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Identity Construction on Instagram

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Abstract

There are different ways as to how identity is constructed in the world today. The term is a social and historical concept that comes as a result of communication with people around and within our surrounding. Globalization has aided the way we interact and react to things around us. Five different Instagram accounts were analyzed during this research in order to see if people constructed their identity based on a global or cultural norm. Therefore the goal throughout this paper is to explore the ways identity is being constructed in today's global world through the use of Instagram and how it changes in different cultural contexts.

Keywords: Identity, Online Identity, Social Media, Instagram

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1. Introduction

The question of online identity construction had already been explored many times. However, due to the fast development of technology and new methods of communication, it is still relevant to learn more about how the identity change and adapt to current communication platforms and channels. The aim of this article is to discover the differences and similarities between Instagram identity construction norms for each culture of the article authors: Brazilian, Francophone, Nigerian, Slavic, and Turkish. Based on Instagram pictures of both genders, the article distinguishes the global tendency of identity construction norms in all mentioned cultures. The research was made by using such methods as content and statistical analyses and semantic differential. At the hand of, amongst other, the theories of identity performance of Erving Goffman, John Berger's Signaling theory, and Judith Donath's Identity Signaling theory, the gathered data will be analysed and conclusions will be drawn. The research findings can be used for better understanding of online identity construction within particular cultures. It can also be a supplement for already existing studies and a fundament for further researches.

2. Literature Review

This sections provides an in-depht insight into the theoretical background of identity, perception, and online identity construction and aims to situate the research within the existing literature utilizing from some prominent theorists and their academic work.

2.1. Identity

Identity constructed online has its reflections and foundations on the publicly known identities as the studies show that, "Early research on online self-presentation mostly focused on identity constructions in anonymous online environments. Such studies found that individuals tended to engage in role-play games and anti-normative behaviors in the online world. We find that the identities produced in this nonymous environment differ from those constructed in the

anonymous online environments previously reported”¹ Moreover, therefore the correlation between the identity of the self and that which is anonymously constructed is what formulates a definition to the term identity. Considering the lens of the research, identity should be referred as Self-concept or self-identity as it is a "collection of beliefs about oneself that includes elements such as academic performance, gender identity, sexual identity, and racial identity.”² The embodiment of an answer to the question of “*Who I am*” would be what we refer to one's self-identity.³

It would be highly essential to mention the division of the self-proposed by Carl Rogers which has three different components of one's identity. The three elements constructing one's identity can be given as follows; self-image which is the view one has of himself, self-esteem which is the value one has for himself, and the ideal self which is how you wish you were really like.⁴ Because this research aims at examining the how identity constructed on Instagram, the identity definitions around self-image and ideal self would have particular significance on how users of Instagram reflect on their self-image and ideal self. More thoroughly, as defined by James D. Fearon, "Identity refer to either a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors or socially distinguishing features that a person takes special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential. In the latter sense, "Identity" is the modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honor that implicitly links these to social categories.”⁵ Therefore, the definitions of identity as mentioned above are remarkably

¹Zhao, Shanyang, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin. "Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships." *Computers in Human Behavior* 24.5 (2008): 1816-836. ScienceDirect. 5 Apr. 2017.

²Leflot, Geertje; Onghena, Patrick; Colpin, Hilde (2010). "Teacher–child interactions: relations with children's self-concept in second grade." *Infant and Child Development*. 19 (4): 385–405.

³Myers, David G. (2009). *Social psychology* (10th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

⁴Rogers, C. R. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships, as developed in the client-centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.), *Psychology: A Study of a Science*: Vol. 3 (pp. 184-256). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

⁵Fearon, James D. "What Is Identity (As We Now Use The Word)?" Department of Political Science Stanford University, 3 Nov. 1999. 5 Apr. 2017.

associative with how social categories, socially distinguishing features, and one's conception of dignity, pride, and honor are reflected on the identity constructed and perceived online.

2.2. Identity and Perception

Many scholars have written extensively on online identities and how it structures individuals' identities⁶. According to John T Warren et. al in their book "Communication: A Critical/Cultural Introduction," there is a difference between identity and perception. In chapter 4 of the book which talks about identify and perception, identity refers to who someone is, in the sense that your identification (your driver's license, your Social Security card, your student ID, etc.) refers to you. Perception, on the other hand, is someone's perspective or point of view. This is a helpful starting point for exploring how identity and perception are because they emerge from communication, more complex. Additionally, the writers argue in their book that identity is a compilation of your experiences as influenced by the social, political, and cultural factors that frame and mark those experiences. In other words, identity is, or the self is, the answer to the question "who am I?" with the added recognition that the "who" is always a little bit in flux, emerging from the cultures to which we belong. Perception, on the other hand, is how one sees the world, as influenced by the social, political, and cultural experiences that frame and mark her/him. The writers also discussed the use of identity and perception as a social construction and as a kind of performance. From a performance perspective, who we are is the result of our repeated, patterned human actions; in other words, as socially produced selves, our identities are always in the process of becoming. It may help to approach this explanation in pieces. The writers further stated that our identity regarding performance is as a result of four factors which are; who we are is the result of repeated actions, these actions are patterned, these are repeated patterns of human action and ourselves, our identities, are always in the process of becoming.

⁶Sage Publications. 'Communication: A Critical/Cultural Introduction.' Chapter 4. "Identity and Perception" John T.Warren, Deanna L.Fassett. 6 January 2014.

2.3. Online Identity

The communication on the Internet has become an enormous part of our everyday life, and as a result, we have a new level of identity that can be easily created, controlled and modified — an online identity.

Despite the fact that online identity seems to be pretty much unstable comparing to such identities as, for example, gender or national ones, it still plays an overwhelming role in our lives. Especially, when it comes to young and mid-aged generations. Richard Hold explains why an online identity is such an attractive thing for all of us. He argues that via communication through the Internet the real world physical becomes much less substantial. It means the notion of time and space is significantly changing. As a result, we communicate with the people with whom we may never see in the flesh, and it works as a trigger for creation a new better "self" without any visible consequences at first glance.⁷

Different social media also make us able to construct multiple online identities. That leads to some orientation on different target groups that vary from one social media to another. Concerning this fact Seargeant and Tagg pointed out that “if identities are discursively (and semiotically) constructed and dialogically performed, then nowhere is this more evident than on social media, where people have relative freedom to choose how they wish to present themselves, have the opportunity to address new, diverse and potentially global audiences, and have at their disposal a novel set of resources for doing so.”⁸ Online identity now is considered to be as permanent as an offline one. "Psychologists argue that this is valuable for the development of a sense of who one is, who one can be, and how one fits into different contexts." – Tells Alexs Krotoski from The Guardian.⁹

⁷Holt R., “Dialogue On the Internet: Language, Civic Identity, and Computer-mediated Communication Civic Discourse for the Third Millennium”, - Greenwood Publishing Group, (2004) p. 64

⁸Seargeant P., Tagg C. (eds.), “The Language of Social Media. Identity and Community on the Internet”, - PALGRAVE MACMILLAN UK (2014), p. 9

⁹Krotoski A., “Online identity: is authenticity or anonymity more important?” – The Guardian (19 April 2012), <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/apr/19/online-identity-authenticity-anonymity>>

2.4. Idealized Virtual-Identity and Extended Real-life Hypothesis

In 2008, Manago et al¹⁰, conducted research with MySpace users regarding their identities on that specific social media website. Basing the study on the knowledge that young adulthood is a crucial moment in someone's life when it comes to developing identity¹¹ moreover, that identity is also a process of discovery and learning about our "possible selves"¹² The study team conducted interviews with 23 students of different cultural groups: 8 European Americans, 5 Latinos, 5 Asian Americans, 4 Persian-Americans and 1 African American. Their answers pointed to the fact they knew of the fluidity of creating an online profile and used that to explore their identities by either cultivating a specific part of it online or experimenting with traits that are inhibited offline. The hypothesis tested in this work was called "Idealized Virtual-Identity". To counter the previously mentioned hypothesis, Back and his colleagues came up with the "Extended Real-life Hypothesis" after testing the Idealized Virtual-Identity theory¹³.

Here, the researchers used teenager participants as well, but only from Germany and the United States. The reason why idealizing your identity is hard is because social networking sites contain additional information that is connected to the reputation of one's profile. Friends also serve as accountability and feedback as shown by the results which favored the notion that our identity is transferred and not imagined online.

On the social networking site Instagram, the same issue arises when one attempts to overtly idealize their identity since real-life friends, and other acquaintances would easily pick up

¹⁰Manago, M. Adriana M, Michael B. Graham, Patricia M. Greenfield, Goldie Salimkhan "Self-presentation and gender on MySpace." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 29: 446-58. (2008)

¹¹Arnett, J. J. "Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties." *American Psychologist*, 55, 469-480. (2000)

¹²Waterman, A. S." Identity, the identity statuses, and identity status development: A contemporary statement. *Developmental Review*, 19, 591-621. (1999)

¹³Back, Mitja D., Juliane M. Stopfer, Simine Vazire, Sam Gaddis, Stefan C. Schmukle, Boris Egloff, and Samuel D. Gosling. "Facebook Profiles Reflect Actual Personality, Not Self-Idealization." *Psychological Science* 21.3 372-74. (2008)

on it and have the capabilities to publicly give feedback, and thus potentially call out the inaccuracy of the online identity compared to the offline counterpart.

2.5. Goffmanian Perspective

Goffman offers a general framework for Impression management and identity in social situations¹⁴. Most memorably, Goffman compares our everyday social interaction to a theater play. As such, in social interaction, there are actors, there is an audience, a stage, and a backstage. This framework Goffman offers is versatile, in that it need not only apply to interpersonal social situations but can also be applied to computer-mediated communication such as those on social networking sites.

Goffman calls the situation or context of social interaction, a "social establishment": "A social establishment is any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place. Within the walls of a social establishment, we find a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation." Goffman claims a social establishment can be viewed in four different ways. Each way of viewing gives a specific perspective, however, each observation is interrelated. A social establishment can be viewed "technically," which highlights the establishment's means to which an objective can be reached. It can also be viewed "politically," which focusses on the demands others can enforce, and other kinds of social controls which guide behavior within the establishment. When viewing an establishment "structurally" horizontal and vertical status divisions resulting in group structures can be observed. Finally, when viewing an establishment "culturally," one looks at the cultural morals and values which influence the activity in the establishment. Within a social establishment, we perform a role. According to Goffman, it is through the performance of this role that we come to build our sense of self. "In our society the character one performs, and one's self are somewhat equated, and this self-as-character is usually

¹⁴Goffman, Erving. "The presentation of self in everyday life." New York: Anchor Books. (1959).

seen as something housed within the body of its possessor." The self is a product resulting from the performances done in social situations.

In this research paper, we can regard the social networking site (SNS) Instagram as a "social establishment." For example, looking at Instagram "technically" as a social establishment, we understand that the SNS imposes limitations to how one can behave and communicate to achieve one's goals. Looking at Instagram "politically," we can see how the SNS can communicate social controls or social influences via feedback systems such as Likes, comments, and followership. Group structures and status divisions can also be witnessed on Instagram when looking at it "structurally." Group structures can be perceived in an Instagram user's list of followers, and whom they follow themselves, revealing. Comparisons between the number of followers an Instagram users has compared to another can also indicate a type of social status. Looking at Instagram as a Goffmanian social establishment "culturally" is most interesting to learn about the cultural differences in the usage of the global SNS Instagram.

Goffman draws a stark division between frontstage and backstage, or front region and back region. In the back stage, performances are prepared for when they are exercised on the front stage. The notion of building up of an identity through performance every time it is called upon to do so due to a social situation is compared to scaffolding by Goffman. Scaffolding is temporary, in that we put them up when needed, and taken down when the performance has made its desired impact. As such, scaffolding is in place in situations of the first contact, such as a first date or a job interview. As the audience gradually builds up a stable and desired understanding of your identity, this scaffolding, i.e. front stage role performance can be relaxed. This notion of front- and backstage, along with scaffolding, becomes interesting when we apply it to how identity is constructed on Instagram. A key difference between interpersonal communication and communication via SNS is that, is that, although interpersonal communication is in real-time and one can see their audience, on Instagram, one has no control over when their audience watches their "play," nor does the Instagram account author need to see

or know their audience. As such, one's Instagram account could be regarded as scaffolding which will never be taken down, or in other words, relaxed.

The performing of roles is a form of information dissemination. The audience builds up a notion of the actor's identity through the reception of information from the performer. Goffman argued people manipulate "sign vehicles" which include conduct and appearance and which signal information. Such "sign vehicles" are arguably all that the communication of identity through Instagram is about. Instagram, giving its users control over when and what to share, and what they share being predominantly visual communication, enables or conditions its users to take extra care in manipulating the "sign vehicles" they broadcast.

2.6. Identity Signaling

Berger suggests an identity-signaling approach can help explain the divergence of identities and social groups through the signals they emit¹⁵. Berger's approach looks at cultural practices, products or tastes, and suggests these elements serve as signals for identity. For a cultural taste to become a signal of identity, it has to gain value. Value is imbued in the expression of a cultural taste when people draw associations between a cultural product and a social group. Berger goes further suggesting identity-signaling results in the spread of culture.

Similar to Goffman's "sign vehicles," Berger puts more emphasis on the cultural relativism of identity signals. As such, Instagram users may post images with identity signals which only communicate the desired meaning or value to recipients of their culture or circle. Recipients from other cultures may inadvertently decode Instagram images and conclude values in identity signals which are not congruent to the communicational aim of the sender, i.e. Instagram account holder.

¹⁵Berger, John. "Identity-Signaling, Social Influence, and Social Contagion," in *Understanding peer influence in children and adolescents.*, (pp. 181-199). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press, xiv, 255 pp.

2.7. Social Identity and Identity Prototypes

Individual's Social identity refers to what type of person he/she is¹⁶. Through social network sites, in the case of the paper; Instagram, individual users reflect their social identities to online platforms. According to Judith Donath "Social identity is fundamental to all social interaction: people want to know about others' beliefs, status, affiliations, and intentions to interpret their words and actions and to predict their future behavior."¹⁷ Individuals engage with social interactions through social network sites with the intent of building relationships by constructing their identities through their posts. In this way, the followers of the individual can predict their future behavior according to one's constructed online identity.

Donath differentiates the signaling theory between the animal world and human beings by reflecting the idea of social identity. "The signaling examples from the world of biology have been simple mappings, with a direct correspondence between signal and trait: big horns indicate strength. Our interpretation of social identity is more complex. We bring to the process some pre-existing prototypes, and we form our impressions of each other by identifying them with one or another of these prototypes."¹⁸ The origin of biological signaling theory differs from perceiving social identity. As mentioned above through the behaviors of individuals others can predict the future behaviors of the account holders. As human behaviors and interactions are different from animals, human beings perceive specific prototypes according to their cultures. Hence, the cultural aspects of an individual can affect the impression of the account holder. Judith Donath explains this by highlighting "the relative lack of identity cues necessitates relying more on one's personal prototypes to infer details about others, while the cultural difference among participants means that these prototypes, and thus the resulting impressions, are likely to be disparate."¹⁹ On the other hand, she emphasizes the importance of common cultures in social interactions by

¹⁶Donath, Judith. "Signaling Identity," Sociable Media Group, 10 May 2007. PDF.

¹⁷Donath, Judith. "Signaling Identity," Sociable Media Group, 10 May 2007. PDF.

¹⁸Donath, Judith. "Signaling Identity," Sociable Media Group, 10 May 2007. PDF.

¹⁹Donath, Judith. Signaling Identity., Sociable Media Group, 10 May 2007. PDF.

highlighting "The more people share a common culture, the more likely it is that their social prototypes will be similar."²⁰ Hence, the common culture might provide a better understanding of account holder's online identity through the social prototypes within the culture.

2.8. A New Borderless Mainstream Culture

The 21st century is surely the century of technological progress regarding media and communication with the era of Internet and, more specifically, the emergence of social media. Instagram allows people to transcend physical boundaries and creates a mainstream culture. Thus, the social networking theory, saying that people and groups who surround or are close to each other "share the same characteristics, values and social statuses"²¹, applies to a worldwide stage. Interactions are not contained into a certain culture anymore since the network grows. Numerous social exchanges from different backgrounds create more opportunities for finding the most suitable idea of self-identity.

Additionally, new communication platforms offer a consequent amount of entertainment which is now considered as an "extension of everyday life and a tool of cultural change"²². Consumption of social media and especially Instagram encourages the social comparison since the question of identity lies on the idea of the type of person we want to be²³. Having access to many more successful and attractive person who might gather thousands of followers and fame support the complex process of homogenization, standardization, and assimilation of culture.²⁴

²⁰Donath, Judith. Signaling Identity., Sociable Media Group, 10 May 2007. PDF.

²¹Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings. Broché – 5 décembre 2011 de Charles Kadushin

²²Singh, C. (2010). New Media and Cultural Identity. China Media Research, 6(1), 86-90.

²³Arnett, J. J. (2010). Adolescence and emerging adulthood: A cultural approach. (4th edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-Prentice Hall

²⁴ Julia Khrebtan-Hoerhager. (Re-)Negotiating cultural identity through social media. Scientific publications of the Humanities and Social Sciences University of Lille, Mar 2012. 5 April 2017

Like in the offline world, Instagram tends to create a mainstream but hybrid culture with its codes and rules, without geographical frontiers.²⁵

The cultural effacement occurring on Instagram is highly supported by the desire of fame – and by extension power - since it does not require any specific talent to success than following what is the main trend and imitate it. Consequently, the Instagram ideal will become the general one regardless of the cultural aspect.

2.9. Revival of Cultural Identity in the Face of Globalization

In the world today, globalization has also had an impact on how identity is viewed and perceived. Globalization is not just another word we use in describing the growth of multinational and transnational companies. It is all the sociocultural processes that contribute to making distance irrelevant.²⁶ In the new era of globalization, people become much more concerned about the uniqueness and particularity of their culture. Cultural identity provides the global significance of local knowledge and the sense of self, community, and nation.²⁷ According to Manuel Castells, a professor of Sociology and Regional Planning at the University of California, the development of globalization process has co-existed with a reaffirmation of different cultural identities: religious, national, ethnic territorial, gendered and other specific identities.²⁸ Castells also argues that our world and our lives are being shaped by two opposite trends which are globalization and the integrity of identities. Cultural identity is not a collection of thoughts, beliefs, tradition and language. It is a work plan created by people for their future activities based on their past experiences. Therefore in the new age of information in our world today, culture, identity, and globalization have created a different feeling among people. For

²⁵Kraidy, Marwan. *Hybridity, Or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Temple University Press, 2005.

²⁶UN Chronicle. "Globalization and the Politics of Identity." Thomas Hylland Eriksen. Autumn 1999

²⁷"Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity." Yi Wang. Harbing Engineering University China. 2007.

²⁸University of California, Berkeley. "Globalization and Identity" Manuel Castells. Accessed: May 2017.

some, it is an instrument for establishing universal unity and democracy based on a global culture signified as a "global village"²⁹

2.10. Instagram

Instagram is one of the youngest and fast developing social networks and a mobile application. The social network is mainly focused on capturing and sharing visuals, pictures and short videos, on which different manipulation tools or "filters" can be applied to change the appearance of a visual. Visuals also can be shared on other social networks, as well, including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, and Foursquare. Before posting photos and videos, the network gives a possibility to its users to add captions, hashtags (the "#" symbol) to describe the visuals or to attract more attention, and mention other users by including the "@" symbol to create a link from the post to another user's account.

Instagram was introduced in October 2010 and was bought by Facebook in April 2012, and by December 2016 "had reached 600 million monthly active users"³⁰. Pew report confirms the great success of the social network and states that "photos and videos have become key social currencies online"³¹ which proves that the social network. In addition to photo and video capturing, Instagram allows users to follow other people. Moreover, the network is asymmetric, which means that user can follow many other people, but they do not have to follow that user back. By default user's account is open and visible to anyone, but it can be changed in privacy settings, meaning that their posted materials will be available only to the user's followers. These

²⁹"Media, Globalization of Culture and Identity Crisis in Developing Countries." Sedegh Babran. Iran Islamic Azad University. Accessed: May 2017.

³⁰ Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Instagram: active users 2016." (2016): Statista. Web. 05 Apr. 2017. <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/>>.

³¹Rainie, Lee, Joanna Brenner, and Kristen Purcell. "Photos and Videos as Social Currency Online." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. N.p., 12 Sept. 2012. Web. 05 Apr. 2017. <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/09/13/photos-and-videos-as-social-currency-online/>>.

functions allow us to call Instagram a "social awareness stream"³² as other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Having a better understanding of Instagram is important as it provides us with a better awareness of social, cultural and environmental issues among people and their activities (through the prism of visuals). After all, "[a picture] is worth a thousand words"³³. According to The Statistics Portal, "Due to the apps visual nature and high user engagement rate, Instagram is also a valuable social media marketing tool. As of 2014, 67 percent of luxury retail brands that were active on social media also had an Instagram profile"³⁴. Moreover, findings demonstrate that "Instagram influencers with high numbers of followers are considered more likable, mostly because they are considered more popular. Important, only in limited cases, perceptions of popularity due to the influencer's number of followers, lead to perceptions of opinion leadership"³⁵.

2.11. Visual Rhythm and Cultural Rhythm

Nadav Hochman and Raz Schwartz used the Cultural Analytics approach to find visual differences between the posting behavior of Instagram users from New York City and Tokyo³⁶. The study amassed over 100.000 Instagram pictures geotagged to NYC and Tokyo across one week. Using visualization techniques to gather meaning from the large sample, the team found different patterns in Instagram posting behavior. These differences included different quantities

³²Naaman, Mor, Jeffrey Boase, and Chih-Hui Lai. "Is It Really About Me? Message Content In Social Awareness Streams." New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University, School of Communication and Information, 2010. Web. 5 Apr. 2017. <<http://infolab.stanford.edu/~mor/research/naamanCSCW10.pdf>>.

³³Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2010. Print. P. 48.

³⁴Bureau of Labor Statistics. Opt. cit.

³⁵De Veirman, Marijke, Veroline Cauberghe, and Liselot Hudders. "Marketing Through Instagram Influencers: Impact of Number of Followers and Product Divergence on Brand Attitude." *15th International Conference on Research in Advertising*. 2016. Print.

³⁶Hochman, Nadav, and Schwartz, Raz. "Visualizing Instagram: Tracing Cultural Visual Rhythms" *International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (2012): n. pag. Web. 7 May. 2017

of posted images depending on the time of day, and the day of the week, and different dominant color tones. These temporal patterns and tonal patterns combine into what the authors call the geographically-bound "Visual Rhythm." Although this paper will not go into such details such as when the Instagram posts are posted, nor will it focus primarily on tonal patterns, however, this paper will borrow the idea of Hochman and Schwartz of finding meaning in geographically-bound patterns of Instagram postings. As such, a kind of "Cultural Rhythm" will be sought after.

2.12. Image Categories and User Types

Responding to the lack of research on the behavior of Instagram users, Yuheng Hu, Lydia Manikonda and Subbarao Kambhampati set out to be pioneers: "To the best of our knowledge, we believe this is the first paper to conduct a deep analysis of photo content and user activities and types on Instagram."³⁷ What they found was eight types, or categories, of Instagram images: self-portraits, friends, activities, captioned photos (pictures with embedded text), food, gadgets, fashion, and pets, where the first six types are much more popular. Furthermore, five types of users were identified through an analysis of the type of images they posted. As such, one of the five types of Instagram users appeared to post many captioned photos. Another Instagram user type was identified through the disproportionate posting of selfies. This categorizing of images and defining of user types can be very useful in finding cultural differences in Instagram posting behaviors.

3. Research Design

According to John T Warren et. al in their book "Communication: A Critical/Cultural Introduction," identity is the result of repeated actions, these actions are patterned, and identity is repeated patterns of human action. Therefore, we have analyzed how identity is constructed on Instagram, by trying to uncover patterns in posting behavior. A content analysis of Instagram accounts also aims to reveal differences and similarities in Instagram posting behavior between

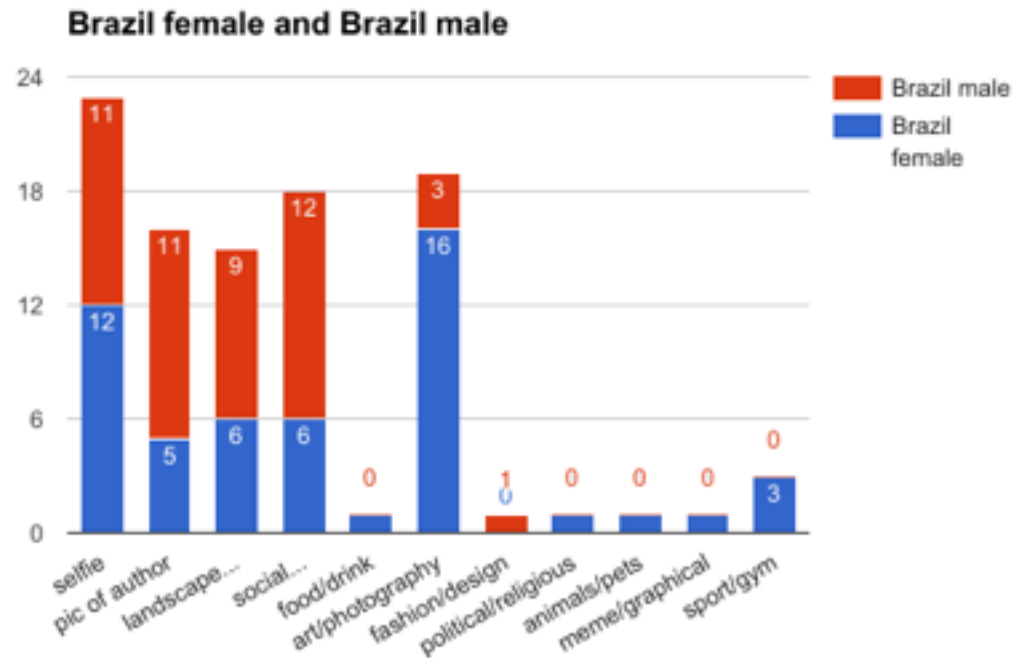
³⁷Hu, Yuheng, Manikonda, Lydia, and Kambhampati, Subbarao. "What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types" *International AAAI Conference on The Web and Social Media* (2014): n. pag. Web. 7 May. 2017

individuals from different cultures. Moreover, just as Hochman and Schwartz looked for patterns in Instagram posting and what they call “visual rhythm,” this paper will also look for patterns to figure out a “cultural rhythm.” The aim of the paper is to find out if there is a different Instagram identity construction norm for each culture, or if a global identity construction norm dominates.

The research question will be studied within the context of 6 different countries, separated by five cultures: Turkey, France, Russia/Ukraine, Brazil, and Nigeria. According to their great cultural similarities, Russia and Ukraine were analyzed together. For every culture, six accounts were taken randomly from public accounts, three males and three females for a total of 30 accounts. The users are between 18 and 30 years-old because of the urge to construct an identity and perform it is crucial for this group. Moreover, the target group needs to have between 100 and 500 followers because it is the average number most people on Instagram have. From those 30 accounts, the last nine pictures were analyzed and categorized into 11 categories: selfie, a picture of the user, landscape/travel/nature, social life and family, food and beverage, art and photography, fashion and design, politics and religion, animals, meme and graphics and finally sport. Those categories represent the different aspect of identity through the message it conveys and expands the eight categories suggested by Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati: self-portraits, friends, activities, captioned photos (pictures with embedded text), food, gadgets, fashion, and pets. We decided to add three categories to broaden the analysis.

4. Research Results

4.1. Brazilian Instagram users



The six Brazilian accounts analyzed showed that selfies are not as abundant as many would believe. Only 23 selfies were found, less than half of all the 54 pictures analyzed. Pictures that had the owners of the accounts were also not that many: only five for female and 11 for male users. Unlike the selfie category, where we had 11 male selfies and 12 female selfies, there is a clear difference between men and women in this regard. Another big disparity is in the art and photography category. Female users posted 16 images that had some artistic quality to them such as light and posed while men only did the same three times, making less use of filters and different angles, for example. Even though men posted more pictures with friends and in social interactions than women, 12 to six, all but one profile had at least one picture with friends. Landscape and travel pictures are also numerous (15). In this category, men also posted more nine to six. The other categories such as food and drink, political, pets and memes had only one picture for each and from female users in all cases. The sports and gym categories had only three pictures all from a single female profile. Fashion, a popular category in Instagram in general, had only one picture found in a male profile and none from female Brazilians.

A deeper analysis from the data gathered from Brazilians can be connected to the notion that Brazilians are warm and friendly³⁸. The majority of profiles had pictures with friends or family members posing together and always smiling. A big number of pictures also go with the motion that Brazilians love beaches, according to the Brazilian Government³⁹, the ten most visited places in the country include seven cities known for their beaches. Most of the travel and landscape pictures had beaches or the ocean shown, and most of them were from Brazil and not different countries. Although there has been many political scandals and protests in Brazil in the last years, very few people chose to use Instagram to express their opinions. Selfies were the most popular category, which is not a surprise since more than 160 million Brazilians are using smartphones⁴⁰. Another category that could prove to be popular within Brazilian Instagram users, Gym and Sport, was not very present in the analysis with no pictures depicting a football match, for example. The biggest difference was in the photography/art category. Women posted more of those pictures, but no study indicates that women enjoy photography and art more than men.

On the number of pictures with friends and family — this style can be compared to one of the user profiles that Hu et al found. Brazilians appear to care just as much about their friends as they care about themselves. Still, not all profiles are alike, and the signaling theory can be applied here. Those who posted more artistic pictures had fewer pictures with friends or family, on the other hand, users who had many pictures with friends had fewer pictures with filters, different angles or portraits. This can show an attempt to dissociate themselves with the Brazilian stereotype, by posting more abstract images and fewer pictures in social interactions. Even though there is this small clash of Brazilian identities, we can say that there is a similarity between cultures since Brazilian users had almost the same number of selfies as the

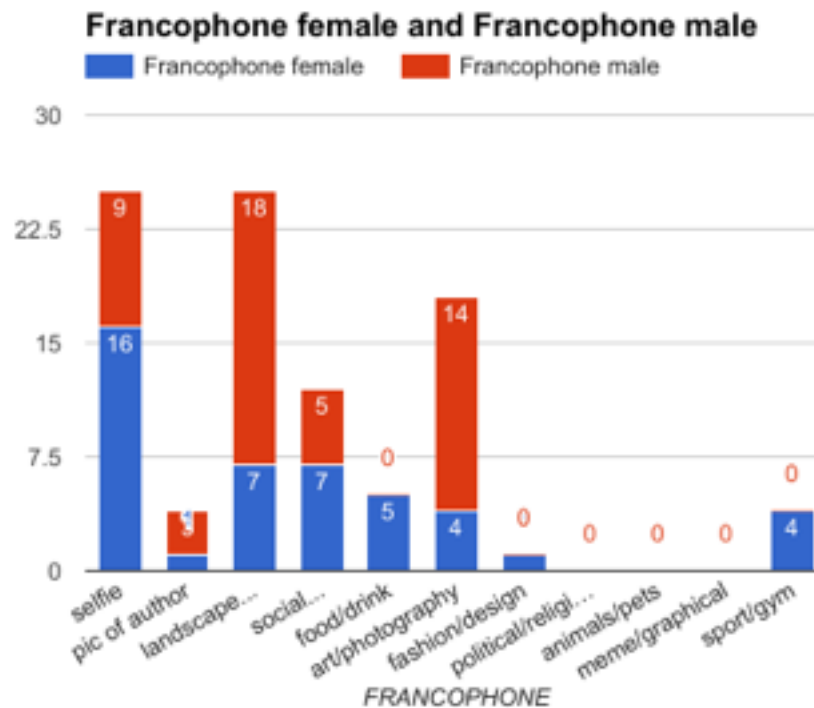
³⁸Rezende, Claudia Barcellos. "Stereotypes and National Identity: Experiencing the "Emotional Brazilian."" *Identities* 15.1 (2008): 103-22.

³⁹"Destinos preferidos pelos turistas receberam investimento de R\$ 725 mi." Portal Brasil. (2016). Accessed: 06 May 2017. <<http://www.brasil.gov.br/turismo/2016/04/destinos-preferidos-pelos-turistas-receberam-investimentos-de-r-725-mi>>.

⁴⁰Fundação Getúlio Vargas - "27ª Pesquisa Anual de Administração e Uso de Tecnologia da Informação nas Empresas". (2016). Web. <<http://eaesp.fgvsp.br/sites/eaesp.fgvsp.br/files/pesti2016gvciappt.pdf>>

Francophone, Nigerian and Slavic users, this also applies to the number of pictures with friends and family. Finally, while we can identify some traits of the Brazilian identity in Instagram, they are not more noticeable compared to other countries. Slavic accounts had, even more, pictures with social interactions than Brazilian ones, contrasting the warm versus cold stereotype. This can point to a global culture that Instagram users are part of.

4.2. Francophone Instagram users



Out of the 54 total Instagram images in the sample of six francophone Instagram accounts, just under half of the images were categorized as selfies. Francophone female Instagram users appeared to post almost twice as many selfies than their male counterparts. Compared to a large number of selfies, only four non-selfie pictures of the author were found. Pictures of landscapes, nature, and travel were just as common as selfies. However, the male francophone Instagram users posted them more than twice as often than their female counterparts. Pictures portraying social life occurred half as much as either selfies or pictures of nature and travel. Pictures of food and drinks were few but were notably only found in the female francophone Instagram accounts. A third of the 54 images were categorized as being

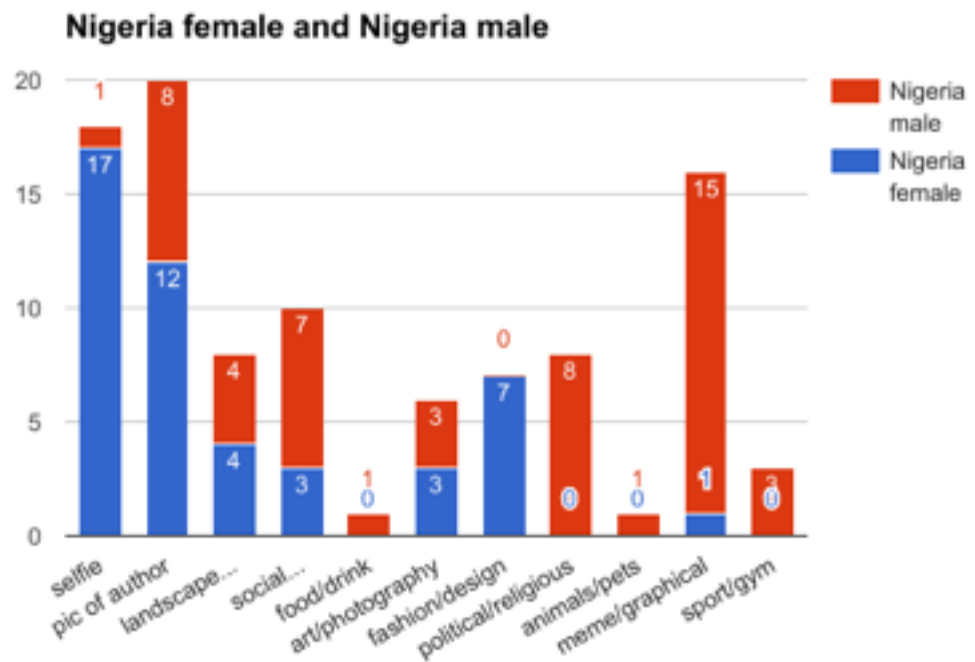
artistic and related to the art of photography. More than two-thirds of these were posted by male francophone Instagram users. No pictures related to fashion, design, politics, religion, animals or pets were found. Nor were there any non-photographic images spotted. A mere four of the 54 images sampled included images related to sporting or gym activities. All of these were posted by female francophone users.

The prominence of selfies in the francophone sample is similar to that of other cultures. It would be seen that selfies are a universal visual language on Instagram and central to the construction of one's Instagram identity, regardless of culture. The French culture is known for its secularity, or *laïcité*, which is ingrained in the French psyche, and that may be why there was not a single religious Instagram post. However, this lack of religious, and also political communication through Instagram images seems also to characterize other cultures in the study results. Similarly to other cultures, art photography pictures were prominent. This can be due to a global trend of art photography which is enabled by the increased accessibility of photographic technology, and, arguably, through a new culture of photography which Instagram might spearhead. Another cause for the high amount of art photography images could be due to France's relationship with art and culture. It is said that the arts and culture are seen as sacrosanct in France⁴¹, and as such, a French person may choose to signal this aspect of their cultural identity through artsy imagery. One francophone Instagram user, in particular, devoted his entire Instagram account to showcase his photographic works. Finally, francophone Instagram users appeared to share the most amount of pictures of travel and landscapes compared to any other researched culture. However, whether this is a result of culture or a consequence of economic privilege is not immediately clear. A survey by Timetric in 2014, however, did see France ranked 10 in countries in which their inhabitants travel the most - more than any of the other countries representing the cultures of the scope of this paper⁴².

⁴¹Chrisafis, Angelique. "France and the arts: a new revolution" *The Guardian*. *The Guardian News and Media Limited*. 24 March 2011. Web. 6 May 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/24/france-arts-revolution>>

⁴²"Which countries travel the most?" *The Telegraph*. *Telegraph Media Group Limited*. 18 Oct 2014. Web. 6 May 2017. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/galleries/Which-countries-travel-the-most/>>

4.3. Nigerian Instagram Users



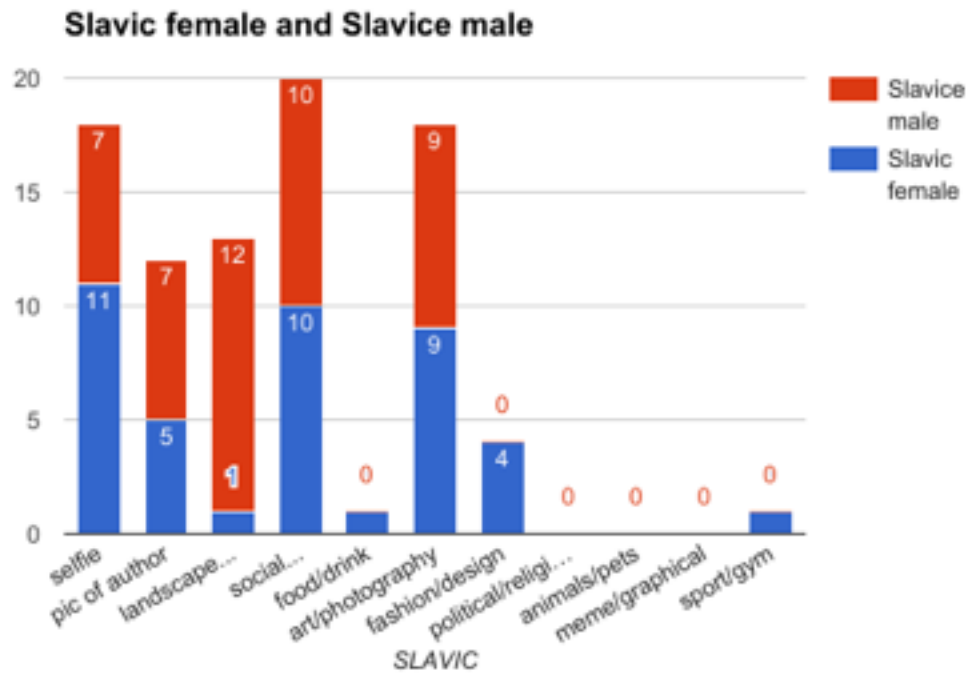
Six Instagram accounts were also analyzed to show how and what Nigerians use their accounts for on Instagram. Similar to the research result in Brazil, only a total of 18 selfies were found among Nigerian Instagrammers. Out of the 18 selfie shots analyzed the result showed that just one male Instagram user had a selfie picture in his profile. This is also less than half of the 54 pictures analyzed. However, regarding the picture of the author, the result was closer. Out of 20 pictures of the authors, 12 belonged to the male accounts while eight belonged to the females. In the category of Landscape, art & photography, the results were even among both male and females. Both males and females have 4 Landscape photos each and three photos each relating to art and photography. The category of Animals & Pets was also pretty low with only one male user have a picture of an animal in his profile. Results in the categories of Sports & Gym and Food & Drinks was also low as well with a total of just 1 and three pictures respectively. The male users had more pictures (7), showing their social lives as well as eight pictures showing their political and religious status. The female users had more pictures 7 in the category of Fashion while the male users had no picture attributing them to this category. Finally, the results

showed that a significant amount (15) of the male Instagrammers in Nigeria were more into the use of Memes and Graphics as opposed to just one from the female Instagram users.

Further analysis of how Nigerians use their Instagram account showed that a majority of their picture relied heavily on the use of Meme and other graphical photos. This is no surprise as the research carried out by the Department of Computer Science at Arizona State University proved that the use "caption photos" (pictures with embed texts and memes) are one of the main photo categories on Instagram. However, the memes and captioned photos used by the Nigerian Instagrams also revealed something else. Most of the memes related to the user's religious beliefs. This supports the result of the survey carried out by the BBC on religious beliefs in 2004. The survey concluded that Nigeria is the most religious nation in the world with over 90% of Nigerians saying that they believed in God.⁴³

⁴³“Reasons Why we are Religious” James Damia Our Vision Magazine Vol 5 (3), 2004.

4.4. Slavic Instagram Users



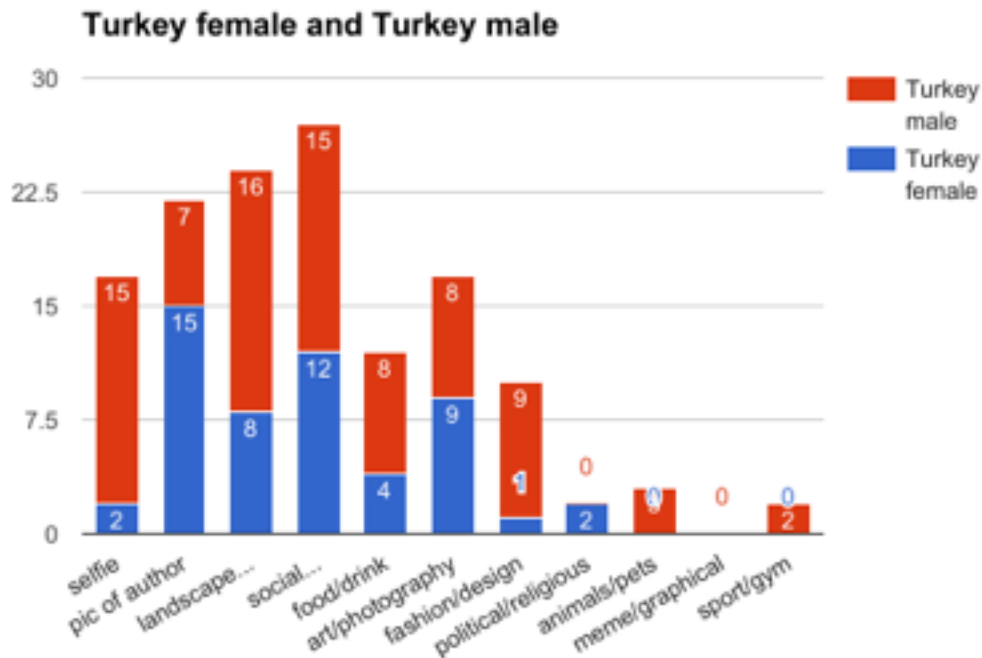
Out of 54 images in the sample of six Slavic Instagram accounts, just a third were categorized as selfies. Notably, more female than male users of the whole sampling tend to post selfies. Simultaneously, in male accounts, the same number of photographs in the category of non-selfie pictures can be found. While comparing to selfies, in female accounts there are six pictures less in the category that had the owners of the accounts portrayed. Pictures of landscapes can primarily be found in the male Slavic Instagram accounts. The biggest amount of pictures, namely 20, are portraying social life. Moreover, they are evenly divided between male and female Instagram users. Eighteen images were categorized as art and photography. Here, male and female users are also parted evenly. Only four pictures which were allocated to fashion and design category. All of them were posted by male users. The least number of pictures were found in such categories as food and drinks, and sport and gym, but notably only in the female Slavic Instagram accounts. No pictures related to politics, religion, animals, pets were found. Nor were there any non-photographic images spotted.

According to the Goffman, the social aspect and "social establishment" are critical for identity construction. It can be seen from the results of Slavic Instagram users profiles data analysis, that the pictures of social life dominate in both male and female accounts. Which is typical for Slavic mentality when family and friends have an overwhelming part in everyday life.⁴⁴ However, the selfie has a leading position in female account chart, which means that global stereotype that women care more about their appearance can be applied to Slavic culture as well. The pictures that contain fashion are typical only for the female users that also show the big gender gap that still exists in this culture.⁴⁵ At the same time, landscapes are the most popular theme for Slavic male Instagram users. That can be interpreted as an indifference of Slavic males to their appearance and attempt to construct their online identity through showing "outside world." Another big amount of pictures in the accounts of both genders is art and photography. Usually, pictures of this type in Slavic culture are used to show the intellectual level of the person. Pictures of the author for Slavic people are also more about social life. They show the author is doing something with another person, who was asked to take a picture. The pictures of food are not so popular as well as the gym, political/religious, Instagram and pets. Those aspects of life are also not so relevant for Slavs in the everyday life.

⁴⁴Sobolevskaya O., "Russians value the traditional family," IQ, National Research University Higher School of Economics, November 14, 2014, <<https://iq.hse.ru/en/news/177666358.html>>

⁴⁵Global Gender Gap Index 2016, World Economic Forum, <<http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/rankings/>>

4.5. Turkish Instagram Users



For Instagram analysis 3 Turkish female and 3 Turkish male Instagram users were randomly picked. Out of 54 pictures, in total, approximately half of the pictures belongs to Social/Friends/Party category. This category is followed by Landscape/Travel/Nature by 24 pictures. There are 22 non-selfie (picture of the author) pictures which more female Instagram users shared. When female accounts shared 15 pictures of themselves, only seven pictures of male accounts included pictures of themselves. However, in selfie category, we see the opposite. Turkish male Instagram users tend to share more selfies than female Instagram users. In this category, one can see that 15 selfies were shared by male users and only two selfies were shared by female users out of overall 22 selfie pictures. Art and photography category includes only 17 pictures divided between female and male users. 12 out of 54 pictures belong to the food and drink category. Political/religious, animals/pets, meme/graphical and sport/gym categories are the least shared pictures. Only two political pictures were shared by female users. Only three animal/pet and two sport/gym pictures were shared by only male Instagram users.

Considering the fact that half of the pictures fall under the Social /Friends/Party category, it can be stated that, as John T. Warren et. al in their book "Communication: A Critical/Cultural Introduction" explained, the target group is aware of the correlation between augmented reality and the physical reality one attempts to re-shape through the vessels of social media. The online identity of Turkish Instagram users are widely based on group pictures which reflect on the collectivist cultural aspect, pictures with friends in social zones, sharing pets and foods which is an inevitable part of Turkish culture, and landscape pictures either from a trip abroad or places like beach and nature. The manipulated and re-structured agenda of an Instagram user is laid out with the intention of reinforcing the desired identity profile, and therefore the dichotomy between the one's true and perceived is fostered. This can be highly seen in pictures where friends are enjoying time together supported by drink or food and also in pictures that tend to be non-identificatory towards the account user which in a way makes the person appealing to people of other cultures. The elusiveness of identity through social media and playfulness of time and space wise notional and intangible social media environment appear to be the components to which majority of the Instagram users adhere. This is quite obvious in pictures that are supported by a landscape in the background to give the picture a meaning of sort of art and aesthetics. This very idea can be supported by Richard Hold as He sees the online identity construction a phenomenon which diminishes the substantiality of one's true existing and furthermore it mitigates the potential consequences of one's online conduct. Therefore, the least adhered categories of political/religious, animals/pets, meme/graphical and sport/gym can be provided as a backup rationale why selfies and self-portrait pictures are far more appealing than the rest, and how widely and more efficiently selfies contribute to the construction of an intended identity in the given culture.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore whether users of Instagram construct their identity according to local or cultural norms, or if global or universal norms appear to dominate. In the literature review, different theories and aspects of identity, and its online counterpart were

analyzed to get an understanding of how identity is constructed, and perceived, on the social networking site. The research team, consisting of members from five different cultures (Brazilian, Francophone, Nigerian, Slavic, and Turkish) went on to explore whether there were similarities or differences between how identities were constructed on Instagram by members of their respective culture. This was done through a content analysis of thirty randomly sampled Instagram accounts, six from each culture, and a total of 270 images posted collectively by these users. These images were subsequently classed as pertaining from 11 non-exclusive categories.

In Goffmanian terms, the social networking site Instagram can be regarded as a social establishment, and as Goffman suggests, can be analyzed from a cultural point of view. From the image categorisation results, image posting patterns which were, to the extreme, unique to a single culture, were not found. Instead, the research results revealed that the types of images posted enjoyed a somewhat cross-cultural prominence. For example, images about the categories of selfie, picture of author, landscape, and social were posted by every culture. However, political images, animals, memes, and images related to gym and sports, did not seem to be as ubiquitous. Interestingly, for the sampled Nigerian Instagram users, it appeared to be popular to post graphical images with text, and as such, may reveal a culturally specific appropriation of Instagram as a tool of identity construction.

In general, the research results revealed that pictures pertaining to the selfie category, i.e. selfies, proved to be the most common, and thus most globally shared mean of constructing one's identity on Instagram. Even though Instagram images pertaining to the selfie category were not necessarily reported to be the most popular for every culture, they were nonetheless popular for every culture. As such, we can agree that selfies are a primary tool shared between cultures for one to construct their identity on the social networking site. However, regarding the usage of selfies, and particularly the use of other images, cultural fluctuations persisted. For example, Turkish and Slavic account holders seemed to tend to build their online identities by sharing more pictures portraying their social circles. On the other hand, French and Nigerian account holders did not share such pictures nearly as much as Turkish and Slavic Instagram users.

Identity signaling theory looks at how certain cues or signals, within the context of a certain culture, signal a certain identity. However, Instagram may pose limitations to the breadth of cultural cues through its technological limitations. The technological limitations of Instagram may influence how identities are built, in that, uniquely local means of identity expression may be impossible, and a more globally shared mean of expression may arise. This may explain why some expressive aspects of the sample of the research are shared. Another reason could be that Instagram imposes new identity prototypes as a result of, or complementing, the digital age culture. In general, it can be assumed that, as a result of the global appeal of Instagram, the ways in which the social networking site is used converge. Whether this reflects a universal human behavioral trait or the structural and technical aspects of Instagram, is not clear.

A great limitation of the research has to do with the subjective nature of identity perception. The presumed identity an Instagram users builds up does not reside in his or her account, nor his or her pictures. Instead, the identity which is perceived resides in the eye of the beholder, i.e. the mind of the observer. This kind of observer bias may result in the research team seeing certain cues, and making a conclusion regarding identity, while at the same time being oblivious to other cues, which may be uniquely cultural. Although the members of the research team analyzed Instagram accounts from their culture, a given country need not have one solid culture and can have many branches with each unique identity prototypes and identity signals. If one of the researchers does not have this identity prototype in their cultural knowledge, certain identity signals may not be seen or may be misread, and thus the analysis may be skewed. In further research, this observer bias can be avoided by relying more thoroughly on objective quantitative means of analysis on a larger sample.

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