

# Showing Being in the Instagrammism era with a view to Lev Manovich's views

Parastou Keshavarz<sup>1,\*</sup>, Mohammad Khodadadi Motarjemzadeh, Maryam Kahvand

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Art Research, Tehran University of Art, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Art Research, Department of Photography, Tehran University of ART, Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Art Research, Department of visual Communication, Tehran University of ART, Tehran, Iran

\*Corresponding Author: [parastou2@gmail.com](mailto:parastou2@gmail.com)

## Abstract

Among the studies conducted on the subject of Instagram in various fields of research such as media, communication and culture, Lev Manovich's research is aimed at examining the general tendency of people, especially the young generation, to photography through Instagram communication system. After reviewing the photos on Instagram, Manovich identifies a style that he calls designed style. He attributes this style of photography specifically to the period he calls Instagramism. Due to the novelty of the subject and the importance of its reflection in other interdisciplinary studies related to art, media and culture, this research tries to examine the mentioned style and its characteristics with a descriptive analytical method which has a fundamental nature in terms of purpose. The research findings show that this style, regardless of any emphasis on the elements of the image and only relying on its unique aesthetic principles, which is the result of a combination of individual choices and Instagram features, by displaying the verb (present) in situations and Transient conditions represent the identity of the Instagram period.

Keywords: Instagramism, Photography, Designed Style, Lev Manovich.

## Introduction

Today, millions of people around the world use digital cell phones and social networks to produce and share modern cultural products across a wide geography. The importance of virtual communication networks stems from the fact that the audiences of such networks are able to play a role in both consumer and producer positions (Raudrad and Gashnizjani, 2017: 261). Among the virtual social networks, Instagram is one of the networks that has become one of the most important communication systems of the last decade since its establishment (2010) due to its popularity and significant growth in terms of user attraction. An important feature of the Instagram communication system is that it is image-centric. Instagram is an instant mobile photo sharing service that quickly came to the forefront. One of the reasons for the success of this communication system is the consumption of photos and video images, which has become one of the most important social trends in virtual communication today (Hu & Others, 2014: 595).

In the book *Instagram and Contemporary Images*, Manovich highlights the importance of Instagram, in addition to aligning the network with the camera, cell phone mechanism, as well as sharing everyday images, and believes that this feature not only distinguishes Instagram from other similar visual programs, but also shows new generation of photos. In this book, after reviewing photos shared by Instagram users,

Manovich divides them into three styles: casual photos, professional photos and designed photos (Manovich, 2017: 41-42). Among them, he attributes the style of the photographs to the post-Instagram era, which he said culminated in the public's tendency to photograph through the Instagram communication system via digital cameras embedded in mobile phones. Manovich calls this period according to the characteristics of that period, Instagramism (Manovich, 2017: 71). By naming this period in the form of an ism, he not only elevates its importance to the level of a cultural and artistic movement, but also seems to consider its position alongside the intellectual movements of the twentieth century.

The importance of this new approach and its unique features led the author of this study to study the style of designed photos on Instagram to address various aspects of it. A style whose dimensions and characteristics reveal the nature of the Instagramism era in contemporary time.

On the other hand, the interdisciplinary nature of new media studies, especially Instagram, and the lack of proper research approaches to it, which often examines the subject of Instagram in a one-sided way and only by considering the researcher's area of expertise, highlights the need to address this new approach.

In line with its objectives, this research examines the mentioned style by answering the following questions.

What are the features of mobile phone camera photography?

What are the new approaches to photography today?

What is the role of mobile phone cameras in the visual culture of communities?

What kind of aesthetics do the photos shared on Instagram have?

What is the show's nature of photos on Instagram?

What are the style features of the designed photos?

What is the message of the designed photos?

What are the characteristics of the Instagramism period?

In this research, after paying attention to the importance of photography and its popular approach in the contemporary period and considering the use of photos on social networks, how to display photos on Instagram will be discussed. Then, according to Lev Manovich's views, the style of the designed photos on Instagram is studied, and the nature of the Instagramism period is described based on the characteristics of the photos of the mentioned style, and finally, conclusions are drawn based on the research findings.

## **2. Research background**

So far, many articles and books on the subject of Instagram and its features have been published in the fields of media study, culture and art in Iran and abroad, but the number of targeted researches focusing on content analysis and photo form on Instagram is limited. In Iran, various studies have been conducted on Instagram photos in art universities, especially in the field of photography at different stages.

For example, we can refer to Fatemeh Daemi's master's thesis on the subject of examining her representation in selfie photography "mobile self-portrait". This research deals with the subject of the play (self) in the form of photographic selfies in its current form.

One of the goals of the research is to study and analyze selfie photography as a pervasive genre among people in society and to find the causes of their tendency. A case study of Azadeh Hashemi and Ali Rabiee's work on the Instagram social media users is another similar study.

Elahe Farrokhi's master's dissertation entitled " Study the features and functions of family digital photo albums on photo-based social networks " is one of the other examples, the subject of which is the study of photos on Instagram. The study was conducted to investigate changes in family photos posted on Instagram and it seeks to explore whether Instagram has created a new kind of family photos or not. The author of this study claims that Instagram, as a social network with a focus on the image, has caused fundamental changes in the form and content of family photos and has created different functions for family photos and albums.

Sara Zandvakili's master's thesis entitled "Analyzing the Personal Photos of Users in Virtual Social Networks" is another study that, although it studies the approach of photographs on the social network Facebook, is a valuable study in its own right in 2011. The author seeks to explain a pattern for the structural and intertextual analysis of personal photographs in the media context. The research findings identify four functional, memory, motivational, and communication functions for these images based on the explained pattern.

Unfortunately, most of the research conducted in Iran with social, cultural and artistic approaches, without considering the characteristics of Instagram and entering into interdisciplinary discussions, have analyzed the photos of this network and its effects on culture and artistic currents. On the other hand, by limiting the choice of photos to titles such as selfies, self-expression, family photos, advertisements, etc., they have inadvertently strayed from the mainstream of Instagram's photo approach, which is capturing snapshots and sharing experiences.

Outside of Iran, however, the situation looks better, and examples with more appropriate approaches can be found. For example, a study by Julia Deep et al. Called selfies - self-expression in everyday Instagram photos. The visual display of Instagram Nadav Hochman and Raz Schwartz is another study that aims to uncover cultural signs by analyzing photos on Instagram.

In 2015, Yolinde Meijers presented a study entitled Instagramming Nostalgia. This research continues the trend of past photography styles in certain periods of history and re-represents them in Instagram photos, and points to the stylistic and content continuity of photos from the past to the present.

But the most important authoritative source that is completely in line with the current research approach and the theoretical foundations of the research are based on it, is the book Instagram and Contemporary Photographs by Lev Manovich, which was mentioned earlier. The book is the only study on Instagram to share photos with an artistic and historical approach to twentieth-century art movements in photography. After dividing Instagram photos into three styles, the book compares them to similar peers in the twentieth century.

The author of this study, however, take a more comprehensive look at the style of designed photos on Instagram, and in the process, avoid choosing photos with conventional titles such as selfies, self-expression, etc. on the one hand, and also relying on Lev Manovich's studies. In the book Instagram and Contemporary images, on the other hand, and also considering the interdisciplinary nature of studying photos on Instagram, which includes the fields of study of the visual arts, media, culture and technology.

### **3. Theoretical foundations**

#### **Photography (unprofessional)**

Today, the trend towards digital photography and the emergence of social media is not only what photos are taken, but also an approach that is important in the social impact of images and in the process of collecting, managing and publishing images at the societies. The high performance of digital camera-enabled phones, along with the capabilities of the Internet, photo editing programs, and social media, has not only increased the trend toward photography among the community, but has made photography the most effective medium.

Since digital camera images, especially those embedded in mobile smartphones, play a crucial role in the high volume of interactions people have today in the form of shared images, they are clearly of great importance in shaping the visual culture of societies.

According to Popova, From the invention of photography as a search phenomenon to the presence of the mass media, photography today has a significant impact on the creation of visual culture in the digital age. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of digital photography and social media is recording and publishing everyday life (Popova, 2013, website). Bennet states that the "improvisational" feature of everyday life has made it a valuable subject for social research (Bennet, 2014: 7), especially since photography has made it possible to see the most visible manifestation of this phenomenon, and of course the importance of this issue. Given the importance of this group of photographs being taken by the people themselves and by pocket cameras, it is even more so.

From its inception, photography has always sought to consolidate real status and gain authority among other forms of media, and this demand seems to have materialized today in the 21st century. The integration of mobile phones with cameras and easy access to social networks has made digital photography the most important cultural product. It is safe to say that in no other era, such as the modern era, has the distance between photography and the public been so close. Today, photography, both with a realistic approach and with an artistic or commercial approach, has moved away from the monopoly of professional photographers and has taken a public and consumerist approach in all three areas.

Until the advent of digital photography, or mobile photography, the general public is the only passive audience for photographs, or only in the field of photography, but they are now considered as mobile photographers looking for something to look forward to. They come back for their photos. In 1935, Laszlo Moholy Nagy states that in the future, the illiterate are not those who do not know the pen, but those who do not know the camera are considered illiterate (Dandis, 2007: 15). That promised future seems to have come true today.

Today, thanks to technology, media photography is on the move, so in the nature of its images, one can feel a form of fluidity and floating. In addition to enabling people to produce images directly at any time and at any time, this feature also enables them to instantly attach and store their emotions and gaze to the image.

In other words, these images are displayed according to their expiration date and have their own effects. Also in this era, photography has become such a powerful tool that people prefer to validate their experiences with images to talk about it.

The most important result and achievement of the connection between photography and the people, apart from the increase in the general visual literacy of the people, is the entry of purity and simplicity in the

photographs. It seems that the recording of reality, which has been one of the most important goals of photography in the past, has taken on more of the color and smell of reality during this period, and has separated itself from its cold and dry form. Is taken and defined.

### **View photos on Instagram**

The shape and style of photography on Instagram is largely influenced by the mobile feature of the phone. Easy-to-use, moving, and ubiquitous mobile phone cameras seem to have introduced new values and definitions into the field. This efficient device, although initially considered technologically unique, has in fact become part of a belief system, a system that has even affected the way we look at everyday life. They capture images that were not previously thought to be worth recording.

The mobile phone's camera captures Bennet's improvised feature for everyday life and displays it through communication systems such as Instagram. It can be said that the photography style on Instagram is improvised style. However, Manovich cites the Shutter Stack website as more than just defining or attributing a particular style to this form of photography, he rightly considers simplicity and purity to be the most important features of Instagram photos. (Manovich, 2017: 9).

Of course, it is important to note here that although the improvisational feature can be attributed to Instagram images, but it seems that Instagram users in showing their style and topics of choice not accidentally and without purpose, but consciously from a visual language that They belong to the contemporary era. It can be said that showing beauty at the same time has become the visual language of Instagram users. The important point to note here is the influence of simplicity and originality, or in other words, purity, which includes not only everyday images, but also the overall infrastructure governing the variety of images on Instagram.

Manovich also points to a particular form of aesthetics that can be seen in Instagram images by applying various filters, square boxes, display environments, and more. Of course, he does not consider this form of aesthetics to be an artistic feature, but rather explains it as a feature of the products and services provided on Instagram. This is why he believes that "aesthetic society is not the same as The society of the spectacle of Guy Debord" (Manovich, 2017: 117) because "The behavior that the show demands is passive acceptance, which it has already acquired by the way it appears to be irreplaceable, by making appearances its monopoly" (Debord, 2019: 62).

However, images on Instagram not only do not behave passively, but with each appearance, they add their own unique aesthetics to what appears to be necessary, and they themselves become a reference point for other images. On the other hand, "showing is something that is beyond the scope of human activity and reviewing and correcting their actions. The show is anti-dialogue" (Debord, 2019: 64).

Given the feature that Deborah attributes to the show's community, does this apply to Instagram users? Don't Instagram users have control over what they display (share) and what is displayed? Is what is displayed on Instagram anti-speech? Because the Instagram Foundation is based on displaying instant snapshots (Hochman & Schwartz, 2012: 3) and since "snapshots are practically used as an excuse to talk, recall memories, and comment" (Wells, 2014: 358). Therefore, it can not be claimed that displaying photos on Instagram is anti-dialogue. On the other hand, Manovich considers the activity and role of users on Instagram so important that he refers to them as "knowledge workers in a knowledge society" (Manovich, 2017: 117).

Of course, it is worth mentioning that although the society of spectacle on Instagram does not fit in Debord's the society of spectacle, Instagram and the photos that are displayed in it, are examples of the same community that Debord and her group of like-minded people wanted to achieve. It means a society in which "there is no separation between everyday life and art" means "art should no longer be a report and description of sensitivities but should be the direct creation and organization of sensitivities" (Debord, 2019: 18) and this is the same. It is an approach that can be seen in the display of photos on Instagram.

#### **4. Research method**

This research examines the style of designed photos on Instagram with a descriptive analytical method that has a fundamental nature in terms of purpose (Rasman and Marshall, 2016). Theoretical foundations of the research are based on the methods of inference and logical analysis based on library studies, and the theoretical foundations of the research are based on the views of Lev Manovich in *Instagram and contemporary images*.

Also, the theoretical approach chosen for the present study can only be applied through interdisciplinary studies.

The photographs used in the study were also purposefully selected based on the selection and display criteria of the designed photographs by Manovich.

It should be noted that the author of this study, by selecting the mentioned style photos from the photos of Iranian Instagram users, only seek to compare this style of photos with the selected samples by Manovich and show their objective example to the readers of the present study.

#### **5. Style of designed photos**

In general, Manovich categorizes shared Instagram photos into three casual (non-professional), professional, and designed styles. He describes a wide range of photographs in his studies (Manovich, 2017: 50).

It should be noted that among the three mentioned styles, he considers the designed style to belong to the period which he calls Instagramism. According to him, this style of photography is the result of people's general tendency towards this social network, as well as the nature and structure of Instagram.

This style of photography on Instagram, in addition to having modern photography features, also benefits from the principles and rules of graphic design (Figures 2 and 1). These images are consciously edited, arranged, and staged (Manovich, 2017: 67).

Of course, it is important to note here that although, according to Manovich, this method of directing the shooting scene is done quite consciously, its importance lies in its improvisation. In other words, the photographer appears without prior intention and knowledge of the situation on the stage, and from the available elements and situations, selects the desired frame and captures his / her favorite photo.

Manovich also calls this style of photography, which is more popular among young Instagram users, a poetic design style (Manovich, 2017: 85). He attributes this style of photography to the Instagram era and believes that in this style, the aesthetic features of two-dimensional design and modern photography (photography + design) have been combined (Manovich, 2017: 71).

Since in this style of photography, none of the technical features of photography such as lens selection, etc, aspects of image aesthetics such as attention to composition, background selection, choice of colors

and forms, as well as subject selection and scene elements ... are not superior to each other , thus, it is not possible to consider specific features for this form of photography as in other styles, they must be accepted and considered in the form of a general board. Therefore, it can be said that this style is a different and unique style.

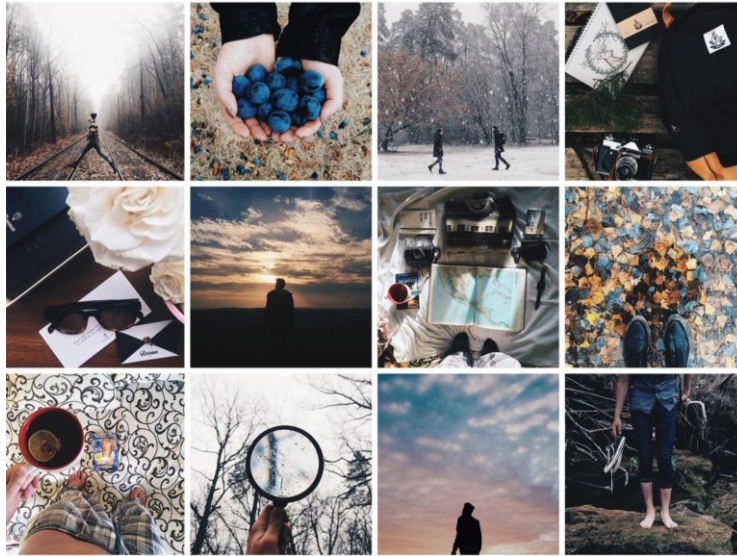


Figure 1; Examples of lightweight photos designed on Instagram (Manovich , 2017: 44).

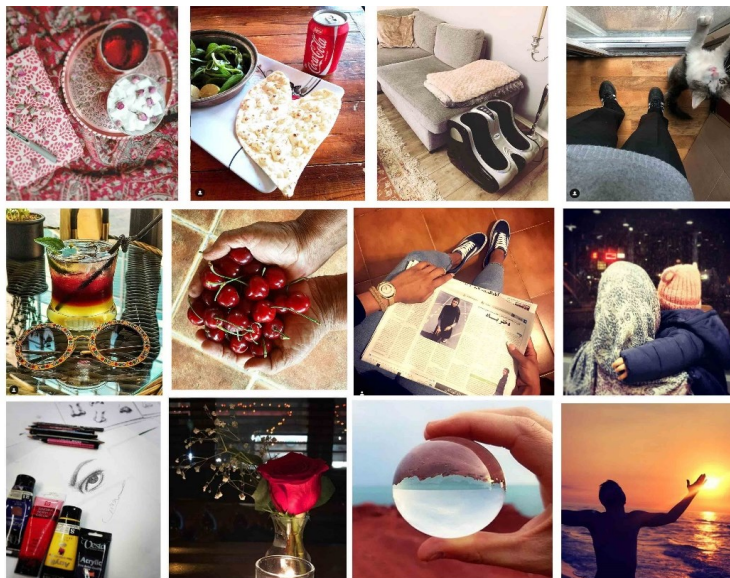


Figure 2 ; Sample of lightly designed photos shared by Iranian Instagram users (Instagram.com).

According to Manovich, this style of photography first appeared in advertising photography in the 1930s and (graphic designs) (Figures 3 and 4), then in the 1990s with the ability to Photoshop in the works of graphic designers and its software-developed form. Creating special effects can be seen in animated images, and now this style is once again in photos shared by millions of regular (non-professional) Instagram users, it has been around since 2010.





Figure 3; Sample promotional photos of the thirties AD (harvardmagazine.com)



Figure 4; Sample advertising graphic designs of the thirties AD (alamy.com)

In fact, the media form of this style is a combination of photography and design techniques that, by displaying the subject matter, represent a particular form of sensitivity, tendency, and visual theme (Manovich, 2017: 73). Manovich considers the combined form of these photos to be specific to the Instagram era. The period he calls Instagramism.

As Manovich approaches the style of photography on Instagram and their familiar boundaries diminish, it can be said that sometimes one can identify photographs with the theme of everyday life or fashion that have very close boundaries to the style he calls poetic design. Although images of this style of photography are not unlike commercial or fashion photography, they do not directly address a specific topic and do not pursue financial goals.

In this form of photography, the display of space, atmosphere, and conditions is more important than the objects and things depicted in the photographs. He points out that the differences are insignificant, but emphasizes that there are very close and intangible boundaries that alone can be an important indicator of the performance of today's culture (Manovich, 2017: 85-86). In other words, in an era where the pace of change is much faster than in the past, people tend to promote these diverse and small changes rather than looking for something different and notable.

## 6. Instagramism

Given the public's tendency to photograph and the desire to share photos posted on Instagram and the growth of the network in a very short time, as well as the emergence of a particular form of aesthetics that can be seen in the photos of millions of users of this network, Manovich After the advent of Instagram, history calls it the era of Instagramism.

From Manovich's point of view, Instagramism, like other isms, while presenting its own visual language, represents its view of the world, except that its nature is shaped by millions of users and contributors, not



just by a particular group or class (Manovich, 2017: 115). In other words, If in the past the values based on the aesthetics of lifestyles belonged to the ruling and wealthy class of society, in the period of Instagramism these values belong to all the people who are members of Instagram.

Users who, in the role of members of an artistic civic movement, do not even imagine their moments outside of this flow, Manovich says, While Renaissance artists draw perspectives in an off-stage situation, Instagram users are more in the scene than ever before (Manovich, 2017: 125) and immersed in Experiences become moments and situations. He also points out that the period of Instagramism underwent many changes in its structure as an ism (Manovich, 2017: 115), while modern twentieth-century movements accept change only in the form of new isms.

In the age of Instagramism, people seem to use the same facilities and equality to produce their visual products, but this alignment does not prevent them from being able to display their unique identities and tendencies in photographs. In other words, Instagram can help the process of personalizing people's identities and cultural values more than any other time. Today, photography, especially through the Instagram system, gives young people the opportunity to display their unique identities. All they have to do is choose a subject for their photos, and then they can use Instagram's features and filters to shape it (Manovich, 2017: 89).

Manovich considers the desire to imitate and copy in the period of Instagramism as another feature of this period and believes that this tendency not only does not reduce the value of users' work but also gives them credibility (Manovich, 2017: 134), in fact, it is a real and true thing that they feel, not what the rules or do's and don'ts of art, culture and society dictate. Instagram's professional users do not follow the rules of how to take good photos, but rather to turn restrictions into opportunities, and use all the features of Instagram in this way.

In this period, it is not appropriate to use attributes attributed to culture, such as top, bottom, subculture, or public culture, which indicate class differences in societies, because Instagram is present in a larger global stream, in the digital age, and this is the current trend. According to Manovich, it follows the principles of twentieth-century aesthetics and offers a new style of aesthetics. Emphasizing the special aesthetic form of this period, Manovich considers it to be derived from mental states expressed in free and arbitrary choices (Manovich, 2017: 118).

An important issue he calls the message of the Instagramism era. In the age of Instagram, there is a new form of freedom and equality in which people, regardless of their social or political status, can take advantage of Instagram and display their cultural products. In such a society, video production and sharing experiences, along with user-selected styles and the patterns they use to interact with other people and groups of like-minded people, are essential to their economic and social performance.

## **7. Results**

a. By studying the style of designed photographs, the first thing that becomes apparent is its autonomous and independent nature compared to other photographic styles and art in general. They do not seem to follow the rules and principles of any familiar style of art and photography that is common in the twentieth century. The style of the designed photographs transcends defined boundaries or, by moving between their positions, depicts a particular form of civic sensibility. In fact, these photographs follow the principles and rules of another field, which belongs to the form and aesthetics of the contemporary era. This course has been emerging since 2010 with the advent of Instagram. In general, in this course, the

aesthetic form of photos is a combination of free choices along with taking advantage of the features provided on Instagram, such as various filters, square boxes, and so on.

B. As can be seen in Figures (1 and 2), the subject of the designed photographs is not limited to a specific space or spectrum of objects. In fact, Instagram users use ready-made products to create their visual products. Nor do they seem to be looking to show or create a new concept. In other words, photographers of this genre are, of course, present and create their work without any previous plans or ideas, and share it after applying the rules of aesthetics based on Instagram features.

J. Also, by viewing the photos (Figures 1 and 2), we can enumerate the formal and content features of the photos of this style as follows: Using flat and perspectiveless surfaces, considering different parts of the body (hands, feet, fingers, etc.) in the frame, showing spaces Empty and without details, showing a part of the body while in the corner of the frame and the desire to use diagonal combinations and unconventional angles.

D. In the designed style, the focus of the image is not on its constituent elements (humans or objects), in other words, there is no particular emphasis on the components of the scene. Rather, as Manovich points out, it is more indicative of space, atmosphere, position, and expresses the mental state of the photographer and the aesthetic values of the image. In this style, the components of the image all pursue a common goal, which is to reach the stage, which shows the photographer's attention to a particular subject, when stopping at a particular station, which, of course, can also reflect the mental state of the photographer. Also, in the design photos, it is not important to tell a story and to set a specific topic as in conventional photography.

e. It seems that in the era of Instagram, freedom and equality are the most important principles in the framework of the instructions of this contemporary movement. Instagram users during this period will not be allowed to stay locked up and be required to follow the rules within specified and pre-defined boundaries. During this period, despite the facilities and the same services that Instagram provides to its users, the opportunity to provide unique identities and attitudes for each user is provided. They create photos with free choices and with the help of networking features, which are like the author's signature on the foot of the work.

## **8. Conclusion**

The speed of operation of smartphones and their built-in cameras, along with the capabilities of the Internet and social networks, has made photography re-emerging not only as a hobby but also as a means of producing culture. In other words, in contemporary times, the importance of photography is due to the value and cultural-social impact of its recorded images. This dominant language of communication, which has been welcomed by the people, has led to the emergence of new cultural approaches.

The ease of photography and its convergence with mobile phone technology as an inseparable object from individuals has brought photography and people closer together. The result of this link is the daily reflection of people in digital photographs, which in turn has made purity and simplicity the most important feature of contemporary photography.

With the advent of Instagram as a popular communication system and its addition to the rise of digital cameras and mobile phones, it is possible to publish simplicity and purity in the form of photos with the theme of everyday display on Instagram. A society that offers a new definition of spectacle. Unlike Debord's the society of spectacle, Instagram is not only passive, but its life depends on the efforts of its

members. In this society, beauty is produced and displayed. In this society, all the moments shown in life are full of procreation and creation. Simply put, in the Instagram community, art cannot be separated from life.

Among the photos displayed on Instagram, there is a style that is clearly derived from the Instagram era. The style that Lev Manovich calls style of designed photography. Studying this style of photos on Instagram reveals an important point. The characteristics of this category of photographs do not fall within the framework and rules of any of the styles of photographic history. While they do not follow the principles of professional photography, they do not seem amateurish or unprofessional and can not be considered clear in terms of form, content and approach.

In this style, the image components disappear in the specific representation process of these images. Therefore, there is no special attention, emphasis or emphasis on the components of the scene. They don't even mention a specific topic. Instagram photographers select their ideas from current moments and situations and display them at the same time. Photographers of this genre are not afraid to show whatever they belong to in life, and they do not feel the need to respond to critics.

photographers of designed style, emphasizing the act of (being present) in different situations, share their special moments and feelings in space and time with other people and prefer to follow only their own aesthetic principles instead of following social and artistic principles and rules. Enjoy the simplicity and purity of the display. They are not looking to create something extraordinary and original, and they are usually happy with familiar and even trivial things.

Given what has been said, the most important purpose of designed photos can only be showing (be present) being. A show that is the product of stopping at different stations in everyday life. In other words, for Instagram photographers, being in every moment of the day is the most important subject, and success in showing it is the greatest mission.

Obviously, this form of being displayed gains credibility from the fluid nature of mobile cameras. Instagram photographers use their pocket cameras, which today can be considered part of the human body, to portray and confirm their existence at any time and in any place. Finally, being in the moment and keeping up with the flow of life is the most important achievement that the Instagram era gives to its fans.

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