creative professionals and do not care about "slow lifestyle"? (Some of the best "poetic design" Instagram accounts I found in Russia are from teenagers.) Maybe things are not as logical and straight-forward as Kinfolk self-description suggests?

*Lifestyle is not about always doing things. (Never mind that American commercials for lifestyle products and services associate lifestyle with actions: you*

driving your European sports car, you having romantic dinner with your beautiful wife, you being served by hotel staff in a luxury hotel in an exotic location, etc.) To use the term from narratology, lifestyle is often about about “description” than “narration” (although “description” also does not quite capture what I am trying to say.) It is about sitting in a café and looking down at the table which has your coffee cup and a notebook. It is about gazing into the landscape from the corner of a photo frame. It is about “contemplation,” “meditation,” “being lazy,” and so on—the luxury of doing absolutely nothing while being in a perfect place, perfectly dressed, with a perfect drink—solo or with a perfect friend. It is the unique feeling you get when you put on a special piece of clothing or when you look at a very particular landscape or cityscape.

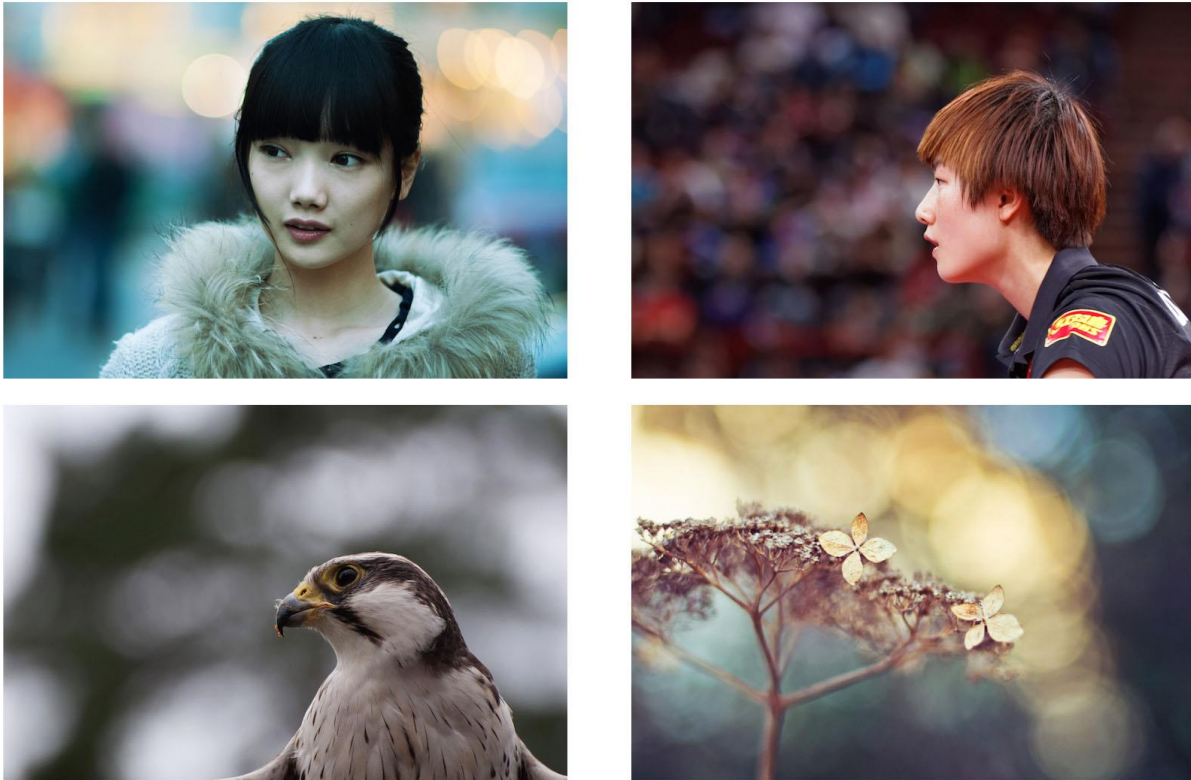
Both Kinfolk and Instagrammers represent a lifestyle—but only if we understand it in this non-commercial, *not product- or action-oriented* way. Kinfolk’s original motivation behind subjects and aesthetics of its photography and films was the cultivation of gatherings with friends and family, while young Instagrammers adopted and extended this style to capture all kinds of situations—but in both cases, it is about experience. Therefore, their films and photos do not focus on products or actions. For example, we do not see people talking on their mobile phones, or taking photos with mobiles or cameras. Instead, we may see these objects lying on a coffee table or a bed. *Being* rather than *doing*—if there is any message in poetic design, this is it.

“Washed out” filters often used for these photos and films are not about photo history nostalgia. They are about *reducing greyscale and color contrasts—which are metaphors for emotional contrast and cognitive dissonance*. (Thus, the most un-Kinfolk location in the world that I have experienced is Midtown Manhattan.)

The neologism “Instagram” suggests speed, quick decision, and fast action. If this was the platform’s original intension, then the visually sophisticated global youth and many members of global creative class use it today in a completely opposite way. Instagramism needs slowness, craftsmanship, and attention to tiniest details. (One of the young Russian Instagrammers I follow at some point started experimenting with adding one pixel wide white border to her Instagram photos). These qualities are also required to create great design, regardless of whether you are working with physical materials, a space, a printed page, or an app.

And this is why today ***Instagramism is the style of global design class*** (although it is also used by millions of young people who are not professional photographers, designers, editors, etc.). This global class is defined not by the economic relations to the “means of production” or income but by Adobe Creative Suite software it uses. It is also defined by its *visual voice*—which is about subtle differences, the power of empty space, visual intelligence, and visual pleasure.

Everything you find in the very best Instagram, web and print images, space design, food, and street style fashion today.



**Figure 12.** Examples of *bokeh* effect. Sources: Flickr Creative Commons and Wikimedia.

### **Meta-principle of Modern Design**

Modern *design image* follows different principles. They were first defined in abstract painting produced in Europe during 1909-1914. In the early 1920s El Lissitzky and others applied them to all areas of design, including posters, magazines, and books, textiles, interiors, architecture, furniture and industrial and consumer products. Here are some of these core principles (Manovich, *Avant-garde as Software*, 1999; expanded for this article): High contrast (in use of tones, colors, font sizes, size and types of shapes, etc.); limited color palettes; simple geometric shapes; thick lines as design elements; large empty white spaces; asymmetrical composition; clear differentiation between sizes of fonts; strong visual rhythm created via repeating elements, parallel lines, etc.; use of infinite projection that



creates 2 ½ space; or parallel projection that results in parallel rather than converging lines (and repeating parallel lines create visual rhythm.) [Figure 13](#) shows the classical examples from one of the first designers to start using these principles (El Lissitzky, 1923) and one of the leaders of the second generation of designers (Josef Muller-Brockmann, 1966).



**Figure 13.**  
 Examples of modernist graphic design.  
 Left: El Lissitzky, design for Mayakovsky's poem "For the Voice," 1923. Book page.  
 Right: Josef Muller-Brockmann, 1966. Poster.

Generalizing these principles, we can come with a single *meta-principle of modern design*—*clear hierarchy of information and attention*. The particular choices such as compositions consisting from only a few clearly differentiated elements, use of only a few significantly difference type sizes, and limited palettes that use a few very different hues are logical consequences of this one meta-principle.

To express this differently, we can say the following: that meta-aesthetics of modern design is *the use of extremely limited choices on all visual dimensions that a designer controlled*, including colors, tones, line orientations, shape types, patterns,

and fonts (if text is used) as well as objects chosen as subjects, figure poses, and lighting.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, original modern design aesthetics evolved resulting in a number of styles that emphasize some principles over others, or do not use some principles at all. During the 1990s and early 2000s, an influential, more minimal version of modern design emerged and it found its way into everything—hotel, café, restaurants, and other architecture and space design, print publications, web sites, Jonathan Ive’s design of Apple products starting with all white iBook G3 (2001). Eventually it was also adopted by the new generation of OS (operating systems). IOS 7 introduced by Apple in 2013 featured more minimal and monochrome “sophisticated” style from Ive’s team; Microsoft Metro design language introduced in Windows Phone 7 in 2010 featured more colorful “popular” style. This *global minimalist aesthetics* became identified by marketers, consumers, and creators worldwide as *cool, hip, sophisticated, and contemporary*—and therefore especially important for self-identification of young urbanites who were growing up in 2000s or 2010s.

While retaining simplicity and clear presentation of information in modern design, the new minimalism differentiates itself by subtlety, i.e. *small differences* on some of the visual dimensions—in contrast to modernist design that always used big differences. The feel is often quiet and ambient rather than aggressive and loud. The color palettes may use many shades of one or two hues, rather than opposing hues that creates strongest contrast. (In our analysis of all covers of *Time* magazine from 1923 to 2009, we saw the shift away from highly saturated colors in the 1980s covers to an aesthetics influenced by minimalism in the late 1990s, with big white empty areas and smaller color accents. See Jeremy Douglass and Lev Manovich, [Mapping Time](#), 2009).

While the use of *white*, shades of *grey*, *transparency*, and *translucency* were identifiers of early global minimalism in the late 1990s, a new version developed about ten years later, with focus on *rich natural textures*, use of different materials and rich color accents that signify “authenticity” and a selective use of tradition. In the early 2010s, a different version that can be called *digital minimalism* also developed in response to small phone screens, tablets and use of apps—bolder lines, higher contrast, big fonts, and use of back to back photos arranged in layouts filling the screen.

Different countries have their own additional versions of contemporary design which often include references to local traditional aesthetics. Korea’s design and fashion colors are white, grey, black, and beige. Along with white and grey, Thailand’s design uses a palette of bright saturated colors—orange, green,

blue, pink and violet. Tokyo's popular young fashions mix bright saturated colors and pastels.

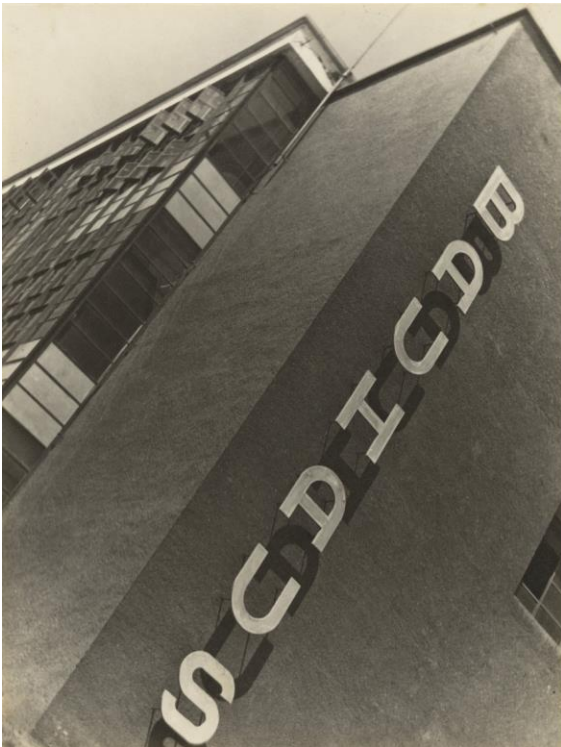
Having a style means adapting particular choices, coordinating them to achieve a distinct look, and being consistent. This is true for any kind of "life design," be it curating of space, choice of what to wear, what to eat, and where to spend time with friends. This also applies to Instagram photos we call *designed*—they represent particular lifestyles, or subjects (such as nature). But they do this not in an arbitrary way—instead they also use a visual language of contemporary design. Some of the photos choose the global minimalist version; others reference the local versions of the contemporary aesthetics; others mix different versions in their photos. In contrast to un-curated messiness of the visible world captured by all-seeing perspectival view of the lens as in casual photos, and predictability and rigid conventions as in professional photos, designed photos aim for *originality* in terms of how subjects are shown, at the same time for very tight *control* of an image—ideally consisting from smaller number of clear differentiated elements organized to achieve strong visual contrast and rhythm.

However, since there are still photos of three-dimensional reality made using the camera lens that inevitably creates perspective and many details, they have to find a balance this default photo-realism and the language of design. While purely abstract design allows the author complete control of all visual elements and variables, photographer of a three dimensional scene has less control (unless the scene is created in a studio), since the world outside already has its shapes, colors, forms, and textures. Some designed images may tip the balance more towards realism and less control while others may retain only minimal references to visible reality privileging abstract patterns, colors, shapes, and textures organized to achieve desired aesthetic effects (see examples in **Figure 5c** and **5d** in Part 1).

This *aesthetics of the in-between* is not unique to Instagram. It also can be found in modern and contemporary advertising, editorial, and fashion color photography. **Figure 14** shows example of such photography from 1950s by famous photographers Irving Penn and Richard Avedon who both created many images for *Vogue* and other magazines. And earlier, modernist black and white photography of 1920s-1930s also operated in the space between realism and abstraction, employing devices directly borrowed from geometric abstract art of 1910s and 1920s design (**Figure 15**).



**Figure 14.**  
Examples of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century fashion photography.  
Right: Richard Avedon, photograph of Dovima and Sunny Harnet, 1955.  
Left: Irving Penn, photograph for the cover of *Vogue*, 1964.



### Figure 15.

Modernist photography from 1920s-1930s. After the introduction of the first small 35mm film [Leica camera](#) in 1925, photographers were able to get very close to their subjects and use unusual points of view.

Right: Iwao Yamawaki, a photograph of Bauhaus building, 1930-1932.

Left: Alexander Rodchenko, "Pioneer," 1930.

Going from photography to paintings, we note that most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century "figurative" paintings and works on paper also explore the rich space in between 19<sup>th</sup> century realism and full abstraction. While modern art history and museum collections focused on influential artworks from various "isms," statistically these are outliers in the universe of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art made up from millions of paintings, sculptures and works on papers that are situated at different points along realism—abstraction dimension.

Modern artworks were designed for viewing in a gallery or in print publications and photographs appeared in magazines or large posters. Instagram users design their images for different reception conditions: 4.5-6 inch phone screens (or much smaller size when shown in a grid in Instagram gallery view); very quick viewing time; and competition with all other images in user's feed. This leads to the emergence of particular aesthetics that does not simply repeat modernism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century figurative art and photography. (Screen size details: According to 11/20/2015 report, the most popular screen size in many countries at that time was 4.7 inches, followed by 5.5, 5, and 5.1. <http://pocketnow.com/2015/11/20/world-most-popular-mobile-screen-size-resolution>.)

### Visual and Content Strategies of *Designed Photos*

Below we list examples of visual strategies used in Instagram *design photos*, which we define in comparison to aesthetics of *professional photos*. They are based on our informal observations and study of the galleries of young Instagram users from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (see examples in **Figures 5c, 5d** in Part 1 and left side of **Figure 16**). Note that in these countries people are particularly concerned about style and fashion, and a sophisticated look that follows current fashions is expected for both women and men in most professional settings and situations regardless of the field. (In contrast, in the U.S. the dominant professional styles are either standard business suits or casual clothes. Even in NYC, only people in particular cultural professions and in certain parts of the city dress fashionably). Therefore, it is quite possible that in other countries design photos use different visual strategies, and also are less frequent. (In the future we would like to test what we noticed in our informal observations by measuring characteristics of large samples of

Instagram photos and comparing them to measurements of photos created for other mediums, such as early Flickr photos designed for desktops and laptop viewing in 2004-2007, magazine editorial photography, etc.)

This is our list:

- Increased brightness;
- Increased contrast;
- Increased saturation, or its opposite—
- Decreased saturation to create almost a monochrome photo;
- Large proportion of light areas, and small proportion of dark areas;
- White backgrounds;
- “Negative space” (i.e., large empty monochrome areas), with no gradations or details;
- Detailed and texture parts confined to clearly differentiated parts of an image juxtaposed with other empty parts;
- Compositions arranged around diagonal rather than vertical and horizontal lines;
- Use of the point of view looking down from above;

We can illustrate the first characteristic by measuring average brightness of the photos we already used to discuss professional photos and Instagram designed photos. The average (mean) brightness of professional photos shown in [Figure 1](#) in Part 2 is 99 (on 0-255 scale). For designed Instagram photos, it is significantly higher: 129 for photos in [Figure 5c](#), and 173 for the photos in [Figure 5d](#) (in Part 1).

In the case of dedicated authors of galleries of designed photos, there are also additional key rules that apply to sequences of their photos:

- Use of a single visual style for all photos in user’s gallery or a few styles reserved for particular subjects.
- In a sequence of photos posted over a period of time, no two photos posted one after another should come from the same photo shoot or show the same subject. Similar photos from the same photo shoot used in a gallery need to be separated by a number of other photos in between.
- Every photo is very polished, no casual photos are included.

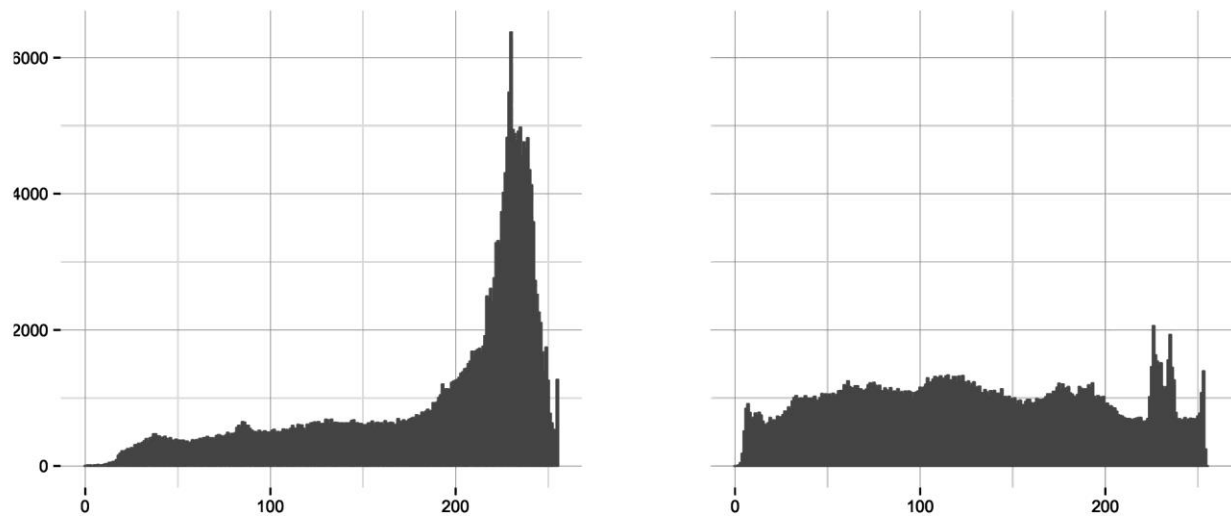
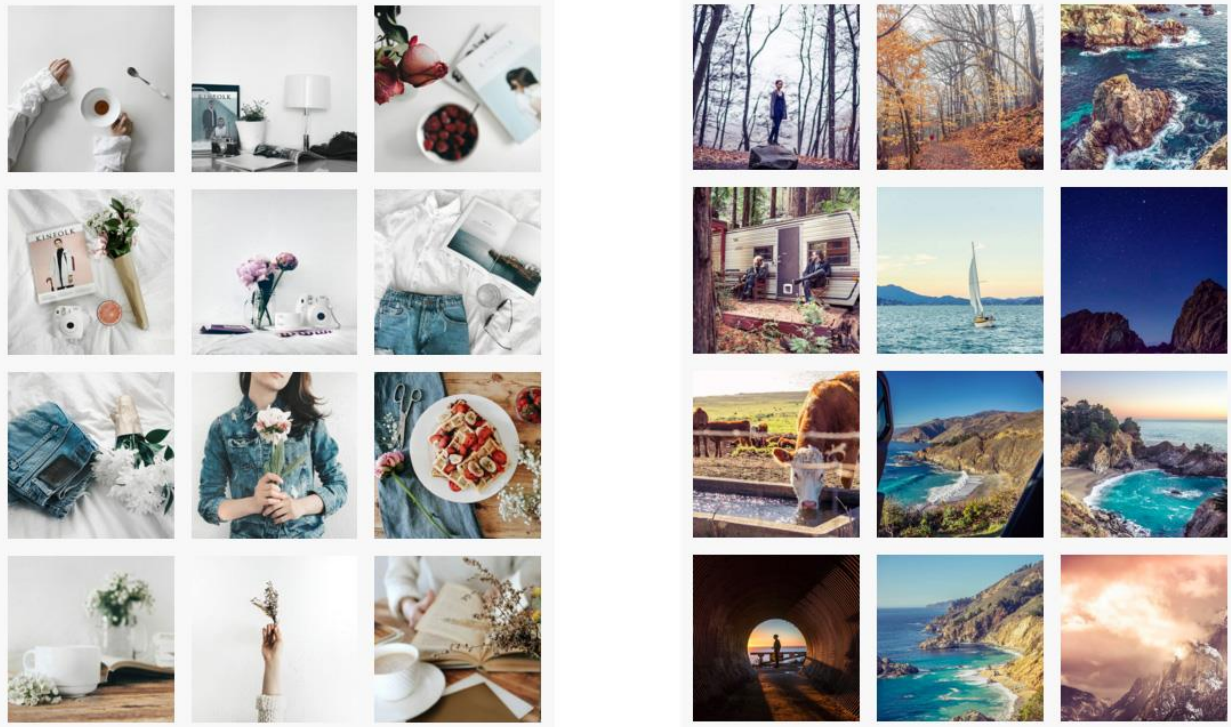
Some examples of the strategies from the two lists above can be seen in [Figures 5c](#) and [5d](#). We also find a few of them recommended in many “how to” online posts, such as “How to Establish Your Instagram Aesthetics” from 2015:

Edit all photos similarly. In order to maintain consistent branding, consider either picking a filter and just using that one, or using no filter at all. Bouncing around between filters based on the photo is not conducive to maintaining a common aesthetic. I prefer to pop my photos in *Afterlight* (my favorite photo editing app), up the *brightness* and the *exposure*, *sharpen* a bit, and *clarify* a bit (to bring back some of the definition you lost from over-exposing). That's my go-to photo "recipe" for photos I add to my lifestyle blog on Instagram. (Nadine, "How to Establish Your Instagram Aesthetics," <http://blogbrighter.com/establish-your-instagram-aesthetic/>, 04/08/2015).

The much quoted study by Curalate published in 11/2013 that analyzed 8 million Instagram photos also found that the photos that are lighter, have large background area and use a single dominant color generate more likes. (In addition to describing already existing trends, this study may have influenced some authors of designed galleries start using these features). (Brendan Lowry, "6 Image Qualities Which May Drive More Likes on Instagram," <http://blog.curalate.com/2013/11/25/6-image-qualities-that-drive-more-instagram-likes/>, 11/25/2013.)

We believe that out of all visual strategies in our two lists above, the single most important strategy for creating a popular gallery of designed images is *the consistent use of a strong visual style*. The experienced authors of design photos establish a single look and apply it to all their photos. This requires more modifications than simply increasing brightness, exposure, sharpening, and clarification as described in the quote above. Strong designed look is achieved by using only narrow choices on greyscale, hue, saturation, and contrast dimensions. Only one filter (if used at all) is applied to the photos, and this filter comes from a third party app such as VSCO, as opposed to built-in Instagram filters.

For example, one look may only have cool colors and low saturation. Another look may feature only darker tones, and warmer colors. Most sophisticated authors may have two or more looks, each for different subject, and they create sequences over time applying these looks. They may also remove some older photos from their galleries if they do not work in a larger sequence or received few likes.



**Figure 16.** Selections of sequences of Instagram photos from @vita\_century (left) and @neivy (right). Below are aggregated greyscale histograms for all photos in each sequence.

Some of the visual differences between designed and other photo types can be measured and compared quantitatively. [Figure 16](#) compares a sequence of designed photos (left) with a sequence of professional photos (right) from the galleries of two. Similar to a photo camera that shows histograms of tones for a



single photo, we show greyscale histograms below the photo sequences—but they are calculated over all nine photos in a sequence instead of a single photo. The professional photos (left) capture all grey tones equally, and consequently their combined histogram is close to being flat. The designed photos (right) are not aiming for photo-realism; instead they use subjects, compositions, and post-photo effects that result in very light photos but with strong darks preserved—more in line with 2D design. Consequently, their combined histogram is far from flat; instead there is a narrow and strong peak corresponding to a narrow range of dominant light tones.

Our discussion focused on the differences between professional and designed photo, but they also share some similar aims. Creating visually pleasing aesthetics is one of them. Another is that they both have to deal with the biggest challenge of modern photography—dealing with overabundance of information captured by lens and recording media. Both film cameras and digital cameras of today, including the ones in phones, *record too much information*. When we look at a photo that presents all captured information without any filtering, we may be confused about what is important and what subject photographer wanted to capture; we may also have difficulty differentiating between objects and depth planes. Both professional and designed photo strategies act to *reduce visual information*. Composition that positions objects or a person(s) against flat background is one common strategy used by both. But professional photographers also often want to show perspectival outdoor scenes. In these cases they may rely on bokeh that blurs background, so the focus is on face, person or objects in the foreground. Currently small cameras in phones can't create bokeh, so if the author of designed photos wants to be true to Instagram medium and only use phone camera, s/he has to resort to other strategies for reducing information. Many of the strategies used in designed photos that we listed above act in this way. Strong contrast, increased brightness, backgrounds empty of details, and use of the point of view looking down from all act to get rid of details in parts of a photo so the subject clearly stands out.

Like casual and professional photos, designed photos also often feature their own *particular subjects photographed in particular ways*. Here are some frequently used *combinations of subjects and visual strategies*:

- “Spreads” or “flat lays” (i.e., careful arrangements of a number of objects, photographed from above);
- Photos of separate objects showing one or a few objects from an angle such as coffee cups, fashion and design magazines, laptops, phones, bags, and other accessories of a hip / cool / urban lifestyle;
- 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;
- Full body positioned towards the edge or corner in a scene in ways different from traditional posing for camera (standing straight, facing camera and smiling) and normal compositions where figure(s) or face(s) occupy most of the image;
- Avoidance of stereotypical subject/style combinations popular in commercial photography such as a portrait with blurred background (i.e., portraits with bokeh effect).

Note that these subjects of designed photos do not correspond to any popular particular tags. For example, if you search Instagram for #flatlay, what you will see that the results are different from flat lays in designed photos. The aesthetics of photos marked with #flatlay is that of commercial photography; the aesthetics of designed photos showing flat lays (see [Figure 5c](#) in Part 1) is more personal, emotional, and “moody.”

### **More Context: Irving Penn, Martin Munkacsi, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and Global Minimalism**

While some of the subjects and composition strategies listed above are similar to what we can see in commercial photography in the “lifestyle” genre we can see on websites, in magazines, in TV ads, and so on. Others can be directly related to the modernist photo aesthetics that were developed in 1910s-1920s simultaneously both in art photography and advertising contexts—specifically, close-ups of objects, products and nature, portraits, or fashion photos that explore differences in textures between objects and background or use object shapes and shadows to create geometric structures. First developed during black and white photography era, in the 1940s these aesthetics further evolved to work in color pages of magazines, adding color to the number of visual dimensions used to create contrast.

**Figures 17a, 17b** and **17c** show examples of such color aesthetics developed by American photographer Irving Penn (1947) who worked extensively for *Vogue*; earlier black-and-white aesthetics by Hungarian photographer Martin Munkacsi (1930-1932) who created first outdoor swimsuit fashion spread for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1933; German Walter Peterhans (1929-1932) who was photography instructor at Bauhaus; and even earlier version by another famous American photographer, Paul Strand (1915).



17a—Irving Penn



17b—Martin Munkacsi



17c—Walter Peterhans and Paul Strand

**Figure 17.**

Examples of modernist art and commercial photography using close-ups and creating contrasts between textures, shapes, and organic and human-made patterns.

17a. Irving Penn, “Salad,” approximately 1947.

Penn was one of the first photographers to photograph objects and food in color, arranged in precise compositions against a neutral background.

17b. Black-and-white examples from fashion and sport photography by Martin Munkacsi (1930-1932).

17c. Black-and-white examples from Walter Peterhans (1929-1932, left photo), and Paul Strand (1915, right photo).

However, the authors of Instagram design photos modified these aesthetics originally aimed at silver gelatin prints or reproductions in full magazine pages (and now even larger TV screens) in response to the specific characteristics of Instagram medium—specifically, the phone screens and Instagram app interface.

For example, among designed photos we do not see images that are very dark, or have low contrast, or a lot of intricate detail across all parts of the image. While such images work on a large magazine page, a laptop or a TV screen, they would be harder to read on a small phone screen in bright sunlight, or at night, or in other kinds of light conditions. Instead, Instagram authors prefer compositions that organize the photo content into a fewer distinct shapes separated by color, tone, or texture. Such photos are in some ways like app icons—communicating even at a very small size. As already noted, authors of designed photos also often increase brightness, contrast and saturation significantly beyond camera defaults to make the photos “pop.” (In 2014 Instagram added a separate *Lux* control that allows users to adjust brightness and saturation simultaneously using a single slider). These differences are very clear if we compare professional images in [Figures 1 and 2](#) with the designed images in [Figure 11](#) (Chapter 2).

Since small screen of a phone can have much less detail than a magazine page, in order to be visually effective, reducing effects of perspective is particularly important for Instagram photography. One of the key ways Instagram designed photos do that is by photographing objects in the spreads form. It is the easiest way to turn a photo into a clear 2D design with controlled colors, grid arrangement, and use of parallel and perpendicular lines. This is likely to be one of the reasons behind frequent use of this point of view on Instagram.

We noted some of the connections between Instagram visual aesthetics and photographic and design aesthetics of modern print fashion and lifestyle magazines, but there is also another way to connect them. Rather than comparing Instagram designed images to photography that was featured inside the magazines on their pages, we can compare them to *magazine covers*—and especially the covers of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, when their new art directors Agha (1929-), Alexander Liberman (1944-1961) and Alexei Brodovitch (1934-1958) brought ideas of European modernism to American magazine design, along with participation of best American and European art photographers and artists (for the examples of such covers, see [Figure 18](#)). Like Instagram images on mobile phones, the magazine covers were designed for viewing at a distance, so they used many of the same strategies that appear above in our list of “visual strategies used in Instagram *design photos*”—high contrast, use of large negative (empty) spaces, compositions that consist from a few clearly separate parts, flat 2 ½ space rather than deep perspective, and strong rhythm established by using lines arranged at the same angles.



**Figure 18.** Examples of *Harper's Bazaar* covers. Left: 1947 (photo by Brodovitch). Center: 1956. Right: 1951 (styling by Diana Vreeland).

Let's turn now from the history of photography to that of design, and in particular the developments of the last 20 years. "Designed photos" on Instagram also modify the aesthetics of global minimalism to fit what works best on the small screen. For example, while grey color is the most common in minimalist architecture and space design, we do not see any pure greys in designed photos. Instead they use white areas to create high contrast that works better on small screens.

Along with global and regional versions of minimalism that developed in second part of the 1990s and early 2000s, Instagram designed photos also participate in another key contemporary design and lifestyle megatrend—nostalgic revivals of selected 20<sup>th</sup> century styles that includes not only fashions from every decade and mid-century modern furniture and product design, but also particular no longer existing media technologies and their aesthetics. In the case of Instagram's original design, this was the decision to only use single size square photos—explicit reference to photos produced by Kodak Instamatic and Polaroid cameras. Instagram original filter names and their effects also explicitly reference popular photography of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (when color photography become more common). For example, according to one description of filters effects, Nashville filter "warms the temperature, lowers contrast and increases exposure to give a light "pink" tint—making it feel "nostalgic"; Toaster filter "ages the image by "burning" the center and adds a dramatic vignette"; Sierra filter "Gives a faded, softer look." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram#Filters>, accessed 12/25/2015). Such

historical references and corresponding effects are also used in filters available in popular third party apps for Instagram. For example, VSCO offers many collections of presets such as The Chromatic Collection, “evoking the tone of early color photography”; The Essence / Archetype Collection offering “emulations of consumer films from past 20 years”; and “The Aesthetic Series” “inspired by classic analog film” (<http://vSCO.co/grid/journal/new-vsco-cam-presets-available-now>, 12/03/2013). And of course, the neologism “Instagram” itself cleverly combines names of earlier technological media of representation and communication: instant camera and telegram.

The last question we want to address in this brief analysis of a designed photo type is the purpose of such photos. Our list above of frequent subjects of such photos suggests that at least some of them are created for business purposes. Indeed, some Instagram users want to establish a visually sophisticated profile that follows the aesthetics of advertising photography (but modified for Instagram—i.e. including enough of shots of the author in interesting spaces and travel destinations, with object photos in between), so s/he can then start getting paid by brands to include their products in photos, or to receive free products in exchange for featuring them. Such products can range from fashion items to notebooks, so they organically fit into Instagram “first person lifestyle and travel blog” *narrative genre* that goes along with designed photos. Other authors already achieved such status. They periodically include items that the brands asked them to promote or send them as gifts in their photos, and include explicit references and links to the brands in photo descriptions (this is considered to be the right behavior, although not everybody does this)—for example, “Thanks to XXX [brand or company name] for the wonderful YYY [product included in the photo].”

The Instagram profiles of these authors include details on how to get in touch with them, sometimes also featuring words like “cooperation”—indicating that these authors are interested in working with brands. The appearance of products in such Instagram galleries functions as a new type of *product placement*, the well-established practice in media culture. We can also think of such galleries as *lifestyle ads*, creating not as much as through staging but through very careful selection of only certain moments in one’s everyday life. The adoption of snapshot aesthetics in fashion and lifestyle advertising in the 1990s is the background for this type of Instagram photos—although in contrast to “heroin chic” of mid 1990s fashion photography, all Instagram designed photos with products or gifts from companies look “pretty,” and “cool” in a healthy way, and their authors similarly look at home in design hotels and coffee shops, rather than in a 1990s rave.

In yet another case, the goal of an Instagram gallery is to establish a sophisticated visual image that does not advertise any items directly, but as a whole, makes the viewers interested and involved with the gallery and the author of the



photos—who is selling some products or services on her/his blog or a web site indicated in Instagram profile without featuring them directly on Instagram. Such Instagram accounts function similarly to many contemporary ads that present images of exciting and desirable lifestyle without showing advertised product or brand directly—the latter only appearing in the last shot of a video or in corner of a still add. This ad type is often used for *brand marketing*—as opposed to product marketing. For example, in the famous *Think Different* ad campaign created by Chiat/Day in 1997 for Apple after Steve Job’s return, “the first rule of the campaign was that there would be no products in the ads.” And already much earlier in the 1930s, the pioneering art director of *Harper’s Bazaar’s* Alexey Brodovitch, in the words of curator and photo historian Lisa Hostetler, “wanted to be ‘astonished’ by radical images and was willing to neglect the display of the merchandise.. His bet was that mood was a better seller than description when it came to fashion.” (Lisa Hostetler, “Photography and Everyday Life in America, 1945–60,” [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phev/hd\\_phev.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phev/hd_phev.htm), 2004).

We noticed plenty of all such commercially motivated designed galleries that fit “strategic photography”—but we also see many carefully designed and polished Instagram galleries without any obvious link to commercial interests. We will address further the use of commercial-like subjects and aesthetics of photos by many young Instagram users to define their cultural identities in the next part of the book.

## Part 4. Themes, Feeds, Sequences, Branding, Faces, Bodies

November 2016

Note: The earlier version of this part was published in *PhotoResearcher* No. 27, 2017, [http://www.eshph.org/journal/2017/03/15/photo researcher-no-272017/.](http://www.eshph.org/journal/2017/03/15/photo researcher-no-272017/) For this publication we added References at the end of the text with full citation information. You can also find there links to all online sources used in the text.

“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 do not 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 do not 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.”

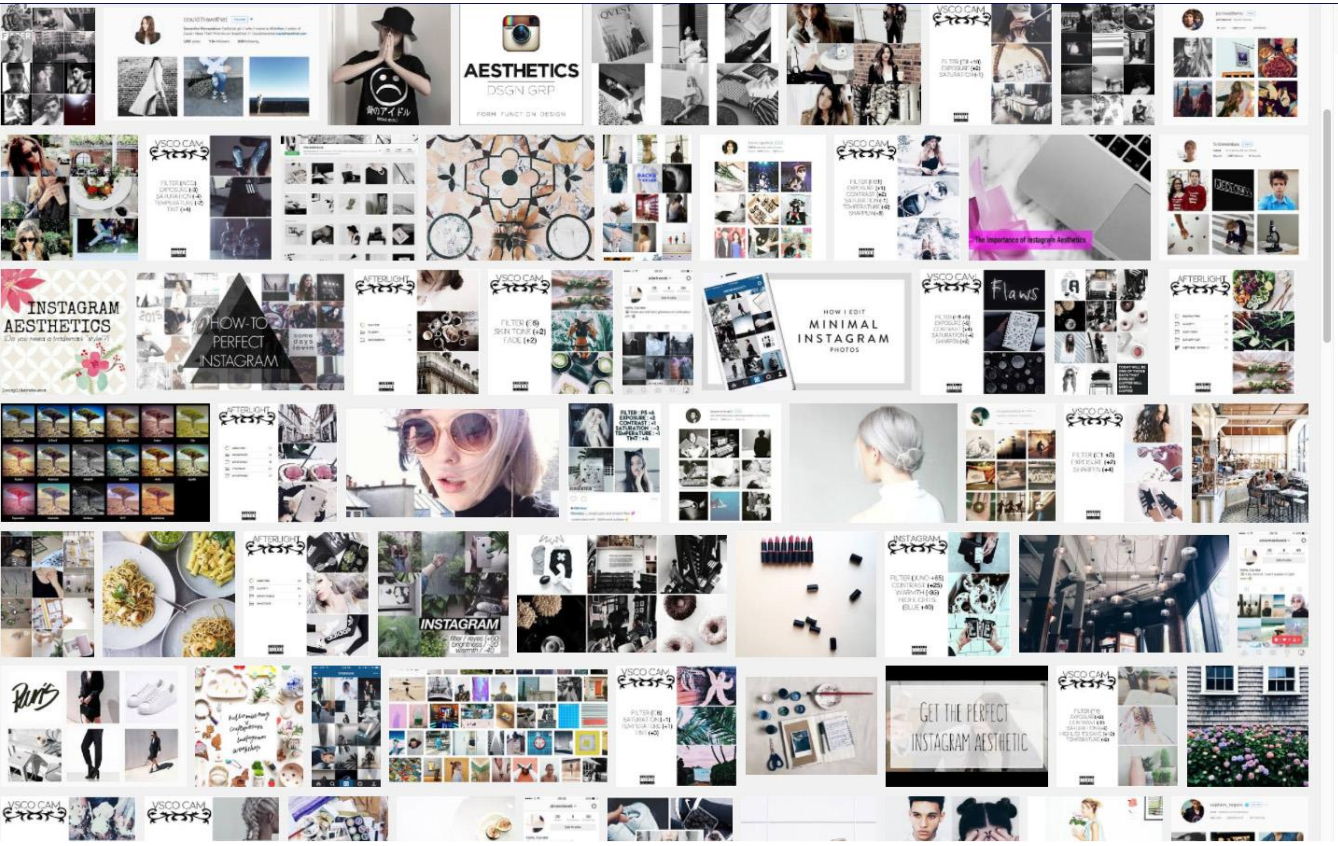
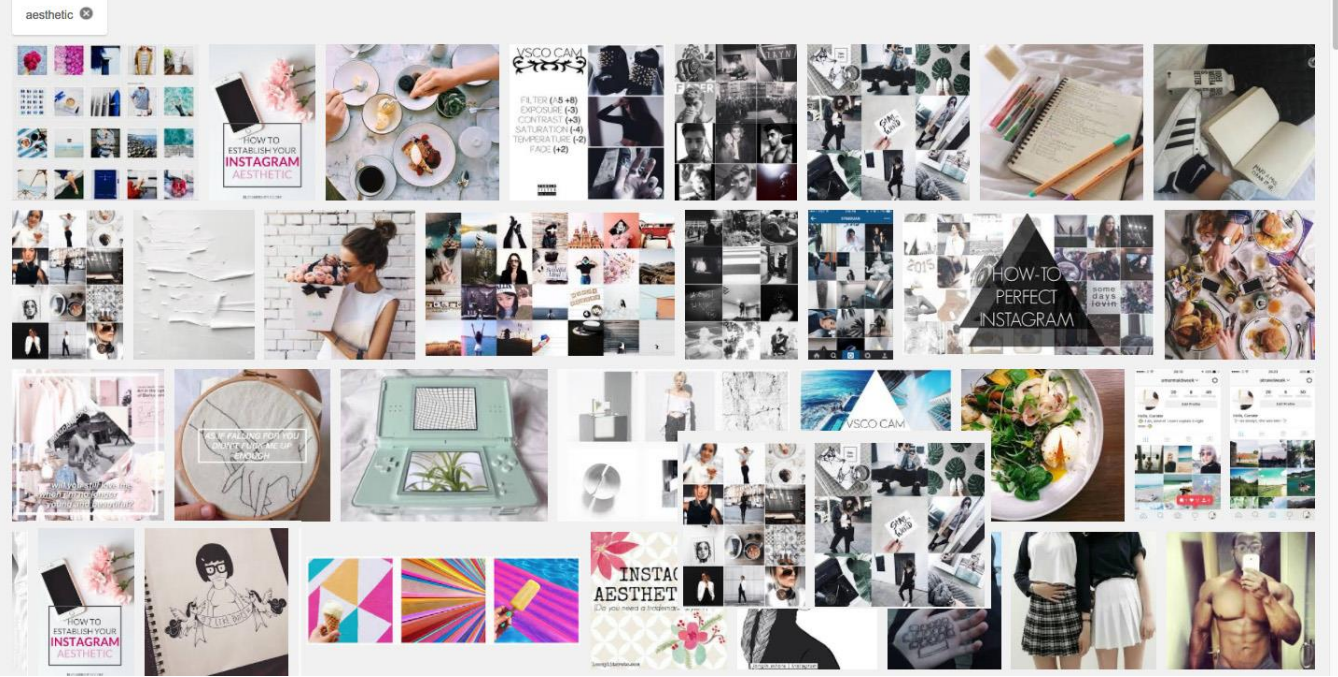
Michel Maffesoli, 1988. *The Time of the Tribes—The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, trans. Don Smith, Sage Publications, 1996.)

By 2016 people and companies around the world were sharing 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. In this chapter, I will continue to investigate particular type of popular photography that I call *Instagramism*. I will also discuss important strategies adopted by many Instagram users as of 2015. If in the previous parts of the book we focused on contents, styles and photo techniques of single images, the strategies we will discuss now have to do with a *sequence*. Like with many other social networks, Instagram experience is about a temporal sequence of posts (a *feed*). At the same time, Instagram UI also has (at least until now) certain unique ways or organizing images different from, for example, Facebook or Twitter—a photo *grid* with *three columns* across. All these features make Instagram medium sufficiently different from 20<sup>th</sup> century common platform for presenting photos such as newspapers, magazines, books or exhibitions. Although the sequencing of photos was important to all of them, it becomes a single most crucial strategy for creating successful Instagram feeds, as we will see in this part.

## The Aesthetic Society

I use the term “Instagramism” 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, Instagramism 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. See VSCO, 2016.) They influence each other and share advice on using mobile photo apps to create, edit, and sequence photos to be shared on Instagram

A note about the two terms that frequently appear in this book part: *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 (searches performed on 11/22/2016). (See [Figure 1.](#))



**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.

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 owning 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*. See 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 93 countries (see Forbes, 2017).

## **Instagram Class**

In Part 1 I introduced three popular types of photos shared by people on Instagram and other popular media sharing networks that are analyzed in this book. I will now briefly review these types since in this Part we again will be using them in comparisons.

I called these photo types *casual*, *professional*, and *designed*. Once again, I need to remind you that I am not asserting that this covers all Instagram photography. 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 2012–2015. 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 often 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 sharing platforms. In Part 3 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. (I am not using standard terms for “generations” such as Generation X, Millennials, or Generation Z, because all such terms were typically defined and discussed only using American context, and in my view they do not necessary apply to other parts of the worlds.)

*Global digital youth class* partially overlaps with the *global Adobe class*. What is this? *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](https://www.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. (For the analysis of the demographics of Behance users, see Kim 2017).

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.

In 2015, Behance grew in some fun, and even unexpected ways. You gave:

**50,382,569**

Appreciations

**3,430,206**

Comments

And our community grew to over

**six million**

members around the world



## Interaction Design

was incredibly popular in 2015: new projects in that creative field grew by 52%, more than any other field.



## Interaction Design

was incredibly popular in 2015: new projects in that creative field grew by 52%, more than any other field.



## Ukraine

saw their creative community surge: their new members grew by 23% in 2015, more than any other country.

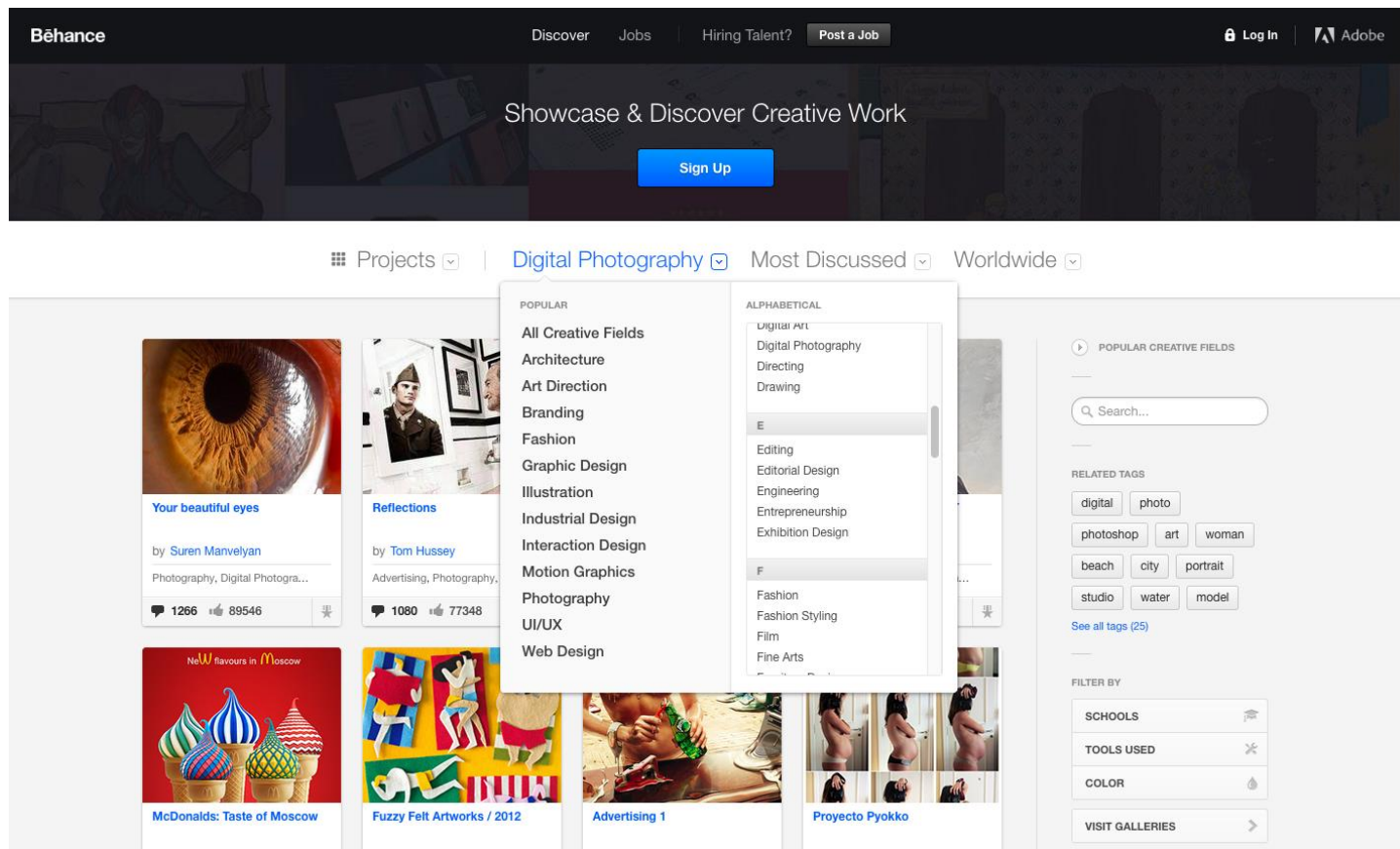


## São Paulo, Brazil

also grew rapidly in 2015: their new members grew by 21% this year, more than any other city.



**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.)

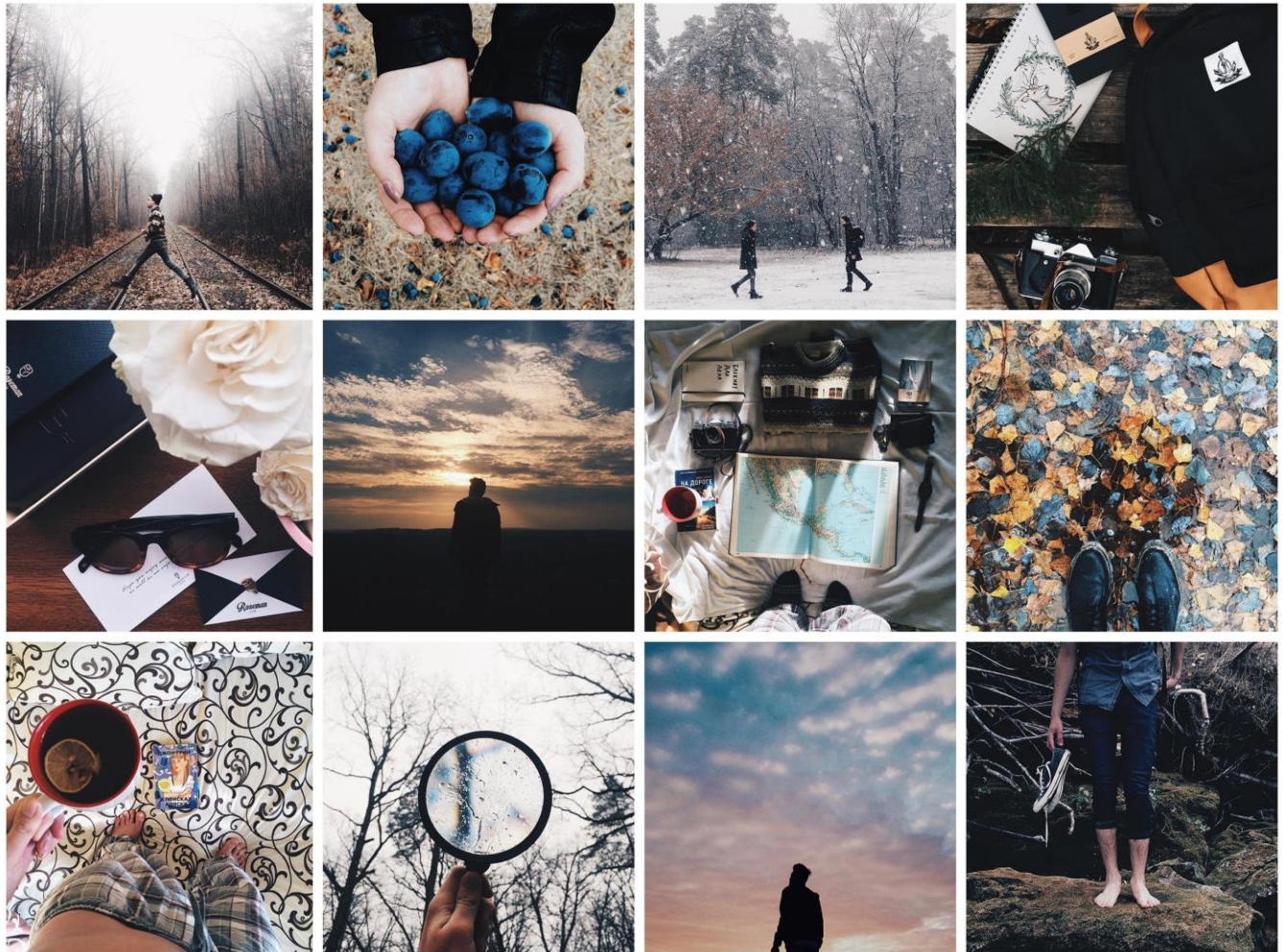
So how do you define aesthetics of designed photos using Instagram affordances? How do we create Instagram *cool*? By opposing popular image aesthetics, i.e. the types of photo conventions what we think of as *normal, mainstream, popular*. (Historically the term *cool* and a related term *hipster* became 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’s paintings). 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 photos. 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*

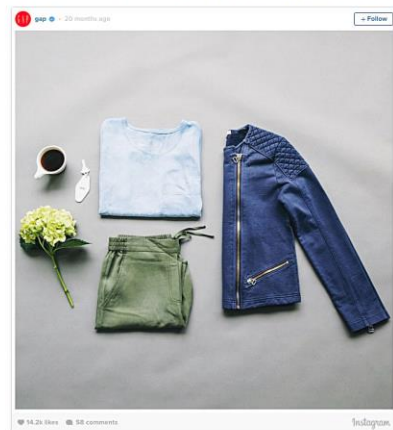
sensibility that opposes these norms. This opposition is constructed using another set of norms—that of contemporary (2010–) *design culture*. How does this work?

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.

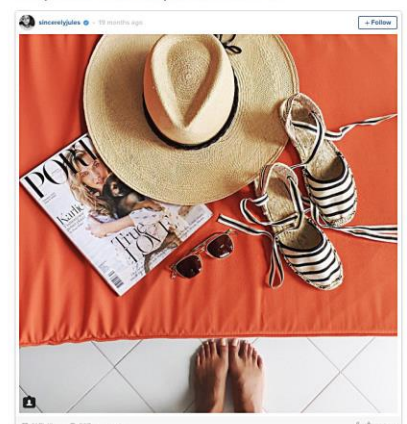


An example of magazine knolling, which allows buyers to more easily shop and peruse the products. *Wolcott*

And knolling today is not just about selling products, but a lifestyle. In addition to the bags, shoes, shirts, or jeans that are neatly laid out, the photographers also include a touch of reality.



A camera is placed next to shoes, flowers are arranged near a shirt, or a cup of coffee is set down next to a scarf. Suddenly you can envision yourself in a cleaner, more organized life—and all you need to achieve it is to buy that scarf or those sandals.



### 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 photos 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 Part 2. 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” in 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 Instagrammer 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 example of this *structuration of Instagram* is the emergence of *strong rules* one has to follow to attract many followers. These rules were described in numerous advice blogs and articles. 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

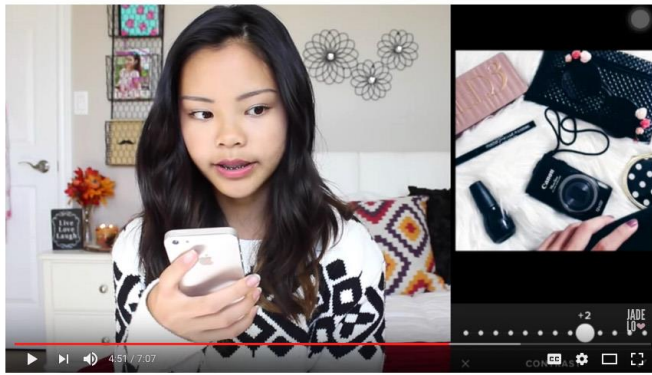
Instagram editing, strategies and theme ideas. I have searched YouTube on 11/19/2016 for few relevant phrases that appear in video titles. Here are these phrases and numbers of video returned. (Note that to find only directly relevant videos, I have entered the search phrase in quotes.)

“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.



How I Edit My Instagram Photos!

229,239 views

6K likes 81 comments



Jade Lo  
Published on Oct 12, 2015

SUBSCRIBE 156K



How I Edit My Instagram | White Theme

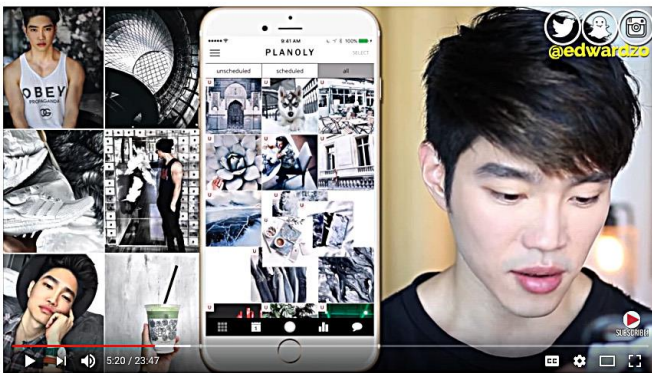
173,133 views

3K likes 60 comments



Levi Rocha  
Published on Sep 20, 2015

SUBSCRIBE 21K



5 Instagram Hacks for a Perfect Aesthetic Theme! + How I Edit My Photos

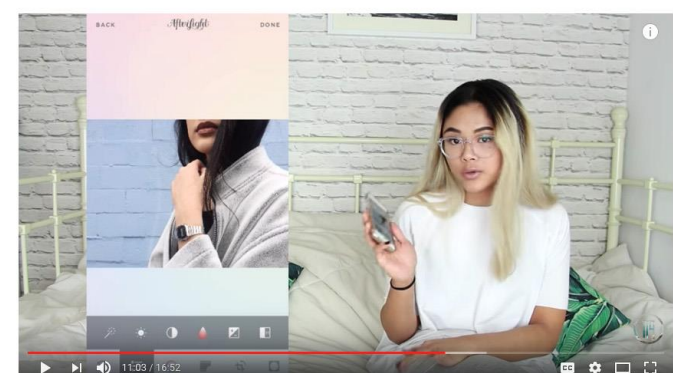
215,051 views

6K likes 108 comments



EdwardZe  
Published on Sep 4, 2016

SUBSCRIBE 72K



TAKING + EDITING INSTAGRAM PHOTOS | ToThe9s

622,209 views

24K likes 196 comments



ToThe9s  
Published on Apr 19, 2016

SUBSCRIBE 462K

**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).

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 07/19/2016, 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 as of 2015.) 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 do not 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.

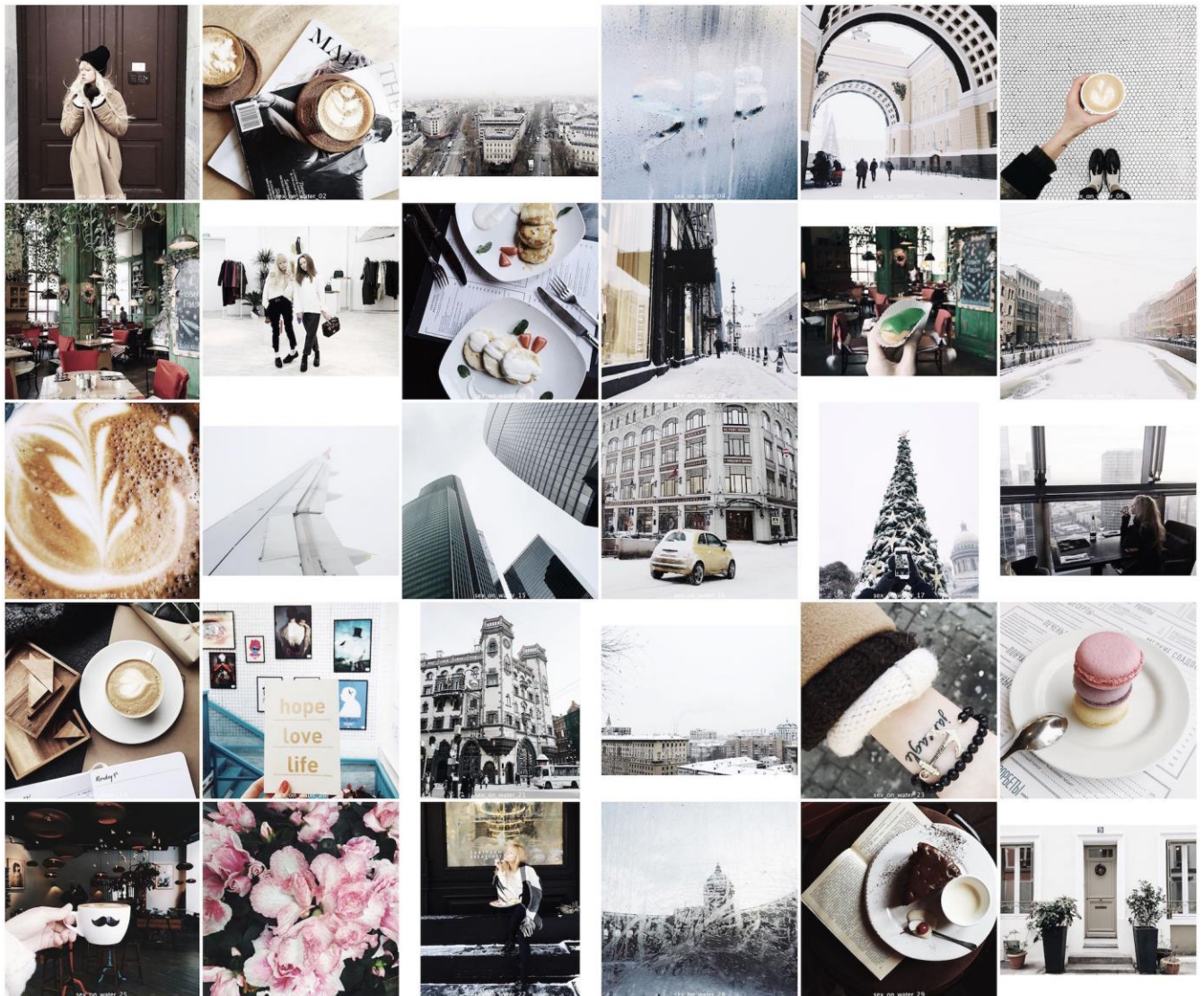
A post called “Reimagining Your Instagram Profile” (Dana, 2015) from another blog gives these suggestions:

*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 do not 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.

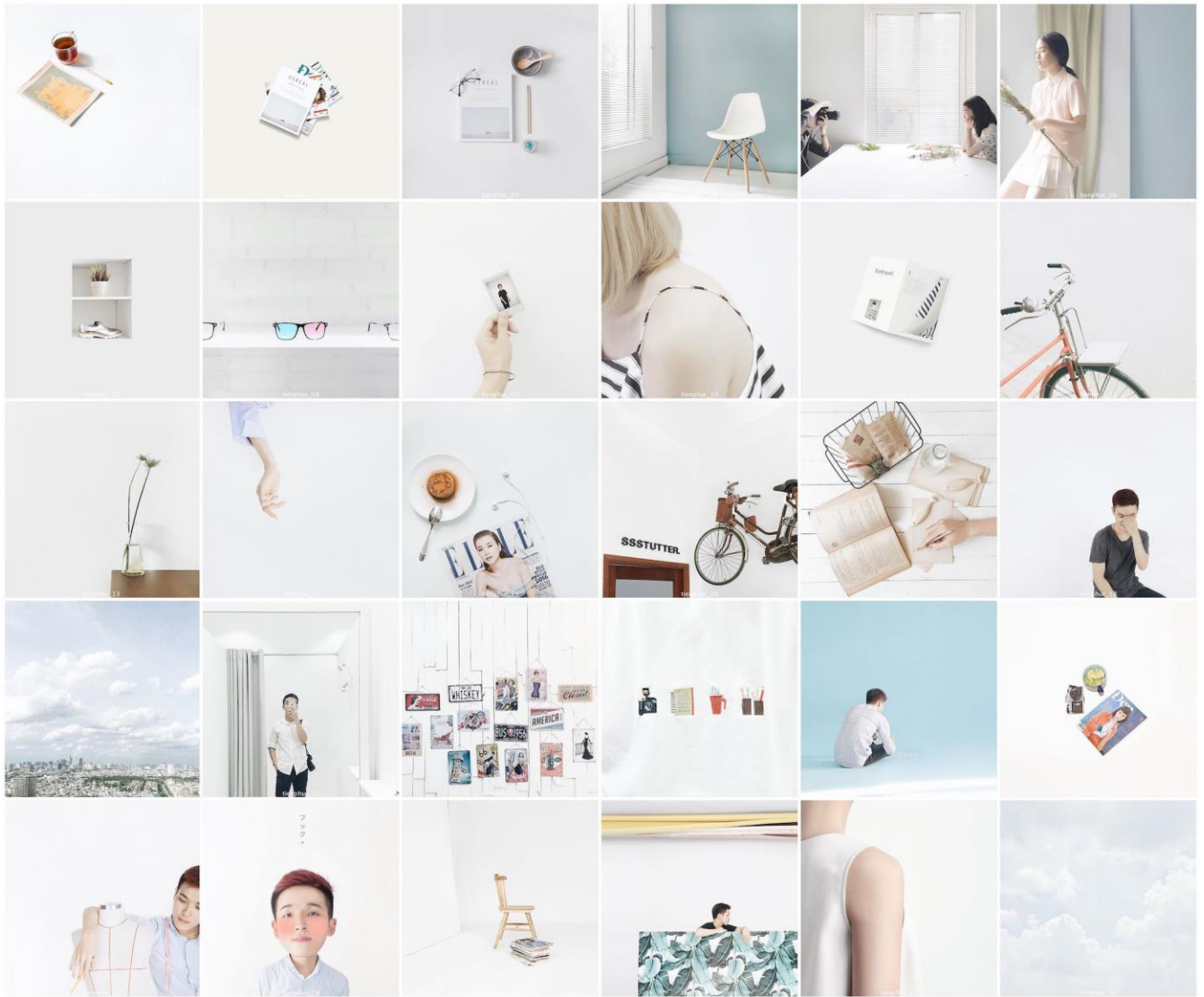
One male Instagrammer explained in an interview in 2014 how he used small photo printouts to design the sequence of his photos before starting his Instagram account. He quickly gathered over 50,000 followers purely on the strength of his individual photos and his sequencing. I am highlighting this author 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.

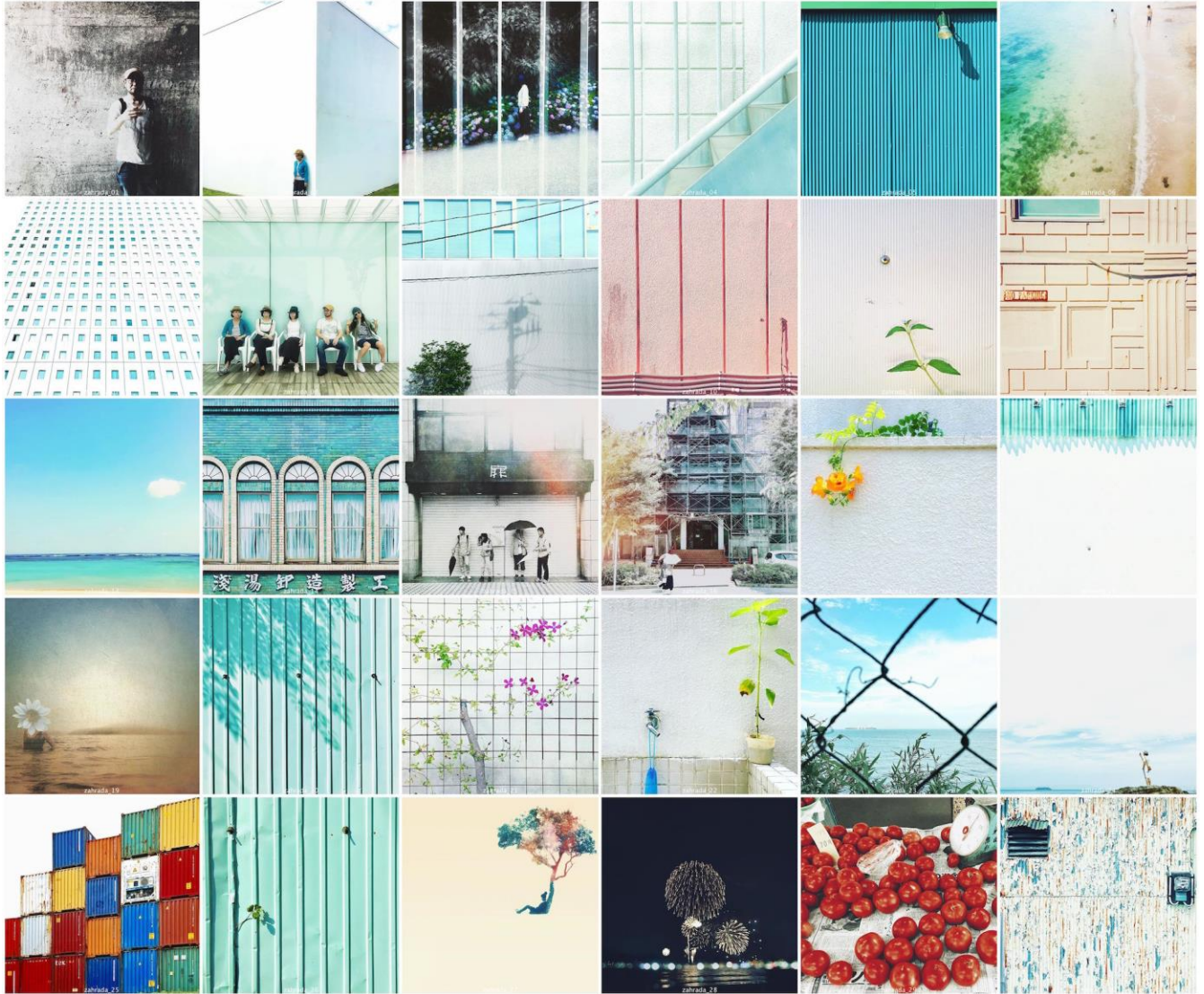
The authors who design both individual photos and their sequences may be considered as the true “Instagram professionals.” They do not follow the rules of “good photography” and strategies developed well before Instagram for different photo capture and edit technologies, publication and exhibition platforms, and circulation and feedback mechanisms. Instead, they systematically exploit the specific properties, affordances, advantages, and limitations of the medium Instagram.



@sex\_on\_water



@tienphuc



@zahrada

**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”).

### ***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 necessarily 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 is 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 of 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 purposes: 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.)<sup>1</sup> 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 (perhaps too romantic) 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.

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.

Of course, after some time this position itself also becomes a new norm now used by millions of Instagrammers. This is obvious and not unique to Instagramism. What is more interesting is the differences in aesthetic preferences and expectations of the same social classes in different countries. In the West, only in countries like Sweden, Norway, Finland and parts of Italy contemporary design has become mainstream, and middle classes are not alienated by it. But in the rest of Europe and North America, only some parts of middle and upper classes are at home with contemporary design. So what is seen as “mainstream” forms in one country becomes “avant-garde” and “not normal” in another country. And now let’s also consider Asia. I have been spending time in Korea, Thailand, and Japan, both

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<sup>1</sup> The figure of 784 million members of global middle class by 2011 comes 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.



in biggest cities and in small places. In these countries (and this likely also applies to a number of other Asian countries, although I do not have direct experience there), being contemporary and “in trend” is not an option but a requirement. This means that sophisticated contemporary design is used in kinds of places that even in most design countries in Europe may remain “not designed”; not only urban youth but people of all ages pay carefully coordinate their dress and overall look; and the use of social media including Instagram and messaging apps is also more intense. In other words, the kinds of behaviors and values that in the West we may associate only with young urbanites, or creative class, or upper class, or one gender, or another group are norm for more people in certain Asian countries. For example, staging and taking photos, carefully editing them to get the desired aesthetic look, posting them to social media or groups in messaging apps is much more widespread than in Western cities.

Thus, then we analyze contemporary culture in terms of structural differences, we need to remember that oppositions such as mainstream/alternative are culturally relative. The oppositions that are important in one country may not exist (or be very weak) in another country. This is why identifying Instagramism with particular demographic, spatial, or professional categories is dangerous (such as people in early 20s, or people in big cities, or people in creative fields). Postulating Instagramism as the aesthetics of “global digital youth” was a useful place to start—but eventually we would need to go beyond such categories.

### **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

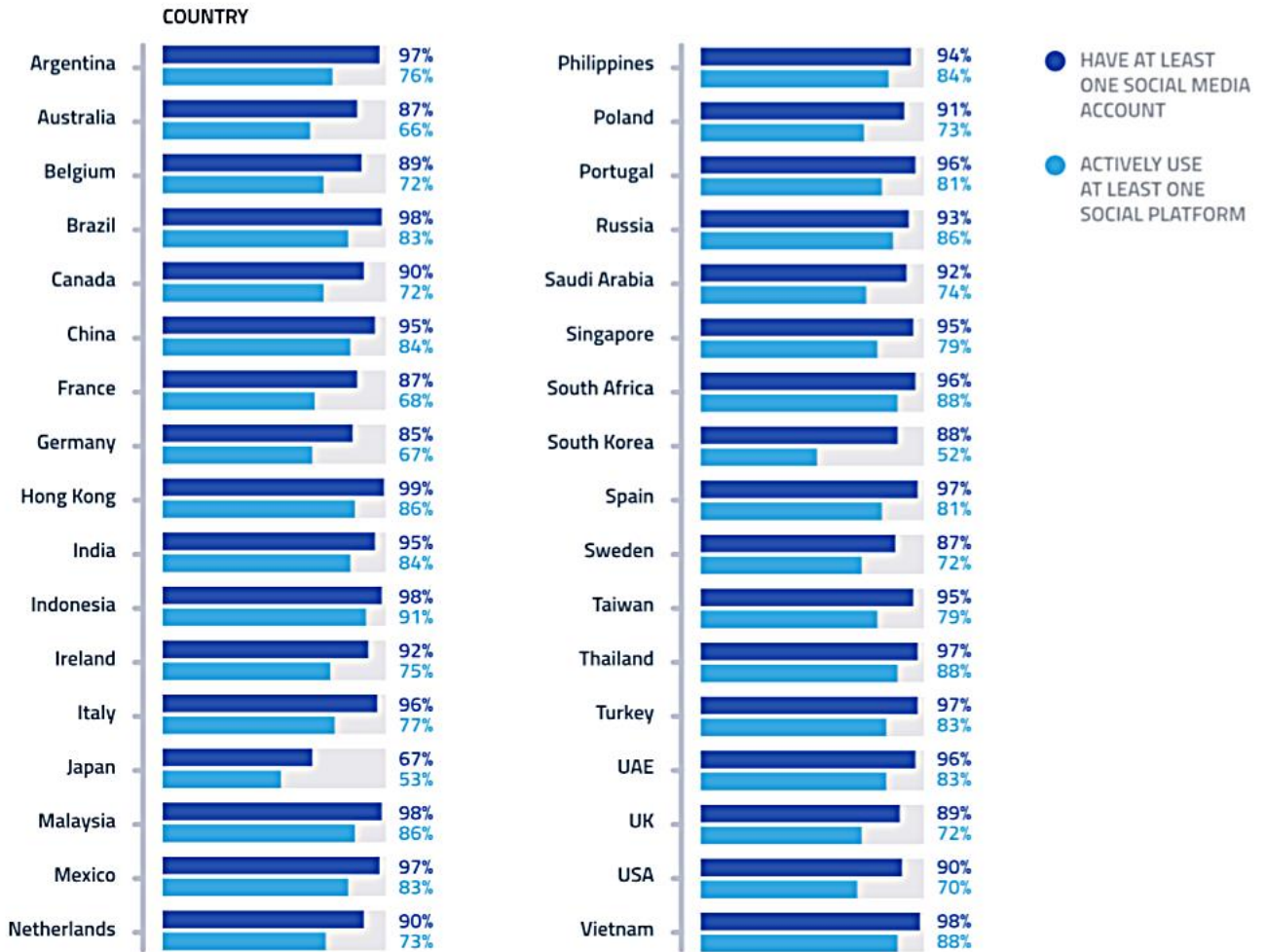
who figure as original inventors in these stories include European Modernists of the 1920s, Paris Surrealists of the 1930s, Beat Generation in late 1940s in NYC, Northern California Hippies in the 1960s, Hip Hop in the Bronx in the early 1970s, or Williamsburg (Brooklyn) in late 1990s.

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, then 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 *borrowed 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 big or even higher than in the developed Western economies (see statistics in [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 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.



**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>.

## TIME SPENT SOCIAL NETWORKING BY COUNTRY



**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>.

In physical reality, the local norms constraint how people dress and behave. Compare New York’s Chelsea & Lower East Side, Seoul’s Garosu-gil (**Figure 10**), and Harajuku area in Tokyo (**Figure 11**). 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 10.** Google image search for “Harajuku street style,” top three rows, 08/11/2017.



**Figure 11.**  
Google image search for “Garosu-gil street style,” top three rows, 08/11/2017.

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## Appendix

### iPhone models: release dates, display resolution, camera resolution

model	release date	display height	display width	rear camera (megapixels)	front camera (megapixels)
iPhone	29-Jun-07	480	320	2	-
iPhone 3G	11-Jul-08	480	320	2	-
iPhone 4	24-Jun-10	960	640	5	0.3
iPhone 4s	24-Oct-11	960	640	8	0.3
iPhone 5 / 5s	21-Sep-12	1136	640	8	1.2
iPhone 6	19-Sep-14	1334	750	8	1.2
iPhone 6 Plus	19-Sep-14	1920	1080	8	1.2
iPhone 6s	25-Sep-15	1334	750	12	5
iPhone 6s Plus	25-Sep-15	1920	1080	12	5
iPhone 7	16-Sep-16	1334	750	12	7
iPhone 7 Plus	16-Sep-16	1920	1080	12	7

### Instagram timeline: app releases, new features, new filters, commercialization

Compiled from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram> and posts on Instagram company blog. (More details: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_Instagram](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Instagram).)

date	app releases and new features	new filters	Commercialization
10/ 2010	Instagram app released for iOS: square same size photos; adding photos only via Instagram app; feed uses chronological oldest-to-newest order, built-in filters		
1/2011	Hashtags added to help users discover photos and other users		
9/2012	Instagram v2.0: live filter preview, increased photo size, tilt-shift tool, one click rotation	Amaro, Rise, Hudson, Valencia	
4/2012	Instagram app released for Android phones		
4/2012			Facebook acquires Instagram
12/2012		Mayfair,	

		Willow	
6/2013	Video sharing		
11/ 2013			Image advertisements starts appearing in feeds
5/2014	10 new editing tools—straighten, brightness, contrast, warmth, saturation, highlights, shadows, vignette, sharpen		
8/2014			Analytics features made available to big advertisers
12/2014		Slumber, Crema, Ludwig, Aden, Perpetua	
3/2015	Layout app to make image collages		
4/2015		Lark, Reyes, Juno	
5/2015	Structure tool		
8/2015	Landscape and portrait photos and videos are now accepted		
2/2016			200,000 advertisers using Instagram
5/2016			business profiles, Insights analytics for all business users, the ability to turn posts into ads
6/2016	Introduction of algorithm-based feed images ordering		
8/2016	Instagram Stories (image and video disappear after 24 hours)		
9/2016			500,000 advertisers using Instagram
12/2016	Can save other user's photos for later viewing		
2/2017	Addition of carousel format (can contain up to 10 images or video)		1,000,000 advertisers using Instagram
5/2017	Can add photos using Instagram mobile website (in addition to app)		
5/2017	A user can move her/his photos from timeline and optionally restore later (Archive feature)		

## Proportions of Instagram users outside of U.S., 2013—2016

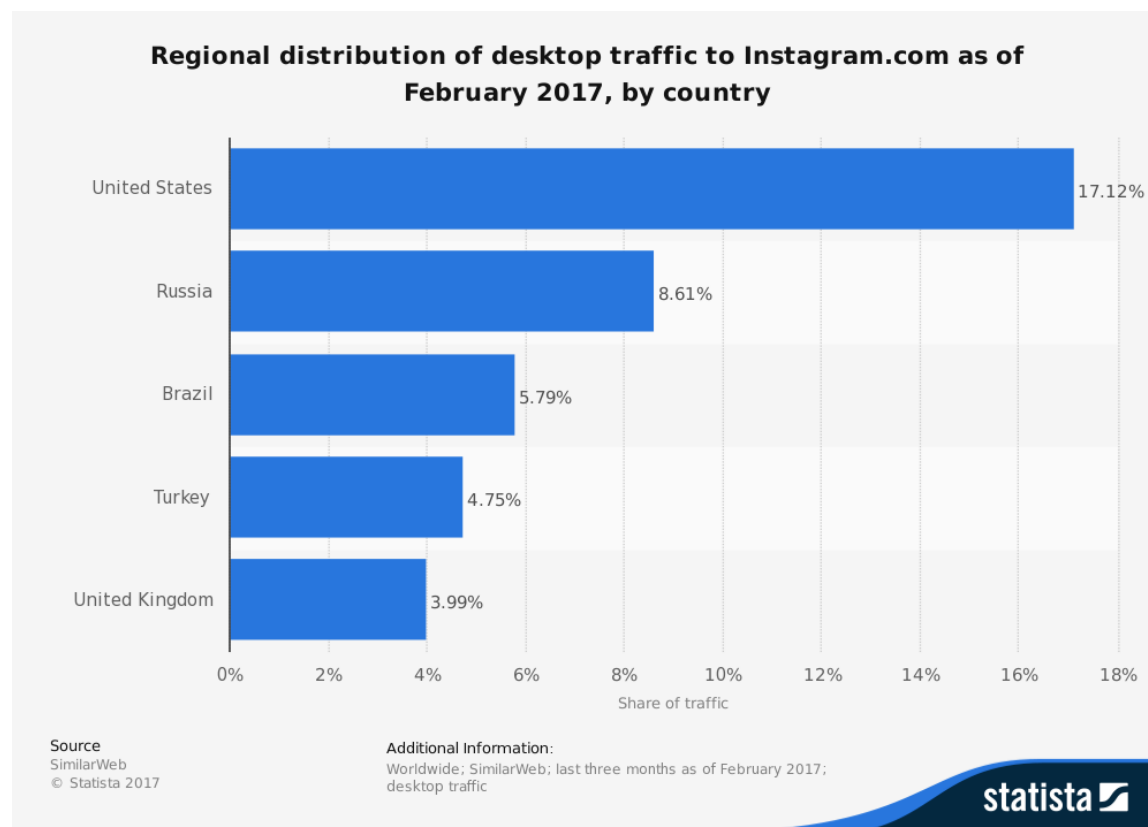
09/09/2013: 60%

10/12/2014: 65%

09/22/2015: 75%

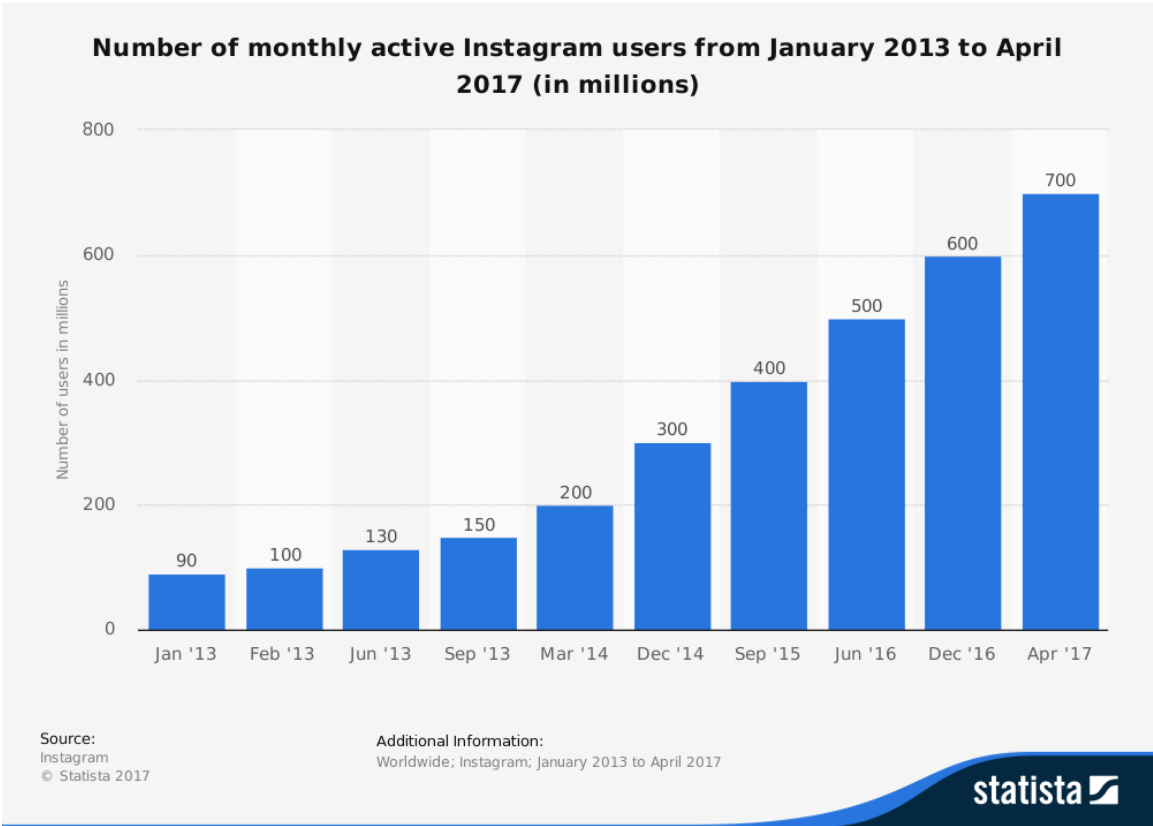
06/21/2016: 80%

## Top countries for Instagram visitor traffic, 2/2017



source: <https://www.statista.com>.

# Instagram users growth, 2013—2017



source: <https://www.statista.com>.