The aesthetics of Instagram: Exploring the aesthetics of visual and semantic aspects of Instagram

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Abstract
The article presents the results of an aesthetic study of content and visual forms on Instagram, a relatively new social media platform. The study focuses on how the products of digital technology, understood as new artifacts within the postmodern aesthetic framework, have been taken up within the digital culture. The results of the research help us to understand the characteristics of this new social media platform, indicating that Instagram has been highly successful in changing aesthetic criteria and standards and creating new aesthetic forms and content.

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Introduction

What does it mean to examine communication from an aesthetic perspective? On the one hand, it means that communication should not be considered as a simple act of transference, but rather as a significant and engaging process of connection that requires intelligence, evokes excitement and other emotions, and combines imagery, taste, and intuition, bringing them into substantive interaction. On the other hand, it is a reference to the media themselves, that is, to all the means that shape communication, render it shareable, and lead to the transfer of sensory experience, and thus bear on questions of aesthetics.

The evolution of communication reflects the fast pace of change in modern human history; today, more than ever before, communication has become a vehicle that guides individuals in the choices they make, and consequently in creating and influencing their sense of identity. Aesthetics is dependent on communication, and communicative reality is an aesthetic phenomenon. Undoubtedly, social media have today become an integral part of everyday life, especially for the youth. Within a very short span of time, a universe of entirely new applications has been introduced to the media consumption market, and the process of globalization has been significantly accelerated by the emergence of these applications. Instagram, launched in the media consumption market only a short time ago, is now one of the most popular social media applications, having revolutionized the world of media communication; indeed, in the few years since its emergence it could be fairly be said to have transformed attitudes towards life, lifestyle, and social behaviors, and its popularity is particularly strong among the youth. The stunning success of Instagram makes it of considerable interest to media studies.

Only a few years after the launch of Instagram in February 2010, the app had attracted over 150 million active users with an average of 55 million images uploaded per day. By 2013 over 16 billion images had been uploaded (Hu et al., 2014), and this rate had reached 20 billion images by 2016 (Zappavigna, 2016: 271). The beta version of Instagram sold for approximately $1 billion in April 2012. According to the Pew Research Center, 27% of Internet users in the United States between the ages of 18 and 29 use Instagram (Alper, 2013: 1235).

A newer Instagram demographic statistics, indicate that More than 50 billion photos have been uploaded to Instagram so far.[1]

In June 2018, Instagram had reached one billion monthly active users, up from 800 million in September 2017.[2] Actually Instagram has

1. https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics
2. https://www.statista.com

seen a significant rise to 1 billion active users, making it one of the top 4 social networks worldwide.

This is part of the statistics and data related to various activities on Instagram:

- Instagram monthly active users: 1 billion monthly active users access the Instagram app globally.
- Instagram daily active users: 500 million daily active users access the Instagram app globally.[1]

According to the Pew Research Center, 40% of adults say they ever use Instagram (About half of Hispanic (52%) and Black Americans (49%) say they use the platform, compared with smaller shares of White Americans (35%) who say the same)[2]

The main characteristic of Instagram is that it is a visual media platform on which communication is effected through the sharing of images. As a visual media platform it can consequently be considered an aesthetic object. Yet despite the popularity of Instagram, few studies so far have focused on it. It is indeed so new that even its general nature has hardly been the subject of investigation, and research on its aesthetics is rarer still.

This research proceeds on the assumption that Instagram, as a form of visual media, does have certain aesthetic qualities, and that by identifying and examining them we can illuminate the powerful impact of this new medium on modern attitudes towards life and lifestyle. Ultimately—although this perhaps goes beyond the aspirations of the present paper—we might hope that an aesthetic analysis of this social media platform can help guide the production of media images so as to have a positive impact on its users, especially the youth.

The nature of Instagram

Instagram is a social photography app designed for smartphones, through which social media users can create visual as well as textual content and viewers can interact with those objects and their associated meanings.

Instagram features that differentiate it as a new media from other similar platforms include:

I. Instagram may be considered a social network service in that it allows the user to create a personal profile, and to follow, and be followed by, other users; however, these relationships are "asymmetrical", meaning that users do not have to react to the

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1. https://backlinko.com/instagram-users
2. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021

messages and answer in return. The users who have gotten in touch through the mutual sharing of images are known as "friends" or "followers".

II. The Instagram social network is a media platform for posting images and Instagram images are an instance of the concept of a "scalable and expandable media", a media platform that is used by its audience and users for specific purposes in a wholly cooperative culture (Zappavigna, 2016: 273).

III. Instagram allows users to take photos, use digital photography filters, and post images along with a short caption on their social network page. The everyday life of users and other people is recorded by Instagram and thus exerts an influence on public views and social perceptions.

IV. Part of the power of Instagram is that it allows users to see the images shared by friends or other users and to interact with them. The visual and personal intimacy made possible through sharing a constant flow of special images with close friends and colleagues is one of the unique characteristics of this platform. In social photography, or photography supported by social network apps such as Instagram, there is a combination of richness and intimacy in the process of sharing content with a wide range of viewers, not directly known to the photographer, which was not previously possible through any other medium.

V. Instagram also allows users to take a "filtered" photo through the app, or filter an existing photo on their device and share it on the platform. The Instagram filters can blur the image, adjust the contrast between colors (color saturation), add depth to the image, simulate and fix image defects, or even deliberately add defects to it; for example, they can deliberately distort the clarity or purity of the image.

VI. The near-real-time speed at which images can be shared by the photographer in the act of shooting and simultaneously viewed by other users, allows the viewers to 'be' in the same place as the photographer, sharing what he or she is experiencing in the moment.

VII. The Instagram app thus allows users to take digital photos with their smartphones and, instantly and continuously, share them in a manner that was once restricted to physical analog photos; ultimately, it allows photographers to instantly upload photos to social networks so that other users can see them simultaneously.

VIII. At the same time, the filters provided by this app engender a unified form and perspective that some have considered contrary to the

creative potential of photography (the camera), "producing trivial images" and at the same time "frequently re-producing absurd and ridiculous effects" (Kohn, 2016, 3).

Nevertheless, the use of Instagram has become so ubiquitous that Benjamin Lowy, famous for his photo of a sandstorm in the US which appeared on the front cover of Time magazine in 2012, and his photos from his mission in Libya featured in the *New York Times*, in both cases took his photos using his iPhone and uploaded them to that platform (Alper, 2013: 1235).

Instagram has thus established itself as a contemporary form of self-portraiture in the evolution from digital photography to social media. Although its function as a means of taking self-portraits appears to be simple, it has transformed into a means of socializing and establishing an online individuality, and indeed of making sense of the various situations faced by humanity in the new digital-driven society. Thus, we suggest, Instagram may today be considered an image or portrait of our online presence in both its positive and negative aspects.

The advent of photography apps such as Instagram as well as Hipstamatic has added extra layers to visual aesthetics that were not previously accessible. These qualities have encouraged artists to search for technologies with which to engage in artistic experiences using the new media. Thus, Instagram may be considered a new expression of the ancient form of human communication embodied in painting, now redefined within a virtual framework and augmented with the capability to distribute messages on a global scale. Given all this, Instagram is clearly a media platform with many facets and potentials, and thus an important object for aesthetic research.

Aesthetics of Instagram
1. Photography with smartphone cameras or iPhoneography

Photography with the iPhone, or 'iPhoneography', and the recording of everyday moments with smartphone cameras, have today entirely replaced analog and even digital cameras. In most cases, even professional photographers including the most well-known figures in the world of photography take their most important photos with mobile cameras and capture the major historical, social, and natural events in this medium. These days, the iPhone has become the most popular and most common camera due to its prevalence and the ease of uploading images directly to web platforms such as Flicker, Facebook, and Twitter.

This 'iPhoneography' (obviously this term also includes photography with Android smartphone cameras) has features that distinguish it

from other types of photography. The images produced in this mode of photography are also distinct in terms of aesthetic characteristics, as will be explained in the following.

2. Ease of use

The key advantage of photography with a smartphone is the speed and facility with which it enables users to take photos, edit them, and then upload them, all at once and using the same device. This had no parallel in the era of analog cameras; smart phone cameras have obviated the problems of developing photos in a darkroom, non-simultaneous editing, or even the need for printing the photos. As soon as a photo is taken with a phone camera, it is instantly presented to everyone without having to go through a manual process.

Moreover, photography with smartphone cameras differs from photography with the now nearly outmoded digital cameras. First, it is more likely that a person's smartphone is available at all times, even while lying in bed, and compared to even the most portable digital cameras of the past, it is much easier to carry a smartphone everywhere. Second, compared to previous types of camera, smartphones are much more easily connected to the Internet. Therefore, the photos taken by these cameras not only are meant for personal purposes, but also, and to a greater extent, for social purposes, because one always carries the camera in social settings and, more importantly, the device connected to the Internet has access to other applications usually installed on smartphones, enabling instant posting of content to various social networks.

These features underpin the other advantages which may be categorized as follows.

3. The ability to edit images

The ability to edit images manually (instantly and with one's fingers) is a major part of the experience of photography with smartphone cameras. Smartphone features offer the user the ability to edit an image, modify its brightness and sharpness, and change (filter) the color and mode of the image at the same time as it is captured manually, without the need for a professional photographer; thus the user becomes the editor.

4. Ubiquitous presence and immediacy

The immediacy and urgency of photography, drawing the attention away from the device itself (the need to understand the complexities and function of the previous photography devices) and instead establishing

direct contact with the main subject, is a crucial characteristic of smartphone camera photography. Immediacy is obtained by choosing a subject which is part of the everyday routine of life, and also by minimizing the barriers between the photographer and the human subject. The immediacy achieved through the ubiquitous presence of smartphones is one of the unique characteristics of this new form of representation (Hu et al., 2014: 68).

5. Sharing

One of the features that has turned the iPhone into a revolutionary device for photography is the ease of publishing photos. Using smartphone cameras, one can directly publish photos via social networks, the internet, or email. Therefore, the process of publishing photos has been accelerated. And again, what still further distinguishes smartphone cameras from the older generation of smartphone cameras is that their features turn them into a device not only for taking or publishing photos but also for editing and modifying images, which is aesthetically important.

In general, the aesthetics of Instagram, visually and formally, can be encapsulated under a certain number of topics, as discussed in the following.

Aesthetics of Instagram images

The products and outputs of iPhone photography have their own aesthetics which differ from that of conventional photography. In iPhoneography, the original image is not the sole determinant of the value of the image considered as a whole, because the original image is modified by image-processing apps so as to gain new aesthetic qualities. In some cases, photos taken with the iPhone are of higher aesthetic quality than other images modified or created with personal computers, and in some cases the iPhone-modified image considerably surpasses the original image in terms of aesthetic qualities.

The circumstances of the processing and sharing of images on Instagram have created a new aesthetics. Although the instruments and features of this new type of media, much like previous social media platforms, help users to assert the 'validity' of their own existence, they do so paradoxically by simultaneously detaching us from our experience here and now. Holding a smartphone camera has now become part of everyday experience, even part of our existence, and it is quite rare nowadays to travel without a camera or not to have a smartphone camera ready at one's side throughout the journey. While having a

new experience in a new restaurant or trying a new dish, rather than enjoying our experience in the moment, we contemplate posting or sharing an image of the experience we are having. For instance, before eating our food, we take a photo of it and share it. What tendency does this reflect? The act of sharing the experience and the pleasure of the present moment seems to carry greater worth than the pleasure of the experience itself. It is in this tension that the new aesthetics resides: the tendency, which at the same time detaches us from our present experience and enables us to share it with others, while also depriving us of the ability to take genuine aesthetic pleasure in the moment. It is an aesthetics which is expressive of a gap between ourselves and the aesthetics of the experience we are undergoing.

Aesthetics of nostalgia

The term 'nostalgia' was first used over three hundred years ago to describe an acute and sometimes fatal medical condition also called 'homesickness'. In the nineteenth century the term was used not only to describe a longing for a place, but also a longing for a past that cannot be brought back except through reminiscence. The aesthetics of nostalgia have been understood as "a socio-cultural response to forms of discontinuity, claiming a vision of stability and authenticity in some conceptual golden age" (Hu et al., 2014: 71).

Today, many applications, including Hipstamatic, simulate the styles of old movies. The images created using these apps evoke a sense of nostalgia on both sides of the connection, that is, on the side of the creator of the image as well as the other users. In the nostalgic aesthetics, the camera, with its modern tools, software programs, digital photography devices, and image-processing procedures, are used to make a photo taken today look thirty, forty, or fifty years old. In fact, arousing a sense of nostalgia is the key point to the aesthetics of the iPhonographic photo. Some users use this nostalgic aesthetic in their photos because it reminds them of their youth. A sense of nostalgia for an authenticity that once was is a means to affirm our own historical existence in the present.

Many users who grew up before the digital era consider these photos to be similar to those they used to see in their childhood. They hold that HD images cannot depict their history or speak to their generation, whereas photos edited using vintage filters are visually identical to the photos they grew up seeing (Hu et al., 2014: 70). The aesthetics of nostalgia is a key form of the virtual aesthetics. The emotional connection to nostalgia seems to be based on the very imperfections

that are conspicuously missing in digital images, and other qualities that assert themselves precisely by their absence.

It should be noted that creating a nostalgic effect in an image can also be considered an artistic technique because, with such an image, a large part of dialogue has been transformed into emotional supplements that originate from the social and ritual usages of cameras. According to many iPhoneographers, an image that evokes childhood memories, in addition to having a nostalgic effect, can also be a work of art.

For many users, all over the world, one of the appeals of Instagram is thus its capacity to transform an ordinary image into a nostalgically beautiful image. This leads to the production of a series of images that represent the artistic sensitivities of the users, significant moments in their lives, places they have visited, their unique selfies, and their ability to capture interesting moments of ordinary life, all of which can be considered a form of artistic activity (Haynes, 2016: 72).

The quickest way to evoke nostalgia with a photo is to use the features of a smartphone. This process produces what is referred to as "augmented reality": a nostalgic aesthetics in which the physical and the digital are intertwined, where digital photography becomes a means to create an augmented or pretended reality.

The experience of filtering: the aesthetics of retrospection

Before the advent of digital photography, photographic filters were physical devices, typically glass or plastic disks that were placed in front of the lens to achieve a certain photographic effect, ranging from changing the color balance to distortion of the image. Digital filters invoke the effects of traditional filters, and at the same time provide new options for the manipulation of images. Instagram filters allow one to change images as one wants without the need to learn Photoshop. It offers users twenty premade filters that can be applied to an image in the app. The nature of images in Instagram is such that the user indeed expects them to be manipulated: the Instagram app invites users to apply filters and edit images as one of the steps in the process of posting them. As a consequence of the prevalence of filtering in the photos shared on Instagram, there is a clear trend towards homogenization in the aesthetics of the products of the new photographic media, as well as an integration of aesthetic and semiotic factors.

As mentioned already, another semantic dimension that is constantly seen in social photos is the "faux-nostalgia" or "instant nostalgia" achieved through certain digital filters. Most of the Instagram filters evoke the "past period" both in terms of visual effects and their names.

For example, these filters allow the user to modify the visual dimensions of images in a way that is reminiscent of older media. Retro-style filters of this type reconstruct the physical defects of analog films using mimicking effects such as light penetration and contrast. The '1977' filter effect enhances the image brightness while blurring the colors to evoke the sense of an old photo. Similarly, the 'Early Bird' filter uses a shady form: it reduces the richness of the image and highlights warm brown colors (Zappavigna, 2016: 285). Instagram allows users to trim photos and choose filters that adjust the contrast, color tone, saturation, and zoom. The results of these changes often resemble Polaroid photos. Images with vintage filters are similar to the original vintage photos of the 1960–1980s that resound with nostalgia and authenticity while expressing symbolic and historical emotional values (Renaningtyas et al., 2014: 3). This type of image construction evokes the concept of "make-believe" or "simulation" familiar from Baudrillard's media theory. The emergence of "faux-vintage" seems to be an attempt to create a kind of "present time nostalgia" and to make photos look more significant, noticeable, and realistic. Although all these photos are taken with smartphone apps such as Instagram, they create a profound sense of nostalgia and authenticity related to the past that the unfiltered digital photos lack. In this respect, the faux-vintage, retro, and other filters that simulate the past serve to record a view of the present as if it were a documented past, and enable the users of new media like Instagram to add nostalgic feelings to the images of their life in the present.

Reactions to Instagram images are generally more concerned with the aesthetics of the image itself and its currency as part of a social media network than with its content. Users often pay attention to the techniques, colors, and combination of the filters used that create a "momentary emotion" (Kohn, 2016: 3). Instagram images are the result of a targeted procedure that has been internalized; they are "beautified" using software tools and then published as an entity whose aesthetic aspects are used to blur or highlight a specific ideological framework (ibid: 8).

Instagram images are visually distinctive. They are square digital images, most of which are taken with smartphone cameras, are viewed on a smart phone screen, and are defined by being "shared". The creating and publishing of these images are simultaneously intertwined with and defined by aesthetic dependencies and interests that are reflected in predefined visual options for easy manipulation and quick use. The net result is the emergence of a combined form of producing, publishing, and consuming photographs (Champion, 2012: 83): users view each others' works, engage in the interactive process of responding directly or

indirectly to them, and post images to be viewed by others. Over time, the result is a burgeoning number of photos with homogeneous aesthetics, a phenomenon that the widespread use of Instagram filters has only amplified. Indeed, this homogeneous aesthetic is the result of the almost mandatory use of predefined filters (whether filtered by 'Sutra Sepia' or 'Washed-out Walden' filters, virtually all the photos taken by smartphone apps such as Instagram are filtered, and even basic Instagram photos have a square shape compared to the automatic rectangular dimensions of the output of a smartphone camera) and the modified objectivity of images, the result of Instagram's features, is of utmost significance because it is indicative of a syndrome of changes in the relationship between the superficial characteristics of photography, the range of expressions of individual and social identity, the available possibilities for communication, and the aesthetics of photography (Champion, 2012: 84). Ideologically, even the #nofilter hashtag serves the particular sociocultural purpose of those who employ it: as a claim to distinguish the real photo from the fake, it primarily serves the photographer him or herself. On the other hand, although the process of filtering adds an effective and expressive dimension to the image which reduces its documentary value as a modified record compared to its original condition, it increases its capacity to fulfill the demands of its creator. "Filtered images do not indicate 'this is how it looks', but rather emphasize 'this is how I meant it to look' or 'how I felt it looked'" (Fallon, 2014: 59). Figure 1 and Figure 2 are examples of images that were in fact taken recently, but thanks to the use of Instagram filters have taken on an historical appearance.

Figure 1 and 2. Examples of photos that have been edited by applying the faux-vintage filter and looks older than they actually are (Kohn, 2016: 200)

It should be noted that the photos filtered by Instagram are self-conscious simulations, intended to simulate a particular historical time, mode, or condition and give the false impression of the passage of time.

From this perspective, when techniques such as saturation, blurring, contrast, etc. are used so extensively they become less like an artistic choice (the 'artistic aura' remarked upon by Benjamin) and more of a trend or fashion (what Baudrillard referred to as the logic of fashion). Figure 3 shows an example of various filters applied to an image in order to create a different visual effect. Figure 4 shows an example of the effect of using three Instagram filters, namely, 'Rise', 'Inkwell', and 'Toaster', in order to make visual changes that lead to a different aesthetic perception. Figure 5 shows an example of applying two filters in Instagram in order to increase or decrease the richness of the image which, aesthetically, causes the bird image to appear closer, more realistic, and more tangible, or on the contrary more distant and more intangible.

Figure 3. An example of various filters applied to an image in order to create a different visual sense and pictorial appearance (Kohn, 2016: 201)

Figure 4. An example of the effect of applying five Instagram filters to the same image (Kohn, 2016: 201)
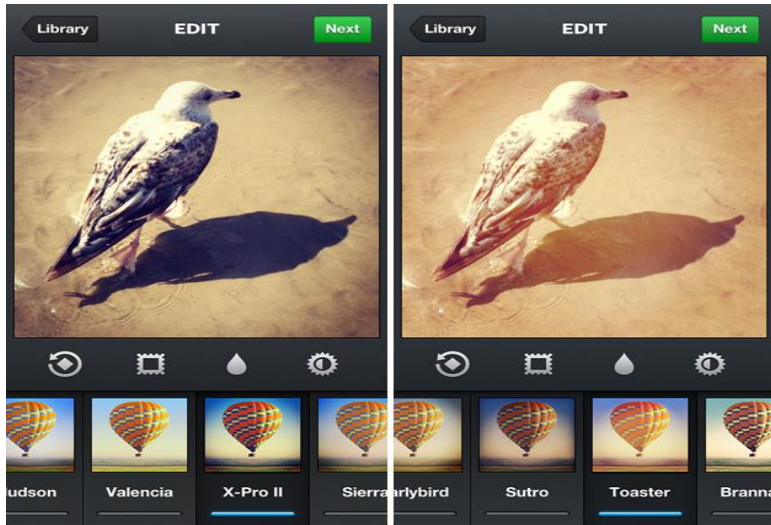
Figures 5. An example of applying two Instagram filters in order to increase or decrease the richness of the image (Kohn, 2016: 201)

Selfies: aesthetics of the new generation

Among the numerous phenomena associated with the advent of digital media, few are more hated than the "selfies", a kind of "self-portrait" taken by standing before the smartphone camera held with an outstretched arm. The simple act of taking a self-portrait and sharing it via social media in a general manner could obviously be seen as indicative of a certain degree of self-centeredness as well as personal and social defects. What could fairly be described as the perfection of "social narcissism", it represents a remarkable phenomenon of the broad social generalization of the obsession with oneself. On the other hand, the association between selfies and self-centeredness could also, paradoxically, be perceived not as an expression of narcissism but rather as a marker of one's ability to interact. The desire to share a selfie with the world is a form of behavior that has the objective of being seen and of seeing oneself, as opposed to remaining in isolation and being stuck within oneself. In fact, selfies engender a level of interaction between the participant, audience, and the subject matter which, in this respect, can be categorized as a form of interactive media. At the same time, selfies are interesting in terms of the ways in which the overarching mentality as well as the "photographer–viewer" relationship are reinterpreted.

Of course, selfies had existed even before the advent of smartphone cameras, but the emergence of smartphones elevated selfies to a form of interactive narrative; with the introduction of smartphones equipped

with a front-facing camera was born what today can be considered a new form of "autobiography" (Fallon, 2014: 57).

Selfies represent the culture of the so-called me-generation— or, to be more specific, the 'me-me-me-generation'— a product of the millennial generation of digital natives who due to the overprotection of their parents have grown up in complete welfare and with an excessive level of self-confidence (Fallon, 2014: 54). This kind of image has become a "widespread everyday art form for ordinary people" (Zappavigna, 2016: 275). On the other hand, however, the historical evolution of technology in self-photography has led to the evolution of the "self" that is photographed as well. A selfie is a poster for a kind of isolation that may be described as being "alone-together" (Fallon, 2014: 55). At the same time, selfies also involve a certain degree of interaction. Selfies are a kind of invitation to others to see one's image. Regardless of the level of apparent selfishness and narcissism involved in the initial interpretation of selfies, this type of photograph can be considered as a mode of dialogue and interaction with others through one's recorded image. The "I" depicted within Instagram's frame is a narrative of the self and a presentation of one's current condition in order to interact with the other. The selfie, here, is no longer a representation of one's image, but rather a tool or a way of expressing oneself.

The semiotics of Instagram

Instagram is a semiotic system. Apps are semantic packages and the function of each is distinguished and recognized by its distinctive name and "icon" that marks its availability for purchase through online smartphone stores. Instagram offers its users specific semiotic modes with specific textual and visual qualities. These modes are concomitant with certain semiotic constraints and limitations in terms of image dimensions, title, or caption. This app can be considered as a neo-retro or new interactive system because it self-consciously and nostalgically positions itself in relation to old photography techniques such as Polaroid photography (Zappavigna, 2016: 273). This description of the Instagram design principles demonstrates the important role of the timing and valuation of the images produced via the platform.

The semiotics of Instagram, with the use of the image manipulation capability embedded in the Instagram app, can be associated with the set of complex interactions that Bakhtin (1981) refers to as the artistic genre in the service of aesthetics (Zappavigna, 2016: 273). The process of uploading images is an unfolding construal of identity in which the particular phenomena photographed are a presentation of one's personal

style. Images appear as revealed 'contents' in chronological order. In terms of semiotics, Instagram has special characteristics: above the caption there is a selected icon, username, and timestamp showing when the image was uploaded. Below the caption, there are the names of other users who have liked the post along with positive or negative assessments of the image. There are two types of comments about the image: one written by another user and one by the user who has uploaded the image.

The semiotic system of Instagram transforms media signs and symbols into hypermedia (Alper, 2013: 1240); like the character limitations on Twitter (140 characters, later increased to 280), Instagram also imposes a set of visual limitations on posts, making this service an interesting study in meaning-making within a constrained environment. For instance, image dimensions are restricted to a square frame and the text is limited to 2200 characters including a maximum of 30 hashtags. Furthermore, the number of photography filters that can be applied to the image is limited to ten. Users may find ways to circumvent these limitations such as uploading images created using other systems, but the general design principle of image production is defined under these semiotic constraints (Zappavigna, 2016: 275).

In Instagram, the main choice of subjectivity is between the interpretations of the visual position as "the photographer" or "with the photographer"; that is, when the photographer him or herself is seen in the image, or when only revealed and present by name. There are three different types of photographer's subjectivity:

1. The photographer is clearly in the picture, for example, in what is commonly known as a "selfie". If one is not already familiar with this type of photograph it may be mistaken with a conventional portrait taken by third party (on the other side of the camera). Nevertheless, there are usually visual hints indicating that the person depicted in the photo is indeed the photographer, such as the position of the shoulder or arm or image distortion due to short focal length.

2. The second choice in terms of subjectivity is that the photographer is recognized by the viewer because part of his or her body is visible in the photo. For example, the appearance of feet in the photo may reveal the photographer's presence as a participant in the scene depicted.

3. The photographer can be recognized through combined and implied choices. For example, as someone sitting at a table in a café engaged in a conversation, or the placement of a cup of coffee in the foreground of the photo (Ibid:279).

As we have already seen, filters are a crucial semiotic aspect of Instagram. From the semiotic viewpoint, the names of some of the

Instagram filters evoke certain historical periods (such as '1977') or refer to specific places (such as 'Nashville'), although other filters often have ambiguous and enigmatic monikers which cannot readily be identified (such as 'Walden', which is actually the name of the dog of one of the developers of the app).

The term "nofilter" is a famous hashtag name in Instagram jargon, and here the relationship between the hashtag and the images is semiotically significant. For instance, by typing "nofilter" in the comment section below a Instagram photo, before posting them, the user claims the appearance of the photo has not been changed using any of the artistic features made available. Thus, it could be stated that the "nofilter" hashtag is Instagram's purest aesthetic form (Alper, 2013: 1244).

Instagram can also be considered an ideological semiotic system in which signs serve political purposes. A good example in this regard can be seen in the photos and videos shared by soldiers on social networks such as Facebook and YouTube, an extreme example in this regard being Eden Abergel, the Israeli soldier who in 2010 shared on Facebook a photo of herself in front of Palestinian prisoners blindfolded and in chains, the caption reading "Army, the best days of my life" (Kohn, 2016: 201). The picture is striking in terms of the way the physical and emotional experience is conveyed to the viewers, via the position of the camera, the almost immediate contact with the photographed figures and faces, and the visual framework and the atmosphere of the place. In this example, photos become the visual representation of a space in which people themselves are used as "the background of the photographer's action" and the figure that is present as an object is transformed through the complex power of communication with the environment (Figure 6).

Figure 7 shows a photo shared by an Israeli soldier named Mor Ostrovski on Instagram in February 2013, which was later described by the British newspaper The Guardian as an example of "shame and disgrace". This photo demonstrates the perception that the camera itself can be a weapon. "Convergence: the international journal of Research on New Media Technologies", in an article entitled this as: "the Photographer's Weapon, and the Battlefield as the Hunting Field" and defined it the "aesthetic" framework of Instagram in the case of this photo as an improper visual record due to its inhumanity. There are three aesthetic dimensions to this photo of a Palestinian boy, the back of his head within the cross hairs of a rifle, as posted on Instagram by Ostrovski: "artistic" (making use of the beauty of colors), "documentary", and "ideological" (serving the political objectives of the Zionist regime) (Ibid: 202).

Figure 6. Eden Abergel, the Israeli soldier, and the photo she shared online of herself with blindfolded prisoners (Kohn, 2016: 202)

Figure 7. A Palestinian boy viewed from the lens of the gun of the Israeli soldier Mor Ostrovski. An example of ideological aesthetics on Instagram, where the weapon and camera have become one, and the beauty of the image serves the photographer's inhuman purpose (Kohn, 2016: 203)

Figure 8 shows a photograph shared on Instagram by the Israeli Ministry of Defense entitled "Army and Peace". This photo is an example of an Instagram image that has become aesthetically ideological and political.

The posting of photographs on Instagram can be likened to the method of curation as used in art museums, where various aesthetic

objects are brought together to create a narrative or simply a beautiful environment. The liking and sharing of images is perceived as approving of others' ideas. Immediate implications arising from any use of social media and the interpretation of these implications and signs, mutual commonalities, social liberty, and membership in a community incorporating new cultural trends help this app and its websites to be a sample of social media stereotype. The semiotic norms of social media primarily appear in the visual representations of the self, and in this regard Instagram contains the highest number of semiotic interpretations.

Figure 8. A photograph shared on Instagram by the Israeli Ministry of Defense entitled "Army and Peace". This photo is an example of an Instagram image that has become aesthetically ideological and political (Kohn, 2016: 208).

Conclusion

By presenting and studying examples of the new interactive-media-based art we have indicated the ways in which these new media are changing aesthetic criteria and standards. The case study of Instagram, as a new virtual media space, shows that the new media have been effective in creating their own aesthetic form and associated content; indeed, the study of Instagram reveals that the characteristics of the new media are represented more strongly on that platform than perhaps anywhere else. As we have seen, the new media are neither solely media and message, nor are they mere form, as is evident with the ubiquitous use of filters on Instagram. Although Instagram is an image-based media platform, all the images posted on it, right

down to the profile pictures of the users, contain a message and a meaning, and are in fact a medium for communicating and interacting through a multitude of messages. Instagram is based on interaction, and its interactive nature means that we must reject any purely instrumentalist interpretation of the operation of this media platform and the new media it conveys. The nature and essence of Instagram are proof of the interactive nature of new media, and the images and contents posted on it show the autonomy of this type of media and the formal and informal aesthetics associated with it.

Instagram filters are a clear example of the potential of new media to change the visual features of an image to obtain a particular form of aesthetic pleasure. The paper has demonstrated how photography with a smartphone camera, or iPhoneography, and the instant posting and sharing of images on Instagram and similar apps, has led to a type of instant and accessible aesthetics as well as an aesthetic form which is now ubiquitous in the contemporary world. Besides this, we have also conducted an aesthetic study of Instagram in terms of its form and content. In the formal dimension, the nostalgic aesthetics has proved the ability of Instagram, as a new media platform, to evoke and re-create nostalgic beauty.

The selfie, the photographic phenomenon of recent decades, made possible through smartphone cameras and disseminated through Instagram, also presents a new type of aesthetics. Through diverting attention from others and eliminating the need for a photographer, the self-centeredness embodied in a selfie has presented the contemporary man in the new media as the "photographer of the self" and "the only subject of interest" in the new aesthetics. The selfie has thus introduced a new aesthetics in which the subject is even more important than the way it is presented; the pleasure of being the center of attention exceeds the pleasure taken in beauty and formal aesthetics; and presenting oneself is prioritized even at the cost of the aesthetic dimensions of the image itself, which may be ugly or even entirely destructive of aesthetic qualities.

Ethical considerations
The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Conflicts of interests
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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