

Instagram: The Latest “Big Moment” in Photography

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Abstract

Instagram shares a few commonalities with the art and history of photography. Other successful moments, or “big moments” in photography were successful for many of the same reasons that Instagram is successful. Moments such as the invention of the Daguerreotype and the release of Kodak’s Brownie camera were both very important moments for the art of photography.

Studying Instagram’s similarities to these other “big moments” will bring to light the common characteristics that are responsible for their overall success. What elements of our culture led to these particular moments being successful, and what distinguishes Instagram from other social media image sharing sites in regards to how content is featured and shared? Through the examination of articles regarding how and why people use Instagram along with the observation of my use of the site, this research will show Instagram’s significance to the world of photography as a whole, rather than it being thought of as just another social media website. Instagram is geared towards showcasing photos one at a time, as opposed to showing entire albums all at once like other websites (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr) so frequently do. This focus on singular images stimulates human connection via the use of photographs, instead of through the more common textual based means seen everywhere else.

Introduction

Photography is a large part of today's society and is frequently used as a means of sharing and connecting with one another. Things have not always been this way though, photography used to not be as commonly known and used. The "big moments" in the development and evolution of photography have led it to becoming the art form and means of documentation that it is today. In studying Instagram's similarities to other important events in the history of photography (such as the invention of the Daguerreotype or the invention of Kodak's Brownie camera), the characteristics that make a moment successful will become apparent. Understanding these characteristics will provide a better understanding of the level of importance that Instagram has in photography's historical timeline. It will also provide insight into what sets Instagram apart from other photo-sharing websites.

Looking at past research done on similar subjects and thoroughly reading articles about today's Instagram use will provide understanding in regards to the previously stated areas that are going to be examined. Instagram is a social media outlet that facilitates the social creation, creation, and dissemination of media content. One reason it is successful is because it is "a venue in which users can fulfill their need to belong through using services that enable various activities such as communication, information seeking, expression, and so forth" (Kim, 2016). Users are also able to create and maintain connections through social media sites, similarly to how they were able to share printed photos with one another before Instagram came about. Instagram's influence spans across the entire globe, and because of this, it plays an important role in the development of the art and practice of photography. Prior to Instagram, there was no real photo-sharing website that garnered as much attention as it, even though others like

Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr tried. After analyzing preexisting research as well as articles and my own social media use, I will develop findings clarifying the topics highlighted previously.

What elements of our culture led to these particular moments being successful, and what distinguishes Instagram from other social media image sharing sites in regards to how content is featured and shared? Further research and analysis of these questions will provide insight to the similarities that Instagram has with other “big moments” as well as highlighting cultural elements that have led to the general success of these events. Also, the reasons that people use Instagram will be touched on and compared to the reasons that people have used photography in the past before it was so easy to share photos with the rest of the world.

Literature Review

Before getting into the sources that I examined for my research, I will first be reviewing preexisting studies that provided a foundation for and led me to my conclusion. In order to fully understand the significance of Instagram, other “big moments” for the art of photography must also be analyzed. The Daguerreotype was the first main type of photographic medium that became relatively commonly used. When this technological innovation came about, Daguerreotype photos were primarily used for portrait photography, since that is what people were paying Daguerreotypists to take photos of (Rudisill, 1967). Although they were not used as commonly for artistic purposes, their use still slightly spanned past portraits of and for paying customers:

Response to the daguerreotype remained primarily individual throughout the entire period of the medium's use, although there were displays of pictures in most daguerreotypists' studios and a few public galleries of celebrity portraits were opened.

Portraits of public figures were copied for sale by the daguerreotype process itself—which produced identical copies (...) (p. 62)

Copies of certain images were made for profit purposes and images of celebrities were set up in galleries, much in the same way that we would go and browse a gallery of photos at a museum today. Even though photography as a common means of use was still developing, it was already shifting to something more personable and artistic in nature. The emergence of the Daguerreotype “not only brought matchless permanent images but it also brought a new means of self-definition for Americans” (Rudisill, p.55). Although most photos were very staged, people were beginning to recognize photography’s potential as a form of self-expression, documentation, and an art form; most importantly though, it was a becoming way for humans to connect with one another.

Another “big moment” in photography was the release of Kodak’s Brownie camera. This particular development allowed for everyone to become a photographer and the advertisements were directed towards women and children:

At a time when children were to be seen and not heard, the Brownie introduced them to a potent, if mute, form of self-expression. In a parallel campaign, women were encouraged to tell their stories from their own point of view with a Kodak. In both campaigns, groups typically excluded from the production of ideology—women and children—are given an alternate form of expression in which to order and express their own worldview (Olivier, p. 15-16)

This camera revolutionized the way people interacted with photography and allowed photos to be easily taken and shared with whomever you wished. Of course, the extent to which people could share their photos was not as immense as it is today with Instagram, but it still provided

more distribution opportunities than the Daguerreotype photos did. Olivier also makes the point that Kodak's Brownie camera shifted our culture into a more visual one instead of the mainly text-based one we were in beforehand. As stated in *George Eastman's Modern Stone-Age Family: Snapshot Photography and the Brownie* by Marc Olivier:

The sweeping narrative advances to the advent of the printing press before continuing in a manner that places photography on a higher point of the evolutionary scale: "Now photography is a means of recording thoughts, actions and events, as well as an art." (...) In Kodak's history, photography—and not writing—becomes the ultimate end of our primitive instincts.

The emergence of this new way to share photos allowed humans to connect with one another via the use of photographs, instead of being limited strictly to textual based means. This is the first time photography has been something that everyone can dabble in, and it forever altered the course of the history of photography. Without the Brownie camera, photography would still have been a hobby available only for those wealthy enough to afford it. Brownie cameras further solidified the development of photography into a form of self-expression, a way to connect with one another, and create art, all at once (Olivier, p. 12).

Instagram might just be a social media site, but its effect on the popularity and practice of the art of photography is enormous. Upon its release in 2010, it would begin changing the world of photography in very significant ways. This most recent "big moment" has gone a long way in providing people with better ways to share their photos and connect through that sharing, but before Instagram, people did not care as much about capturing a quality photo. Instagram's focus on the individual image made people hyperaware of both what they were sharing and the extent that they needed to go through in order to create something that people would be

interested in. In *Crafting the Look* by Daniel Miller (2016), there are examples of the extent to which users go through to facilitate taking what would be considered a good photo for Instagram. For his study, he spoke with students about the ways that they go about taking a photo for Instagram and how one student in particular chose to:

Upload a photo of some books I found which I got really excited about. I found them, put them in a pile, but I rearranged them so they'd look good for the photo . . . It is a craft, it's important. You're not going to upload a rubbish blurry photo or something embarrassing . . . You have a lot of Instagram pictures that are mostly taken if someone goes out for a meal and they're like 'that looks good' so they'll take a picture and they'll put it on Instagram.

Another student in Miller's study said that taking a photo for Instagram "is a craft. Like baking a cake. I'd rather get some nice flowers in, or a nice cake stand, rather than just taking a picture of the cake. You need to make the whole picture look good." (Miller, 2016). This is an example of the way that users of Instagram put time, effort, and consideration into the things that they are going to share with others. Humans inherently want to showcase their artistic abilities, and they strive to successfully do that via the careful staging and capturing of a particular scene. Since Instagram allows for users to share the photos they have taken with one other, it encourages and stimulates human connection via the use of imagery. People can document their lives, share their photographic art, and view other people doing the same thing on this versatile website. Photographs were not always this easy to see and share though; photography has had to come a long way to get to the level of success that it is now.

These three "big moments" have a lot in common as far as reasons that make them strikingly similar to one another. They all provided humans with a way to document and share

their lives, as well as providing them with a way to create art in a way that had never been done before. Each new development slightly changes the game as far as what can and is done to each photograph. The similarities that these moments have with each other are the key characteristics that made them successful and led us to how we know and use photography today.

Findings & Analysis

In the society we live in today, Instagram is a very popular social media site used for sharing photos (and the occasional video) to someone's followers. According to an article written by Tyler Becker (2016), he highlights some of the reasons that people use Instagram:

They use Instagram to document their lives ... they do it creatively, curating moments and artistically filtering their images to display life at its best. As Mohamed, a 19-year-old in Germany, says, Instagram is where “you have these effects available ... where you share your coolest pictures.”

In other words, Instagram is used to share visual content about your life with anyone who chooses to follow you. Humans tend to have a desire to connect with and relate to one another, and this is a way for them to do just that. People use their profiles to share photos of their family, friends, vacations, nature, artwork, pets, and so much more. This primary characteristic of Instagram is what has made it such an important moment in the history of the art and popularity of photography. Although Instagram is the most recent, there are other moments in history that have also led to similar revolutions in the way that people share content about their lives.

The means at which we capture images has come a long way since its initial development. When the Daguerreotype was first developed in 1839 it allowed for photos to be

taken and persevered for people to keep (Little, 2015). Those who could afford it would have portraits taken of them (usually to display in their homes), but Daguerreotypes were also used to photograph things such as “topographic and documentary subjects, antiquities, still lifes, natural phenomena and remarkable events” (Daguerrebase, 2017). These uses are not unlike the same uses that we have for photography currently – to capture and document our lives. Of course, back then there was no Instagram to share images through, so people could only share their pictures to a much smaller audience than Instagram offers, but nevertheless, they were still shared to an extent.

Fast-forward about sixty years and another huge advancement in the world of photography is released – the Kodak Brownie camera. This camera was marketed to people using the slogan “You press the button—we do the rest!” and it made everyone a photographer (Kodak Brownie Camera, 2016). Allowing people to easily document things on their own provided them with a way to connect and share with one another via the use of their developed photos. Not unlike the way we take and share photos today with our friends and families on Instagram, the Brownie camera was a big advancement in the way that people connected with one another, and it allowed for photography to become an everyday activity. The last “big moment” for photography was the invention and production of digital cameras. Much like the Brownie camera, these made photography easy and allowed for people to even further document their lives with a much simpler process than having to develop film and print photos. Instagram, although very different, is similar to the Brownie camera, the digital camera, and the Daguerreotype in a few important ways.

Social media—specifically Instagram—has turned heads towards photography and made it more accessible for those who wish to see and experience it. Before they had the opportunity

to showcase the photos they take on an online profile, the primary ways to view other's photos was by either seeing them in a museum or by looking at them in a homemade scrapbook.

Facebook was the first of the big social media sites to really allow for a lot of photos to be shared with others, but unlike Instagram, it is not focused so heavily on imagery. Recently, they have pushed for the inclusion of more visual content (such as photos and videos), but it still does not compare to the photo-centered layout of Instagram's interface. Their entire platform is designed for sharing photos, and the focus lies on individual photos rather than large groups of them at a time. This is different and more successful than other social media sites like Flickr, for example. On Flickr you can share mass numbers of photos at a time, and people do not usually have the attention span to click through an album with 30 (or more) photos of someone else's recent vacation. Over the years, Flickr has transitioned into more of a photo storage website, completely eliminating it from Instagram's competition. Instagram's focus on individual photos is similar to film photography in which every single photo has a monetary cost. Instagram brings back that sense of importance given to individual pictures. Until recently, you were only allowed to share one photo at a time on Instagram, so people have a tendency to put more thought and consideration into the photo they choose to post. The entire interface is designed to convey the importance of these individual photos to be recognized. The way Instagram is used and designed has really made it the jack-of-all trades when it comes to a place to share photos. Parents use it to share snapshots of their families, celebrities use it to document their lives for their fans to see, photographers use it as type of online portfolio, and college students use it as a way to express themselves. All of these modern uses for Instagram sound strangely similar to the reasons people used even the Daguerreotype photos. Humans inherently strive to connect with one another, and Instagram provides a way for them to do that through the documentation

and sharing of their lives with others. The particular characteristic of our society (one of striving for human connection) is one that will likely never change.

Although Instagram is not exactly a technological advancement in the same way that Kodak's Brownie camera was or that the digital camera was, all of these developments are similar in that they owe their success to characteristics that are present in the societies of today and of yesteryear. The desire to document and show off our lives is something that is a part of human nature, as is the desire to connect with other people. Instagram, the digital camera, the Brownie camera, and even the Daguerreotype allowed everyone to do just that. It might not be conscious, but we post things for a reason – we want people to see the things we are posting and acknowledge them by liking it or commenting on it. Our ability to show off to, share with one another, and connect through this hobby has increased in efficiency over the years. Whether or not people realize it, these big moments in the history of photography have all drastically changed the way that we look at and share photos with one another. Without these moments happening, we could still be sharing photos with our friends by hauling around scrapbooks to show them. They allowed for connections to be made among humans that previously might not have been made – people from different countries are now able to connect with one another in ways that they never could before.

Conclusion

Instagram as a social media site has changed the way we look at and interact with photographs. Much like the emergence of the Daguerreotype, the release of Kodak's Brownie cameras, and the later development of the digital camera, photography has progressed into something that just about everyone has access to so that they can now share and connect with

others using photographs as they please. Along with satisfying people's desire to see things rather than read them, these "big moments" have all provided humans with new and improved ways to connect with, share with, and showcase themselves to one another. We can now document our lives in ways that we never could before, and each new moment further streamlines the ease at which we do so. Instagram's development just allowed for all of those actions to be performed and achieved on a more heightened scale than they were before. Studying Instagram's similarities to other "big moments" in photography has allowed me to pinpoint the exact characteristics that make something a successful moment and has, in turn, allowed me to understand Instagram's significance and contribution to the world of photography. In the future, should more research be done on this topic, one might study how the types of photos taken over the years might have changed with each of these "big moments" and why those shifts in photographic design transpired. Also, studies on how money is made via photography could also be useful in further understanding why and how photography has advanced to the level of popularity that it is today (especially through any of the various social media sites).

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