

Brands and Instagram: Point, Tap, Swipe, Glance

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Short summary

Instagram is an image machine brands use to capture and calibrate attention in intimate and urban space.

Abstract

Brands are a critical part of the ongoing experimentation that underpins the development of mobile social media platforms like Instagram. Instagram had no dedicated advertising or analytics tools until 2014 so, in the absence of such devices, brands have developed uses of the platform that engage with the productive ability of cultural intermediaries and consumers to create and circulate images of their bodies, everyday lives and cultural practices. This article examines the Instagram activities of the global vodka brand Smirnoff and the fashion retailer General Pants. Each brand engages with cultural intermediaries and builds themed activations at cultural events to orchestrate the production of images. Following Wissinger's (2007a) study of fashion models, we conceptualize Instagram as an image machine that captures and calibrates attention. Instagram expands the terrain upon which brands operate by dispersing the work of creating and engaging with images into consumers' everyday lives. The efforts made by brands to experiment with mobile media demonstrate the need to critically examine how participatory, discursive and algorithmic modes of control are interrelated.

Keywords

Introduction

Critical accounts of branding over the past decade have illustrated how brands rely on the content and data that consumer participation generates on social media platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2008; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). The aim of this article is to extend accounts of brands as ongoing social processes embedded within cultural life by conceptualizing the process of open-ended innovation undertaken by brands on Instagram. When Facebook purchased Instagram for \$1 billion in 2012, the platform generated no advertising revenue but brands were extensively engaging with users via individual accounts. Since late 2014, selected brands have been able to pay for sponsored posts targeted at specific users. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram has never gone through a period of attempting to demarcate advertising from other content on the platform. The majority of brand activity on the platform remains native in the sense that it uses the same conventions, tools, and devices as the content generated by all other actors on the platform. Instagram's emerging paid advertising model is one that aims to enhance the native activities already developed by brands. Drawing on the activities of the fashion retailer General Pants and the global vodka brand Smirnoff, we argue that brands use Instagram as a device for organizing the activity of cultural intermediaries and consumers, and that accounts of brand-building labor on social media need to take account of the promotional and reconnaissance work of these consumers and cultural intermediaries. Users promote brands by incorporating them into narratives about their lives, and they undertake reconnaissance by generating streams of data that enable media platforms to respond to them.

Our account of brands' use of Instagram to create value without any dedicated advertising or analytics tools makes three contributions. First, it conceptualizes Instagram as an "image machine" (Wissinger, 2007a, 2007b) that harnesses the continuous and habitual use of mobile devices to scroll, tap, and glance at a never-ending flow of images. Second, the article examines the self-presentation of consumers and cultural intermediaries, thus making a contribution to debates about identity, gender, and the branded self (Hearn 2008; Wissinger 2007a, 2007b; Banet-Weiser, 2012) by arguing that users not only reproduce brands' preferred depictions of bodies, but also make their bodies available to the increasingly calculative nature of these media platforms. Third, we explore the use of Instagram to channel and orchestrate uses of real-world cultural spaces. This brings together accounts of the extensive use of cultural space by brands (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Moor, 2003) with the calculative nature of mobile media devices and platforms. Focusing on the relationships between these activities, it is argued that mobile media platforms enable brands to extend the forms of attention and action they appropriate.

Instagram as an Image Machine

Branding on Instagram relies on the active participation of users, who present their bodies as images. In this section, we use Wissinger's (2007a, 2007b) account of modeling as affective labor to conceptualize Instagram as an "image machine." Wissinger (2007a) describes fashion modelling as the work of "being (and being assisted to be) open to interaction with technologies, such as photography, that channel attention." The "interaction between information machines and living organisms" that Wissinger identifies in the play between models and photography offers a useful starting point for understanding Instagram as an "attention capture and calibration device" (Wissinger, 2007a, p. 235).

The capacity of fashion models to give and receive attention is channeled into the fashion industry's apparatus for producing and distributing images. The model poses and the photographer captures images. Images are then selected, framed, cropped, filtered, and edited before being distributed via magazines, television, stores, and billboards. The model and the photographer affect one another with the intention of creating images that will in turn affect viewers. Affect flows "between bodies," in an "unpredictable process that is difficult to control" (Wissinger, 2007b, p. 262). Here, affect is understood as an open-ended, social and pre-individual capacity to attract attention and stimulate bodily responses (Clough, 2007). Specific affects may be narrated or qualified as part of the performance of particular emotions, meanings, and identities. In the first instance, though, they depend on the embodied capacity to channel attention. The subjects, producers, and consumers of images are affective laborers, who interrelate in an ongoing effort to give and gain attention from each other.

Instagram, combined with the smartphone on which it runs, is an image machine that stimulates and captures the productive activity of producing, circulating, and attending to images. Like fashion models and photographers (Wissinger 2007; Author 2014a), Instagram users' affective labor has two facets. First, the production of images involves individuals affecting one another. They make judgments about how to capture, edit, and circulate images of their lived experience. Second, they watch flows of images and modify them by scrolling, liking, and commenting. Both activities are valuable forms of engagement on the platform. Furthermore, Instagram expands the array of aspects of everyday life that become organized in relation to flows of images. Instagram's architecture of affecting enables spaces like clubs, cultural events, bedrooms, bathrooms, and other locations where bodies and web-connected smartphones appear to become sites where affect is released, channelled, and directed. For example, as a consumer puts on clothes they have bought from a fashion retailer in the privacy of their own bedroom, takes a selfie and posts it to Instagram with the brand hashtag, their bedroom and body

becomes part of the promotional apparatus of the brand. Instagram enables market relations to form through everyday life and cultural space around the production and circulation of images.

Instagram's capacity to calibrate affect is interdependent with the smartphone and its in-built devices: the camera, the touch screen, and the web connection are used to capture, manipulate and upload images by pointing, tapping, cropping, filtering, and swiping. The portability and habitual use of the smartphone within everyday life enables Instagram to extend the role played by images in the stimulation, capture, and modulation of attention. Where the work of fashion modelling requires interaction between cultural intermediaries in bounded industrial settings, Instagram and the smartphone disperse the work of calibrating flows of affect in everyday life.

Engagement can take the form of likes and comments, but also pauses on particular images, tapping on hashtags, or visiting individual accounts. Likes and comments also make images visible to people elsewhere in the network, interjecting images into customised flows of content. Instagram iteratively develops devices to calculate and modulate these forms of engagement. The app has a combination of curated and algorithmically generated feeds of images. The "home" feed is a stream of images curated by users, based on the accounts they follow. The "explore" feed is algorithmically generated, based on images and accounts that are popular in a user's network or region. Over time, Instagram has developed the sophistication of the "explore" feed algorithm to be more responsive to individual users. Users can also generate a flow of images in the explore feed by searching for a hashtag, a kind of "manual" algorithm whereby users collectively code and assemble a flow of images by adding hashtags to them.

The flows of images on Instagram are live and ephemeral. Images receive most attention within the first several hours of being posted, and then mostly disappear from view. Users navigate flows of images by scrolling through the stream, using their finger on the smartphone touch screen. This is a material, habitual, and interstitial practice. Users might scroll back a short or a long distance. They might scroll so quickly that only the account names show up, as images whiz by underneath. As users bounce back to the top of the feed, it refreshes, displaying the most recent images that have been uploaded. Users typically scroll in both directions, down a certain distance, then bouncing to the top of the feed to bring new images into the flow, then down again until they reach images they have already seen, prompting them to bounce the top of the feed again. This might go until the intervals between bounces for new images become so short that attention is diverted – perhaps by another app and its flows of content or something happening around them. The flow of images is live and unending in both directions. The speed of the flow is dependent on the productivity of users within that feed. Users access a momentary position in whatever stream they are engaged with.

As consumers in late-capitalist societies are exposed to expanding flows of images, the quality of their attention changes (Wissinger, 2007a, p. 235). Users tap in and out of the flow with their mobile devices as they go about their daily lives. Older images are rendered invisible as the stream updates; they cannot be found by searching or saving a link. Wissinger (2007b, p. 265) theorizes a shift in contemporary visual culture from a “cinematic gaze,” in which viewers relate to subject positions within constructed narratives, to an ephemeral, sensational, and instantaneous “televisual glance.” The glance is momentary, non-narrative, and repetitive. Instagram is a media device designed for glancing, directed by the swiping and tapping of the user’s finger on the screen of their smartphone. The continuous flow and small size of the images seem to work against the possibility that the content could be open to contemplative viewing. The insertion of each individual image or short video into a potentially endless number of differently curated or algorithmically generated feeds of content works against the possibility of users constructing a narrative. Moments of fleeting interest, affect, and desire are generated from a constant pulling and pushing at individually customized feeds of images. The images circulated on Instagram are softly and persistently promotional in character, as users seek attention from one another. The composition of images, use of filters and hashtags, and time and space from which the image is sent are each oriented toward catching a glance.

Wissinger continues to develop the historical development of image technologies, documenting a shift from the televisual ‘frame-jumping’ glance to the digitized ‘pixilated blink’ (Wissinger 2015). While both are characterised by speed and volatility, in a ‘blink regime’ new ‘techniques of attention’ emerge (Wissinger 2013, 2015). The blink regime tends toward the continuous transformation of the body in pursuit of evolving limits and ideals rather than the standardisation of the body against predetermined criteria. Rather than adherence to a set norm the blink requires cultural intermediaries and consumers to participate in an ongoing process of bodily optimisation. In this regime media technologies exert control by engaging consumers in endless loops of body work that both produce forms of calculable attention and embed the construction of the self within market processes (Wissinger 2013).

The following sections describe the activities of Smirnoff and General Pants on Instagram. Using these two brands as an instructive case, we develop an account of how Instagram works as an image machine that brands use to harness our capacity to affect one another by producing images of our bodies, identities, and everyday lives.

Examining Smirnoff and General Pants Hashtags on Instagram

The predominant mode of branding on Instagram involves interaction between brands, cultural intermediaries, and consumers who follow each other, like, and comment on images, and create

hashtags that group images together around particular tastes, identities, cultural events, and practices. While from 2014 onwards Instagram began to gradually allow specially chosen brands to experiment with promoted posts in users' feeds, and offered analytics to brands, these features are only incrementally being rolled out on the platform. In the analysis that follows, we examine images circulating under four brand-created hashtags: General Pants' #generalpants and #gpwetedream and Smirnoff's #doubleblackhouse and #vipublic. Examining a flow of images under a hashtag enables us to describe the interaction between brands, cultural intermediaries and consumers. Our analysis examines a sequence of 100 images on each brand hashtag. The length of the sequence depends on the frequency of posts. #gpwetedream and #vipublic each generated over 100 images in a day, #generalpants generated 100 images over the course of a week, while #doubleblackhouse generated 100 images over the course of several weeks. We coded the images to determine the producer of the image (brand, consumer or cultural intermediary), the gender of any bodies depicted in the images, and the engagement with the images in likes and comments.

This analysis of the images was complemented by a critical examination of the way the images were interrelated with cultural events, retail spaces, and the brand's online presence. We attended the Smirnoff brand activation at Splendour in the Grass in 2014, from which the #vipublic images were created; examined the use of consumers' images in General Pants stores and online catalogues; and examined online and trade press accounts of each of the campaigns of which the hashtags were a part. The purpose of this descriptive analysis was to determine who produced images under brand hashtags, whose bodies appeared in those images, and where the images were produced. From this description, we develop a critical analysis of the role played by self-presentation and real-world brand activations in brand-building on Instagram. Like Marwick's (2015) study of Instafamous accounts, the goal of this study is not to collect a representative sample of Instagram brand hashtags, but rather to examine the practices employed by two brands around hashtags in order to develop an explanatory and critical account of how branding functions on the platform.

Smirnoff

Smirnoff is a global vodka brand owned by the global distributor Diageo, which has been an innovator in the use of social and mobile media (Author 2014b). We focus here on two examples of Smirnoff leveraging real-world brand activation using Instagram. "Activation" is the marketing industry term for the real-world spaces created by brands to embed themselves within cultural events and practices. The activation process has developed over the past 20 years as part of culturally embedded branding strategies aimed at influencing peer leaders at

such cultural events as music festivals and club nights. Activations are critically important to the way brands produce content for social media platforms like Instagram. They are a device for organizing consumers and cultural intermediaries to produce flows of images that connect together brand iconography and experiences with cultural events and identities.

The Double Black House and Smirnoff Cocktail Bar brand activations are both examples of purpose-built visually rich environments that reflect the brand's imagery. Double Black House was an all-black house featuring brand iconography and performances by bands and DJs. The Smirnoff Cocktail Bar was a purpose-built two-storey bar at the Splendour in the Grass music festival, featuring performances by DJs. Smirnoff invited such cultural intermediaries as musicians, celebrities, writers, fashion models, stylists, and bloggers to both venues to party. The cultural intermediaries and consumers then posted images from each activation using hashtags like #doubleblackhouse and #vipublic. These hashtags were displayed on screens and marketing collateral in the venues. The activation is a "set" or "stage" for the production of brand images. As consumers and cultural intermediaries at brand activations post images via their own social media accounts, they attract the attention of their own followers. Their use of hashtags places the brand within a wider flow of images related to their own bodies and identities.

Smirnoff's creation of real-world activations provides a useful illustration of brands stimulating the creation of content for Instagram within a purpose-built cultural space. In Australia, a number of other alcohol brands have used similar strategies. The use of Instagram by alcohol brands presents challenges for public health researchers and policy-makers attempting to regulate alcohol marketing (Author 2014b). Instagram appears to be especially useful in terms of the efforts of alcohol brands to create forms of branding that are coextensive with the mediation of drinking culture by consumers.

General Pants

General Pants is an Australian retail clothing brand selling urban streetwear, which has an established history of culturally embedded and participatory branding. This includes running programs for emerging artists and musicians. The creative efforts of these aspiring artists position General Pants within the cultural world of their target market (Author 2011). This section examines images circulated under two hashtags. General Pants encourages consumers to use #generalpants to post images of themselves wearing the retailer's clothes, periodically offering gift vouchers to consumers who post using the hashtag. On the company's website and in its stores, consumers are encouraged to use the hashtag whenever they upload images of themselves in General Pants clothing to social media networks. General Pants uses images that

consumers have tagged with #generalpants as promotional material on its website and in-store. The second hashtag is one of a number of event-specific hashtags used by the brand. #gpwetdream was used to catalogue images of a summer swimwear launch where General Pants set up a large blow-up waterslide and had models in swimwear slide down it while DJs entertained. The activity on both these hashtags builds on the variety of relationships fostered by General Pants with cultural intermediaries and consumers over the past decade around fashion, music, and popular culture.

Both Smirnoff and General Pants are innovative brands with a long history of experimentation with participatory and culturally embedded activities and media technologies. Each offers an instructive example of the use of “native” modes of branding on Instagram that are interconnected with the broader mediation of cultural life on the platform. Each brand also demonstrates how mobile social media activity is interrelated with the larger media infrastructure that brands develop by engaging with cultural intermediaries and cultural events.

Cultural Intermediaries and Engagement

For each hashtag, the most images are produced by cultural intermediaries (see Table 1). Cultural intermediaries and consumers together significantly outweigh the number of images produced by brands. Under all hashtags, the analysis demonstrates that cultural intermediaries (and, to a lesser extent, consumers) are important to the production of both content and engagement. Marwick’s (2015) analysis of Instafame offers a way of conceptualising the activity of cultural intermediaries on Instagram. In the social media economy the creative labour or activity of cultural intermediaries is bound up with their identity, taste and appearance. Their practices of self-presentation and creation of networks generates value for media platforms, brands and events they are associated with. Cultural intermediaries often occupy a precarious position in the cultural industries generating value in the form of attention but not income and being subject to constantly changing professional and cultural circumstances. Marwick (2015: 156) argues that Instafamous cultural intermediaries are “more edgy than mainstream celebrities but still rely on aesthetic display and are aspirational for a particular segment of followers concerned with cutting edge cool”. In this study, the cultural intermediaries engaged on brand hashtags include musicians, DJs, photographers, stylists, fashion bloggers, designers, artists, and models. In the case of General Pants, we also include the company’s retail staff, who are employed on the basis of their “fit” with the brand’s style.

Table 1: Engagement with images

	Brand hashtag			
Engagement (likes plus comments)	#generalpants	#gpwetdream	#doubleblackhouse	#vipublic

Total average engagement	531.84	260.74	51.42	250.3
Brand average engagement	966.57	1,343.30	21.14	46
	27,064 engagements from 28 images	17,463 engagements from 13 images	148 engagements from 7 images	184 engagements from 4 images
Cultural intermediaries average engagement	588.97	98.97	106.72	335.9
	25,326 engagements from 43 images	8,611 engagements from 87 images	4,589 engagements from 43 images	24,189 engagements from 72 images
Consumers average engagement	27.3	0	8.1	27.2
	755 engagements from 29 images	-	405 engagements from 50 images	680 engagements from 25 images

Conceptualizing engagement as the combination of likes plus comments is a standard marketing industry practice. Engagement is significant because each interaction with an image generates data that makes the image available in wider flows of content on the platform. Posts on the General Pants brand account generate more engagement on average than posts by intermediaries and consumers, while under the Smirnoff hashtags, posts by intermediaries generate the most engagement. This is because Smirnoff posts so few images under its hashtags (possibly due to regulatory restrictions), whereas General Pants is an active producer of brand content. Cultural intermediaries spread engagement across a range of different accounts, making the brand hashtag more likely to be interjected into a greater range of users' feeds. Cultural intermediaries increase both the amount of engagement and its extent across the platform's networks.

For all hashtags, the top 30 images produce, on average, 93% of engagement (see Table 2). With the exception of #generalpants, cultural intermediaries produce the majority of these highly engaging images. For #vipublic, average engagement for the top 10 images alone accounts for 94.63% of engagement. This is primarily driven by the celebrities and micro-celebrities invited by the brand to party in a themed activation and luxury house at the music festival.

Table 2: Engagement with top 30 images

Brand hashtag	Engagement	Top 30 images	Producers
#generalpants	Average engagement	1,706.13	18 produced by brand
	% of total engagement	96.23	12 produced by intermediaries
#gpwtdream	Average engagement	775.20	12 produced by brand
	% of total engagement	89.12	18 produced by intermediaries
#doubleblackhouse	Average engagement	156.63	4 produced by brand
	% of total engagement	91.38	20 produced by intermediaries 6 produced by consumers

#vipublic	Average engagement	825.80	4 produced by brand
	% of total engagement	98.88	16 produced by intermediaries 10 produced by consumers
Average all hashtags	% of total engagement	93.90	

Brands harness the efforts of cultural intermediaries (and, to a lesser extent, consumers) to gain attention from each other. In the case of the activation-based hashtags #gpwtdream, #doubleblackhouse, and #vipublic, this is also facilitated by the creation of a purpose-built, real-world space that orchestrates image production. All images circulating via these hashtags were produced at the brand activation (with the exception of four images on #vipublic, produced at the music festival). The labor of cultural intermediaries involves more than just producing images that perform frameworks of taste useful to the brand; they also undertake the reconnaissance work of translating life into data that informs the development of increasingly calculative media platforms. The following analysis critically explores how brands orchestrate cultural intermediaries' self-presentation of their bodies under brand hashtags and within real-world brand activations.

Producing Images of the Self

The activity under brand hashtags on Instagram is similar to the Instafamous practices described by Marwick (2015). Instafame is primarily organized around efforts to garner attention via visual self-presentation. Instagram's attention economy reinforces already existing hierarchies of taste and judgment, especially those relating to the body, gender, and cultural consumption (Marwick, 2015, p. 141). This reinforcement is underpinned by both the practices of users who acquire attention by performing already established norms, and by the platform's devices that recognize attention being given and gained in the form of engagement metrics. Instagram users commonly produce images of their bodies. Table 3 details the gender of the subjects and producers of images. Across all the hashtags, females are more likely to be both subjects and producers of images. Each of the hashtags #generalpants (51%), #gpwtdream (46%), and #vipublic (46%) has half of all images depicting only females. In each case, this is substantially higher than images depicting only males or mixed company. Furthermore, these images depicting females generate more engagement in total than those depicting males or mixed company across all hashtags. Images depicting only females generate 60% of total engagement from 50% of the images, whereas images depicting males only generate 15.3% of total engagement from 21.42% of images. On average images depicting only females generate 340.97 engagements, whereas those depicting males generate 203.73. The fashion and style bloggers with which brands partner are mostly female. On #gpwtdream, the images of models

are mostly female, despite the fact that the event launched male and female swimwear. In these images, female bodies are depicted in the “conventional” ways described by Marwick (2015) in her analysis of Instafame and Banet-Weiser (2012) in her analysis of YouTube.

Table 3: Gender of image subjects

Depiction of (%)	General Pants #generalpants	General Pants #gpwetdream	Smirnoff #doubleblackhouse	Smirnoff #vipublic
Bodies	90	80	67	96
Female	51	46	26	46
Male	27	12	16	15
Mixed	12	22	25	35

Cultural intermediaries and consumers creatively “model” brands using their identities and bodies. Like models, Instagram users embody the style and “vibe” of brands by “doing” their bodies in ways that personify brand characteristics (Entwistle & Mears, 2013: 326). These depictions of the body routinely draw on gendered norms of physical appearance, body positioning, and movement (Marwick, 2015). Banet-Weiser (2012, p. 66) argues that, on YouTube, young women produce videos that draw on the resources of a commercial popular culture. Commercial brands and popular culture work as “structuring narratives,” within which we craft our identities. Like fashion models (Entwistle & Mears, 2013; Wissinger, 2007a) and YouTube users (Banet-Weiser, 2012), Instagram users labelling their images with the brand hashtags examined here reproduce common and mundane gender scripts. Banet-Weiser (2012) observed young girls on YouTube drawing on the gender tropes of commercial popular culture in the way they styled their hair, dressed, and moved their bodies. Similarly, non-brand users posting under the General Pants hashtag draw on “cultural scripts” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 66) provided by the brand in their performances of the self. A typical image posted by General Pants depicts a model wearing the retailer’s street fashion in an “edgy” urban setting. Cultural intermediaries and consumers mimic the brand in their own images tagged with #generalpants. For instance, in one image a consumer stands alone on an internal balcony while a second person takes their photo. The consumer wears ripped jeans and an all-black outfit purchased from General Pants. They stand with their hands in their jacket pockets and their face turned away from the camera. The consumer’s physical surrounds, their clothing, how they hold their body and their facial expression mimic the brand’s urban style. Here we can see a blurring of boundaries between the brand models and non-brand users in the performance of gender, both in the social codes that are drawn on and the aesthetic and affective labor that is characteristic of the performance (Entwistle & Mears, 2013; Wissinger, 2007a). While the production of the body relies on the affective capacities and creativity of consumers and cultural intermediaries, the brand and social media platform provide the resources, stage, background, and devices for

images to be produced. Under the General Pants hashtag, users appear to draw on the brand's "template" in their performances of the gendered self.

Presenting and judging images of bodies are both ritualized on social media platforms via a series of devices and associated actions: posing, framing, cropping, filtering, swiping, liking, and commenting. As argued by Marwick (2015) and Banet-Weiser (2012), these rituals of creating and circulating images reproduce gender as social relationships. What we seek to add to these arguments is that while the social media platform might be technically ideologically agnostic about gender norms, the devices it offers for judging bodies leverage the performances of gender norms as an engine for producing attention. Branding on Instagram does not reproduce gender as a deliberate ideological project as much as it iteratively learns to use the platform as an image machine within which gender can be performed in ways that attract attention and affect others. Nurka (2013) argues that we need to see the creation of devices to orchestrate and exploit these rituals of judgment as problematic in a culture where it is overwhelmingly female bodies that are being judged. Following Nurka (2013), the ranking and rating of female bodies on social media is a foundational device from which other tools of online judgment have emerged and been deployed to create valuable formations of attention.

As consumers and cultural intermediaries faithfully recreate and personify the brand in their images, they perform work that is similar to that of fashion models. They undertake the labor of drawing on gender scripts and styling the body in ways that personify the brand. This is particularly evident on #generalpants, where consumers model clothes purchased from the store, and the brand appropriates those consumer-generated images into its own online catalogues. As consumers and intermediaries add to the flow of images under the brand hashtag, they create an archive on which the brand can draw in its broader marketing activities. Brands can appropriate the images for use in other contexts, or use them as a source of market research to identify trends and consumer innovations. Consumers and intermediaries undertake the affective labor of not only attracting attention to the brand and incorporating the brand in their identity, but also innovating the applications and uses of the brand and its products. The negotiation and performance of identity visible on social media are part of a larger production of the self as a brand. Hearn (2008: 298) describes this work as "creating a detachable, saleable image or narrative, which effectively circulates cultural meanings" in promotional and competitive ways. The creation of a branded self is a predictable consequence of social media networks in which users and brands are produced and evaluated through the same "rubric" and devices (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 57). Engagement on the social web is organized around users participating in the production and judgment of images of their bodies, identities, and lives (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Nurka, 2013).

Until 2014, brands had to earn attention on Instagram exclusively by getting other users to acknowledge them by following them, using their hashtags or incorporating them into their depictions of themselves. The female body appears to be most often the subject and producer of the images upon which brands depend. As Instagram's advertising and analytics model develops further, brands will be offered the capacity to track and target users and use algorithms to organize more valuable formations of attention. Following Hallinan and Striphas (2014), algorithmic culture conforms to the pre-existing tastes and practices of users. In algorithmic culture, the coherent and repetitive enactment of discursive scripts is useful not only because it forms an ideal subject that identifies with particular meanings, but also because it makes the subject recognizable to algorithms. This is important in thinking about the trajectory of mobile social media platforms such as Instagram. Instagram appears to be undertaking an incremental process of becoming more algorithmic and calculative in the way it organizes images and brokers attention. Since 2014, the "explore" feed has become more targeted to individual users' networks; the app now more seamlessly suggests accounts to follow; and advertisements are gradually being targeted into individual users' home feeds.

As platforms become more algorithmic, the repetitive performance of identity establishes patterns that the media system can predict and to which it can respond. A user is an ideal subject – not necessarily because they adhere to established discourses as such but because, in adhering to discourses they create repetitive and predictable flows of attention and data that make algorithmic decision-making more efficient. As algorithms learn the gendered patterns of representation and production on mobile social media platforms, they may contribute to their reinforcement, enclosing rather than opening up the performance of our bodies around established gender scripts. For instance, users' under #generalpants mimic the brand's performance of gender by posing in General Pants clothes and posting to Instagram. By doing so, they secure engagement from other users. While Instagram's algorithms don't understand the cultural specificity of these performances, they do register the higher engagement with them and work over time to make them more visible on the platform because they increase engagement. As these platforms become more calculative, more detailed judgment about images may be made – for instance, about gender, items of clothing or brand logos present in images. On Instagram, the labor of the branded self extends beyond incorporating brands into images of ourselves or acting like brands in the way we communicate. The production of the branded self also involves making the body available to image machines (Wissinger, 2007a) in predictable and dependable ways.

The escalating capacity of media technologies to 'calculate' attention place new demands on the body. By developing an account of the shift from the 'glance' to the 'blink' Wissinger (2013)

opens up a way of accounting for the role algorithmic media technologies play in the standardisation and optimisation of the body. A digital technology like Photoshop acts on the body by emphasising particular proportions and tones. By altering representations it affects what bodies are seen as desirable. Instagram is a technology of the 'blink regime' in the sense that it uses its capacity to 'calculate attention' to manage flows of images of bodies. In addition to editing the appearance of the body in the image, Instagram collects data about engagement with particular bodies that it uses to optimise flows of images over time and space. The blink regime is composed of both technologies like Photoshop that edit the appearance of individual bodies, and devices like Instagram that use measures of attention to determine which bodies are made visible when, where and who to.

In a mode of branding that is open-endedly social and data-driven, the labor of the branded self also involves the work of producing, cataloguing, and contributing to an analysis of data via the interplay between the body and media devices. We develop this idea via Friedrich Kittler's (2009) conceptualization of media as devices for data collection and reconnaissance. Kittler (2009, p. 238) argues that media devices both produce narratives and store data about everyday life that enables populations to be monitored and managed. Kittler's formulation helps us to situate accounts of the narrative labor of the branded self, as detailed by Hearn (2008) and Banet-Weiser (2012), in relation to the data-collecting, storing, and processing labor of the branded self. If narratives promote and persuade, then data enable the production of a more responsive and customized media system. In a mode of branding that relies on the participation of consumers in generating data, as much as it relies on them mediating brand narratives, the "work of being watched" (Andrejevic, 2002) is a central element of branding. Instagram prompts us to consider the so far under-theorized "reconnaissance" or data-generating work of the branded self. Following Kittler (2009), media constitute a device for both persuasion and reconnaissance; the labor of producing the self is implicated in both functions. The participation of ordinary people in generating an account of themselves as both narrative and data is critical to image machines like Instagram, and especially to the mode of branding that operates through them.

Activations and Image Machines as Market Devices

Smirnoff's #doubleblackhouse and #vipublic and General Pants' #gpwetedream hashtags each organized a flow of images that were produced within a purpose-built brand activation. McFall (2009) explains that market devices are material and discursive assemblages that orchestrate action. This account draws on Callon's (2005, cited in McFall, 2009, p. 272) notion of *agencements* as the "human and non-human, textual and material, social and technological

assemblages from which action springs.” Following this formulation, the linking together of the bodies of users, smartphones, Instagram, and activations constitutes a mobile media and market device that orchestrates action, generates data, and calibrates attention. This combination of components comes together in an iterative and experimental way. Activations emerged during the 1990s as purpose-built spaces in which brands engaged with peer leaders within cultural scenes as part of below-the-line and guerrilla marketing strategies. The value of activations increases as they become important components in the attention and image machinery of mobile social media. The interplay between the platform and cultural spaces shapes both as they adapt to each other’s capacities and requirements. Brands are key actors in developing interconnections between Instagram and real-world cultural spaces. The activation is one of the specific devices they use to develop these connections.

Cultural intermediaries and consumers bring both their agency and their creative capacity to affect one another into brand activations. Their dispositions interplay with the devices that orchestrate action within that material space (McFall, 2009, p. 272). Activations comprise a series of social relationships, performances, and symbolic objects and motifs that orchestrate the production of images circulating under the brand hashtag. The activation is a critical device for producing images that are thematically and aesthetically repetitive. Images circulating under #doubleblackhouse all shared the same color palette of the entirely black venue. The activation also featured distinctive black objects. One in particular was an old claw-foot bathtub, painted black with a Smirnoff logo on the side. The bathtub was filled with black and colored balls. Smirnoff did not necessarily “instruct” attendees to take photos of the tub, but its placement in the venue marked it out as a curious and inviting object. Many images were circulated of people sitting in, falling into, throwing balls around, or drinking Smirnoff in the tub. Cultural intermediaries and consumers within the activation acted like fashion models on the set of a photo shoot. They would sit in the tub, play with the balls, consume Smirnoff, and pose for images. The tub was an object that stimulated “affective flow” between bodies in the activation, which was then translated into the circulation of images online. While the people and poses in the images might have changed, the tub acted as a device that produced a repeated branded motif through images circulating in many different flows on Instagram.

In this study, we have only been able to view images circulated on the public #doubleblackhouse hashtag. Arguably, many other images of the tub circulated through personal feeds during the life of the activation. In a previous mode of branding, an object like this tub might have been used with a model posing in a staged photograph. In the mode of branding described in this article, the tub and activation are devices that organize the production of images. The tub is not just a symbol in an image, but plays a material role in

calibrating attention. Where once an object like an old bathtub might have been used as a prop in a staged print advertisement, in this mode of branding the tub orchestrates the production of standardized images by multiple actors. The market device created here is one whereby the activation and its objects, social media platform, and smartphones work together to orchestrate the interplay between bodies and brands.

Each activation has objects like the bathtub. Smirnoff's #vipublic bar at Splendour in the Grass featured Smirnoff-branded cups. On the bottom of each cup was a comical mouth, like a mouth with a goatee beard. As consumers lifted the cup to drink, it appeared as if they had a goatee. The cups were an object attuned to the sociality of the bar, a device that prompted consumers to translate their engagement with each other into images. The comical image on the bottom of the cups became a motif repeated throughout the flows of images. On General Pants #gpwetdream, the waterslide, water pistols, pink flamingos, and a large "wet dreams" neon sign became repeated motifs throughout the images. Such objects are analogue media and market devices. They not only work in a representational sense to convey specific brand qualities, but also operate to stimulate forms of sociality that weave the brand into flows of images online.

Instagram is the product of a longer history of developing devices for storing, manipulating, circulating, and scrolling through images. Furthermore, the Instagram user operates within media-dense urban spaces that provide the technical telecommunication infrastructure to mediate everyday life. Activations are one example of the creation of urban spaces organized to stimulate and direct the production of media content. The technical capacity to create a non-narrative and continuous flow of images is interrelated with urban spaces that invite these forms of image production. Within these spaces, with mobile media devices in hand, users create and participate in the development of a culture where our engagement with images shifts from narratives to glances (Wissinger, 2007). The streams of images created by Instagram users might narrate everyday life and cultural practices, but in an open-ended and non-linear way. For instance, as a hashtag forms around an event like a music festival, the thousands of images flowing under that hashtag tell a repetitive story as motifs, performances, and practices relating to the festival are captured and circulated by users. Following Kittler's (2009) approach, cultural practices are interrelated with the development of the technical capacities of media. Just as audio tape enabled multi-tracking, over-dubbing, and tone-shifting in popular music, the smartphone enables an image culture to emerge that is fast-moving, non-linear, and dynamic, as users swipe, filter, and tap. At least in part, this image culture is the product of the technical development of mobile media, urban space, and cultural practices.

The image machine created by Instagram is also increasingly computational. Filtering, locating, liking, and swiping all generate data that can be used in a variety of ways. Image machines prompt the generation of data that can be used to predict, open, shut, and experiment with social life (Packer, 2013, p. 295). The interplay between bodies, media devices, media platforms, and purpose-built cultural spaces is a system of “stimulus, adaptation and response” (Schüll, 2012, p. 157). Schüll’s account of poker machines offers an illuminating framework for thinking about the mode of branding on Instagram. Schüll details the interplay between the design of casinos, poker machine interfaces and software, and data collected about the activities of gamblers. The poker machine is a media device that shapes its delivery of media entertainment by collecting and analysing data to keep the gambler engaged on the device for as long as possible. The data generated by the player shapes the ongoing design of not only the poker machine game but also the material form of the device and the design of the cultural space within which the device is used. The more we interact with media devices, the more they collect information that is used not just to curate the flows of images that come back to us via the screen, but increasingly also to design the real-world spaces with which the image-machine is interdependent. There is an iteratively developing circuit of feedback and innovation between social media platforms like Instagram and real-world cultural spaces like brand activations, music festivals, clubs, and retail environments.

Branding and Mobile Image Machines

The activities of brands are integral to the ongoing development of image machines like Instagram. Mobile social media platforms like Instagram are engaged in an iterative and experimental process of designing devices like advertising tools, data analytics, and algorithms for calibrating attention. Instagram illustrates how the discursive symbolic and data-driven work of branding is interrelated. As much as brands might seek to instruct or persuade, they are also part of the creation of a media system organized around the capacity to “experiment with reality” (Packer, 2013, p. 297) through the design of cultural spaces and the orchestration of social practices.

Algorithms appear to enhance the capacity of media to reinforce discursive norms. As mobile social media like Instagram become more algorithmic, an important question concerns how algorithms work in relation to the discursive modes of power observable on social media platforms. The images produced under the brand hashtags studied here illustrate how gender norms are reproduced on mobile social media. As algorithms recognize the performance of gendered norms as patterns associated with valuable formations of attention, they are likely to reproduce them. Analysis of how brands reinforce and exploit gender norms needs to account

for the interdependence between the discursive and algorithmic aspects of mobile social media platforms.

The design of urban spaces like brand activations, nightlife precincts, clubs, festivals, and retail environments becomes integrated into the calibration of attention on mobile social media. Critical accounts of algorithmic social media have begun to address how cultural content “addresses” algorithms (Hallinan & Striphas, 2014). By “address,” Hallinan and Striphas (2014) mean that cultural content is produced with the algorithmic decision-making of media platforms in mind. We also need to consider how the design and appropriation of cultural space will address mobile, algorithmic, and data-driven media systems. This image machine depends on constant interplay with bodies that move about urban space with smartphone in hand: pointing, tapping, swiping, and glancing. Rather than being subjects that narrate, users make themselves available to the device and its modes of capturing and channelling affect and attention. Mobile social media platforms are driven by the experimental, participatory, and data-driven logics of contemporary branding. Users’ image production does not just perform brands in a symbolic sense, but creates forms of action that brands and platforms modulate and calibrate in an open-ended way. The efforts of brands to experiment with mobile media’s image machines, our bodies, and cultural spaces draw our attention to the need to critically examine how participatory, discursive and algorithmic modes of control are interrelated.

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