

The Semiotic Layers of *Instagram*: Visual Tropes and Brand Meaning

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Abstract: In an era of mobility and ubiquity, *Instagram* is a relevant communicative landscape for brands and products, allowing for the creation of a specific mood for campaigns and ads in general, merging photos, videos, themes, captions, hashtags and stories with a multilayered web of meanings. This paper outlines how the visual syntax of *Instagram* and its meaning-making processes goes beyond uniformity by affording the possibility to invest in creative formats, while contemplating visual tropes such as metaforms, visual metonymies and ironic images coming from the participatory culture. It will also present an understanding of the democratic dimensions of amateur photography and a discussion of two academic concepts related to *Instagram*: Instagrammatics and Instagrammism. Being that applied semiotics involves the study and analysis of visual and verbal languages that express cultural contents, the aim of this essay is to contribute to the understanding of polysemic manifestations, associating its signifiers with the rhetorical and aesthetic potential of visual tropes, ultimately demonstrating overlapping codes that could be relevant for brand management.

Keywords: social media, rhetoric, multimodality, visual semiotics, metaforms

Before *Instagram*: The Democratic Dimensions of Amateur Photography

Since the first camera phones emerged in Japan at the beginning of this century, mobile photography has become a specific and co-constitutive part of our everyday experience, both because of the easy portability of camera phones and their low cost (compared to traditional digital cameras). Camera phones have become the inseparable companions of adults, teenagers and even children worldwide; and mobile photographs taken by these small gadgets have started to become the visual proofs of the everyday. As Hjorth and Pink (2014) have stated, this form

of visuality “is part of place and makes place, and in this case traverses and connects the material-physical with the digital-intangible” (2014: 46).

Mobile photography is a way of experiencing life in its social dimensions. According to Nancy Van House and Morgan Davis (2005), these photos are already considered a form of social contact with the ability to:

1. Maintain and create social relationships;
2. Construct personal and group memory; and
3. Enhance self-representation and self-expression.

For marketing and brand communications specifically, mobile photography has also gained prominence in the last number of years. Now, rather than expensive campaigns that can take months to produce and respectable budgets for broadcasting on television, we have come to the era of dynamic mobile strategies, respecting the incredible obsolescence of information with the relatively new parameters of e-commerce in mind—which has revolutionized the ways products are communicated and sold.

If until the 2000s we sought to analyze Advertising and Commercial photography through iconic, indexical and symbolic expressions coming from beautiful images published in traditional magazines and newspapers, images captured by the likes of Edward Steichen, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Annie Leibovitz or Mario Testino; now we need to understand the phenomenon of advertising and commercial photography not only through its artistic and communicative power, but also through its complex composition, taking into account its polysemic and democratic ways of production and distribution. To be brief: there are now many more layers included in the analytical process. If the meaning of chemically-based photographs was perceived in the intentions of the “truth-effect”, and, semiotically speaking, being an index of the “real world”, within the camera phone we see that, beyond its indexicality, photography has become more and more attuned to its technical, social and cultural affordances.

Before turning our attention to visual tropes detected in *Instagram* and their importance to brand meaning, it is relevant to sketch out a few issues related to the social structures of amateur photography to deepen our understanding of the production and consumption of images in contemporary society.

In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag demonstrates that photos capture an ordinary instant and for this reason the picture is a crucial means of social participation, with the camera becoming a sort of “arm

of consciousness in its acquisitive mood” (1977: 174). Photos are proofs of moments, not necessarily a proof in a strict “realistic” sense, but at least an imprint of a nanosecond—the crystallization of a time interval.

When we situate photography within such an “experiential” environment, we are connecting all these technical images to the activities of daily life. In this sense, the photographic device becomes a democratic instrument (or weapon) for freezing fragments of the day, situating the activity between the intellectual and the ordinary, in the creation of a visual poetry and a series of common popular meanings, as Pierre Bourdieu (1983) reminds us in his discussion of the relevance of the social sphere beyond the artistic side of photography. In regards to amateur photography, it is also important to cite Richard Chalfen (1987), who demonstrates the visual conventions of the “Kodak Culture” and the particular expressions of “polaroid people” (both terms being coined by the author) to explain how vernacular images are stories emanating from domestic environments in the specific form of shots, as well as in the way they are exhibited (focusing on the culture of photo albums).

As a means that is available to all, amateur photography sustains a hybrid position between a sublime art and a practical activity. The specific position depends directly on uses and purposes, molding processes of signification within the sphere of emotional content. There is an interesting citation extracted from a Brazilian *Kodak* Guide (2003) that presents how the act of amateur photography is social and familiar:

Each time we take a picture of a child, a spouse or a friend, we reiterate our love for that person, eternalizing the moment and turning it into something very special. [. . .] everyone who has been moved by remembering a happy moment falls in love with photography. The most exclusive thing about Kodak, pioneering enterprise in the photography sector, is exactly this highly emotional aspect of photography. (2003: 6)

Although the possibilities of portable analog photography expanded rapidly between the 1960s and 1980s under the influence of *Kodak* and *Polaroid* and their focus on social relationships, in the late 1990s and early 2000s the advent of digital photography turned the act of taking pictures into an ordinary everyday experience.

Don Slater (1995) states that one of the great assets of digital technology lies in the way it has made amateur photography accessible, turning almost everyone into producers of photographic images, with the concomitant intensification of image-based self-representation of everyday life. In his words: “In brief, what is at stake in digital culture is the fate of self-representation through images” (1995: 138).

Digital images are visual forms that possess a specific materiality and technicity, made up of luminous and malleable fragments—the pixels—synthesized and edited for a single performance on smartphone screens. It is on these small screens that we experience images in a diminutive and two-dimensional space that allows us to take part in innumerable concomitant visual manifestations, creating new ways of relating the visual experience to its technical images (or “*Technobilder*” as Flusser stated in 1985). Since the pictorial turn (Mitchell 1995) both photographs and videos have become image-models that conjoin the privilege of vision and the emphasis on images as a technical phenomenon.

With the launch of *Instagram*, the technical, social and democratic aspects of amateur photography have been renewed. In the combination of Instagram’s functionalities and the portability of smartphones we see the digital image reaching an apex of ubiquity, acquiring distinctive characteristics in terms of production, ease of manipulation as well as its relevant role in edition, dissemination, consumption and storage of images. Zizi Papacharissi (2010) demonstrates how the contemporary socio-cultural arrangements of amateur and mobile photography are influencing life. Now, we tend to be sought out more for our photos and videos than for our ideas, a tendency which encourages the construction of our daily life experiences through images. It can also be said that the more images are posted, the more interesting network-based performance becomes. This is also valid for brands, not only for people.

Between Instagrammism and Instagrammatics

Instagram was one of the first social networks to be created for exclusive use on mobile platforms. For this reason, we are best able to understand its workings through the figure of the smartphone—a technical gadget that is easy to handle and has become a dominant medium of choice for instant interaction.

Given the medium’s open-ended, volatile and easily manipulated qualities, digital pictures posted on *Instagram* have a particular way of distributing visual content, especially because *Instagram* was one of the first social networks created for the mobile environment that focused exclusively on static and moving images. Based on Instagram’s specificities, some authors propose that this social network facilitates a specific way of producing, editing and sharing images, referring to its synthesis of images as *Instagrammatics* and *Instagrammism*. First we turn to Instagrammatics.

Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver (2016) are among the group of researchers who see the specificities of visual content on *Instagram* as a

particular form of expression and meaning-making processes when in relation to verbal and metadata aspects (e.g., hashtags, legends). In their text, “Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: Studying Visual Social Media, from Selfies and GIFs to Memes and Emojis” we find the term Instagrammatics used to define a singular structure of image (in connection with texts and other meaningful elements), becoming a kind of grammatical system that emerges through Instagram. This system is based on a set of aspects that shape the communication process. The authors reinforce the importance of the role of hashtags as a way of tracking and studying individual and social activity on Instagram, being a semiotic connection between the visual universe and the meaning generated by the verbal realm. In general, the purpose of hashtags is to define an image’s meaning, and it is possible to configure a wide range of references with a polysemic perspective.

The specific grammar presented on *Instagram* is a structure that goes beyond rigid rules, being multifaceted and open to rapid changes, including geographic coordinates, captions, the possibility of comments (participatory culture), the use of filters, the insertion of links and other significant structures that are in constant development. Due to the social network’s frequent updates, Instagrammatics require special attention from commercial semioticians.

Another particular form of representability on *Instagram* is what Lev Manovich has referred to as Instagrammism (2016). For Manovich, Instagram’s particular gestalt comes from elements of design, as well as those of photography and cinema, which fuse to create a new outcome. Instagrammism takes shape as a hybrid form, creating a specific atmosphere that brings the bi-dimensionality of design together with the tri-dimensionality of spatial relations. Furthermore, as Manovich argues, the phenomenon of Instagrammism does not necessarily involve a subject who orchestrates actions, but leaves the meaning-making process within the sensorial realm, where subtle and ethereal sensations are shared.

While the Instagrammatics concept of Highfield and Leaver focuses on the almost grammatical aspect of the social media platform, Manovich’s Instagrammism refers to Instagram’s artistic (and expressive) manifestation, focusing on the sensitivity and the artistic quality of images, which are not necessarily produced by traditional expressions, but that result in a manifestation of the sublime aesthetic. According to Manovich, we have in the phenomenon of Instagrammism a combination of media forms that create a specific “‘sensibility’, ‘attitude’ or ‘tonality’” (2016: 3) to the combination of design and photography.

Instagrammism denotes the *mise-en-scène* of *Instagram*, in an imaginative perfectionism that becomes contemplative. It is a new artistic expression, based on the speed of social networks. Its suffix is similar to so many other artistic manifestations of the twentieth century, like Cubism, Surrealism, Impressionism or Expressionism and carries a dense network of signifiers that can be observed in *Instagram* posts from Brazil, Canada, United States, England, Russia, China, India or any other country.

Both within Instagrammism's imagery and the visual and discursive structure of what is referred to as "Instagrammatics", we discover an expressive repertoire that is not limited to the simple action of posting images, but involves artistic representations, emotional markers (emojis and likes) and verbal cues produced through captions, hashtags and links. The conscious or even arbitrary choice of the photographed object (or subject) mixed with specific metadata completes the action of posting, defining the frame of what is represented as action.

Visual Tropes and *Instagram*

The visual dynamics of *Instagram*'s photographic imagery produce a vernacular aesthetic which can be improved by harnessing the potential of visual tropes that we may observe throughout a wide variety of elements semiotically (both linguistically and extra-linguistically).

To understand details of visual communication on *Instagram* and how this content is related to the tropes that we traditionally learn from classical rhetoric and poetry, it is necessary to understand that *Instagram* is primarily dominated by visual codes, and for this reason we need to transpose the rhetorical and poetic senses of tropes to the visual perspective. Therefore, the visual tropes that will be presented here are similar to their verbal counterparts that Kenneth Burke (1941) has defined as being essential to the narrative process:

1. Metaphor (contextualized herein as "Metaforms")
2. Metonym and Synecdoche
3. Irony

In addition to the vernacular characteristics of *Instagram*, visual tropes can create some interesting rhetorical narratives to enhance brand expressions. Visual tropes bring connotations, visual associations, transpositions of qualities, transferences and substitutions of meaning that make activity on social networks richer and more meaningful.

To present the major visual tropes found on Instagram, this essay will consider select Brazilian *Instagram* accounts, as Brazil is one of the platform's largest markets. With more than 50 million Instagrammers (*Folha de São Paulo* 2017), the country occupies the second position in total number of users. According to another survey (D'Angelo 2018) among 2,538 participants, 25 percent acknowledge that *Instagram* is the most used network, with 63 percent saying they visit their timeline several times a day. In regards to brand communication, 83 percent of the respondents follow some brand or company, demonstrating the strength of this platform for brand actions or marketing activations.

With these dynamics in mind, we turn to the first visual trope: the Metaform.

Metaform

Here, rather than presenting the traditional concept of metaphors, I follow Marcel Danesi's (2013) suggestion of the term "metaform" for cases in which the strength of representation emanates from all semiotic domains, linking images, symbols and distinct cognitive sources through a vernacular (but also poetic) logic. The metaform can emerge from numerous manifestations of the everyday: from decorative forms, colors, representations, and deviations from "literal" meaning that offer us a new way of seeing the world, with very particular meanings that depend on the cultural filters through which they are seen.

A wide variety of metaform examples can be encountered on Instagram. A recent example from Brazil is the metaphorical representation of the colors green and yellow on one hand and the metaphorical understanding of the color red on the other. Both highlight the turbulence of the current Brazilian political background, as I describe further below.

Beyond this particular case, colors are potent metaforms in general, representing emotional expressions and evoking subtle sensations, being a key point in almost every semiotic analysis. The signifying power of color is one of the most salient themes of applied semiotics (Van Leeuwen 2011; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2002).

Since 2015 Brazilians have been witnessing a time of intense political and ideological turbulence, which has practically divided public opinion into two facets: the left (emotionally represented by the color red) and the right (emotionally represented by green and yellow). On Instagram, images using these colors can be identified by conducting searches for specific hashtags, including the following: #foradilma (Oust Dilma!) with more than 650,000 tagged images (as of mid-2018); #movimentovempraru

(movement “Come Out Onto the Streets”); #foratemer (Oust Temer!) with almost 700,000 tags; and #foratemergolpista. Other hashtags used to denote political and social tensions were #operacaolavajato (Operation Car Wash) and #dirtasja (Direct Elections Now).

The Yellow and Green Metaform on *Instagram* Brazil

Much more than just a representation of the nation’s flag, the connotations of these colors in the collective unconscious of Brazilians goes back to the mid-twentieth century. They also play a primary role in Brazilian football. The mythology surrounding the yellow-green national team shirt dates to six decades ago—when the yellow shirt came to replace the white uniform that the country had used until the 1950 World Cup (which Brazil hosted—and lost).

If until the 1950s the white color of the Brazilian football shirt was a sign of failure and “bad luck”, bringing the aftertaste of defeat, since the 1954 World Cup, a bright yellow has been associated with good luck in sports, coming to signify nationalist self-assertion. Similar to the many semiotic associations of yellow as a color of energy, attention, and positivity, Brazilians have appropriated this representation to fill it with meaningful associations related to their own national culture. This proposition has been intensified since the epoch of the 1970 World Cup: the golden days of the Brazilian soccer team, when famous soccer players like Pelé, Rivellino, Gerson and Jairzinho wore the shirt. This embodied representation became so strong and so recognizable worldwide that in 2007, the British newspaper *The Times* chose the 1970 football shirt as the most important football shirt of all time.

Since the 1970s, the yellow shirt has been a marker of Brazilian identity functioning almost as a wearable flag, extending its symbolism far beyond the realm of sports. Generally, informed foreigners interpret the yellow shirt as a sort of “pass” for Brazilian culture, strongly related to the vivacity which football players display when they celebrate their goals. Before words even arrive, the yellow and green shirt is a first sign of communication with and among Brazilians. The nationalistic meanings of the yellow and green metaform started to move from sports to politics in 2015–2016, since which time it has come to embody right-oriented nationalism.

During the public demonstrations against ex-president Dilma, and particularly within the largest of them, which took place on 13 March 2016, many demonstrators posted photos on *Instagram* that were bathed in the yellow and green metaform (Figure 1).

On 12 February 2018, the Rio de Janeiro samba school *Paraíso do Tuiuti*, made its way through the corridors of the Rio Samba-drome with a group devoted to recasting those yellow-green demonstrators as political puppets or “marionettes” (Figure 2).

As a metaform present in the context of *Instagram* Brazil, the yellow and green went from a simple icon of Brazilianness to a semiotic formation guided by the symbolism of political and ideological expressions.



Figure 1. Demonstrators Protesting Ex-President Dilma on 13 March 2016



Figure 2. Group of the Samba School *Paraíso do Tuiuti* portraying demonstrators wearing the yellow shirts of the Brazilian national team as puppets (Photo: Alexandre Durão/G1)

The Red Metaform on *Instagram* Brazil

The emotional weight of red tones has also changed in recent Brazilian history to become an oppositional Metaform, against a national backdrop of political and ethical tensions. Since the 2010s, the color red, especially in clothing and accessories, has not only come to connote passion, energy, strength, happiness or excitement for Brazilians; its meaning is now also colored by political representations as the emblematic color of PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, ‘the Workers’ Party’) the party of ex-president Dilma Rouseff, as well as the color of diverse social movements such as MST (a landless rural workers’ movement) and CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*, a major trade union confederation).

More precisely, the new red metaform took shape on *Instagram* as a semiotic counterpoint to the yellow and green metaform as recently as 2017: a chromatic counter-attack through which left wing demonstrators sought to distance themselves from the model of right wing demonstrators.

Since 2017, this oppositional metaform, functioning under the sign of red, evokes a call to action, a color to be defended (by left-wing sympathizers), and a color to be fought against (by right-wing sympathizers). The 2016 campaign for the government of Michel Temer even proposed an advertising blitz entitled “Let’s take Brazil out of the red” drawing on



Figure 3. Left-wing demonstrators wearing red pictured on 4 September 2016

a double meaning that could be interpreted as “let’s take Brazil out of the economic crisis” and simultaneously as “withdrawing the political weight of the color red”. Indeed, on the day of President Jair Bolsonaro’s inauguration in January 2019, one of the phrases uttered during his speech was “Our flag will never be red.”

Polarized between green + yellow and red, Brazil has become divided into two chromatic metaform poles, both with dense cultural meanings. To extend the complexity of this chain of meanings, we should also consider the semantic connection of hashtags derived from #fora, i.e., ‘oust’, that function in tandem with these oppositionally colored metaforms.

The Symbolic Power of “Fora”

Fora-based oppositions include #foradilma (‘oust Dilma’) and #foratemer (‘oust Temer’), which map onto yellow + green and red metaforms on *Instagram*, respectively: dynamics directly related to the turbulent political history of democracy in Brazil.

After a little more than twenty years of military dictatorship (from 1964 to 1985), the country began a period of redemocratization marked by the movement “*Diretas Já*” (‘Direct Elections Now’), that defended the return of the popular and direct vote. After this democratic movement and a transitory period from 1985 to 1989, the first election was held in 1989. Since then, the country has had six presidents, two of whom were impeached. The first was Fernando Collor, who took up his position in 1990. After two years of command he was accused of corruption and was impeached in 1992. During his impeachment, the country witnessed the public demonstration of young high school students called the “*caras pintadas*” (‘painted faces’) who wore black clothes and painted their faces with yellow and green as a way of protesting against political corruption. This was the first contemporary political movement following years of dictatorship in which people used bodily signs, specifically clothes and make-up to express nonconformism. Due to Collor’s impeachment, the country was commanded by the vice-president Itamar Franco, who remained in office until 1994.

Then came Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a president who remained in office from 1995 to 2002. Cardoso’s presidency was followed by that of President Lula for two terms (2003–2010); a clear symbol of the rise of proletariat. The popularity of Lula was essential during the campaign and election of Dilma Roussef, who remained in office from 2011 to 2016. Having the same experience as Fernando Collor, Roussef suffered an impeachment process for suspected fiscal irregularities. In 2016 she

left the command to her vice president Michel Temer. Again, a vice president was in charge in Brazil after an impeachment, demonstrating how intense this “political ballet” is, full of inconstant and uncertain dance steps. Some might say that the Presidency in Brazil is more a question of change than a question of charge, with the hashtag #fora (‘oust’) being a democratic and popular claim for another change and further enriching the multimodal textures of metaform oppositions on *Instagram*. Paying attention to visual part-whole relations allows us to identify still further semiotic layers on the platform.

Visual Metonymy and Synecdoche in *Instagram* Brazil

Because *Instagram* is a network that presents fragmented images, we may identify ample manifestations of what I will call “visual metonyms” or “visual synecdoches” to represent the act of taking a part of some image to stand for the whole. On *Instagram* it is common to encounter a series



Figure 4. Each post is a fragment, a significant part, which constitutes the representative whole of the profile (image from the author’s personal profile: @marianecara)

of privileged fragments that become an intentionally selected slice of the signifying complex, increasing the potency of meaning.

Generally speaking, metonyms are an important trope in all media manifestations, as Arlindo Machado (1997) reminds us. Machado argues that every electronic image, whether in cinema, television, video art or photography is by nature a representation of a synecdoche, because every “cut of action” executed by cameras or any other technical apparatus also creates a cut of reality, where “the part, the detail and the fragment are articulated to suggest the whole” (Machado 1997: 194). Transposing the relevance of the synecdoche to the context of Instagram, we can say that every post is a single metonym working as synecdoche, being part of the whole meaning making process that forms the profile (Figure 4).

Like factual metaphors (and metaforms) that circulate frequently on *Instagram*, synecdochal propositions rest in real life, describing reality in a fragmentary way: a contiguity of presentation that transposes meanings through pieces. To illustrate the relevance of the synecdoche in *Instagram* Brazil, consider the movement #sayhitothewater, created by the photographer “Cesinha” (Cesar Ovalle), as an emblematic example (see e.g., Figures 5 and 6, next page).

When Cesinha first opened his account on Instagram, he was looking to the internet as a new form of expression that would offer something different from the traditional portrait format, and he became a successful Instagrammer faster than expected. Today, Cesinha has almost 400,000 online followers and is much admired for his urban scenes, particularly the popular images tagged with #sayhitothewater. This *Instagram* movement consists of a series of images in which Cesinha waves to his own reflection in puddles that the rain has formed on city streets and public spaces. In his words (Bernardo 2016, translated and adapted):

I always liked photos using reflections in water and I noticed that in all the ones I appeared in I was always waving as a form of ‘hello’. Then, I got the idea of putting all the images together with a hashtag, to make it easier to visualize them. The idea of doing the original hashtag in English and not in Portuguese was because I wanted that everyone understood the message, and for my surprise, in the end not only were people able to understand the meaning behind but they also began making their own contributions to the #sayhitothewater movement. The high point of this hashtag (and this movement) was when *Instagram* itself launched its first print magazine and made a reference to five of the most successful hashtags thus far (one on each continent of the planet). The #sayhitothewater was chosen to represent Latin America!”

Semiotically speaking, the #sayhitothewater movement becomes a potent unit of information in the relationship between a fragment (the hand) and the whole (the subjectivity of the photographer and his artistic choices). Within these images, the photographer uses the symbolism of a hand that takes action, a hand that presses the shutter and a hand that waves to the city in a congenial way, also evoking the celebratory gesture of fertility that rain represents culturally. At the same time, #sayhitothewater is an authorial and sympathetic gesture of Cesinha to his followers, taking advantage of the water reflex that represents one of life's simplest moments.

The gesture of waving provokes engagement and an effect of proximity between the producer and the spectator. The experience provided by observing the images that pertain to the #sayhitothewater movement affords a fusion of exogenous and endogenous elements, in a system that Michelle Zappavigna (2016) refers to as the “mediated portrait”, when a fragment of the performing agent (the photographer who is waving) is clearly represented in the scene. In #sayhitothewater, Cesinha is not only a photographer-executor, but also an actor in the mirror of water, drawing attention to the urban landscape and its subjectivity in the mediated co-presence.

Both the various metonymic manifestations and, more specifically, the relevance of synecdoche are essential for understanding the underlying network of meanings in *Instagram*. The popularity of the movement #sayhitothewater has reached such heights in *Instagram* worldwide that more than 8,000 posts now bear this tag, thereby revealing the force of this visual trope. But beyond such fragments, a post can represent other features of expressive content, such as the use of irony, to which we turn next.

Irony

In rhetorical and poetic tropes—both verbal and visual—irony is an interesting deformation of meaning, that shapes an unexpected path of significance. Irony reorients the direction of signifiers through interconnections with many other meaningful elements, often leading the spectator to laughter. With irony, we take significance and meaning to another level, withdrawing the linearity of interpretation and leaving the expected contiguity to the unknown, bringing in new semiotic addresses, which end in ambiguity and humor. Irony inverts, subverts and brings out the reverse interpretation of meanings through distortions, enlargements and exaggerations that corrupt meanings in a sympathetic way. It is a transmigration and it has a surprising effect.

Ironic posts on *Instagram* are baroque and excessive expressions and at the same time appeal to creativity, removing the imposition of linear meanings. In the Brazilian case, one of the major examples of irony-inspired profiles belongs to John Drops (@johndrops) who depicts the celebrity universe with considerable irony, crafting creative parodies from looks and poses of famous women around the world (Lakshmin 2015). Currently boasting more than 1.1 million followers, his work has been featured in a variety of worldwide media channels, including *Vogue Paris*, *MTV* and *E! Online*.

John Drops creates his parody posts in unusual ways, using improvised paper-based materials that are reusable and inexpensive, such as poster boards, adhesive tapes, cellophane papers, garbage bags, supermarket bags and egg cartons to mimic and recreate the look of celebrities. To do so, he uses an unpretentious kitchen as his scenario and background, precisely in order to demonstrate the everyday nature of what he is showing (Figure 7).

There is no pretentious glamour in John Drops's work, but, rather, an amusing and non-aggressive mode of playing with a variety of performative signs emerging from the mythical world of the celebrity. John Drops plays a double, a replica, a secondary (and laughable) connection to the untouchable and well-posed aura of celebrities. His posts are a breakdown of the visual syntax and normal expectations of feeds, making room for humor. His body operating as a humorous replica is a kind of cathartic mechanism which breaks the well-paced rhythm of regular social media



Figure 7. *Instagram* user John Drops (@johndrops) as Beyoncé

representations. His visual irony is intensified by the verbal layer of captions and hashtags that the Instagrammer inserts for each look. The combination of visual and verbal meanings is extremely assertive, breaking into a semiotic articulation that bears new meanings, expanding the significance of a given celebrity's manifestations (Figure 8).

In Figure 8 featuring the mocking of Kim Kardashian, the caption states: “*Quando o aplique tá caindo no meio da balada*” that could be translated as, ‘When my wig clips are falling off in the middle of the dance floor.’

The element of connection between the interdependent form of John Drops's ironic posts and the original images breaks the denotative framework of a “shining reality” of a celeb's life to suggest a new layer of satirical connotation. Thus, he constructs a new discourse for any glamorous scene, reinforcing aspects of intertextuality between captions and images. In this process scripted by irony between denotation and connotation we discover a humorous appropriation and a new arrangement that remixes the celeb's bodily signs with new representations. Rather than demonstrating aggressiveness, John Drops's posts may actually pay homage to celebrities.

Worldwide, we have seen the growing emergence of *Instagram* profiles in the same editorial vein, from users like the Australian Celeste Barber (@celestebarber), the French Nathalie Croquet (@nathaliecroquet), and the Italian Emanuele Ferrari (@_emilife). The latter even portrays the following fitting acknowledgement in his profile: “*La libertà comincia dall'ironia*” (“Freedom begins with irony”).



Figure 8. *Instagram* user John Drops (@johndrops) as Kim Kardashian

Between Uniformity and Differentiation in *Instagram* Activities

Notwithstanding the innumerable visual possibilities that *Instagram* provides us through the use of metaforms, metonyms, synecdoches and a dizzying variety of ironic meanings, we note that within marketing forum discussions, the uniformity of *Instagram* content still remains a key issue.

One example of the relevance of uniformity to marketing experts is a post from January 2018 made by the Social Media Marketing group (LinkedIn 2018). In this discussion, which talks about *Instagram* as the major source of advertisement within social media, we are able to see plenty of references that praise the consistency and uniformity of feeds, including color patterns, stability of themes, order of elements arranged in posts, repetitive filters and other references to the homogeneity and invariability of image sets that are posted on Instagram.

Although consistency and uniformity are key factors for branding and marketing, this should not be interpreted as a boring repetition of references or a sameness in aesthetical choices, because this strategy can lead to a certain kind of monotony in posts and content. In support of the multi-faceted capacity of social networks, it is not possible to limit the marketing action in *Instagram* to having uniformity and consistency as the main reference.

Before betting all one's chips on the invariability of the feeds, attention should be paid to the fact that creativity and uniformity do not necessarily go hand in hand, particularly when we are dealing with the visual dynamism of social networks.

Once the "core visual" for a brand's performance on *Instagram* has been defined with some sort of uniformity and consistency, it is important to maintain an uninterrupted search for new forms of sign distinction, whether through the use of metaforms or visual metonyms and synecdoches, or even to discern the best way to include a touch of irony and humor in a brand's discourse.

The ability to encounter the communicational potential of visual tropes also means one must be open to a new visual rhythm within social networks. In this regard, it is important to remember that the process of image signification is not necessarily linear and, accordingly, that we need to rethink visual strategies that may be overly reliant on aesthetic patterns. Space must be left for disruptive choices, in new meaningful alternatives that seek greater authenticity in visual content, always remembering that brands become susceptible to the inescapable connection between participatory culture and brand image.

In an environment of co-creation and in-between spaces, brands cannot be presented in an aseptic, uniform and extremely regulated manner, restricted and enclosed by visual rules. In the dense brew of social network culture, we must also remember the relevance of meaning deviations and how the associative aspects and semiotic articulations can interfere with the image of a brand.

Conclusion: Signifying Flexibility Through the Elasticity of Instagram

Instagram is a social platform in constant expansion, largely because it privileges the photographic image and video representations, particularly through mobile devices. It is a place of visual storytelling, with a sequence of images that could tell a singular and significant story. *Instagram* provides a space that is well adapted to campaigns and brands that seek a social network for multi-layered meanings.

If we were able to trace *Instagram's* historical genesis, we could say that this social network has two distinct moments. The first (2010–2015) was directly connected to the culture of amateur photography and is reminiscent of the “Kodak Culture” universe. In this first moment we saw the emergence of a concrete and “retro” aesthetic, providing a particular salience to the nostalgic references of filters that hark back to the 1970s. The second moment of this social network (2016 onwards), although maintaining the beloved retro filters, disconnects *Instagram* from strictly nostalgic representations, incorporating the flexibility of signs and a broader capacity for the meaning-making process, creating a semiotic atmosphere that is elastic and open to new perspectives.

The concepts of concrete and elastic phases of *Instagram* were presented by Sónia Marques (2016) and are clearly understood by looking at the two different logos. Each of these stages reveals a particular paradigm: in the first one, a concrete network is defined through a specific time and space, focused on the idea of nostalgic feelings. In the face-lifted second phase, an elastic paradigm inheres, in the shape of an open and timeless network. Since the launch of *Instagram* Stories—which is similar to Snapchat, with several ways to optimize any given post—we see a non-concrete and evanescent types of content publishing, focusing on everyday events lasting only twenty-four hours. The ephemeral nature of *Instagram* Stories allows Instagrammers to keep a closer (and maybe more authentic) relationship with their audiences. Even being a short-lived sequence, Stories is placed at the very-top of *Instagram's* feed, presented as a priority in a

user's experience, showing that narratives (no matter the size or format) are both elastic and very relevant to this social network.

In the same malleable way, *Instagram* also launched an update in 2017 that allowed users to post slideshows with up to ten pictures, displaying pictures horizontally. This transformation modified user experience on the platform, admitting the horizontal scroll, corresponding to the existing vertical scroll.

Within this new, flexible, and elastic *Instagram* paradigm, brands need not restrain themselves in terms of uniformity, consistency of colors, filters or other standardizations. Such concerns were more salient in the old days of concrete and solid representations. Now, space can be made for the flexibility of pictorial representations, experimenting with visual tropes and different ways of arranging a motif or dealing with the pictorial sphere. Semiotically speaking, it is important to examine the emotional and cultural aspects of images that enable them to move closer to users rather than being limited by the rational bias of the structural restrictions that govern profile consistency.

It is from features such as stories, multiple-pictures, and live videos, among others features, that we see new directions emerging in *Instagram*—directions that are not based on the massive constancy and uniformity of posts but, rather, give space to the construction of new narratives that can be empowered by metaphors, metaforms, metonymies, synecdoches, and (because, why not?) touches of irony.

For a visual communication platform to prevail, there must be an openness toward diverse and polysemic types of symbolisms, taking into account the kinds of dynamic and multilayered grammatical forms engaged by *Instagram* (i.e., the platform's "Instagrammatics") and the sensitive and artistic ways of creating and representing images and spaces inspired by design, photography, cinema and the other arts (i.e., "Instagrammism").

Considering that the observation of *Instagram* posts and profiles is an important part of daily practice in commercial semiotics, this approach lends itself well to broadening the perception and understanding of cultural codes that circulate in a wide variety of social media expressions.

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