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EDITING AND JUXTAPOSITION IN KIM KARDASHIAN’S INSTAGRAM STORIES

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Introduction

‘The internet doesn’t forget’ is a commonsense truism that surrounds the debate of social media platforms, however, as Bainotti et al. (2021) discuss, there is an increasing development of ephemeral content on these online spaces, like Instagram stories, multimodal content that allow users to mix photos, video, text, emojis, stickers and gifs, as well as original or existing soundtracks in a creative logic that resembles what Manovich (2007) called the hybrid language of motion graphics. There have been few studies that are mainly concerned with the formal qualities of stories (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019; Villaespesa & Wowkowych, 2020; Georgakopoulou, 2021), so in this work-in-progress paper I argue that studying Instagram stories through the lens of film studies can be a productive point of entry (Manovich & Kozharinova, 2024), aiming to better understand what are the audiovisual effects that emerge in this particular user-platform editing process. This pilot study will look at Kim Kardashian’s profile, an arbitrary choice based on exploratory research but an interesting object because of the tension in the posts in relation to everyday, commercial and activist content. Also, with Kardashian being a public person with a media presence beyond Instagram, ethical concerns regarding user exposition were less relevant.

Methodology and theoretical concerns

The website Story Saver¹ was used to provide a simple way to download and archive the content (Bainotti et al., 2021), with an important limitation being absence of metadata. The stories in this corpus were collected on December 17th and 18th of 2024 with the first collection having 12 individual stories, and the second 17, which were put together in Adobe Premiere as two single video streams with 2’47” and 5’12” running times.

¹ <https://www.storiesaver.net/>

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These videos were analyzed with a poetics of film approach based on Bordwell's (1989) work – which is concerned with effects as articulated through a set of audiovisual materials – articulating Eisenstein's (1988) thoughts on montage which are paramount to thinking about how the individual story segments relate to one another in an analogous way to shots in a film. The author proposed that shots of a film always bear a relationship of juxtaposition to the one before and the one after it, the meaning in cinema emerged not of the single shot, but of the collision of the denotative and connotative elements in different shots. However, what Aumont (2020) notes reading Eisenstein's formulations critically is its ambiguous nature, a specific montage of shots does not bear in its probable or possible effects a conclusiveness, highlighting the polysemic nature of the moving image as a medium.

Analysis and preliminary findings

Although Bainotti et al. (2021) found in their corpus that most stories were individual units of meaning, here I propose to look at how they are edited together by an automated actor which is the platform itself, even if the resulting video stream is not an intentional outcome. Although two of the main activities of editing are performed by the user – selecting and arranging video clips – Instagram is a relevant actor in this human-technical system. The corpus of this article relates to a very curated and professionally managed profile, but it's interesting to note how the affordances of Instagram specific to stories (Kreling et al., 2022) can be mobilized by users in particular ways that are informed both by the iterative process of posting and looking at analytics of the content provided by the platform, as well as the poster's experience as a user who views stories. The corpus here is very restricted and specific to warrant generalization, but there are findings such as the ones described in Abidin's (2021) work that support this kind of vernacular know-how in micro-celebrity practices as well.

The first aspect of the videos that stand out is the visual tension between the static and moving images that are alternated throughout all constructed video streams. Eisenstein (1988) codified this kind of editing as rhythmic, when the plastic contents of each shot determine the cutting and the synthesis of ideas. This applies to the alternating shots of a Billie Eilish concert, colliding videos of the stage in vertical aspect ratio, to selfies of Kardashian and her friends in horizontal video, the visual clash as well as the difference in sound quality provide a series of shock effects. At the end of the concert segment there is a very shocking cut, both visually and rhythmically, from a moving shot with loud crowd noises to a static and blurred photo of a person holding a phone with 'Kim my Armenian sister' written in large caps on its screen, with no sound. The next shot changes the subject completely and consists of a video taken by Kardashian of her eating chips, with comments in the audio track. These segments were probably posted sometime after the concert, so it's not jarring for the poster or for a user seeing in real time, but taken as a whole the end of the concert segment and beginning of the next one with the chips bear an almost Avant Garde quality akin to Jean-Luc Godard's work and even of Sergei Eisenstein himself in its disjunction. Highlighting how the human-technical system of Instagram stories interlaces affordances, platform algorithmic instances and user agency in a way that results in unexpected and often overlooked artistic effects.

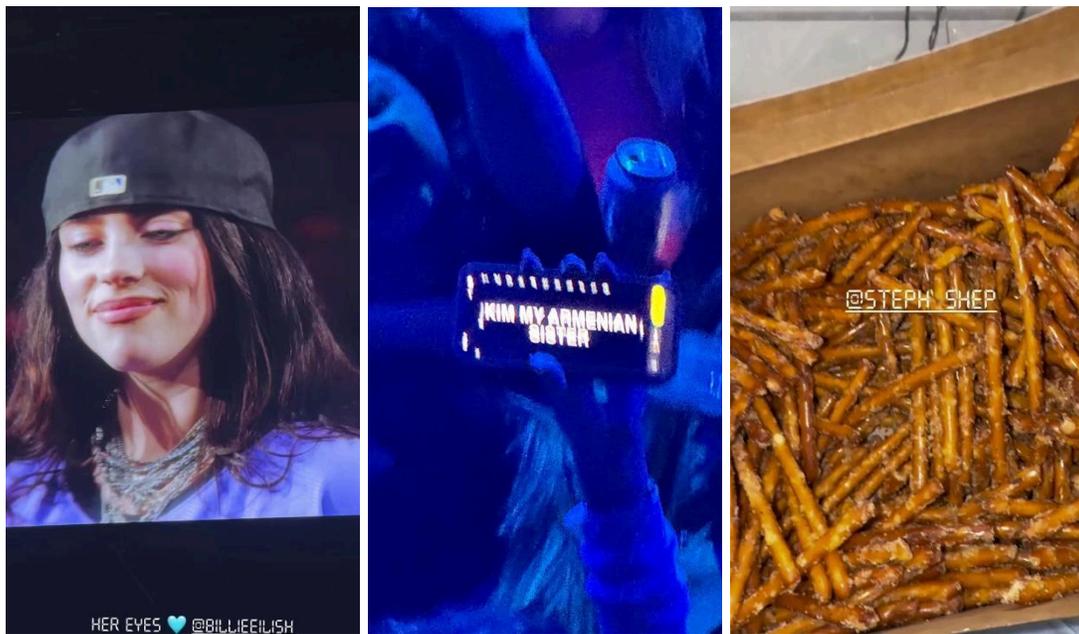


Figure 1: Screenshots of the three stories described above.

Another notable effect is the cross-platform aspect and the multimodality of Instagram stories as a rule. There is a moment which presents (in two different story segments) a screenshot of a People Magazine article and then a print of a post by the New Jersey governor in X thanking Kardashian directly for her work in a prison pardon case, with superimposed text of her thanking him. These two segments follow Christmas inspired images and are directly ‘colliding’ with a non-sense photo of what appears to be a female leg that is wearing a cast over high heels, which could be linked to shitposting practices (Krough et al., 2024) and stands out in relation to the other images. The collision of ideas is very jarring when put in succession and although it is not possible to speak to the intentionality of it, the effect it produces is of shock, not a strong emotional one as Eisenstein would recommend, although it seems to highlight the advocacy content in a strategic way.

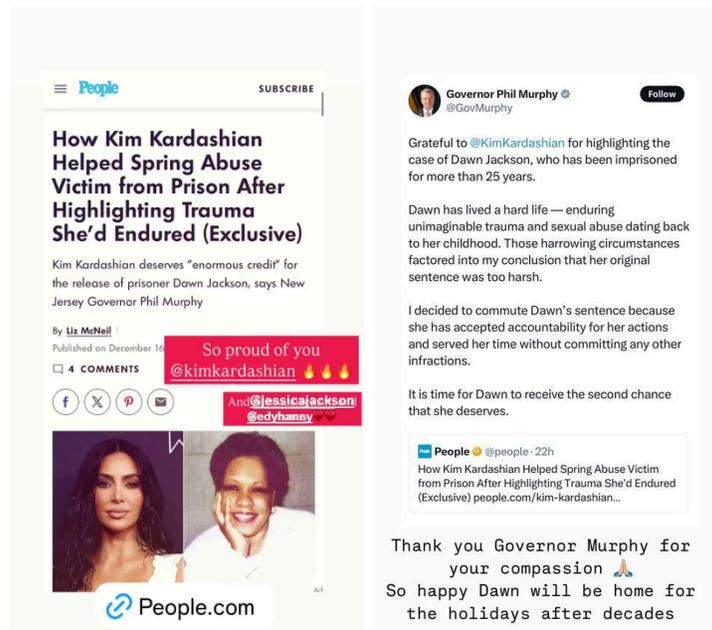
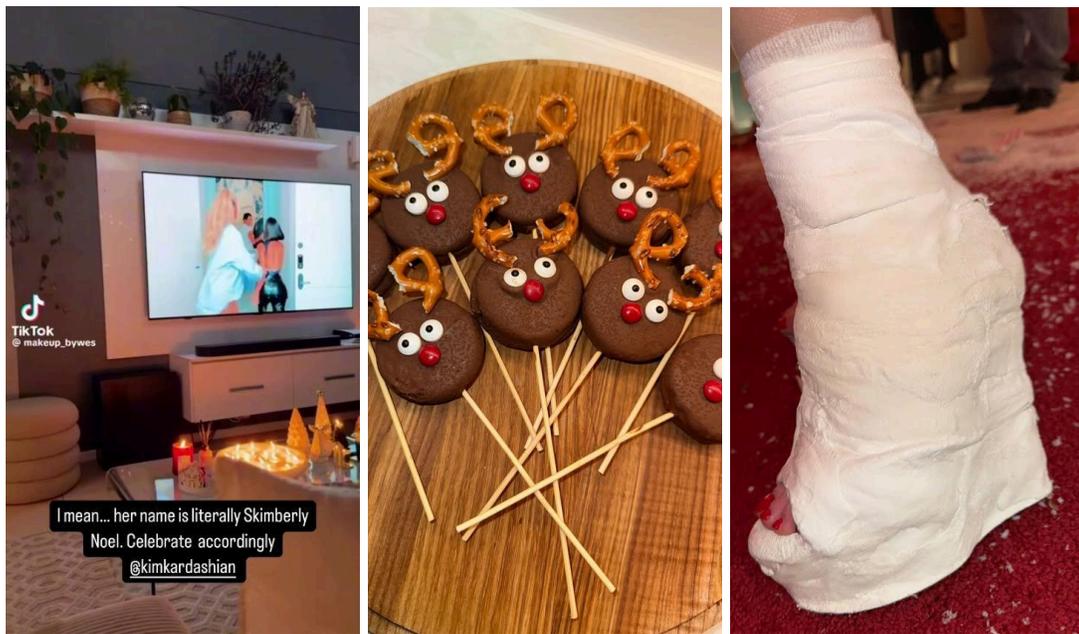


Figure 2: Screenshots of the five stories described above.

This study has important limitations, mainly the arbitrary choice of Kardashian’s profile and the restricted corpus, however the analysis through the lens of film studies turned out to be a productive approach. Stories have been characterized as being a more authentic form of expression (Kreling et al., 2022) and as a “visual display of ordinary life” (Bainotti et al., 2021, p. 3665), in this paper I propose that they can also be viewed as artistic works, albeit not intentionally and constructed via a platform/user editing process. In this sense, Kardashian’s stories seem to present a synthesis of her online persona, contradictory and multifaceted, with the editing highlighting the advocacy content that could be dismissed by most users for its lack of visual interest.

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