

## An Investigation of Instagram's Metonymy: A Multimodal Social Semiotic Approach

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### Abstract

This paper applied a social semiotic lens toward investigating the metonymic representations repeatedly displayed on the Instagram official account and the Instagram blog. The main source of data were 90 photos gathered from ten “Weekend Hashtag Projects” (WHPs), a weekly photo challenge organized by the Instagram team. The multimodal analyses revealed that the WHP photos shared some common visual properties including medium to low color saturation, medium color modulation, minimal background, unengaged social actors, long distant shots, and unique visual presentations. Thus, the metonymy VISUAL PROPERTY FOR BRAND IMAGE was proposed. These findings suggest that certain visual elements that were repeatedly featured on Instagram has subtly yet persuasively suggested its users what kind of visual aesthetics are highly valued in the community.

**Keywords:** social semiotics, metaphor, metonymy, social media, visual grammar

### Introduction

#### Instagram

Launched in October 2006, Instagram is a photo-sharing social networking site (SNS) that has quickly become one of the fastest growing social media platforms alongside Facebook and Twitter. At present, it has over 800 million monthly active users, 500 million daily active users, and 300 daily stories active users (Instagram, 2018). Because Instagram is a visually-oriented SNS, images are undoubtedly the most prominent features appearing on the site; however, the *Instagrammers* are equipped with various other tools that they can use to express themselves and to communicate with others. The modes of representation available on the platform include, but are not limited to, text, emoji, hashtags, videos, audio, and live stories. With such a variety of features offered on the site, people may approach Instagram with diverse purposes in mind and through various activities, depending upon their needs, interests, and goals for using the platform. Factors such as individual, cultural, and historical influences are also intertwined in shaping and creating Instagram's unique activities and artifacts. Accordingly, users may view Instagram as a tool to connect with friends and family, a site to express and showcase their aesthetic abilities, a strategic tool for corporate branding, as well as a marketplace to sell products. In this sense, Instagram is a culturally-embedded tool that shapes, and simultaneously is shaped by, user activity, and its uses have been constantly defied by the ways people across a variety of cultures approach it (Thorne, 2003).

#### Instagram as a Semiotic Resource

In this paper, I regard Instagram as a *semiotic resource*. Semiotic resources are one essential element of social semiotic theory, which is an approach to communication that seeks to understand the ways language and other non-verbal modes of communication have been used as “a social exchange of meanings” (Halliday, 1985, p. 11). A semiotic resource can be understood broadly as a material, social, cultural, or technological resource that people use to make meaning (Van Leeuwen, 2005). In order to analyze Instagram through the lens of social semiotics, it is important to explore its *semiotic potential* (i.e., potential of Instagram for

making meaning). Social semiotic theory views semiotic modes as having different potential for making meaning because they afford different kinds of expression, representation, and communication. Hence, an investigation of the *semiotic potential* of a given semiotic resource involves “studying how that resource has been, is, and can be used for purposes of communication” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 5). Accordingly, its meaning potential is determined by its past, present, as well as possible uses. In describing Instagram’s semiotic potential, the question such as, ‘what kinds of meanings can be made in a particular social context’ is explored (Jewitt, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the multimodal strategies that Instagram repeatedly uses on its activity called “Weekend Hashtag Project” (WHP), which is a weekly photo challenge organized by the Instagram team. I particularly focused on analyzing multimodal metonymy on the Instagram’s official page and blog in order to examine their semiotic potential. As a regular user of the app, it occurred to me that even though Instagram photos can be presented in diverse ways (e.g., by different articulations of color, background, tone, detail, etc.), Instagram strategically chose to feature photos with certain visual designs as their “favorite photos of the week”. This strategy, as a result, has subtly yet persuasively suggested to its users what kind of photographic art is preferable, appreciated, and representative of the Instagram community as a whole. My hypothesis is that, with repeated representation of its preferred visual aesthetics, Instagram has created its own patterns and standard, or what I would like to call Instagram’s *visual grammar*. It is important to note that, in answering a question of whether Instagram visual grammar exists, I did not attempt to criticize nor favor the practices of Instagram. Rather, as Van Leeuwen (2005) contends, the main tasks of the social semioticians are to systematically collect semiotic resources, as well as to investigate those semiotic resources within historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. These tasks are, therefore, what I attempt to accomplish in this paper.

## Literature Review

### Metaphor, metonymy, and multimodality

Metaphor and metonymy are widely recognized concepts in the field of cognitive linguistics. Metaphor refers to the understanding of “one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain” (Kovecses, 2002, p. 4). In using metaphor, people try to understand abstract concepts (i.e., the target domain) through the use of more concrete concepts (i.e., the source domain). This can be illustrated through the metaphors LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD and LIFE IS A JOURNEY. These two concepts (i.e., love versus battlefield, life versus journey) are situated in the different conceptual domains, and it requires a mapping process to get from the source domain to the target domain. On the other hand, metonymy is a mental mapping whereby people use one entity to stand for another entity when both entities are in a close conceptual space (Kovecses, 2002). In other words, metonymy is when we speak and think about a person, an object, or an event by understanding a salient part of that person, object, or event (Gibbs, 1999). For example, we ask someone if he/she can give us *a hand* when we in fact need a whole person to help us with something. Thus, a hand in this case depicts a metonym A BODY PART FOR A PERSON and A BODY PART FOR AN ACTION (i.e., for help). Metonyms are also used to highlight as well as to repress certain aspects of people and things. When we say, ‘*Can you give me a hand?*’, what we care for is not the helper’s individuality but rather his/her labor (Van Leeuwen, 2005). The facts of highlighting and repressing also hold true with metaphors; only selective qualities of A BATTLEFIELD can be transferred to the concept of LOVE, and the addressees are required to ‘fine-tune’ or to determine which features of the source can be associated with the target (Forceville, 2014). Although the two tropes share some similarities, they function in different ways. The distinction between metaphor

and metonymy lies in the fact that the former works by similarity (i.e., similar qualities between two concepts), while the latter works by contiguity (i.e., two elements in close proximity). In other words, metaphor illustrates the *A-as-B* relationship whereas metonymy depicts the *B-for-A* relationship (Forceville, 2009).

Though usually considered within the field of linguistics, an increasing number of scholars have been applying the concepts of metaphor and metonymy to analyze non-verbal and multimodal artefacts, such as gesture, image, film, and music. The core idea is simple: because metaphor and metonymy are fundamentally conceptual and mental phenomena, they should be manifested in all forms, linguistic or non-linguistic, given the fact that we communicate and create meanings through multiplicity of modes (Kovecses, 2002). One example of non-linguistic manifestation of conceptual metaphors provided by Kovecses is advertisement, in which metaphors are used widely to evoke desired attitudes and feelings in the audience. It is common to see ads and TV commercials utilize the metaphor ITEMS TO SELL ARE PEOPLE. For instance, cleaning products are often depicted as GOOD FRIENDS (e.g. Mr. Clean, Mr. Muscle) coming in to rescue the people from dirtiness, while cars are shown as LOVERS, being hugged, kissed, or whispered to. Metonymy is also commonly used in advertisement. A close-up shot of wheels on the road is a metonym PART FOR WHOLE for a part of the car represents the entire vehicle. In the case of Benson & Hedges (cigarettes) ads, the sole appearance of the gold foil packet without the cigarettes is recognizable by consumers. The packet itself, thus, has become a sign of the company, a metonym of the content and the brand (Thwaites, Davis, & Mules, 2002).

### **Research on multimodal metonymy**

There is an increasing number of studies that investigate the presence of metonymy beyond written and verbal languages. Some of these studies investigate only the metonymic representation, while others examined how metonymy and metaphor interplayed and overlapped one another in the multimodal meaning making process. The discourses or modes being analyzed also varied considerably; they ranged from advertisement to news articles, cartoons, picture books, movies, and music. Since the primary modes of communication on Instagram are image and text, I would like discuss three studies that explored multimodal metonymy for its image-text relationship.

Forceville (2009) discussed four case studies on metonymy in advertising billboards and art films. In one of his cases, the piece being analyzed was a series of ads from the ABN-Amro bank, which advertised the slogan ‘making things possible’ targeting entrepreneurs who were interested in a bank loan. One of the ads in the series was a picture of a sheep with the accompanying text *haute couture* (i.e., expensive, fashionable clothes). The author proposed that a metonymic link given in the ads lies in its ORIGIN (of a sheep, or wool from a sheep) FOR THE END PRODUCT (as the fabric from which *haute couture* clothing is made). Forceville also found all other ads from this campaign displaying the same metonymic concept of ORIGIN FOR END PRODUCT. These included an image of grape with the text *grand cru* (a regional wine classification), a sprouting acorn with the text *forest*, and a brick with the text *skyscraper*. It is interesting that in this ABN-Amro bank ad campaign, the roles of pictorial and textual representations were interdependent. That is, the mapping process and the realization of metonymy would not be possible by either the text or the image alone.

Another study that informed my analysis was the investigation of visual and verbal metonymy in financial discourse conducted by Catalano and Waugh (2013). In this study, the researchers investigated eleven online news articles in the financial field to discover how text and image interplayed in conveying metonymies. In essence, they found that the role of metonymies can be used to subtly yet powerfully manipulate the audience’s thought, opinion, and decision making toward financial issues. They reported a variety of visual and verbal

metonymic strategies used to hide or highlight financial events and to shape public opinions. More important, was their discussion on the power of suggestion and connotation that were accomplished by metonymy in images. Catalano and Waugh concluded from the findings that the careful metonymical analysis of financial discourse was essential as it served not only for academic purposes but also for social justice and social awareness.

Urios-Aparisi (2009) analyzed multimodal metaphor and metonymy in four television commercials, and he found that in three of the four cases, the objects were personified and animated as human beings. As discussed previously, the personification (of items as people or of items doing human relating activities) were common conceptual metaphors used in advertisement business. The researcher also presented the concept of *submodes* which inspired the present paper. In visual representations, submodes can be color, shape, line, tone, and such, while in moving images they also include movement and rhythm. In his analysis, Urios-Aparisi discussed how the color submode (i.e., SOFT COLOR IS WARMTH) within a mode was an important element that contributed to the meanings of any multimodal piece. His findings were in line with several visual metonymies of color, line, and tone reported by Catalano and Waugh (2013) including metonym COLOR (red) FOR DANGER, WEIGHT (thick lines) FOR STRENGTH, and LIGHT FOR TRUTH.

## Methodology

In this paper, my analysis was conducted on the activity called Weekend Hashtag Project (WHP), which is a weekly photo challenge held by Instagram's Community Team. Every weekend, Instagrammers are encouraged to take and share photos according to the designated theme of the week for a chance to be featured on the Instagram blog. In order to explore whether there was any recurrent metonymic strategies applied across WHPs, the ten latest WHPs at the time I collected the data were selected for the analysis. Those were #WHPsilhouetted, #WHPappreciateEarth, #WHPtypeinthewild, #WHPhandinhand, #WHPchairaffair, #WHPdancers, #WHPwomenwhoinspire, #WHPtelephone, #WHPinteractivegrams, and #WHPsentbymail. In each WHP, nine photos were finally chosen to be featured on the blog; this accounted for a total of 90 photos (See Appendix A). Besides the featured photos, I also analyzed the descriptions provided for each WHP in order to explore Instagram's metonymic representations. The WHP featured photos and descriptions were gathered from two sites: the official Instagram account (on the app) and the Instagram blog (<http://instagram.tumblr.com>). The official account has more than 235 million followers, and it is the site where WHP featured photos are shared weekly. On the other hand, the Instagram blog is where the detailed description of each WHP is posted weekly for all the followers to see.

## Findings and Discussion

### Metonymy of Instagram: A Social Semiotic Perspective

Forceville (2009) claims that any filmic depiction in itself is a metonym because it is a metonymic representation or a referent of something that exist in the real world. This notion also holds true in the case of photographs. For instance, a picture of a little girl blowing candles stands for the series of event happening in her birthday party. Likewise, a single snapshot of a smiling man wearing graduation cap and gown can be interpreted as a metonymic representation for all academic experiences he had received. In the context of Instagram's WHP, beside the general metonymic property of photographs, I would argue that the use of hashtag is in itself a metonym as it is a referent to a certain quality or a property that appears in a post. The hashtag #WHP, therefore, clearly stands for all the activities and

the people relating to WHP, from the weekly designated themes to the featured photos and the processes in-between.

### **Visual and Sensory Modalities**

Beside the metonyms derived from the characteristics of the photographs and the hashtags, the primary source of my metonymic analysis comes from the visual representation, specifically featured photos in ten WHPs. In analyzing Instagram's visual metonymy, I have been informed by the social semiotic concept of *visual modality* as well as different visual expressions used to achieve varying degrees of visual modality as discussed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). In social semiotics, modality deals with the question of truth; it involves the issues of fact versus fiction, reality versus fantasy, real versus artificial, and authentic versus fake. However, it is not concerned with the absolute truth of things but rather with the truth as *regarded* or *perceived* by sign producers in specific contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2005). In visual modality, visuals can represent people, places, and things as though they are real, or as though they are not. Furthermore, a definition of what counts as real can be varied diversely depending upon individuals, contexts, and/or cultures. In this sense, visual modality judgments are social as well as contextual for it depends largely upon specific social groups or within specific institutional contexts. In the context of Instagram, the fact that its visual mode is primarily photograph, which captures and portrays the users' life moments as they happen, contributes to the *naturalistic modality*, suggesting that what is represented in an image actually exists in this way.

It is not surprising that photographs are usually perceived as *real* and *true* because we believe that photographs capture reality, when in fact, what they really capture are arbitrary moments that reflect an event or something memorable (Machin, 2007). Similarly, how real and naturalistic Instagram photos are is arguable because the app is fully equipped with photo editing tools that allow users to play with visual modality by distorting, hiding, and highlighting the photo details. Hence, *sensory modality* comes into play on the Instagram platform because the pleasure principle, rather than realistic properties, is used to create visuals or to judge their truthfulness. In contrast to the naturalistic modality, the truth lies in the feeling rather than seeing in sensory modality. Impressionist paintings are what Machin (2007) provided as examples of the sensory modality. While photographs with high color saturation are normally perceived as unnaturalistic and thus unreal, full color saturations are considered real in this particular context of impressionist paintings. On Instagram's WHP, I found that both naturalistic and sensory modalities interplay in varying degrees to create visual aesthetics that are appreciated and regarded as true and real by the Instagram community.

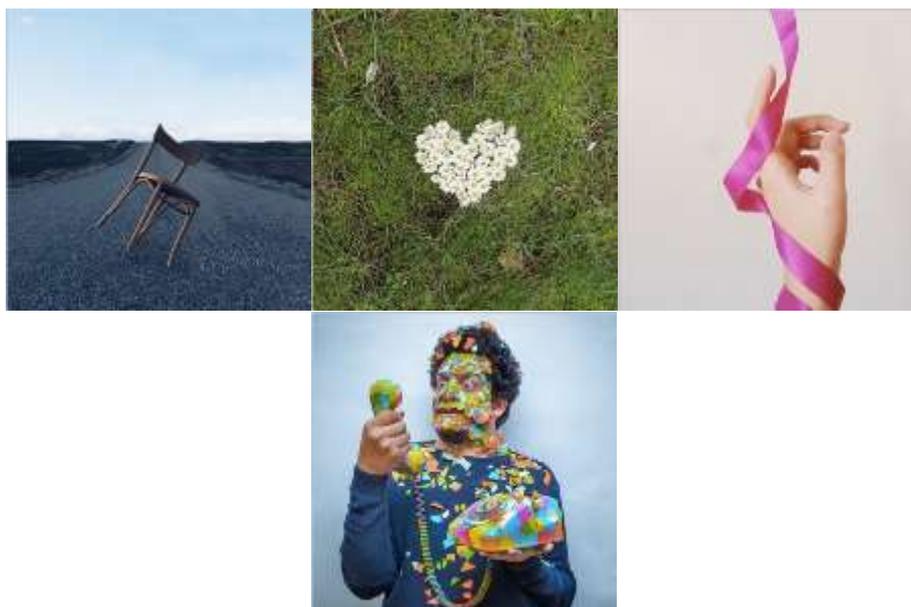
According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), there are several means of visual expressions that can be utilized to create differing levels of visual modality. These include, but are not limited to, articulation of detail, articulation of background, color saturation, color modulation, depth articulation, articulation of light and shadow, and articulation of tone. Applying the concept of visual modality to the metonymic analysis, I observed certain means of visual expression that are preferred by Instagram, and such expressions are evident in the WHP featured photos. By repeatedly featuring photos with particular visual elements, Instagram has been designing its own reality and thus, creating a single metonymic concept of VISUAL PROPERTY FOR BRAND IMAGE. Specifically, three categories of visual expressions are discussed this section: 1) articulation of colors, 2) articulation of background (contextualization), and 3) representation of social actors.

### **Articulation of colors: Color saturation and modulation**

Colors are widely used to communicate meanings in images. In the case of WHP, most of its featured photos appear to be harmonized and uniformed in terms of colors. On the scale of color saturation (i.e., from the intense to the absence of color), most WHP photos display medium to low color saturations, which are diluted towards pale and pastel rather than dull and dark. The meaning potential of these less saturated colors involves the expression of emotional temperature. While highly saturated colors signal emotional intensity, the fact that the colors are toned down possibly indicates subtlety, tenderness, or peacefulness (Machin, 2007). Regarding modulation (i.e., a scale from fully modulated color, such as the use of different shades in the same color, to unmodulated, or flat color with no such shades), WHP photos portray medium modulation as they reflect natural shades that lights and perspective can create, rather than flat, generic colors. The choices of saturation and modulation found in these photos point towards naturalistic modality. I found this articulation of colors similar to what Zhao (2014) found in his analysis of photographs in *frankie*, an 'indie' Australian women's magazine. Zhao revealed that in contrast to mainstream women's magazines that employ a high sensory visual modality with high color saturation, *frankie* portrays its indie quality by adopting a low sensory and more naturalistic visual modality with medium color saturation, modulation, and differentiation. Without any attempt to categorize Instagram as indie, I still find Instagram's use of several visual realizations including medium color saturation and modulation similar to those of *frankie* as discussed by Zhao.

### **Articulation of background (Contextualization)**

Contextualization refers to the use of background on a scale from the absence of background to the fully detailed one. Among the 90 WHP photos analyzed for this study, it is very common to find subjects of the photographs appear on very minimal backgrounds (see Figure 1). In theory, minimal background usually associates with decontextualized, void, and generic properties, which make an image seems more like a typical example rather than something real. On the other end, fully articulated backgrounds can also create an artificial, *more-than-real* impression if, for instance, the background is more defined than the foreground (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). However, this is not the case for the WHP photos. Less detailed backgrounds seem to give more weight to the subjects as they give the impression that the contexts are unnecessary, and what matters most is the subjects or the ideas presented in the foreground. Of course, the fact that Instagram photos appear rather small, especially when viewing from smartphones, makes it reasonable to create as plain a background as possible in order to direct the eyes to the people or objects in attention. I came to the conclusion that minimal or absence of background is acknowledged as aesthetic in the WHP context not only through the analysis of images but also of texts. From the textual description of each WHP, I found several instances in which the preference for decontextualized, simple, and solid backgrounds is promoted. Some of the photo tips posts on the Instagram blog are illustrated as follows:



*Figure 1. Minimal, decontextualized backgrounds*

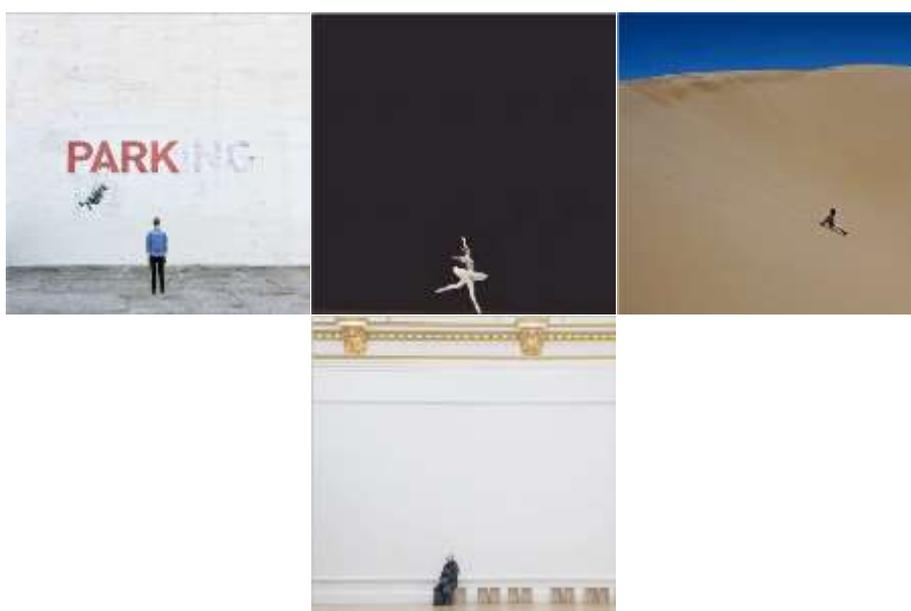
### **Representation of social actors: Gaze and distance**

Because of the varying themes, not all WHP photos depict people, and when they do, they are presented in various ways, from body parts (feet and hands) to close-ups and whole body shots. The different ways social actors are represented in images convey particular ideas about the participants towards the viewers. One common, almost conventional, technique to portray WHP people lies in their gazes, which is away from the viewer, not making direct contact. *Gaze* is one technique to position viewers to people in the image. Similar to real life situations, eye contact in photos means involvement, engagement and interaction. When people in the picture are not looking directly at the viewer, it removes the contact or direct address, and those people become an exhibit for the viewer to ‘look at’ (Machin, 2007). This notion applies well to the people of Instagram as we the viewer play the role of the spectator, silently observing unfamiliar faces and trying to get a sense of who they are. The fact that they are caught in actions also creates a realistic effect to the images, portraying the impression that these photographs are not set up, that they present those people as they actually exist in the real world, hence it creates high naturalistic modality.



**Figure 2 Gazing technique to represent social actors of Instagram**

Another technique used to position the viewer in relation to people inside the image is the *distance*. Close, medium, and long shots present different degrees of proximity and intimacy. Close-ups reveal reactions and expression, allowing the viewer to observe their emotions and feelings; it can sometimes suggest claustrophobia or a threat. In contrast, the more distant the actors are in the frame, the more they appear anonymous and impersonal, presented as generic characters (Machin, 2007). It could be the property of anonymity that contributes to Instagram's favor for long shot photography. The fact that the actors represent generic characters implies that they can be anyone given the same age, gender, or occupation. Without reference or connection to a particular person, the images become easily relatable to the viewer's life. Hence, similar to the gazing technique, long shot photographs appeared on these WHP photos, though implying anonymity and a distant relationship, provides the 'exhibition' effect which allows the viewer to observe the real life as it is happening.



**Figure 3. People positioning in a distance**

### **Visual aesthetics: Creativity is key**

Though creativity is quite an abstract visual expression comparing to other submodes such as colors and background, I believe that it is one essential aspect contributing to high sensory modality on Instagram. The creativity of Instagram is realized immediately through the WHPs themselves with various themes involving both common or abstract concepts that encourage creative designs. Because it is difficult and rather subjective to judge the degree of creativity on images, I decided to take evidences from the textual descriptions provided in each WHP instead. When analyzing the WHP descriptions, I found that the concepts relating to creativity was emphasized in every project. WHP announcements usually begin with the sentence such as, “*The goal this weekend is to take a **creative** photo (or video) of ...*”. Then the descriptions continue to shape the users’ understanding of what is considered creative in the WHP context. As revealed in the textual descriptions, the concepts of creativity on Instagram are associated with uniqueness. Hence, the adjectives such as unique, unlikely, unusual, unexpected, and special are commonly used in the descriptions:

Creativity in WHP perspectives also involves good eyes and ears as Instagram encourages its members to carefully observe common things in the surroundings from a newer perspective:

### **Conclusion**

In this multimodal analysis of Instagram, I explored certain visual expressions repeatedly presented in its WHP activity. By analyzing the commonly-used visual designs in 90 WHP’s featured photos, a single metonymic concept of VISUAL PROPERTY FOR BRAND IMAGE was observed. These visual properties included 1) medium to low color saturation, 2) medium color modulation, 3) minimal background, 4) unengaged social actors, 5) long distant shots, and 6) unique visual presentations for creativity. Ultimately, occurrence of these metonyms has led to the recognizable patterns of photographs that are considered real and true in the context of WHP and possibly of Instagram as a whole. These visual grammar patterns are manifested sometimes subtly and connotatively through repeated sets of visual samples, while some other times they are spelled out through verbal descriptions. Even though Instagram is a cultural resource that is used differently by people in different contexts, the findings of the present paper suggest that in order to become a part of the inner Instagram community, a person needs to understand certain aspects of its preferred visual properties. The understanding of Instagram’s visual grammar, together with the ability to apply such features onto his/her photographs, becomes a key aspect for any individual to become a *true* Instagrammer. All in all, I believe that visual language works the same way as the verbal language does; the strategic uses of its structure leads to successful and meaningful communication.

### **About the author:**

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