INSTAGRAM'S SHIFT TOWARDS LIVE: HOW STORIES AND LIVE VIDEOS SHAPE THE EXPERIENCE OF LIVE EVENTS

Dr Esther Hammelburg
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

Introduction

Instagram has long been about sharing perfect pictures. For their Instagram posts many users beautify scenes from everyday life, elevate photogenic aspects, and articulate special moments in a style that fits the standards of Instagram culture (Leaver et al., 2020; Manovich, 2017). The term "instagrammable" found its way into many dictionaries and is widely used as a promotional label, for instance in tourism, food, and the museum sector. However, since the introduction of Instagram Stories and Instagram Live – in 2016 – an increasingly large part of the content shared on Instagram is no longer instagrammable in the same sense. These features afford instantaneous sharing of images and videos that are not necessarily displayed permanently, introducing a very different visual language and new visual practices.

At festivals, Instagram is a ubiquitous platform. Many event-goers share their live experiences through posts and stories, often using event-specific hashtags, locations, and stickers. Based on an elaborate empirical examination of event-goers' Instagram practices, this paper argues that Instagram's shift towards live shapes their live experiences in distinct ways.

Studying Hybrid Events

This paper results from a large study that employed ethnographic, digital and visual methods to investigate platformed imaging at three large annual events in The Netherlands: Pride Amsterdam, Oerol Festival, and 3FM Serious Request.[1] As it is based on analysis of extensive research material from fieldwork – participant observations in online and offline fields, media diaries, unstructured interviews with 379

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[1] Fieldwork for this study was carried out pre-pandemic. The COVID-crisis has only intensified the use of live features as we needed to find new ways to hold festivals, but also birthday parties, classes, and meeting friends. This has thoroughly changed our understanding of being there live, which would be an interesting point to explore with the audience.

event-joiners, and large data sets of platformed visual content – it brings unique empirical insights into the concrete visual media practices of festival-goers.

The full study indicates that the studied live events can be considered hybrid in the sense that physical event environments and media environments are thoroughly entwined. The sense of "being there live" in these events then revolves around the alignment of event-joiners' physical event and media environments rather than (only) the mediation of happenings in the physical world (Hammelburg, 2021). Consequently, platform features and cultures impact event-goers' behavior and the experience of event-going. In this paper the main question is how event-goers' live experiences at these three events are shaped by their use of Instagram's features for live and ephemeral visual content.

Fun and Messy Instant Imaging
Imaging through Instagram Stories and Instagram Live (see Figure 1 for examples) is typically less serious, more impulsive, and less subject to aesthetic standards than the large part of posting on the platform. The visual language of these features is unpolished, incorporating both new visual tropes and templates, and continuing existing visual languages from older "instant" media technologies.
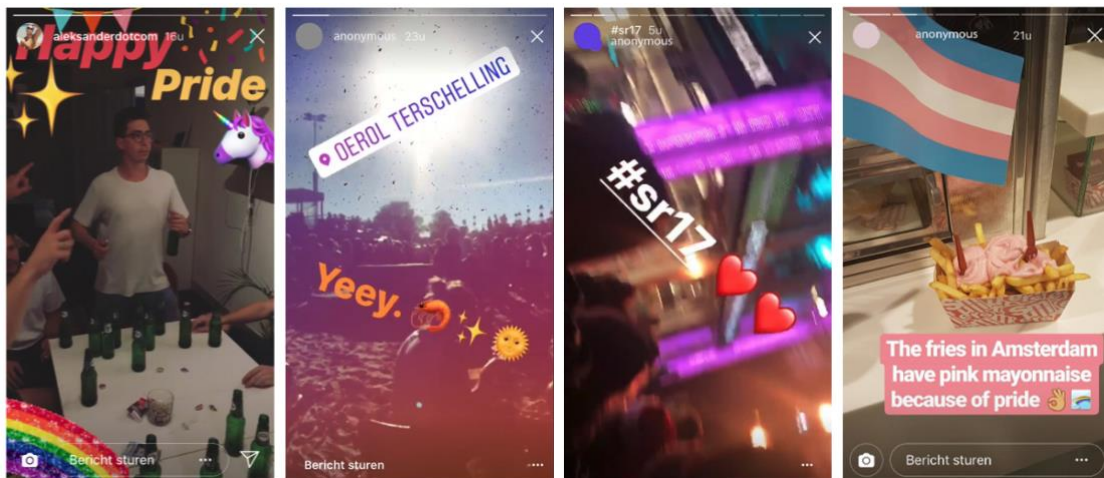

Figure 1: Instagram Stories by Event-joiners Exhibiting the Feature's Aesthetics.

The new visual characteristic that seems to have the most impact on people's behavior in the events is the vertical display in stories and livestreaming. As Leaver et al. (2020) argue, this indicates that these visual practices are promoted as native to the mobile device. While this concrete visual vernacular is new, the affordance of the handheld device results in additional aesthetic qualities that continue existing visual traditions rather than break with them. The aesthetic form of these instant photos and videos remediates (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) that of the handheld camera introduced in the 1960s, particularly the visual language of event reporting on TV, and home videos at parties. As these older media forms are familiar to event-goers, adopting these styles positions them in the event in a specific manner.

These live images are allowed to be of lesser quality – they are often shaky, badly lit, of lesser digital quality, and not neatly cut or framed – because they find their appraisal in the instantaneous: the sense that the maker is part of the unfolding event at that moment. Further, this raw style of imaging cultivates a vernacular that reflects authenticity, remediating a culture of aesthetics of film and television in which unrefined visuals were intentionally used to evoke a sense of "realness" (e.g., films such as *Festen* (Vinterberg, 1998), and *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999), and many reality TV shows). In the 1990s, this style worked in contrast to the sleek and polished look of film and TV – in many ways a similar contrast as that between the Instagram story and the Instagram post.

Capturing and Creating Authentic Moments
Stories and livestreams can be understood as forms of *cinéma vérité*, both capturing and creating the authentic live moment. While these images are often understood as displaying the unfolding unpredictable moment, they are themselves part of that happening; stories and streams have become part of event environments and create specific new physical realities that are experienced as authentic moments. One of my interviewees – Matthew, who was on a boat in the Amsterdam Pride Canal Parade – specifically told me about the "authentic moments" he enjoyed at the event when people gathered closely for the live Instagram Stories he made. "There is something funny" Matthew says, "the way I behave and the way people around me will behave as they see that you're doing the live ones. Then I think there is a certain kind of spontaneity and a kind of certain energy which you capture."

For Matthew the practice of making live stories in the event intensifies the now in the physical event environment. These authentic moments are afforded and shaped by the visual and technological form they aim to produce: quick spontaneous gatherings around a phone or funny dances together for a live video[2], making colorful annotated stories while on the way to the event, or cheering for the livestreaming phone that pans the crowd in the event-goer's hand. All these embodied event practices have become an integral part of event-goers' experiences of being at an event.

The Experiential Now
Moreover, Instagram's shift towards live resulted in new visual practices that position eventgoers in a specific way, enacting their immersion in the fun and messy event. The Instagram post affords the eventgoer to create an image that is worth a permanent place in the feed, to reflectively look at their experience of the event – while in it – and visualize it as an aesthetically pleasing lasting memory. Stories and livestreams, in opposition, are shared casually and continuously, positioning the eventgoer more in the *experiential now* of the event.

References
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[2] This is even more the case for TikTok-users. I would love to further explore this with researchers who have studied that platform.

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