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

Abstract

Sample and Methods

- 300 photos screenshotted from the #Instagay “top nine” page between June 24 and July 24, 2019
- These photos were determined to be the most relevant at any given moment based on audience engagement
- All photos were inductively coded for aspects of setting, photo orientation, subject, clothing, and skin tone, as well as other notable features

Findings and Discussion

“By following the pattern set forth within the micropublic of gay Instagram, these men have a roadmap toward validation by way of conformity. The men posting these photos experience gratification in the form of likes and comments that equate to social approval in the digital sphere.”

- Strong preferences toward setting, subject, and skin tone
- Weak preferences toward photo composition and clothing
- “Suggestive” photos had less to do with the level of clothing or amount of skin showing and more to do with the photo’s subtext (posture, facial expression, physical touch, sexual innuendo)
- Wearing less clothing found to be more of a circumstance than a statement
- Men with darker skin tones
  - Appeared infrequently
  - Were only kissing or showing affection with lighter-skinned men
  - Did not appear in any photos coded as “suggestive”
- “The collective action surrounding these photos has produced patterns that value discreet self-objectification as a form of sexual capital with a favorable bias toward men with lighter skin tones

Foundational Literature

- Uses & gratifications
- Presentation of self
- Online public spaces
- Microcelebrity and influencer culture
- Hashtags
- “Pigmentocracies” and discrimination

Ethics and Limitations

- Approved by Rutgers University IRB in May 2019
- None of the photos that were studied are included in the resulting paper or presentation in order to avoid disseminating online content intended for a specific audience, especially without knowing the openness of one’s sexuality
- Photos not featuring men were removed from the sample
- Only coded by one person and therefore subject to bias

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