Coming of age on Instagram

Over the past decade, Instagram has emerged as one of the world's most important social media platforms. Young people use it as a vehicle to share defining moments, and they have now grown up with the platform. The app has served as a focal point in their biographies, as they form relationships and revise their personalities through their profiles. Although it offers its users control over the images they post and the people they follow, users are embedded in complex webs of interdependence. Our project seeks to understand how users craft and negotiate their Instagram presence in relation to proximate and distant audiences. For this purpose, we have interviewed nineteen frequent Instagram users, who are students enrolled in international programs at the University of Amsterdam.

RESEARCH QUESTION A

How do students imagine their audiences, and how is this reflected in their contents?

Young Instagram users are often aware of their connection to both close and distant audiences when they post content to the platform. The sub-question we addressed is: How do students imagine close and distant audiences, and how is this reflected in their content curation? This question is important in our exploration of the student's self representation of identity because to understand the identity formation, it is important to know what identity the international students want to portray. The first step we took in order to understand the participant's posting practices was to figure out which followers they specifically intended to reach and why?

Situating the research in the context of imagined versus actual audience, or the idea of identity communicated through the Instagram vernacular, we analysed the interviews in conjunction with the images and asked the participants about their posting behavior. The theory of audiencing, first introduced by John Fiske (1992), and elaborated on from a social media perspective by Tim Highfield and others, has in addition been an important aspect of our analysis (Highfield et al., 2013). Coding specific quotes from the interviews for themes, we found that 'close, distant and imagined audiences', 'audiencing by location', and 'construction of the self' were recurrent topics that came up repeatedly across interview texts.

In turn these themes were used as the basis of our three case studies. Coding the interview texts along with the posts from the participants in this study gave us an in-depth idea into the ways some young people use Instagram when forming their Insta-identity. We found that the ways they shaped their posting was responsive to certain audiences, and rather than try to accurately represent their daily life and sense of self, their adhered to unwritten rules around Instagram's vernacular, and trends which certain audiences followed and were interested in. This was useful in the ability to understand the Instagram users as more than they present themselves in their images, but to really dive into the practices of uploading and how this affects their sense of self and everyday life.

CASE STUDIES

Close, Distant and Imagined Audiences

Audiences are integral to students on Instagram. Whereas some audiences are followers that Instagram users know, like family and friends, others are strangers. Users also imagine audiences and their expectations. Students attempt to create content that fits their preferred audience when uploading to Instagram, consciously or not.

Louis has used Instagram since studying. He's aware of the expectations close audiences can have, like friends and family. He does this by not showing aspects of his life that they might judge, like weed use. At the same time, he also wants to reach a wider, global, audience of those interested in photography and calisthenics. To catch the attention of strangers, he meticulously constructs his posts. He takes a large number of photos to choose from, and edits to make the colors pop.

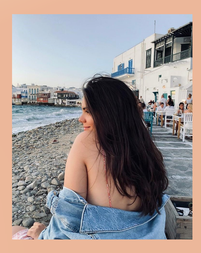
However, Louis hasn't managed yet to reach his aspired audience. This has resulted in a tension between Louis and his audience. As Litt notes, "a large enough misalignment between one's imagined and actual audience could lead to negative consequences" (Litt, 2012). In the case of Louis, he does indeed feel constrained in his Instagram use by his old family and friends to move forward. He finds the reactions and comments of them annoying, hindering his personal progress.

"In my head, there are three main groups. It's my base followers from home [...]. Then there are people from New York, my college experience. Then Amsterdam and post-college [...]."

HARPER

Close audiences

CONNECTION WITH AUDIENCES



"I remember I posted a picture last summer and according to my brother it was too much. I was showing too much, I was showing too much of my body and his friends commented about it- like sending him a screenshot saying like oh look what your sister posted."

SELIA

"I remember my grandma follows me and like my boyfriend's grandma even its like oh. So yeah like I'll think about it, but for example I won't post like a really terrible picture."

SARAH

Distant audiences

"After this first period people got accustomed back in Italy to my sharing in English. I tend to share in English when I'm here and in Italian while I'm back home."

GIANNI

"I'm sort of noticing that my locations sort of affect or has affected the way in which I post. In New York I felt this pressure to have a New York type of cool Instagram."

HARPER

Imagined Audiences

Audiencing by Location

Location and language factor strongly into the students' content curation on Instagram. Given the international aspect of their lifestyles, the students in the sample each have audiences from where they have previously lived as well as their new acquaintances in the Netherlands. The cultural identities of these young people are diverse and, regardless of their location prior to moving to the Netherlands, where these students situate their cultural affinities influences their imagined audiences and any content they share. We can identify their process as "audiencing," forming the "International Student in Amsterdam" through their Instagram content curation while simultaneously preserving their participation in other spheres (Highfield et al., 2013, 317). The interview transcripts we analyzed showcased how some young people use Instagram to imagine multiple audiences based on places and individuals they have interacted with, and decide which of those audiences to continue participating with. In such a way, close and distant imagined audiences can also be affected by location and who they intend to connect with. Instagram empowers these students limited by their immediate localities and offers them a way to broadcast their personal cultures across physical borders. Thus, the content young people share are both shaped by specific localities — and the cultural norms that are prevalent in these particular contexts. This can enable young people to connect to different people easily, affecting their own identity construction. At the same time it can constrain them by feeling 'surveilled' by peers from high school or family members.

AUDIENCING BY LOCATION

Audiencing and Content Curation

Instagram's visual culture and vernacular are unique to the platform. For our case study analysis, we found that each interviewee negotiated their posting in a way which responded to that vernacular. Whilst some interviewees found it difficult to participate in the trends, and the mediated visual culture, others embraced it and leveraged their posting to attract more interaction. Louis for example considers the specific aesthetic of his page by focusing on the colour composition of his entire feed. Doing so he is able to directly address and interact with his distant audience. Following this, Martina is a user with conflicting perspectives and has multiple uses on the platform. She subscribes to the Instagram vernacular in a way which helps elevate her content on her business account, through following trends and playing the algorithm game she hopes her content gains a certain kind of visibility. Martina also keeps a personal account inorder to reach her closer audiences. The group of young people that we studied subscribe to an ever-changing vernacular through which they construct their representation of the self. Users are continuously shaped by and shape the vernacular of Instagram. This vernacular is fluid, dynamic, and acts as a social mirror.

"In which language do I have to write my stories?! Ooh that's an open theme!"

GIANNI

Cultural

Curation

"I think [my followers are] Amsterdammers, or the Netherlands' students, they would interact more with the posts that I'm posting right now."

NAO

"For the ones in Korea I think I posted at 12AM so I put the alarm then. The ones in Mexico super late, like 11PM. The ones in the Netherlands and Spain at around 6 or 7PM. So, depending on the week I put phone reminders, like: Ok, post this!"

MARTINA

Spatial

"I would not consciously post okay mum I am smoking weed here."

LOUIS

"I would like to have some fanbase, not living and imagining having like 20000 followers something respectable yeah and who knows what happens next."

LOUIS

Engagement

PARTICIPANTS

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