#Instagay: The Uses and Gratifications of Photo-Based Social Networking for Gay Men

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Through an inductive content analysis of 300 top photos posted to Instagram using the popular hashtag "Instagay," this research uncovers patterns about what type of content prevails in this online community. Findings indicate strong preferences toward covert communications of desire and men with lighter skin tones. Men with darker skin tones were found to have severely limited potential for appearances and expressions of sexuality. By establishing set norms of gay male representation online, this community achieves gratification through collective definition and validation. These findings build on a growing body of literature on Instagram studies and the "queer publics" found within by characterizing the exchanges and values found on the publicly available interface (Duguay, 2016). This study provides a framework that can be used to analyze other hashtag-based online communities and proves valuable in exploring the visual measures that Instagram users find worthy of interaction and approval.

Introduction

There is no doubt that social life has been irreversibly altered by the Internet. So much of our daily routines and transactions have been digitized and made public with the help of social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The myriad new possibilities for online social relationships and behavior warrant ongoing analysis and interpretation as they continually present new definitions of human connection. This research will qualitatively examine the visual representations and interactions that take place in one particular community surrounding a topical hashtag on

Instagram that has dubbed itself "Instagay." This is a virtual place where gay-identified men share photos of themselves in order to gain visibility and build community. By studying the photos that gain the highest levels of user engagement, I will reveal some emergent patterns in gay men's' online popular culture.

Literature Review

While SNSs were originally centered solely around the individual and what they chose to share, the companies behind them have since capitalized on opportunities to distort users' senses of time and scale with augmented timelines controlled by what is mysteriously referred to as "the algorithm" (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Barbour, Lee, & Moore, 2017). Therefore, what was once straightforward and chronological in social feeds is now highly calculated and curated. With this development comes a host of new sites for study as the content on SNSs adopts a competitive quality in order to maintain visibility. In particular, Instagram's photo-focused nature provides an edge when it comes to the visual perception of the lives of others and how users are able to connect and understand one another. By presenting oneself in a certain way in a photo, volumes are communicated, both intended by the user and presumed by the audience.

Uses & Gratifications Research

Uses & gratifications research is a body of work that has long sought to understand the ways in which people engage with various types of media. Early inquiries focused on daytime radio serials, genres of music, comic books, and newspapers (Ruggiero, 2018). This research developed a concept of the individual's social position and identity within the context of their media diets and found gratifying sources

of advice, stability, and reassurance about "the dignity and usefulness of one's role" in society (Blumler, 1985; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Put more simply, people are most likely to consume and interact with media that comforts them and reinforces what they already know and believe.

More recently, Erz, Marder, & Osadchaya (2018) conducted the first investigation of the uses and gratifications associated with online hashtags, of which findings were sixfold; hashtags served purposes of self-presentation, inventiveness, chronicling, information-seeking, venting, and etiquette. A hashtag, notated with a "#" preceding a string of words without spaces between them, is a unit for organizing and making accessible the seemingly endless avenues of content that are represented online. Most prominent social networks utilize user-generated hashtags for this purpose. The hashtag relevant to this research is #Instagay, typically indicating that a photo posted to Instagram either features or was taken by a person who identifies as gay, or is attracted to members of their own sex. ("#Instagay" would be read aloud as "hashtag Instagay.")

While hashtags accomplish the task of describing the contents of a post, they are also a "crucial currency" that has the potential to increase a user's visibility (Page, 2012). Hashtags are searchable and therefore can be used to access content without a pre-established digital acquaintance between users. A registered Instagram account is not even required to view posts that contain a certain hashtag in their captions or comments (Bruns & Burgess, 2015a). There are also some inferences that can be made from certain styles of hashtag use. An extensive list of hashtags that painstakingly describe every aspect of the photo and its subjects indicates an intention to move into the public eye and garner more likes and attention than are typically received from one's own following (Abidin, 2016b; Barbour, Lee, & Moore, 2017). In this research, I will build on Erz, Marder, & Osadchaya's

(2018) finding that hashtags provide a path toward gratification by way of controlling one's self-presentation online.

Identity and Impressions

The high potential for interaction on Instagram and the opportunity to see and be seen on a grand scale creates what Internet scholars call "an ultimate stage for the empowerment of individualism and self-expression" (Blight, Ruppel, & Shoenbauer, 2017; Ruggiero, 2018).

Alves de Assis (2017) puts succinctly:

> These digital new media allow anyone to become an author, narrator, and creator of their own character . . . One of the typical strategies to achieve a popular and highly followed persona is to make one's intimate life a spectacle. This performance is simultaneously real, private, and life-like: these images and reports eagerly offer themselves to an audience of hungry, voyeuristic eyes that is potentially infinite.

The "performance" that Alves de Assis references is one that Erving Goffman theorized about heavily through his metaphor of dramaturgical sociology. He proposed that the "performance" of everyday life is used to influence others (the "audience") to think and feel a particular way and form their opinions thusly (Goffman, 1959). Expanding on this notion with a focus on photography, Boerdam and Matinius (1980) asserted that the act of being photographed is the perfect example of such a performance because one is aware of the public that will eventually see the photo that is being posed for. Therefore, sharing photos of oneself or others on

Instagram is a method of creating and experimenting with identities, also called "self-representation gratification" (Lee et al., 2015).

There is extensive scholarship stating that SNS users strive to present their best selves at all times and conceal any features or tendencies that would be considered unbecoming; the self that is presented online is idealized rather than authentic (Manago, Graham, Greenfield et al., 2008; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Senft, 2012; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011; Hogan, 2010; de Vries, Möller, Wieringa et al., 2018). Some scholars chalk these behaviors up to narcissism (Moon, Lee, Lee et al., 2016; Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis et al., 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) while another points out that this presentational mode is, instead, simply a manifestation of current societal norms (Marshall, 2014).

As with all social behavior, these presentations of self in photos on Instagram do not occur in a vacuum. Instead of the traditional "life is a stage" metaphor favored by Goffman's dramaturgy and William Shakespeare's comedies, Hogan (2010) argues that SNSs are more of a "participatory exhibit." Identity is not simply the property of the performer; the perceiver, or audience, also gets an opinion in the matter (Senft, 2012). The approval of one's followers is of utmost importance to many Instagram users and is measured in the form of likes and comments. In order to "like" a photo on Instagram, one can either double-tap on the image itself on their smartphone screen or tap the heart-shaped icon below the photo. The number of likes carries a value for some Instagram users that is far more than numerical. Likes can also be used as a yardstick against which to measure the "success" of a post, a symbol of social approval and validation (Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis et al., 2017). In the Subconscious Films documentary *Social Animals,* teen Instagram users admit to the habit of deleting a photo if it does not receive a certain amount of likes within the first

hour of being posted in fear of public embarrassment, which is not an uncommon practice (Green, Garriott, & Martori, 2018).

Instagram likes have their own set of social codes. For example, to not like every photo posted by a close friend in a timely manner can be considered rude or unsupportive. Some users engage in "deceptive like-seeking" strategies such as "like for like." This is commonly demarcated by the presence of #like4like or #l4l in the caption of the photo and implies that if any user likes the photo in question, the favor will be returned by the poster (Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis et al., 2017). The "likeability" of an Instagram post is also crucial for the ability of users to monetize their profiles through brand endorsements and sponsorships, among other opportunities (Abidin, 2016a).

Online Public

In addition to facilitating identity creation and providing personal gratification, SNSs are also, by nature, a public experience (Moore, Barbour, & Lee, 2017). Specifically, hashtags form virtual public spaces around the topics that they represent. Much scholarship has been devoted to this phenomenon, called "imagined data communities" by Hochman (2014) and "ad hoc publics" or "topical hashtag communities" by Bruns & Burgess (2015b). The latter group of researchers observed the online interactions surrounding an Australian election, the 2011 London Riots, and WikiLeaks, all bound by the use of common hashtags on Twitter. Duguay (2016) expanded on this theory of the ad hoc public with what she called the "queer public" created within LGBTQ spaces online, specifically by analyzing actress Ruby Rose's Instagram presence and its ability to "produce and circulate forms of LGBTQ visibility."

Many Instagram users seek to curate a similar presence and participate in these communities. As does any public space or gathering, the queer public creates a loose network of "poorly defined strangers" who may become familiar with one another through peripheral interactions on various SNSs (Miles, 2018). This is a common method of acquaintance as social life continues migrating into the digital realm. Specific to Instagram, this theory of queer publics is relevant because they are the site of a substantial amount of interactions. The digital community surrounding photos with #Instagay has implications for the future of these queer publics because it dictates what kinds of photos are being shared, seen, and liked, and speaks on the values of and discourses within real-life queer communities.

Microcelebrity and Influencer Culture

The Internet, and SNSs, more specifically, have made accessible levels of status and notoriety that were formerly reserved for stars of film, television, print, and radio (Moore, Barbour, & Lee, 2017). "Microcelebrity" is a term coined by Theresa Senft (2012) who originally used it to describe "camgirls" who broadcast their lives over the Internet, though it has taken on an entirely new meaning with the rise in popularity of SNSs. A new breed of microcelebrity has risen; the Instagram-famous "influencers" boast large followings and celebrity status beyond the mobile phone screen. As Marwick (2015) notes, they "tend to be conventionally good-looking, work in 'cool' industries such as modeling or tattoo artistry, and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars." These influencers have achieved this status in ways too varied to name, but the basic infrastructure of their fame is the result of adopting Instagram's intended uses for their own purposes. What started as a smartphone

app meant to share the nostalgia and networked intimacy of spontaneous images has been appropriated as a stream to circulate information and content that is often staged, shot, and edited using professional equipment and resources (Abidin, 2016a). Gay men have not been excluded from the opportunity to achieve influencer or microcelebrity status, and the "Instagays" often share the qualities described above.

Personal Photography

At its core, Instagram promotes the taking and sharing of personal photos. While its capabilities and societal significance have evolved and adapted greatly since its inception in 2010, photography remains at the foundation (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). From the beginning of photography studies, scholars have argued that photos are highly ritualized by nature of the necessity to step out of the moment in order to document it (Musello, 1980). While there is a seemingly unlimited number of things to photograph, a rather limited range of subjects and events are recorded (Chalfen, 1987). Consider the amount of times a sunset or a delicious meal have been photographed and shared and compare that to the number of photographs of less popular subjects such as a garbage can or a stained, wrinkled shirt. Personal photographs often present ideals, emphasizing how one wishes their life to be remembered (Holland, 1997).

On the Internet, photos and videos are important "social currencies," and those posted to Instagram are held to a particularly high standard due to the visual nature of the platform (Abidin, 2016a). One genre of personal photography that comprises a substantial percentage of content on Instagram is the "selfie," a photo taken of oneself, by oneself. This brand of "personal reflexivity" can be understood in several ways:

> [A] form of self-expression, a type of positive image construction, a tool for self-promotion, a means to express belonging in a certain community, and/or an outcome of the desire for attention. (Abidin, 2016a; Alves de Assis, 2017).

Instagram is a breeding ground for the proliferation of selfies and thus has the potential to create communities, foster embellished identities, and reinforce standards of appearance.

#Instagay

Figure 1 presents a crowdsourced definition of the term "Instagay" from the popular website, *Urban Dictionary* (Invidiosa, 2019). While not an academic source by any stretch of the imagination, this description succinctly captures an accurate, albeit exaggerated, snapshot of the topic of this research. The Instagay is a stereotypically gorgeous and vain gay man with his best foot forward at all times. He documents his adventurous life through the lens of his smartphone camera and shares it with the world on Instagram. A life-size Ken doll, it would not be difficult to pick him out of a lineup. While the moniker comes from the hashtag commonly added to the captions of gay men's' Instagram posts, it has become synonymous with this breed of user, regardless of their actual hashtag use. This research tests the accuracy of this colloquialism to gain insights about the demographic who use and interact with it.

The cultural phenomenon of the Instagay has even permeated other areas of media beyond the threshold of a mobile phone app. A parodied representation on the Comedy Central television show *The Other Two* helps to contextualize this concept. In one episode, a millennial actor named Cary Dubeck intentionally befriends a group of 4 Instagram-famous gay men in hopes that the association will increase his

number of followers, which he needs in order to be considered for a role. Upon meeting the group's leader, Cary's sister Brooke explains, "He's one of those 'Instagays,' you know, that runs around with no shirt on posting song lyrics that have *nothing* to do with the pic he's put up" [emphasis in original] (Escola & Valia, 2019).

These men share more than just large online followings. Their names are Cameron Colby, Colby Dallas, Dallas Drake, and Drake Cameron, which is likely a comment on the lack of diversity found among the men who occupy the top tiers of the Internet. The Instagays of writer Cole Escola's creation are endearingly aloof and somehow convincingly genuine as they flex their muscles for the camera and laugh robotically at even the most trivial remarks. They spend their time throwing pool parties, hiking in animal onesies, and referring to their SNS profiles as their "work" and themselves as "creators," all while making sure to snap enough photos to strategically satiate their followers. Notably, they visit a church during off-hours for a staged photoshoot in red Speedos (with some of them wearing nothing at all) to capture some Christmas content well in advance because "we look way too fat after Thanksgiving," as told by a deadpan Dallas Drake. Afterward, they brainstorm surface-level, agreeable captions such as "Christmas is a time for all people to be thankful and to give back" and "#Christmasgoals." The latter is met with unanimous approval and enthusiasm, as if to say, "Why didn't I think of that?" (Escola & Valia, 2019).

This farcical depiction of the Instagay trope cuts close to the bone of the public's perception of what the reality behind the screen must be like. In many ways, this idea of a hypersexual, braindead model-type has become synonymous with the word Instagay, and is a running joke within the gay community often used ironically to describe a man with some of the aforementioned traits. (Recall the remark "Textbook

Instagay" from Figure 1 and refer to the political cartoon [Theguyliner, 2018] in Figure 2.)

Racial Identification

Another aspect of identity that heavily influenced this research is the perception of race. In the words of Sieder (2002), identity involves "a complex dynamic of self-identification and ascription;" we can identify ourselves as we like, but there will always be the uncontrollable outside variable of how others perceive and identify us. Telles (2017) refers to this as "the gaze of the other." Specific to appearance, race is a classification that can foster a meaningful divide between self-identification and ascription, one that social research should aim to capture when it affects the subjects of study and the findings that surround them. When solely observing appearance as in content analysis, race and ethnicity are not aspects of identity that can be defined by the researcher. However, skin color is a factor that can be separated from these two classifications as it often is in everyday observations between strangers. Other scholars have taken this approach in order to account for the biases of outside observers who have no knowledge of how others identify racially or ethnically by categorizing research subjects by defined skin tones (Keith & Herring, 1991; Gullickson, 2005). Both of these studies used a simple scale to measure skin tones, ranging from 1 (darkest) to 5 (lightest). These definitions suffer from issues of ambiguity and subjectivity, to which Edward Telles and the Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) responded with a more comprehensive skin tone scale with defined colors, numbered from 1-11 (Figure 3). In their book, *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America,* Telles and PERLA set out to broaden conceptions of appearance and identity through a comprehensive, multidimensional approach to the ethnoracial

stratification in Latin America. "Pigmentocracy" is a term coined by Chilean anthropologist Alejandro Lipschuts in 1944 to refer to inequalities or hierarchies based on the categories of race and ethnicity, as well as a skin color continuum that will be utilized in this research (Telles & PERLA, 2014).

Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Sexual Politics* (2004) about the distorting effect of skin color on LGBTQ people and their potential for sexual expression. Her work focuses specifically on the experiences of Black people in America, and though this research is unable to make racial classifications, this will still help to inform findings dependent on skin tone. Collins asserts that homosexuality is seen primarily as a "white sexual practice," and therefore people of color who identify as homosexual come to be seen as less "authentic" (Collins, 2004). The American concept of normalcy is defined by hegemonic white masculinity, which increases the difficulty of expressing oneself sexually outside of those boundaries. This emphasizes the impact of racism in homosexual spaces, discounting the experiences and expressions of people with darker skin tones.

I aim for this research to be a case study at the intersection of the aforementioned existing literature in order to push forward the knowledge surrounding online communities' potential for meaning-making. By posting and interacting with #Instagay photos, users are continually defining and reinforcing what it means to be a gay man online and in the world.

Sample and Methods

Much previously conducted research exists that is similar in design and scope to the present study, which establishes that Instagram is a powerful tool that can be used to gain insights into the everyday lives of its users. Namely, many scholars have used hashtags to retrieve content surrounding a

particular subject or subculture for closer examination (Barbour, Lee, & Moore, 2017; Leaver & Highfield, 2018; Gibbs, Meese, Arnold et al., 2015; Pila, Mond, Griffiths et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Santarossa, Coyne, Lisinski et al., 2019). The far-reaching topics of study explored by these scholars reinforce the idea that the content shared by Instagram users can be utilized in a wide range of fields and hold valuable implications regarding social behavior. By applying this approach to the gay community through the widely used #Instagay, I aim to elevate Instagram content's academic relevance and societal significance.

Because sexual orientation is not something that can be confirmed by appearance, using a hashtag in which users self-identify is gay is one way to study their behavior online. In this case, #Instagay was chosen because it is the most popular hashtag among this community and is culturally synonymous with gay Instagram use. There are other common hashtags used by gay men such as #gay, #gayboy, and geographically-specific hashtags like #gaychicago or #gayla, though #Instagay is used most widely. However, it should be noted that #Instagay is not the standard of gay male Instagram use. The majority of well-known Instagays and "influencers" do not regularly use this hashtag on their posts out of fear of damaging their "brands." It should also be noted that the engagement surrounding photos with #Instagay does not come exclusively from other gay men. Engagement can come from any person who views the photos, regardless of their identity.

The photos in this sample were all found on Instagram's "top posts" page for posts containing #Instagay, which prominently displays the nine most popular posts on any given day (https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/instagay/). All photos were publicly available at the time of capture, and an Instagram account was not necessary in order to view them.

This part of the site was chosen as a data source because these photos are determined by Instagram's algorithm to be the most successful, influential photos of the moment. While the intricacies of this algorithm are not public knowledge, it is widely understood that determining factors include the quantity and quality of Instagram users' engagement with the photos (Baker & Walsh, 2018). All Instagram users and visitors see the same top nine photos, as this part of the website is untouched by individualized algorithms. Though the top posts are reflective of popularity, influence, and social validation, they by no means represent the entire community that uses a certain hashtag. Instead, they indicate "popular forms of identity presentation and display" (Baker & Walsh, 2018).

For two months during the summer of 2019 (June 24-August 23), I screenshotted the top nine photos with #Instagay each day to form a final sample of 586 photos. Data were collected at varying times throughout the day in order to capture a diverse sample of post times and time zones, though the majority of the photos were captured in the afternoon and evening hours on the East Coast of the United States (Ging & Garvey, 2018). I then named each photo according to date and order among the top nine, and uploaded them to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software.

In order to make meaning of this data set, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. The photos were coded using an inductive approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) and the initial phase examined the objective elements of the photos, loosely inspired by Chalfen's (1987) Event-Component Framework. In addition, any notable aspects of the photos were also coded such as any props used by the subjects, physical contact between subjects, and sexually suggestive elements. I reached a significant point of

saturation after coding the first 300 photos, so the final time span of the data set is June 24-July 24.

Though self-identification has become the standard method for collecting racial and ethnic data around the world following from a rights perspective (the belief that people have a right to self-identify these traits), this was not possible through unobtrusive content analysis alone (Morning, 2009). To code for skin tone, the pigment scale developed by Telles and PERLA (2014) was used to perform a side-by-side comparison of the scale and the human subject(s) of each Instagram photo. This is to assume nothing of the subjects' racial or ethnic backgrounds, but rather to provide an objective measure of their skin color as it was perceived by the viewing audience on Instagram. On the recommendation of other scholars, I focused the comparison on the facial skin tone of the subjects in order to maintain consistency and objectivity (Telles, 2017; Dixon & Telles, 2017). This pigment scale was used because it reflects the classifications made by Instagram users who choose whether or not to engage with these photos based solely on appearance.

Findings

As the coding of these photos progressed, certain patterns and styles of photos prevailed as more common than others within Instagram's top nine #Instagay photos. This is important because it demonstrates that the phrase "Instagay" has a consistent meaning for those who use it and is reinforced by those who view posts containing it. In this way, the users continually define the genre of "Instagay" for themselves over time. Codes were grouped into the following categories: setting, orientation, subject. clothing, pigment scale and N/A. All relevant photos were assigned at least one code from each of the first five categories; photos outside of the scope of this research were coded with one "N/A" code:

advertisement, female, meme, or inanimate object. Only 5% of photos were coded as "N/A" which shows that the majority of photos using this hashtag are homogeneous. A list of the core codes used in this content analysis and the frequency of their appearances throughout the data can be found in Figure 4.

33% of the photos were taken indoors and 62% were taken outdoors. The composition of the photos was 20% portrait, 30% selfie, and 44% standard (a photo of a person or people from a close distance). Slightly over three-quarters (77%) of the photos were of just one man while 14% were of a group of men and 3% were of a group with mixed sexes. Additionally, there was a relatively even split between photo subjects who were fully clothed (51%) and those who were partially clothed (40%), defined as wearing clothing that is modified in some way to show more skin than intended by the garment, with only 5% wearing no shirt at all.

When coded using Telles and PERLA's (2014) pigment scale to account for skin tone, all photos scored a 6 or less on a scale of 1-11, with 1 being the lightest and 11 being the darkest. There was one outlier in the data, coded as skin tone 9, that was removed due to distorted color in the image. Figure 5 shows the distribution of skin tones in this sample, with the majority concentrated between 2 and 4. Skin tone 3 matched over half of the men pictured. These patterns within the data express strong preferences around the setting, subject, and skin tone of the men in these photos, and weaker preferences toward photo composition and clothing of the subject.

Photos that appeared sexual or erotic were characterized less so by the amount of skin shown or the absence of clothing, but more by qualities of the subject's facial expression and posture, as well as the composition of the photo. Photos were coded as "suggestive" if they alluded to sex, which could be achieved in several ways: men positioned

in a way that accentuates their groin, the wearing or use of sexual paraphernalia such as harnesses or whips, as well as touching oneself or another in a way that implies that there is sexual chemistry, either present or desired. Within the photos of this sample that satisfy any of these "suggestive" requirements, none of them featured men who were completely shirtless or coded as anything less than "partially clothed." Thus, the conversation around sexual capital pivoted from solely body objectification to more subtle methods of communicating lust and desire. Further, all 119 photos featuring partially clothed men displayed them in neutral settings and postures; the fact that they were displaying certain parts of their bodies was more of a circumstance than a reason for posting the photo. This also speaks to altered norms among gay men that make it more commonplace to feel comfortable showing skin and putting one's body on display without it necessitating sexual undertones.

Some miscellaneous codes were employed throughout this content analysis that did not fit neatly into the core 6 categories but were still of interest. Trends that were noted but relatively uncommon were men holding and/or drinking beverages, highlighted presence of muscles, symbolism of rainbows and pride parades, visible tattoos, and travel photos taken in front of famous world monuments. Of the 300 photos analyzed, only one of them contained a man with a visual disability in a wheelchair. Further exploration of the overlaps between core and miscellaneous codes as well as a closer, qualitative look at the photos within reveal deeper insights about the most successful Instagay photos.

Discussion

According to Miles (2018), gay and bisexual men in particular have historically been early adopters of new

technologies. From the inception of the World Wide Web to contemporary dating applications on mobile phones, gay men are eager to find new ways to connect with their community. Senft's (2012) research on the concept of "microcelebrity" views the Internet as a marketplace for a variety of purposes, with users able to posture as sellers, buyers, and even as the goods themselves. In the same vein, gay men have appropriated several online spaces, including Instagram, to "market" themselves for romantic, sexual, and approval-seeking purposes. In his search for a definition of the gay "aesthetic" within gay and bisexual selfies on Instagram, Alves de Assis (2017) acknowledged the reputation of these men to be particularly savvy about self-presentation, personal creativity, and expression on SNSs:

> Due to the sexualized atmosphere, gay selfies… serve as an instrument of flirtation. The images, full of seductive symbols, attract the attention of other gay Instagrammers who, consequently, post their own provocative photos, receive likes, and so on. This reciprocal and networked communication eventually brings the seductiveness found [in] selfies to a more overt sexual representation, transforming the search for love and partners into a primary reason to take a selfie.

This observation that gay self-presentation may have romantic motivations is crucial to understanding the patterns found within gay Instagram content. Alves de Assis (2017) goes further to say that the representations of gay bodies found in his research were reminiscent of many styles of pornography and erotic art which reinforces the notion that for gay men, sexual capital is closely aligned with social capital (Gudelunas, 2012).

The most significant finding of this content analysis was a wide disparity along the lines of skin color. It became clear that the photos that "do well" on Instagram, that is, make it to the top nine due to positive reception and high engagement, largely contain subjects with lighter skin: skin tones 1-4 on the scale developed by Telles & PERLA (2014) represented 90% of the sample. This does not come as a surprise due to the prevalence of the same issue across all forms of media, but the ways in which men with darker skin were present in these photos revealed some interesting and complicated dynamics.

While darker skin tone clearly acts as a barrier to entry in Instagram's top nine, featuring any type of affection in the photo further stratified one's chances. Photos were coded as "affectionate" if they featured 2 or more men physically touching one another in any way. This could include a platonic arm around the shoulder or a more sexually charged hand on the inner thigh. Photos of 2 men kissing were coded separately, because the act of kissing implies a certain (higher) level of affection than a physical touch. My findings at the intersection of skin color and affection further emphasize the limitations placed around the expression of darker-skinned men in this sample. Any man with skin tone 5 or above kissing or showing affection to another man was doing so with someone of a lighter skin tone. The absence of darker-skinned men showing any kind of affection toward one another is telling of the expressions of love or affinity that earn approval among the audiences of these photos. The user activity that produces these top nine photos seemingly only allows darker-skinned men to occupy certain spaces and engage in certain activities. Not only is their appearance limited, but their ability to be portrayed showing or receiving affection is stifled as well. Further, no men above skin tone 4 were featured in photos coded as "suggestive," reserving such sex appeal for the majority. This confirms Collins's (2004)

analysis of the intersection between racism and heterosexism with a practical erasure of darker-skinned gay men as sexual beings and creates a disconnect for a community that commonly advertises itself as diverse and inclusive.

Gay men are conditioned to overcompensate for their minority sexuality by presenting idealized, aspirational selves that others can strive for, which is a dominant strategy on Instagram (Alves de Assis, 2017). The moments captured in these photographs are made to seem spontaneous and candid, when in reality, there is always an awareness that the camera is facing them and that they will be sharing these glimpses into their personal lives with a wide audience. To share such photos is to construct a reality of gay life that is aesthetically pleasing: men who are traditionally attractive, joyful, adventurous, wealthy, and sexually viable. Such representations paint with a wide brush and minimizes that complications and intricacies of a homosexual identity: discrimination, isolation, and longing for mainstream approval. This creates the need for external gratifications. By following the pattern set forth within the micropublic of gay Instagram, these men have a road map toward validation by way of conformity. The men posting these photos experience gratification in the form of likes and comments that equate to social approval in the digital sphere. The audience that interacts with these photos are also gratified by their role in reinforcing a common conception of what it is to be a gay man, as well as the comfort of seeing a public face of free expression for this community.

Ethics and Limitations

This research was approved by the Rutgers University IRB in May of 2019. As with any study of SNSs, there are several ethical dimensions to consider. It should be noted that all photos captured for this research were publicly available.

They were stored securely in a hard drive and deleted upon the completion of coding and analysis. Highfield & Leaver (2016) emphasize the danger of scholars "surfacing and amplifying" online content that was intended for a specific audience (especially without knowledge of the openness of one's sexuality), thus no photos from the sample are shared in this paper or any of the resulting presentations.

The skin tone scale utilized from Telles & PERLA's (2014) *Pigmentocracies* created ethical considerations and limitations that need to be addressed as well. Each photo was coded with a skin tone 1-11 based on the color of the subject's face, the accurate appearance of which is dependent upon adequate lighting. One photo was identified as an outlier and removed from the sample because the subject was coded at pigment level 9, though the setting was heavily shaded. Additionally, some men appeared several times throughout the sample and may have been coded with different skin tones across those appearances due to differences in lighting. Another important consideration to mention along the lines of skin tone stratification is that there are other common hashtags on Instagram that are used specifically by different racial and ethnic groups, including #blackgaymen, #blackgayslay, #asiangay, #asiangayboy, #gaynative, etc. Findings of a similar study among these hashtag communities would produce a vastly different distribution of skin tones.

Photos featuring only female-presenting subjects were excluded from the coding process because of this research's focus on men. Subjects were coded based solely on appearance of biological sex, so there is a degree of assumption and bias present in the coding process. In an attempt to avoid mislabeling, a separate code was used for those whose sexes were not easily discerned and these photos were eliminated from the sample. 12 of the 300 photos were excluded on the basis of sex.

As mentioned, photos were screenshotted at different times throughout the day to account for as many different time zones and posting patterns as possible, but it should be noted that the majority of the photos were screenshotted between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 10:59 p.m. on the East Coast of the United States. This limits the geographic reach of this study, though many different countries are represented as evidenced by the language spoken in captions and comments of photos.

Future research is encouraged to take a participant observation approach and interact with some of the Instagay personalities being studied in order to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and intentions of their online activity. Other scholars could adopt this content analysis framework to analyze any subset of online life on Instagram or elsewhere on the Internet. For example, researchers could take a comparative approach by examining other popular gay hashtags such as the location-based and racially organized hashtag communities mentioned earlier. Comments could also be taken into account during content analysis in order to measure the reception of a post with more nuance. Due to the many different languages in which comments were left, translation was beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, instead of looking at the top nine #Instagay posts as this research did, a similar approach could be applied to a random sample of the "most recent" posts displayed below the top nine, in order to study photos that may never reach "top nine" success.

Conclusion

This research makes meaning of some of the interactions that produce the top nine daily photos within the topical #Instagay community on Instagram. At the time of this writing, Instagram has announced, but not yet implemented, a

plan to eliminate the number of likes that posts receive from public view, meaning that this research was conducted using valuable metrics that may not be publicly available for much longer. Using this information, I found that the collective action surrounding these photos has produced patterns that value discreet self-objectification as a form of sexual capital with a favorable bias toward men with lighter skin tones. This knowledge pushes forward the literature surrounding Instagram and gay public spaces by illustrating some of the many dynamics that govern online discourse. This is a valuable sociological contribution that brings to light some common biases in a tangible, measurable way and also reveals methods of communicating sexual desire in the public eye. The uses of SNSs evolves alongside the platforms themselves and this is just one small subset of the gratifications that can be found within.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

TOP DEFINITION

Instagay

a gay male who boasts an excess of followers and likes on his Instagram profile. He might have acquired his online popularity by diligently farming followers, retaining followers from another platform like tumblr, or even through purchasing engagement from a third-party app. There is a 99.9% chance that he has autonomously labeled his account as a business profile, indicated by the "public figure," "**personal blog**," or "entrepreneur" subtitles. Other defining characteristics include having conspicuous elective surgeries (namely fillers), extravagant/outrageous hairstyle and color, abuse of **self-tanner**, unreasonably filled-in eyebrows, and excessive whitening of teeth to the point of translucence. A master of misdirection, the **instagay** carefully constructs an **online persona** that portrays himself as attractive, fun, rich, outgoing, happy, and confident; in reality, he is typically plain, desperate, awkward, insecure, depressed, and more often than not—tragic.

*Person 1: This boy's **profile** is obnoxious.*

*Person 2: Right? **Textbook instagay**.*

#instagay

by Invidiosa January 22, 2019

Figure 1. UrbanDictionary.com, screenshot from June 2019.

FINALLY

05/16

21st century boys:

the #instagay

Can a man be a hashtag? Petal, it's 2016; we're ALL a hashtag. **So what does the #instagay do?** He snaps away, building that brand and aiming for as many likes as he can before bedtime, whereupon he'll take a selfie just seconds before he goes to sleep, so he can secure some more while he's out for the count. **Where would I find him?** In the gym, click-click-clicking away in the mirror, getting in everyone's way, or hovering over carefully constructed lunches in hipster cafes, taking a #sneakypic. **How will I recognise him?** You'll have seen him already on Instagram, of course. If you're a beginner, keep an eye out for a pigeon-toed guy in immaculate shoes – "a gift from Nu Shooz boutique in Tamworth, thanx guys xxx" – being photographed by a terminally bored pal. **Who are his friends?** Anyone willing to take his picture, people who comment "wooooo sexy!!!" on all his pics. **Who are his enemies?** Uggos, photobombers, anyone who serves him food that's not photographable, people who use selfie sticks. **Would he make a good boyfriend?** If you're cool with 17,000 gays slavering over your man because he can't go a day without taking a picture of himself in the shower, then maybe. **Most likely to say:** #nofilter #like4like #gaypicoftheday #instagay "Can you take it again?" **Least likely to say:** "Let me take a picture of you!" **Am I an #instagay?** Check the top five rows of your Instagram. If the selfies and lunch snaps outnumber everything else, then yes you are! Shall we take this one again? ●

words *the guyliner* pics *ian nicholson*

162 GT

Figure 2. https://theguyliner.com/21st-century-boys/the-instagay/, screenshotted June 2019.

Figure 3. Skin tone color palette developed by Telles and PERLA (2014)https://perla.princeton.edu/perla-color-palette/, retrieved October 2019.

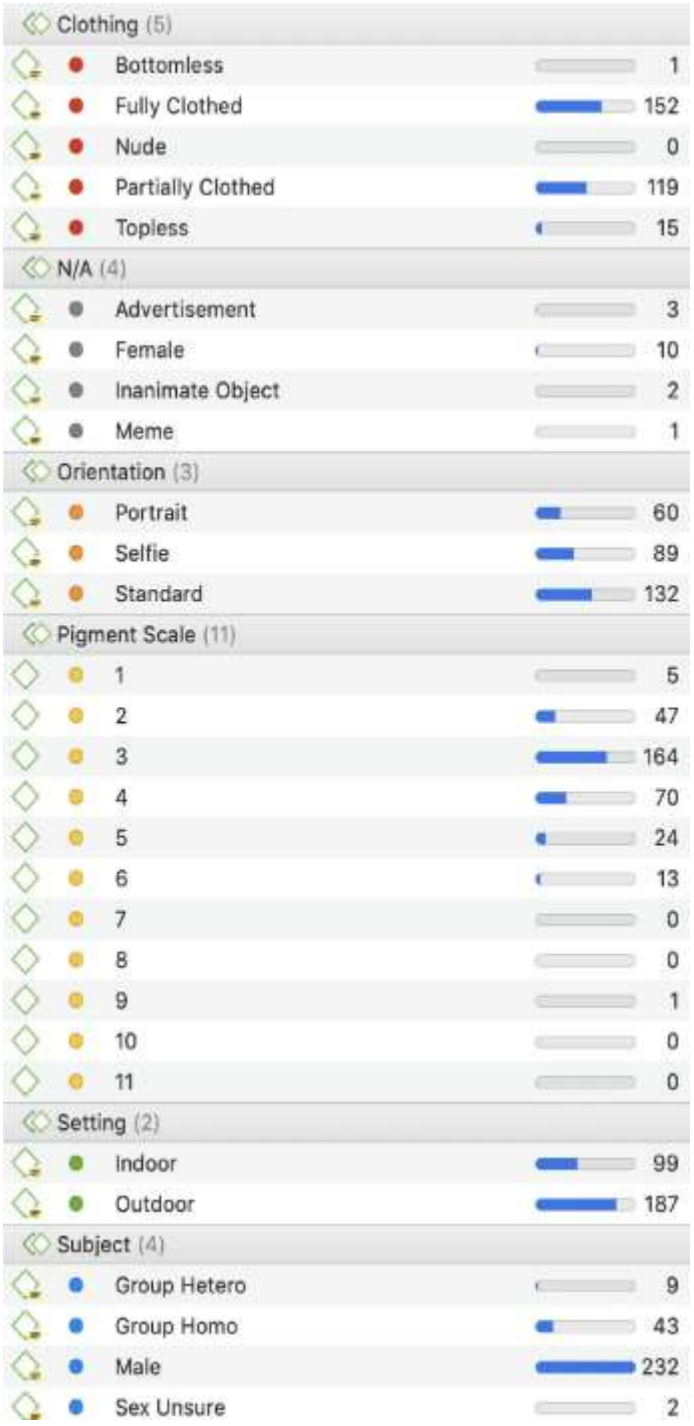

Figure 4. All codes from content analysis.

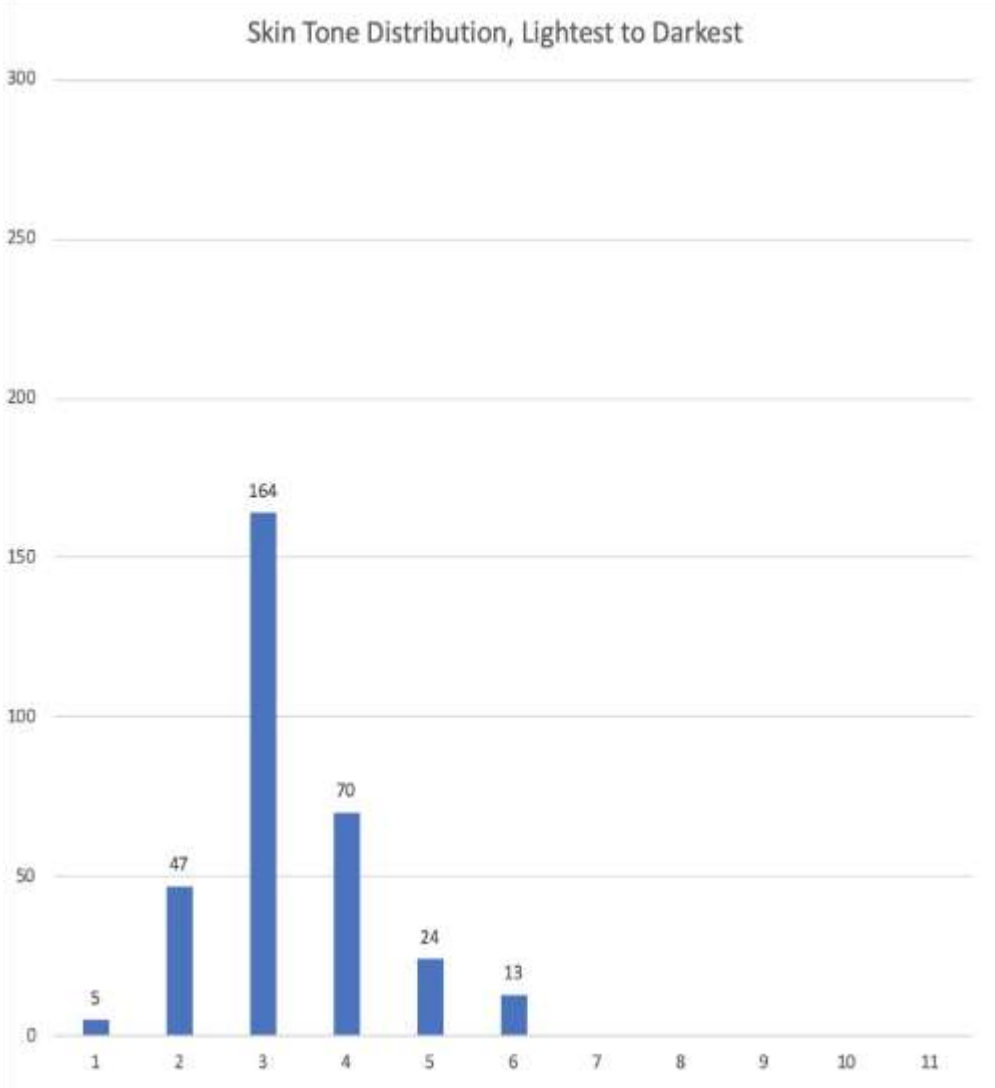

Figure 5. Skin tone distribution among sample, based on Telles and PERLA's (2014) color palette scale.