

# Book Review: Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin

*In Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures, Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin elaborate on how and why Instagram has grown to become an icon that has altered understandings of visual social media cultures. Students, scholars, social media practitioners and platform users can all benefit from the book as a great introduction to how to approach and study social media, writes Beyza Dogan.*

**Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures. Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin. Polity. 2020.**

In *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin elaborate on why Instagram is more than just a social media platform: instead, it has become an icon that has altered understandings of visual social media cultures. By doing so, they focus on different aspects of Instagram, such as its aesthetics, cultures, ecologies and economics, supported with real-life examples and cases.

In recent years, academic attention on social media and digital cultures has increased. Some of the literature has been anthropological studies, such as Abidin's previous book on social media influencers, [Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online](#). At the same time, some have examined social and cultural changes in diverse regions: for example, the 'Why We Post' book series. Platform-specific interdisciplinary studies are also becoming extensive, beginning with analyses of Facebook. However, although there are journal articles that have explored Instagram in terms of its economic dynamics and its psychological and cultural implications, books written about Instagram have generally been 'how-to' guides. Thus, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* fills a noticeable gap in the academic literature by seeking to comprehend various aspects of the platform in a coherent way. The lack of existing academic research is also shown in the references used in the book, which are mainly internet articles.

*Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* consists of seven chapters and an appendix. The sections are reinforced by figures and an Instagram timeline in the appendix provides a great amount of detail regarding the development of the platform. Throughout the book, readers encounter numerous recent terms created to define internet trends and social media practices, which are useful for interpreting everyday experiences. Besides this, the book tries to communicate with the reader through transmedia engagement. For this, it uses its own source of inspiration which is an Instagram account named [@polityinstabook](#), so that readers can share their reactions and comments via hashtags and direct tags. The introduction is highly comprehensive in giving context to each of the following chapters and clearly reflects the aims of the authors in writing this book: namely, to examine the success of Instagram in creating an insta-worthy world beyond the platform by analysing it and the changes it has undergone.





Chapter One, 'Platform', introduces the history of Instagram from its foundations to today, detailing the changes in its ownership, its partnerships and operations as well as the challenges. The authors define the platform as 'more than one thing: it is an app; it is a series of programs and algorithms; it is a gigantic database [...]; it is an application program interface [...]; it is a series of decisions and developments over time that create different versions of each of these things' (8). This definition is apt as readers realise how Instagram has become more than an instant photography app, especially following its purchase by Facebook, due to operations like its algorithmic timeline and advertising options.

However, Instagram has tried to keep itself distinct from Facebook and other social platforms. For instance, while Facebook emphasises that 'there is only one "real" authentic you online' (16) and user accounts should be based on real identities, Instagram allows its users to create and move between multiple accounts which enables them to engage with varying groups and users on the platform. Besides, as former CEO Kevin Systrom stated, Instagram did not invent stories, newsfeeds or hashtags, but integrated them successfully so that users can find all of these in one place (27). While this opening chapter offers a strong basis for the following material, especially for non-expert readers, one downside of starting a book with such a broad and explanatory chapter is that it does lead to repetition when reading about the same concepts later in the book.

In Chapter Two, 'Aesthetics', the authors elaborate Instagram's impact on aesthetic visual cultures through mobile photography and how changes in the identity and functions of the Instagram app reflect on visual cultures. The main idea of this chapter is built upon Instagram being a space for aesthetic visual communication (40), which is mutually consolidated by *iphoneography*, 'creating photographic art on iPhone and distributing it on the networked spaces' (43). Instagram's aesthetic rules, such as square frames, filters and the introduction of vertical stories, have shaped visual cultures. Instagram has been always more than a photography platform in offering a space for communication and sharing experiences. However, it reiterated its concentration outside photography by altering its aesthetics, such as in changing its logo, which indicated that the platform is not solely for retro-style photography but for diverse types of aesthetic visuals created non-instantly.

The following chapter, 'Ecologies', is devoted to explaining the visual social media ecology around Instagram, which functions as both partner and rival. The authors state that any post on Instagram should be mobile (posting is only possible on mobile), social (shared with others) and visual (a post should always contain a visual). It is these three features that differentiate Instagram from other social platforms (75). These chapters demonstrate that a technological application can have an impact on broader concepts such as the aesthetics of visual culture, simply by imposing one filter style; they also show how new complicated ecologies are created outside the app consciously or unconsciously by users. I found these chapters very beneficial to understanding how bigger and complex dynamics are at work behind a single post shared on social platforms.

Chapter Four, 'Economies', examines the economic side of Instagram, which has emerged lately through the commercial practices of influencers and platform users beyond the Instagram app's initial intention. The authors state that Instagram positioned itself as offering 'networked intimacy', which constitutes friends rather than followers. However, influencers altered this 'networked intimacy' into a 'networked public' by attentively managing their follower numbers and creating public personas for an unknown audience (103). They promote their lifestyle and branded images through high-quality visuals and by carefully designing their posts and feeds (104). In becoming 'microcelebrities', they also become business accounts which post advertising content and have a commercial mission (107). In this chapter, the authors conceptualise the economic activities happening on the Instagram app and explain the practices surrounding Instagram's commercial world.

The following chapter, 'Cultures', is a highly descriptive section that depicts the other cultures that have emerged on Instagram. A few of the subcultures on Instagram are exemplified by groups of users who raise social awareness of varying issues (151) and global grief tributes that have emerged in response to violent attacks or natural disasters (157). The chapter also elaborates Instagram's influence on real-life cultures, such as *instagrammable* museums, food and homes (173). Chapter Six, 'Life Spans', approaches Instagram from an unusual aspect by examining its connection with users in different age groups. *Sharenting* is an interesting term used here to explain parents who share posts about themselves and their children, an activity which raises debates from time to time (179).

The final chapter, 'From the Instagram of Everything to the Everything of Instagram', acts as a conclusion where the authors remark that our lives and the world around us are now curated to be *insta-worthy*. While Instagram is becoming much more than a communication platform, the *templatability* of its visuals leads to similar behaviours and perpetual styles where originality is no longer the main concern. The authors also mention that despite being a global platform with over a billion users, Instagram still faces challenges such as emerging competitors in Asia.

*Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* is a seminal book in a growing field of academia which enables readers to analyse the social, visual and cultural changes in our daily lives conceptually. The choice of platform, Instagram, is valuable as the authors remark that 'the attention economy is primarily visual today, and Instagram remains synonymous with the visual zeitgeist' (216). While the book is an academic study that examines a popular culture topic, it is highly descriptive rather than based on critical theory. Students, scholars, social media practitioners and platform users can benefit from the book as a great introduction to how to approach and study social media.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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