

**The Shaping Influence:
Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Contemporary Photography**



Fig. 1. Amalia Ulman, Excellences & Perfections, 2014



Fig. 2. Amalia Ulman, Excellences & Perfections, 2014

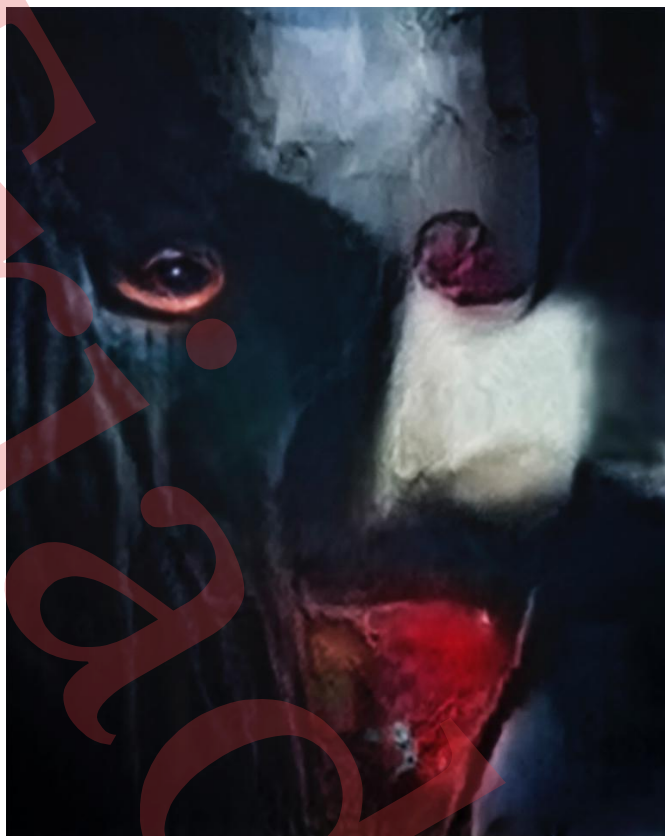


Fig. 3. Trevor Paglen, Adversarially Evolved Hallucination: Vampire (Corpus: Monsters of Capitalism), 2017, Dye-sublimation metal print, 121,9 x 152,4 cm.



Fig. 3. Trevor Paglen, Adversarially Evolved Hallucination: A Man (Corpus: The Humans), 2017, Dye-sublimation metal print, 121,9 x 152,4 cm.

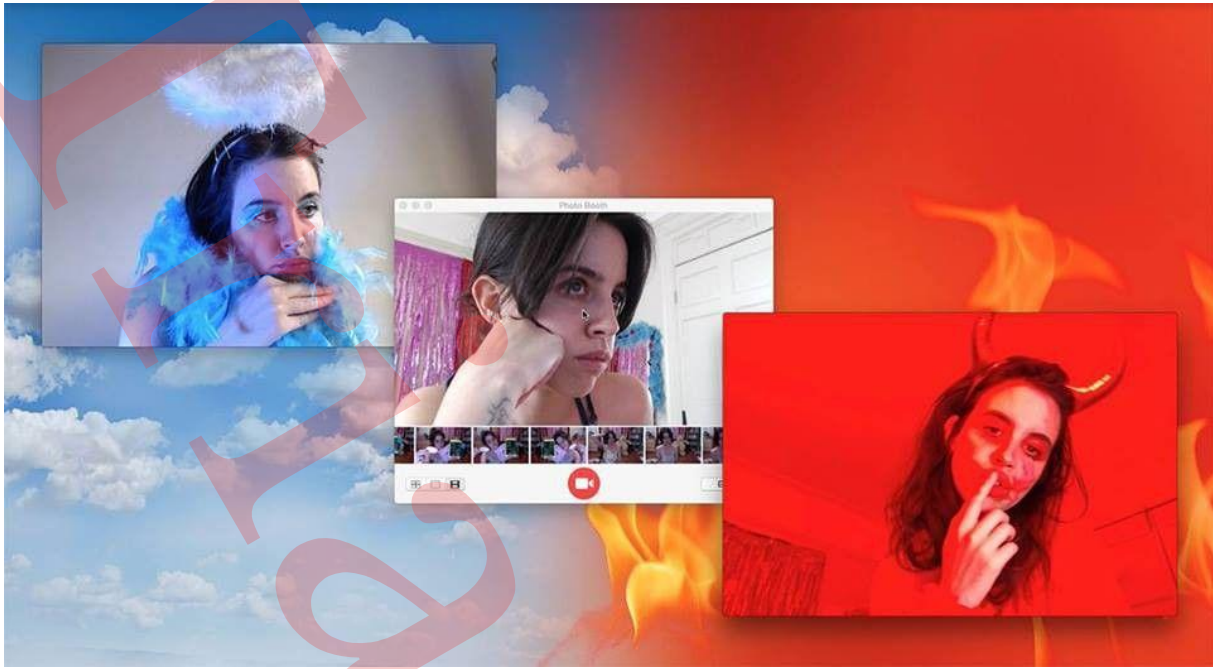


Fig. 5. Molly Soda, *I'm Just Happy to Be Here – 50 Percent Whatever*, 2017.

1. Introduction

Photography serves as a medium for reflecting upon and commenting on societal constructs such as cultural, political, or ideological influences within any given period (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). Recently developed digital technologies, such as the ubiquitous presence of social media platforms, have significantly impacted the creation, discovery, and sharing of photos in modern times, shaping contemporary photographic styles, trends, technology, and people's reception and perception of these images (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011).

This essay examines how social media influences modern-day photography and explores how contemporary artists have responded to this phenomenon within their artistry. In addition, the thesis focuses on how these technological advancements democratize (while commodifying) photographic opportunities, ultimately altering individuals' exposure and engagement levels with others and changing perceptions surrounding image value and consumption habits. Ultimately, this paper provides nuanced insight into this complex relationship by exploring case studies featuring artists who critically engage with these issues concerning social media's impact on modern-day photography.

2. The Rise of Social Media and its Influence on Photography

The emergence of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter has immensely influenced how images are produced, shared, and consumed (Bosher and Yeşiloğlu, 2018). It has been exponential growth for most of this decade. Billions of users worldwide engage with visuals daily, making social media an undeniable force in

contemporary visual culture shaping aesthetic preferences and trends in photography (Sarah, Angus & Burgess, 2022). First of all, Tifentale and Manovich (2018) observe that social media has made photography more accessible by democratizing its use. Previously, only professionals or serious enthusiasts could take high-quality photos due to expensive equipment and specialized training. However, with the advent of phones with good cameras, almost everyone can now capture and share images easily.

As mentioned earlier, social media has played a significant role in not only democratizing photography but also in shaping aesthetic preferences and visual trends within the medium. With images shared rapidly through various online platforms, specific styles, and techniques emerge that quickly gain popularity among users, creating new aesthetic movements (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020). An example illustrating social media's effect on aesthetic preferences is the rise of "Instagram aesthetics." These feature highly stylized pictures that undergo intense editing with vibrant colors and high contrast, leading to a dreamy or nostalgic feel. This distinctive look becomes achievable through filters and powerful editing software effortlessly integrated into different apps and platforms photographers utilize (Hargraves, 2020). As a result, many images on social media platforms, particularly on Instagram, have come to adhere to these distinct visual characteristics.

The impact of aesthetic trends on social media transcends individual images. It influences how users collectively experience visual content on various platforms. Some popular styles can lead to unoriginality as users copy them to gain online popularity or validation from their peers. This led to people criticizing Instagram for causing a homogenized aesthetic environment where all photos look similar in composition, color schemes, and editing choices. However, it is essential to recognize that social media's impact on aesthetic preferences is not solely negative or limiting. Artists use this platform for self-expression by pushing boundaries regarding what is visually appealing. Sharing their perspectives through social media channels has enabled individuals to initiate impactful discussions centered around diversity, inclusion, and unconventional beauty norms in photography- ultimately leading to an enhanced understanding of aesthetics that is both inclusive and progressive (Serafinelli, 2018).

3. The Impact of Social Media on the Perception and Consumption of Photography

Social media's growth has radically altered how people interact with and perceive photography in the present digital era. The change has significant implications for photographers and their audiences (Hand, 2020). Social media provides viewers with fleeting glimpses into massive amounts of visual content (Arda, 2021), resulting in innovative approaches to photography interaction. However it also presents new challenges. One critical

challenge brought about by the oversaturation of visuals is "image fatigue." With countless images clamoring for attention on one's screen simultaneously, viewers may feel inundated or indifferent towards them (Jurgenson, 2019). Photographers who desire viewer participation face daunting tasks in today's overcrowded digital environment. To stand out as a photographer requires navigating through vast amounts of visual information and creating striking photographs that resonate with audiences amidst scores uploaded every second. There needs to be more than the traditional photography methods in today's fast-paced environment. As such, photographers must revamp their practices by incorporating more creativity and strategy.

To avoid image fatigue and grab the interest of their desired audience, photographers need to produce captivating and significant content (Dhanesh and Rahman, 2021). This calls for exceeding superficial appearances and trying to communicate stories, sentiments, and thought-provoking notions through their visuals. Photographers could stand out amidst the social media clutter and leave a lasting impact by creating photographs that narrate compelling tales or trigger intense emotional reactions.

Social media's impact on photography extends beyond its technical capabilities. In addition, it also shapes how people understand it as an art form. By making photographic tools more accessible than ever, social media platforms have raised questions about what constitutes "art" regarding photographs (Tifentale and Manovich 2018). This accessibility also fosters a rise in amateur and DIY photography that challenges traditional notions about what makes someone a professional photographer (Myzelev, 2015). As people seek answers regarding these shifting boundaries, they must consider how professional photographers remain valuable experts within this evolving field (Grundberg, 2021).

One of the most significant impacts is that it has expanded the inclusiveness and diversity within the field like never before. With easy-to-use cameras and powerful smartphone editing tools, even those without formal training or professional experience can produce visually stunning pictures and share them with audiences worldwide. As a result, photography has become more democratic by removing barriers to entry and letting diverse perspectives emerge. However, this transformation also raises essential debates about what defines art in contemporary times. The rise of amateur projects through social media has challenged traditional hierarchies within photography, muddying previously clear distinctions between professionals/nonprofessionals. These conversations are significant because they precisely address what counts as artistic merit when 'everyone' can quickly produce images (Alshawaf, 2021). The democratization of photography seems to indicate that everyone can be an artist if

they are given access or a chance. Nonetheless, this premise is still debatable: while many people have captured remarkable images through their phones or affordable cameras, there remains a question over what sets great artists apart from amateurs.

Social media's proliferation of images has sparked concerns regarding photography diminishing value as art (Mortensen & McCrow Young, 2022). With countless photos uploaded daily, each picture struggles for recognition amidst this overflowing stream. As such, the worth and importance assigned per photograph are lessened by viewers who scroll through them without pause or thoughtfully considering their impact. However, people should recognize how social media platforms have helped photographers gain recognition on a global scale and engage in creative dialogues around the nature of photography as an art form (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). By sharing their work online, photographers can experiment with novel techniques while building a community around their craft.

4. Artists Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Photography

In recent years, a number of contemporary artists have explored the impact of social media on photography through their artwork. These artists offer a critical lens through which to examine the ways in which social media has transformed photographic practice and representation.

First, Amalia Ulman's artistic prowess shines through in her exploration of social media's impact on photography. Her Instagram project "Excellences & Perfections," which went viral in 2014 for revealing the constructed nature of social media personas (Ruigrok, 2018), is an example of her ingenious use of Instagram as a platform. Through carefully curated images presenting an idealized version of herself within a fictional narrative she crafted for the project, Ulman blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction while exposing how much influence social media has on users' highly-curated online identities (Glover, 2016). It was like reading a captivating visual story with glamorous selfies and aesthetically pleasing tableaux portraying luxury, beauty, and perfection (Fig.1 and 2). As Ulman's project progressed, she began to expose the artificiality of her online persona, disrupting common notions of genuineness and honesty within social media platforms. In her innovative artistic venture, Ulman blurred the distinction between truth and fantasy to highlight the performative dimension that characterizes social networking sites, along with the attendant demands to conform. Using her immense creativity, she skillfully focused on how users on these platforms tend to present a faultless impression that never reflects real-life experiences. Through her thought-provoking project, Ulman inspired contemplation about whether social media influences our self-esteem and compels us to seek endorsement via virtual links.

Second, in his quest to uncover the hidden structures of power, surveillance, and privacy in modern society through art, Trevor Paglen undertook a groundbreaking project in 2016 titled "Adversarially Evolved Hallucination." The project involved manipulating machine learning algorithms on images from Google Street View and highlighting how they are used to create powerful narratives that shape our understanding of reality (Fig 3 and 4). Paglen's work sparks critical reflection on how social media influences our perception through photography and artificial intelligence. Using machine learning, Paglen sparks a fascinating conversation between human perception and artificial intelligence. This prompts people to reconsider how they define truth and representation in today's digital landscape. Paglen's art intervenes in expected visual narratives, revealing structures of power and surveillance that pervade modern society. With manipulations and distortions of imagery, his work exposes the potential for differing interpretations within digital landscapes while encouraging viewers to engage critically with constructed realities encountered online. By exploring intersections between photography, AI, and social media platforms, Paglen probes into their roles as agents shaping public perception. He presents essential questions around authenticity within a medium fraught with hidden agendas behind curated public presentations, raising awareness about how these curated narratives can skew an observer's understanding of reality. Moreover, Paglen prompts reflection on such themes as how social media influences one's perspective on issues while drawing attention to nuanced power dynamics lurking silently behind accessible imagery, highlighting that critical thinking is necessary when faced with surging amounts of mediated data today.

Third, Molly Soda is a contemporary artist whose thought-provoking work explores how social media affects modern photography and self-representation. Her artwork provides a critical perspective that exposes the complexities surrounding digital culture aspects like personal identity and online platforms' performative nature. With an approach that blurs boundaries between art, self-expression, and social media use cases like Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter, among others, Molly actively challenges societal norms related to female identity, body image, and commodification of oneself (Geffen, 2018). Through her online presence alone, Molly highlights issues about these norms that need our attention today (Sauerlaender, 2020). One of her notable projects, named "I'm Just Happy to Be Here," features candid selfies uploaded to various social media sites without filters or artificial enhancements (Fig.5). The project highlights how much people tend to curate their online personas by presenting what suits them best, often hiding vulnerabilities or other aspects of themselves that help

shape who they are. The current undertaking brings to light the strain of maintaining an immaculate persona and disputes the idea of being genuine online.

Molly Soda effectively explores two sides of the same coin - privacy and the public space - in her artistic practice. Her piece named "Privacy Settings" exemplifies this approach most strikingly. She recorded conversations without taking consent from close friends to spark essential discussions about surveillance concerns over online sharing amidst blurred lines between what constitutes private vs. public space today. By challenging typical notions of privacy head-on through her art pieces like Privacy Settings or beyond selfies' realm through collaborations with other artists or audience engagement activities, Molly Soda unravels critical issues such as power dynamics embedded within social media practices by exploring themes like vulnerability or intimacy. It is worth noting that Molly Soda's oeuvre primarily speaks to contemporary photography - offering a much-needed introspective view of social media effects alike. She typically engages with these performative elements using them as subject matter and medium, exposing how authenticity issues can arise from online self-representation. With her engaging projects, Soda prompts viewers to interrogate their association with social media. Her work investigates how it impacts our sense of self-worth while highlighting the broader implications for digital culture and contemporary photography.

5. Conclusion

In essence, this essay has explored social media's impacts on photography in contemporary times. There is no question that these ubiquitous platforms have fundamentally altered how people interact with images-fostering novel styles at unprecedented rates and providing hitherto unimaginable self-promotion channels. Inevitably, the sheer volume and relentless barrage of images that flood people's screens have made it taxing for people to take everything in. Furthermore, social media has drastically altered the significance of what constitutes "art." How artists approach their medium now includes concerns such as digital identity and representation that reflect or resist social media's commodification of image production. Given this context, speculating on the future trajectory of photography in the digital age is an arduous task, except to acknowledge that whatever happens next will present unique challenges and opportunities for photographers while contributing to significant cultural transformations.

Reference list

Adams, T. (2017). *Trevor Paglen: Art in the Age of Mass Surveillance*. [online] The Observer. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/25/trevor-paglen-art-in-age-of-mass-surveillance-drones-spy-satellites>.

Alshawaf, E. (2021). iPhoneography as Visual Literacy: How Image-Making Practices on Social Media Encourage Creative Growth. *TechTrends*, 65, pp.896–906. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-021-00631-7>.

Arda, B. (2021). Ephemeral Social Media Visuals and Their Picturesque Design: Interaction and User Experience in Instagram Stories. *Film and Media Studies*, 19(1), pp.156–175. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2478/ausfm-2021-0010>.

Bosher, H. and Yeşiloğlu, S. (2018). An Analysis of the Fundamental Tensions between Copyright and Social Media: the Legal Implications of Sharing Images on Instagram. *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, 33(2), pp.164–186. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13600869.2018.1475897>.

Carah, N., Angus, D. and Burgess, J. (2022). Tuning Machines: an Approach to Exploring How Instagram's Machine Vision Operates on and through Digital Media's Participatory Visual Cultures. *Cultural Studies*, 37(1), pp.20–45. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2022.2042578>.

Dhanesh, G.S. and Rahman, N. (2021). Visual Communication and Public Relations: Visual Frame Building Strategies in War and Conflict Stories. *Public Relations Review*, 47(1), pp.1–11. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.102003>.

Geffen, S. (2018). *Molly Soda on Making Art from Your Online History*. [online] The Creative Independent. Available at: <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/molly-soda-on-making-art-from-your-online-history/> [Accessed 16 May 2023].

Glover, A. (2016). *Amalia Ulman: 'I Learn Things from the Performances That I Wouldn't Have Otherwise'*. [online] Studio International. Available at: <https://www.studiointernational.com/amalia-ulman-interview-privilege-labour-dance> [Accessed 16 May 2023].

Grundberg, A. (2021). *How Photography Became Contemporary Art: inside an Artistic Revolution from Pop to the Digital Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hand, M. (2020). Photography Meets Social Media: Image Making and Sharing in a Continually Networked Present. In: G. Pasternak, ed., *The Handbook of Photography Studies*. Routledge.

Hanna, R., Rohm, A. and Crittenden, V.L. (2011). We're All connected: the Power of the Social Media Ecosystem. *Business Horizons*, [online] 54(3), pp.265–273.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.007>.

Hargraves, H. (2020). Looking: Smartphone Aesthetics. In: E. Thompson and J. Mittell, eds., *How to Watch Television*. New York University Press, pp.41–50.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479837441.003.0008>.

Hariman, R. and Lucaites, J.L. (2007). *No Caption Needed: Iconic photographs, Public culture, and Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jurgenson, N. (2019). *Social Photo: on Photography and Social Media*. Verso Books.

Leaver, T., Highfield, T. and Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram : Visual Social Media Cultures*. Cambridge: Polity.

Mortensen, M. and McCrow-Young, A. (2022). *Social Media Images and Conflicts*. Taylor & Francis.

Myzelev, A. (2015). Creating Digital Materiality: Third-Wave Feminism, Public Art, and Yarn Bombing. *Material Culture*, 47(1), pp.58–78.

Ruigrok, S. (2018). *How This 2014 Instagram Hoax Predicted the Way We Now Use Social Media*. [online] Dazed. Available at: <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/39375/1/amalia-ulman-2014-instagram-hoax-predicted-the-way-we-use-social-media> [Accessed 16 May 2023].

Sauerlaender, T. (2020). A Short History of Self-Representation in Digital Art. *International Journal for Digital Art History*, (5), pp.2–17.

Serafinelli, E. (2018). *Digital Life on Instagram: New Social Communication of Photography*. Emerald Publishing.

Tifentale, A. and Manovich, L. (2018). Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self. In: J. Eckel, J. Ruchatz and S. Wirth, eds., *Exploring the Selfie*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp.167–187. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57949-8_8.