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Mobile Mediated Visualities

An Empirical Study of Visual Practices on Instagram

Elisa Serafinelli and Mikko Villi

Abstract

The escalation of photo sharing through social networking sites is one of the most substantial changes in mobile communication practice in recent years. The launch of smart mobile technologies represents a decisive moment in the production and observation of visualities with an elevated characteristic of digital shareability and reproducibility. Considering recent technological advancements and new social media services, this paper aims to study how social platforms and smart mobile devices are affecting individuals' visual, social and digital practices. In particular, this paper examines the social exchange of photographs online in order to advance an in-depth reading of contemporary mobile media. The mobility afforded by smart mobile devices represents a fundamental condition that shapes the human-technology relationship. The paper studies this condition by concentrating on the dynamic mobility of individuals, devices and visual information. Methodologically, the paper employs a case study approach to analyse how Instagram affects individuals' perception of their mediated lives. Qualitative interviews formed the fieldwork and a sample of 44 Instagram users took part in the study. Visual content analysis of participants' photo sharing further contributed to the investigation. Findings from the study show that the use of smart mobile devices constitutes the development of new forms of mobile mediated visualities. The mobility and mediation afforded by smart mobile devices seem to establish new practices for producing and sharing images that push individuals to think visually of events, people and surroundings. These practices lead to the visual datafication of social practices and intensify the quantity and variety of visual data shared online. Within this context, the visual hyper-representation of social practices is exemplified by the current trend of giving to everything a visual justification (e.g. foodporn). In its conclusions, the paper offers a conceptual apparatus that can help to understand contemporary social, digital and visual interactions.

Introduction

The escalation of photo sharing through social networking sites is one of the most substantial changes in mobile communication practice in recent years. In many daily activities, indeed, it can be observed that a remarkable number of people cannot do without maintaining visual relationships with the events of their lives: from the coffee cup captured during a coffee break to the girls' Friday night out. This rising practice of online photo sharing is enabled by the use of mobile devices. They play a crucial role in providing new opportunities for capturing and sharing photographs, especially online. These two trends intermingle in visual mobile communication (Villi 2010), i.e. the use of smart phones in photography and photographic communication.

A clear example of how these technological advancements draw new assets for contemporary sociality can be observed in the fact that people are not willing to buy a mobile phone without an embedded camera anymore (or that there would be many non-camera models still available). With smart mobile devices photography has become so ubiquitous that the existence of events, people, and objects seems to be directly connected with being photographed (Kember/Zylinska 2012) and shared, we could add. In fact, the passage from physical sharing (face-to-face and through prints) to digital photo sharing (through the mediation of digital technologies) drives a significant increase in the production and the exchange of photographs. In social media, the 'imperative of sharing' (Van Dijck 2013) is in force and plays a central role in shaping the various types of social communication. The mediated exchange of images is an example of how these social connections are built and maintained on a daily basis. As Gómez Cruz (2016) has noted, photography acts pronouncedly as an interface for visual communication, a 'connective interface'.

Considering the progressive alterations in the media environment, in this paper we analyse the practices of photo sharing by taking into account affordances provided by social media and mobile communication. These affordances represent a decisive moment in the production, communication and use of photographs, and therefore this paper corresponds with the necessity to advance a critical understanding around photo sharing as mobile media practice.

Theoretical Background

This paper builds its theoretical framework on the new paradigm advanced by Couldry (2004) that considers media not as text, but first and foremost as *practice*. Couldry emphasises that to understand the effects on people, the attention on media needs to move towards considering what people actually do with media. The notion of practice here offers the possibility to interpret life experiences in a media-saturated world where certain practices, such as posting, tweeting,

liking, and photo sharing seem to become part of social norms. The practice-based approach does not intend to deny the interests of previous media research, it rather aims to broaden the focus on media from text to media practices that shape social life in a more general way (Couldry 2004). This continuity is manifested in practice theory: a branch of social theory centred on practices rather than structures, systems, individuals or interactions (Bräuchler/Postill 2010). This approach offers to the investigation of media phenomena a new way to address questions related to the role of social media in everyday life, in particular considering the ubiquitous presence and use of social media platforms.

Another important strand of thought for this paper is mediation and what is defined as 'mediated' phenomena (Parikka 2012). To help understand this approach Parikka (2012) introduces the idea of 'new materialism' that intends to illustrate the way technical media transmit and process cultures in a way that sees mediated processes as embedded in ephemeral, even though real, *things* (authors' emphasis). In other words, this theorisation (as media theory) looks at where the materiality in discussing media actually is, i. e. in practices. From this perspective, the focus moves from understanding media objects (such as user-generated content) to understanding the practices that mediation generates through the use of social media and smart mobile devices. Mediation is a complex and hybrid process that results from the flows of production, circulation, interpretation and recirculation (Couldry 2008) of objects.

Mediation is an everyday condition that defines new social behaviours. To investigate this condition, Kember and Zylinska (2012) challenge the traditional questions about photography (e.g. truth and indexicality of photography) and suggest understanding photography rather as an active practice of cutting through the flow of mediation. This shift can be observed in the intensification of photographs with hashtags such as #selfies, #foodporn, #picoftheday that testify the importance of showing an online presence. The idea of 'being-as-mediated' (Kember/Zylinska 2012: 40) differentiates the understanding of digital practices. Following this approach, the analysis of images (the object) extends toward the analysis of the practices of photo sharing (the process) and the effects of mediation.

To understand photo sharing as online visual practice, taking into account images only would be limitative. Rather, it is important to consider a plurality of agencies, i. e. the interrelations between users, images, practises and socio-cultural influences (Pink 2007). In fact, photo sharing, as digital practice, is shaped by the combination of connectivity and the convergence of media, and this condition plays a crucial role in the development of digital practices. This is the reason why the concept of mediation is of importance in theorising new media phenomena.

In studying digital practices, it is important to keep in mind that mobile devices present an efficient vehicle for interpersonal connections (Serafinelli 2017). They remove social barriers and increase connectivity and access to digital content. Through their use, they also increase the activity of taking photographs,

altering the content of images, and the way they are shared and edited (Serafinelli 2017). This shows that advancements in smart mobile technology contribute to the intense circulation of photographs in social media platforms and elsewhere in the digital environment, creating fertile ground for the interconnection between digital technologies and the development of new mediated practices. In these interpersonal connections, reciprocity seems to define the main motivation that shapes sociality online (Granieri 2005). Other motivations that guide people to participate in online communities are enjoyment, commitment to the community, self-development, and reputation gaining (Lakhani/Wolf 2005). Online platforms are environments where users provide content, advice, and services and where collaborative behaviours are awarded.

In the context of mediation, media platforms and mobile devices become part of people's daily social experiences. The convergent environment of 'mobile interfaces' (Farman 2011), where devices intersect with social and spatial spaces, creates new forms of virtual and imaginative travels combined with physical ones (Sheller/Urry 2006). To explain this change, Sheller and Urry (2006) argue for the turn towards the 'new mobilities paradigm', which does not simply advocate mobility in today's world but rather focuses on the speed and intensity of flows of people, objects and information. This paradigm also explains social interactions between people located in distant physical spaces. This approach considers the concept of portability a central element in the discourse on smart mobile devices (Siapera 2012), emphasising that they allow people to bring their own media everywhere. Both mobile devices and mobile interfaces appear independent of locality, thus determining paradigmatic changes in social habits towards what Farman (2012) would define as reconfiguration of practices in the digital age.

In sum, this paper examines different ways of using smart mobile devices, explaining their ubiquitous use and the role they play in experiencing everyday sociality. An insightful analysis of motivations, organisation, and transformations of the practices of photo sharing is fundamental to understand how social media affects the visual experience of everyday life. Considering the rising dependence on technology, this paper investigates the uses of smart mobile devices and how they affect people's visual experience of their surroundings. To do so, this paper analyses the features of the popular photo sharing platform Instagram – a smart phone app that enables users to capture, edit, and share photos on various social networks – identifying the key elements that shape contemporary mechanisms of visual communication.

Considering the ubiquitous use of smart mobile devices, this paper interrogates *whether and how the co-presence of the mobility of devices and the mediation of platforms changes the way people experience their everyday life*. To answer this research question, we examine the ways the digital practices of photo sharing contribute to these changes. Through an empirical examination of digital practices, this paper delineates the development of new forms of visual communication.

Data and Method

Qualitative computer-mediated interviews formed the fieldwork for this paper. A sample of 44 Instagram users took part in the study. 29 participants were interviewed via Skype and 15 participants responded to open questions that were sent via email¹. The sampling was accomplished entirely online circumscribing the investigation within Instagram user groups and owners of smart mobile devices. Following the interviews, visual content analysis was implemented to expand the interview data.

Since the goal of data collection was to gather photographs and understand Instagram users' behaviours, Facebook was recognised as the main platform where users converse. After Facebook bought Instagram in 2012 there has been a rise in the number of Instagram users, partly because of the visibility afforded by Facebook. The call for participants was spread out on Instagram communities' Facebook pages. After the first approach through the social network, participants who had responded positively were approached via private email. The email that participants received consisted of a general description of the study and a consent form with the explanation of the treatment of personal data, which gave us permission to follow their Instagram feed and use their photographs for academic purposes. The target population did not have particular restrictions in terms of gender, race and education. The demographic of this study was formed by 29 males and 15 females between 24 and 52 years old. Participants represented a large geographical mix (Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, USA, Canada, Spain, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Argentina, Turkey, and Iran).

The netnographic approach, a qualitative method that is specialised for the unique computer-mediated contingency of today's social world (Kozinets 2015), was adopted to combine together the different data sources (interviews and photographs). Social sciences are increasingly reaching the conclusion that they can no longer adequately understand many of the most important facets of social and cultural life without incorporating computer-mediated communication into their study. We employed netnography in order to go beyond the mere observation of online phenomena and aim to understand online social interactions within the context of analysis. Netnography was used to examine photo sharing following the idea that analysing visual content is almost impossible without taking into account the context in which the visual is produced and finally received (Bock et al. 2011). In addition, we also considered how photographs alone do not represent emotions, social relations, relations of power and exploitation, but they need to be

1 This approach was developed to prevent lack of data caused by the potential inability of recruiting participants willing to do an in-depth interview. Thus, it was decided to give participants the opportunity to choose how to conduct the interview.

contextualised with verbal discourses or other knowledge in order to invoke such experiences (Pink 2007).

Through qualitative interviews, it is possible to understand experiences and reconstruct events in which the researcher does not participate (Rubin/Rubin 2005). Through the in-depth description of social processes, interviews allow an additional understanding of ways and reasons why things change. In this study, the main purpose of the use of qualitative interviews was to find out in the context of photo sharing what happened, why and what it meant more broadly (Rubin/Rubin 2005). To discover causes, explain and understand the digital practices of photo sharing, participants were asked to show, justify, and comment on photographs in relation to their responses. Additional questions were also asked to explore critical themes (such as privacy and ethics). This approach elicited more details without changing the main focus.

The visual analysis of participants' photographs extended the understanding by focusing more on their disclosures and experiences. Participants were asked to provide their Instagram nickname in order to be observed (followed) online by one of the two researchers. The visual data collection was limited to two months for the 29 participants who took part in the Skype interviews. In the case of the 15 participants interviewed by email visual examples were studied only if they were specifically mentioned. The two-month period included different events, such as working days, leisure time, national holidays, and vacations, producing a more complete view of the variety of participants' photo sharing. Their photo sharing was interpreted through the classification of visual materials and the contextualisation of participants' communicative acts (Bowler 2010). Through a qualitative content analysis, the visual data were translated into categories (holiday, landscape, food etc.), identifying themes and common patterns.

This study did not include semiotic visual analysis. It rather identified the correspondence of meanings through the qualitative analysis of both interviews and images. In the analysis, we did not examine photographs as evidence of the 'who', 'where' and 'what' of reality, but rather as interpretations of how their makers perceived and (re-)constructed it. The analysis followed the idea that while images alone reveal nothing, they are given ethnographic meaning when linked to other types of knowledge (Pink 2015).

Motivations, Organisation, and Transformations of Photo Sharing on Instagram

Data analysis is broken down into three sections: motivations, organisation, and transformations in the practices of photo sharing. This subdivision aims to provide a clear exploration of the phases that form the digital practice of photo sharing, highlighting factors that shape Instagram users' approach to visual communication and how previous habits are transformed.

Practices of Photo Sharing on Instagram

The relationship between mobile devices and photography affects the advancement of new photo sharing practices, emphasising the utility of the practice-based approach (Couldry 2004). The example provided by *Participant 13* illustrates well the connection between mobility and photography:

‘I have a photo I shot at the train platform in Florence of a guy and a girl where for sure she was leaving for far away. She had suitcases. He was crying like mad [...] but this super passionate kiss ... I swear! I could snap it at less than a meter away. My mobile was here and they were next to me, and this is something that with the camera it’s not possible. [...] That is something you say “I put it on Instagram now or never!”’ (See fig. 1).

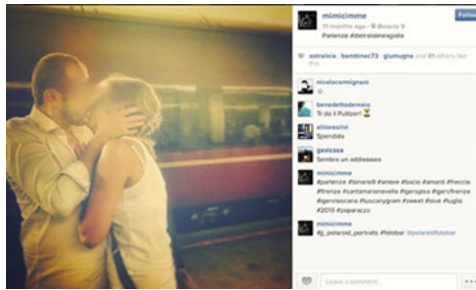


Figure 1: Kiss at the train station. Instagram, 2014.

Source: <https://instagram.com/mimicimme>

This response shows how the mobility afforded by smart mobile devices organises sociality around devices that enable people to be individually mobile and also create spheres of connection “on the go” (Sheller/Urry 2006). Instagram seems to be enhancing customised networking systems, which empower people’s interactions and mobile connectivity (ibid) in a way that diverges from such sociality that is based on close physical relationships. In this, photographs represent in-material and non-solid objects (Parikka 2012) that hold social lives together. The easy access to social media platforms and the portability of devices help people see in daily life opportunities for sharing visual experiences and establishing their presence online.

As discussed in the theoretical background section, being online is an interactive and creative practice formed often by the principle of reciprocity and the philosophy of “give and take”, where media representations offer constant mutual recognitions (Couldry 2004). Participants in our study reported that being an active user is ‘very rewarding’ especially when receiving social interaction such as likes, positive comments, and feedback. This type of interaction is similar to the motivations of self-satisfaction and recognition described by Lakhani and Wolf (2005). It follows that sharing photographs makes sense when there is social

interaction and reciprocity (Granieri 2005). Social responses and the creation of social relationships, indeed, support the continuation of the Instagram experience (Serafinelli 2017). This again supports Couldry's (2004) emphasis on media practices as socially-informed activities.

Initially, participants in our study were asked why they chose Instagram rather than another photo sharing platform, and in their responses it is evident that curiosity and friends' suggestions influenced their initial choice for trying the new platform. These responses underline how the spirit of connectivity (Van Dijck 2013) pushes users to follow their peers' behaviours and, consequently, the use of Instagram.

Participant 5 stresses the innovative potential of the Instagram platform. Thanks to the invention of mobile cameras, in fact, individuals are more willing to capture photographs of what happens around them because now they have a place to share them (Cohen 2005). An example of this is explained by *Participant 23*. She describes her engagement with the platform as follows:

There are situations, moments, objects that make me say 'I need to be Instagramming this!' [...]. One of the last photos I took was in Taormina three weeks ago. I went to Taormina when there was the lava rain. Basically, I was seeing pieces of lava. And that was a moment that I must share. Snap and share! (see fig. 2).



Figure 2: Lava rain in Taormina. Instagram, 2014.

Source: <https://instagram.com/erikarotella>

This response, together with the one provided by *Participant 13*, are only two examples that show a common interest in sharing photos of particular events. From this, it can be seen that situations and events push individuals to consider images in association with the platform. The use of a precise verb 'to Instagram' connected with the practices of sharing photos on Instagram leads to think about the evident change that the platform makes. The notion of mobility here explains how communication technologies increasingly mediate people's life experiences. Indeed, theorising the new mobilities paradigm, Sheller and Urry (2006) suggest paying attention to these processes. In fact, through the responses provided by *Participant 13* and *23* these conditions emerge clearly together with a strong interest in the use of photographs to recreate events and locations.

Many responses stress the importance of the mobility of smart phones also in capturing worthy images. The emphasis on the mobility of devices makes the difference in visual production. Participants experience the mobility offered by smart mobile devices as a crucial element in capturing new scenarios because, as Parikka (2012) emphasises, that they are not limited to locality. The chance of taking photographs at anytime and anywhere enhances the possibilities of capturing situations, objects and moments that ‘must’ be posted on Instagram. *Participant 2* describes this phenomenon as “a continuous telling in real time what you are doing many times ... [however, photo sharing] makes you miss out maybe some of what you’re doing, a bit of the value of the event that you are following”. Photo sharing appears here to be a practice that describes sociality online, connecting people and their experiences visually. Social digital practices locate users and connect them to one another (Couldry 2004). In describing digital practices, it is important to comprehend the reasons that motivate users in expressing their digital sociality visually.

Motivations of Photo Sharing

In order to understand the role of Instagram in shaping new digital practices, participants were asked to explain the reasons and describe what drives their online photo sharing, providing, where possible, visual examples. Personal satisfaction, reciprocity, and experiencing new images were recognised as the main reasons. Motivations can be understood with reference to uses and gratifications theory, which is helpful for analysing how specific forms of media use (in this case photo sharing) are connected to ‘digital gratifications’, such as the adoption of new roles in online communities (Villi/Noguera 2017).

Participants share photos on Instagram aware that their audience is formed by a variety of users, mainly strangers, who share the same passion for photography. Considering the visibility afforded by the platform, they aim to share ‘shareable images’, i. e. images that the vast majority of users can appreciate. This common approach follows the intent of reaching a high number of followers re-marking the principles of reciprocity (Granieri 2005) and personal satisfaction (Lakhani/Wolf 2005). Users, indeed, enjoy sharing photos online because they feel it is an act of mutual concession and recognition, as Couldry (2004) would argue. In this case, the principle of reciprocity is based on the expectation of seeing photos shared by other users. In other words, what motivates users to share their visual experiences and unconventional scenarios is the fact that consequently other users will share images as well. In this mechanism of “give and take”, users experience feelings of personal satisfaction in social interactions, such as likes, comments and followings.

The findings show that the main reason participants share photos on Instagram is to produce photographs that a wide number of users are willing to appreciate, together with the expectation to receive positive comments and feedback. In relation to this the response given by *Participant 22* demonstrates how:

One of the reasons why I started to share more was because other people who were sharing started to inspire me. I could honestly go to Instagram right now and see ... I call them visual dispatches, but I mean, I can see photographs from Africa, Italy, Spain, Russia and others. I can see them from all over the world and see a tiny portal into someone's world. And I thought "well, it's a kind of sharing/social thing you give me, I give something". So, for me this is just what motivated me to share back.

This response summarises well users' general tendency to share their photographs in relation to other users' practices and interactions on the platform. This response demonstrates how the concept of new materialism (Parikka, 2012) can be used to interpret the practice of photo sharing considering the in-materiality of communication when formed by digital content. Smart mobile devices, in fact, do not only show how people can 'do' things and 'talk' to people without being physically in the same place (Sheller/Urry 2006), but demonstrate how the practices of photo sharing are embedded in a more ephemeral world (Parikka 2012).

Again, the principles of reciprocity (Granieri 2005) and self-satisfaction (Lakhani/Wolf 2005) represent here an incentive to share more photographs. Regarding this, *Participant 26* describes his motivation as follows:

People started to notice me. I got very good comments and I spent the first six months trying to make good pictures and good captions. And people started to comment "Your pictures make my day!" or "Your captions are really great!". And all the comments encourage you to keep doing what you are doing.

As can be seen, receiving positive comments seems to foster users' engagement with other users and increases their visibility and activity on the platform. Moreover, participants report that the more they receive positive feedback and comments the more they are motivated to share images, thereby potentially receiving further positive comments.

Additionally, photo sharing can also be motivated by the presence of certain emotions that occur with images. In particular, 'being in a good mood' seems to stimulate users' motivation in sharing photographs. Participants recognise in their photo sharing the intent to share experiences and emotions through images in such a way that is reminiscent of the notion of reverberation as opposed to that of 'representation', 'narration' or 'impact' (Karatzogianni/Kuntsman 2012). Through this, photo sharing appears as a way to convey people's feelings following the intent of sharing 'shareable experiences'. For instance, on pleasing other users, *Participant 17* comments:

On social media people don't care about the photos but they care about the experiences, right? For instance, yesterday I went to a coffee tasting event in a coffee shop. People like things because they see themselves doing the same things. [...] If I am somewhere doing something and I think people like it, I will post it (see fig. 3).



Figure 3: Coffee break photo. Instagram, 2014.

Source: <https://instagram.com/inayali>

This response shows that there is interest in sharing personal emotions with those who are not physically present. This approach follows the idea of mediated presence (Villi 2015) which considers mediation as the dynamic logic through which to interpret the practices of photo sharing. Participants in our study reported that, in this way, images convey additional messages through the mere information shown. In fact, most of the time photo sharing involves feelings, as *Participant 7* explains: “Photography for me is emotion and passion and so I try to share the same the emotions that I felt in the moment I saw that particular shot. I try to share it with others. My aim is to try to make others empathise with my persona when observing my photo”. Through this response it can be said that the intent in sharing shareable images is determined by the personal emotional engagement with the subject (see fig. 4), but also with the practice itself. In this case, it is visible how the changing structures of feelings and emotions within everyday digital culture (Karatzogianni/Kuntsman 2012) appear on Instagram through such images that aim to convey significations going beyond mere visual pleasure.



Figure 4.: Sharing empathy and emotions.

Instagram, 2014. Source: <https://instagram.com/giuliotolli>

To fulfil their aims (experiencing personal satisfaction, reciprocity and new images), participants carefully plan their photo sharing in all its stages (i.e. shot, editing, caption and time of photo sharing) following precise guidelines. Regarding this,

Participant 2 comments: “Instagram must be seen as a means of sharing, like a shop window for the work you produce or also for your daily life”. Indeed, the motivations of reciprocity (Granieri 2005) and self-satisfaction (Lakhani/Wolf 2005) in combination with the intent of reaching high numbers of followers, as illustrated above, lead towards a careful organisation of photo sharing. The most frequent responses that emerged in relation to the organisational aspect were connected firstly to the frequency of photo sharing and secondly to the personal photographic style. As *Participant 7* explains: “Initially, I was much more active both posting so many photos that at a certain point I said to myself ‘Oh my God! I need to stop because if I identify myself with others ...’ there could be someone saying, ‘this guy is annoying with all these photos!’”.

Organisation of Photo Sharing

Participants report careful planning of photo sharing mainly to ensure visibility to their images. To organise effective photo sharing participants adhere three main strategies: following their own personal photographic style, posting at specific times (time bands) and sharing a set number of photographs (precise frequency of sharing). An additional way of organising content is the well-thought choice of hashtags and geo-tags. In fact, careful photo sharing seems often to be more important than the rapidity of photo sharing.

The temporal organisation is showed in the time bands of photo sharing. The frequency of organisation is connected to the number of uploads per day, week, or month. Content organisation, instead, follows an identifiable photographic style, such as themes or styles, storytelling, and particularities. Participants upload and observe photographs during precise moments in their daily routine. Indeed, they combine coffee breaks with Instagram, lunch with Instagram, waiting at the bus stop with Instagram. Their practices of photo sharing seem to be routinised in combination with other activities. This modality creates in the followers a state of expectation and regular habits. Thus, the term ‘organisation’ is here used to describe the phenomena as all participants do not follow the fundamental principle of *instant* photo sharing, rather they follow precise guidelines that, often, are distributed throughout time and daily rituals.

In relation to temporal organisation, the guideline related to the time band of photo sharing is particularly useful for increasing the number of followers. *Participant 14* described the organisation of his photo sharing as follows:

I post pictures at 12 pm, 2:30 pm and 5 pm, London time. Even when I was in Australia, 12 pm, 2:30 pm, 5 pm, London time. I was in Israel. I was in New York. Anywhere I go it would be the same time. Why? Because I consider as I am doing a magazine, I am sharing the story of my life through a magazine. I am the publisher and I am the editor and I decide what I want to do and I do it at the same time, and I find it amazing.

Considering that the aim of this approach is to collect a high number of followers it is easily understandable that users perceive this guideline to also enhance their personal satisfaction (Lakhani/Wolf 2005) and recognition (Couldry 2004).

Participant 26 highlights the importance of frequency in the following way:

There is not a single picture or a single caption that made me popular. The basic thing that made me popular has been constant posting every day over a year and always trying to keep the quality high. Telling others what they should do and posting pictures every day. That's the main thing.

This response is only one of the examples that confirms how the imperative of sharing (Van Dijck 2011) shapes users' practices on social media platforms. It demonstrates that many mediated practices (constant posting every day) and social interactions (telling other what they should do) have become part of daily routines. This also keeps users motivated to maintain their presence online.

Finally, regarding content organisation we observed that users tend to think of their photo sharing as a 'whole' rather than a sequence of independent pictures. This guideline makes visible a sense of continuity in the entire stream of photos and renders the fruition of the photographic stream fluid and visually pleasant. *Participant 19* firmly believes that for a good experience of the Instagram platform users should identify the objective of their photographic sharing and the type of story they intend to share on the platform. He labels this his 'photographic project', explaining its importance by how

The photographic project is what allows anyone who gets through your profile to understand your intent. [...] The principle is pretty easy out there; there are 180 million active users per month. You, with your photographic profile, need to catch the attention of those who like the kind of things you do, but the genre of things you do needs to be very clear on for those who come across you.

This response evidences the importance of telling stories with digital technologies (Alexander 2011; Scolari 2009) in order to engage with other users and establish an effective presence online.

The principle of storytelling figures as one of the most used ways of organising photo sharing, and often takes the form of a personal visual diary. *Participant 14* describes his way of telling stories using a personal account and an additional account that he created for his dog, Izo (called @theizotime). He explains this choice in the following way:

I also know something thanks to the TV that I work for, to tell a story. I think that it is super important that when you are on Instagram you need to tell a story' [...] 'I opened Izo's account and again with Izo I decided to see like "What is Izo's story? What am I trying to

say?” [...] So, I tried to make Izo my alter ego [...] so, Izo is basically saying all those things that, maybe, I don't want to say.

This response exemplifies the concept of ‘being-as-mediated’ (Kember/Zylinska 2012), a combination of users’ interest in sharing photos as a way to define their online presence through personal narrative contributions.

Another common way of organising content was identified in the search for visual particularities. Participants report that their Instagram planning includes specifically unconventional imageries. To describe this *Participant 28* comments: “It is boring to see the perfect Eiffel tower or the perfect building in New York. That is not a new photo, it is just a scan”. Sharing photos of unordinary situations and particular scenarios comes from the interest in arousing other users’ curiosity and making the personal account stand out among the multitude of accounts. A significant number of participants disclose interest in what they are not used to seeing, such as distant places and uncommon scenes. These new visual experiences are facilitated by the mobility and connectivity of the devices. *Participant 29*’s account is an example of this. Fig. 5 also shows how the portability of smart mobile devices allows to capture scenes instantly anywhere, remarking how technological advancements allow new digital practices (Parikka 2012).



Figure 5: London. People under the underground. Instagram, 2014. Source: <https://instagram.com/peopleontheunderground>

Transformation of Photo Sharing

As discussed in the previous sections, it is possible to observe how smart mobile devices play a crucial role in shaping the digital practices (Couldry 2008) of photo sharing, following the foundation laid by the theories of mediation, new materialism and mobility (Parikka 2012; Sheller/Urry 2006; Kember/Zylinska 2012). Indeed, all participants in our study report in their daily use of Instagram several modifications compared to their earlier photographic practices. These transformations are identifiable in the constant search for photo opportunities,

seeing beauty in the surroundings, and framing images as squares. Participants assume that the transformations of the practices of photo sharing are not so much related to the use of the platform. Instead, they believe that real transformations originate from the invention of camera phones and, afterwards, of smart phones.

The participants describe themselves in a constant search of imageries to draw out, highlighting that the use of smart phones shapes the way they think visually. As *Participant 3* comments: “It helps me to see things more as photo opportunities. Above and beyond just looking for Instagram photos. It is a really good medium. The ability to see even more beauty in situations”. This response shows arguably that the use of smart phones shapes the way people think visually and the practices that arise from the use of Instagram, demonstrating the changes that devices make in people’s behaviours and how, as Couldry (2004) argues, these changes guide people to incorporate the devices and smart phone apps more and more in their daily routines.

This is epitomised in the observation of *Participant 7* on how

it [Instagram] made a change in my way of watching things. I mean, before if I was in a situation thinking “Ok, I am here” and stop. Now, finding myself in the same situation I could make 3,000 more thoughts and seek something to extract from it. Instagram helped me a lot in this precisely because I photograph, even mentally, a place. Before seeking to extract from that place emotions to share with others would never have happened.

In fact, all participants report that their use of Instagram has gradually changed since their first experiences of the platform, and that their daily use has progressed towards new ways of consuming and producing images. This shows also a progressive improvement in users’ literacy in photography and social media use in a more general way. For instance, *Participant 10* says about the platform that “at the beginning I didn’t know how it was working and I was posting photos without any reason”.

The main changes that participants experience through the use of Instagram are related to the way they look at their surroundings and the increased visual attention they invest in observing them. For instance, *Participant 13* mentions how “I have been passing by that [wall] 250 million times because I pass it by every day because going to catch the train. That day, I had never seen it until that moment [of photography and sharing].” (see fig. 6). Users’ visual attention towards the surroundings is augmented because of Instagram use, thereby shaping mediated practices (Couldry 2004).



Figure 6: Tuttomondo, murals in Pisa.
 #stopthewomenocide photo campaign.
 Instagram, 2014. Source: <https://instagram.com/mimicimme>

This mobile augmented visual attention also modifies participants' presence at events. The use of the mobile phone changes incisively people's experiences of the surroundings because the experiences are mediated through the screens of their mobile devices. The device appears to take a middle position between people and objects, giving people a completely different (mediated) experience of events.

Conclusion: The Mediated Practice of Photo Sharing

The aim of this paper was to advance a critical analysis of the mediated practice of photo sharing that is experienced through the use of the smart phone application Instagram. The analysis formed around three elements in the practice of photo sharing: motivations, organisation, and transformations. According to our study, personal satisfaction (Lakhani/Wolf 2005), reciprocity (Granieri 2005) and expansion of visual knowledge are the main reasons that motivate users' activity on the Instagram platform. Users' gratification is recognised as a reason that enhances the digital practice of photo sharing. The second element, organisation of photo sharing, describes the ways and reasons that drive users to plan carefully their mediated practices of photo sharing. Within this, three ways of organisation were identified: styles and themes, storytelling, and search for visual particularities. Discussing the significant transformations in the practice of photo sharing, this paper indicated how the use of Instagram changes users' visual experience of the immediate surroundings that they live and move in (see Sheller/Urry 2006). Mobility, in particular, allows the expansion towards the 'snap, share and move on' culture. This modification discloses also an increased attention toward 'photo opportunities'. Arguably, the fact that Instagram produces an augmented perception of and connection with physical surroundings is derived from the mobility of smart devices. This finding is connected strongly to our research question focusing on how the co-presence of the mobility of devices and the mediation of platforms changes the way people experience their everyday life.

Through the empirical analysis of interview data and photographs, this paper has demonstrated changes in the social practices of photo sharing that are facilitated by the affordances of smart technologies (mediation and mobility). These changes express how digital photography can be rethought as a social practice. In fact, this paper has responded to the necessity to focus on the processes of mediation (Parikka 2012; Kember/Zylinska 2012) rather than studying photographs as objects when interpreting social practices related to photography in the mobile, social media environment. The paradigm of media as practice (Couldry 2004) is most visible in the attention that users invest in photographing for sharing. In this context, Couldry's (2004) theorisation exemplifies what people do with social media (Instagram) and devices (mobile communication) and how their use affects daily digital practices (photo sharing). Overall, this paper has offered a conceptual apparatus – built upon the co-presence of the mobility of smart mobile devices, the mediation of social media platforms, and the practices of photo sharing – that helps to comprehend the development of new digital phenomena.

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