

Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, **Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020, 264 pp., \$22.99 (paperback).

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Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures, by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, is a seven-chapter book suited to upper-division students and scholars in the communications field exploring notable aspects of the popular, even ubiquitous, social media app Instagram. Their book provides an engaging discussion of Instagram not simply as a social media platform but as a multifaceted force that catalyzes and shapes contemporary visual cultures.

The authors emphasize a few main points throughout the text. They begin by pointing out that this book is not about photography; rather, they argue that the main intention of Instagram is to be a communication tool that happens to use photography as its medium. While photographs and videos are clearly vital to Instagram's functionality, the broader purpose of these elements is to facilitate communication. "Instagram," note the authors, "is an icon and avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures, whether on Instagram itself, or through the many ways the material world has sought to become 'Insta-worthy' in redesigning practices, cultural institutions and material spaces" (p. 1). Instagram's ability to create and propel visual trends increasingly blurs the line between the real and the digital as Instagram has grown to entwine itself throughout multiple facets of our daily lives.

But before Instagram became the omnipresent, culture-shaping social media behemoth it is today, it was known as Burbn. Chapter 1, "Platform," describes Instagram's inception to serve a niche user group and its rapid evolution. Developed by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010, Burbn was conceived as a locative media app where users could check in and share about their favorite bourbon spots with images captured on their cell phones. When the app failed to catch on, Burbn rebranded as Instagram and pivoted to serve a broader population of users as a general image-sharing social media platform. The authors provide valuable insight regarding the app's new name, elucidating that "while Instagram is well known as an app which changed photography, it's worth remembering that the immediacy of 'instant' was the most important thing at the beginning" (p. 9). Instagram allowed users to snap a photo with their phone and instantly share it in the app. This type of purely visual communication, the authors observe, is what made Instagram hugely successful. So successful that social media company Facebook purchased Instagram just two years later for \$1 billion. The authors are quick to point out that this acquisition took place for reasons beyond Facebook wanting to become even more of a social media giant. Purchasing Instagram allowed Facebook to legally acquire "all of the underlying Instagram user data from the date of purchase onward" (p. 13). However unnerving these digital surveillance tactics may be, the Facebook-Instagram merger highlights the vastness of today's digital landscape.



This history of Instagram as a social media platform lays important groundwork for the book's ensuing content. Chapter 2, "Aesthetics," builds on Instagram's history by describing the ways in which its visual content has evolved over the past decade and hinges on three key ideas: first, that of Instagram's visual aesthetics, including genres and content tropes; second, user practices; and third, Instagram's audiences and their motivations to use the platform. At Instagram's launch, its aesthetics harkened back to the visual moods of the 1970s and 1980s with preset filters designed to look like Polaroid pictures and film reels, often characterized by washed-out, tonally warm colors. These played a large part in popularizing and, importantly, normalizing the filtering of photographs by giving people permission to alter the aesthetics of an image (p. 52). While these early filters have grown largely out of fashion within Instagram, new photograph aesthetics have gained traction on the platform—primarily filter tones that are bright, crisp, and evoke a fresh feel. But, as the authors explain, different aesthetic communities exist within Instagram that use differently coded photograph aesthetics for different purposes.

As the aesthetic preferences of Instagram's users undergo shifts, so, too, do the broader ecologies of the platforms in which Instagram is situated. In chapter 3, "Ecologies," the authors discuss the mobile, social, and visual contexts of Instagram. The launch of Web2.0 precipitated a boom in visual social media platforms "shaped by the shift in digital architecture towards profiles and sharing, and the capabilities of the technology at the time (and the deprecation of others)" (p. 77). The dawn of the smartphone, for instance, gave us the capacity to photograph and record on the spot. The Instagram ecology, affirm the authors, is "firmly focused on the mobile" (p. 84), and although accessing Instagram is possible from a desktop computer, a smartphone is required to meaningfully interact with any content or to post Stories to one's profile, a popular feature relying on ephemerality designed to directly compete with rival platform Snapchat. This focus on the mobile, posit the authors, "allows for mediated presence, connecting individuals in and across space and time" (p. 85).

Instagram's capabilities as a visual social platform continually respond to global technological and social trends. From its adoption of messaging software to implementation of advanced advertising techniques, Instagram has succeeded in creating and supporting its own economies and subcultures. The book's fourth chapter, "Economies," delves into the commercialization of Instagram with particular emphasis on influencers, social media personalities who are paid to sell products to their followers. Instagram influencing can trace its origins to 2012, though Instagram as a social media platform was not reimaged with e-commerce integrations until as late as 2016 (p. 102). "The main use of Instagram," write the authors, "is no longer centered on archiving keepsakes, but instead primed for circulating and amplifying content for maximum visibility and reach" (p. 104) as the platform continued to develop its focus from centering a "networked intimacy" to a "network public" (p. 102).

While the goal of influencing may be to extend one's viewership to as wide a range of users as possible, Instagram also lends itself to the proliferation of countless diverse social communities, as explained in chapter 5, "Cultures." A few of the most prominent subcultures on Instagram include artists and photographers, meme accounts, social awareness accounts, politicians, and grief tribute accounts. Some of the same social practices that popularized Instagram, such as posting photos of food, drinks, or experiences, remain as much of a trend today. However, many of these things have become specifically stylized as Insta-worthy to attract Instagrammers to certain products or places to get that perfect Instagram photo. Through these and other

examples of Instagrammable culture, the authors raise interesting questions of authenticity. Is a specially designed product or place providing a genuine experience if its primary function is to end up on a two-dimensional Instagram feed? Are manufactured or highly curated Instagram accounts worth engaging with?

Similar conversations surrounding how we choose to post and engage with content on Instagram are put forth in chapter 6, "Lifespans," which "maps out that tension, between the presumed active Instagram user, and the way many users are almost always navigating choices about how they capture, communicate about, and represent other people" (p. 175). Particularly provocative is the example of Sharenting, a portmanteau of "sharing" and "parenting" where parents share their child's life through Instagram posts. While sharenting is oftentimes a positive force in its normalization of things like breastfeeding and parenting struggles, hyper-sharing of children also harbors negative implications for children's privacy. A study by Gaëlle Ouvrein and Karen Verswijvel (2019) additionally confirms that the online aims of parents and teens (sharing candid moments vs. curating a polished persona) are largely at odds.

The cumulative impact of Instagram is summarized in chapter 7, "From the Instagram of Everything to the Everything of Instagram." The authors reiterate in their final chapter that "Instagram has infiltrated and influenced almost every other facet of life" (p. 190), adding that, "the success of Instagram has led to a reverse flow of inspiration: the digital as stimulus for physical and material products" (p. 191). The platform, to be sure, has changed and continues to change the way we communicate with one another and with the world around us, as it has become synonymous not only with visual social media culture, but with popular culture as a whole.

Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin's book tackles a timely and complex topic with precision and clarity. An essential overview of Instagram as a far-reaching, multifunctional platform, the authors deftly map out the ways in which Instagram permeates our daily lives. By providing engaging examples throughout the book, the authors give life to their arguments while leaving room for readers to consider important questions for themselves.

Reference

- Ouvrein, G., & Verswijvel, K. (2019). Sharenting: Parental adoration or public humiliation? A focus group study on adolescents' experiences with sharenting against the background of their own impression management. *Children and Youth Services Review, 99*(C), 319–327.