#Instalike Me: Consumerism, Self-Enhancement, and Instant Gratification Fantasies in Instagram

Abstract

*In her paper, “#Instalike Me: Consumerism, Self-Enhancement and Instant Gratification Fantasies in Instagram,” Alicia Reinersman views the up-and-coming social media application, Instagram. In order to provide a theoretical foundation for her research, Reinersman traces consumer behavior explained in Marxist notions of capitalism, socialization theories stemming from literacy development and need-fulfillment, and social media studies. Reinersman finds that Instagram takes root in each of these ideas. Through her concluding Fantasy Theme Analysis, Reinersman describes the larger over-arching themes manifesting in this application, which she determines as the following: consumerism, self-enhancement, and instant gratification.*

Introduction

“Millennials,” “Echo Boomers,” and the more apathetic-sounding “Generation Y” are three commonly used signifiers describing people born sometime between 1982 and 1995, according to Annie Lindstrom’s article, “The Kids are All Right.” No matter the name, one thing
is for certain: this generation has come of age in a world where perpetual access to seemingly
unlimited information is as simple as the touch of a screen. Privy to the workings of televisions,
personal computers, the internet, cell phones, and now “smart” phones, this generation has
developed a *digital* literacy unknown to those generations prior.

As a result of their constant connectivity, Millennials not only request and experience the
increased *velocity* (speed) of interactions but also an increased *volume* (quantity) of those
interactions in a consumerist manner. Lindstrom addresses this notion within her article by
quoting Walter Smith, the President of the consumer behavior research firm, Yankelovich:
“When marketing to [Millennials], you have to put them in control to get their attention. This
generation embraces consumer culture because they are in control of it.” These words bring to
light a potentially defining quality of this generation. The key here is not simply technology; it is
*control*. Better yet, it is happiness stemming from that control -- *instant gratification*.

In Stephen Koepp’s 1986 *Time* article, “Life in the Express Lane: Instant Gratification
has become a Fast Growing Industry,” he addresses the increasing societal focus on the now. In
1986, Koepp observed that instant gratification manifested in *instant* bank loans, mass marketed
*instant* coffee, express check-out lanes in grocery stores, et cetera (Koepp). Fast-forward 27
years to 2013. We still have instant bank loans, instant coffee, and express check-out lanes in
grocery stores. In spite of these similarities, we live in a very different society today. Many of the
marked differences that help contextualize the Millennial generation were unimaginable in 1986,
much less in 2000. A slew of new social media platforms and “smart” phones dominate today’s
society. Prior to the advent these technologies, people grew accustomed to quick access to
commodities and assistance. Now people have virtually unlimited access to information and
other people – suggesting the the proliferation of new, “virtual” goods.
Capitalist production and consumption practices not only explain the increased saliency of instant gratification but also the advent of social media. In order to provide the necessary material conditions for a good life and make high profits, capitalism has driven technological innovation and its resulting efficiency. These innovations, in turn, allowed the development of social media and the further perpetuation of instant gratification attitudes. Socializational factors also contribute to capitalist practices by providing human capital to function within the labor force. Social goals and tastes stemming from this type capital have also allowed social media to flourish – giving a greater sense of autonomy to the people and promoting the rise of the digital “prosumer,” producer-consumer. As a result of these economic and socializational realities, social networking sites geared especially toward Millennials embody these ideas. The increasingly popular photo-sharing application, Instagram, is no exception. Upon viewing Instagram through the lens of the rhetorical Fantasy Theme Analysis, this application clearly displays capitalist consumer behaviors and production constraints, self-enhancement goals and aesthetic-replication strategies, and instantly gratifying photo-sharing and feedback capabilities.

In order to demonstrate how each of these ideas manifests in Instagram, this paper divides into four large sections: 1) Consumer Culture, 2) Consumer Socialization, 3) The Rise of the Prosumer, and 4) Fantasy Theme Analysis. Within the first section, this paper views Marxist theories of automation and alienation, which have resulted in technological innovation and instant gratification. The second section views the socializational impact of literacy, the implications of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the importance of Bourdieu’s cultural capital, and the resulting ideas of self-enhancement. Thirdly, this paper explores Web 2.0 capabilities in the “cloud” and the types of communication expressed in this virtual sphere. The final analysis section of this paper provides an explanation of Instagram, a description of the Fantasy Theme
Analysis methodology, and the findings of this analysis that demonstrates each of these aforementioned ideas.

Consumer Culture

In order to understand the proliferation of social media and the societal emphasis on the now, it is first important to provide a contextual description of consumer culture, especially as it manifests in capitalist systems. This discussion serves the purpose of establishing two important concepts to this research. The first idea relates to the resulting development and prevalence of instant gratification ideas, and the second notion suggests a connection between consumerism and societal power roles. Within the explanation of the first component, this paper views Marxist theories of automation and alienation. Following this exploration, this paper moves to relate technological innovation to instant gratification.

Automation and Alienation

The economic theories – or, predictions – of Karl Marx promote various, often negative, connotations pertaining to socialism and communism. In lieu of these negative attitudes toward Marx, consider Roy Macridis and Mark Hulliung’s words from Contemporary Political Ideologies: “For Marx, the rejection of capitalism is not based on moral or humanitarian considerations. It derives from what he considered to be the empirical reality of the capitalist economy” (99). Given Marx’s empirically-rooted predictions, what follows describes capitalist
practices in order to contextualize the development and perpetuation of instant gratification tendencies.

Through his predictive dialectical materialism, Marx addressed and predicted stages of historical development ranging from the primitive society leading to a utopian realization in communism (104). Capitalism, in Marx’s historical lineage, functioned as a necessary stepping stone toward the proliferation of socialism – later leading to a utopian communism. According to Macridis and Hulliung, Marx valued capitalism’s drive towards efficiency because it allows “human beings in a society to supply all their wants and more,” thus achieving “all the material conditions for a good life” (102). Without this capitalist achievement, the socialist stage would lack imperative foundational support, rendering it impossible to function as Marx intended. Without socialism, a true communist society would also be an impossible goal.

The crux of Marxist economic theories relies upon the creation of a production-efficient workforce. Marx believed capitalist competition within the marketplace would prompt higher sales at lower prices (101). This desire to produce and sell more goods would then prompt the capitalist to continually modernize, mass-produce, and develop better machinery in order to “increase the productivity of labor” (101). How might the capitalist achieve more efficiency in these ways? Michel G. Smith addresses this notion within his article, “Marx, Technocracy, and the Corporatist Ethos.” In this article, Smith notes that “Marx sought to achieve efficient order in society by way of democratization of both the workplace and technical knowledge” (235). While such efficient organizations would facilitate streamlined production practices, Marx warned against total automation within the workplace not only due to threatening pay decreases but also a societal lowering of morale (241). Marx valued labor because he believed it functioned “as an interchange between man and nature” and could allow a type of freedom (242). Depending upon
the production practices, labor could be helpful for the workers who Marx termed the *proletariat*. Conversely, the exploitation of the proletariat to produce more goods for low wages would degrade the morale of the public – rendering them as cogs in the larger capitalist machine (242).

Significantly more important to Marx than automation was claimed ownership over the means of production – or, who promoted automation (244). This concern serves as the basis for Marx’s theory of alienation. Edward Andrew’s article, “Work and Freedom in Marcuse and Marx,” provides a description of alienation, which appears below in the following words:

> Alienation, for Marx, arises from the separation of the worker from the means of production, from the ownership of the means of production by non-labourers. In such a condition, an individual must alienate his labour-power to a capitalist in order to obtain a subsistence wage. The capitalist prescribes the production goals, the amount of labour to be done, and the methods by which it is done [...] (244)

In these words, Andrew demonstrates that Marx observed a very clear separation between the proletariat and the owners of the means of production, who he termed the *bourgeois*. Marx predicted that such alienating tactics would inhibit self-realization and the expression of human personality, thus constraining the proletariat and suggesting a lack of control (244).

*Technological Innovation in the Capitalist Sphere:*

*Changes in Demand*
In tandem with the Marxist ideas noted above, Jerry Courvisanos describes technological innovation in his article, “Technological Innovation: Galbraith, the Post Keynesian, and a Heterodox Future.” Before delving into the implications of increased automation resulting from technological advancements, Courvisanos provides a context-building definition of technological innovation. He denotes the term as “the creation, development, and implementation of an idea from problem solving or opportunity identification that alters… the state of theoretical and practical knowledge, skills, and artifacts… in the production and delivery of economic activity” (84).

Courvisanos furthers Marxist ideas of automation by noting that “[a]ll technological change is contingent on how technology is ‘shaped’ by human agency processes as social groups manage technological, social, economic conflicts” (87). In other words, although the proletariat – more broadly, the people – might not control the means of production, they do have a say in what is produced. For this reason, Courvisanos determines that technology works as an engine in the capitalist machine – propelling change and economic growth. This growth results from the response to societal needs and allows the “conception of new economic opportunities that induce demand” (84). To illustrate this idea more fully, Courvisanos views the philosophies of Martin Heidegger. Courvisanos writes:

Heidegger identifies ‘laws’ that drive capitalism to technological innovation through a sequence of technical knowledge encapsulated in technological trajectories. One technological development is instrumental in generating complementary innovations while destroying the integrity of older technologies. (86)
Through this example, Courvisanos presents an important idea; he demonstrates that once-useful technologies become outmoded due to changes in consumer demands – demands stemming from evolving needs. Renaud Bellias concurrently expresses this notion in “Post Keynesian Theory, Technology Policy, and Long-Term Growth,” where he argues that “changes in demand determine the long-term evolution through their impact on both the utilization of means of production and investment” (426).

What are some of the current demand changes about which Courvisanos and Bellias discuss? Refer back to Lindstrom’s quotation from Smith in the introduction: “When marketing to [Millennials], you have to put them in control to get their attention. This generation embraces consumer culture because they are in control of it” (11). The emphasis on relentless technological innovation became salient within the industrial economy and persisted into – and ultimately allowed – the less physical labor-oriented service economy. For this reason, the standard of efficiency has become expected over the course of the last century.

Millennials grew into the world with this standard of efficiency and view it as an asset – a tool. Lindstrom observes this characteristic by arguing Millennials not only see technology as a means of efficiency, but they also view it “as something that provides them with the power to customize and control their environments” (11). In other words, technology permits Millennials a greater sense of agency within day-to-day activities (e.g. entertainment choices, information gathering, and relationship building). By having numerous choices and seemingly unlimited access to information, Millennials can quantify -- and even commodify – many facets of their lives. Therefore, Millennials cater to consumer practices and function as part of the capitalist machine as described by Marx. But, maybe the most important factor is the speed at which Millennials are able to consume.
What is Instant Gratification, Anyway?

Since capitalists seek to raise profits through fast production and consumer satisfaction, the standard of efficiency has become a societal expectation. Although the media often discusses instant gratification as being a direct result of the most recent technologies, these attitudes are not necessarily new. Instant gratification, instead, has evolved concurrently with capitalism into a societal reality – not necessarily an ailment. Instant gratification functions as a negative feedback loop. How? Think back to Marx; the bourgeois demands quick and massive production within the proletariat in order to make profit. But, from where does this profit come? Used to efficiency, consumers have grown to accept and appreciate the quick satisfaction of their needs. As a result, consumers demand more efficiency and capitalism delivers, thus creating a negative feedback loop.

Although instant gratification may not be new, that is not to say that Web 2.0 and social media have not played a role in its development. Many of the ways in which instant gratification attitudes manifest today would not be possible without these technological developments. Now instant gratification is not limited to the achievement of “consumptive necessities” like food, water, and shelter (Ward 4). It also conveys ideas relating to “effective consumption,” which are the “styles and moods of consumption” (4). In other words, instant gratification carries implications as to how people consume – which qualities they seek in goods, especially virtual goods. Perhaps, instant gratification as it exists today can be more clearly described through the exploration of social media.
People often think of instant gratification in terms of the increased connectivity realized within the Millennial generation. Darren Waters of the BBC explores this conception in his article, “Hyper-Connected Generation Rises.” In his words, Waters notes that “an increasing number of applications have been launched that take advantage of ‘always on’ connections, either over the net or on mobile devices.” Maybe even more important than being “always on” is how people connect and share information with each other. Waters points out that “users are not just sending texts and emails, but they are ‘lifecasting’ words and video 24 hours a day…[M]essages are ‘one-to-many.’” In this context, current instant gratification clearly involves limitless accessibility. Based on Waters words, “hyper-connectivity” to other individuals allows this type of instant gratification. How? Whenever someone wants to express their thoughts, they have an audience online ready to listen. On the opposite side of the same coin, people can view peer into other people’s virtual lives whenever they crave some socializing.

Consumer Socialization

As demonstrated above, capitalist practices clearly affect the efficient standards consumers demand, especially by allowing and promoting instant gratification. Those demands, however, do much more than shape efficiency standards; they also play an integral role in shaping people’s lives – determining some means of socialization. In order to address the importance of socialization and the perpetuation of instant gratification within social media, this section explores literacy development, need-fulfillment, cultural capital and aesthetics, and notions of self-enhancement.
Before viewing each of the ideas mentioned above, understanding the concept of socialization stands as a foundational building block. For the purposes of this paper, *socialization* means “the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to participate as more or less effective members of groups in society” (Ward). This definition undoubtedly reflects that numerous forces affect human development from birth to death and that those processual developments determine the societal roles to which people subscribe – consciously or not. Furthermore, this definition indicates a utilitarian goal realized in an effective, participatory culture, thereby promoting ideas of *human* capital – an idea addressed in the following words.

*Socialized Literacy*

Language functions as one of the most important mechanisms of socialization by allowing communication and permitting relationship-building, information-sharing, and potential innovation. Since language essentially facilitates each of these actions, socialization clearly takes root in literacy development. Without some form of literacy, societies could not function as they do today. Literacy-development, like socialization, also depends upon a multifarious variety of influences. What does *literacy* even mean? James Paul Gee, in “What is Literacy?” articulates a definition for this complex concept, and comes to define it as “the control of secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language in secondary discourses)” (6). This definition, however, provides little clarity and requires a contextual framework in order for it to be more fully understood. To allow a better knowledge of what it means to be literate, this paper addresses the implications conveyed in *discourse* and the distinction between the *primary* and *secondary* qualifiers.
Gee defines *discourse* as a “socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘network’” – functioning as an “identity toolkit” (1). Already, Gee’s definition provides some clues as to how language plays a key role not only in self-identification but also in community associations. Also worth noting here is Gee’s use of the word, “networking,” which implies notions of information-sharing and relationship-building that are important to socialization.

In order to distinguish between the *primary* and *secondary* qualifiers, Gee provides some contextual descriptions. To convey the meaning of *primary discourse*, Gee writes the following words:

> In modern technological and urban societies which function as a “society of strangers,” the oral mode is more narrowly useful. Let us refer to this oral mode, developed in the primary process of enculturation, as the “primary discourse.” (5)

Compare this definition with Gee’s proceeding words articulating the meaning of *secondary discourse*:

> Discourses beyond the primary discourse are developed in association with and by having access and practice with… secondary institutions (such as schools, workplaces, stores, government offices, businesses, churches, etc.). (5)
Through these explanations, Gee clearly conceives of literacy as being both acquired through and refined by socialization. Furthermore, Gee’s descriptions demonstrate that literacy functions as a tool that allows knowledge-acquisition and skill-building – also ideas that were articulated in the initial definition of socialization.

Deborah Brandt builds upon notions of literacy development in her article, “Literacy Learning and Economic Change.” Like Gee, Brandt suggests that literacy serves as one of the most important yet multifaceted factors affecting socialization. To this end, Brandt articulates her concept of the literacy sponsor – an idea similar to but more specific than Gee’s notion of the secondary discourse. Whereas Gee focuses on some of the institutions that affect literacy, Brandt looks to larger factors which include social structures. According to Brandt, “[s]ponsors are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who provide, enhance, or deny opportunities for literacy learning and gain advantage in some way” (376). Why are these sponsors so important? Not only do they help socialize people, but they also result from and contribute to economic development, thereby becoming increasingly “integral to the interests of capitalism” (376). Due to this distinction, Brandt considers literacy to be a type of resource, “which, like wealth or education or trade skill or social connection, is pursued for the opportunities and protections it potentially grants its seekers (375-76). Since literacy can be viewed through this consumerist lens, it has “potential value for gaining power or pleasure, and accruing information, civil rights, education, spirituality, status, or money” (376).

Even more important, Brandt notes that literacy now serves a new purpose – contrasting with its religious and democratically influenced histories (374). Brandt writes, “[A]ccording to the government,” literacy represents “a duty to productivity, and one with increasingly sharp consequences for those not in compliance” (374). Within her words, Brandt not only suggests
that literacy helps define societal roles, but she also makes a poignant claim: in an information age, literacy turns people into resources requiring refinement. Brandt expresses this sentiment in the following words:

Where once U.S workers had value for a capacity to transform raw materials into consumable goods, by the end of the twentieth century they have become the raw material itself. In an information economy, reading and writing serve as both instruments and products by which surplus wealth gets produced and competitive advantage gets won. (374)

As a result of such a great focus on literacy in capitalist societies, Brandt presents her idea of human capital. In her article, she says human capital is “represented by knowledge, skills, organizations and motivation” (374). In other words, Brandt suggests that a person’s worth in society derives from their ability to not only effectively communicate but also to produce informational goods. As society becomes more information-reliant and more complex (as it is with the advent of social media and Web 2.0 platforms), the amount of education and knowledge needed to make a more productive contribution to the economy has grown, thereby placing even more weight on literacy.

Social Needs and Goals

Not only are people socialized through language but also through their physical needs and social goals, which are often communicated through language. In order to make this
distinction, it is important to again view the difference between “consumptive necessities” and “effective consumption” as articulated by Scott Ward in “Consumer Socialization.” According to Ward, consumer socialization is the “process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (2). Part of this definition relies upon the ways in which people develop “attitudes about the ‘social significance’ of goods, or more precisely, how people learn to perceive that the acquisition of some kinds of products or brands of goods can be instrumental to successful social role enactment” (3). For instance, consumptive necessities like food, water, and shelter are ideas generally enforced by families (4). Effective consumption behaviors – indicating styles and moods – are shaped by peer interests (4). This dichotomy, although articulated in different terms, relates very well to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

Maslow’s hierarchy consisted of five need classes – ultimately generated a “ladder of achievement:” 1. Basic needs like food, drink, sleep, and sex; 2. Needs for safety like securing stability, health, and comfort; 3. Needs for belongingness such as love, affection, and acceptance; 4. Needs for self-esteem as displayed in prestige and status; and 5. Need for self-actualization, a moral need (Trigg 395). An important point to note here is that the upper-level needs (needs 3 – 5) articulated in this hierarchy can only be “realized once more materialistic needs are achieved,” thus indicating an association not only with income but also with Marxist critiques of capitalism (i.e., capitalism achieves provides all the material conditions for a good life) (395).

Bourdieu’s Capital and Habitus
How do individuals achieve Maslow’s upper-level needs? Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, offers some insight. In his works, he describes a bifurcation of capital – both economic and cultural (Trigg 399). While addressing the former, Bourdieu expressed that “[e]conomic capital entail[ed] the income and wealth held by an individual” (Trigg 399). Through this delineation, Bourdieu’s conception of economic capital relates to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which – again -- argues social needs can only be accomplished upon foundational physical needs, consumptive necessities. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s concept of economic capital hearkens back to the Marxist critique of capitalism as achieving the necessary conditions for a material life.

Cultural capital, on the other hand, relates to ideas of literacy socialization and effective consumption. Whereas economic capital promotes concepts associated with income and wealth, cultural capital is more symbolic – defined by an “accumulated stock of knowledge about the products of artistic and intellectual traditions” (399). Based upon this distinction, Bourdieu’s cultural capital ties into the previously discussed notion of literacy as being both an “identity toolkit” (a means of socialization) and an instrument allowing productivity and potential innovation (a resource utilized by capitalism). More important to Bourdieu’s cultural capital is the latter half of the definition: “…the products of artistic and intellectual traditions” (399). Through this description, cultural capital suggests a type of common sense of taste or aesthetic that would result from associations with peers (i.e. effective consumption). Furthermore, by adhering to artistic and intellectual norms, people might be able to achieve the upper-level social needs articulated in Maslow’s hierarchy.

Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus also lends to theories of socialization – particularly the self-enhancement model, which follows in the next section. Bourdieu’s habitus relies upon two main aspects. Firstly, he believes “an individual derives the principles which govern his or her
behavior from the social structure in an unconscious way,” and that this structure reveals in the “dispositions and perceptions of individuals” (400). Secondly, he argues that “the social structure itself is shaped by the way in which individuals learn and adapt their dispositions” (400). In other words, typical practices and behaviors are dictated by notions of taste and associations with other people (401).

*Self-Enhancement*

Jeffrey Pfeffer and Christina T. Fong’s articulation of the self-enhancement model continues along the path of Maslow’s hierarchy and Bourdieu’s notions of capital by linking to consumerist ideas and “Western cultural attitudes” (374). According to Pfeffer and Fong, self-enhancement may be linked to “in-group favoritism, social feedback, and mental health,” which are all relevant ideas while noting the proliferation of social media in recent years. Pfeffer and Fong’s “Building Organization Theory from First Principles: The Self-Enhancement Motive and Understanding Power and Influence,” defines *self-enhancement* as “the desire or observed reality of seeing oneself and by extension, one’s actions, traits, and attitudes in the most positive light” (374). Pfeffer and Fong write the following words in support of this idea:

People want to associate with winners and with success and are willing to subjugate their own interests and emotions… This line of reasoning suggests that at least the appearance or illusion of current or future success is crucial for attracting allies and supporters, particularly if current rewards for these individuals are small. (377)
Pfeffer and Fong ultimately argue that people attempt to build a sense of “we-ness” by searching for common traits. And, through these interactions, people are able to gain power and influence (380).

While searching for similar traits, individuals might also try to enhance themselves by displaying some recurring or popular characteristics – again, building “we-ness” (380). Pfeffer and Fong better-articulate this idea by writing,

To obtain power, then, one strategy is for individuals to show they are similar to individuals and groups with more power, thereby building a relationship and identifying with these more-powerful others. It is… noteworthy how simple it is to induce a sense of shared social identity by reminding people of what they have in common. (380)

This notion of community-building relates directly back to Maslow’s needs for belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Without being able to belong, individuals struggle to build strong self-esteem and ultimately achieve self-actualization. Also important to note here is the stress on common traits. Thinking back to Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and the habitus, the self-enhancement model’s necessitates commonality which can be realized through similar tastes and aesthetic – or, artistic – traits

The Rise of the Prosumer

Now that this paper has addressed capitalist and socializational forces, it is important to apply these ideas to the prosumer and the digital sphere. Alvin Toffler coined the term,
“prosumer” in his 1979 book, *The Third Wave*, which ultimately argues that “[a]s society moves toward the Post-Industrial Age,… the number of consumers [will] decline,” giving rise to prosumers, people who both *produce* and *consume* goods (Kotler). What makes this idea important is that “when people produce for use, production and consumption are united in the same person.” In order to better-explain this phenomenon, Toffler distinguishes three stages of human activity as being important to the development of the prosumer. An idea worth noting here is the concurrence of these stages with the evolution of capitalism. According to Toffler, the first wave was characterized by agrarian interests when most people were prosumers – producing their own food, creating their own clothing, and providing for their own entertainment. The second wave occurred in tandem with the Industrial Revolution when prosumer activities were undervalued. According to Toffler, goods were “produced under the norm of efficiency” and “consumed under the norm of indulgence” during this stage. The third wave, the post-industrial age, was a fusion of the previous two stages. Toffler argued that the dominant institution of this post-industrial age was the home, “or electronic cottage, in which most people carr[jed] on their own production and consumption.” Toffler’s third stage sounds like the social media’s infiltration into people’s homes and daily lives, doesn’t it?

While Toffler’s words preceded the development of the internet as it exists today, his definition of the *prosumer* still holds true. One criticism of this term in the context of Web 2.0 is that traditional economic forces are not at play, so the “prosumer” distinction cannot suffice. However, just as capitalism relies upon a marketplace to operate efficiently, the virtual world manifesting in the internet relies upon a marketplace of ideas. In social media, users not only produce content, but they also consume content from others.
As a result of this distinction, social media users now seem to claim ownership over the means of production that were so important to Marx – suggesting a rise of the proletariat over the bourgeois economic forces. After all, if allowed by the given platform, social media users choose which mode of content to post (e.g. text, photos, videos, et cetera), when to post that content, who can see that content, and the level at which they participate in the platform. By giving users so much control in this virtual realm, they feel a greater sense of agency – possibly even efficacy – within society and the economy. In spite of these strides, however, one idea is worth noting. While social media users control content, they do not control form. Kristin Arola articulates this notion in her article, “The Design of Web 2.0: The Rise of the Template, The Fall of Design.” She ultimately argues that, “composing texts, more specifically making choices about the composition of a page or screen, helps individuals think through the ways in which design functions to make meaning and produce selves” (7). Restricting this type of expression, in turn, limits meaning-making (7). In other words, structures of social media sites are geared toward specific information-sharing goals. Even if a user chooses a new background template for their site to change the appearance, they cannot change the general form of the website. Furthermore, users cannot go beyond the parameters of what the social media website has been designed to accomplish (i.e. users are limited by the website to the modes of information they can share).

While thinking about the proliferation of social media websites and increase in control over content instead of form, one question stands: are we really seeing a rise of the proletariat? Is the proletariat claiming ownership over the means of production? Not quite. Participants in social media frameworks can choose their levels of involvement and which content to produce; they are absolutely producers in the most academic sense. However, these users usually are not the code-writers and web designers, and – again – they are constrained by the parameters of these sites.
For these reasons, capitalism may be experiencing some shifts that nearly match the predictions of Marx. However, ideas of control are illusory. People participate because they believe they are in control, but by subscribing to the form or the way in which content can be produced, these people are clearly being controlled. The means of production stand in the hands of the web designers, code writers, and business owners. Instead of the “Rise of the Proletariat” as predicted by Marx, society seems to be experiencing the “Rise of the Prosumer” instead – still allowing capitalist control while giving prosumers a greater sense of agency (and maybe even happiness).

_The Cloud and the Digital Prosumer_

Jamie Skye Bianco’s article, “Social Networking and Cloud Computing: Precarious Affordances of the ‘Prosumer,’” provides descriptions of what it means to “cloud compute” and how people are using this technological innovation. Bianco provides a contextual description of the cloud in her following words:

Cloud computing refers to the use of a network-based application that also handles user data storage. In other words, both the program and any documents, files, or data generated through this program all reside on the host’s remote networked server and not on a user’s own hard drive. (303)

Due to the rise of the prosumer, “web-based platforms that engage fuller participation” rely on “social networking and ‘cloud computing’ as a part of everyday digital life” (303). Where can we
see this type of information-sharing and storing? Websites like “Myspace, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, and Delicious… [a]ll offer a variety of user controls that allow for the creation of a personal network such as ‘adding a friend,’ ‘subscribing’ to a channel or feed, and ‘following’ other users” (303). While providing these explanations already articulated, Bianco also responds to the widely-held notion that social media technologies perpetuate and promote narcissism. Bianco counters this idea by providing numerous examples of social action, productivity, collaboration, and interaction taking place in social media – on the “cloud.”

Tatiana Mazali, in her article, “Social Media as a New Public Sphere,” addresses the ethos of virtual social spaces. She argues that “social network spaces are not simply representational,” but they are also performative. According to her, “[t]hey are constructed social and relational spaces where identity is created and where, above all, ‘we act.’” In order to better explain the shift from relational to participatory social cultures, Mazali views scholar, Henry Jenkins’, typologies of the “participatory culture,” which she outlines as the following: (1) affiliations as manifesting in Myspace, Facebook, message boards, et cetera; (2) expressions like digital sampling, fan videos, fanfiction, and mashups; (3) collaborative problem-solving as demonstrated in sources like Wikipedia and in alternative reality gaming; and (4) circulations such as podcasts or blogs. As a result of these participatory features, Mazali notes the concept of a “smart mob,” which “represent[s] a dynamic sociality, nomadic… mobility,” and ultimately “a hybrid culture of social interaction” characterized by both “face-to-face and virtual” associations. According to Mazali, “social network sites, which are primarily organized around people and not interests, represent both a continuation and extension of this concept. They have revealed the close relationship between virtual and real communities.” Contrary to popular beliefs connecting social networking sites to actual networking, Mazali writes the following words: “Participants in
many of the larger social networking sites are not necessarily ‘networking’ or trying to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network.”

By primarily communicating with people we already know, “social networks have provided online communities” and communities in general “with a new organizational framework.” Whereas the early internet was characterized by topical hierarchies, “social network sites… are structured with the individual at the center of their community and networks.” Mazali ultimately argues that “a participatory culture is one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least they care about what other people think about what they have created).” In this sense, ideas of the prosumer come into play. Mazali writes, “The matter in hand here is the category of media ‘production’ and media ‘participation.’ We face a new complex scenario of users; there is a new order and relationship between the consumption styles/levels, content management and new interpretations of uses of the media.”

*Virtual Communication as Digital Rhetoric*

One critique of social media is that it does not consist of real communication because it takes places within the digital realm. While marked differences exist between communicating face-to-face and computer-to-computer or cell phone-to-cell phone, this “real” qualifier holds no ground. Why? Consider Mazali’s discussion of participatory culture; real people take part in social media. Furthermore, consider Eisenberg et al. in *Organizational Communication: Balancing Creativity and Constraint*. Within this text, Eisenberg et al. underline the parameters
of communication – two of which being “communication as information transfer” and “communication as a balance of creativity and constraint” (28). By “information transfer,” Eisenberg et al. suggest that language bears the capacity to transfer thoughts and feelings; speakers and writers enrich their words with thoughts and feelings; “words contain those thoughts and feelings,” and “[l]isteners or readers extract those thoughts and feelings from the words” (29). Although social media might not always be composed of words like a more traditional form of literacy, other modalities displayed in these platforms do have the ability to convey deep meaning. In other words, social media users can transfer ideas to their followers.

Furthermore, while discussing the “balance of creativity and constraint,” Eisenberg et al suggest that “[p]eople create reality through communication.” Therefore, by simply communicating with other people in the digital realm, people create a reality.

Analysis

Introduction

Now that ideas relating to consumer culture, socialization, and the prosumer have been discussed, the next step is to demonstrate how each of these ideas manifests within social media – more particularly, in Instagram. In order to make these connections, this section will first provide a brief artifact explanation of Instagram. Secondly, a contextual description of the Fantasy Theme Analysis methodology will be outlined. Finally, this paper will delve into the analysis and demonstrate the overarching fantasy themes of consumerism, self-enhancement, and instant gratification within Instagram.
Artifact Explanation:

What is Instagram?

Since October 2010, Instagram has functioned primarily as a photo-sharing application designed exclusively for smartphone use – first iPhones, later Androids, and now Windows phones (Instagram). Not only does Instagram stand as one of the most popular social networking applications today, but it also demonstrates unprecedented connectivity. One unique quality of Instagram is linkage to other social networking sites and email accounts. For instance, Instagram users can share their photos on Facebook, Flickr, Foursquare, Tumblr, Twitter, or via email directly through the application by a simple touch of the screen.

Beyond its ultra-connectivity, Instagram also bears numerous integrated features often associated with other social networking sites and smartphone applications. Reflecting the goal of Flickr, Instagram allows users to easily share and store photos on the “cloud.” Like Twitter, Instagram users can attach hashtags (#) to their photos for others to search, and they can “Write a caption” – or status-like line – to provide a brief commentary on a given photo. Mirroring Facebook’s communication functions, users can “like,” comment on, and “tag people” in photos. Also worth mentioning here is that Instagram can connect to Facebook in order to find “friends” to follow and to gain followers in return. Similar to Foursquare, Instagram users can tag their photos on a virtual “Photo Map” not only to “check in” but to also allow others to see where they
have been. Instagram also mirrors the capabilities of the new video-sharing application, Vines. As of June 2013, users have been able to post short videos in the place of photos (Instagram). Most importantly, Instagram functions like Twitter and Tumblr as a microblog – allowing people to post and view short bits of content on the go. Due to this application’s large user base (consisting of approximately 150 million users), the numerous messages shared, and its similarities to other social media sites, Instagram stands as a great artifact to analyze to determine the impacts of consumerism, self-enhancement, and instant gratification within social media and the Millennial generation to which it caters.

Methodology Description

In her book, *Rhetorical Criticism*, Sonja K. Foss provides descriptions of numerous methods of rhetorical analysis – one of those methods being the fantasy theme criticism. In her chapter focusing on this methodology, Foss not only provides useful instructions but also applies examples. According to Foss, Ernest G. Bormann developed the fantasy theme methodology – stemming “from Robert Bates and his associations of group fantasizing or dramatizing as a type of communication” within groups (96). This type of “fantasizing or dramatizing occurs when individuals find some aspect of a ‘message that catches and focuses their attention until they imaginatively participate in images and actions stimulated by the message’” (96). Bormann expanded upon this notion by articulating his symbolic convergence theory, which relies on two primary assumptions: 1) communication creates reality, and 2) “symbols not only create reality for individuals,” but “individuals’ meanings for symbols can converge to create a shared reality or communication consciousness” (96). Foss notes that “convergence,” in this case, also denotes
“consensus” on subjective meanings. In order to determine this symbolic convergence, a “frequent mention of a theme” and a narrative must be elicited in numerous messages and contexts (97).

After providing her explanation of the origin and development of this methodology, Foss outlines the fantasy theme criticism approach. According to her, the fantasy theme is the most basic unit of analysis within symbolic convergence theory (98). The fantasy is the “creative and imaginative interpretation of events” (98). The fantasy theme, on the other hand, denotes the “means through which the interpretation is accomplished in communication” while depicting “characters, actions, and settings… removed from an actual current group situation in time and place” (98). Foss articulates three types of fantasy themes in order to describe groups’ perspectives of the worlds: (1) setting themes, (2) character themes, and (3) action themes. Setting themes demonstrate where the given action took place. Character themes show the agents or actions in the drama (whatever it may be) while associating qualities with and assigning motives to them (99). Finally, action themes – or plotlines – describe the “actions in which the characters of the drama engage” (99). After determining all of these ideas, Foss underlines the second primary unit of analysis in this methodology: the rhetorical vision (100). This rhetorical vision seeks to unify all these “various shared fantasies” and derive any larger implications (100).
Instagram:

Fantasy Theme Criticism Analysis

Setting Themes

Based on the Digital Rhetoric section articulated above, Instagram communication clearly does not take place solely within one realm. In the case of Instagram, the communication is both physical and virtual. Instagram communication begins as soon as a person chooses to pull out a smartphone and document something (e.g. a plate of food, new outfit, puppy, et cetera) in real time, thereby taking place in the physical – or, “real” – world. Upon capturing this moment, the communication occurs visually. In other words, the Instagram photographer relates a message through their chosen subject, camera angle, lighting, filter, et cetera. The latter three qualities can even be manipulated directly within the application – allowing the Instagram photographer to exert more control in the conveyed message.

Once Instagram photographers determine how a given photo should look, the next step is to post the photo onto the online feed or to any of the other social network sites to which it Instagram connects. By posting photos, Insta-communication then takes place virtually on the “cloud.” Not only can other Instagram and social network users see the message the photographer communicates, but they can choose to participate in the discussion as well. Within the application, Instagram users can “like” photos by clicking on a grey heart icon on the bottom-left portion of the screen – turning it red (Figure 2). Furthermore, if a user chooses to respond to the poster’s photo, he or
she can click on the “comment” option and compose a brief text, which will appear below the photo within the feed. Finally, users can also click on the icon on the far bottom-right on the page and choose to report the photo as being inappropriate, share it Facebook, Tweet it, or copy the URL, thereby extending the virtual communication.

**Character Themes**

Instagram stands as one of the up-and-coming social networking applications, but who exactly participates – leading to this distinction? Since Instagram functions primarily as a mobile service, participation is limited to smartphone and tablet users. According to Instagram’s blog, 150 million users around the world take part in the application. *Pew Internet* provides even more demographical information about Instagram’s user base. According to a *Pew* study released in February 2013, 10% of men who use the internet also use Instagram, compared to 16% of women. The study also indicates that 28% of internet users between the ages of 18-29 and 14% of users between the ages of 30-49 participate in the application. Based on these statistics, Millennials women frequent the application the most. *Pew* also suggests that some younger Millennials now even choose Instagram and similar applications over sites like Facebook due to the lack of older participants and social drama. *Pew’s “Teens, Social Media, and Privacy” report* reads as follows:

Those teens who used sites like Twitter and Instagram reported feeling like they could better express themselves on these platforms, where they felt freed from the social expectations and constraints of Facebook. Some teens may migrate their activity and attention to other sites to escape the drama and pressures they find on Facebook, although most still remain active on Facebook as well. (7)
Action Themes

Now that this paper has established who uses Instagram and where they use it, this paper now must address what people do within the application beyond simply posting, “liking,” and commenting on photos. More specifically, what kinds of photos are people posting? Social media scientist, Dan Zarrella, provides some answers to this question. In his study of Instagram, Zarrella viewed over 1 million photos posted on the application and determined that hashtags lead to more “likes.” He also noted that certain hashtags, ones that demonstrate a sense of reciprocity, lead to more likes. By searching these tags using the star-demarcated “explore” option, this paper will be able to provide some insight as to what Instagram users post.

#Followforfollow stands as the most-liked tag, according to Zarrella. Searching this tag will result in a feed full of thumbnails representing recently posted photos (Figure 4). The notion of following an Instagram user to obtain a follower in return serves as the reciprocal premise of this hashtag. Maybe
even more important is how users obtain these followers; notice that many of the results in Figure 4 are selfies, which are self-portraits that are generally taken with mobile phones. These people, at least in the context of Instagram, appear to be concerned with obtaining a type of virtual friend – someone with whom they can share their photo lives and ideas. The prevalence of selfies within this category suggests a personal plea on the part of the Instagram user – almost as if to demand attention.

#Likeforlike has even more posts – displaying nearly 45 million results. Much like #followforfollow, #likeforlike demands reciprocal action (a “like” for a “like”). Unlike the preceding hashtag, however, the obligation to follow disappears since users’ public profiles can be viewed by anyone using the application. In other words, users posting under this hashtag request brief attention – attention on a specific photo. In the case of Figure 5, the photos under this hashtag are more varied (i.e. it features nature, an icerink, a ballerina, a kiss, a body shot, celebrities, and a selfie), which suggests that users posting under this hashtag might be making less of a personal plea. While once again demanding reciprocity, this hashtag conveys a sense of affirmation-seeking. Put another way, Instagram users posting under #likeforlike seem to ask, “Do you value what I value?”
#Sky, a hashtag with over 37 million posts varies even more than #likeforlike. Unlike the previous two hashtags, #sky features more scenic photos displaying – as its title suggests – the sky. An idea worth noting, however, is that Instagram users attach this tag to content not related to the sky (Figure 6). Knowing that #sky stands as a popular hashtag, users can simply post unrelated content to draw attention back to their profiles and to their lives.

#Girl (Figure 7a), with over 116 million posts, also reflects the results of the previous hashtags addressed in this paper. Searching this hashtag results in numerous selfies composed predominantly of teen girls and young women – just as the title implies. #Boy (Figure 7b), similarly displays a multitude of selfies, which are composed mostly of teen boys and young men as well. By posting under either of these hashtags, Instagram users gain the ability to disassociate their photos from their character. How? Users searching these tags likely compare attractiveness and “like” or comment on photos which they find more pleasing to the eye. Intuitively speaking, Instagram users posting under this tag seek those “likes” and comments about their appearance and not their character per se – promoting the idea of affirmation-seeking.

Since selfies make their way into numerous tags, viewing #selfie will provide enhanced clarity. With over 61 million posts, #selfie displays multiple close-ups of people’s faces. However, unlike the previous hashtags, #selfie evokes a strong sense of autonomy on the part of
the poster. Notice that Zarrella did not find #selfie to be one of the top-liked hashtags, yet it displays many more results than some of these previously discussed tags that are apparently popular. This data connote a different idea: posting under this hashtag might not receive numerous “likes” and comments. For this reason, this hashtag promotes a stronger sense of self – almost as if to say, “Here I am if you like me or not.”

Another hashtag that has gained recent attention in the media is #funeral. This hashtag, resulting in just over 220,000 mentions, displays a varied arrangement of photos featuring selfies, caskets, and churches. In an October 2013 *Huffington Post* article, this hashtag was viewed as evidence that the “Apocalypse Can’t Come Soon Enough.” Pulling out a smart phone and snapping photos at a funeral might prompt controversy; however, the importance of this hashtag rests in what it suggests? This hashtag’s photos depicting teary eyes, dark attire, and caskets seem to demand consolation – not “likes” and follows. In this case, #funeral demonstrates a personal appeal and an expression of grief.

*Shared Fantasies*

Now that each of the fantasy themes has been explained, the next step is to determine the shared fantasies – or, overarching themes – presented within Instagram. By considering the theoretical components presented within the earlier literature review and the articulation of the
fantasy themes, the following words will express three shared fantasies: 1) consumerism, 2) self-enhancement, and 3) instant gratification.

**Consumerism**

Without consumerist ideals expressed through capitalism, Instagram would most likely not exist today. The capitalist push toward efficiency as explained by Marx has led to a multitude of technological innovations. These innovations, in turn, have ultimately allowed the proliferation of speedy need-fulfilling services and increased levels of consumption. Not only do people now expect unrelenting efficiency, but they also want to consume more goods. As a result of these practices, consumerism impacts the ways in which people develop. Without the fulfillment of material needs as provided through capitalism, Maslow’s upper-level social needs (belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization) would be difficult – if not impossible – to achieve.

By adhering to these above-noted capitalist behaviors, Instagram clearly participates in the fulfillment of Maslow’s upper-level needs; however, the goods which Instagram users consume to achieve these needs are unique. Due to the rise of the digital prosumer in recent years, Instagram has flourished by proving a space for sharing user-generated content – in this case, photos. But, Instagram also allows for the commodification of self, “followers,” “likes,” and comments through its photo-sharing and instant feedback capabilities. In spite of these prosumer characteristics that give Instagram users a sense of autonomy, the application still features capitalist control through its form.

Instagram commodifies the self not only by providing a profile for users to view all of their photos, but it turns these photos into goods for other users to consume. Intuitively speaking,
Instagram users would not share photos if they thought they were irrelevant, thereby indicating some a type of value. In other words, Instagram user gets some level of pleasure out of their photos, which promotes the idea that people using this application effectively consume themselves to a degree. By posting their photos into the feed, users develop a profile of their compiled images – a place where they can view their arrangement of numerous shared visual messages. Furthermore, once these users post their photos into the feed, they transform their content into goods to be consumed (i.e. viewed, “liked,” commented on, and shared) by other people – hoping for some feedback.

Instagram also allows commodification through its social-networking components: followers, “likes,” and comments. Upon viewing a user’s profile, anyone can see how many followers a user has unless privacy settings are enacted. For people who use Instagram to get a sense of popularity – or, even fame – the follower count is incredibly important. Why? The more followers a person has, the more people there are to view their content. Furthermore, “likes” and comments are often tallied as well. Getting more “likes” and comments on photos serves as a determining factor in Instagram popularity. For example, if an Instagram user gets numerous “likes” on one of their photos, he or she will most likely believe that people value them or – at the very least – their content.
Instagram users can gain a sense of control by choosing which photos they share, how those photos look, and the captions attached to them. In spite of these capabilities, the form which Instagram embodies limits any further sense of control. How? Not only does Instagram limit the content type to photos and videos almost exclusively, but the application’s structure limits expression through arrangement – an idea expressed through Arola’s discussion of content and form. Instagram does not allow significant changes in arrangement; a user’s profile picture is always on the upper-left side, and their photos can only appear in either the grid or list fashion (Figures 9a and 9b). In other words, Instagram users make the content, but Instagram itself controls the parameters by which that content is produced.

**Self-Enhancement**

Instagram ultimately works to achieve Maslow’s upper-level needs through self-enhancement. By posting photos, Instagram users transform their content into a means of self-evaluation and affirmation-seeking. As already noted, users are unlikely to post photos they believe to be unworthy of sharing, which hearkens back to the notion that users consume and receive a degree of pleasure from their content. Also worth considering at this point is the main premise surrounding this application -- sharing photos, receiving feedback in the forms of
“likes” and follows, and engaging in “like” and comment-based discussions with other users. Even if users post professional-grade photos or images of puppies, they still hope to receive peer feedback. Upon getting that feedback, Instagram users are more likely to feel a greater sense of belongingness and higher self-esteem.

How do Instagram users participate to create a sense of belongingness? Firstly, consider the fact that Instagram users can find people to follow and follow them in return by connecting to a social networking site full of personal friends and acquaintances – Facebook. Due to the more personal nature of these relationships, an Instagram user might consider these people’s values and try to display them within their photos. Secondly, consider Bourdieu’s notions of cultural capital and the habitus. In order feel a sense of belongingness, a user might cater to a common aesthetic or taste – effectively mimicking the behavior of other individuals who are well-liked. To realize such an aesthetic goal, users not only have to be conscious of what their peers post but also how those posts look and which hashtags to use. Instagram even promotes aesthetic-development by providing over 20 filters that change the appearance of a photo, which is displayed in Figure 10.

**Instant Gratification**

Instant gratification stands as a product of capitalist demands for efficiency and technological innovation. Instagram, being a combination of “instant” and “telegram,” clearly perpetuates instant gratification attitudes. In years past, people had to rely on bulky cameras and
film-developing. Instagram, however, relies on new technology to convey its quick, visual messages. Emphasizing the “always connected” mantra associated with Web 2.0 technologies, Instagram functions purely as mobile application ready to be used at any moment. As a result, Instagram users can easily take photos within the application or access photos on their smartphone to edit and post. Furthermore, editing can be done simply by touching a desired filter in order to change a photo’s appearance.

Not only is Instagram geared for on-the-go use, but the self-enhancing functions noted above also contribute to instant gratification. Photos in the Instagram feed appear from newest to oldest. This chronological arrangement means that followers actively using the application will see a user’s photos as soon as they are posted, thereby allowing instantaneous “likes” and comments. As soon as an Instagram user “likes” or comments on a photo, a notification appears within the application itself – suggesting that a user can even be made aware of feedback very quickly. Beyond its quick workings, Instagram also perpetuates instant gratification ideals by its association with the virtual cloud. Not only are photos stored on this cloud, but Instagram followers – or, friends – also appear here. In other word, an Instagram user can immediately gain feelings of friendship and belongingness.

Conclusion

While Instagram surely embodies more ideas than could possibly be presented in this analysis, Instagram clearly promotes capitalist, self-enhancement, and instant gratification ideas. The initial theoretical framework of this paper contextualizes and describes the development of these ideas and links them to social media as it stands today. Furthermore, the prevalence of
Millennials using these social media sites and applications promotes the idea that this generation has come of age in a world dominated by efficiency standards and instant gratification. The Fantasy Theme Analysis serves the purpose of confirming these notions. How? Not only do Millennials utilize Instagram the most frequently, but the ways in which they share information on the application demonstrates their consumer behaviors and means of acquiring affirmation – or, self-enhancement. Finally, the fast-working nature of this application and its popularity only supports the concept that Millennials value instant gratification.
Works Cited:


"Funeral Selfies are the Latest Evidence that the Apocalypse Can't Come Soon Enough."


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