

Book Review

Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures

Leaver, Tama., Highfield, Tim. and Abidin, Crystal. (2020) *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Polity. Xiii + 264pp. ISBN: 978-1-5095-3438-8

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Starting life under the name of *Burbn* as a check-in app to help users share details of the best bourbon locations in 2010, *Instagram* has risen to become one of the world's top social media platforms (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin 2020, 9), synonymous with selfies, self-representation, and all things aesthetic. *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin is the first book-length exploration of the popular platform, exploring how its evolution has influenced the cultures and communities that live there. The authors argue that *Instagram* is “a conduit for communication” where “the visual focus is particularly important in the success and relevance of the platform” (2020, 1). In exploring how the app has been shaped by, and shaped, the behaviour of its users across its history, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin demonstrate the importance of Instagram as a form of visual social media and a platform for human connection.

The main argument of *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* is that *Instagram* is more than just an app used to share photos; it is a communication platform that provides the key to “understanding and mapping visual social media cultures” (2020, 2). The book explores the app's history, noting how the platform and aesthetics have evolved, before moving on to how its affordances have been shaped by the users as they engaged in building communities, commercialising their presence, and living an ‘instagrammable’ life. Drawing on an impressive established body of work by the three authors, along with many others, the book offers an overview of the platform and its history that has not yet been explored in book form, drawing examples from *Instagram* communities and cultures around the world.

The book's blurb promotes it as “essential reading for students, scholars and practitioners of media and communication” and this is demonstrated throughout the text. The writing is accessible, explaining the points made clearly and effectively and illustrating these with relevant examples. As the first book of its kind, the authors provide an in-depth history of *Instagram*, but do so in a

way that would be easily understood by those new to the field of Visual Communications. The focus does remain on *Instagram* only, however, presuming some understanding of social media generally, therefore avoiding the repetition that could discourage established scholars from reading.

While *Instagram* has developed into a social media platform intrinsically linked to influencer culture, the authors begin the book by stepping back into the platform's early history and mapping the spaces between its start as an app similar to *Foursquare* and through to its more recent history as a component of *Facebook*. Much of this history highlights the way that the platform's evolution was born out of competition. The relationship with *Facebook* is given a suitable level of attention, noting how the integration of *Instagram* into the "Facebook empire" (2020, 13) affected both companies, but also looking at how competition with other apps, such as *Snapchat*, gave rise to *Instagram* stories, third party apps, and song stickers. The authors also nod towards the role of users, particularly in relation to how the app tries to protect its community, but this does not always align with the chapter's overall aim of showing the issues and changes that have shaped the platform. For example, the authors discuss the way that *Instagram*'s content moderation and boundary is handled, directly tying the changes *Instagram* has made to the needs of the unified community they wish to promote. Comparatively, their discussion of Russian-based groups attempting to manipulate the outcome of the 2016 US elections feels out of place, as it is highlighted as an event that demonstrates the importance of *Instagram* as a platform rather than showing how the platform was shaped.

The authors continue to explore *Instagram*'s development in the second and third chapters, focusing on its aesthetic evolution, both in terms of the app's visual identity and the vernacular associated with it as shaped by its users, and its place within visual, social, and mobile contexts. Drawing on previous scholarly discussions of digital photography, influencer culture, and social media generally, these chapters create a bridge between the more descriptive exploration of *Instagram*'s development as a platform and the subsequent discussions of how it is embraced by its users. As the authors note in their discussion of *Instagram* filters, "the visuality... reflects *Instagram*'s evolving relationship with its early aesthetics and aims" (2020, 58). The addition of the *Instagram Stories* embodies this point, as *Instagram*'s prior reputation as a carefully curated space moved to provide more ephemeral and "fun" moments for users to share while also demonstrating the app's ability to adopt features typically associated with popular rivals. Though the focus stays on visual communication, *Instagram* evolves to more firmly establish itself in the social media landscape and to enable its users to better shape their communication through the app. User behaviour similarly responds to these developments, adapting to embrace changes that suit their aesthetic or manipulate those that do not, creating a shared set of practices across the many *Instagram* communities that grow out of the app's ongoing development.

The subsequent chapters focus more specifically on how *Instagram* is used, pulling in threads from the earlier chapters to explore the economic side of the platform, the cultures that grow there, and

Instagram's impact on lifespan. While clearly building on established themes within the field of Social Media Cultures, such as influencers and teen use, these chapters are also the ones that most explicitly draw on the expertise and personal experience of the authors. Chapter Four's discussion of the *Instagram* economy, for example, begins with a flashback of one author's first experience with the platform following a discussion with an influencer informant. This enables them to establish their position more clearly, connecting each author's established bodies of work to the previous chapters to show how the findings of their research tie in with *Instagram's* evolution. Together, these chapters demonstrate the way that *Instagram* has been adopted and adapted, influencing practices both on and off the platform, to become "the Instagram of Everything" (2020, 213). The authors conclude with a warning, however, highlighting that the *Instagram* experience that they describe increasingly promotes 'templatability' for a platform "whose currency is communication and authenticity" (2020, 216). They conclude that *Instagram* must continue to evolve to maintain its place as the icon of visual social media culture.

As the first book-length examination of the platform, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* does well to provide an overview of the important topics related to the subject. It explains clearly and makes effective use of examples to illustrate the points made. Unfortunately, as an overview, it is not always able to go in depth into the points it raises (see, for example, the 2016 US elections example mentioned above). As such, it works well as an introduction or a reminder, but may be less useful to those already familiar with the subjects covered. This limitation is somewhat mitigated, however, by the inclusion of links to the *@polityinstabook* – a dedicated *Instagram* 'home' of the book - in the introductory chapter. Not only is this a clever way to promote the book and its subject matter, but it also serves to enhance and expand the conversation by bringing those reading about *Instagram* to the platform to talk further. Many of the figures found in the book – such as selfies of an author's face or snapshots of another author's *Instagram* story – can be found on the *Instagram* page, which also pulls in more recent examples of the subjects covered. The Fifth chapter, for example, briefly discusses *Instagram* as a potential platform to discuss social awareness initiatives (2020, 151-152), highlighting the ways that *Instagram* can be used by individuals and groups to draw attention to a cause. The *@polityinstabook* page then demonstrates this itself through the authors' post about *@celestebarber's* campaign to fundraise for the *NSW Rural Fire Service and Brigades Donations Fund* in light of the Australian bushfires (2020). In posting a snapshot of the fundraiser post on *Facebook* and connecting it with relevant hashtags, the *@polityinstabook* provides a relevant and up-to-date example related to the book while also using their own platform to draw attention to the cause. While *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* is, in some ways, limited by being the first of its kind, its connection to the *@polityinstabook* page pushes it beyond the confines of its pages and allows the authors to expand the conversation about *Instagram*, social media, and connected subjects.

Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin's *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* provides an engaging overview of the platform, weaving the history of its development with the way it is used by the individuals that embrace it. They show how the app has been shaped not only by its competition,

but also by the communities that it hosts as they navigate the strengths and limitations of the platform against commercial needs, cultural norms, and living for the ‘gram. As the first book-length introduction to the subject, it navigates the tricky balance of clear communication and depth well, but also expands the conversation through a connected Instagram account. A read well-suited to those new to the study of social media, interested parties looking to examine *Instagram* more deeply, or those already established in the field looking to refresh their knowledge.

References

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Biography

Kate Stuart is a PhD candidate at Bangor University, Wales, researching authorship and online book culture. Her other research interests include, among others, fantasy, adaptation, and online identity.

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