

# DIGITAL LIFE ON INSTAGRAM

New Social Communication  
of Photography

## DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY: POLITICS, ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN NETWORK COMMUNICATION

The *Digital Activism and Society: Politics, Economy and Culture in Network Communication* series focuses on the political use of digital everyday-networked media by corporations, governments, international organisations (Digital Politics) as well as civil society actors, NGOs, activists, social movements and dissidents (Digital Activism), attempting to recruit, organise and fund their operations, through information communication technologies.

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- transformations of older topics such as inequality, gender, class, power, identity and group belonging; and
- strengths and vulnerabilities of social networks.

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Dr Athina Karatzogianni is an Associate Professor at the University of Leicester, UK. Her research focuses on the intersections between digital media theory and political economy in order to study the use of digital technologies by new socio-political formations.

# DIGITAL LIFE ON INSTAGRAM

New Social Communication  
of Photography

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*I dedicate this book to my dear friend Andrea.  
He is always in my heart.*

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*The camera is an instrument that teaches people  
how to see without a camera.*

Dorothea Lange

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# CHAPTER 1

## NEW APPROACHES TO DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND ONLINE PHOTOSHARING

Since the arrival of photography, visual communication has been interpreted as a means to discover the unknown, placing connective bridges among cultures, societies and visions. In fact, Martin Heidegger wrote in *The Age of the World Picture* (1977) that in the modern age, the fundamental event was ‘the conquest of the world as picture’ (p. 134) describing the approach to unseen visualities as a determining aspect in cognitive processes. Following this, digitality opened up a vision of new scenarios with an elevated characteristic of reproducibility via online sharing, which expands the concept of mechanical reproducibility elaborated by Benjamin (2008) in the 1930s. Nowadays, Benjamin’s concept of reproducibility is substituted by the potential of virality and connectivity of the Internet, which plays a crucial role in shaping the information sharing.

Through the innovative combination of three fields of study, mobility, mediation and visuality, this book investigates

the ways Instagram has changed social approaches through visual experiences. To address the complexity of this subject, this book is divided into five thematic nodes (photosharing, social relationships, social media marketing, privacy and surveillance and identity). The sectorial division into themes, explained here as the architecture of this book, articulates critical investigations that converge towards a unique interpretation of the phenomena. The arrival of smart mobile technologies significantly changed the approach to new media, opening new pages for interpreting the human–technology relationship and increasing, in fact, access to digital contents. Through their constant use, people also intensify the activity of taking photographs, altering content and how they are shared. In addition, technological developments contribute to strengthen the circulation of photographs through the Internet and social media platforms. In this, they contribute to the hyper-representation of the world (e.g. from the photo of the cappuccino in the morning to the Friday night out with friends) showing the predominance of visual elements in many daily practices.

This book discusses the significant features and affordances of the popular photosharing platform Instagram (a smart phone application that enables users to capture, apply filters and share photos also on other social networks), identifying the key elements that shape new mechanisms of visual communication. To do so, it examines how images are used in various forms of communication (marketing, social relationships and surveillance, for instance), showing how visuality is changing people's perception of the world and their mediated lives. It advances a critical re-reading of the combined interrelations between mobility (smart mobile devices), mediation (platforms) and the thematic areas mentioned earlier, delineating the changing dynamics that digitality determines in visual communication. To understand the

growth of new visual practices, this book considers how relationships develop among individuals, visual technologies, practices and images, society and culture (Pink, 2007). The current lack of structural categories to interpret a combination of the conditions mobility–mediation does not help with improving the knowledge of the social practice of photosharing. This book corresponds with the necessity to advance a thematic critical understanding around the complex sphere of mobile media and visual studies.

The relationship between visibility and the current developments in research on social and mobile media is the focus of this book, which envisions a large-scale discourse on photography and the practices of photosharing. Starting from the conception that there is no single characteristic or practice that represents the essence of photography (Tagg, 1988), it is helpful to compare the present book to a complex cubist art piece characterised by a variety of facets that merge together in a unique composition on canvas, giving a multi-faceted vision of all the various constitutive parts of the phenomenon. The subdivision of this book into thematic areas (one per chapter) takes into account the representative moments of the conspicuous international debate in the fields of social media, communication and visual studies that, since the 1990s, has evolved beyond the original separate disciplinary connotations in the domain of social sciences.

In **Chapter 1**, this book defines the context of analysis providing with the theoretical framework and circumscribing the analysis around digital media and visual studies. The combination of these two disciplines is necessary in order to both delineate the existing inter-relationship between human and smart technologies and to investigate how visibility fits into this relationship. Defining the area of analysis, this book exemplifies the critical approach that interprets smart mobile

devices as objects of socio-cultural studies. The critical understanding of the role of smart mobile devices leads to broader perspectives on mobility and visuality, which question smart mobile communications and their ubiquity (Bechmann & Lombrog, 2012). Indeed, by reflecting on technological innovations, the peculiar elements that guide smart phones to become socially embedded (Green & Haddon, 2009) testifies to the growing dependence people have towards such devices. This shift recalls some of the fundamental studies of semiotics (Barthes, 1980; Eco, 1979) and theory of the image (Belting, 2005, 2011; Boehm, 1994; Mitchell, 1996, 1998, 2005) to set the interest of this investigation around the triangulation of mobility–mediation–visuality.

**Chapter 2** recalls relevant theories in media and convergence (Jenkins, 2006; McLuhan, 1964) to engage with the practice of photosharing online (Van Dijck, 2008, 2011) and its capacity to make individuals perform, feel emotions, engage with each other and remember (Van House, 2007, 2009, 2011; Van House, Davis, Ames, Finn, & Viswanathan, 2005; Van House et al., 2004). The basic functioning mechanism of Instagram shows how the practice of photosharing goes progressively towards the direction of mediated photosharing, identifying the mediation and connectivity of the platform as a valid means to share visual stories. Photosharing is experienced and practiced on a daily basis in different sectors. For some, photosharing is a daily habit, a way of working and a personal *mise-en-scène* (Goffman, 1959) that follows precise guidelines breaking the idea of instantaneity of communication typical of social media. The general analysis of the practice of photosharing discloses the common conditions present in its various practices: online (Chapter 2), sociality (Chapter 3), marketing (Chapter 4), protection of personal information (Chapter 5) and formation of the self (Chapter 6). Indeed,

photosharing emerges as a constant condition that enables different ways of communicating visually.

Expanding the considerations advanced in Chapter 2, **Chapter 3** discusses the social possibilities that the practice of photosharing offers in everyday social interactions. In this case, the intuitions advanced by McLuhan (1964) and Giddens (1991) combined together set the theoretical foundations to interpret human relationships and technological interactions. The increased use of social media shows how sociality is affected and mediated by new mobile technologies. This chapter begins with a review of the notion of community, discussing the implications of social media. The theoretical frameworks of online communities (Baym, 1995, 1998; Wellman, 2001; Wellman & Giulia, 1999) and social networking theories (boyd & Ellison, 2007) support the investigation of the current state of virtual social relationships (Bakardjieva, 2003; Turkle, 1997, 2011). An examination of the social uses of mobile devices (Lugano, 2008) helps to reflect on the motivations (Lakhani & Wolf, 2005; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011) that guide to consider the exchange of images as a practice dedicated to the creation and/or maintenance of social relationships. As a photosharing platform, Instagram is inscribable in the creation and development of communities of interest (Rheingold, 2000) that recognise their main social expression in offline meetings (InstaMeet and InstaWalk). The interest in moving the discussion towards the combination of sociality and visuality comes from the intuitions that Van House's (2007) advanced while studying photosharing as an effective practice for maintaining social relationships. Although the social potentiality of (visual) social relationships through Instagram itself does not offer a variety of verbal communication mechanisms, this encourages offline meetings or the relocation onto other social media.

Using Fuchs' (2012) analysis of the value of Facebook's friends and friendships, **Chapter 4** reviews the key theoretical concepts of the political economy (Herman & Chomsky, 2008; McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 1996, 2008) and its complex connection with the environment of social media. Critical interpretations of the political economy of social media and social networking platforms moved the academic attention towards the dynamics that connect companies and users. From this consideration surfaces the growth of social media marketing that sees in the use of consumer-generated advertising (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011) the base for new plans. Understanding the general strategies that move social media marketing helps to progress this book to the consideration of visuality as part of these new techniques. In fact, on Instagram advertising and promotional campaigns are well organised considering the power of images. Taking into account the engagement that brands intend to establish with users/potential customers, the necessity for reducing the distance between businesses and peoples emerges. The engagement between actors (user–user, brand–user) figures as the key aspect of social media marketing (Evans & McKee, 2010). On Instagram, this principle is recognised in photo contests, calls to action and promotional photo campaigns. From this, the tendency arises for advertisers to create visual imageries close to users/potential customers developing what Schroeder (2008, 2013) defines as 'snapshot aesthetics'. The co-presence of new social media marketing strategies and the progression of the snapshot aesthetic in advertising rely on users' voyeuristic interest in watching and being watched and it is that which motivates the practice of photosharing.

Following the 'big brother spirit' that animates the majority of social media, **Chapter 5** examines the delicate issues related to privacy (Debatin, 2011; Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield,

Grey, & Lampe, 2011; Nissenbaum, 2009), surveillance and visual communication online. It focuses specifically on the publicity of the Internet, that is the aspect that constitutes increased fragility for the majority of online services. The way in which businesses monitor and collect users' personal data in marketing shows the controversial context of public and private presence online (Fuchs, 2012; Lyon & Bauman, 2013; Miller, 2011). However, the compulsory agreement to terms and conditions necessary for the use of social media does not seem to cause any concern to Instagram users. They passively accept them as they are aware that most of Internet services (to provide the services they provide) access their personal data and metadata. Indeed, the only concern that Internet users have regarding privacy and surveillance is being subjected to the spread of personal and private images. This concern takes the place of other types of monitoring systems. The surveillance practiced by businesses is not perceived as excessively invasive as much as is the surveillance practiced by other users. The voyeuristic spirit (Denzin, 1995; Mulvey, 1975) that animates Instagram does not come from an interest in images related to sex or sexual pleasure (Calvert, 2000), rather it is more related to the curiosity and the pleasure in observing new visualities recognised in particularities and unordinary images. The co-presence of protection and disclosure of images opens the discussion towards the intent of disclosing imageries related to identity and memory of the self.

The visual interest in watching and being watched is associated with the protection and disclosure of the self-identity as **Chapter 6** illustrates. The ubiquitous use of smart mobile devices constitutes a significant cultural change towards an increased mediated visibility. The polycentric character of modern society (Giddens, 1991) guides to consider the theme of identity through the notion of 'fragmentised subjectivity'

described by Bauman (1998). The decentred and mediated nature of contemporary identities is discussed in relation to the presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959) through images and interpreted within the mediation of social media and social networking sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd & Heer, 2006; Turkle, 1997). This self-representation is commonly associated with the exhibition of self-portraits that nowadays take the name of ‘selfies’.

Overall, this book produces a critical interpretation of Instagram which can, to a certain extent, speak of the mediation and mobility of other platforms. Considering that ‘digital culture now involves more than merely sitting at a computer terminal’ (Miller, 2011, p. 1), the mobility and mediation afforded by smart mobile devices seems to establish new ways for producing and sharing images. This shift guides people to think visually of events, people and the surroundings. Everything is perceived as a photo opportunity, and this constant state of mind produces new forms of experiencing everyday life. The triangulation of mediation–mobility–visuality is rethought as a unique instance maintaining the polivocality (multiple voices) of media and the current understanding of visuality. The ephemerality of digital culture is discussed in this book considering the importance that people give to the *act* of producing visual contents more than the contents themselves. In this, the extensive use of Instagram represents the foundation of a *new mobile visualities* aesthetic. In its conclusion, this book argues that increasingly visualities have been noted to have crucial functions in different contexts (e.g. marketing, leisure, information) that, through the co-presence of the mediation and mobility of platforms, radically transform traditional functions of photography.

### 1.1. MEDIA THEORIES TOWARDS NEW VISUAL PRACTICES

The Internet connectivity in mobile communications plays a crucial role in the development of social practices that now increasingly include visual elements. The Internet presents a complex area of study that requires the deconstruction of previous theorisations to move towards ideas that support the dynamism of the subject and that follow new technological advancements. Without the notion of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006), it is difficult to comprehend the evolution of human behaviours in relation to the progression of new smart mobile technologies. Essentially, by convergence, Jenkins (2006) referred to the flow of content across multiple platforms, as well as the collaboration between media industries and audiences. Exploring the paradigmatic notion of convergence, he described the shift of communication systems and media environments. The augmented interdependence among communication systems produced the collision between different media settings (old and new). In that way, print, television, radio and the Internet merged together. Laptops and mobile phones are concrete examples of this shift that present various levels of interactivity, such as social media platforms.

Technological developments brought together multiple functions and became a phone, television, stereo and photo-camera all-in-one device, producing also visible modifications of people's behaviours, leading to arguments for the advance of the new cultural phenomenon of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). The undeniable innovation of convergence was that multimedia contents and information shifted across different media easily and quickly. The widespread use of mobile devices and smart applications are examples of this conduct that encourages people to create, share, modify and

move contents, stories and images from one means to another. Evident consequences of these possibilities are now recognisable in the facility to alter existing aesthetic models, ways of telling stories, informing, communicating and engaging.

An emblematic example of this alteration was dated 28 April 2004 when, during *60 Minutes*, the historic CBS television programme disclosed, for the first time, services and images related to Abu Ghraib tortures. A series of amateur photographs, taken by digital cameras and mobile phones, conveyed the scandalous happenings inside the Iraqi prison (Danner, 2004; Eisenman, 2007). That memorable episode showed how the potential of media convergence brought new forms of collection, storing and sharing never seen before (Gaby, 2010). In fact, Gaby (2010), taking as visual examples episodes captured with camera phones, described how they break the unclear line between amateur and professional journalism, bringing into discussion the idea of live streaming as a current trend of information sharing and visual communication.

Photographs of the Abu Ghraib event lost their material supports (paper), surpassing the problem of its collocation (mobile phone and camera phone) to find in the Internet a new home, as discussed during the programme *60 Minutes*. Within media convergence theorisation, the photographs of Abu Ghraib become a clear example of cross-mediality (Bolter & Grusin, 1996), the potential of the Internet and the communicative power of images. In parallel with media convergence lies the concept of *Remediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 1996) which emphasised the possibilities offered by cross-mediality and hyper-mediacy.

Given that the process of remediation is ongoing, Kember and Zylinska (2012) suggested combining the knowledge of media objects with people's sense of mediating processes. This idea led them to think *Life after New Media* (2012)

through the notion of mediation rather than the notion of re-mediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1996). Their assumptions propose to understand photography as an active practice of cutting through the flow of mediation at perceptive, technical and conceptual levels. They argue that ‘over the last half century, photography has become so ubiquitous that our sense of being is intrinsically connected with being photographed, and with making sense of the world around us through seeing it imaged’ (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 76).

The potential afforded by new digital technologies have also been witnessed through the London bombing event (7 July 2005), during which fear and terror did not stop people in the underground and in the middle of the street from recording the tragic terrorist attack and promptly shared it over various social media platforms. Helen Boaden, BBC Director of News at that time, described the event in this way: ‘People were sending us images within minutes of the first problems; before we even knew there was a bomb’ (Allan, 2007). Through her speech surfaced the importance of the event. The photographs of the London bombing represented one of the first events coverage recorded and shared by amateurs’ smart mobile devices. The photographs taken using smart phones inside the London tube immediately went viral within global networks. That was another example that amplified further the significance of reconsidering new media convergence towards the evolution of the uses of social media, smart technologies and the power of visual communication.

Within the panorama of convergence and remediation, it can be witnessed how new media develop into hybrids (D’Amico, 2008) and mobile interfaces (Farman, 2012). Discussing technological changes in the digital age, D’Amico (2008) emphasised the fusion between photography and other media, introducing the pioneering notion of digitographies. This new term classified digital images through their material

components: a numerical writing with an extraordinary characteristic of abstraction. In correlation with her discourse and in relation to the two photographic examples discussed earlier, Farman's (2012) theorisation of mobile interfaces and mediating environments that make experiences and constitute people's experiences exemplified how mobile devices stimulate new phenomenon of communication and sharing enabling people to manage daily practices through the mediation of screens. The introduction of the notion of mobile interfaces (Farman, 2012) contributed to the progressive interest in the relationship between humans and technology useful to start thinking about smart mobile communication.

Discussing the recent developments brought by media convergence, the mobility afforded by new digital technologies (smart phones, for instance) represents one of the latest subjects of interest in media studies. In relation to the dichotomy of human–technology, Sheller and Urry (2006) advocated the turn towards a 'new mobilities paradigm' that focuses on the dynamism of people, objects and information. The interactions between people located in distant places are increased by the adoption of mobile technologies that also extend the access to the Internet and social media platforms in everyday activities (e.g. posting, sharing and liking). As observed in the two examples mentioned earlier (Abu Ghraib and the 2005 London bombing), the element of mobility, in combination with the connectivity afforded by the Internet, played a crucial role in the creation and dissemination of those visual contents. Shortly after those events, through the widespread of smart mobile devices, people started to contribute more actively to multimedia content dissemination, which includes information, entertainment and social networking. In fact, while in the past amateur photography was seen more as a casual practice and the photos as unintentional, with the mass adoption of digital cameras and camera phones in

2000s more casual photography become possible (Manovich, 2016).

Previous Internet theories (Bolter & Grusin, 1996; Granieri, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; O'Reilly, 2004) discussed the potential that the connectivity of networks produce, setting the scene for further theorisations associated with the relation human–technology. For instance, following the idea that the Internet overlies social relationships, Granieri (2005) included the characteristic of reciprocity as a cultural constant that defines sociality online. This shows also incisive alterations in daily habits that guided Gefter (2006) to argue for the unclear distinction between real and mediated social lives. Advancements in smart mobile technologies blur the boundaries between online and offline sociality offering a ubiquitous presence that facilitates the development of new behaviours, cross-media and multi-site media experiences. Creating the condition for people to have easy access to the Internet and social media, smart mobile devices become endlessly online and constantly in use, generating connections and practices never seen before.

In general, even the basic functioning structures of social media platforms suggest specific ways of expression via anonymity (Bolter, & Grusin, 1996) or as avatars in virtual environments (Turkle, 1995, 1997). For instance, early studies developed the analysis of how social media influences people's self-expression, ways of communicating and keeping memories of the past (Dominick, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002). Others investigated instead the structural elements of social media and the ways they are used by users to foster interaction, sharing and connections (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These practices show how extensively mobile devices affect the ways people relate to each other (Green & Haddon, 2009).

In fact, technological convergence shows an increasing collective participation towards, the *Liquid Life* (2005) described by Bauman as where nothing is fixed, phenomenon change quickly and technology has never been so fast. The society discussed by Bauman (2005) was based on the conditions of constant mutability and uncertainty. Introducing the term *Liquid Modernity* (Bauman, 2000) and re-questioning the notion of post-modernity, Bauman (2000) defined the condition of transformation that societies live regarding relationships, identities and economy. Within this discourse, that emphasises the state of transition of things, the relation human–technology obtains a particular position in eliciting new social dynamics.

Following this line of interpretation, the Abu Ghraib and London bombing events discussed earlier visibly illustrate how technological advancements introduce the conditions for an enhanced information and communication sharing that exploits the power of visibility. Considering Rubinstein and Sluis' (2008) assumption that mobile phone pictures become contemporary visual speeches, the co-presence of mediation–mobility–visibility seems to represent the turning point in new practices of instant communications. Smart mobile devices provide new opportunities for capturing and sharing images, in particular online, transforming numerous communicative practices. The growing conception of the Internet as communicative platform also delineates the emergence of multitude of screen-mediated practices leading to the reconsideration of digital photography.

An example of this is the potential for social media photographic archives. Questioning how social images can affect the everyday and the emergence of history, Kuntsman and Stein (2015), in *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age*, examined images from Facebook and argued that digital archives can unfold stories and details that

some might try to obscure providing information that will not be available otherwise. Bringing visual examples of soldiers taking self-portraits and posting them on the Internet, Kuntsman and Stein (2015) showed how the ordinary use of social media platforms boosts the visual sharing of episodes and scenes that before were difficult to divulge. For this reason, digital archives seem a valid alternative database that can document and preserve memories on devices and through screens.

During the late 1980s, Jean Baudrillard wrote that 'the entire universe unfolds unnecessarily on [people] home screens' (p. 21). Terming this evolution 'ecstasy of communication', he described the fall of society within technologies. However, nowadays people's everyday life cannot just be considered a potential browse ground of media. Enlarging Baudrillard's (1988) intuition, it can be argued that the ubiquitous presence of smart mobile devices leads people to unfold virtually in their hands mobile devices anywhere. Due to media convergence, the intensification of online practices sets the presence of the screens of smart mobile devices between people and surroundings, so creating a new state of mediation, new forms of seeing and representing.

Following this line of interpretation, Instagram is a good example to discuss the changes that the convergent environment of smart mobile technologies spawn. Analysing the practice of photosharing on Instagram, Manovich (2016) identified three main genres on the platform: casual photography, professional photography and designed photography. In other words, Instagram seems to be sliding into numerous areas, such as not only information and advertising, but also leisure and entertainment. In fact, on Instagram, compared to professional photography that is mainly dominated by landscapes and cityscapes, casual photography emerges as a new style, which sees the human world filling most of the scenes.

Although the widespread use of the platform brought numerous images of drinks, avocado toasts and eggs Benedict, Instagram cannot be reduced to a simple list of repetitive scenes. Rather, it enriches users' imageries with the narrative and engaging capacity of photography that, as Manovich (2016) noted, seems to be setting the new standards of the ordinary.

## 1.2. SEMIOTICS AND THEORIES OF THE IMAGE

Even though this book discusses the practice of photosharing online mainly through media studies, talking about images cannot exclude the foundations of semiotics, 'a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life*' (Saussure, 1974, p. 16). With Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce (1977) is another key theorist that developed this philosophical approach at its early stage. Subsequently, Roland Barthes (1981, 1982, 2000), Christian Metz (1991) and Umberto Eco (1979) developed its late modern approaches. Early theories on semiotics are fundamental for the progressive developments of contemporary theories on the image. The reason why this book interlaces them with media studies is in the recognised interdependence of digital images by smart technologies. In this, the evolution towards visual semiotics moves the attention from a linguistic approach to the interpretation of signs and visual patterns. The works of semioticians is, indeed, at the base for critical considerations of digital images, which also involves the contemporary debate of visual studies.

An important methodological and mature interpretation of photography has been advanced in *La Chambre Claire* (Barthes, 1980). Through this book, Barthes suggested a phenomenological reading of photography. His interpretation of

the image argued for the existence of a deep link between photography and the object represented in the photo. Following that, Barthes (1982) ascribed this link to the concept of 'trace', which receives a particular interpretation and claimed that photography reports the existence of a precise object that embodies the lifetime of the object itself. Thus, the essence of a photograph was recognised in the certification of presence of the object. It gives the possibility for thinking that a certain event (represented in the photo) really happened, somewhere during a precise moment. In this way, Barthes questioned the peculiar features of the image and the effects that the image produces.

Indeed, as a natural consequence of that interpretation, he investigated what there might be beyond the image. To do so, he considered the affective dimension of photography. The image, according to Barthes (1982), immersed the subject impeding him/her to take the right distance from it. In this way, he located the image within a certain cognitive dimension. This is the reason why, almost always, people support images with explicative verbal language. Where the image refers to the affectivity, Barthes (1982) claimed that it needs to be interpreted through phenomenological filters. This is the reason why Barthes (1982) believed that theorising photography without considering socio-cultural variables is not possible. From his perspective, semiotics is useful mainly to explore the connotation of visual signs, in which images are signifiers of specific instances. However, this book does not follow Barthes (1980) line of reasoning related to the photography as trace of reality, rather it metabolised the conception of the ephemerality of digitality to focus the discourse more on considering Barthes' idea that photographic production depends on socio-cultural dynamics and vice versa. Consequently, in this book, the semiotic interpretation of images passed through the interpretation of human

behaviours and relations to technologies expanding the discourse started with investigation of the *Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (Lister, 1995).

Umberto Eco was another theorist that contributed to the development of semiotics. According to Eco (1979), considering photography's iconic aspects (photography as icon), its ability to indicate also emerges (photography as index). In this approach, photography, as 'photosensitive trace', differentiates itself from draws and paints (mimetic signs) because it represents both objects and their trace. Photographs are not specular images but are read as such. Photography is located at the border between semiotics and extra-semiotics field, and between sign and no-sign. Then, Eco (1979) developed his theorisation of photographic image criticising this dichotomy. Reflecting on the relation between semiosis (the process of signification in language) and perception (the way something is understood and interpreted), Eco (1979) defined the process of primary semiosis or perceptive semiosis as something that does not develop when something figures for something else. In other words, it means that a certain object is reached per inference thanks to a set of stimulus. The semiosis process is activated by sensorial stimulus emergent from things, from which it is possible to grasp some useful aspects as a base to construct the sign that will become the starting point for interpretations.

Following these distinctions, Eco (1979) identified two macro categories: iconic signs (perceived through Alpha mode) and all the others (perceived through Beta mode). Objects perceived through Alpha mode could be paints, photos, a movie's image and all semiotic phenomena. Even if the observer is aware that it is a sign, before perceiving it as something else, the observer perceives it as a group of stimulus that creates the effect of being in front of an object. These types of icons substitute the real stimulus in order to appear

as a good reality approximation even if illusory. Alpha and Beta modes are linked and tangled one with the other without having a clear demarcation. From the Alpha mode (what substitute stimulus suggests) to Beta mode (interpretation of what a text communicates beyond the author's awareness), the observer perceives stimulus, substitutes and things, and then he/she looks for a narrative coherence within their assemblage. This passage allows the observer to pass from the natural perception to the sophisticated intertextuality. Through Eco's statement that 'semiotic is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign' (Eco, 1979, p. 7), his theorisations expand towards not only 'signs', but what 'stands for' something else, such as photography. This book moves forward Eco's (1979) explanation to interpret images within socio-cultural systems, as Barthes mentioned (1981), as signs that stand for something else such as social connectors, business makers and other various digital environment where images are nowadays experienced.

With the arrival of digitality, the academic debate moved to questioning the new ephemeral nature of the image. In this, Philippe Dubois (Dubois & Valli, 2009) suggested an alternative interpretation of index model and referential realism. Dubois (Dubois & Valli, 2009) claimed that if unavoidably the image refers to its referent because it adheres to the image, consequently, it is necessary to interrogate, under other degrees of interpretation, the ontology of the image. Dubois (Dubois & Valli, 2009) also stated that the statute of photographic index is grounded in a sort of 'conceptual complex' that involves the implication of the subject within the visual experience. Thus, the indexing essence presumes the generative modality of the sign itself that, following Dubois, emerges from the aesthetic act of relating oneself to the reality. The photographic image hence becomes inseparable from its referential experience. Following this reasoning, the

attention moves onto the mode of production and, consequently, the interpretative stage moves onto the procedure that Dubois defines *L'Acte Photographique* (1983), which involves the close relation between subject and object. He concluded in his book by arguing that photographs do not have any meaning themselves. Their meaning, instead, is determined by their relationship with the object. The logic of photographic index uses the distinction between sensation and existence; the photo index certifies the existence of what it represents (Barthes' 'has been'), but it does not say anything about the meaning of that representation, apart from considering the subject. Dubois' (1983) explanation of the photographic act emphasised the importance that the individual fulfils in the production of images. Through this theorisation, this book stretches semiotics theories of signs in order to comprehend the existing interrelations of meanings between people and images.

Moreover, within digitality, it is evident that the contemporary discourse on photography interrogates whether its immateriality allows an authentic reproduction of the reality. This debate expands together with technological developments and reviews the traditional conception of photography as mirror of reality. In contrast to other means of reproduction, photography is a sign that paradoxically testifies the presence of the absence. The photographic index allows a temporary intrusion in the reality towards the universe of signs. A photograph shows the presence (the image) of the absence (the subject portrayed). From this co-presence, the digital nature of photography is the relation that it holds in the construction and maintenance of reality (Dubois, 1983). In spite of this theoretical questioning, this book moves the attention from the presentation to consider the representation of reality and the impact that this mediation has on the interpretation of visual signs.

Once theoretical issues of reference within the process of production have been surpassed, other philosophical debates have been developed, such as concerning the ontology of the photographic image. Regarding this, Bazin (2005), questioning the ontology of cinema, analysed the aim beyond the process of mummification explaining the substitution of something with its representation. The subject of the camera, in this discourse, represents the reality by creating an illusion of reality, that is, its representation. According to Bazin (2005), the nature of photography is connected to the objectivity of photographic images, and he added that the automatism of the image construction is not important because it generates similarity. Photography for its automatic genesis certifies the existence of the referent, but it does not imply that it would look like it. The principal characteristic of photography is, indeed, that it figures as trace of reality rather than its mimesis.

The photographic index allows a temporary intrusion in the reality towards the universe of signs. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (2008), Walter Benjamin discussed the changes produced by technical improvement in the twentieth century. He emphasised the modifications that mechanical reproduction systems produce in particular on art works. In doing this, he introduced the pioneering conception of the 'loss of aura' (the distinctive quality or atmosphere that seems to surround and be generated by a person, place or thing). In the modern age, indeed, everything can be reproduced in infinite copies, and it causes the loss of authenticity of objects. Developing this line of interpretation, Benjamin (2008) advanced also the rise of new modes of perceiving images. In other words, systems of mechanical reproduction embody the fundamental characteristics of change in modern society. The reference to cinema and photography, the loss of aura translates technological

improvements into the loss of authenticity and uniqueness. Benjamin's theorisation (2008), emphasising the repetition of mechanical reproduction, anticipated what later is considered the strength of digital technologies. Benjamin's theorisations (2008) of the reproducibility of photography did not limit the discourse to images, rather it was a model that exemplified the emerging dynamics of society. Mechanical reproduction did not only destroy the aura of artwork, but rather it also led to critical consideration towards the expansion of visual communication and image exchange. This book, through Benjamin's (2008) intuitions, extends the notion of mechanical reproduction to infinitive copies, alterations and uses that digitality affords and also the consequences that this produces at social level.

In light of Benjamin's (2008) contribution, Gisele Freund (1980) in the late 1980s wrote that in the Renaissance, it was said that an observant person 'has a nose [for something]', nowadays it is said that a knowledgeable person 'has an eye [for something]'. Freund, in *Photography and Society* (1980), brought this comparison to argue that the sight is the most stimulated sense in contemporary society, emphasising that its main characteristic is its relation to emotionality, which is directly connected to its immediacy. In fact, in her conclusions, Freund (1980), because of its link with human sensitivity, highlighted the power of persuasion that photography owns and the following ways in which it is used as means of manipulation. This aspect testifies its strong use in advertising. Through Freund's (1980) analysis of photographic culture in France, the contribution of photography arose in discovering the world under new visual angles suppressing previous conceptions of space and time. From this, indeed, this book expands the analysis of visual and photographic culture

towards social habits that nowadays see the employment of a personal means of communication redefining the cornerstone of visual analysis.

After the first semiotics studies, theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell (1996, 1998, 2005), Gottfried Boehm (1994) and Hans Belting (2005, 2011), in the footsteps of Benjamin's loss of authenticity, moved the discussion towards the intangibility of digital photographs. They started to consider the idea of visibility, on the whole, within social daily actions, defining in this way the importance of the context for visual experiences. Therefore, Mitchell (1996, 1998, 2005), Boehm (1994) and Belting (2005, 2011) theorised new understandings of the visual dimension that contemporary society is living in, necessary for elaborating significances, beliefs, identities and values (Pinotti & Somaini, 2009). Within this, the mimetic conception of photography was replaced by the idea that reality is just 'impression' and that photographic images are instead a powerful tool of transformation and interpretation of reality.

For example, through his essay, 'What Do Pictures "Really" Want?' (1996), Mitchell proposed to contemplate images as animate subjects, endowed with personality, needs and desires. He did not question the meaning of images; rather, he investigated what these images want. In his opinion, photographs want to be observed as complex independent opuses 'occupying multiple subject positions and identities' (Mitchell, 1996, p. 82). His reflections stem from the general attitude of considering photographs able to affect, fascinate and influence similar to the Barthesian idea of photography as adventure. Mitchell elaborated a conceptual framework in which images need to be re-evaluated between what they signify and what their signification asked of the

observer. He argued that images influence the observer's emotions and behaviours. Declaring in this way the power of images in having an effect over observers, Mitchell consequently located the observer in a subaltern position compared with the image. From this interpretation, images arise as elements that depend on the producer and the observer to fulfil signification. In this way, the direct interdependence with individuals, highlighted by Mitchell (1996, 1998, 2005), leads this book to move the focus towards the investigation of practices, that is, how people experience images. The consumption of images through the mediation of smart mobile devices sets new connections between individuals and images. This book expands Mitchell's questioning, including in the discourse the variable of mobility that in turn includes the production and consumption of new visualities within everyday life.

Mitchell's contribution is not too divergent from Boehm's one, who proposed a return to the visual culture. Both of them, in fact, speculated images to be subjects with their own individual identity. Boehm took part of the debate that sees the intersection of different disciplines, such as theories of art, sociology of cultural processes and aesthetic theories, which characterise later modernity. He contributed by introducing the definition of 'iconic turn'. Boehm (1994) demolished the epistemological fundamentals interrogating the increasing 'illusionistic' use of images developing the idea of a polyvalent nature of images. Boehm claimed that images are the post-modern cultural figuration because of their ubiquity. Moreover, because of their ubiquitous presence, he described images as seductive medium able to control and influence individuals' everyday lives. Basically, Boehm's words anticipated the notion of multi-representations deriving from digital technology. Boehm, through the 'iconic turn', suggested a movement beyond the logic of languages,

and considered the individuals' dependency on visuality. Overall, Boehm's assumptions undertook an epistemological position that consented this book to unify visual studies to sociology and cultural studies. In this way, he stated the overlap of different disciplines for a proper analysis of post-modern phenomena.

Hans Belting (2005, 2011) is another theorist who contributed to enhance the critique on images, analysing that images are at a distance from the general fundamentals of the history of art. Differently from previous theorists, Belting (2005, 2011) proposed an anthropological approach to the subject presuming to comprehend adequately images using two fundamental angles: the medium and the body. He combined together the cultural history of the body with the perception of physical activities, presenting a parallel that figures as an anthropological approach of the diachronic study of images. His basic claim was that there is no image without support; in fact, mental images (memories) and material images (photographs) possess a medium that allows their visibility, otherwise they could not be perceptible. According to Belting (2005, 2011) on the one hand, there is the medium 'body' that transmits mental images, whereas, on the other hand, the medium 'media' diffuses material images. Through his description, Belting (2005, 2011) affirmed that the human body sets itself as fundamental anthropological prototype to comprehend the relationship between images and media.

Following this, the notion that images live within media like people live within their body (Belting, 2005) makes it necessary to rethink the elements that concur in visual production and perception, where the perception tends inevitably to unify images and medium towards a real symbiosis. This theorisation recalls Mitchell's (1996) idea of dependence between the image and the observer, including in the

discourse the presence of a medium. In the digitality, whether considering the ephemeral nature of images, the facility through which they move from the body of the individual (the mind) to other external media, such as contemporary mobile devices, the intangible nature of the images figures as bonding instance between the individual and the device recalling Belting's triangulation of image–medium–body. Considering that images 'live *in* our bodies' (Belting, 2011, p. 306) archived in humans' brain external media, such as smart mobile devices, figures as their actual representation. Within this, images appear between internal and external representations reminding also of the McLuhanian (1964) idea of media as the extension of man. This book, indeed, expands Belting's (2005, 2011) idea of the interrelation between images and body to explain the inclusion of smart mobile devices in contemporary debates. Opening Belting's ideas towards current technological developments, his critical reasoning helped to understand the implications that the integration of mobile devices produces in this discourse.

The theories articulated by Mitchell (1996, 1998, 2005), Boehm (1994) and Belting (2005, 2011) are some of the fundamental principles for decoding the contemporary debate on visual studies. Following these theorists, this book proposes an oblique analysis that considers the triangulation of mediation–mobility–visuality. Images reveal themselves through the aestheticization of the world that erodes their traditional boundaries through the mediation of social media platforms and smart mobile technologies. Moving the attention onto the processes of visual representation and visual communication, the mediation of social media platforms and new mobile technologies becomes the determining factor of the way people experience visualities. This line of interpretation considers the progressions of new media technologies as a crucial variable for people's perception of screen-mediated images.

During the late 1980s, Jean Baudrillard, wrote that ‘the most intimate operation in individuals’ life becomes the potential grazing ground of the media’ then, he added that ‘the entire universe also unfolds unnecessarily on individuals’ home screens’ (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 21). Terming this evolution ‘ecstasy of communication’, he described the fall of the society within technologies. However, nowadays people’s everyday life cannot just be considered a potential grazing ground of media. Enlarging Baudrillard’s (1988) intuition, this book observes that the ubiquitous use of social media platforms leads people to unfold virtually in their mobile devices anywhere. Due to media convergence, the intensification of media processes sets the presence of the screens of smart mobile devices between individuals and surroundings creating a new state of mediation and new forms of seeing, looking and representing.

Given that the process of remediation is ongoing, Kember and Zylinska (2012) suggest combining the knowledge of media objects with individuals’ sense of mediating processes. This idea leads them to think *Life after New Media* (2012) through the notion of ‘mediation’ (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 19) rather than the notion of ‘re-mediation’ advanced by Bolter and Grusin (1996). Their assumptions proposed to understand photography as an active practice of cutting through the flow of mediation at perceptive, technical and conceptual levels. They argued that ‘over the last half century, photography has become so ubiquitous that our sense of being is intrinsically connected with being photographed, and with making sense of the world around us through seeing it imaged’ (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 76).

This is the direction that, at the Software Studies lab, Lev Manovich and his team of researchers are undertaking with their projects. Using computational and visualisation methods, they advance new software to analyse large visual

datasets. For example, in 'Zooming into an Instagram City: Reading the Local through Social Media' (2013), Hochman and Manovich illustrated the analysis of users' use of mobile applications offering social, cultural and political insights about individual activities. Their analysis aims to trace what visual social media can narrate about individuals considering spatial, temporal and visual levels. Their work focuses in identifying socio-cultural patterns centring the examination on big data. They advance the analysis of social and cultural dynamics leaving aside users' personal experiences of photo-sharing. Instead, this book reflects on people's interpretations considering people and images as equally important for the analysis.

Since the first camera had been embedded to a mobile phone (Kahn, 2011), this topic generated reasoning about the influence of different ways of experiencing the world would cause at a socio-cultural level. Indeed, this book shows how Instagram, in shaping individuals' experiences of the world, is also modifying people's perception of their mediated lives. This is the reason why, this book focuses on the factors of mobility and mediation of Instagram that sets the tendency for new social practices. The functioning structure of social media platforms suggests specific ways of human interactions interpreted as expression via anonymity (Bolter, & Grusin, 1996) or as simulated real life in virtual environments (Turkle, 1995, 1997). For instance, early studies, such as Dominick (1999) and Papacharissi (2002), developed the analysis of the influence that social media platforms employ over individuals' self-expression, ways of communication and memory. Others, instead, investigated the structural elements of social media and the ways in which they are employed by users to foster interaction, sharing and connections (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007). Considering this environment of research, this book examines the platform

Instagram from different perspectives giving a broad view of the changing dynamics that social media and smart mobile devices produce.

### 1.3. NEW RESEARCH METHODS IN INTERNET RESEARCH

Smart mobile devices are intensively widespread and social media platforms are taking the place of previous means of communication. Undeniably, phone calls are decreasing dramatically and text messages are becoming shorter and more contracted. In other words, it seems that the time invested in each communication or connection is shorter and easier than before. Within this context, visual communication rises as one of the most used means of communication. It follows that the concept of ‘media convergence’ (Jenkins, 2006) comes into account again to describe the major shifts that digital technologies and new media afford in contributing to the richness of social communication. The notion of media convergence structures the context of analysis and is discussed in this chapter to illustrate the principles followed in the fieldwork, which was formed by qualitative mediated interviews and visual data analysis. A sample of 44 Instagram users took part in this study. Twenty-nine participants have been interviewed via Skype and 15 participants responded to open questions that have been sent via email. Subsequently, contents analysis combined users’ responses with their photosharing.

This book confined the area of analysis to the use of smart mobile devices referring to the interconnections between mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006) and new media theories (Kember & Zylińska, 2012; Levinson, 2009; Siapera, 2011). Thus, the concept of mobility becomes particularly important. Sheller and Urry (2006) identified six bodies of theory underpinning the ‘new mobilities paradigm’. This book considers

their theorisations of the third and the fifth bodies that respectively conceptualise contemporary mobile societies. The third body of theory they presented comes from the notion of spatiality where places are constantly in motion and subjected to constant reconfigurations. Meanwhile, the fifth body of theory referred to complex patterns that information technologies produce within social life. Following these theorisations, the analysis advanced in this book combines the concept of ‘mediation’ (Kember & Zylinska, 2012) with the ‘new mobility paradigm’ (Sheller & Urry, 2006) in order to advance an investigation that sees the interconnection of the two different areas.

The use of mobile communications has spread rapidly since the mid to late 2000s. At present, the rapid adoption of such technology is especially evident in the market penetration of smart phones and other mobile devices. The use of smart phones cannot be separated from the use of social media any more. Socio-technical transformations raise new substantives for social sciences, while also being conditional upon new theoretical and methodological approaches, such as ‘digital materialism’ (Manovich, 2001) that stresses the ephemerality of reality in new media or, in addition, ‘New Materialism as Media Theory’ (Parikka, 2012). ‘New materialism’, according to Parikka (2012), is present in the way technical media transmit and process *cultures* (author’s stress). In order to move philosophical traditions forward, a new materialistic approach helps to understand mediated processes that are embedded ‘in much more ephemeral, but as real, *things* – even non-solid things’ (Parikka, 2012, p. 96). Parikka’s new materialistic approach is employed in the book because it proposes a vision of media as multiplicity. Indeed, new materialism allows a questioning of solid and non-solid objects (digital images), and also processes. Following these theorisations, this study designed its methodology taking into account the variables illustrated earlier, which include the

existing dichotomy between the immateriality of the platform Instagram and the materiality of the object mobile device. Before digitality, social sciences were focusing more on the ongoing geographical proximities based on more or less face-to-face social interactions proposing that the immediate presence of others becomes the basis of social existence. However, digitality shows that the materiality of objects is surpassed by the ephemerality of new media. Following this, smart mobile devices are crucial variables in investigating the effect that the social media platform Instagram origins at social level.

### 1.3.1. A Netnographic Approach for Qualitative Research

This study used qualitative research to reach an in-depth understanding of reasons and modalities in which people experience new media. Qualitative researchers 'tend to use a variety of different methodologies' (Brenner, 2013, p. 4). This is the reason why this research used a multi-methodological approach that included a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015), the (embedded) multiple-case study research method (Yin, 2009), qualitative interviewing techniques (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and visual content analysis (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). To stay current, this research method adapted the traditional ethnographic guidelines to a netnographic approach, which includes the mediation of the Internet for the contemporary sociality. Netnography is a specialised method for the unique computer-mediated contingency of today's social world (Kozinets, 2015). Social scientists, as Kozinets (2010) argued, are increasingly reaching the conclusion that they can no longer adequately understand many of the most important facets of social and cultural life without incorporating the Internet and computer-mediated communication into

their studies. This shows that nowadays there is more attention on mediated experiences.

In this study, the concept of netnography is necessary to delimitate the context of analysis: The Internet. It provides useful insights by analysing users' behaviours in the interactive sphere of the Internet as 'being in contact with an online community seems becoming a regular part of people's everyday lives' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 14). An accurate coordination of netnographic fieldwork includes the analysis of online social behaviours. Kozinets (2010) discloses four key characteristics: *adaptation* to various technological media; participation under optional condition of *anonymity*; vastly enhanced cultural *accessibility*; and automatic *archiving* of exchanges. The list he makes is useful for creating a set of specific guidelines for planning a valid methodology. For this study on Instagram, the netnographic approach is adapted to combine together different areas of analysis (interviews and photos). A netnographic approach was used to consider the mediation that the social media platform determines for the practice of photosharing. Indeed, 'analysing visual contents is almost impossible without taking into account the context in which the visual was produced and finally received' (Bock, Isermann, & Knieper, 2011, p. 272). Considering the fact that Instagram 'lives' within the Internet and through smart mobile devices, the employment of a netnographic approach is considered vital for the study of Instagram.

Following a netnographic approach, the sampling technique employed was accomplished entirely online. Considering the mediatic nature of this project, initially an online research was conducted to identify the fundamental information related to the Instagram users. Since Facebook bought Instagram (April, 2012), the development of Instagram communities, Facebook pages has been witnessed. Therefore, the call for participants was shared within every single Instagram community Facebook

official pages. After the first approach through the social networking platform, participants (who have responded positively to the call for participants without any restriction in terms of gender, race and education) were approached via private email. The investigation was confined only within Instagram users and owners of a smart mobile device. For an adequate netnographic exploration, this research gathered participants who were 'active, relevant, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich for the research question' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 89).

The context of analysis was examined separately to provide a precise description of the structure and the functioning of the platform. Following Franklin's (2012, p. 159) criteria of analysis, it is decided to apply those that can better fit the research question: design of the platform, whether and how the platform is part of a larger conglomeration; uses of the platform, content analysis, theme/s of the platform and its connections with offline relationships; technological features, and the role of the platform in a larger setting have been analysed. The current social world is mainly experienced online, with perhaps millions of people interacting using various social media platforms. This phenomenon produces consequently an increased use of online research (Franklin, 2012), which brings into academic research the employment of digital tools as data gathering. The Internet represents the context of analysis where the case Instagram is located. The employment of this approach illustrates the use of Instagram across different areas.

### 1.3.2. (Embedded) Multiple-case Study

The (embedded) multiple-case study designed by Yin (2009) was the most appropriate research method for the study of Instagram as it gathers materials from the synergy of case-based practices and qualitative research methods. This method, as can be seen in [Table 1.1](#), presents the context (the

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**Table 1.1. Organisation of the Study: (Embedded) Multiple-case Design.**

**CONTEXT: The Internet**

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**Case study: Instagram**

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Embedded Unit of Analysis 1:	Embedded Unit of Analysis 2:	Embedded Unit of Analysis 3:	Embedded Unit of Analysis 4:	Embedded Unit of Analysis 5:
Photosharing	Social relationships	Political economy and social media marketing	Privacy and surveillance	Identity and the visual self

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Internet) that includes a main case study (Instagram) that, in turn, contains five embedded units of analysis that explore new practices of online photosharing, identify users' social engagement and interaction, describe uses of images in social media marketing, question concerns related to privacy protection and surveillance and examine how the platform becomes crucial for the formation and disclosure of the self. The co-presence of the different areas considered in the units of analysis does not require different methodological approaches. However, they are kept in separate sections (chapters) because they involve different filters of interpretation.

Considering the multi-faceted nature of the platform of the co-presence of different aspects, this method includes in the analysis a plurality of interpretations. This method figures as a useful exploratory tool to examine real-life situations, issues and problems regarding Instagram in a more appropriate way. The selection of the (embedded) multiple-case study approach enabled this study to consider multiple experiments as the interrelations between the different areas of enquiries involving so multiple sources of evidences (Yin, 2003). In order to avoid inaccuracy in the results, this study approaches the subject from different angles using a mixed method. Indeed, the (embedded) multi-case study method used includes an innovative technique that combines together qualitative in-depth interviews and visual contents analysis. The concurrence of different typologies of sources (interviews and photos) determines the main strength in the data collection. This combination is chosen because interviews can be *targeted*, that is, focused directly on the case study topic, and *insightful*, that is, providing perceived casual inferences and explanations (Yin, 2009; my emphasis).

This research method follows the notions of *Visual Ethnography* (Pink, 2007) advances in relation to social research (Bentham, 1995; Brenner, 2013). In her book, Pink (2007) argued that 'social scientists often complain that

photographs alone do not represent, for example, emotions, social relations, relations of power and exploitation, but they need to be contextualised with verbal discourses or other knowledge in order to invoke such experiences' (Pink, 2007, p. 125). In fact, the combination of interviews and visual materials draws attention to the importance of this aspect.

### 1.3.3. Computer-mediated Interviewing Technique

Following Yin's (2009) claimed that 'one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview' (p. 106), this study used a qualitative interviewing technique as the main benchmark. Through online qualitative interviews, it is possible to understand experiences and reconstruct events in which the researcher does not participate and, therefore, through the accurate description of social processes, they allow an additional understanding of modalities and reasons why things change (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The main purpose of the employment of qualitative interviews in this study, as part of an elaborated case study, was to find out what happens, why and what it means more broadly (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Participants were asked to show, justify and comment on photographs related to their responses.

Specifically, computer-mediated interviewing method was employed to honour the principle that 'research questions that explore an online phenomenon are strengthened through the use of a method of research that closely mirrors the natural setting under investigation' (Geiser, 2003, p. 3). Computer-mediated interviewing allows a valid investigation of participants' mediated experience within the context of analysis developing a progressive understanding of practices, opinions and perceptions.

In this case, computer-mediated interviewing used two methods: asynchronous and synchronous. The asynchronous method used was the email (researcher University account) and shared platforms (Facebook and Instagram) whilst the synchronous method was the video call (Skype). Even if a computer-mediated interviewing method could be considered incomplete because of its mediated nature, the condition offered by online interviews provides benefits that the traditional face-to-face approach cannot offer (Curasi, 2001). The strengths of this approach are given by the contemporary widespread familiarity that people have with media technologies. In both cases (asynchronous and synchronous online communication), the mediation of the device conferred on the entire process of data collection a conformable distance between the interviewee and interviewer. In doing so, participants did not perceive the interview as interrogatory, rather as a mediated discussion similar to other conversations experienced during everyday life. Indeed, both have the time to reflect, interpret questions and responses and to elaborate appropriate comments and observations.

Considering that part of the sample population was more comfortable with text-based communication, the email asynchronous interviewing method was suggested to participants as a valid alternative for taking part in the study. A list of seven open-ended questions was sent to the 15 participants who preferred this option. In this case, participants were asked to provide general insights and support their responses through visual examples. This approach was progressed to prevent possible lack of data caused by the potential inability of recruiting participants willing to do an in-depth interview. Instead, those 29 participants who expressed the interest and availability to undertake an in-depth interview were only initially approached by email or Facebook. The interviews were approached more as guided conversations than structured

interrogations in order to unearth additional data in a more natural way. The questions asked examined what happens in specific circumstances, explore the ordinary, the routine, the shared history, the taken-for-granted norms and values, rituals and expected behaviours of a given group of people (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Participants were asked to describe a typical day, ordinary occurrences and exceptional events allowing to portrait relevant issues.

#### 1.3.4. Visual Data Collection

The emphasis that this study has on images follows the ethnographer Sarah Pink (2007) in her observation that ‘each individual produces meanings by relating the image to his or her existing personal experience, knowledge and wider cultural discourses’ (p. 82). Photosharing analysis was different between those participants who had replied only to the open-ended email interview and those who took part in the Skype in-depth interview. The first group of participants were asked to complement their responses providing explanations and visual examples. Instead, for the second group of participants, responses and photosharing were combined together following their examples and visual data collection. The opportunity to have participants’ photosharing added new dimensions for understanding both the context and the phenomenon.

In addition to the responses, it was possible to fulfil the research with participants’ actual photographic activities on the platform. Participants were asked to provide their Instagram nickname in order to be followed online by the researcher. Considering the abundance of visual materials present on the platform and to cope with the concern related to big data (boyd & Crawford, 2012), it was decided to limit the visual data collection to 2 months for the 29 participants

who respond to the in-depth interviews (the other 15 participants were considered only the visual examples that they mention). The ‘two-month’ period was a fair amount of time. In fact, such length could include working days, leisure time, national holidays, vacations and so on, producing a more complete view of participants’ photosharing. The visual data collection took place on a computer screen. Participants’ photos were captured through screen shots, saved and stored as the same as the interviews.

To observe participants’ photosharing, it was decided to use the typology of participant observer proposed by Gold (1958). Considering the mediated nature of the entire study, participant as observer (Gold, 1958) was the most suitable stance that enabled participants’ behaviour to be monitored within the Instagram platform. Participants’ photosharing data collection focused principally on the typology of happenings (photosharing, ‘likes’, comments and so on) and their reasons (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2011). Participant observation was a beneficial tool for producing studies that provide accurate representation of a culture (Kawulich, 2005) that, in the case of this study, investigates the field of visual mediated culture.

#### 1.3.5. Qualitative Content Analysis

The data analysis involves semiotics combined with critical response analysis and visual content analysis (Pink, 2007). ‘Semiotics is the study of signs that exist in our social lives’ (Brenner, 2013, p. 196) and images, words, objects and gestures that from it are recognised as signs that represent something else. Semiotic analysis does not advance unique interpretations, rather it aims to understand linguistic codes taking into account the specificity of contexts, cultures, places and time. However, semiotics was employed here to draw

meanings of qualitative content analysis of interviews and images.

The critical response analysis started after the computer-mediated interviews. Qualitative analysis is a complex process that needs to be done in constant interaction with the data (and the participants). The critical response analysis examined written responses received by email/SMPs and the Skype interviews. Once the fieldwork was complete, data were organised to allow a combined interpretation of interviews and visual materials. During the critical response analysis, this research looked at *'concepts that interviews frequently mention or indirectly revealed, that emerged from comparing interviews, themes that suggest new concepts, typologies, figures of speech and symbols, stories and labelling'* (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp. 210–212). Participants' photosharing data were interpreted through the classification of visual material and the contextualisation of participants' responses (Bowler, 2010). The qualitative content analysis allowed to translate the visual data into categorisations, which precisely demonstrated the sharp sense of the results, identifying themes, discuss findings and advancing new concepts.

Images were not the only data taken into consideration in this study because what happens with images does not necessarily reflect the meaning of images. Key aspects of interpreting photographic images are not just critical analysis of visual contents, rather social behaviours before and after the photo exchange. Visual messages travel through different spaces. Photos are made in one place and displayed in another one; they are also very easy to capture and send, and their value or significance often changes through time and across platforms. For this peculiarity, photos' meanings are constrained by several socio-cultural contexts in which they are located, and these are different in different places and periods. It follows that contexts of experience are decisive in shaping the value of

images. This approach guided Thomas (1991) to emphasise the concept of re-contextualisation of objects and, later Bolter and Grusin (1996) to talk about remediation. In social life, objects pass through different cultural contexts and devices that may modify what they mean. The analysis of participants' photo-sharing did not consider photographs as evidence of the 'who', 'where' and 'what' of reality, rather as evidence of bias, ideologically collared interpretations of how their maker or makers perceived and (re-)constructed the reality.

This research employed Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) method of visual content analysis in order to provide a basic framework for a descriptive analysis of the photographs. Precisely, visual content analysis, as an empirical (observational) and objective procedure (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001), quantifies visual representations using reliable defined categories of semiotic studies (Barthes, 1980, 1982, 2000; Benjamin, 2008; Eco, 1979). However, it does not provide a complete sociological interpretation of the photographs. In the light of this latent incompleteness, the combination of computer-mediated interviews and participants' photosharing analysis was chosen following Pink's comments about *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2007). She stated that 'while the image alone reveals nothing, it is given ethnographic meaning when linked to other types of knowledge' (Pink, 2007, p. 131). From Pink's (2007) assumption, this research grounded its strengths on the combination of interviews and images.

### 1.3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted respecting principles of codes of research ethics in line with the basic human rights legislation in force in the United Kingdom (Human Rights Act (1998) c. 42). An informed consent was sent within which all

participants apprise about the access, the observation and the use and protection of their personal data in this research. Faces or information that might harm participants' security were obscured. As part of the developing relationship with the participants, the researcher took on deep ethical obligations. This includes the responsibility to report the interviews accurately, to keep visual data shared under the researcher's control (providing a safe archive for photos and scripts) and the commitment not to harm participants' privacy and security. Photos and scripts were collected and archived following ethical procedures and assuring a fair treatment of personal data. This research follows the precise set of ethical considerations illustrated by Wiles et al. (2008) regarding the conduction of a qualitative approach on visual research. During the entire study, the principles of anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, copyright, data sharing and archiving (Wiles et al., 2008) were followed ensuring the appropriate confidential procedure regarding participants' data. Indeed, the research report does not mention any personal details. Participants could choose to show their real name or to provide a nickname.

Overall, the mixture of computer-mediated qualitative interviewing (in-depth interviewing, email interviewing) and participants' photosharing observation form the mixed method that analysed the Instagram phenomenon. This (embedded) multiple-case study learnt from Instagram active users how the use of the platform changes people lives and their ways of visually experiencing their surroundings. Additionally, the visual data collection combined what participants say and what they actually do within their daily use of the platform.

#### 1.4. THEORISING NEW MOBILE VISUALITIES

This book explores the triangulation of mediation—mobility—visuality within the multifaceted context of mobile media

using Instagram as the main case study. This includes the combined analysis of functioning structures (platform) and social dynamics (practices) that aim to identify the effects that the mediation and the mobility offered by the platform presents. This book discusses further the development of new (mediated) social practices and how they change in correspondence with technological advancements keeping in consideration the ever-changing character of the relationship human—technology. Media convergence, indeed, generates continuous phenomena of relocation that see users experiencing always new mediated dynamics. Within this environment defined by continuous development of different forms of communication, Instagram plays a crucial role in shaping new ways of seeing and using photographic images.

The act of photographing is so integrated into everyday sociality that people often do not realise the radicalness of the Instagram phenomenon. A clear example can be identified in the multitude of food photographs taken before eating a meal, which keeps people who are present waiting for the obligatory snapshot pre-lunch/dinner. In this, images act to exhibit the desires and needs of the society. In fact, the importance of visualities does not lie in its referentiality to reality (Barthes, 1980), as the first theories of images argued, rather it is in the fact that it is an efficient means to affect people's daily practices. To extend this line of thinking and to contribute to Mitchell's (1996) question 'What Do Pictures "Really" Want?', it could be argued that rather than questioning pictures as visual objects, we should question the practice of taking photographs. The possibility of photographing anytime and anywhere produces in people a constant state of looking for 'photo opportunities', images to extrapolate from the surrounding. The subaltern position that Mitchell (1996) argued about the person in relation to photographs now needs to shift towards the subaltern

position that the person holds in relation to events and surroundings precisely because of the widespread attitude of looking for 'photo opportunities'.

Arguing for the development of *new mobile visualities*, this book identifies the interdependence of the various uses of images in social practices. People, in their daily life, are used to photographing anything, and they give it a meaning and a place afterwards (social media platforms). In this, social media and smart mobile devices push photography towards new forms of interactivity that combine the representative and communicative capacities of images. As discussed, since their arrival, smart mobile devices amplified the quantity and the variety of social forms of visualities (in online communities, forums, social networking sites, etc.) towards one of the most visible transformation of the traditional functions of photography: the snapshot culture. Based on the instantaneity of snapping and sharing (Chalfen, 1987), the snapshot culture recognises the affordances of smart mobile technologies as the key factors that allow people to accomplish the act of photographing and sharing.

Smart mobile technologies push visibility towards the polarisation of its characteristics (representation, connection and memory) emphasising the processes of sharing through the visibility and connectivity of the Internet. The visual hyperrepresentation also converges towards the current trend of giving to everything a visual justification and representation. The ubiquitous exercise of photographing confers to visibility a prominent position in the contemporary digital age, guiding people to visually experience the surroundings through the mediation of screens, instead of actually experiencing the surrounding, and the object photographed does not appear as important as is the act of photographing itself. The mobility that new technologies are equipped for allows the expansion of this concept towards the 'snap, share and move on' culture

removing the initial importance of the image in favour of movement from one photo opportunity to the other one.

Developing this way of thinking, it is safe to recall Belting's (2005, 2011) comparison of the similarity between the interdependence of images—media and human mind—body pulling together the reasoning advanced in relation to devices, humans and images. This book advances the idea of an innovative interdependence among these three instances in a dynamic ephemeral circle that sees the individual perceiving surroundings as a valuable image to extract from the reality. This common circular process extends Belting's dichotomy, 'images live within media like we live within our body' (Belting, 2005) into thinking that images live within media as they live in our body (where body stands for mind). This evolution replaces photography in an ephemeral circular dynamic that does not contemplate the stability of traditional photography, rather the mobility and fluidity of digitality.

Overall, this book offers a critical understanding of Instagram and the thematic areas discussed throughout, illustrating the changing dynamics that digitality, smart mobile technology and social media determine within contemporary sociality. It discusses how technological advancements, described in the triangulation of mediation—mobility—visuality, substantially modify the way people see the world and the social life of photography.