Consumer Production in Social Media Networks:
A Case Study of the “Instagram” iPhone App

Zachary McCune

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Dr. John Thompson
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Introduction

Today’s information society has become reliant on consumer production. With cheap and ubiquitous technologies such as mobile phones, consumers are enabled and encouraged to casually produce videos (see YouTube), audio recordings (see SoundCloud), and real-time textual responses (see Twitter) to their growingly mediated lives. Engagement in these casual productions is empowered by “always on” global communication networks, enmeshing consumers in a web of social ties that are predicated, to various degrees, on production. Academic treatments of Web 2.0 and mobile technologies tend towards macro-assessment, failing to closely examine any one site or technology and in the process missing the specific motivations and experiences of users. While discourses about the banality or exceptionality of digital consumer production proliferate, “deep ethnographies” of digital consumer/production culture prove rare.

In an attempt to make an intervention in this feedback loop of macro-analysis, this study will examine consumer production in a single social media network. Taking the “Instagram” iPhone app as a site of study, this analysis will examine the user experience of social photographic production and ask what engagement in this “always on” media network provides. Specially, this research is grounded in the question why do consumers share personal media with global social networks? This research will directly challenge culture critics like Lee Siegel and Andrew Keen who contend that “the cult of the amateur” and “social” media production subvert ideas of “quality” in global culture today (Siegel 2008; Keen 2008). For this study will show that social media production is not ‘mob’ media
production, but a negotiation of identity through production (an auteur impulse), and the engagement of other producers as peers/critics (networks). This negotiation borrows partly from Henry Jenkins’ idea of “participatory culture” but attempts to push back on it as well, returning forms of creative agency to the user, which Jenkins plays down, by arguing against his subtle privileging of network-over-user (Jenkins 2006).

Communities of user generated content are at once self-propelled projects, in which individuals conceive of themselves as unique creators with personal traits and styles validated by their community, and work as social spaces in which creative production is celebrated, hailed, and encouraged. These dynamics are not restricted to the online spaces where they begin, as creative social networks such as the Instagram community host frequent “real world” meet ups in major world cities to validate their creative work and to share skills/techniques of production.

Ultimately, the technological object (iPhones) connecting these individuals, becomes a mobile production sites, in which a distinct form of digital craft occurs (users relying on several different apps to achieve nuance yet iPhone-only results), as well as a nodal point in a global network of creative production which encourages such labor.

I: Research Methods
The designated purpose of the Instagram App is to provide a social network platform through which iPhone/iPod photos (treated by a host of app-provided visual filters) can be shared, liked and commented on. Or, as the App is described on its website, “it’s a fast, beautiful and fun way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures” (Instagr.am 2011). This ‘sharing of life’ through technology is the foundation of social media practice and is precisely what this study will attempt to examine. As such, this research project began with first person engagement of the app as a user of the technology and an active member of the Instagram community.

This personal participation made use of the ethnographic traditions developed by scholars like Clifford Geertz in anthropology, and adapted for use in social technology by contemporary researchers such as danah boyd (Geertz 1973; boyd 2009). The engagement was an ongoing process, begun in late December 2010, and continued throughout the spring of 2011 with a four week period of intense participation. Unlike other forms of ethnography however, which move in and out of a discrete study area, my participation was pervasive, persistent, and extemporaneous. The Instagram App, like many mobile social networks, invites participation at any time, from any (preferably many) location(s), and for various durations. Regulating my access and use of the application was necessary for formal fieldwork and close analysis, but over-regulation (i.e. strict scheduling) of this experience would have render inauthentic observations. Consequently, I used Instagram for approximately four hours everyday during the ethnography, but never at the same times, nor in single long bursts.
As a qualitative form of analysis, my first person participation in the community of Instagram required rigorous field notes and techniques of documentation. Instagram itself solved part of this problem. As a digital media object, conversations, comments, and actions within the app are logged and become persistent records, freely browsed and recalled by users including myself. This data serves as source of primary analysis, as it is the very content around which value in the app is constructed. But the meaning of these records is not always self-evident. Indeed there are ‘codings’ within this content that needs more inferential and culturally nested analysis. Because as Clifford Geertz as noted, the twitch of an eye may be a physical tic or a sly signal (a wink) without proper cultural decoding, my research will use his “thick description” methods to contextualize Instagram users actions and statements (Geertz 1973: 6).

Though the project is focused on digital technology, analog methods of sociological record keeping will be preferable to electronic alternatives. Field notes were kept in written journals to keep the mobile device (an iPod Touch 4th Generation) engaged with the Instagram community. Written journals are preferential to taking notes on a computer because they can be as light and unobtrusive, accommodating the “always on” engagement with the social media network. Written journals were scanned regularly to be backed up on personal computers as well as to personal research servers. Comments, photo captions, and other exchanges within Instagram were recorded in these field notes, ‘liberating’ the Instagram content from its network. At the beginning of my research, Instagram was only available to use and explore via the Apple iPhones and iPod touches,
preventing direct access to and thus storage of its raw data via conventional personal computer platforms. But halfway through research, Instagram offered an official API (Application Programming Interface, a way of querying databases for their information directly without use of a graphical interface) that spawned a set of web-based Instagram browsers including Statigram and Webstagram. These websites offered a late but helpful look at the data trends of Instagram from outside of the app.

Interviews and interactions with Instagram users were primarily mediated by the app and its social networking tools. This choice was made in the hope of engaging the culture of Instagram through its own paradigms and discursive forms. It is meant to render “situations as they occur rather than in artificial situations” and provide “accounts of the situation in the participants own language which gives access to the concepts that are used in everyday life” (Burgess 1994: 79). Many critiques of such mediated ethnographies suggest that without ‘seeing the eyes’ of a research participant, the data collected is somehow uncertain or undesirable, but this seems to privilege old ideas of what social interaction means in the first place, entirely marginalizing the growing ubiquity of digitally mediated social interactions. These critiques imagine sites ‘outside’ of the site of interest as preferential, and romanticize them as more ‘honest’. While face-to-face interviewing may be more traditional, there exists rich literature to evidence the practicalities of online inquiry, particularly as it keeps conversations within their proper contexts (Slater & Miller 2000).
Supplementing interactions and interviews with users in-app, this research also analyzes a “real world” meetup of Instagram users in London. This afternoon to evening event, sponsored by the Instagram company but organized exclusively by users, was termed a “global InstaMeet” and provided first person access to Instagram users. Thirty one people RSVPed to attend this event, but only 17 offered their usernames in a rough census of attendees near the end of the evening. While hardly a typical sample of Instagram users, this meetup provides the ethnographic research of these study with two interconnected sites to consider: a social gathering of Instagram users in person, alongside the persistent social gatherings in app.

Before, during, and after the London InstaMeet, I made clear my research status as a sociologist, and in respect to participants at the London event will not directly name or quote individuals.

Participants in the London InstaMeet became a primary interview group. Throughout the meetup, participants including myself, exchanged usernames and began following one another on Instagram. I continued corresponding with these individuals after the InstaMeet, and approached them about interviews through the app, or through other social network sites such as Twitter or Facebook. After approaching all seventeen users who volunteered their names to a group-list, I was sent out 13 questionnaires, and 12 were completed (a 92% return rate). These London participants have shared an astounding average of 386 photos, have an average of 898 followers, and follow an average of 231 other Instagrammers. All of which means they are in the top 5% of Instagram users according to Robert Moore
who found in a March 2011 study that 95% of Instagram users have shared less than 50 photos (Moore).

A second set of survey participants was drawn using Instagram’s built-in “popular” which returns the most actively discussed Instagram users. This second ‘Global’ group was composed of six Americans (four in New York City, one in California, one in Alaska), and a single user from South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and the UK (outside London) each. I approached over twenty Instagram users from Europe, Asia, South America, and North America through Instagram and was asked to send along the survey to 12 of that group. 11 completed the survey. Language turned out to be a major barrier in this global group as a number of European, Asian, and South American users responded that they wanted to participate but were not confident writing in English. The second group, unaffiliated to one another in the way the London group was, offers an opportunity to assess if the London answers had any idiosyncratic patterning that a global audience did not reflect.

Like the London group, the global set is an exceptionally high-production, high-participation user base. These users shared an average of 371 photos, were followed by an average of 1166 users, and followed 433 other users on average. Typically, I approached users through comments on their photos about answering my questionnaire and then would send the questionnaire via email (11 of 12 users were contacted via email). This is not to say that my comments and participation on Instagram was only about finding users to complete the survey. Over the period of the ethnographic research, I commented on all aspects of user photography, which
ultimately developed relationships that increased the chances a user would be willing to answer in depth questions about their participation.

About 40 users were approached in total about their Instagram use, with 23 of 25 completing full questionnaires. The research continued for five weeks as expectations that many users would not responding to survey requests proved founded. Among those who did get back to me about answering questions, the rate of completion was outstanding. Often these users were people I had exchanged four to five comments with (on their photos and my own).

The questionnaire itself consisted of five questions, which users were encouraged to answer in as much depth as they could.

1. Why do you take photos?
2. Why do you share them on Instagram, rather than say, keeping the private?
3. Do you feel that you take photos for yourself or for other users?
4. Is your photography a hobby or do you have professional aspirations?
5. Do the photos of other users inform the photos you take or the way you take them?

Because of Instagram’s interface design, there was no way to ask these questions as private, user-to-user messages common to other networks. So instead they were collected off-app in a web survey system. Answers were unstructured, so responses could be a single word or a paragraph. Respondents did both, sometimes within the same survey offering lots of input on one question and very little on another. Certain biases exist in the questions, such as the use of the word “share” on question two, which may have led to many of the respondents using the verb through their answers. This complicates my analysis, because sharing is something central to social media, but it is unclear whether users directly think about it as “sharing” or if
they are simply taking the verb from discussions of social media including my own. Question two is also complicated by creating a share vs. private binary that may be reductive of actual user practice. One user responded that his/her “personal photos” were never shared, highlighting an unasked secondary question of what kind of material users were willing to share, and what they were not. Perhaps this would be an excellent avenue for further research.

**Theorizing Networks, Users, and Production**

Several recent academic studies provide theoretical approaches to users, networks, and social media production. These works focus on digital networks as social phenomena, and the impact of digital technology on global consumers. Yochai Benkler’s *The Wealth of Networks* presents network technology as an agent directly empowering the autonomy of individuals, as censorship and privileged of corporations and governments is freely routed around (Benkler 2006). Jonathan Zittrain, on the other hand calls, the development of app culture on mobile devices “the end of the internet” – a position echoed by Wired editor Chris Anderson in complaining that “the web is dead” (Zittrain 2008; Anderson 2010). For these latter authors, not all networks are empowering or productive.

Zittrain and Anderson attach freedom and user agency to the “internet” because they evaluate “the web” as offering equal, un-weighted access to pornography and poetry. But with ‘app’ culture, they claim, users are being sandboxed into smaller networks and the smaller sets of privileges and roles within those networks. Both Zittrain and Anderson characterize users as highly passive in
the development and deployment of network technologies. At best they believe in forms consumer advocacy, and at worst assume consumers simply do not care about the technologies they use. Critiques of these apathetic-user assumptions are critically formulated in *How Users Matter*, which argues for the “co-construction of users and technology” (Oudshoorn & Pinch 2005). Co-construction is something that this study will foreground, as the assumption of ‘ignorant’ consumption and ‘smart’ technology or vice versa privileges one analytical category of over another overlooking the vital interplay and blurred boundaries between the two.

Theorizing user production, this study will draw on the work of Clay Shirky and the philosophy of Michel de Certeau. In his recent text *Cognitive Surplus*, Shirky argues that user production online represents a historical shift from media as opiate, which he attaches to TV, to media as a creative site, evidenced best by Wikipedia (Shirky 2010). Shirky contends that consumers are in possession of free time that may be either squandered or harnessed. Preferring the latter, Shirky’s work frames the operating questions of this study and presents the hypothesis that user engagement with a social media production in turn drives up the value of social media networks without subsuming user identities. Michel de Certeau argues for this understanding of users as active participants in opposition to earlier theories of consumption-production binaries in which elites dominate production and in turn dominates the masses through their consumption (de Certeau 1988). De Certeau’s work will impact this study at both the outset of the fieldwork and the final evaluation of the data, as he provides a certain flaneurial idea of research, and rich taxonomies for thinking through everyday social production.
In the field of sociology, there has been a great deal of work done on social networks. danah boyd, in particular, has completed a highly influential ethnography of MySpace, offering theoretical approaches that instruct by doing rather than simply discussing (boyd 2007). boyd has also written in several collected volumes about working in social network sites (SNS) and coined the term “networked publics” as an analytical category for user interaction and production online characterized by the “persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability” of personal data/social acts (boyd 2009; boyd 2011: 45-46). While these theoretical categories will serve as ways of thinking through user activities on Instagram, they are too generic to be fully sufficient.

boyd’s work, like much of recent social network sociology is more interested in the production of identity online (race, gender, age, etc.) than it is in the act of production as an identity itself (Hargittai & Hsieh 2011). This causes a frequent confusion of “social network” with “social media” or “social media network” that is not ideal. Social networks, technological or otherwise, represent the connections (ties) between people (nodes) forming networks (clusters). Taken from telecommunication sciences, this understanding of networks is a foundation for all contemporary SNS work (Barabasi 2011: 1-2). Social media on the other hand is a term used to described publishing platforms characterized by their reliance on “user-generated content” which is spread through ‘sharing’ toolsets built into the platform (Kaplan & Haenlin 2009). Social media inherently always features some sort of social network technology, hence the use of the term “social media network” to refer to patterns of sharing and user interaction. In this project, sharing
photographs on Instagram positions photographs as part of a shared culture in which consumption and production collapse together.

**Addressing Biases, Omissions, and Generalizability**

As with any research project, bias and the omission of certain analyses is inevitable. But by attempting to acknowledge these faults before the research begins they may become what Martyn Hammersley has called “foreshadowed problems,” borrowing the term from Malinowski (Hammersley 24). Because this study focuses on a site of digital culture, the question of access (who has it? Where do they get it? What does it cost?) always pre-figure this type of sociology. Scholarship on the so-called “digital divide” between people who have access and those who do not, will not be directly considered by my research. In fact, close racial, gender, class, and sexual typologies of Instagram users would prove difficult because of the simplicity of user profiles (which lack conventional 'personal information') and lack of private access to users for such further questions. Interrogating the social composition of Instagram would certainly be a fascinating project, particularly as the app is currently only available to iPhone users that are often assumed to be predominantly white and upper middle class. Nested within the context of the iPhone, Instagram invites a substantial contextualization within mobile phone use and social distribution that cannot be undertaken in the given research period. Secondary data from the organizations like the Pew Internet & American Life Project supplement this context but may be dated (these trends are always shifting) and geographically restricted (i.e. looking at the US rather than world iPhone usage).
Geographic information, something that accompanies nearly every photo shared on Instagram, will also be something that this research project will overlook. As a set of information, this data would highly interesting for further research as patterns of where photographs are being taken. Closely analyzing the photographs shared by users of Instagram will also not be a part of the study. This is at once because of the “trouble with pictures” as complicated sources of sociological data and because the ‘what’ of social media production (the content or object shared) is of less interest to this study than the ‘why’ (the logic or impetus to share) (Banks 2001).

One of the largest problems of this research is lack of personal access to users. Again, the design of the Instagram app simply does not include private messaging features, or list alternative ways of contacting users such as email. Consequently, initial questions and requests for participation were posed in the “networked public” of the Instagram community, and users had to provide alternative contact schemes to me in view of this public community. This certainly influenced and informed whether some users responded to my questions and request, and in turn filtered the participating population. That said, those who did choose to participate found themselves in a secure, anonymous web survey system, allowing them to be quite candid in their responses. The research participants were also not in direct conversation with me, so the results are more akin to a focus group or than a close, intimate exchange of information. That said, the responses were often detailed and fairly in depth, and offer a rich portrait of user experiences,
despite my inability to ask follow up questions or note participant behavior while completing these questions.

My biases as a researcher should also be foregrounded. As what as been termed a “digital native” I grown up with and naturalized digital technology, and consequently assume a high degree of ‘digital literacy’ among people using technology (Palfrey & Gasser 2008). This can easily lead to overlooking people on the periphery of digital fluency and engagement. This bias could also lead to normalizing behaviors and interactions in digital spaces rather than addressing them objectively. This danger is heightened by my use of ethnography and thick description, which will assign meaning to actions from my own body of knowledge/experience within the Instagram community and in other SNS spaces. Thus, my position as the agent of study risks an ethnographer’s dilemma – what Norman Denzin calls creation “through their ethnographic practices, the worlds they study and then write about.” (Denzin 1989: 156-157). Yet simultaneously, my experience and fluency in this field also present the value of myself as a researcher of it. In the age of rapid, fleeting flows of consumer media production, a peer producer-researcher may be ideally suited to make sense of it.

As a close study of a specific technology, this project may not immediately seem to be very generalizable. But because social media users have been shown to be more likely to try new apps, other SNS, and adopt new technologies than people not engaged in such communities, studying users on Instagram should evidence patterns of social media production on other sites as they will share users (Raine 2011). Instagram is also a fairly large community (approximately 1 million users as
of November 2010), with a dramatic growth rate, which makes the close study of it pertinent to understanding contemporary web trends (Yarow 2010). Finally, engaging Instagram as an example of “participatory culture,” “prosumer” activity and/or everyday creativity, discussed in many of aforementioned macro-theories of web culture, positions this study as a test of their implications. Are users actually empowered by new access to media tools and creative communities? This study may help answer that question.
II: Context

Instagram is a both a photographic apparatus and a software object. Contextualizing it requires tracing the history of mass-market photography, particularly ‘instant camera’ culture, while also assessing its status as an “app” in the nascent digital platform of mobile phones. When considered as the synthesis of these ecologies, Instagram can be understood as a hybrid of visual, commercial, and technological cultures which continue to inform the product’s design, popular reception, and use.

Towards the Instant Image

From its origins in the laboratories of gentlemen, photography was a initially a very expensive process reliant on costly chemicals and technology, and requiring considerable expertise. In England, photography is closely linked to William Fox Talbot, while in France, Louis Daguerre and Nicéphore Niépce are generally seen as the art’s inventors. All three gentlemen were relatively wealthy, and were able to develop photography partly out of their ample leisure time and personal funding (Daniel 2004a, 2004b). Fox Talbot would license the right to produce photographs using his methods, while Daguerre’s expensive metal plates pushed photographic practice out of any sort of popular practice. Thus, photography would remain a hobby of the rich throughout the nineteenth century, while a professional class emerged for commissioned work, where costs were offset by sales.

With the advent of the Kodak Box Brownie in 1900, the photographic process reached a mass audience for the first time. The Brownie camera cost $1 and film was
15c, with processing and printing done affordably by the Eastman factory (McCrum 35). An 1881 Kodak camera had cost $25 and came sealed with 100 exposures, but it proved too costly to bring photography to the everyday consumer (McCrum 35). George Eastman designed the Brownie for simplicity and ease of use, with a fixed lens and a single button to trigger the shutter and capture an image. This “snapshot” photography, articulated by the Kodak slogan “You Press The Button – We Do The Rest,” begot an entire culture of domestic, everyday photography, and invented, according to Sean McCrum the division between ‘serious’ professional photography and the emergent ‘ordinary’ amateur with a camera (32, 35).

Snapshot culture was defined by its simplified photographic apparatus, lack of access to the process of image development, and most visibly, to a very aesthetic form, in which certain subjects and styles of composition were repeated extensively. This snapshot aesthetic marked the finished products of mass photographic culture apart from commercial, professional, and bourgeoisie photography, which became equated with technique, prowess, and composition. In effect, snapshots ensured the ‘artfulness’ of serious photography, by presenting their image production as casual and effortless, not a product of composition or intent. But Brownie photographers were more interested in their own photos than in what their photographic practices represented. The returned prints could be collected into sets whose organization and communal sharing became a second act of this emergent photographic culture.

Part of the impact of 36 emprints lies in their bulk in a wallet, and leafing through them. Part lies on showing them to other people, and their appreciation of what is being circulated, often in a sequence originated by the photographer. This is a social activity, different from peer-group interest within a sales environment. Snap-shots are not
saleable. Viewers know photographer and subject. That is what is discussed, not the quality of an image, although that may be mentioned as a secondary issue (McCrum 35).

Thus, the importance of the snapshot lay not simply in bringing photography to a mass market, popularizing the activity and making it a hobby pursuit, but actually engendering a social culture in which photographic objects received a new status as things to share.

Edwin Land’s Polaroid cameras changed mass-market photography again in the second half of the 20th century. As the story goes, Land was on vacation with his family, taking photos of the scenery and his children, when his daughter asked why she could not see the photos right away. Land reportedly responded “why not?” and began the process of research and development that led to the ‘instant’ photograph (Blout 42). It seems almost too appropriate that a snapshot scenario—vacation and family photographs being common snapshot subjects—would inspire an ever more direct and immediate form of image-making. No doubt the virtues of simple use, rapid production, and impulsive image capturing were the doctrines passed into the Polaroid camera from snapshot photography. When the first Polaroid users examined the prepared print ejected from Land cameras, they likely shared the same glee earlier photographers reserved for examining returned prints, only the gap between production and consumption of such personal images had dramatically closed.

Though inspired by the directness of snapshot photos, the first Land cameras that were sold as luxury products rather than to Kodak’s mass market. The 1948 Polaroid Model 95 cost $89.75, a hefty price tag when compared with Kodak’s...
concurrent Hawkeye camera available for $5.50 (Buse 229). Even the 1972 SX-70, which put Land on the cover of Life magazine, was sold in department stores, promoted with a film from the prestigious Eames studio, and embellished with leather, clearly signaling its upper middle class orientation (Buse 230). Only once Polaroids began appearing in drugstores, having been redesigned as an affordable appliance of American life did the camera become a leading seller, and by 1983 it is estimated that 50% of American households had an instant camera (Buse 229).

Edwin Land’s vision for Polaroid cameras remained heroic and optimistic, even in the face of “serious” photographers criticizing the simplicity of the camera as inherently devaluing its own image-making. Land had celebrated photographer Ansel Adams as a company consultant, and Adams penned a 1963 manual on Polaroid photography, which suggested hidden complexity behind simple image making (Buse 222). Land himself did not equate camera simplicity or complexity with the quality of images one could take, and enjoined stockholders in 1976 that the instant camera had brought an important creative practice to the masses.

It is gratifying ... that with the ever increasing simplicity of our cameras combined with the present characteristics of the film, the population of aesthetically competent photographers is expanding rapidly. Thus some 15 billion pictures after we first expressed out hope ... our dream is being realized - (Land, Buse 232)

While Land provocatively suggests that it is Polaroid technology (cameras and film) which have directly begotten more competent aesthetic photographers, a more generous reading could argue that by making image-making more immediate, Polaroid photographers were perhaps more encouraged to experiment with the photographic form. The snapshot shutterbug was throttled by image processing
time, which delayed, and thus interrupted, the personal creative development of a photographer. This is not to suggest that photographic skill or aesthetic merit is simply a byproduct of the total number of photographs taken. Instead, it is to suggest that a non-professional's confidence with a photographic apparatus and medium is encouraged by rapid access to self and social evaluation. For with the Polaroid instant camera, an individual photographer is given rapid access to his/her own compositions, where assessments and adjustments can be made. Poor photographs can be retaken with insights gleaned from the failure. When the Polaroid photos are finally showcased among friends and communities, they may have been retaken several times to get the desired effect. The Polaroid photographer could game the ‘instant’ production scheme not as a perfect technology, but rather a perfectly consistent and adjustable process of shoot and check.

Instagram makes direct reference to snapshot culture and Polaroid technology. An early icon for the app directly emulated a late Polaroid Land Camera, linking the two semiotically. The ‘insta’ in Instagram also alludes to the quickly taken, quickly finished photograph of the ‘instant’ camera. Polaroid photos and Land cameras are also a popular subject of Instagram photos, with nearly 1,200 photos tagged “#polaroid” as of May 5, 2011. To contextualize the significance of that number, consider that the “#cathedral” tag returns around 1,000 photos, and the “#football” tag returns just under 1,500. Even though animal tags like “#dog” and “#cat” return an outstanding 61,000 and 95,000 photos respectively, Polaroid’s persistence as a tag signifies that it is not just a cultural precedent and inspiration
for Instagram, but a frequent subject on a par with touristic and recreational photographs. Especially as the Land cameras photographed often turn out to be the possessions of the Instagram users sharing the photo, suggesting a certain fetish of the instant camera culture endurant on the photo-sharing app.

Kodak’s snapshot culture is also present in Instagram, but much less explicitly. First, Kodak is credited with developing the first practical digital camera in 1986, so it makes sense that the snapshot spirit of the Brownie should be passed onwards into digital photography (Lucas & Goh 2009). Like the Kodak brownie and the Land camera, Instagram encourages the quickly taken photo with an incredibly simple capture screen. More broadly, the camera phone’s mobility and ubiquity present it as an ideal object for snapshots rather than carefully framed and composed images. The aesthetics of the snapshot are also passed into Instagram, as domestic subjects persist. Participants often wrote of using Instagram to “document” and “remember” their lives, recalling the personal value of the snapshot to arrest and preserve that which is most fleeting: life itself.

Like the Kodak snapshot and its heir the instant Polaroid image, the camera phone photo “permits entirely new performative rituals, such as shooting a picture at a live concert and instantly mailing these images to a friends” (van Dijck 2008). Sharing becomes a more integrated part of the photographic process, allowing “transcendence of temporal and spatial boundaries” even “when we ourselves are spatially mobile” (Lee 2). If the Kodak brought photography to mass society, and the Polaroid closed the distance in composing and seeing an image, the mobile phone (and thus Instagram) have evolved photography in dramatically accelerating the
sharing process of photography, by using global communication networks to transcend the distances physical photos could not cover.

**The Mobile Digital Platform**

In its most discrete and technical form, Instagram is a free, 6.8 megabyte iPhone/iPod touch app. As such, it is crucial to understand the object in the development and culture of the popular mobile digital platform. Just to be consistent, the device on which Instagram is hosted will always be called an iPhone, although it may also be used (and was for this study) on an iPod touch 4th generation, and will shortly be available for the iPad 2.

The iPhone was introduced in 2007, and was hailed by Time magazine as the “invention of the year,” not simply because its touch interface was considered innovative, but because “it’s not a phone, it’s a platform” (Grossman). What Grossman meant was that the iPhone was more than a device, it was an system on which developers could create their own software applications to extend, modify, and augment the device’s core functionality. These applications, shortened to “apps” have come to define the iPhone in both it’s marketing- “There’s an app for that” tagline - and its purpose (Van Grove 2010). With apps, the iPhone has entered many markets, including the video game and digital photography economies. A commenter on the Gamasutra blog, identified the genius of apps in their minute appeal to consumers.

I think the primary thing that Apple did was create and market the concept of the "app" as a $1-5 unit. They're doing to software what
they did to music: they broke it up into little pieces and then gave consumers a nice place to shop for the piece. (An)

Apple itself never directly define what “app” means, offering the objects instead as their own definitions. In promotional materials, the company has called apps “Over 350,000 ways to make iPhone even better,” ascribing the growing app store a sense of raw potential and boundlessness (Apple 2011). In a 2010 study, the Pew Internet & American Life project defined apps as simply “mobile software applications” connecting the shift of mobile phones from “voice device” to “internet-accessing mini-computer” as essential in the advent of this digital object (Purcell 2).

The smallness of apps is not simply a boon to consumers, as An presents, but an incentive for producers. Large teams of coders and extensive funding are not needed for app development as they are in PC software production. Instagram, as will be discussed, was created by a small team in California, rather than a large software conglomerate. This is partially because of how “simple” a successful app may be, and because apps leverage the iPhone as a pre-existing piece of electrical hardware, with a well-documented operating system— it’s a platform. Though it is a photographic app, Instagram did not have to build the camera(s) it uses. Nor did it have to develop the screen for reviewing images, or the network protocols its uses for sending data from iPhones to Instagram servers. These are all provided (and thus limited) by Apple. When we talk about Instagram, we are thus talking about a piece of software running on an iPhone or iPod, and the community of users, their images, and relationships between images and individuals this software encourages.

Through March 2011, Apple has reportedly sold 100 million iPhones worldwide (Warren). But perhaps more importantly, the success of the “app” has
made them a ubiquitous part of mobile phones broadly, particularly among "smart" phones (like the iPhone) which have mini-computer features and fast data networks. In a 2010 study, the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 35% of American adults had apps on their mobile phones but of that group, only 24% (two thirds) reported using them (Purcell 2). One in eight American adults reporting paying for apps, and the most likely app user was found to be male, young, educated, and affluent (Purcell 12). Age was found to be a major determinant in app usage, as 79% of young people (defined as 18-29 years old) who had apps on their phones reported using them (Purcell 12).

Though this Pew study is focused on the US alone, and does not delineate its results for different mobile devices (which would allow a more direct look at the iPhone app culture rather than collective rates), these numbers provide a sketch of the social patterns in which Instagram is used. But it must be added that mobile phone usage is constantly growing and shifting, so the findings of this study may quickly become outdated. Consider for instance that American minorities are the fastest growing sector smartphone users with an increase of 10% market penetration in just 2010 (Kellogg). More Asian-Americans, Hispanics, and African-Americans by percentage own smartphones today than whites do, which has these minority groups much more likely than whites to access the internet through mobile devices (Kellogg; Smith). If these trends continue, one suspects that the profile of the most likely app user ("male, young, educated, and affluent") could dramatically change, if it has not already. As mobile phone use becomes more ubiquitous worldwide (the UK reported 89% of citizens had a mobile phone in 2009-2010, up
4% from the year before) and as mobile phones become smart(er) phones (with more powerful computing and higher data transfer rates) it seems that we can expect app usage to become much more common (Continuous Household Survey).

With or without apps, mobile phones have proved to be popular technologies for more than just phone calls. Sending text messages, playing games, and even checking bank details on-the-go have emerged as possible activities for mobile phone owners. Photography has proved particularly popular, directly forming the social background of Instagram use. By re-defining phones as photographic devices—in addition to or substitution for conventional cameras—mobile phone owners have positively and productively responded to camera technology in phones.

In a May 2010 survey, 76% of American adults said they used their phone to take photos. This number is up from 66% a year earlier (Smith 2). In the UK, a 2009 study found that 37% of adults used their mobile phone to take photos, with rates of over 60% among young people aged 16-32 (UK Adults’ Media Literacy 2010). A year later that total number had dropped to 34%, while in the new smart phone category it was discovered that 63% of owners were using their devices to take photos (UK Adults’ Media Literacy 2011). Research in five European countries (Spain, Italy, France, Germany as well as the UK) has suggested that 57.5% of Europeans use their phones to take pictures, while 63% of Japanese mobile phone owners did the same (comScore 22). These numbers suggest that photography is a very common activity for mobile phone owners in developed countries worldwide. They also make clear that phone photography precedes Instagram, operating as a culture/community the app has attempted to cater to rather than create.
But if Instagram can claim authorship of changes in mobile phone photography, it may be in encouraging the sharing/publishing of such photos, particularly outside of existent social groups. This will be discussed at length later in the dissertation, as it forms a major part of this paper’s argument. As we seen, taking photographs with a mobile device is fairly common. But it is much less common to share those images, even among friends. The 2010 Pew Study found that of the 76% who took photos on phones, only 15% posted/submitted them to online photo blogs or databases (Smith 2). In the UK, just 20% said they sent photo messages, which would mean that almost half the people taking photos on phones felt disinclined to share them even via direct personal messaging (UK Adults’ Media Literacy 2011). A clear division is formed between taking photos and sharing them, even when the technology of capture (the mobile phone) is designed to be a communication medium.

That said, the American study focuses on something which the British inquiry has left unasked: how many mobile phone users have posted or shared their photos online rather than just via messaging. Among young people, of whom 93% use their phones to take pictures, an astonishing 81% send those photos to friends in messages, while 33% share them online (Smith 5). The high rate of photos in messaging suggests that phone-photos operate as additional communicative informative among young people. As Jose van Dijck argues:

> When pictures become a visual language channeled by a communication medium, the value of individual pictures decreases, while the general significance of visual communication augments. A thousand pictures sent over the phone may now be worth a single word: see! (van Dijck 7)
But is that 33% sharing photos online doing the same thing? Are they just posting photos to the web to say ‘hey! Look!’? Possibly, but more likely not. Because their ‘sharing’ may be more like publishing or exhibiting art than communicating closely with friends, their photos and photographic composition may be different. Though it is unclear if these young phone-photographers are sharing their photos publicly—which is to say in open web destinations – or in more controlled sites like Facebook, the point remains that beyond friend groups, young people seem inclined to publish their photos more broadly. And it is this growing trend, from taking photos on phones, to sending them to friends, and finally to publishing them online, that Instagram most closely represents.

**Instagram Itself**

**How it Developed**

The Instagram app was launched on Wednesday, October 6th 2010. In just two days, the app gained nearly 40,000 users, overwhelming its servers. As the story is told on *Mashable*, Instagram faced a make-or-break moment as the weekend neared. Either the team would have to dramatically ‘scale up’ its servers to accommodate an expected deluge of weekend photos, or the app would be swamped and go down, surely alienating and losing users (Van Grove). But the co-founders, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, were based in a “open source entrepreneurship” space called “Dogpatch Labs”. Funded by a venture capital firm, the San Francisco “coworkspace” brings together web entrepreneurs to “help founders conceive and launch startups” (Dogpatchlabs.com). Systrom and Krieger walked around the lab,
talking with the other micro-companies about how they should solve their server problem. Amazon’s cloud computing services were suggested and seconded, leading the team to switch their databases over, ‘saving’ the nascent app (Van Grove). The significance of this anecdote is the way it presents as Instagram, as empowered, from its inception, empowered by social engagement. Instead of trying to solve the problem alone, the Instagram duo played a social media trick, and asked for help from others. While perhaps a cynical reader may dismiss this early development event, it importantly foreshadows the link between the app’s sense of community and its subsequent success.

Over the next few months, Instagram grew massively. In three months, it boasted a million registered users, and six weeks later, it had a second million (Siegler 2011a). At the South by Southwest Festival- an influential Austin, Texas showcase of new films, music, and digital media startups – Instagram was the 10th most “socially discussed” company on Twitter and Facebook networks (Hampp). This was only just behind software giant Microsoft in ninth, with CNN in sixth, and Twitter itself in second.

Photo uploads have followed user growth, but as Robert Moore found in March 2011, over a third of Instagrams users have never uploaded a single image. Moore’s in-depth statistical analysis of Instagram provides not only an idea of its macro-growth (how big it is in total) but also a profile of its user base in terms of their quantifiable actions- photo uploading, and following other users. In the week of November 14th, 2010, 1.2 million photos were uploaded growing to 3.6 million photos a week – 6 per second - as of March 10, 2011 (Moore). But based on a sample
population of 9,200, Moore found that 37% of users had never uploaded a photo, and over a quarter had only uploaded 1-3 photos. Only 5% of Moore’s population had uploaded 50 photos to the service. This confirms the ‘elite’ and ‘hyperuser’ status of participants in this study, of whom all but one have uploaded 50+ photos.

Moore’s remarkable study also shows that the percentage of users uploading a photo (at least once a month) has decreased over 20% in Instagram’s first six months. Moore called the pattern consistent with other social media networks, as a filtering process takes place between users ‘trying out’ the app, and those who will become consistent users (Moore). But it is this number that is crucial in assessing the un-broadcast and therefore ‘social’ qualities of Instagram as a media platform. If participation in photo uploads dropped to say 5% of users, then the device would become more a publishing platform than a social media space where parallel consumption and production define participant action.

In February of 2011, Instagram announced that it had developed an API or application programming interface (Siegler 2011b). API’s allow third-party developers to interact with a database through commands and methods defined by the parent company (in this case, Instagram). The result is often the emergence of derivative services, websites, and applications which capitalize on the existing popularity of an app, while also attracting the original product new users and generating hype. For Instagram, this effect has proved so substantial that the New York Times has called it the spawning of “a photo ecosystem” (Wortham). Third-party applications emerging to print Instagram images as postcards (postagram),
books (keepsy), or magnets (stickygram), among other services that simply offer online (non-iPhone) browsing for the first time (e.g. webstagram).

From a research perspective, this mass proliferation of Instagram-linked technologies have both complicated and enriched the site of study, as they add new functions and dynamics to the social activities of Instagram, while also providing new lenses to analyze it. Webstagram, for instance, allowed browsing of Instagram images (returned from search terms or user names) on a PC for the first time, making quantifying image tags much faster and easier than on the ‘actual’ platform. Then again, this API-shift has problemized the very site of ‘Instagram.’ Is Instagram the iPhone app, or the photos and users its databases collect which can be accessed through their API? Because these research was begun before the API emerged, the app itself has been selected as the primary site, making the iPhone not web browsers, the location of its activity and community.

How it Works

Instagram is a free download from Apple’s App Store. It can be downloaded via PC, then synced to the iPhone, or downloaded directly on to an iPhone. When a user first opens Instagram, the app will prompt s/he to sign in or create a new account. Prior to the development of its API there was no other way to share, comment, and view images, apart from on other networks photos had been published to (e.g. Twitter, Facebook). User registration requires an email address, first and last name, and a username not yet registered. Adding age, a profile photo, or gender are all optional profile details.
Once a user registration is accepted, the app opens into a standard interface whose navigation and orientation (portrait rather than landscape) are currently inalterable. This interface guides user actions, and in part defines them, by separating and thus isolating actions like “share” from “popular” or “feed.” Theoretical frameworks for assessing interface design and human computer interaction (HCI) prove helpful for assessing Instagram’s app design and the user-app interactions. Bertelsen and Pold’s “interface criticism guide” encourages analysis of stylistic references, senses of materiality, the links (or lack thereof) between “functional” and “cultural” interfaces, and user expectations and difficulties (26). Jeffrey Bardzell’s 2009 work stresses the importance of acknowledging limits to ideas of “users” (not a single united subject, but a role inhabited by many different individuals) and the importance of thinking about the application or artifact as not simply a tool, but also a rhetoric (2362, 2363-64).

The Instagram app fills all but the top time toolbar of a iPhone. Most of the central screen space displays the app’s current content. A gray-black toolbar on the bottom allows users to navigate by five touch-sensitive digital buttons. The central button, differentiated from the rest by a pronounced, rounded top is the “share” button, which has both a camera icon and the word “share” on it. This button’s centrality and its unique shape suggest that the designers wanted to draw user attention to the button and make “sharing” images the highlighted action of the app. The other categories of the tool bar are “feed” with human head-and-shoulder silhouettes, “popular” with a heart icon, “news” with a word-bubble and framed heart-icon, and “profile” with a framed silhouette and text.
Touching any of these buttons will fill the white display space above with content from that category of Instagram. “Feed” returns a set of photos from users that one follows. Popular returns a 4 x 8 photo grid featuring the most popular images in the past few minutes. The exact criterion to be a “popular” image is not completely clear, but any user’s photos with sufficient “likes” (30 or more) may be featured. News shows comments and likes placed on one’s personal images, or offers a voyeuristic peek at what your friends are liking and commenting on.

“Profile” is an administration space, where one can alter his/her account details or counterintuitively, find friends via a sub-menu. Like Twitter, Instagram encourages a follow culture in which users consume the content of other consumers, so finding people worth following can be quite important. If you are not following anyone, your “feed” section will be completely empty. Friends can be found by searching Facebook or Twitter friends to find who has cross-registered (tied their accounts together allowing “sharing” on Facebook or Twitter in addition to on Instagram) or based on suggestions from Instagram itself (popular users or staff picks). One can also follow a user by looking them up, or by clicking their username wherever it may appear (a comment or like).

“Share” is the only button which alters the interface completely. The white display space becomes a black-framed live-image preview of one’s front-facing iPhone camera. Only four buttons exist in the “share” screen- a circled ‘x’ which will return a user to the main interface, a series of stacked squares, which signifies taking an image from the phone’s memory, a button to switch between front and back facing cameras, and a button twice as big as the other two with a camera icon
on it. This largest button will capture the image. Again, the size of the buttons has been used to emphasize image capture over the other options. Importantly, the image capture button has been placed at the bottom of the phone’s screen, where user’s thumbs generally rest, and conveniently out of the image preview. These conscious design choices emphasize photo production and sharing over simple consumption. When the camera button is depressed, there is a “click!” and whir sound to emulate the instant camera’s shutter and print-ejection sound.

The captured image is returned quickly in a new screen. Users are given the option of several filters to apply to the image, each of which give the digital snapshot an analog, toy-camera feel. Here, the debt owed by Instagram to Kodak and Polaroid is made clear in aesthetic homage. The color, focus and definition of the captured image is intentionally sabotaged by the app, to make it appear old, to make it appear as though it were taken by a snapshot or instant camera of yesteryear. This visual nostalgia has been one of the most discussed features of Instagram (and the related “Hipstamatic” app) and it will be returned to. The filters themselves have names (“gotham” “inkwell” “lord Kelvin” etc.) and offer previews of their effects in a scrolling menu below the captured image. When a filter is (or is not) applied, the user moves to a third ‘publish’ screen in which details about the image are volunteered. The image may be given a caption, and/or geo-tagged with a location (automatically or you may “add a location”). Below these options, the image can be shared via Twitter, Facebook, email or other weblog services. With a click of the “done” button, the image is published and the app opens to the “feed” where one’s image will top the recent feed content.
Any photograph may be “liked” or “commented on” by other users. Users may “lock” their photos to limit “likes” and “comments” only to users they approve, but this is rare. When a photo is uploaded, it appears in the “feed” section of a user’s followers who may then press the “like” button under the photo to offer a quick validation. There is no “dislike” button, so images have to be judged on how many “likes” they accrue instead of a like-dislike proportion. Pressing the “comment” button pulls up the iPhone’s digital keyboard and a small off-white message area. Composed “comments” are published with a touch of a “checkmark” or canceled with a touch of an “x” in a rounded red circle. Comments, likely because of the time they take to compose, are less common than simple “likes” and tend to be short messages: less than a sentence. Users may fill comments with emoticons or other animated symbols (a smiling face, a unicorn, two hands clasped in prayer, etc.) alongside or instead of written text. Users may also “tag” photos in comments, by placing a “#” in front of terms like “#london” to enter an image in a stream of other images supposedly related to that tag-term. Users may also address other users in comments by placing an “@” in front of their usernames to designate the “directed comment (e.g. thanks for the support @sontag). All comments are publicly visible beneath an image, with usernames listed as people who have “liked” and/or “commented” on an image. Comments and likes may be deleted by their users, or the photo’s owner.

Instagram is not itself an incredibly complicated app, but it’s simple interface belies a vast set of possible actions and interactions which cannot be exhausted here. As will be shown in subsequent chapters, Instagram is a space of creativity, so
users are often re-inventing the roles and processes of production that the app explicitly allows for, or encourages. For example, very few of this study’s participants captured their images using Instagram’s “camera,” and instead upload photos they have taken and/or edited on other iPhone photography apps. The Instagram app and interface should be understood as privileging two types of activity: sharing photos, via a pronounced and streamlined “share” pathway, and consuming photos, by examining them in “feed” or “popular” lists. The “news” section of Instagram also allows individuals to monitor what people are saying about their images, and responding to comments and questions on one’s images has become common. The Instagram app takes a certain iPhone interface fluency for granted, in expecting its users to understand the touch controls (tapping for a “click,” stroking up or down for a “scroll”) and make sense of the app’s design by exploration alone. There is no “guide” or “manual” for Instagram, or at least not one published by its founders. On the App Store, one can track down an app called “IG Tips” which offers a complete overview of what and how Instagram users should be doing.

**Context Conclusions**

Instagram is both a photographic apparatus and a software object, a culture whose origins are in snapshot/instant camera photography, and a technology which relies on the mobile digital platform of the iPhone. Understood in these contexts, Instagram can evaluated and examined more closely without the pretense that it is exceptional or isolated phenomenon. Indeed, positioning Instagram within the
context provided, while hardly exhaustive, should make clear the ways in which its own development builds upon previous technologies and popular practices (e.g. high percentages of mobile phone users taking photos with their phones).

The context this chapter has provided is not an exercise in technological determinism or teleology. In fact, it should be evaluated partly as ‘media archaeology’ in which a contemporary media technology is considered as a layered site of inquiry, where roots and webs must be traced down from the present surface to understand the genealogy of media devices, media use, and media cultures (Huhtamo 221-222). This approach is itself in development, working from theorists like Friedrich Kittler, Siegfried Zielinski and Erkki Huhtamo, to provide new contexts for media culture which ‘reverse-engineer’ the products we have, rather than finding a historical antecedent and projecting it forward as a teleology. This chapter has not and will not suggest that the sheer existence of mobile phones, instant cameras or Instagram itself have ‘made’ people photographers. But as the interviews and questionnaires show, the existence of these technologies can incentivize, ease, and encourage photographic practice, particularly when technology develops a social function alongside its electronics.
III: An Ethnography of Instagram

Instagram operates as both a practice and a community. Evaluated ethnographically, in which the lines between participation and observation are intentionally blurred, these twin pursuits yield nuance and depth themselves. From the manner in which Instagram users take photos, edit them and eventually share them, a personal craft culture has developed. Users pursue the production of a ‘unique view’ on the to visually and aesthetically manifest a distinct personal identity. But this individual production is always pursued within a community context, as users consciously produce images with ideas of reception and exchange within the Instagram social media network. This exchange is visible in the app’s comment culture, and in it’s tagging system, which can be used to signal membership in groups and subcultures. Exchange also occurs around the very idea of iPhone-photography, as users ask about techniques of photo composition and editing. Participation in the Instagram social media network becomes essential to understanding it, not just because taking photos allows one to perceive the choices involved in mobile phone image-making, but also because Instagram photos and comments are social interactions that build digital world (and real-world) relationships.

This chapter will assess the practice and community of Instagram through two experiential lenses. The first is a ‘real-world’ Instagram meetup in London that I attended on Thursday March 24, 2011. The second is drawn from four-weeks of using the Instagram app daily, sharing my own photos with the community, commenting on other user’s photos, and eventually, approaching users about
answering formal research questionnaires. The results of those questionnaires will be assessed in the next chapter, and will reinforce many of the observations and findings of this ethnographic analysis.

As stated in the methodology chapter, particularly attention was paid throughout the ethnographic research to emphasize my status as a social researcher. In RSVPing for the London InstaMeet, I introduced myself via the “talk” section as a sociologist looking at the social media community of Instagram. I reiterated this position throughout the InstaMeet and was pleased to find the other participants more than happy to continue speaking with me. None of the participants from that InstaMeet will be named here, and none will be quoted directly in respect to the pattern of open exchange that characterized this experience. On the app itself, I always acknowledged my researcher status in approaching users about questionnaires and formal research questions. The rest of the time, I simply participated as a genuine Instagram user, commenting and liking photos I found interesting, while trying to compose and upload photos worth sharing.

An InstaMeet in London

On Thursday March 24, 2011, a group of people gathered in London to talk about Instagram. The event was engendered by the Instagram company, but left to its users to organize themselves. Instagram set the date, the title: “World-Wide InstaMeets,” and loosely defined the event as “Instgrammers in all different parts of the world ... gather[ing] in their hometowns to meet other members of the
Instagram community” (Josh for Instagram). But the actual organizing of the event was left to Instagram users themselves. The company was in a way testing the power of its social media network to organize and make digital culture into a ‘face-to-face’ activity. Using Meetup.com, along with Twitter and Instagram itself, a call went out for Instagram users in London to come together (Meetup).

There was no pre-existing London Instagram group to message, so the event relied on users self-identifying. Consequently, the process privileged highly “connected” Instagram users who used the app enough to notice event messages, or were attentive to other networks and websites that might promote the event. This process also filtered out users who might feel uncomfortable meeting iPhone-photography colleagues outside of the mediations that joined them. In effect, the event produced a London Instagram community as it initiated individuals to such an identity. But it must be clear that the users willing to attend such an event, in overcoming anxieties about meeting relative strangers, do not necessarily comprise a ‘typical’ Instagram community from London or anywhere else. Nonetheless, the users who did RSVP and attended the meetup represent a crucial, active core of the Instagram social network for whom the idea of a community is particularly important. The only thing an attendee of the London Instagram meetup could know about the other participants was that they too shared a passion for the iPhone photography app.

Thirty one people registered for the London event, and others wrote in to say that could not come but would be happy to join future gatherings. This action signaled a play for membership in the emergent London Instagram community that
might supersede participation in this founding event. Attendees were asked to be at the George Pub in Southwark at 7 pm, but the initial meetup organizer (a user who saw Instagram’s first message and started the London event) decided to add a “photowalk” from Big Ben to the pub an hour earlier. This second event added direct photographic practice to the more social event at the pub. I eagerly RSVPed for both events.

**The Photowalk**

Of the nine people who showed up to the photowalk, only the Meetup organizer had ever been a part of a purely digital community becoming physical. As we walked off from Westminster towards the South Bank, he explained how he had once participated in a similar event at a photo-conference, and this had given him the courage to try it out in London. At first participants shook hands and introduced themselves, offering their usernames alongside “real” names. The usernames were quickly looked up on the Instagram app as everyone began “following” everyone else on the walk. Having never imagined needing to actually say my username (@zmccune) rather than simply type it, I became frustrated spelling out the orally impractical handle. Some of the other ‘photo-walkers’ relied entirely on the Instagram usernames rather than given names, addressing people in conversation as though we were still “online.”

The very idea of a “photowalk” recalls the figure of the flâneur. Taken from the literature of Baudelaire, and entered into critical theory through Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, the flâneur is a figure of movement- an individual who
consumes the very space s/he moves through. Susan Sontag recognized in the
flâneur and unmistakably photographic figure, a person whose desire to capture,
objectify, and consume the passing world yearns for the photographic apparatus.

The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker
reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic
stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes.
Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flaneur
finds the world 'picturesque' (Sontag 55)

Collapsing the two categories of being: photographer and walker, Sontag’s
assessment of the flâneur leads directly to the term “photowalk.” But there is
more than etymology to the comparison, for the InstaMeet “photowalk” also
yielded a “solitary” activity in which the participants found the world
“picturesque.” In fact, the operating assumption of any walk with a camera is
that world is by its nature a site of images worth capturing. Almost
everything about the very planning of the photowalk promised this
photogenic/picturesque world for the participants. The timing coincided
with a spectacular sunset, we began at Big Ben, and we walked along the
South Bank strand with tourist attractions, the London skyline, and the
Thames as ready subjects. Not to take anything away from the talent of the
photowalkers, but we were placed in a photo-ready situation that was ripe
for exploitation by our latent flâneural prejudices.

Before we formally set out to capture photos, people looked over one
another’s images and commented on them out loud. It was scene that would be
repeated at the pub later, as the actual Instagram photos became the orientation
points of conversation in the “real” world just as they are on the app. We walked through the South Bank growingly individualized. There seemed to be a desire to take unique photos, so we avoided subjects we saw others capturing. When certain iconic subjects – such as Big Ben or a sunset behind the London eye – proved common targets, everyone sought a different angle, a different filter, or a different light setting, etc to mark it as their own. Though we were traveling and photographing as a group, individual vision and perspective was the desired end. Just halfway into the walk, the group had broken into small pairs or individuals who barely in sight of one another. The fracturing was not anti-social, but rather a consequence of a certain productive ideal: perhaps the model of an individual genius.

In fairness, different subjects interested different people. Some of the group preferred “streetphoneography” or image-making that catches passer-bys in candid action. Others were interested in architecture, or in the sunset over the city, or animals, or graffiti, or Thames boats, etc. But there was also a sense that the ‘photo-walkers’ wanted a chance to impress one another through their images rather in spoken conversation (or at least that part of the evening would wait). This was a continuation of the Instagram mediation culture – where communication is centered on images rather than individuals. Images come to represent an individual, suggesting their perspective. It is akin to what Susan Sontag called the “heroism of vision”. “There is a peculiar heroism abroad in the world since the invention of cameras: the heroism of vision. Photography opened up a new model of freelance
activity- allowing each person to display a certain unique, avid sensibility” (Sontag 89).

During that photowalk, the iPhone became primarily a photographic apparatus. But as a communicative device, the iPhone also connected all the photographers to Instagram and thus reconnecting the group again. Individual user images were collected alongside each other by use of a shared tag in our image descriptions: “#londoninstameet” or later “#longram”. The photowalk thus became largely virtual- a collected archive of digital images, a common tag we all used. Though the sense of personable fellowship was failing in the “first” world, on Instagram it became all the stronger as images accumulated and constructed a shared central memory. The group was a photographic machine with many eyes. And tellingly, this group flourished on Instagram while fracturing into individuals in physical London. Instagram after all was the space that mattered.

**The Pub**

If the photowalk presented the Instagram user in practice- an individual guided by solitary photographic ideals - the George Pub presented the communal aspect of the app, where people found photography as a common node in emergent relationships. The assembled group at the Pub was quite large, possibly even larger than the 31 who RSVPed on the Meetup web page. Individuals were milling about, pints of beer and glasses of wine in hand, introducing themselves. It was clear that almost no one in attendance had any previous relationship to anyone else at the gathering, save a few who had begun following one another on Instagram in
anticipation. As at the photowalk, the courage and trust of individuals at a gathering with almost complete strangers was remarkable. People were incredibly friendly, with particularly confident leading the socializing between more timid individuals including myself. Almost everyone had their iPhones out, and periodically raised them to frame a photograph. For the other pub patrons on the terrace, the scene must have seemed absurd, but for late arrivals, the ubiquity of iPhones signaled clearly that this was the Instagram group.

The London InstaMeet attendees were a rather diverse. Ages and occupations spanned from university first-years to middle-aged professionals. The meetup included a generous amount of media and web technology professionals, including a few who would launch Instagram-tethered products in the future, but this group was not as dominant as might be expected. An informal sample yielded a graphic designer, a police officer, a lawyer, a businessman, a research scientist, a film student, a media consultant, and an actress. There was also a relatively balanced number of men and women. Spanning these professional, gender, and age categories, the InstaMeet showed how photography, particularly iPhone-photography could cross boundaries as a common hobby and passion. Asked about why they took photos or shared (formal answers in the chapter) many attendees spoke about photography as a creative escape from their jobs or worries, and valorized the community as something that supported their continued practice of photography.

Keep in mind that as a sample, the attendees of the London InstaMeet were anything but random. This was a self-selecting group who were able to find the
event online (for new physical promotion had been done), passionate/confident enough to attend it, and sufficiently dedicated to travel to a South Bank pub on a Thursday evening in March. All of which makes the balanced composition of the group and its seeming heterogeneity all the more interesting. No one had put together this group, and yet it was visibly diverse.

As people socialized over drinks, a series of informal surveys and lists collected information about the group. This research, not my own initiative, asked the attendees to volunteer their usernames, favorite apps besides Instagram, and suggest improvements for the Instagram app which may or may not have been passed back to the company. The given purpose of the username list was that it would allow everyone to easily follow one another. But this list also offered a raw census of the group, though the lateness of the survey (over an hour into the event) and its haphazard movement through the group meant it hardly provided a reliable figure. When this list was later posted to the Meetup web page, it totaled 17 users. These were a central core of the group, a set of individuals who had stuck around long enough to be counted in the tally, and a group who wished to share their Instagram identity. When there was a few-day delay in this list being posted to the Meetup web page, several attendees complained, seemingly impatient to re-connect with these Instagram acquaintances.

A second informal survey asked people to write down their favorite photography apps beside Instagram. This was already a popular conversation topic, and when the survey went through the group, it caused a ripple of excited conversation. Individuals began sharing their iPhone screens with one another as
they pointed out and demoed apps that allowed editing tricks beyond the power of Instagram alone. A consensus formed that no one in the group “really” took photos with Instagram’s capture screen. Almost everyone preferred to take images with other apps, and tweak them in secondary or tertiary apps, suggesting a several-stop image-making process.

Attendees hailed “Camera+” and “Hipstamatic” as favored starting points to capture images. Others preferred “HDR” or high dynamic range apps to capture images at two exposures (high and low) and then merge them, creating photographs with exceptional color and contrast ranges. Editing apps like “Photoshop Express” and Camera+’s “lightbox” were used as intermediaries- places to refine the images or correct for problems in the initial capture. Then a user might pull the image into “labelbox” or “diptic” to add on-image captions or group several images into a single frame. Only then might an image be uploaded to Instagram, where it might receive an additional Instagram filter on top of all this previous processing.

The InstaMeet attendees spoke with pride about the duration and intensity of this multi-app composition technique. Almost as a corrective against the ease of iPhone-photography, the gathered group privileged craftsmanship and involved techniques of production. On iPhone screens shared with me, I saw dozens of photography apps clustered consciously together, and watched individuals work a single image through pathways of apps, doubling back at times to re-render a filter, or extenuate an effect. The observation recalled Ansel Adams book on the early Polaroid camera, which consciously complicated the process of the “instant” image, to add it a certain artistic merit (Adams in Buse 222). In this elite Instagram
community, the same phenomenon seemed at work, as users converted their close attention and commitment to photographs whose quality suggested a distinct artfulness.

Fluent with several apps, engrossed in the processing of images across a myriad of effects, the London InstaMeet group represented an elite Instagram user. Seeing attendees move through several apps seamlessly, with clear ideas of how they wished to adjust their images, I felt vaguely unworthy. Until this point, I had never spent longer than a minute capturing and composing an image for sharing on Instagram. But after the event, I purchased several of the apps I’d seen other attendees use and began to play around with their effects. Other novice users had done the same during the event, as they purchased apps recommended by more experienced users.

Several users helped me get the feel of certain techniques. Looking over another attendees’ images, I could ask directly how they had achieved an effect and found them more than happy to share their ‘secrets.’ Users would refer to specific limitations of the iPhone camera, certain apps for certain corrections, and even certain effects within apps that were particularly powerful. There was a distinct expertise- a certain technical capital – that had been accumulated by experience individuals. But the sharing of this capital seemed a crucial part of the community’s ethos. The InstaMeet statement had suggested this might happen, but with no one to enforce such sharing, the spirit of exchange could only be produced by individuals genuinely sharing their knowledge. The app list became a valuable resource for me and the few other attendees who were relatively new and inexperienced with
Instagram. But among the bulk of the group, each app was familiar and they all had opinions about them. It was quite clear that the InstaMeet attendees were not just Instagram users, but dedicated iPhone-photographers, or as the tag on Instagram shortens it, “#iPhoneographers”.

As the night drew to close, the assembled group turned the iPhones on themselves, documenting the individuals and activities of the night. These visual records capture the spirit of community and exchange which characterized our time at the pub. In an image I captured and shared on Instagram, several attendees look at their iPhones individually at a table (McCune 2011a). What one cannot hear is their conversation as one led the other through a complicated way of touching up an image. In another Instagram photo, I am shown talking with two other attendees (Bile). Comments and likes on these photos accumulated from people in the room, at the event even as we remained talking to one another. The iPhones were never put away, as they were parts of our raison d’etre and points of mediation for our socializing. Individuals browsed Instagram images, commenting, liking or uploading them, even in mid-sentence.

Early in the event, a group photo was taken. As the selected photographer framed the image with his iPhone he sarcastically criticized the ‘limited’ camera and shouted ironically “does anyone have a proper camera?” to general laughter in the group (Instameetlondon). The point was, with a proper camera one might be able to take a better picture, but one could not share it at that same moment. As Instagram documented the InstaMeet, creating a tight circuit of production and consumption, the significance of the meetup was clear. Photography, when networked through a
sharing platform, becomes incredibly social. It was, of course, already a social
device, as it documented people’s lives and united in conversation, but generally
only in communities and groups that *preceded* the photographs. With the Instagram,
a community is formed by photography for photography, and its actions are almost
entirely photographic. Taking photos and interacting with them online
simultaneously, the London InstaMeet blurred the boundaries between “real” and
digital space, suggesting their collapsing together. Even as new relationships grew
in-person, the activity online remained the point of conversation, action, and
interaction. One set of new friends took a photo in which each person was
photographing the screen of another iPhone on Instagram (Ping). The layered,
endless Instagram images suggested the nature of Instagram relationships – linked
photographic practices that convert individuals into mediated groups.

Since that first London InstaMeet, there have been at least two other
attempts to bring individuals back together again. In the run-up for these
subsequent events, there *is* a set group of individuals to message directly: the
individuals who RSVPed to the first event. There are also the Instagram tags we
used to mark our images at that first event, which can be understood as a sort of
community title or shibboleth. “#InstaMeetLondon” was one of the tags used, and to
date it has been marked to 437 images. “#Longram” was another of the popular tags,
which returns 360 images. These tags are not historical markers in that they
continue to be used by members of that first group. Where they once marked photos
taken during the InstaMeet, and offered concurrent global InstaMeets (such as New
York’s, San Francisco’s or Singapore’s) the ability to go through the images from our
group, they now signify a community of people and their unique visions. Tagging an image “#longram” does not ensure it has anything to do with London, but instead that a user wants the #Longram community to see the image. Even now, a look through the photos reveals that new images have been uploaded in the past 10 hours, all from users I recognize from the first meeting (Webstagram 2011a). As the solitary photowalkers have gone off their separate ways, the tag continues to signify a community within Instagram, and our images represent our individual vision yearning for a united, yet entirely mediated social space.

**On the App**

There are two primary modes of actions on Instagram, which are typical of most social media practice. A user may *produce* content by sharing an image, or *consume* content by examining, liking, and commenting on the images of others. This rough Marxist binary is not always consciously delineated in the mind of a user, but in practice, the app only allows one of these actions to take place at a time. Thus, a user is forced to shuttle between these two *modes of Instagram*, which are better labeled *share* and *engage* to avoid pulling forward the theoretical baggage attached of production/consumption. Importantly, a user *must* participate in both modes of action in order to gain “real” membership in the community aspects of the app. Without both sharing and engaging, a user falls back into the dynamics of mass media where cultures (tools and experiences) of production and cultures of consumption were intentionally separated. *Share* and *Engage* each break down into
smaller patterned events such as styles of production, frequency of sharing, types of comments, and conversation vs. compliment. By working through this framework of Instagram action, one can begin to observe patterns and logics in Instagram, within its dynamic creativity. The observations and analyses done in this section are taken from four weeks of ethnographic engagement with the Instagram social media network.

Share

The interface design of Instagram emphasizes the sharing process by enlarging and centering the share button in the app menu. The app icon itself emulates a camera, with a lens in the middle of the icon, suggesting the importance of taking images, rather than receiving them. When a user examines a personal profile (including that of his/herself), the profile will begin its statistics with how many images one has shared before listing followers/users one follows. Below, the ‘content’ of the profile are the photos one has taken, and personal photos (either yours or another users) are the only sites for conversing with other users. Sharing an image may not be the first thing a new Instagram user does, or the most frequent action of a longtime user, but it is primary in that it comprises the identity of a user and contributes directly to one’s ability to communicate.

Shared photos suggest a photographer’s interests, styles, locations, and lifestyles. By ‘reading’ an image, a user makes judgments about where peers live or have traveled, by assuming a first person relationship between the photographed subjects and the iPhoneographer. ‘Reading’ the content of images also suggests the
sorts of things that arrest the eye of another user, encoding personal ideas of vision, or what some survey respondents called “seeing through the eyes of others.” Even Instagram’s labeling of the photograph process as “share” suggests that the image is more than published. It’s circulated as a gift or a personal object lent out among a trusted community.

Despite the ease of sharing images on Instagram, individuals generally avoid sharing excessively, with even ‘active’ and highly followed individuals only sharing a handful of images in a day. Many of the users I followed would share 2-3 images in a day, sometimes going several days without posting an image. This may be related to the small screen of the iPhone, which can only display a single image at a time, and/or the app’s settings, which default to loading ten images in a feed. But there is no limit to how many images a user may share, so it seems the userbase has developed this as a cultural norm rather than a logistic requirement.

In composing and selecting images to share, users seem to rely on well-worn subjects or popular styles. This does not completely efface the individuality of the photographer, but instead circumscribes it within repeated categories of production. #Streetphotography for instance, is a popular image tag (23rd on the top 100 tags) and image style, that I have observed often among both users I follow and Instagram’s “popular” feature (Webstagram 2011b). Pet photographs, landscapes, portraits, and cloud images are other frequent subjects with HDR (high dynamic range), black and white, and Hipstamatic filterings as popular Instagram aesthetics. In a 14:34 GMT survey of Instagram’s popular images on April 15, 2011, I counted nine pet photographs (seven cats, two dogs), four nature photographs, and three
street scenes among 32 total images. A 14:54 GMT survey on May 16, 2011 totaled twelve nature photographs, four pet photos, and six portraits of 32 images.

According to totals on Webstagram, #cat is the top photo tag with nearly 111,000 photos, #sky is third at 90,000, and #flower is fifth at 66,000 (Webstagram 2011b). Stylistically, #blackandwhite is the 25th most used tag with 23,370 images and #hipstamatic is 26th with 22,734 (Webstagram 2011b).

The repetition of these terms does not mean that Instagram sharing is generic or clichéd, but that the culture of sharing on Instagram is highly reflexive, with users drawing ideas for personal subjects and styles from the site. Alternatively, the pre-existing popular photographic practices are rendered explicit by Instagram’s community. Popular subjects and styles should not be equated with redundant or repetitive photos, as experimentation within a form or a subject may yield countless permutations and opportunities for innovation. The point is, Instagram’s photo sharing is at once personal and social—it is developed by an individual for a group, but that group also informs the individual producing the image. The negotiation between individual production and common categories of style and subject repeats the individual/community dialectic that Instagram continues to be characterized by.

Engage

The sharing of an image on Instagram is a simply an individual’s action, until the Instagram community engages it. At that moment of consumption, particularly in the moments of liking and commenting on an image, the photograph becomes a
mediation of social interaction, it brokerson relationships. The nature of these relationships can be silent and passing: one may examine an image and move on, with no trace left to the photographer of the visit. The engagement may be superficial: a like from a user a photographer does not know. The engagement may be cursory, but kind: a short word of encouragement in a brief comment. Or the engagement may be the beginning of a distinct exchange, in which a question or in-depth response to the image prompts a conversation between photographer and viewer, with the possibility of still other users jumping in.

Early in my participant observation I shared an image of Susan Sontag’s On Photography to Instagram. The initial responses were small heart icons- “likes”. I might have hoped for a few kind words about the image’s composition or its framing, but those comments did not come. Instead, two users not yet known to me began discussing their feelings about the book in the comments. The first was at once addressed to me, and completely open: “have you read Regarding the pain of the others? That’s really good as well. Actually she was brilliant.” A second user responded before I could: “it is. im reading a book by liz wells with excerpts of other photographers/critics and its aggravating, some of them i swear just write nonsensical shit cause they want to sound smart. when everything can be said in intellectual english. also another good read is graham clark book called the photograph” (McCune 2011b). By the time I responded to these comments, the image had become a site of a conversation. Several more exchanges ensued about Sontag, photography, and the social culture of Instagram. All too ironically, the exchange was itself a sign of the social potential of Instagram images.
When a user “likes” an image, his/her user name becomes attached to the image. It will then be visible to the photographer, other viewers, and the user’s followers as a “news” action. Thus, every like is a sort of stitching or networking of users. It is a gesture of support and compliment- the amount of “likes” an image generates is how it will be assessed as “popular” or not- but it is also a social action in that it creates a relationship between that user and the photograph. Frequently, photographers will examine the photos of users who have liked their photos and will return the favor. This tightens the nascent relationship, and these users may even formalize this respect by following one another.

Because the “like” requires only a single button press, where the comment requires several even dozens of keystrokes as well as a ‘thought’ to share, the comment is privileged as the higher compliment. When a user compliments a photo, the owner may express gratitude or explain more about the image (such as it where it is, the type of cat, or the app used to get a certain color range). Alternatively, a user may tag a photo to categorize it (e.g. #london), enter it into an archive of favorite images (as in “#zacksfaves”) or tag another user in a comment to alert them to this photo (e.g. “@zmccune check this out!”). Each of these practices extends and expands the social potential of the image, which becomes increasingly social with more comments and likes. At a certain threshold of likes (the exact number is always increasing with the population of users) a photo may be selected into Instagram’s “popular” feed where it will accrue many more likes and comments.

The comment fields of images are open spaces. They can be filled with emoticons as well as text, and the language of the comments can vary as well. As an
image becomes popular, it enters more and more global feeds, and comments may begin to accumulate in several languages, highlighting the cosmopolitan aspect of Instagram while exposing the regional tendencies of certain Instagrammers. Typical comments respond to visual elements in the image, or praise a certain decision made by the photographer. The small screen size again seems to encourage more succinct comments, a tendency reinforced by difficulties with the on-screen iPhone keyboard. But long comments are not uncommon, and contribute to users taking other users more seriously. I tried to keep my comments longer and more specific about images, and consequently received comments back from photographers thanking me for the thoughts or responding to statements I made.

Ultimately, engaging other Instagram images increases engagement with one’s own images, encouraging the socialization of Instagrammers alongside their own personal sharing. Engaging other user’s photos develops conversations, threads of networks, and relationships: formal (following one another) and informal (friends through the mediated space of the app). As the two modes of Instagram, inform one another, users are increasingly motivated to share and engage not as separate actions, but as a closed circuit of Instagram use that defines the app as a social media object.
**IV: Six Types of User Motivation**

This research project began with a simple question, a question common to social media: why do users share personal media with global networks of people they do not know? In the effort to answer that question, this project focused on a single photo-sharing app called Instagram and its users. While the technology and the design of Instagram may inform the decisions of its users, and the history of photography may implicate Instagram in a dynamic of popular photographic practices, it is ultimately the Instagram users who define how the app has been used, popularized, and feted. These users are the force that compose and engender the culture that Instagram represents. Accordingly, it is only in addressing these users directly, that questions of personal to social media motivations can be answered.

With 23 responses from 25 questionnaires, a set of six common motivations emerged. They can be summarized as *sharing, documentation, seeing, community, creativity* and *therapy*. *Sharing* motivations were akin to “enjoying something jointly with others” or “possessing a view in common with others” (Oxford American Dictionary). *Documentation* rationales included the urge to capture, record, or preserve experiences that felt transient to users. *Seeing* represents the urge to “look through the eyes of others” and present one’s own viewpoint for a similar exchange of vision. *Community* motivations acknowledged the thrill of responses from other users, a sense of audience, and the productive incentives of social interaction. Next, statements about “creative outlets” or “artistry” were common to discussions of
creativity as a motivation. Finally, a small set of users spoke of social photography as a therapy that promised certain senses of “healing” or “well-being.”

In this chapter, each of these six motivations will be examined in depth. User statements will be assessed to look at the particularities of each rationale. Comparisons will also be made between the London and global groups to see if gaps and discrepancies exist. Generally, the two groups exhibited the same patterns, but in some cases a notable deviation is apparent. Near the end of the chapter, the specific results of questions will also be examined, but generally these results will be addressed within the framework of the motivations themselves.

Sharing

The word “share” has become a key term for the activities and communities that compose social media networks. On Instagram, the term is central to the design of the app and its marketing. The largest button in the Instagram interface is a camera icon with the word “share” beneath it. On the Instagram homepage, the app is described as “a fast, beautiful and fun way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures,” stressing ‘share’ as the verb that defines the app’s activity and significance (Instagr.am). In the last chapter, the entire productive mode of Instagram was described as sharing, organizing photo-composition, editing and publishing into this macro-category. On my questionnaire, the word “share” was used in the second question- “Why share [photos] on Instagram, rather than say, keeping them private?” – providing it as a term to describe the action of contributing photos on the app’s network.
Given this ubiquity, it is hardly surprising than many survey respondents commented on the “sharing” aspects of Instagram. But importantly, their responses reframe the idea of sharing, stressing the pleasure of allowing photographs to become objects of value to people beyond themselves. We respondents wrote about sharing, they stressed the presence of others. “I love to share” photographs was echoed by “I want to share it with my friends” or “I want to share it with people” or “sharing photos on IG can share each other’s point of view.” From a categorical perspective, “sharing” is not so much its own independent motivation as it is part of other motivations such as community and seeing. The responses above highlight how sharing blurs into concerns for a community, or a desire to exchange vision. Other responses connect “sharing” to the desire for critical community responses and self-improvement. One respondent wrote “sharing my pictures and inviting feedback (judgment) helps me to critical about my photographs.” Still other respondents connected sharing with personal memory and documentation. “I just love to capture a moment, share it with others, and cherish it forever.” One further respondent linked sharing with therapy. “I want to share [photography] with people as a therapy practice, for those who are trying to find alternative methods of coping…” While many of these respondents will be revisited, each of them uses the word “share” signaling the plethora of activities and meaning that sharing can engender.

The object being shared on Instagram is almost always the photograph or image. In each of the responses above, users write of images as objects to share. In fact, this becomes the essential value of the Instagram image, that it is shared, rather
than privately kept and prized. But of course, the sharing culture respondents write
of also includes the comment and engage culture that their photographs receive as
shared objects. Because the users have given their photographs to a community,
they are able to enjoy *with* that community, along with what compliments and
approvals the community may award the image.

As a verb, share can be defined in several ways, each of which is visible in the
sharing culture and sharing statements of Instagram users. Sharing may mean “to
tell someone about something” as in communicate. Or it may mean “to posses a
quality or view in common with others.” It may even entail “enjoying a possession
jointly with others” or “giving a portion of something to others” (Oxford American
Dictionary). Because the Instagram image is a digital object, bounded and shared by
communications technology, it is very much a thing *told* in that it is passed through
communication networks and indeed communicates something. One London
respondent hailed the Instagram image as a way to “share visual status updates”
which is certainly sharing in this communicative meaning. Any Instagram image,
whether it belongs to a user or not, is enjoyed “jointly” among a community. Because
the digital image can be reproduced infinite times, it can be co-viewed and thus
possessed simultaneously, allowing a sharing culture in which there is no scarcity to
constrain generosity. Finally, the idea of “possessing a view in common with others”
is perhaps the most obvious sharing principle of Instagram use, in which individual
visions become community objects, and community objects can become personal
views. This exchange is the sharing core, or foundation, on which many of the other
motivations for using Instagram rely. Though sharing may be the most generic and
abstract of Instagram user motivations, it is most pervasive with nearly three quarters of respondents discussing sharing in their surveys.

**Documentation**

Respondents’ expressed urge to capture, record, and preserve “memories” and “moments” constitute the motivation of *documentation*. In the London group, 9 of 12 respondents discussed documentation in some form, while 7 of 11 Global respondents did the same. Their writing highlights a perception that photography can arrest and objectify a world that quickly passes by and changes. “The world is constantly changing and so I am documenting it” responded one user to the question ‘Why do you take Photos?’ Others answered the same question “to remember a moment” or “immortalize transient moments” or “capture emotions” as in “capture an interesting or emotional moment … before it vanishes.” These answers emphasize the value of photography as an aid to memory and to posterity. The answers above are ambivalent about who benefits from this documentation and capturing, suggesting that anyone might ultimately benefit.

Other respondents were more personal, emphasizing the value of photography as a means to record and narrate their own life in images. “I take photos to remember my personal journey in life” expressed one respondent. “I like documenting my life, being able to look back and know what I was doing” wrote another who then added that his/her work on Instagram offered “documentation” of New York, “for those who like NY or hope to come here.” The ambiguity between personal and global documentation seems to sit at the heart of Instagram user
motivations, as other users will express the belief that they are ‘sharing views and viewpoints on the world’ in the seeing section.

The idea of documentation as a motivation for photography and Instagram use suggests immense trust/belief in the Instagram social network as an archive. Scholars have assessed similar beliefs in other social media networks such as YouTube, and have found that this trust in public media housed by corporations is a part of the broader technological development of ‘cloud’ computing (Snickars 292 – 313). The paradox is of course that the fragility and mutability of digital data (think of file formats from even ten years ago) continually undermines the promise of ‘evergreen’ or ‘eternal’ digital media content. It should be clarified that while many users highlighted documentation as motivation for taking photographs generally, only a handful wrote of it directly in regards to Instagram. Nevertheless, respondents belief that photographs document and preserve their lives, memories and experiences, is surely attached to the photos they share on Instagram, binding the importance of photographs as persistent media objects and incentives to use Instagram.

Seeing

The human sense of sight, as augmented and accelerated by the Instagram app, was discussed by over half of the questionnaire respondents. Of that group, there was a delineation between responses that celebrated the transmission of their own personal vision to the world, and those who emphasized the more social exchange of viewpoints between different users. The first type of user emphasized
the power to “be seen by as large an audience as possible” on Instagram, and to “reflect on how I see things.” Related to the idea of “visual status updates” this individualist ideal presents Instagram as more of a publishing platform than a social media network of exchange. It also resembles the narcissism that Zizi Papacharissi observed in an ethnographic study of Facebook photography (Mendelson & Papacharissi 2011). Papacharissi detailed the ways in which Facebook photos tended to be expressions of individuals and groups in superficial exhibitions of personal identities.

Also intrinsic to this response is the idea of a personal world view that can be mediated by photography and thus by Instagram. This view is not necessarily fixed, or static, and that these photographers do not have a firm sense of their “eye.” Instead, respondents wrote of photography on Instagram as a “search for the elusive individual style which is my own ‘voice’/ ‘eye’” and a “way to see in life in ways that you never noticed before.” So while some respondents may have been interested in the projection of their vision as a narcissistic/authorial product, others conceive of Instagram as a part of their process of visual self-discovery. Vision, as a motivation for Instagram users, can be about publishing a fixed ideal of the world, or searching for it.

The second type of seeing responses emphasized a user’s ability “see the photographs of people around the world” through Instagram. Generally, this type of seeing was a motivation emphasized in responses to the survey’s second question, ‘Why share [photos] on Instagram rather than say, keeping them private?’ About a third of respondents surveyed responded to that question with something about
sharing vision with others. “I like seeing other people’s worlds through their eyes” answered one respondent. Another added that as a reason to use Instagram, seeing should go both ways: “people can see through my eyes, and vise versa [sic].” Unlike the previous one-way dynamic, this belief in co-vision situates Instagram as a two-way interchange of individuality.

This exchange of vision as an enriched cultural experience is stereotypical of social media. The ideal is an “open” culture in which users validate one another’s work as an alternative to a handful of producers working for hordes of consumers. While this model has been attacked as “romantic” by authors like Andrew Keen and Lee Siegel, those authors are only attacking other polemicists of social media and ignoring considerations of how users assess their own production and desire to be in social media spaces. Thus, the presence of responses validating and emphasizing share life through global media networks in this survey directly contradict the assumptions of Keen and Siegel. Particularly as some respondents have elected to use Instagram in addition to conventional media outlets that formerly presented them “the world” exclusively. One respondent explained that Instagram “is a good way to see what’s going on in peoples lives all over the world.” This statement indicates a new type of mediation where the direct peer-to-peer (individuals rather than collective) sharing of ideas, media, or life stories can be brokered through media technologies rather than by them.
Community

In acknowledging interaction with other users, particularly the support and encouragement of comments and feedback, use responses emphasized community as a motivation for using Instagram. Respondents discussed community aspects of the app in answering four of the five questions, leaving only the fourth question about photography as a ‘hobby or profession’ without responses that celebrated ‘InstaSociety.’ 7 of 12 London respondents wrote of community in answering why they shared photos on Instagram, and a stunning 10 of 11 did the same in Global group. Seven respondents in each group discussed the importance of community interactions in answering fifth question ‘Do the photos of other Instagram users inform the photos you take or the way you take them?’ Finally, on the third question- Do you feel you take photos for yourself or for others?- 11 of 12 London users discussed community, while only six of the global group did the same. This discrepancy, on the few in the survey results, is likely linked to the presence of professional photographers among the Global sample who may be communicating an occupational pride.

The community responses can be broken down into two types of statements. The first set are statements which value other users as an abstract entity or collective, resembling the sharing and seeing comments which a sense of community rather than specific functions. The second set of statements highlight community actions, particularly community feedback and comments on images as inspirational and supportive. The first set is characterized by comments like “the joy of Instagram [is] finding others who love photography and love sharing their photos with you” or
"I thrive off of having a common interest with other people combined with a perfect way of communication." The second set is evidenced by assertions like "I admire and value other people’s work and their comments about my own photos" or "I like the fact that other people can see my photos and give me some kind of feedback no matter how tribal or analytical it is." The difference between these types of response is somewhat subtle, but distinguishing between community abstractly construed and community as a sect of interactions allows us to perceive the particular value of the engage culture discussed in the ethnography chapter.

Because the vast majority of community comments relate to "feedback" comments or "critique," it is quite clear that these actions are particularly and motivating for my Instagram respondents. By sharing an image on Instagram users may "find out how people might react to it," creating a feedback loop that is faster than previous photo-sharing cultures. "The Instagram community is unlike any other I’ve encountered. It’s instant feedback" wrote one respondent. Another added "since I discovered Instagram, it has allowed me to get better, to get some validation from fellow users. To get feedback." Like a cybernetic process, in which feedback continually improves a process or device, Instagram users are empowered by the rapid critical ability of the social media network. Perhaps this ‘instant response’ and ‘instant gratification’ experience is one of the meanings of “Insta” in “Instagram,” and a direct continuation of the Kodak-Polaroid trajectory, except that the innovation has been more social (as in global social networks) than photographic.

Because Instagram allows photographs to be quickly assessed and validated by a host of users, individuals are more incentivized to keep producing. "The
community itself is addictive” explained a respondent “inspiring me to take pictures to show the community: it feeds itself.” “Sharing has add another dimension to my photography,” added another user “where I am constantly seek to my photos better, spurred in by other user’s comments and critiques.” Even when users appear to be more individualist and anti-community, their comments ultimately stress a sense of community. A user explained that he/she uploaded photos to Instagram to “make people envy. Show off. Get ego boost from nice photos. Sharing with friends.” This comment, like the previous too, positions other users’ perceptions of one’s photos (perceived jealousy included) as a cause to engage with Instagram. The culture of engaging and supporting image-making on Instagram empowers a sense of community which proves a significant motivating to its users.

Creativity

Describing the app as an “outlet,” and photography as a place for “artistry,” a small set of respondents hailed Instagram as a site for creativity. Six individuals explicitly presented photography as an opportunity to be creative, while just three of the 23 discussed creativity directly in regards to Instagram. Nevertheless, this creative urge is a significant part of Instagram use as I observed in users' experimentations during my four weeks of using the app consistently. Perhaps the difficulty in fully recognizing the importance of creativity in Instagram is actually in how one thinks of it. This study has been literal in assessing creativity, looking for terms such like “creative” as “Photography is a creative outlet “ or “artistry” in user responses. But if the idea of creativity is expanded to include the concept of craft– as
in learning or developing an aesthetic skill— the numbers of “creative” responses increases significantly. 5 of 11 Global respondents discussed improving their photography through using Instagram, and 6 of 12 London respondents reported the same.

The word *creativity* may be too loaded to accurately represent the artistic/craft motivations among certain respondents. What users wrote of was more akin to playful production and experimentation, an experience of learning and improving their personal photography. “When I see particularly striking images, that stand out, I try to consider what I like about them, and think if I an produce something similar.” “I wish to learn more about photography and sometimes may use peoples ideas of style s and blend with my own.” “It’s a challenge to find a moment that works in a photograph.” A *creative* challenge, rather than a technical one.

This idea of creativity could also be considered as craftsmanship. Richard Sennett’s work has theorized craftsmanship as “a commitment to and a quality of work that is not simply about survival but is about something that culture adds to work so that it has value” (33). This is to say that mere technical prowess is not sufficient, an individual must mediate their own work with an impulse towards creativity that comes from individual passion. This creative impulse, beyond “survival” is made up of play, experimentation, and learning which let “you repeat, mature into, grow, build” as a craftsman (Sennett 53). Many of the respondents discussed a sense of personal growth in their statements. That feeling was always described positively, as something that kept Instagram meaningful. To follow
Sennett, this sense of growth is the feeling of craftsmanship that creativity both informs and is itself defined by. When users wrote of growth and learning, they were writing of craft, which is to say they were writing of creativity.

Most of the learning/creativity statements came in response to the survey’s fifth question which asks if users are inspired by other Instagram images. Rather than just answering yes, many participants explained how much they learned from other users. The first two responses above are answers to the fifth question that stress how engaging other images allows personal production to improve. This is a peer to-peer creativity. A social exchange of more than viewpoints (from the seeing section) as production itself is shared and traded. Like the part of the London InstaMeet in which users traded tips and techniques for taking better photos, the Instagram network itself does something similar. When users write of the value of learning, they are presenting creative improvement as something desired that Instagram presents. This form of creative practice, beyond the literal use of the term, is a sizeable Instagram motivation observed in user responses.

**Therapy**

The belief that Instagram provides forms of “healing” “coping” and broad “life lessons” compose the motivation of therapy. This motivation is the least explicitly discussed motivation among respondents. It is also a motivation for engaging with social media that has not been seriously considered in scholarship before, as it would seem that in ignoring direct user’s responses (as so many social media analyses do) user’s could not add this rationale among the more theorized
motivations like community and creativity. Only two London participants and two global discussed the therapeutic values of Instagram, but their comments were poignant and detailed, suggesting a gravity to this motivation. One respondent wrote that he/she took photos “for my mental well-being, honestly” and that he/she wanted to “share it with people as a therapy practice for those who are trying to find alternative methods of coping (whether it be medical or psychological).” Another participant wrote of photography as “a highly therapeutic form of escapism where I can truly indulge my creative side.”

Another response directly addresses Instagram as a community in which healing and well-being can be provided.

Social photo sharing has been a social lifeline for me. I’m severely hard of hearing, and fit neither in the hearing world nor the deaf world. I thrive off common interest with people combined with a perfect way of communication.

It is hardly a typical response, but it is a unique view on social media that might deserve further interrogation. For instance, what communities outside “normal” producers are employing platforms like Twitter or YouTube to share content that overcomes senses of social difficulty? Clearly some Instagram users are drawn to its network because of this sort of bridging. The response above speaks of “a perfect way of communication” as a means to overcome an auditory trouble, allowing an individual to “thrive off common interest with people” unrestrained. This same user connected “learning” about photography on Instagram with learning “invaluable life lessons as well.” The value of creativity, community and therapy are here closely intertwined. Furthermore, this user has connected documentation and sharing with
therapy, in suggesting that photo sharing his/her life heals gaps and fractures within that life.

As with creativity before, therapy can be defined explicitly, or more broadly, to reveal it as a more widespread motivation. Whenever a respondent writes of the “fun” or “enjoyment” of using Instagram as a self-explanatory value, one might consider that as contributing to a user’s well-being correlating the motivation to therapy. Similarly, calling Instagram photography a “relaxation” or “creative outlets” suggests that using the app releases personal tension, anxieties, and stress that again builds a sense of well-being. Even statements about finding “validation” and “support” on the app’s social media network could be construed as inflating personal confidence and contentment. With this wider conception, 14 of 23 respondents have attested to the importance of therapy as a reason for their use of Instagram.

In Review

Reading over participant responses, six common motivations emerged. On the first question, about why users take photos, documentation was the common answer, with seeing, sharing, and creativity each showing up in about a third of responses. On the second question, about why users share images on Instagram, community and sharing were included in over two-thirds of responses, with seeing answers on approximately one-third. The third question asked users whether they felt they took photos for themselves or others. Here there was a group discrepancy. All of the London respondents said that it was a mix of both personal and social
audiences, but just half of global respondents agreed, with a third of global respondents stating that their photography was entirely for themselves. Explaining this discrepancy is difficult, as many of those who claimed their photography was “for myself” commended the social aspects of Instagram on other answers, suggesting that this was not an anti-social position. In fact, it would seem that these users may have understood the question to be about *inspiration*, as in what motivated them to take a picture, rather than *destination* (audience). The “personal” respondents may have been exerting their sense of individuality and unique identity production in the production of their photos. A subset of those who answered “both” on the third question discussed a progression from taking photos for themselves onto taking photos with others (specifically Instagram users) in mind. This third of respondents offers a dynamic in which social media *socializes* its users to think differently (socially) about their media production.

The fourth question, about whether users pursued photography as a hobby or as a professional occupation, was designed to assess whether user responses were coming from ‘amateurs.’ Because so much of social media literature focuses on users as hobbyists rather than pros, it was designed to get more information about my sample. But in fact, it ended up revealing an aspiration trend among respondents who felt that Instagram had inspired them to be more serious about their photography and to consider professional and artistic futures. Nine London users and six Global users identified photography as a hobby, with just one individual among all results identifying as a pro. Not that this makes respondents’ ‘amateur’ photography ‘informal’ or ‘unserious.’ As Clay Shirky has argued “amateur’s aren’t
just pint-sized professionals,” for “the essence of amateurism is intrinsic motivation: to be an amateur is to do something for the love of it.” (59, 82-83). Shirky goes on to argue that contemporary culture privileges professional production as intrinsically ‘better’ than user-generated content or any level of ‘amateur’ production. But in fact, the beauty of Instagram, as revealed by its users, is that the content is mostly amateur produced. Or said more appropriately, it is users producing for themselves and each other, a peer-produced media network.

On the final question, users were asked if other Instagram images informed the way they took photographs. Over half agreed strongly, with several respondents adding “definitely” “very much so” or “absolutely” to emphasize the sentiment. Four of the London respondents replied in a mixed manner, carefully explaining that only inspiration from other users was occasional or only in small ways. Less than a quarter of respondents felt their photography was completely unchanged by other Instagram users, with these respondents asserting their personal “style” or technique was something they consciously wished to protect. As with the third question, there was a sense in the individualist respondents that personal identity was closely in their photography, and that playing too excessively with this style might obscure their own (or others’) sense of personhood.

**Questionnaire Conclusions**

The six motivations traced out in this chapter are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They represent common trends among responses, organized into categories of action and conception, ways of thinking about ways of doing. It is
unproductive to imagine that Instagram or social media users broadly, are drawn to these activities by a single, pre-eminent motivation. In fact, it is crucial that scholarship begin to recognize social media user motivation as multi-dimensional. Every single response acknowledged three or more motivations for using Instagram, with several responses moving between different motivations in the span of a single answer or sentence. Motivations are many in social media, and in fact, these motivations often work in tandem or overlap considerably. The lines between community, seeing, and sharing motivations for instance, are incredibly blurred. The overlap between therapy and documentation may be considerable when users feel that capturing and recording their life brings them a sense of peace with it.

While reducing motivations to a common core ignores their subtlety and difference, it may be argued that all of the motivations observed are pre-eminently social. This is not completely surprising, as Instagram is an example of social media. But the particularities of that social common ground are interesting and even surprising. User responses celebrate seeing from the positions of others, and allowing people to see from their position as well. User responses validated the community and its support. User responses celebrate personal creative growth through interacting with and looking at other user’s images. If social media thinks it is social, and consciously markets itself that way, these research findings confirm that opinion but from the other side of the screen. Users perceive, value and celebrate, the social aspects of social media, feeling more empowered as an individual by communities that challenge them to produce for one another.
Final Thoughts

William Morris once wrote that the industrial age had alienated people from their own work, denying them the pleasure of recognizing themselves in that which they created. He opined that reconciling individuals with their innate creative potential would make them feel human again. Moreover, a production individual would be guided, inspired, informed and supported by a community in which creation was so valued. History and “imagination” would help shape individual work, binding the search for personal identity into a consciousness of social value.

A man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body. Memory and imagination help him as he works. Not only his own thoughts, but the thoughts of the men of past ages guide his hands; and, as a part of the human race, he creates (Morris 1884: 3-4).

Morris was addressing the Hampstead Liberal Club about his ideas for an English Arts & Crafts movement, but his words echo the sentiments of theorists who stress the power of social media today. Even more importantly, Morris’ utopian ideal of a creative mankind made whole by personal production and sense of a community, is echoed by social media users themselves. For the respondents of this study have made clear that photo-sharing is not some exercise in banal, inferior media production, but a social action in which media production becomes a site and a cause for community.

In 2006, the Spanish Minister of Education exhorted an audience in Barcelona to make value in their own lives. He called it a “value of living, making a work of art or our life, giving beauty to our own life” (Gabilondo 42). Like Morris,
this Minister was certain that individuals can create personal value for themselves, by seeking art in their daily lives. Art is a troubled word in contemporary English because it has become associated with something difficult, rarefied, and exceptional. Art, like intellectualism, is bound up in ideas of class, privilege, education, and social status. But Gabilondo and Morris are not talking about art as the content of museums, but rather as a creative impulse, a practice of aesthetics in everyday life. Art that is not troubled by assessment as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but rather evaluated as part of living.

During the research for this project, I met two professional photographers at a creative conference. When I detailed my research, the photographers expressed their anger at the idea that ‘everyone was now a photographer.’ They felt a keen need to tell me about their training, their high technical skills, and their long experiences with photography, all of which set them apart from ‘amateurs.’ I later realized why I found this hostility so disappointing. It comes down to literacy. In the developed world, the idea that a population should know how to read and write is taken as unquestionably good. This conviction is followed by policy, investment in education, and ultimately by assessment, where reading and writing are used as skills to evaluate populations. Even though many people can write, very few are professional writers. That does not mean everyone should not write, in fact, reading and writing has become a part of virtually all forms of labor. If anything, high literacy means that the people who do write professional should be all the more talented and passionate about it. In a literate society, there is more writing by more people and this makes writing better and more important.
Photography and media production are also literacies. In fact, studies about media use, be it consumption or production, are often described as research about “Media Literacy.” A society in which all media literacies were increased would seem to be a society enriched and improved, as our own high print literacies offer more writers and more careers rather than less. So why do professional photographers resent popular photography? Why do terms like ‘amateur’ get used to denounce a photographer’s quality (or lack thereof)? Perhaps it is because of economics. Professional photographers feel their occupation encroached on and damaged by the rise in people taking their own photos. Or perhaps it is because photographers preferred the status quo, in which their position within society was clear and stable. McLuhan once claimed as much.

Professionalism is environmental. Amateurism is anti-environmental. Professionalism merges the individual into patterns of total environment. Amateurism seeks the development of the total awareness of the individual and the critical awareness of the groundrules of society (McLuhan 93).

McLuhan is right to point out that any professional is dependent on the system (environment) that exists, where amateur’s are in the process of interrogating and examining that environment, often through play and experimentation that professional does not allow. As Chris Anderson reminds in The Long Tail, “we're starting to shift from being passive consumers to active producers. And we’re doing it for the love of it (the word amateur derives from the Latin Amator "lover" from amare "to love")” (Anderson 63). It is not certain that all amateurs love what they do, or that professionals operate without love or passion for their work. But what McLuhan and Anderson offer to the ideas of Morris and Gabilondo is the further
insistence on a world which respects non-professional production rather than deploiring it. To return to the written word, a society in which people regretted “amateurs” writing personal stories about their family, or their communities, or attempting to develop plays, screenplays, poems or novels would seem oppressive and impoverished. Why does the world of media literacy suffer such oppression and conservatism?

Over a century ago William Morris hoped for a world in which people would be equipped and encouraged to produce for themselves. He, and many since him, including McLuhan, Anderson, Benkler, and Gabilondo, have imagined reconciling people to production and in the process enriching not only their personal lives, but also those of their communities. Clay Shirky’s Cognitive Surplus regrets that Americans watch 4.5 hours of TV a day while Wikipedia was built using substantially less man-hours. What if, Shirky asks, people spent a little more time making and a little less time consuming? David Gauntlett’s Making is Connecting takes this a step further in arguing that creative culture does not simply produce things, it actually offers and mediates relationships (Gauntlett 2). Production is social, Gauntlett argues, and this argument has been confirmed thoroughly by this study.

It is not enough to imagine that a world made more creative would simply be better. Social media networks are not utopias. They are also not places of “digital share cropping” where users are exploited unconditionally (Carr). Social media is an opportunity for nascent information society to put a new emphasis on creativity and production- on media literacy alongside traditional print literacy. This research has
proven how social media users are motivated to produce by their communities, and how their production signals personal identity even in vast networks of media. It would be sheer speculation to suggest that William Morris, equipped with an iPhone would celebrate the communities of Instagram as a perfect manifestation of his more creative society. But such communities surely offer a world that is enriched, expanded, and improved. Social media is not a solution, it is a chance, a chance to let society be more creative and more connected through its own creativity.
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