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iPhoneography and New Aesthetics: The Emergence of a Social Visual Communication Through Image-based Social Media

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Abstract: New digital imaging practices have arisen with the emergence of image-based social media. An aesthetics that is both visual and social in nature is emerging and clearly manifesting on the user-friendly platform Instagram. While new visual aesthetics are rooted in the new attraction to vintage filters, social aesthetics manifest in embracing the mundane aspects of human life as a source for visual communication. Amateur image-makers are taking the lead and experimenting with new visual forms of expression. The field of visual communication has not yet examined such timely issues, so this paper argues for increased attention to new digital imaging practices, such as iPhoneography, the practice of capturing, editing, and sharing images with one device, which is altering how we make and read images.

Keywords: iPhoneography, visual communication, image-based social media, aesthetics

Introduction

Images are changing. Their visual expressive nature is now examined alongside a new social nature where they function as visual tools for communication amidst the emergence of image-based social media. Image-based social media has welcomed amateur image-makers by providing them with opportunities to create and share images in ways previously restricted to professionals (Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012), which have significantly influenced how we visually communicate. Visual communication has therefore evolved, too. It has become welcoming of new visual qualities and themes where the filtered and nostalgic is considered more beautiful (Bakhshi, Shamma, Kennedy, & Gilbert, 2015), while the mundane of family, food and life is highly acceptable as content.



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As a result, a new direction in digital imaging and graphic design has emerged that is dedicated to human activity, new social and visual aesthetics in addition experimental amateur imaging practices. Image-based social media has generated new visual opportunities, which have been studied through the lens of photography theory (Berry, 2014; Gómez Cruz, 2012; Halpern & Humphreys, 2014; Keep, 2014a, 2014b) but not from the perspective of visual communication.

iPhoneography

This paper is dedicated to discussing the value of examining a digital imaging practice known as iPhoneography, which Berry and Schleser (2014) refer to as “mobile media making,” where smartphone applications provide “social, creative, and emotional cartographies” (p.12). iPhoneography, which takes place on image-based social platforms with the use of both smartphone cameras and imaging applications, is the practice of creating, altering, and sharing images via digital technology specific to smartphones and their applications. Realizing the popularity of the iPhone, the term “iPhoneography” was first introduced in 2008 by Glen Evans, a photography blogger whose blog no longer exists (Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012).

The products of iPhoneography are iPhoneographs—digital two-dimensional artefacts, distinct from photographs because of their new social process-based nature and new visual aesthetic. The two features that distinguish iPhoneography from traditional photography are prevalence and immediacy: iPhoneographs are prevalent since the availability of camera phones makes it possible to create visuals based on one’s personal life at any given time and their immediacy is due to the fact that they can be shared instantly on various image-based social platforms. iPhoneographs also reflect new visual aesthetics where images are altered, enhanced, and filtered (Bakhshi et al., 2015; Berry, 2014; Halpern & Humphreys, 2014) and are therefore, visual artefacts capable of generating meaningful visual experiences. This emphasises the idea that current forms of visual communication are changing social and visual conventions on a global scale as these changes are not restricted to any specific region.

iPhoneography as a recent, global, visual practice is worth examining closely for various reasons:

- 1) the parallelism of social and visual aesthetic qualities that stimulate new visual and social trends,
- 2) the ability of image-based platforms to host an abundance of visual artefacts and allow users with various creative expertise and intentions to coexist, receive equal opportunities for exposure, and visually communicate with ease,
- 3) the variety of image-based platforms that currently cater to users of diverse levels of expertise in image making and the use of smartphone devices,
- 4) the increase in the number of smartphone applications that enhance, alter, and add graphics to images.

These reasons contribute to the popularity of iPhoneography as a valuable image-based practice.

Instagram

The introduction of aesthetics that are both visual and social is clearly seen on the smartphone application Instagram. In its early days, it mandated the use of squares as visual signifiers where not only posted images are in the ratio of a square but also the whole feed of Instagram is rows and columns of squares. As an image-based application it was among the first few applications that also functioned as a social platform. Users can use this application to capture images using their smartphone camera, crop images and add filters to them all while connecting with each other by following other users and liking their images. The social aspect is based on one's ability to write his or her own story (Arthur, 2009). With that, people are given the chance to become their own personal biographers and determine how their lives are documented. From this perspective image-based social media encouraged new forms of communication based on a visual and social aspect of the square. Research on Instagram and image-based social media used to be limited to works like McNely's (2012) on Instagram and organizational power, Hochman and Schwartz's (2012) attempt to visualize cultural activity through publicly shared images, and Gómez Cruz and Meyer's (2012) piece on Instagram and the progression of photography. This has only recently changed with the recent publication of several articles and books about image-based social platforms and practices, which introduce multiple directions. These range from business studies (Abidin, 2014), art and photography (Berry, 2014; Halpern & Humphreys, 2014, p. 201220; Keep, 2014a, 2014b) to several approaches to social sciences where the focus is expressing oneself, making connections, and understanding time (Garde-Hansen, 2014; Kalin, 2013; Villi, 2014).

The fluid nature of the practice of iPhoneography allows photographs captured on a smartphone to perform beyond the act of photography. While the term "visual communication" has been considered an alternative term for graphic design, if we consider the primitive nature of the term, it is in reality inclusive of several forms of visual production. In their *History of Graphic Design*, Meggs and Purvis (2006) reflect on examples identical to those in Janson and Janson's (2004) *History of Art: The Western Tradition*. Both books reflect on cave paintings, ancient script, and the progression of decorative Bibles, printmaking, and graphic art. There have been several historical overlaps between the two disciplines of art and design, and it might be beneficial to examine current forms of digital imaging simply as visual communication that encompasses both art and design.

There are several popular image-based platforms that promote visual communication and depending on their ease or difficulty of use welcome image-makers with varying expertise. Platforms like Flickr, which was initially designed for sharing professional images, and others like YouTube, which has evolved to allow the editing and enhancing of videos online, do not offer immediacy and image specificity. It is platforms like Hipstamatic, Snapchat, Phhhoto,

and Instagram that have encouraged the creation and enhancement of images through the use of one smartphone device.

Instagram, which has swiftly grown in popularity in its short life span of five years, is valuable as a tool for examining current popular forms of digital imaging and visual communication and specifically iPhoneography. The success of Instagram is driven by its ability to enhance social experiences while maintaining strong and identifiable visual characteristics. In addition to squared images, Instagram introduced filters that simulate "vintage and nostalgic" aesthetics. Several applications emerged to complement Instagram and work with it by allowing photo manipulation, overlaying graphics and text, and/or cropping images into squares.

Instagram, which started as a platform for documenting daily life as it happened, is now allowing Instagrammers, both as individuals or corporations, to publicly and instantly share images shot and processed on mobile phones. This snap, edit, and share phenomenon that takes place on Instagram, among other image-based smartphone applications, has interested several authors, such as Favero (2014), Gómez Cruz (2012), Gómez Cruz and Meyer (2012), Gye (2007), Halpern and Humphreys (2014), and Hochman and Schwartz (2012), for its ability to transform our personal experience with images.

As Kelly (2014) mentioned, Instagram can also highlight the context of an image by presenting it in a feed that shows what was posted before and after in an individual's feed, while allowing room for the textual part of the post to stand out as well. A number of posts with on a common #hashtag can be viewed next to each other as a group. Hence, Instagram has become a rich source of information in relation to current visual communication through image-based platforms (Kelly, 2014).

Instagram has distinguished itself by being the first popular application that reflects a defined visual aesthetic. With its frame that crops every image into a square, producing visual uniformity, it also offers filters that simulate the works of older cameras, like the Polaroid. With a quick survey of images posted on Instagram, one can see the repetition of several visual themes: filter-enhanced images are reminiscent of the past, poetry and quotes are added to images using image-editing applications, and several images on Instagram use a bird's-eye view angle where objects are shot from above. Instagram provides its users with a range of creative decisions, yet its basic visual qualities—the squared filtered image—makes Instagram recognizable.

The power of one device and the rise of the amateur

The wide use of iPhoneography has raised several concerns about images and image-makers today. Scholars are concerned with how this practice is altering the meaning of photography, encouraging more amateurs to contribute to image making, competing with conventional advertising and graphic design, and overexposing human behaviour, among other phenomena. However, the focus here is not on the discontent of experts with the growing number of amateurs, the approval of anthropologists of practices that better reflect

humans in their "natural habitat," or the enthusiasm of marketers in what is known as WOM (word of mouth advertising). It is on the idea that exposure to visual communication in the form of viewing images and making images is a valuable human activity. The use of image-based social platforms places creative agency in the hands of the public. Since practice is an important aspect of learning, then participation on such platforms could possibly establish a new form of visual communication based on the immediacy of expression and new aesthetic values.

The creation of a digital image takes place on a smartphone through a process that differs from professional manual and computer-based practices. It relies on a smartphone device to capture photos, edit and enhance them, and then share the produced images on image-based social platforms. This process will be referred to here as *snap, edit and share* and is derived from image-based research since the birth of camera phones (Favero, 2014; Gye, 2007; Keep, 2014a, 2014b). Snap, edit and share is the core of iPhoneography and is performed through making creative decisions on one smartphone device. An important aspect of being an active member on image-based social media is the process of capturing an image and then transforming it through image-based applications before sharing it publicly.

Snap is the creation of snapshots using a smartphone's camera; edit is selecting, deleting, enhancing, and altering images; and sharing takes place when images are shared through image-based platforms and creates a form of social interaction. Driven by the popularity of the iPhone, among other smartphones, this practice represents the ability of one device to deliver digital images that become part of image-based social media (Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012; Gye, 2007; Keep, 2014b).

The amateur image-makers of today seem to be driven by digital and portable technology. However, we forget that amateur practices seen today echo those seen in the early days of cheaper analogue cameras like the Kodak Brownie. The amateur culture was based on two things that still exist today: the notion of sharing and the use of everyday life as a topic (Pink 2011). Bourdieu (1965) reports that amateur photographers in the 1950s participated in photography clubs and group exhibitions because they enjoyed sharing their work. He also states that personal topics found acceptance in the amateur community. Therefore, we ask what is different today between amateur image-makers and amateur culture.

The answer is connectivity. This feature has allowed amateurs to be more involved in generating media—at times overpowering mass media (Larsen & Sandbye, 2014b). Accessible technology allows image-makers to be connected with the world and with each other. With the emergence of Web 2.0, which is based on participation and connectivity, today is seen as the true age of the amateur (Larsen & Sandbye, 2014b), and images shared on image-based platforms have come to have a highly social and technical nature. Keep (2014b) refers to this trend as techno-social, while Gómez Cruz (2013), Gómez Cruz and Meyer (2012), and Kalin (2013) refer to it as sociotechnical.

This sociotechnical aspect is based on the notion of using images to create, document, and build relationships while relying on technology to produce these images. Gye (2007) and Van House, Davis, Ames, Finn, and Viswanathan (2005) write about the reasons behind the massive use of mobile phone cameras as social tools. Van House et al. (2007) report that camera phones enhance current “imaging practices” and are used as vehicles for communication. They conclude that the goals behind the use of camera phones are self-expression, preserving memory, and sustaining relationships. To Gye (2007), these goals are not very far off. People used camera phones to construct personal and group memory, to maintain social relationships, and as a means of self-expression (Gye, 2007).

Surprisingly, several years earlier, Bourdieu talked about similar goals behind the use of affordable cameras by the masses. In his book *Photography: Middle Brow-Art* (1965), he discusses how amateurs worked with photography to communicate. He writes that people used cameras to preserve memory, to communicate feelings with others through sharing memories, to re-experience memories, to document personal achievements, and to escape the world.

Average users who use image-based social media for non-commercial or creative reasons are what Hjorth and Sharp (2014) call the “producing users”; they are individuals who use image-based platforms to document and communicate their daily lives. The mundane aspects of life are now a hot topic in mobile media research because many personal images are produced to reflect daily practices (Garde-Hansen, 2014; Kalin, 2013; Keep, 2014a, 2014b). Discussions about documenting everyday life can be traced back to the earlier use of cameras by amateur photographers described in the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 60s, when he investigated how the middle class used photographic practices to document personal memories (Bourdieu, 1965).

Bourdieu’s work also addresses the reasons behind capturing images. He identifies five: to preserve memories; to communicate with others and express feelings; to relive memories and therefore realize oneself; to document personal achievements; and to escape the world. The motives behind making images have not changed, as “producing users” today might not have creative intentions but do make images to document their lives, express themselves, and communicate with others (Gye, 2007; Van House et al., 2005).

There is a distinguishable difference between analogue photography and new imaging practices in that the first is based on not knowing how images would turn out until they were developed. In contrast, new forms of image making can happen in real time. They can also become moments that disappear from memory after being viewed—literally in the case of Snapchat, a smartphone application from which images disappear after being viewed, and metaphorically when images are posted on social media and hardly viewed again. An abundance of images are shared and saved on private devices, such as camera phones, smartphones, computers, tablets, and public platforms such as Flickr and Instagram; they are rarely revisited (Larsen & Sandbye, 2014a).

What is also different today is that mobile phone cameras are portable, available when needed, capable of processing and editing still and moving images, and connected to the Internet (Favero, 2014; Gómez Cruz, 2012; Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012; Gye, 2007; Halpern & Humphreys, 2014; Hochman & Schwartz, 2012). Instagram is not the sole factor in enhancing the social experience of sharing images. Mobile phones can take much of the credit for facilitating current visual communication outside of conventional media. In their book titled *Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography*, Larsen and Sandbye (2014) confirmed what other authors (Garde-Hansen, 2014; Kalin, 2013; Keep, 2014a, 2014b) have stated: the personal photo album, which was once private, has become a public window to the personal lives of individuals with the help of mobile phone devices. New image-making practices produce snapshots: artefacts that visually communicate new personal practices (Larsen & Sandbye, 2014a).

This phenomenon is what Dean Keen refers to as “liquid aesthetics” (2014a, 2014b). The mobile quality of camera phones allows images to be created whenever desired. They also, in the beginning, defied high quality since camera phones captured pixilation, soft focus, and altered saturation. These social and visual qualities presented by early camera phones are still present regardless of technological advancements in mobile cameras; while the camera improves, applications that stimulate older analogue and digital photos—like Instagram—continue to be widespread.

Some believe that the untrained masses lack an understanding of aesthetics and that amateur practices are of lower quality. While it is true that amateur image-makers thrive because they feel less criticized and judged as individuals (Bourdieu, 1965, p. 6), we must keep in mind that humans naturally cannot be excluded from the “Universe of aesthetics” (Bourdieu, 1965, p. 7). As Bourdieu (1965) notes, amateur photographers were recognized as an organized group that understood its norms and trends.

The social aesthetics of images today are based on the connections that users of image-based social platforms make among themselves and with various images and activities. Digital images shared today on image-based social platforms are therefore complex artefacts of both social and visual aesthetic value.

Concluding thoughts: what does image-based social media tell us about visual communication?

The square from the perspective of image-based social media has become a geometric shape that signifies defined visual aesthetics like nostalgic imagery while also functioning as a place where humans and the mundane of their lives meet – just as they would in a town’s square. Embracing the two definitions of the square—the recognized aesthetic based on the visual nature of the square and the social experience based on connectivity—it is important to further examine iPhoneographic practices that take place on Instagram and enhance the visual and social communication of everyday users and amateur image-makers. It is important to keep in mind that iPhoneography is not photography but an image-making

practice rooted in visual communication and involves shooting, editing, and sharing visual artefacts on image-based platforms (Gómez Cruz, 2012; Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012; Halpern & Humphreys, 2014; Keep, 2014a, 2014b). While several authors have written about such practices but referred to them as mobile photography and imaging (Gómez Cruz & Meyer, 2012; Gye, 2007; Halpern & Humphreys, 2014), this paper bridges the gap by examining them all as iPhoneography.

Hjorth and Sharp (2014) present three possible categories to examine image-based social platforms: the relationship of iPhoneography to cultural politics, the common language of image-based social media, and the mundane aspects of image-based social media (Hjorth & Sharp, 2014). Yet, what is not mentioned is the need to investigate iPhoneography in relation to visual communication. The increase in image-making practices in the last few years has made it possible for images to be a new form of “oral culture” with their ability to preserve memories (Burnett, 2004, p.13). Visuals should also be seen as valuable data that can be analysed just as, in the past, gestaltian aesthetics relied on images to understand a phenomenon (Koenderink, 2015). iPhoneography as creative practice, provides various opportunities for investigating and re-evaluating the definition and role of visual communication.

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