

“Spectacular” User Subjectivities on Instagram: A Discursive Interface Analysis

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Instagram has succeeded in becoming a pervasive part of everyday life for many of its million users. Drawing on the Debordian concept of the spectacle and principles of Actor Network Theory, we approach Instagram as a sociotechnical assemblage, examining how it functions as a norm-(re)producing mechanism and how it constructs user subjectivities, analyzing both the platform’s design and the surrounding discourses. Four types of “ideal” users are prescribed: (1) spectators, (2) producers of spectacular content, (3) sociable users, and (4) consumers of commodities and aspiring influencers. Based on this analysis, we argue that Instagram closely resembles a contemporary spectacle (“Spectacle 2.0”), whose key logic is the aestheticization of everyday life.

Keywords: Instagram, interface analysis, spectacle, ideal user, aestheticization

“I am visible, I am an image—look! Look!” Baudrillard (1993) commented, pointing out that what mattered was the performance, an appearing act, expressing “an extraversion without depth, a sort of self-promoting ingeniousness” (p. 23). What could possibly be said about Instagram’s constructed subjectivity 30 years later? We consider this question worth asking as, although Instagram has gradually risen to being one of the most popular social media platforms, it is still unclear which actions and norms it reinforces through its structural elements, potentially affecting users’ behavior. This lack appears crucial when considering that social media platforms are constructed bearing an *ideal use* of their software, in ways that can enact certain subject positions, the *ideal subjects* (Gehl, 2014).

Although Instagram’s founder claimed that the platform was created to inform people (Kiss, 2013) and build communities (see Instagram, n.d.-a), and although some users promote alternative topics through it (see Crowder, 2021; Mahoney, Feltwell, Ajuruchi, & Lawson, 2016), Instagram is, above all, a commercial platform aiming to raise its profits: it has become a strong corporate tool for millions of businesses, while its algorithms seemingly promote mainstream and commercial content (Kollyri, 2021). Additionally, users tend to follow a specific pattern of behavior producing promotional images in a gentle but persistent manner to gain reputation

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and attention (Carah & Shaul, 2016), while the so-called influencers develop strategies to gain money (see Abidin, 2016, 2017). The central role of images on Instagram, its conceptualization through the idea of reputation, and its commercial nature lead us to Guy Debord's (2002) work of the *Society of the Spectacle*, raising questions about whether Instagram's ideal subjectivities resonate with the idea of the spectacle.

To investigate the construction of subjectivities on Instagram, we follow Actor Network Theory (ANT), perceiving platforms as assemblages of heterogeneous relations and actors comprising several human and nonhuman elements through which ideal subjectivities are enacted. Latour (1992) draws attention to both material artifacts and human entities, stressing that nonhuman actors can determine and force specific actions. Thus, the entire design, affordances, and discourses can enact an ideal use of the platform raising the question of whether it reproduces dominant societal norms or generates new. Drawing on these theories, the current research explores how Instagram constructs user subjectivities through its design and the surrounding discourses and whether it resonates with the idea of the spectacle.

Theoretical Framework

Tracing the Actors: Actants, Affordances, Assemblages

One of the most essential contributions of ANT is the position that technology is not neutral. Instead, it plays a crucial role in the mediation of human relationships, as "we cannot understand how societies work without an understanding of how technologies shape our everyday lives" (Latour, 1992, p. 151). This "shaping" occurs because objects have agency. For instance, the inconvenience of a heavy hotel key reminds individuals to bring it back before they leave the building. For Latour (1992), this is the "program of action" that prescribes to people qualities and behavior (p. 226). In the case of software (and Instagram), this corresponds to how the platform's technical elements can set in motion transformations in human actions. As stated by Latour (2005), things may "authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (p. 72).

ANT is strongly related to the concept of the *assemblage*, which describes the relation between heterogeneous elements, such as materials, discourses, and ideas (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The study of both material and discursive entities is also stressed by Bucher's (2012) approach, "technography." In other words, it is significant to "explore both the material and discursive interventions and the ways in which they combine to afford social power through the production and maintenance of certain truths" (Beer, 2017, p. 8). The discourse surrounding platforms might reveal something of the broader system they are part of (Beer, 2017). This study incorporates this perceptive by analysing the discourses surrounding Instagram, as discussed below.

Subjectivation: Ideal Users and Subject Positions

As Sun and Hart-Davidson (2014) posited, "the interface of a computing technology is the manifestation of its implicit politics and ideology" (p. 6). Platforms are constructed bearing an *ideal user*. Designers construct the platform in a way that can enact certain subject positions, the ideal subjects (Gehl, 2014). Latour (1992) described how decisions and behaviors are delegated to technology through a process he

calls "prescription." Prescription is "the behavior imposed back onto the human by non-human delegates" and "the moral and ethical dimension of mechanisms" (Latour, 1992, p. 157), inscribed into the "program of action" of a certain artifact. Latour (1992) argues that machines can be compared with texts in the way they both construct builders/users and authors/readers, "inscribe" them in their "program of action," and prescribe to them qualities and behaviors (p. 160) that are similar to role expectations.

The persuasive power of artifacts, then, becomes evident when "the prescribed user is so well anticipated, so carefully nested inside the scenes, so exactly dovetailed, that it does what is expected" (Latour, 1992, p. 161). Yet, contradictory uses always emerge, as users can behave differently from what designers expect. Platforms' owners and designers try (not necessary in full consciousness), through the design, affordances, algorithms, data, and discourses, to enact the ideal use of the platform and certain subjectivities. This is enabled by habits, routine actions, and ultimately, the standardization of human conduct (van Dijck, 2013).

Building on Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle

In our critical investigation of Instagram, we draw on Guy Debord (2002) and his work *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord (2002) asserts that "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (p. 9). In the spectacle, mass media bombard audiences with millions of images representing an ideal life, a representation of the world that is far removed from one's actual everyday life. Debord (2002) argued that the more of a spectator one becomes, the less one lives, as "the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires" (p. 20). Nowadays, the spectacle is presented not only through movies and magazines but also through state-of-the-art technology, interactive platforms that interplay with users. Additionally, businesses have more opportunities to silently penetrate individuals' lives, and this explains why Instagram has become a strong corporate tool. According to Debord (2002), people ignore their own desires and prioritise "imposed" needs so that representation becomes more important than actual living. The domination of the economy is manifested in the degradation of being into having, but simultaneously having is replaced by appearing.

Instagram, as a space where millions of images are daily taken, shared, and consumed, bears such a close resemblance to the spectacle that it is hard to ignore questions such as how life is represented and whether these representations work their way through everyday life in the ways that Debord imagined (or rather feared). This is the focus of this exploration, which aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Is Instagram a contemporary spectacle?

RQ2: What kind of subjectivities, needs, and norms does it enact through its sociotechnical assemblage?

Methodology

Focusing on Instagram, we investigate how the Instagrammer's subjectivity is constructed and whether it resonates with the idea of the spectacle—through the platform's design and the surrounding discourses. Who is the ideal user of Instagram? Which norms does the platform produce or reinforce?

To explore these questions, a platform analysis was held, a method that explores the norms produced by affordances (Stanfill, 2015). First, we identified the affordances of Instagram, focusing on low-level affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), by navigating to several interfaces, looking for what is available for users, generating field notes, and taking screenshots. Based on Latour, two questions were posed to guide the analysis of affordances: *Does it offer a possibility for action? Does it make any difference in any state of affairs?* This led to the creation of a diagram (Figure 1) depicting the main affordances of Instagram in each interface, namely the *user activity*, *home*, *explore*, and *profile* interfaces. The interface analysis started in September 2019 and was completed in December 2019.

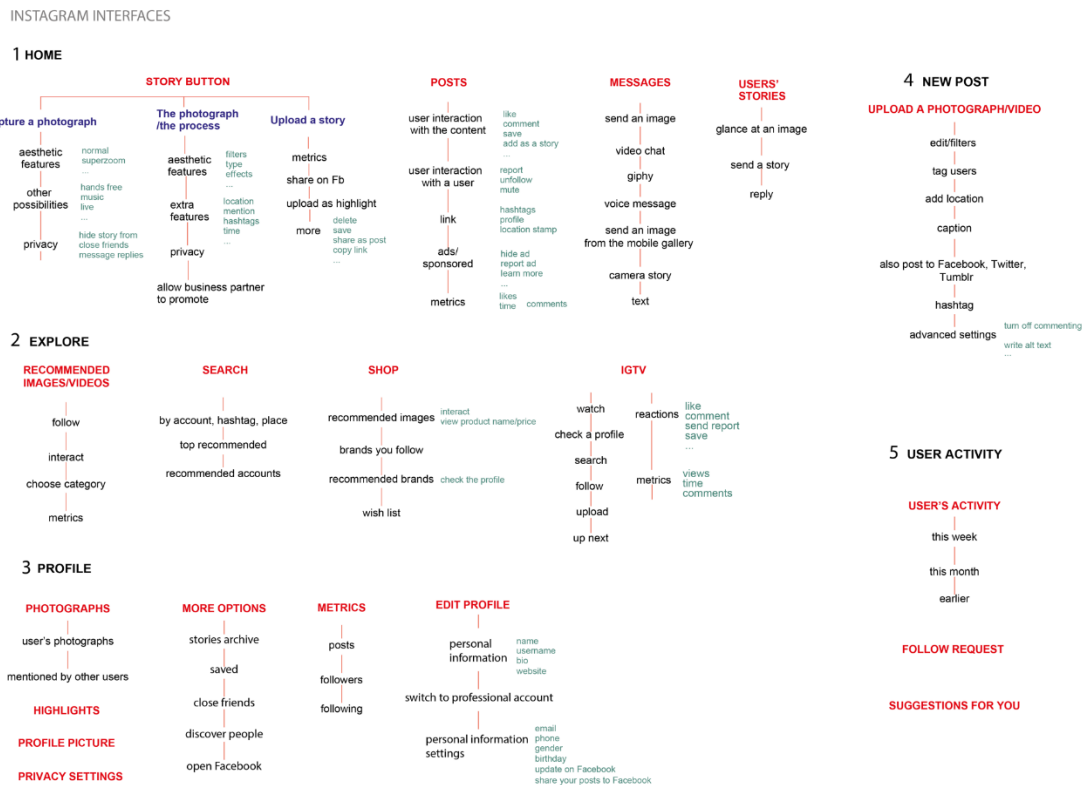


Figure 1. Instagram interfaces.

Next, based on *discursive interface analysis* (Stanfill, 2015), we categorized and analyzed the affordances of the platform,² which entails the analysis of functional, sensory, and cognitive affordances (Stanfill, 2015). *Functional affordances* refer to the possibilities that are opened up (and others that are closed off) for users, allowing them to or preventing them from acting in a particular way. *Cognitive affordances* are interrelated with the act of meaning-making, and they refer to naming, labeling, site taglines, and self-descriptions. *Sensory affordances* are close to an aesthetic analysis of the interface, referring to visibility, legibility, and audibility. The design of the platform can indicate priorities for users and

² Instagram users can set up a business or user profile. This analysis focuses on the latter.

simultaneously constitutes a self-identification of the platform, concerning its purposes and what users should care about (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1064).

Stanfill’s method was combined and enriched by MacLeod and McArthur’s (2019) approach, which identifies six components of interface widgets: *function, behavior, structure, identifier, default, and convergence*. Thus, the analysis focused separately on each widget and affordance of Instagram combining both approaches. The *Like widget* is presented as an illustration of the methodological process (Table 1). The platform analysis was conducted on the Instagram mobile app, repeatedly visited, used, and tested out.

Table 1. Analysis of Like Affordance.

FUNCTIONAL		SENSORY		COGNITIVE		ANALYSIS	
<i>What can users do?</i>	<i>The action solicited by the widget</i>	<i>The technical description</i>	<i>Aesthetic analysis</i>	<i>The text or icons that convey the purpose</i>			
Function	Behavior	Structure	Sensory	Identifier	Convergence	Default	Overall meaning
Like	Users can express their liking toward an image or a comment.	Users are expected to use the like button.	Users can double tap the picture or tap a white heart to express their liking.	There is a white heart below each picture and beside comments, which becomes red when someone touches it.	There are no indications as to how users can express their liking. There is the “heart” symbol below the pictures, which is usually linked with the like action. The heart is white and becomes red when someone touches it.	No White heart	For users to discover the like button, they should use their fingers properly <i>Instinctively use of the platform.</i>

Additionally, the surrounding discourses were considered, focusing on two categories of discourses. First, Instagram press releases, published on the company’s website “Instagram press,” were analyzed to investigate how Instagram itself conceptualizes several tools, affordances, and ideas. Overall, we selected 18 articles, which were most closely related to the research questions, and analyzed them qualitatively via thematic analysis. Second, we sampled Web articles related to Instagram use that were easily discoverable

by an interested user through a Google search. To bypass personalized search results, we used Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox, as these browsers allow users to conduct searches independently from users' history.³ We used the keywords: *Instagram use*, *Instagram hashtags*, *Instagram story*, and *Instagram Explore page*, to trace articles related to vital tools and affordances of the platform. Then, the results of the first two Google pages were collected, scanned, and the most relevant to the research questions were chosen (20 articles) and qualitatively analyzed. The entire process took place in November 2019.

Findings and Discussion

The findings resulted from both the interface and thematic analysis of the articles. Four categories of user subjectivities were identified: (1) the *passive recipient of content*, (2) the *producer of spectacular content*, (3) the *sociable user*, and (4) the *consumer of commodities and aspiring influencers*. These discursive categories indicate how users are *in-scribed*, how their needs and *prescribed* actions are constructed, and to which directions users are steered, while suggesting how their everyday life may be altered. However, it is vital to highlight that although platforms may steer users' behavior, we do not know what users do when they encounter the strategies of power on the Web.

The Passive Recipient of Content

Endless and Constantly Renewed Content

Instagram acts like a "companion" (see Karakayali, Kostem, & Galip, 2018), being there at all times to provide endless updated material and to fulfill the need of finding something new and intriguing. Based on the analysis of its affordances, Instagram seems to be designed in such a way as to trigger prolonged consumption, as a multitude of tools exist urging individuals to consume more and more content.

First and foremost, users do not encounter posts created only by their followers; new material always emerges through interfaces designed especially for that. The *Explore* and *IGTV sections* are exactly to display unseen images and videos. This content is endless—it is always renewed when users scroll up. Furthermore, since 2016, Instagram has incorporated personalized algorithms, whose aim is to "show the moments we believe you will care about the most" (Instagram, 2016a, para. 2), rendering the content more enticing.

Apart from these sections, users can find new content in their *home interface*. The functionality of these interfaces reinforces the continuous consumption of "newness" (Grosser, 2014), as older images are replaced by recent ones. In fact, it becomes very difficult, almost impossible, to come across a certain image again in a subsequent visit to Instagram. *Stories'* layout and design contribute to that: at the exact time a story gets seen, it is automatically switched with another one. Furthermore, when a user watches three stories in a row, an advertisement is displayed. Timestamps are present in all content, which creates the feeling that one may miss something "important" if one leaves the platform for long. Posts contain elements

³ A private window was used while all cookies, tracking content, and cryptominers were blocked. The options "send websites a 'Do Not Track' signal" and "never remember my history" were selected. Data gathering was completed in one day, maximizing depersonalized search results.

(e.g., hashtags, profile names, location stamps) that are active links leading to new sources of fresh content. Thus, users can potentially find new profiles or hashtags to follow, resulting in more upcoming content on their home interface.

Instagram users come to know that they can always find new and interesting content visiting Instagram repeatedly. According to the statistics, this strategy works: Users spend approximately 53 minutes per day on Instagram (Broadbandsearch, n.d.), which is higher than the average time people spend on the video-based platform YouTube.

Content for Passive Consumption

The excessive amounts of content, along with the Instagram design's prods, invoke users to passively consume. When one tries to sign up for the first time on Instagram, she/he will notice the phrase: "Sign up to see photos and videos from your friends" (Instagram, n.d.-c, para. 1). This implies a state of passivity and a call for consumption. The ways in which Instagram images are promoted and conceptualized intensify the drive to consume. As Carah and Shaul (2016) claimed, "Instagram is a media device designed for glancing, directed by the swiping and tapping of the user's finger on the screen" (p. 72). In fact, the platform does not favor a contemplative view of images, but it inscribes and propels a repetitive, brief, and fleeting one. In particular, the size of the photographs is quite small, and users cannot enlarge or save them in their device. Furthermore, each story lasts only for a few seconds before another one appears, preventing reflection. Thus, users are being motivated to massively consume content rather than ponder over it. The inscribed Instagram users are anticipated to espouse a fleeting and passive consumption, restricted to specific quick interactions, such as liking. Moreover, if we look at the most popular categories, the top five are, at the time of writing, fashion, food, design, travel, and fitness, while most popular hashtags are #love, #instagood, #photooftheday, #fashion, #beautiful (Paul, 2019; von Puttkamer, n.d.). This shows that even the promoted content itself facilitates mindless consumption, as it is much easier to scroll and glance at 50 photographs of pizzas and dogs compared with meticulous reading and consideration of political news.

"Trained" Toward a Repetitive and Instinctive Use

Instagram runs chiefly on mobile phones, exploiting their major advantages. In particular, it "trains" users to make specific movements with their fingers to implement several actions. Many existing affordances are hidden as there is no identifier to confirm their existence. For instance, there are no identifiers explaining how one can add filters to a story. Thus, users must devote time to the platform and start using appropriate and specific gestures to investigate all *hidden* possibilities. Such physical motions acquire strong social meanings and are equated with social practices (cf. Tinder "swipe"). On Instagram, we can argue that users are being "trained" to follow specific motions, attuned to the habitual ones of a smartphone. Hence, they are urged to perform repetitive movements that may result in an instinctive use of the platform, which favors prolonged consumption and is conducive to the platform's financial interests.

Furthermore, passive and standardized actions are promoted. One can press the *like button* easily through a quick double-tap on an image. Even comments (an affordance typically involving a higher degree of engagement) are accompanied by predetermined responses (two happy emojis) that a user can easily

choose and move to the next image. Even if users do not espouse this position, the platform seems to have been designed in a way that passive consumption can easily be embraced.

The Producer of Spectacular Content

One of the most significant traits of Instagrammers is their role as *producers*. Users are motivated to expose their everyday moments, generating specific content with specific characteristics. Focusing on the platform's design, the *story* button is a fundamental feature, constituting one of the two possibilities for content production. A *story* is visible only for 24 hours and then it disappears. The platform promotes it, as identifiers of it appear in four different places in the platform (home interface, users' profile, and message section). The very design of this button enables the penetration of the platform into everyday life. First, the *story* button provides a camera mode through which one can directly capture and upload stories without leaving the platform, facilitating and, thus, intensifying this process. Furthermore, a *story* not only has a short public lifespan but also its metrics (e.g., number of views) are absent from public view. Users are enabled to upload more trivial moments without worrying about the feedback they may receive (or not), getting a sense of security. Therefore, the design of this feature *prescribes* users' specific behaviors, namely uploading ordinary moments. Indeed, a website mentions: "Who doesn't know this on Instagram? You go out to eat and want to share your food with the whole world" (All#ashtag, n.d., para. 5). A marketing agency describes the *story* tool as follows: "users often post more casual and candid videos and images, offering glimpses into their everyday lives" (Forsey, 2019, para. 32), while the company depicts it as "a way to share all the moments of your day" (Instagram, 2016b, para. 2).

Second, the Instagram producer is urged to follow specific guidelines concerning content production, which can lead to its standardization. Filters and features can be applied to Instagram photographs. Based on aesthetic interventions, some of them offer a specific atmosphere, such as the "Tokyo" filter, or editing options such as the change of brightness. The almost endless options of aesthetic intervention aim at the ideal representation of each image. The use of filters and additional editing apps is strongly promoted by marketing agencies as a way to perfect Instagram photographs (Burgett, 2018; Moreau, 2018, 2019). Thus, devoting time and energy to improve photographs is constructed as essential in the Instagram realm. Furthermore, the *story* tool provides many features adding funny notes to each *story* (e.g., special effects for transforming oneself to an alien). Instagram seems to propel a specific type of content production related to superficial comical moments that do not require much contemplation, in addition to atmospheric, beautiful pictures. Indeed, it would be weird were someone to use the alien effect in a post about the economic crisis. The company, in its press releases (Instagram, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a), implicitly stresses an orientation toward specific aesthetics. The introduction of several tools is accompanied by photographs depicting dogs and funny faces (see Figure 2), conceptualizing their use in specific ways.

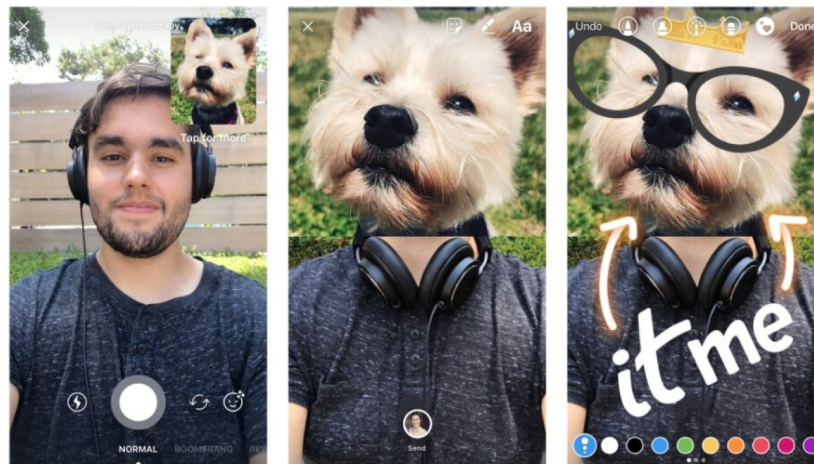


Figure 2. Split-screen reply tool (Instagram, 2017a).

The standardization of users' creations is significantly urged by the metrics of the platform and the surrounding discourses promoting the idea of acquiring popularity. Instagram producers should be (made) *popular*. First, the platform is brimful with metrics, such as number of views, likes, followers, and so on. Instagram users, and especially digital workers, are constantly confronted with statistics of their own fame, which can lead to a pursuit of reputation and attention, as metrics intensify the desire for even more numbers (Grosser, 2014). Thus, users are exhorted to find ways to increase their numerical data, as reputation is visible and measurable (Gandini, 2016), and produce more content under specific terms while generating profit for the platform. The solutions come as tips offered mainly by marketing agencies, which often conceptualize Instagram use as a pursuit of popularity (Burgett, 2018; Forsey, 2019; Moreau, 2018). The advice interferes with the images' aesthetics and the management of elements such as frequency, time, hashtags, and location stamps. For instance, users are urged to use the most popular hashtags to increase their reach and likes (Canning, 2019; Moreau, 2018). Taking a closer look at them, the most popular (such as #love, #fashion, #beautiful, #happy) offer hints about which topics one should exploit to raise her popularity. Therefore, users are triggered to create specific content to gain fame.

Furthermore, the *explore interface* is suggested as a place for "inspiration," so that one "stay[s] on top of the latest Instagram trends" (Moreau, 2018, para. 12), potentially leading to a reproduction of certain topics and styles. According to marketing advice, posts should look diverse, "evoke some kind of emotion" (Moreau, 2018, para. 3) and be high-quality, colorful photos or videos since these tend to get the most action on Instagram (Canning, 2019; Forsey, 2019). Apps automatically creating videos are also recommended, standardizing the creative process even more (see Canning, 2019). Furthermore, users are motivated to "be inspired" by Instagram *themes*, namely profiles with specific aesthetics about colors, atmosphere, and filters. In fact, users are urged to imitate them, reproducing specific aesthetic patterns (see Forsey, 2019). A good illustration of this is the Instagram profile "insta_repeat" (Insta repeat, n.d.), displaying almost identical Instagram photographs taken by different users, sharing the same subject, angle, and filters (see Figure 3). The profile owner adopts a critical standpoint characterizing the images as simulacra. Nevertheless, this observed repetition of a specific (usually appealing) lifestyle is a result of users

being channeled to reproduce popular subjects and aesthetics. Repetition is promoted instead of originality, as the latter may risk users' fame.

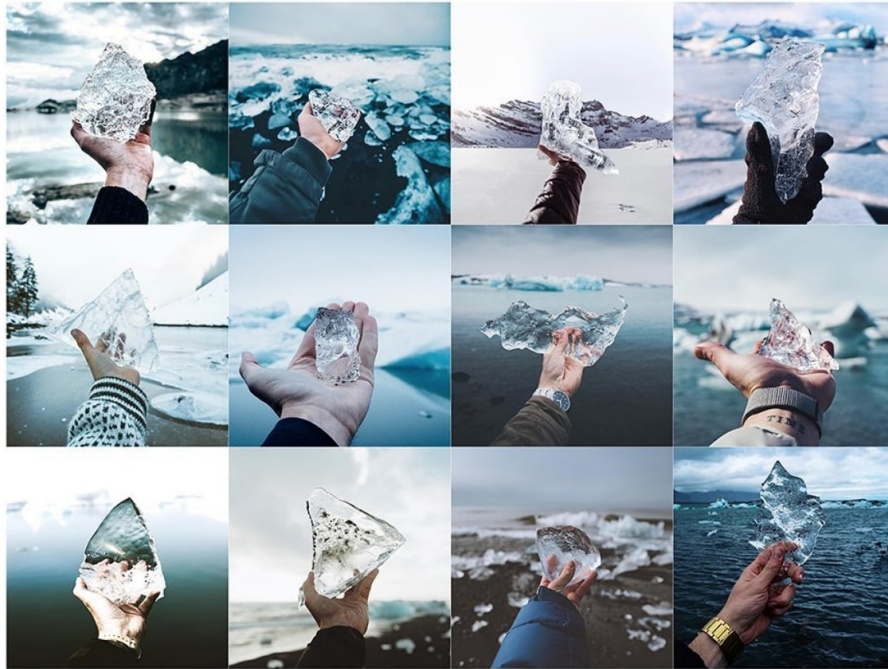


Figure 3. Insta_repeat (Insta repeat, 2019).

Therefore, whereas Instagram is supposedly a space where people can express their creative inclinations, in practice, creative spirit is not what is being rewarded. Users are exposed to step-by-step strategies for the creation of a successful and popular account, standardizing actions and content in the platform. These tools and their conceptualization highlight the significance of the representation of the "ideal image." The original photograph is the starting canvas for users, "upgraded," according to the platform, through the plethora of features, to represent the "best version" of it. The Instagram producer is constructed as a user striving to upload the perfect content, closely resembling an influencer subjectivity, who pays attention to metrics, popularity, and aesthetics.

The Sociable User

Instagram users are prescribed to be part of a social network, constituting *sociable* individuals. Instagram's design promotes a guided communication process while the surrounding discourses commodify human interaction.

Instagram conceptualizes its tools as a means for users to feel closer to their friends and followers, by repeatedly evoking "community" and "friend" (see Instagram, 2017a, 2018b, 2018c). Indeed, Instagram provides several tools and affordances aiming to trigger interaction, such as *comments*, *likes*, *polls*, *question*

stickers, texts, photographs, and recorded voice messages, video calls, or stories' reactions. Nonetheless, the communication process is steered and conceptualized in a specific way.

Messaging is not promoted as much as in other platforms (e.g., users cannot send messages via Instagram on their computers or while scrolling on their wall). This signifies that extended verbal interaction is not a priority for the platform; rather, quick answers seem to be more wanted. Comments and story reactions are accompanied by predetermined responses, positive emojis, which are noticeably popping up when one tries to use these tools. Given the endless content of Instagram, these recommended quick reactions can easily be embraced by users to save time. Thus, users are invoked to act in ways that do not require reflection and personal expression. Generally, Instagram is based on visual content, which actively limits possibilities for verbal communication. Short repetitive answers are promoted instead of text that may trigger an actual conversation.

According to Instagram, the platform constitutes a community assisting users in starting conversations with their friends so that they "get to know each other better" (Instagram, 2018a, para. 1), using tools such as *polls* and *question stickers* in *stories*. By using polls, users make a statement while providing their followers with the answers "yes" or "no," and let them vote. The *question tool* functions in the same way, but answers are not predetermined. In Instagram's press releases, these tools are conceptualized as a way to share trivial concerns. For instance, an Instagram article mentions: "whether you're trying to plan tomorrow's outfit, choosing which class to take or figuring out where to go for dinner, now it's easy to share a two-option poll right in your story" (Instagram, 2017b, para. 2). The *poll* tool is introduced by a picture depicting a cheerful girl holding two donuts and asking, "which one?" (Figure 4). Instagram explicitly associates these tools with topics related to trivial concerns, like the donut choice.



Figure 4. The poll tool (Instagram, 2017b).

Moreover, Instagram relationships are strongly commercialized. Several articles motivate users to be sociable, acquire and retain their fame. Metrics dominate the platform, as each profile's value is estimated through likes, comments, and followers. According to Moreau (2018):

Never ignore your most loyal followers who regularly like and comment on your photos! That's a surefire way to eventually drive people away. Instead, you want to make your followers feel valued. Reply to their comments or even go check out their account and like a few of their photos. (para. 9)

This advice comes from an article entitled "11 Instagram Tips for Beginners" (Moreau, 2018). Thus, from the very start of Instagram use, human relationships are "advertised" as vital means for fame, constituting pseudorelations. Human associations are transformed into a façade, hiding their commercial foundation. This phenomenon is also confirmed by some of the most popular hashtags, such as like-for-like (#14l) and follow-for-follow (#f4f; Gotter, 2019).

Thus, Instagram is based on *sociability*, functioning as an incentive and lure for people to upload and consume. Instagram urges users to follow specific conventions, conceptualizing the communication process and sociability in terms of predetermined, quick, and positive responses, and engagement with trivial topics. Additionally, users may be tempted to establish an online connection to increase their numerical value, embracing the tactics of influencers.

Consumer of Commodities and Aspiring Influencer

Brands and shopping constitute essential components of the platform's structure, even if this is not explicit. The ideal Instagrammer is induced to embrace commodities and become a *product consumer* and sometimes an *entrepreneur* or otherwise an *influencer*.

Being part of Instagram means that one receives numerous advertisements. Sponsored stories, frequently accompanied by a button "shop now," are popping up during a flow of stories, while paid posts are shown in users' home interface. Although this is not new in the social media universe, on Instagram, brands have been fervently integrated in many subtle ways, constituting a ubiquitous phenomenon. It is well known that popular users may get paid to advertise products (see Abidin, 2016). Sometimes this occurs blatantly as users explicitly declare it; at other times some products "accidentally" show up (see Stewart, 2018). Users are exposed to content, which may promote, more or less distinctly, a brand. Furthermore, Instagram provides tools that render easy for one to become a paid influencer. Therefore, as users can become *entrepreneurs* or *influencers* and businesses can easily promote themselves, Instagram content is being commercialized.

Recently, tools were launched to provide online shopping services, strengthening the commercial character of the platform. For instance, a sticker depicting a shopping bag is available in pictures denoting products for sale. Brands and users can tag their products' names along with prices on photographs, while each product is linked to detailed information about it and sometimes to a company's website, where a purchase can be made. Yet, the most significant Instagram shopping service is the *shop section*. By pressing

the *shop* button, users enter a personalized endless flow of products for sale. This way, users have their personal space with infinite items, rendering the purchase of goods especially handy. At this section, there is also a space with the brands one follows along with other suggested commercial profiles, where one can shop from their favorite brands and keep track of them (Instagram, 2018c). Products are part of Instagram culture, as they get entangled in people's flow of content while the platform blatantly promotes shopping (e.g., labels mentioning "shopping now" exist under sponsored advertisements). In 2019 (Instagram, 2019), Instagram enthusiastically launched a feature allowing users to buy products without leaving the platform. The close affinity of Instagram with brands attests to it being transformed into an online marketplace, steering individuals toward shopping.

Fuchs (2012) characterized Facebook as a "shopping mall without exit" (p. 36). We argue that Instagram is even closer to this description, as products have spread to the entire platform. Instagram is advertised as a place where people share everyday moments, but they can fill these moments with shopping tags (see Figure 5). Instagram may have found a way to surreptitiously and uncritically incorporate commodities into people's lives by presenting a fascinating spectacle while enabling users to be part of it.



Figure 5. Shopping tags.

Interesting is also how the company conceptualizes its shoppers and the act of shopping. According to its press releases (Instagram, 2018c), "shoppers on Instagram are savvy. They visit Instagram looking for the latest trends and styles. With 300M using Instagram Stories every day, people are increasingly

finding new products from brands they love" (para. 3). Instagram shoppers are conceptualized as people who want to stay up-to-date, while being savvy and loyal, as the word "love" implies a special relationship between them and brands. For instance, the "about us" section on Instagram's website states: "we bring you closer to the people and *things* you love" (Instagram, n.d.-b, para. 1; emphasis added). Another Instagram article refers to brands and items as "inspiring" (Instagram, 2018b), revamping shopping as a creative process requiring inspiration. Therefore, it is not only about choosing and buying a shirt: This process requires someone intelligent, knowledgeable, and up-to-date. It requires users who devote their time to staying informed through unceasing scrolling and following their favorite brands. On the platform, users have illusionary free time, resembling what Smythe (1977) claimed about the transformations effected by capitalism in the nature of leisure. People's "free" time is spent glancing at products and thinking about what to purchase. On Instagram, shopping has been transformed into a demanding, creative, and ubiquitous process requiring users' time, alertness, energy, and devotion.

Conclusion: The Contemporary Spectacle

This article aimed at exploring how Instagram constructs user subjectivities, and how it functions as a norm-(re)producing mechanism through its design and surrounding discourses. Based on our analysis, we argue that Instagram closely resembles a contemporary spectacle—"Spectacle 2.0," as termed by Briziarelli and Armano (2017)—displaying both familiar and novel characteristics vis-à-vis the Debordian notion.

The spectacle is "a worldview that has actually been materialized" (Debord, 2002, p. 10) and is inextricably linked with commodities and profits. A new reality arises, an augmented survival, in which primary human needs have been replaced by pseudoneeds expressed by the spectacle. According to Debord (2002), "the real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression" (p. 30). Mass media was formerly responsible for bombarding users with the ideal representation of life. With the ongoing platformization of society (van Dijck, Poell, & de Wall, 2018), Instagram becomes the space *par excellence* where the spectacle is produced, consumed, and, ultimately, where reality is experienced.

First, despite all the hype about the participatory nature of platforms, a key user subjectivity is that of the *passive recipient of content*, fleshed out by affordances that "train" users to glance at (rather than ponder over) endlessly renewed images tailored to fit users' habits and expectations through algorithms. In this sense, the original conception of the passive actor, the *spectator*, the object of the spectacle, still holds to a great extent in the contemporary milieu of the "platform society." In this respect, Instagram *affords* the "integrated spectacle," as Debord (1998) described the evolution of the spectacle, a condition where the spectacle "has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality" (p. 6).

The second user subjectivity inscribed by the platform is the *producer of spectacular content*. Debord (2002) argued that "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (p. 9). Instagram provides users with numerous tools to represent their life online in its best possible version. That users assume a more active role as content producers means that Spectacle 2.0 is not only more "discursive and interactive" (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 34) but also an "amalgamation of compound practices such as consumptive production and productive consumption" (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 35). Also, because

what people encounter is, to an extent, shaped by other users like them, the new spectacle becomes more familiar, more comfortable. Furthermore, Instagram's strategic valorization of mundane everyday life means that Spectacle 2.0 colonizes or subsumes most spheres of social life (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017). By normalizing the transformation of everyday banality into content worth sharing, Instagram enables users' "self-spectacularization" (Baroncelli & Freitas, 2011, para. 4), meaning that users are no longer just the "mediated objects" of the spectacle but also its "mediating subjects" (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 37). This is closely related to the norms governing *spectacular content*, namely, the type of content that is sought by the platform and is being produced by possibly well-trained users. In this respect, the key logic of spectacle 2.0 is the *aestheticization of everyday life* (Compton, 2004). Codeluppi (2017) argues for a more pervasive model of "aesthetic capitalism," whose fuel is the digital image that is fluid enough to serve the creation of economic value (p. 55). In the case of Instagram, *aestheticization* is associated with three interrelated processes.

First, we witness the *standardization of content* in digestible terms and with a positivist aura, along with an emphasis on aesthetics instead of meaning. The analogies of Horkheimer and Adorno's theorization (1997) of the cultural industry are striking. According to them, the standardization of culture not only means that cultural industry produces similar commodities but also generates a commodified audience who follows the needs that the capitalist system creates. In the case of Instagram, this culture triggers desires and urges users to maintain the capitalist system by participating in it through the reproduction of specific content. Likes, hearts, comic effects, users' best moments, filters, and brands construct an enormous positive, and promising reality toward which users are steered. This positive ambience also composes the spectacle where "what appears is good, what is good appears" (Debord, 2002, p. 12), allowing it to achieve its ultimate aim, namely, to reproduce itself. "A spectacle aims at nothing other than itself," as "its means and ends are identical" (Debord, 2002, p. 12). Instagram's most common affordances, such as filters and effects, contribute to the alienation of the uploaded images from what it is actually experienced. The discourse produced by Instagram itself and marketing agencies urges users to "upgrade" reality, implying that it is not good enough. In the spectacle, the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by "an incessant fabrication of pseudoneeds" (Debord, 2002, p. 31). People are urged to *separate* themselves from their lives and selves, identifying their needs through the spectacle. A desire to represent a better reality is triggered with a view to creating an ideal impression to others, as the spectacle is a social relation between people mediated by images (Debord, 2002, p. 10). Instagram presents itself as an ideal place where relationships bloom, communities thrive, and users' mundane everyday lives are made to be appealing and worth sharing.

Second, aestheticization serves the process of *commodification* of everyday life, resonating the Marxian (1995) critique of commodification, as "the diffusion of aesthetics in everyday life has facilitated the entry of every object, as well as every individual, institution, and event, into the circuit of the market and of the consumer world" (Codeluppi, 2017, p. 60). Thus, the countless ideas, inspirations, and experiences of users are shaped into specific aesthetic forms and are used to create economic value. Being *instagrammable* is key to enter Instagram economy; simultaneously, it is a powerful means for bringing commodities into users' lives. For instance, many businesses are adapting their products or services to best fulfill this norm. Instagram museums are designed in a way to be the most instagrammable places. Many people have already bought tickets costing from \$19 to \$95 (see Pardes, 2017) to post an outstanding picture. Even the very theme of each museum, such as the Pizza Museum, Candytopia, reflects Instagram's

promoted topics and aesthetics, namely eye-catching content. Furthermore, these museums have collaborated with brands promoted through them, such as Sephora (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Restaurants tend to offer dishes attuned to the Instagram aesthetic, such as the "unicorn foods," while designing their space to be instagrammable (Leaver et al., 2020). Lucrative businesses are dedicated to making profit by providing people the means to catch others' attention on Instagram, whereas people immerse themselves in their smartphones struggling to capture as many photographs as they can.

The third aspect of aestheticization is related to the *depoliticisation* of both content and users. Codeluppi (2017) argues about how the failure of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s to bring about social change and personal realization let disillusioned individuals to replace the ambitions of societal transformation with the transformation of every individual's personal image. Instagram, by valorizing mundane everyday experiences through aesthetics serving primarily commodification, enhances the spectacularization of daily life (e.g., 43.9k photographs share the hashtag #bananashake). Thus, Instagram inscribes the potential to appease and control while diversifications and objections are fading, echoing classic critiques of the traditional cultural industries with regard to repetition and standardization, leading to conservatism and lack of experimentation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1997). A vast positivity, constructed by appealing products, beautiful images, and filters, may prevail over contradictions and opposition. The spectacle demands a passive acceptance, being "effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply" (Debord, 2002, p. 12).

In Spectacle 2.0, users can produce content; in this fact resides the possibility for rupture and subversion, as users can reappropriate the "preferred use" of the platform—cf. Hall's (1973) "preferred reading"—transforming and weakening the spectacle. Questions are raised on how users handle this source of oppressive power/agency. In the platform society, users' participation does not always suffice to claim that a user is genuinely active; a passive user, who does not follow the platform's norms, may be more "active" than a producer. Thus, what active means, as well as who and how one is active, are further blurred. Taking a closer look at users' practices may disclose whether individuals subvert the system even without rejecting it (see de Certeau, 1984).

The third user subjectivity is the *sociable user*, where human interaction and social relationships are hollowed out, "metrified," and then commodified. Instagram aims at establishing norms and prescribing specific needs, one of which is *exposure*. Users are urged to become part of the spectacular Instagram culture, by following specific aesthetic prototypes and patterns to be liked. In this process, everyday life is being instrumentalized, as people are motivated to constantly upload their personal moments to declare their worthiness and receive attention. This is akin to the increasingly extensive and normalized practice of self-branding, which is "not just a technique of self-presentation via social media, but it is a more complex strategy based on the transformation of emotions as a competitive resource in the global market of identities" (Barile, 2017, p. 153). Spectacle 2.0, in the context of Instagram, is extended to social and intimate relationships, which are depersonalized and reified (Barile, 2017, p. 153). The spectacle produces a subjectivity that "may live this spectacle both as alienation and a form of dis-alienation": in the former case by functioning as a performer of a constructed reality (rather than a potent agent), and in the latter "through the promise of hyper-connectivity, sociability, and transparency" (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 40).

The last subjectivity impelled by Instagram is the consumer of commodities and prospective entrepreneur. According to Smythe (1977), media industries produce audiences eligible for sale to advertisers, generating an "audience commodity," whose work is to "learn to buy particular 'brands' of consumer goods, and to spend their income accordingly" (p. 6). The platform is offered as a "free lunch" (see Smythe, 1977) to attract users who will pay attention to advertisements. Instagram is seemingly devoted to entertainment, but it simultaneously provides businesses with audiences ready to embrace their brands. On Instagram, shopping is being transformed into a demanding, distinctive, and ubiquitous process requiring users' time, alertness, energy, and devotion—signifying the pleasure gained but also a sense of duty to consume (Bauman, 2000), a duty translated into the production of audiences with consuming behavior.

As Crary (1999, as cited in Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 43) remarks, "like a Greek tragedy, the spectacle functions as an interface between the spectator and social reality." Yet interfaces function much like texts (Hutchby, 2001) in that, while configured in certain ways, they allow for cracks and slits through which users maintain an agency in their interpretations and use practices. Though this study has focused on how Instagram configures users and uses, it has not looked at how users make sense of these configurations, leaving the possibility of "anti-spectacular" uses and subjectivities wide open. For instance, one can postulate that the validation of mundane everyday life by the platform, despite its profound commodification, may signify a sense of empowerment for ordinary users. In fact, some studies (e.g., Costa, 2018) have shown that users, in certain contexts, are able to negotiate prescribed affordances of social media and retain control over the organization of their social relations. For instance, the Palestinian lawyer Lara capitalized on how Instagram works, utilizing the title "skincare" to start a live video from Gaza during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Lara, 2021). Additionally, recent studies have revealed that Instagram is used for political purposes (Ekman & Widholm, 2017), while topics related to feminism and social advocacy are promoted through the platform (Crowder, 2021; Savolainen, Uitermark, & Boy, 2022). Users build communities (Berard & Smith, 2019), socialize and maintain friendships (Ting, Ming, de Run, & Choo, 2015), while Instagram is also used by social movements to their advantage (Cornet, Hall, Cafaro, & Brady, 2017). Furthermore, studies on influencers indicate the complexity of Instagram use, as they harness the platform's power appropriating its tools to achieve their personal goals (see Abidin, 2016, 2017). However, what emerges as particularly problematic in the "platformized" spectacle is that it appears to appropriate (and potentially neutralize) users' power of self-representation. Viewing the spectacle in dialectical terms, namely its potential both to perfect domination and produce critical subjectivities and "moments of rupture" (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017, p. 23), opens up many interesting possibilities for further research, especially on practices of ordinary Instagrammers.

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