Who Makes Art on Instagram? Understanding Literacy Representation Through a Case Study of Instagram Photographers

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Photography has become exceedingly prevalent in Americans' lives due to social media platforms that rely on photo-sharing. While the public now has increased access via tools and technologies to engage in Photography's discourse, we do not see an increase in those who are considered literate. To gain an understanding of who is accepted into Photography's discourse, and, more broadly, how our understanding of literacy does not necessarily represent all literate individuals, ethnographic data was collected from members of Photography's discourse community. The Photographers discussed who is considered a Photographer, and how increased access affects the community. The study found that increased access does not necessarily result in an increase of individuals who are considered literate, and that the role of gatekeeping is blurred between members and non-members. Inaccurate representations of who is considered a Photographer appear to come from a necessity for Photography to maintain its power by withholding access to its discourse community; if access to a discourse community is increased, acceptance is repressed in order to maintain its power. Additional exploration of this process is necessary to fully grasp who is considered literate.

Prior to the establishment of modern photographic techniques, the art of photography was restricted to scientists or artists who understood the complex chemical processing that was required for developing film. However, as time went on, inexpensive and less time consuming methods of photographic processing became available. Kodak introduced the business scheme in 1888, "You Press the Button, We Do the Rest," which allowed individuals to send in their film to get processed and resulted in a surge of amateur photographers (Rosenblum et al.). Partaking in photography no longer required large amounts of time and money, or extensive knowledge of the intricate chemical processes for developing film. Kodak created the ability for average people to engage in photography and be portrayed as artistic subjects.

Now, smart phones have camera capabilities that allow anyone to take a photo and then share it with an audience through a social media platform. It has been estimated that more than 100 million photos are uploaded to Instagram daily (Omnicore). Due to such technology, access to photography's discourse has expanded tremendously. Additionally, photography's audiences have widened; rhetoricians Robert Hariman and John Lucaites explain, "Many photographs are not intended for public circulation, but circulation has become the ground of photography, a social fact that is reinforced by

the understanding that any photograph is inherently accessible … [meaning] photography presumes a capacious sense of audience" (47-48). Due to tools and technology, the capacity for photos to be created and viewed by a vast audience continues to increase. This is an inherent benefit; viewing and engaging in art is now less restricted. Photography's tools have reduced the power imbalance between who can and cannot engage in art.

Today, more tools are accessible for people to produce art, and people are becoming more consciously aware of photography in general due to their engagement with social media platforms that rely on photo-sharing. However, on social media platforms only a few self-identify as "photographers," and as viewers we only consider a small subset of people out of the ever-increasing population of content-uploaders to be actual "photographers." Evolving literacies like photography are undergoing changes to access, and our definition of literacy is expanding to include non-traditional and non-verbal practices. A close examination of a new, non-verbal literacy can show us more of how discourse communities and literacies work. In this essay, I will address what happens when there's more access to a literacy and discourse community. To do this, I will examine who is a part of photography's discourse community, explore ways accessibility affects a discourse community, and identify gatekeepers of an accessible discourse.

Literature Review

Literacy scholar David Barton describes a literacy as "a symbolic system used for communication" (42). By systematically using symbols, we are able to report and represent ourselves to others (44). Additionally, he says, literacy is a social activity that is shared with people of the same discourse community (34). An important feature of literacy is that it is community-based, and, because of this, literacy is seen as a skill shared and used in a discourse community. James Gee argues that a discourse community is "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 'social network'" (537). According to Gee's definition of a discourse community, there is a distinction between who is and isn't a member of a discourse community; membership is determined by literacy skills, in addition to the sharing of similar values. Discourses "involve a set of values and viewpoints in terms of which one must [use] … while being in the Discourse; otherwise one doesn't count as being in it" (538). Here, we can see that there are certain measures for membership in a discourse community. Criteria for entrance into a discourse community include understanding and implementing its associated literacy and values.

Typically, membership in a discourse community is determined by its current members. This is because individuals need to have knowledge of a particular discourse in order to critique or engage with it (Gee 542). One way that individuals can be excluded from a discourse community is through denial of access to its literacy. Often, use of these symbol systems require tools and technologies; unequal distribution of these tools thus stratifies who can become literate. But access to a discourse community requires not only literacy, but access to audiences and platforms that allow people to share their literacy (Janks 133). Therefore, literacy tools are not enough for

access to a discourse—tools for sharing that literacy are also required. Current technologies, particularly tools for gaining and sharing a literacy, have become more accessible, and photography is one example.

However, even with more egalitarian access to particular tools, we do not necessarily see an increase in individuals becoming literate, nor an increase in those being accepted by a discourse community. As Janks notes, "access to discourse is highly regulated and … systems of exclusion produce distinctions which privilege those who get through the discourse gates" (133). While modern tools and photo-sharing platforms are increasing access to photography, few people are actually being considered literate—that is, few are considered "photographers." Additional mechanisms are being enacted that prevent individuals from entering the discourse. My research, then, addresses such processes of gatekeeping, and who are the major gatekeepers of photography's discourse community.

Methods

In order to understand the dynamic of photography's discourse community through the eyes of actual members, I transcribed one-hour interviews with three photographers, and conducted observations of their photoshoots. The interviews and observations were coded based on definitions of literacy and discourse communities according to the Barton, Gee, and Janks. This research was IRB approved, and all participants agreed to use their real names and Instagram usernames. The three photographers I interviewed were friends who started photography around the same time, and often found inspiration for this medium within their friend group and through images in skateboard magazines. I chose these three photographers because they dedicate their Instagram page to their art, have the potential to make money off of their photos, and were referred to as photographers by other individuals.

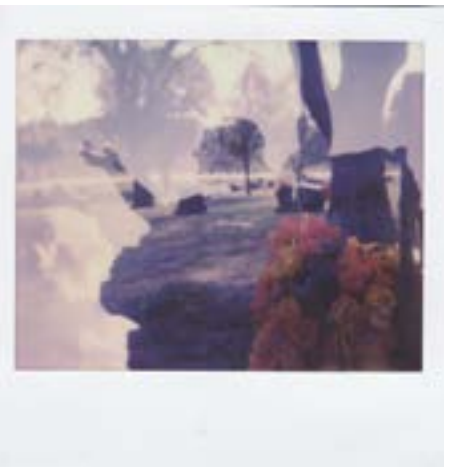

Figure 1
Cody's photograph
Since Cody works with a Polaroid camera, he needs to understand light exposure, and can't take test shots. Cody explains, "None of my photos are actually planned out, they all happen in almost a candid of a moment. I think that's what makes it a lot more unique and why I like it, because whenever I go out and shoot, I'm not looking for anything specifically, I am always just trying to find somewhere new and something I've never seen, and try to find my new little aesthetic appeal to it." Pictured is one of Cody's unplanned pieces of work. (@awkwardtooth. polaroid posted to Instagram 9/29/2017).

First, Cody is a photographer who tries to document underlying meanings within his work. Cody explained that his photos are very candid and not planned out, in part because he strictly uses a Polaroid camera

(see Figure 1). Cody also sells prints of his art through his Instagram account.

Second, Danylo is a photographer who considers himself an amateur. He mainly photographs cars, portraitures, and landscapes. Danylo described his style as "lifestyle photography," which he defined as "raw [and] candid"; his style is also "point and shoot" because he mainly uses film (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Danylo's photograph
When discussing what he likes to photograph, he mentioned cars; "cars are a huge hobby of mine. … I always have my camera at the race track, and [I'm] always posting photos of cars. It's one of the things I photograph the most." The photo above combines his passion of photography with his passion for cars. (@turnsignalsareforchumps posted to Instagram 10/11/2017).

Lastly, John is a photographer who focuses on portraiture, and does creative and commission work. For commissions, he takes photos for local businesses' advertisements, along with doing photoshoots for senior pictures and weddings. John uses digital cameras for producing his work (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
John's photograph
When describing his ideal style, John stated, "I ideally would like to make a photo where you have those real and not staged emotions combined with colorful, bright, poppy aesthetic of that lifestyle, commercial photography because I love both of those types of photography dearly." This photo displays the style John aims for while photographing. (@johnficenec posted to Instagram 9/5/2017).

It is important to note that this study is limited due to the narrow perspective I was able to gain from a small sample size, and since all three photographers are males in their 20s. While the photographers are fairly homogenous in their demographics, this analysis is still interesting since that demographic makes up a large portion of Instagram users. With 42 percent of all

users identifying as male, and 31 percent being between the ages of 18-24 (one of the largest age groups to use Instagram), the photographers in my study do represent a large portion of individuals who engage with Instagram (Omnicore). Despite limitations, the results of this study begin to reveal information about accessible literacies, along with processes of gatekeeping for literacies with increasing access.

Results

Through the ethnographic data I collected, I was able to outline how photography can act as a literacy and discourse community, and gauge how, and by whom, gatekeeping sometimes occurs in Instagram photography's discourse community.

Who is a Photographer?

I relied on literacy scholars and the photographers I interviewed to distinguish what makes someone a photographer versus someone who takes photos. First, in order to be a member of a discourse community, you must be literate in the symbols they use (Barton 34). Someone who just takes photos is likely unaware of the artistic principles, but has the tools necessary for documenting a time and place. In comparison, photographers are people who understand the symbols and elements that make up a photo, and then apply them while shooting. "You have to learn the little things like how the light bounces inside a room, and how it will come out and expose as you wanted and not leave dark spots. You need to have attention to details," explained Cody. Lighting, lines, and composition are symbols utilized in photography's discourse community. Understanding these symbols and how they impact the photo are required for being literate in photography, and to interact with this discourse community. Cody believes,

> The difference that makes a person a photographer versus someone who takes photos, is someone that just takes their time … with a photographer, you have to think of all the time they took into creating that shot, and to dressing it perfectly [to] come out exactly how they want it to be. And to where a person that just takes photos they don't necessarily take their time with it. Normally they are just for the proof, for the documentation.

Here, Cody is referencing the amount of time someone takes—an individual's attention to, and application of, photography's literate skills. According to a member of photography's discourse community, someone can be considered a photographer if they are literate in photographic skills. This means that although an individual has access to the tools necessary to engage in a discourse community, if they do not understand or implement the symbols of that literacy, then they cannot be considered a member.

Danylo interpreted the difference as someone who appreciates the art they are engaging in. He explains,

> The difference between what makes someone a photographer and someone who just takes photos, I think it's the appreciation of the art … there's a difference between people who are like 'oh let's take a photo, and I don't really care if it's blurry or not, and I don't really care if it's composed great, I just want to be able to know that this guy and this and that was here', then that's just taking photos. As soon as you

throw in that artistic value, then that's becoming a photographer.

A photographer then is someone who also values the artistic principles of their photos rather than just their subject matter. According to Danylo and Cody, these artistic values are necessary to be a part of photography's discourse community, similar to Gee's assertions of what it means to be in a discourse community. Even if individuals are literate in photography's symbols, if they do not use or align with the community's artistic values then they are not accepted into the community. Without expressing these shared values of photography's discourse community, achieving membership is impossible.

During a collaborative photoshoot, Cody, Danylo, and John exchanged these symbols and values. For example, when they were trying to decide which angle would be best for a photograph, Cody pointed out, "if you [are angled that way], it would show dead space with leading lines." For them, to be a photographer, you have to understand what defines dead space and leading lines, and then implement these skills in accordance to the community's artistic values. During a photoshoot with John, his subject explained, "John makes it art. You can tell he looks around for textures, colors, [lighting]." Here we see even individuals outside of the discourse community distinguishing what makes someone a photographer by the common values of the community. To be a member of photography's discourse community, photographers must be able to understand and utilize the symbols and the shared artistic values of the community, and then be able to apply them to the photos they take.

However, despite their ability to exemplify their own criteria for being a photographer, Danylo, Cody, and John were apprehensive about defining themselves as such. When asked whether they consider themselves photographers or artists, they were hesitant to agree, citing others as the deciding factors of their membership in the discourse community. When I asked Danylo about this, he rationalized, "[I'm] making [my photographs] more aesthetically pleasing … so yeah I would say I'm an artist … I hate to say it because I don't want to say that, I don't like it coming out of my mouth, saying I'm an artist." In this instance, Danylo is unwilling to describe himself as an artist, even though he meets his own criteria of expressing artistic principles. Similarly, Cody and John also were unwilling to agree that they created art. For example, Cody explained, "I don't know if I would consider my things art, I would leave that up to someone else to decide. That's how you determine, I think, if it's art, if it actually can capture people's attention." Here, Cody is relying on other individuals to determine if his photographs are worthy of being considered art. John furthers this sentiment when he said, "I mean just because of numbers [of followers] and stuff like that, I will say yes even though that's not really up for me to judge." John emphasizes that it's not really for him to judge whether he is a photographer, and that his followers and other individuals on Instagram are the ones deciding whether he is a member of the discourse community. While all the photographers demonstrate their own criteria for being a photographer (i.e. literate in photography, and expressing artistic values), they unreadily categorized themselves as "photographers." For all three

of them, other people viewing their work were what dictated their membership in the discourse community. This reticence hints at additional processes that determine acceptance into a discourse community for an accessible literacy.

Figure 4
When describing the process of taking this photo, Cody says, "I [found the spot] when I was out exploring with some friends. It's actually ladder steps bolted to the wall about eight feet off the ground. I was standing against another building across the alleyway to show the unknown distance between the ground and up, and with only the hole being there it's just a sense of being trapped." Cody was deliberate with his placement in order to capture the "sense of being trapped" that he described. Despite Cody exemplifying the time he takes with his photography, like the one above, he is still unwilling to call himself a photographer. (Cody, @awkwardtooth. polaroid posted to Instagram 10/23/2017).

Figure 5
Danylo explained, "There is a goal to be reached" when making art. While Danylo was apprehensive to identify himself as an artist, he elaborates, "I try to shoot different things by shooting with expired film, or post processing, or double exposure. I think that's where that artistry comes into play." (Danylo, @turnsignalsareforchumps posted to Instagram 4/21/2017).

Figure 6
John articulates "I think it's always a mistake to be elitist when it comes to art and deciding who is and who isn't because I feel like to discourage anybody or to say certain person is doing it one way is wrong; I think that generally is vitriolic and not good. We were all there at one point in the beginning, and to discourage someone when you're past that I think is mean and selfish." Although John says it's up for others to decide if he is a photographer, he himself advises against this sort of classification. (John, @johnficenec posted to Instagram 1/19/2017).

Instagram and Its Abundance

Due to modern tools like social media platforms that use photo-sharing, we can display photos for a wide audience. Such tools increase access for sharing and engaging in a literacy. When the photographers were asked about the benefits of Instagram, Cody explained that Instagram is "really good platform-wise to let people discover new things and discover new types of art." Instagram increases access for people to share their art with an audience, and then allows for reciprocal viewing of other people's art. It acts as a source of "inspiration and appreciation for other people's [work]" (Danylo). The photos you can interact with on Instagram are nearly limitless, and they could be produced by a good friend or a well-known artist. Cody elaborated on the access Instagram creates, saying that Instagram "gives you a good place to learn about a lot of other artists you aren't able to reach; say you aren't able to go to a museum. I follow [Jean-Michel] Basquiat on Instagram, and I love doing that just because I have never had the opportunities to travel to a museum that has one of his original pieces." Platforms like Instagram allow for people who otherwise wouldn't have access to art to engage and participate in art-making.

While Instagram can be a great tool for people to engage in art, it can create an accumulation of art that goes underappreciated. John noted, "Instagram … or any social media can devalue the art because it makes it seem disposable. At some points it makes it seem disposable because you post it one day, and then the next day somebody forgets about it." The abundance of photos being posted to Instagram reduces the visibility of the art and the artist. This is harmful because "a philosophy of abundance could suggest that particular individuals or peoples are dispensable, as their labor or other contribution or way of being in the world could always be replaced" (Hariman and Lucaites 52). This abundance can result in devaluation of the artist and the art form, because it suggests

that their work is insignificant and can be easily substituted. For example, timelines and explore pages offer a limitless number of photos to view, which can make the individual photographs less valuable and easy to forget. These challenges are in some ways exclusive to Instagram as an art platform, since it is accessible and has such a large user population. Competition for visibility is not seen to the same extent with other platforms for art, like at an art gallery or museum, since these spaces do not have infinite scrolling. Due to the accumulation of art that is posted, photographers must rely on viewers more than ever for validation that they produce art. This means that even individuals outside of a discourse community are dictating what is art through attention and likes. Because of this, we see almost more of an emphasis on non-discourse community members for determining who is and isn't a photographer due to the abundancy of art on Instagram.

Gatekeeping

Because Instagram allows for more people to engage in art, large amounts of content are being posted daily. While it seems inherently beneficial for more people to gain individual power associated with art-making, there are negative implications due to oversaturation, or the idea that there is an excess of photographers and their content. When I asked the photographers their opinion on oversaturation, John and Danylo both agreed that oversaturation stems from money-making versus art-making. John points out that wedding and engagement photography "can be very lucrative, so I'm sure some people, and I don't want to say what their motivations are, but if you see [that it's] very lucrative for them you might want to chase that too. So, I think that's a reason it's oversaturated." Although art-making and money-making aren't mutually exclusive, John suggests that people who create business schemes instead of creating art are one of the reasons for oversaturation on Instagram. Danylo agrees that money is a reason for oversaturation, and that it can alter or diminish photography's values. He states, "If you're shooting for money then that kind of takes the artistic value out of it." People who are entering photography's discourse community, or at least being perceived as a member from those outside of it, are reducing and/or changing the values of the community by being more concerned with profit versus the photographs they produce.

Cody extends this idea, and believes that oversaturation occurs due to likes and popularity. He explains,

> To be completely honest, I think what I find to be the biggest problem with photography and Instagram nowadays, everyone is shooting something to gain popularity and attention … it can be anywhere from a car to a model. I just think that most people try to find something that they know will grab people's attention to correlate with likes and essential gain an ego of 'I'm a photographer, I'm a professional photographer' compared to someone who is going to step back and take their time and examine it. You find it almost insulting to use something to just grab someone's attention in such a bland matter to where you only want likes. You aren't appreciating your subject as much as you should … you're just putting them in front of something and snapping a picture.

Cody expresses that on Instagram, people

are moving away from art-making, and instead are taking photos that will get views. Therefore, the people who are most visible on these photo-sharing platforms may also be the people who do not express the same values as photography's discourse community. Instead, they are concerned with money-making or gain in ego rather than capturing art, which can result in skewed or unclear values within the discourse community. According to these three interviewees, oversaturation can alter the original values of photography's discourse community.

However, these altering values are likely being shaped by individuals outside the community. Instagram viewers are deciding what they prefer, which shapes what other people see and perceive as art. Viewers are therefore shaping the values of the discourse community. If membership determination is decided by Instagram's audience, then the audiences' values will prevail over the discourse community's because their viewership is vital for being acknowledged as an artist on Instagram. Additionally, as individuals outside of photography's discourse community determine which photos are art, they are also determining who is a photographer. Thus non-members are also acting as gatekeepers for the discourse community, and potentially have a greater impact since they are being catered to. Individuals outside of the discourse community determining who should be considered members, and what the community's values should be, blurs our sense of who is gatekeeping. Non-members are more likely to be exposed to accessible literacies like photography, which may explain why gatekeeping is not enforced only by members of a particular discourse community.

Implications

Ideally, the increase in tools and technologies used by photography's discourse would allow for more people to join its discourse community. Smart phones with cameras and platforms such as Instagram allow for people who were once restricted from joining photography's discourse community to have the ability to engage in its art. This is beneficial since more individuals are able to gain the power associated with photography's discourse. John further elaborates on how it benefits the art form, stating that "common people … can do [photography]—I think that we have a lot more voices that wouldn't in the past have been able to be heard. I think that's a fantastic thing, because there are more people who have access to something and can share their artistic voice." These modern tools are allowing people to share their art with a large audience. More than ever, people are able to understand and engage in photography's symbols and values, and then share it with an audience. These are requirements for access to a discourse community (Gee 538; Janks 133).

Because of the increase in access, more people than ever are engaging with the discourse of photography. Even though there are benefits to increased access, abundance can be damaging to the discourse community. Given the large number of people on Instagram, photos can be lost and underappreciated. To compensate for this, some people might use models or other attention-grabbing photos to gain a following and the admiration of Instagram users. This strategy might not align with the discourse community's values, meaning some of the most visible people on photo-sharing platforms don't aptly represent the discourse's

values. Some individuals are skewing the community's values by being fixated on making money or gaining popularity. Some people who don't focus solely on the artistic value of their photos are still being defined as photographers by many outside the discourse community. Currently, there is a disconnect between members and non-members regarding who is considered a "photographer," which creates a disparity of discourse membership. Certain definitions and criteria might not align, which creates a gray area in who is considered literate by whom. Additionally, since photographers on Instagram rely on their audiences, their values might need to align more with people outside their community, as the ones consuming the literacy. Outsiders are not only gatekeeping, but shaping the discourse community's values.

While this current study was limited, due to the number and demographics of the photographers interviewed, it begins to show how our current understanding of gatekeeping of discourses does not fully represent how gatekeeping is actually occurring. This is especially concerning for discourses which rely heavily on outsider consumers, and with literacies that are presumably more accessible. With individuals outside the discourse community controlling community membership and values, our current view of what it means to be a literate member of a discourse is altered. These processes are potentially a consequence of an accessible literacy; since individuals are more aware of this particular literacy practice, they are able to be more critical of it. This study suggests that the increased access to tools, technologies, and language about photography doesn't necessarily mean that more people can join the discourse community of photography. Instead, the commodification of photos through likes and money appears to shape the ways that photography's discourse is constructed.

Acknowledgements

A big thanks to Cody, Danylo, and John for sharing their thoughts and artwork that were integral for this essay. Additionally, many thanks to Nicole Green for supporting me throughout the writing process.

Note

Original color photos are available in the online PDF version of this article, on Young Scholars in Writing's website, volume 17.

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