Questioning the extent to which the social media platform Instagram controls our perception of aestheticism in self-representation

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Since the launch of the social media application Instagram in 2010, the platform has changed the way we react to the world, interact with friends, family and acquaintances and represent our lives to others. It has altered how we relate to time itself and how we prioritise the use of this time each day. Much like the ground-breaking conception of Facebook in 2004 and its global influence, Instagram has arguably become the new top-dog in the competitive social media game. From gaining ten million users in its first year of conception, Instagram has gone on to hold one billion monthly active users by June 2018. (Statista, 2018)

This essay aims to consider the influence of Instagram's platform itself as controlling the way we represent ourselves on the platform based on trends of image aestheticism. Through utilizing a growing image-hungry culture globally, with faster ease of viewing than ever before with the help of smartphones, Instagram is at the forefront of this new experience of reality. The power that images have on our understanding of the world and indeed the manipulation of it brings into question if it is possible to have true documentations of reality, and true representations of self; let alone the influence of the platform itself on this. Are we considering ourselves differently because of the profiles we have created to present ourselves to others? And is there conscious decision-making behind this control? Through considerations into the power of the image, data use and the 'candid' photograph, this essay will attempt to explore these questions and ultimately consider if our apprehension of the world is affected on a closer level than our phones physically portray at arms-length.

Instagram, starting from humble beginnings with the original purpose of "making connections with people who see the world in interesting ways", has now been transformed into a normative way of regularly documenting life. It has become an obvious necessity as a young person within the last decade to have an Instagram profile and be engaged within its immense community (ReadWrite, 2019). Not only is it important to create multiple profiles of self to stay valid in this new era of digital domination, on platforms like Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter and of course Instagram, the maintenance of each to uphold interest and 'following' is crucial in the social media game. With the conception of these profiles comes the inevitable manipulation in attempts to define yourself, highlighted in the Journal '*Humans in Computer Behaviour*', *"SNSs [social networking services] such as Instagram provides a platform for self-presentation which is defined as any behaviour "to create, modify, or maintain an impression of ourselves in the minds of others*" (Brown, 2007, p160)" (Ahadzadeh, Pahlevan Sharif and Ong, 2017). As time is spent endlessly updating these profiles, it encourages users to actively engage in the endless stream of other content also. This fun and engaging 'social' activity is what becomes addictive where the idea of consuming mass imagery is now considered a pastime and leisurely activity. Our idea of everyday reality has changed because of this enjoyment from consumption of imagery in this way.

Theories into the impact of exposure to mass imagery implies the underlying subconscious influence that social media applications may have on our apprehension of society. In applying W.J.T Mitchell's 2002 statement that *"vision is a cultural construction, that it is learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature"* to the concept of social media and Instagram within it, it implies how

predetermined our vision is based on the context of the culture we are brought up in, and how easily manipulated imagery can be for various underlying purposes. (Mitchell, 2002) From Berger's comments in *'Ways of Seeing'* as to how each image influences the image to follow, (Ways of Seeing, 1972) the further we delve into the veracity of how easily influenced our vision is, we begin to see the true impact that imagery such as that on Instagram has on our apprehension of society. Every image we encounter is now the context to how we view the image to follow as we scroll down this never-ending stream. However, the now normative structure of scroll-culture gives no sense of beginning and end to these subliminal comparisons. We don't actively think about how many images we are taking in, and there is no end to how much each image will affect one-another. As Berger argues in the importance of chronology in viewing, there is control through the platform itself of this viewing order, and therefore conscious impacts as to how we view that material.

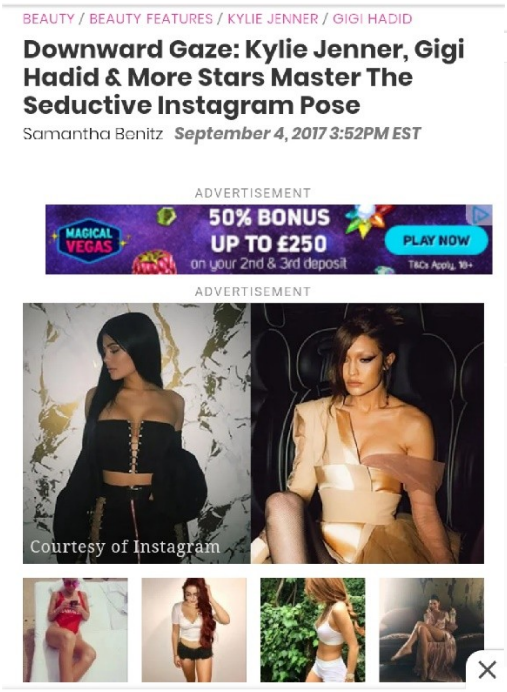
The application encourages us to digest as much imagery as possible through its algorithms that choose which images are shown to us at what point in our scroll-session, based on individual tracking and monitoring of the content we like to see. Because of this, our Instagram realities are arguably all different based on our own subjective exploration through the platform. They are catered in unique ways to each individual user, providing a more personal experience and further encouragement to continue the use on it. Because we all are being exposed to images relative to our interests, our changing apprehension of the world based on these images is becoming more orientated to the visual desires we want to see, becoming more hooked and engulfed with the ideas shown to us. Endlessly scrolling through this personalised feed actively encourages users to participate and engage with the application as much as possible. Because of this, time becomes a crucial factor in using Instagram in terms of data accumulation as moving through this application takes us away from our normal time-structure. Time becomes more estranged when engulfed in social media platforms such Instagram.

Instagram is an app that relies on the user's constant engagement to keep content shown to us relevant to our activities on the platform. Because Instagram uses an unorthodox method of documenting time, rather than using the standard Gregorian calendar, it counts back days and weeks since the moment the post was shared. Manovich explains in 'Zooming into an Instagram City' that *"the representation of time in relation to each image becomes elusive and remains in flux as time passes, changing from 53 seconds to 5 days, to 12 weeks, and one year ago".* (Hochman and Manovich, 2013). This is combined with the main feed not complying with the standard timeline structure of viewing, (viewing the most recent content first, scrolling backwards in time) prioritising the more personalised viewing order based upon previous interactions with posts. Through this algorithm that determines what we see and when, the system rewards posts with high engagement such as likes, video views, shared posts, DM's and comments. (Later Blog, 2019) This personalisation allows users to become sucked into this way of viewing imagery and begin to view this digestion of content as a hobby, therefore willingly spending time on the app. The addictive algorithm set to give us all the content we desire to keep us scrolling, liking and commenting, has been so effective that as of August 2018, the app has since had to release a new function (mirrored by Facebook) showing the user their time spent on the application each day (Business Insider. (2018). The application has had pressure to inform users of the amount of time spent online as we become so engulfed that time isn't considered in our viewing activities.

Instagram's tireless methods of keeping engagement high raises questions as to why. As a platform that encourages creative freedom, it seems that data collection is becoming the primary motive in this online world. As Manovich describes in 'Poetics of Space', "the role of the image is no longer to screen the world but to screen our data" (Manovich, 2006). As with the rise of social media comes

the rise of the power it holds, and no doubt the analysis of 1 billion users' activities would prove invaluable for marketing purposes. Through arguments about Digital Labour, theorists in recent years have analysed social media organizations obtainment and use of mass data accumulation about their users. With a fast-growing database of content production and distribution through the site, sharing an average of 80 million images per day, (Brandwatch, 2018) Instagram gains influence, power and profit from the work that its users do for free. As Adami describes in 'Social Media and the Visual', *"our connectivity while we move throughout the world can become data, in various forms/genres, and serve control purposes",* giving light to the importance of tracking user movements in order to both improve the application's functions in keeping us on it as well as being crucial information for marketers in finding the best ways to promote their business (Adami and Jewitt, 2016). This is corroborated in the study *'Consumer Engagement on Instagram' when Dahl states "social influence and its role is of significance to understand consumer behaviour to be able to understand consumption, how people affect other's emotions and their opinions (Dahl, 2014)."* (Claesson and Tägt Ljungberg, 2018)

'Influencers' are at the forefront of this data analysis, providing marketing companies with the larger followings needed to grow visibility. For Influencers to gain a large following, their content and profile must be desirable, envious and exciting in ways that invigorate the average users feed to be worth following. With these Influencers comes the pressure and desire to present your own profile in a certain way, as everyone shares the same profile layout. These Influencers provide a hierarchy scheme of profiling oneself. Acting as 'micro-celebrities', influencers have considerable power over what is deemed a high-end Instagram profile and can create trends of image conception that take the platform by storm, living up to their title of 'influencing' the users around them.



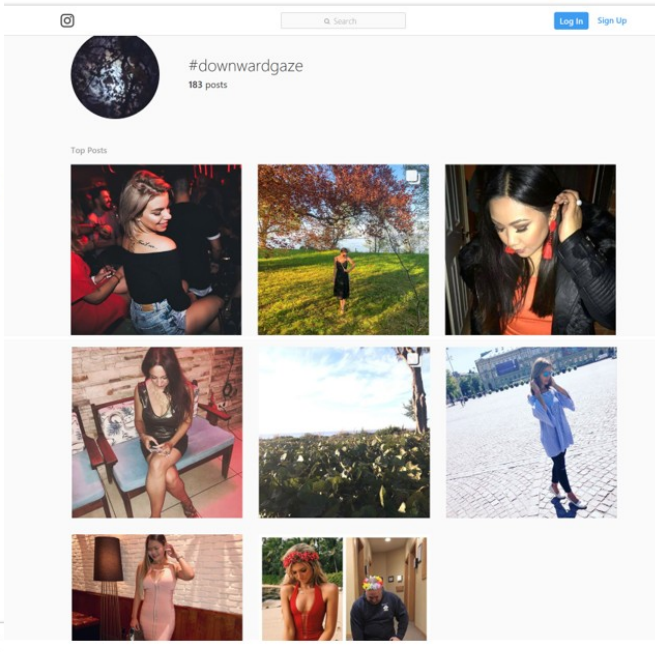


Figure 1 online article on hollywoodlife.com discussing the trend 'downward gaze'

Figure 2 searching for the hashtag #downwardgaze on Instagram Platform

An example of this influence that has seeped into the profiles of many users shows new iterations of the selfie. As 'Candid' shots have taken precedence over posed selfies in recent years, the trend of "the downward gaze" has created waves in the online community (Extra.ie, 2017) As young people

in their millions follow these influencers, of which 18-34-year olds take up 61% of Instagram's user base (Battisby, 2018), they are undeniably impacted by these images and profiles of luxurious lifestyles, depicting people so beautiful and experiences so great that people seemingly must take pictures of them off-guard. The iconised rise of candid-culture could arguably reflect the model-turned-celebrity influence that social media has provided young, attractive and successful models to gain large followings. 'The downward gaze' as a pose depicts a personal moment unaware of the onlooker's stare upon the subject. The connotations behind such images mimic the paparazzi and celebrity status, where images equal value, and are primarily aimed at female users. In a society where women are expected to look good from any angle, this social norm becomes emphasised by the rising candid-culture. Looking down suggests a modesty that contrasts the previous trend of the selfie and a moving away from the conventional selfie image. As selfies took form where users actively choose to distort their faces to appeal to a wider idea of beauty, these images grew to have negative connotations where viewers knew and understood that this is not how said user normally looks. The candid has become the new acceptable form of self-representation on Instagram, and thus have seeped into the profiles of many users. However, it becomes self-contradictory when we (the users) begin to conform to another trend where images seem more authentic than the selfie but are consciously posed themselves, bringing to light the true lack of reality there is in this platform, and what we know to be non-authentic and accept as normal.

As a larger invisible force of social acceptance controls what is deemed satisfactory as ways of representing self, Adami questions the power and agency within identity construction in this way, saying *"while we have renewed agency in construction and projecting our identities through online visuals, at the same time we do not have control over the dynamics of identity construction that will invest our visuals once they have started to circulate."* (Ahadzadeh, A., Pahlevan Sharif, S. and Ong, F. (2017). Because of the herd mentality of mass engagement, we are encouraged to desire a similar lifestyle and act in ways of imitation to replicate this ideal but alternate reality. Stated in an essay on self-schema, "A critical determinant of individuals reaction to the idealized Instagram photos is a degree to which those individuals have internalized the social norms and standards of beauty and attractiveness", (Ahadzadeh, A., Pahlevan Sharif, S. and Ong, F. 2017) I argue that Instagram as a platform consciously globalises these trends to control what and who is idolised, pushing the exposure of influencers who are supported by marketers and providing profit. As a result, and over time, these ideas of beauty become internalized by many users, as evidenced in context to "the downward gaze".

Users, much like moving with fashion trends, are changing their online profile identities to fit these changing standards of aestheticism and beauty. Vaisman, in Adami's essay *'Special Issue: Social media and the visual'* argues that in Instagram specifically *"expressions of individuality are imbued with globally-driven stereotypes"*, highlighting the social pressures that underline the platform relating to who you are and how you should stereotypically portray yourself (Adami and Jewitt, 2016). Adami develops on this saying *"this raises questions about the relation between creativity in forms of production and (often unconscious) re-production of broader naturalized social dynamics of taste, aesthetics and identity values".* This entices the idea that our way of looking as subjective individuals have been generalised through app of popular images and same influencers feeding us imagery or representations of what is and isn't normal as ways of defining self.

As a user of Instagram who has been a part of the platform for years, accessing it daily to keep up with the content on my personalised feed, it becomes apparent in the innate human desire to copy and mimic one another to represent themselves best. As these trends of depicting 'self' grows with popularity, the more authenticity within our own profile comes into question. Baudrillard addresses

this in the growing 'interface' world when saying *"It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, it is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real"* (Baudrillard, 1994). As these trends are promoted and circulated by influencers, being raised on our feeds to the beginning of our viewing experience because of positive engagement, and subsequently imitated and copied by profiles of peers and acquaintances, an inevitable social norm is added to the online community. With this and much like all visual culture, the norm then goes unquestioned. This control prioritises certain images over others, providing a hierarchy of image value. Losh questions this control in the distributions of selfie trends, "world-making is increasingly driven by the design capacities of the distributed development teams that shape visual aesthetics (Losh, 2013b)." (Losh, 2015) highlighting the conscious decision-making behind new trends of aestheticism. This applies in hidden contexts also where influencers with a high following are paid per Instagram post a sum relative to their follow count, by Instagram itself. This image-sharing profit business contributes to the understanding as to why these images are prioritised over other images and corroborates Losh's views in *'SelfieCity*' that 'machines' are doing our seeing for us by creating these image hierarchies, and subliminally shaping our perceptions by defaults that we know little about (Mirzeoff, 2016).

However, as one norm comes into the forefront of self-representation, the abnormal is also heightened with this. It could be said that any young person not conforming to the social norms of profile aestheticism are seen as less attractive in terms of the contemporary Instagram image and do not gain the same following. This social fear is utilized by the algorithm that pushes influential images to become more widespread. Foucault discusses this powerplay use,*"All the mechanisms of power, which even today are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him". (*Foucault, M. 2008). This desire to be a part of this image-based network but never steer to clear from the current 'norm' is validated by Lovink in his text 'on the Social Media Ideology' when saying *"In the age of social media we seem to confess less what we think. It's considered too risky, too private. We share what we do, and see, in a staged manner."* (Lovink, 2016). What does this say about the reality of our Instagram profiles? It becomes less an expression of self and more a moulding of self around the social structures created within the application. Addressed in the essay 'Consumer Engagement on Instagram' Claesson and Tägt Ljungberg further support this view, *"…to what level of extent an individual believes in the aspect of operating through a specific behaviour, as a result of what other individuals in that persons surrounding wants.*" (Claesson and Tägt Ljungberg, 2018) implies how we mould our actions around the platform itself.

To conclude, Instagram uses its platform in a multitude of ways to control our viewing experience in what we consider to be aesthetic. Through its specific time documentation settings, and an algorithm that places precedence on the popular Influencer's images before other content, our way of understanding the images are altered, and place a hierarchy of value above the average shared image. This, combined with techniques of personalising our viewing content, is all consciously used to entice users to further engage with the application as much as possible. Through this, and over long periods of time, our idea of aesthetic images are subliminally altered, therefore, the ways we wish to represent ourselves are thus altered also. It's difficult to pinpoint the transition of our profiles from once we begin our identity construction through the platform to when we inevitably become strongly influenced by others to make subconscious changes to our own Instagram identities by new ideas of what an aesthetic image is. It is only when we scroll back through our images that we look at them differently, in a new context showing us how quickly moving this reality moves, and how malleable our desires to present ourselves are. As Adami states, *"identity construction is dynamic and can change in viewers' perceptions of the very same image over time, through contextual transformations and through layering of information and media discourses."*

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Image Sources

Figure 1 - https://hollywoodlife.com/2017/09/04/downward-gaze-celebrities-pose-instagram-trend-pics/

Figure 2 - https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/downwardgaze/