

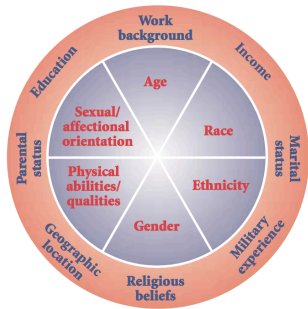
Theoretical Framework:

This paper is written through the lens of aesthetic, educational and social theories. These theories were chosen specifically due to the fact that I wanted to explore how to teach the belief that in the 21st century we use social media platforms such as facebook and instagram as tools to create and share our visual identities with a larger audience. At the same time, however, expression of self often perpetuates or communicates larger cultural values that have existed and prevailed since far before this day and age. As teachers we should bring this pattern to our students' attention and teach so that they have the skills and mindset to make changes to these values. This is important to meet the needs of the current culture. I believe to properly analyze and teach about this visual culture we must consider not only what exists as the cultural "norm" but also what the culture would look like if it was represented in a different way. In 2001, Assistant Professor Patreese D. Ingram described this as "Diversity Competence" or "Diversity Awareness." This is the theory that to truly examine culture we must identify how, understand in what way and then accept that the world is full of diverse individuals. Diversity Awareness also encourages us to consider that diversity has dimensions that affect individuals in different ways but ultimately still exist as a similar way to define their identity. In this paper I will use these dimensions to help guide me in the creation of the questions prompting students to consider the many ways that we are the same and different.

In addition to this theory, I will use the concept of "Relational Aesthetics". This is the theory that meaning is relative. Just as "Diversity Awareness" will be used to help generate questions to get students to consider what is similar and different, this theory helps includes questions that prompt students to consider how what they reject defines who they are just as much as what they accept. This will be executed by analyzing visual representations where one meaning is altered when compared to another. The relational aesthetics then mold the set of questions that scaffold the inquiry based learning approach that suggests that students learn best when they are given the chance to answer, reflect and discuss relevant problems in their own way.

Identity Development:

According to Erik Erickson, most of us begin to develop our identity the same way. As children, we suddenly realize that we are unique individuals. As time moves on and we grow older, this realization deepens due to us not only growing physically but also cognitively and socially. In adolescence we begin to explore what it means to be us in the world by "trying on" new identities and pushing boundaries. But, how do we determine what we want to experiment with? How do we know what feels comfortable enough to keep as a trusted value? Is it the people? Our experiences? Are we just genetically predispositioned to be a certain way? Is there really one true answer at all?



In the article “Diversity Awareness” Ingram (2001) describes that diversity is very similar to identity in the fact that isn’t defined by just one thing but by many dimensions. The image shows that the primary dimensions are broken down into 6 main parts that “...are unalterable and are extremely powerful in their effect.” (Ingram, 4) The dimension of age, ethnicity or physical attributes are either impossible or challenging to change and yet it helps define who we are to ourselves and to other. The secondary dimensions are greater in number but “...we have some measure of control over them.” (Ingram, 4) The dimensions of education, religious beliefs, or geographic location define who we are just as much as the primary dimension and yet we have the power of being able to change it at will.

Student Inquiry Prompts:

“What is identity?”

“What are some aspects of yourself that you believe help define who you are?”

“Is identity concrete or fluid?”

There are aspects of diversity and identity development that hold more weight than others depending on who you are and what you have gone through. I remember many experiences that I had as an adolescent that have changed how I identify in sexual orientation, education and physical (mental) abilities/qualities.

Personal Perspective:

One of the biggest influences on what core values you establish as a child is your parents beliefs and how they communicate them to you. My personal history is that I had very few logical values communicated to me due to the fact that I grew up very close to a father who was undiagnosed bipolar (type 2, depressive), OCD, and ADD. Due to his untreated mental illnesses, he led my family not as a compassionate and understanding individual but as a tyrant. The early years of developing my sense of self was riddled with trauma related to mental and physical abuse. The result of this was that it was completely accepted and considered normal to disregard your own desires, needs and expectations and instead only do what was accepted by my father. It felt as if my identity was not defined by myself but by him. As an adolescent, I did not truly “try on” many identities. Without

thinking, I molded myself to be the daughter that my father wanted me to be in an attempt to avoid fights, insults or other consequences. I became a young, caucasian, feminine, good student, mentally and physically capable, music lover, Christian, heterosexual, and monogamous human. I consciously constructed my identity to the delight of my oppressor.

You never realize the degree of how much a person's physical presence affects you until they are gone. After years of battling his mental illnesses my father attempted to commit suicide. I remember him being carried out on a stretcher by the EMT's, but most of all I remember the feeling of his absence. The weeks following his attempt the house was quiet and calm for the first time in years. I was overwhelmed by the feeling that my home was not my home and that I was not myself. As an adult, I realized that I had centered my entire identity around being a daughter that without it I felt like I had lost myself.

Allison Weir speaks about identity politics in her paper, "Global Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics" (1996) in a way that I wish my adolescent self had known about. She says that for most, the dimensions of identity have been used to categorize. We lump ourselves into a large group of others just like us by identifying or categorizing ourselves as one thing but not the other. This habit encourages us to only focus on the differences rather than the similarities. Weir suggests that this is the reason why we struggle to achieve social change. To truly be able to stand in solidarity with others we must acknowledge that we are all related through global care chains in which some of us must take responsibility for the exploitation and oppression of others. Instead of defining our identities in a static way we must transition into "to a model of identity that focuses on what matters, what is meaningful for us—our desires, relationships, commitments, ideals." (111)

Student Inquiry Prompts:

"What experiences have changed who you are?"

"What are some ways that you would "categorize" yourself?"

*"Now think of the categories that you would **not** put yourself in. What do these categories say about who you choose to be or how you live your life?"*

As I learn to consider how I define myself as an individual I suddenly realize that I must look at all of the people and cultures around me to truly understand what that means. As an artist in the 21st century I believe that is best done through the creative expressions of culture through photography on Instagram.

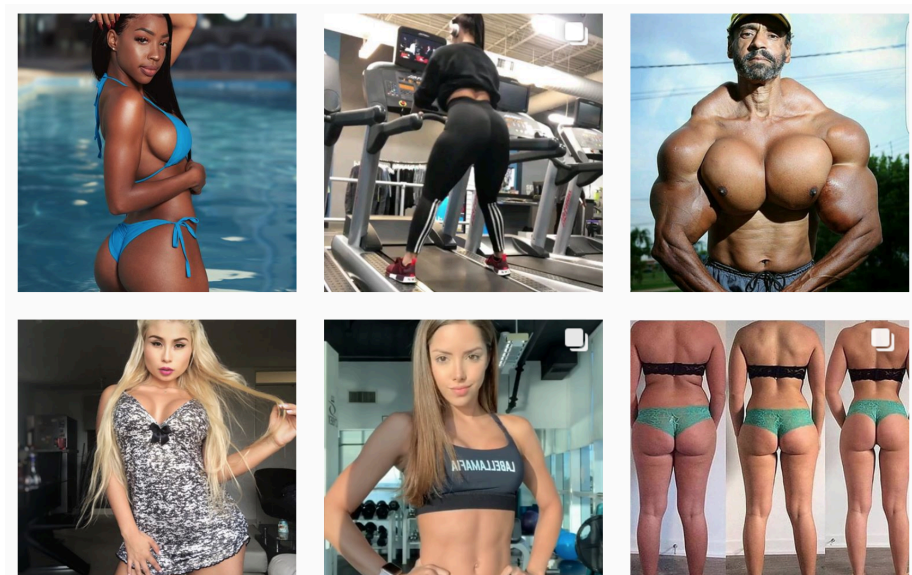
Critique of Creative Works:

To critique the aesthetics of social media I not only have to look at the form of the photographs but also the content. According to Belton (Content Section, para. 3. 1996) "Content means "message," however that message may be organized." Belton explains that there are traditional ways of organizing content by categories. He identifies and categorizes these into nine important genres: History, megalography, mythology, religion, portraiture, landscape, genre, still-life and rhopography. Instagram and SnapChat content is no different from these traditional ideas. Users take photographs of landscapes, people and animals. When looking at other cultures creative expression I believe that we must look at the content and ask ourselves, "What does this mean to me?" But also, "What does it mean to the people that identify with that culture?"



This image exhibits a variety of cultural values that are both different and similar to my own. I first look at the expression and gesture that the young child is making. His arms rise to the sky as if he himself can fly away like the birds that surround him are. The photographers choice to focus on the young and the joyful show us that our culture values the positive. Instead of capturing a subdued moment of everyday life, the photography chose to express not only happiness but the idea of having fun. When we consider the surrounding culture in the middle east I find this choice not only a way to redefine what it means to be an Afghani but also a child. The child itself tells viewers that there is life and a future in the world. The representation of a child who is young and full of energy follows another similar trend when we look at our cultural beliefs through the lense of social media.

This trend is for the visual culture of Instagram to focus on a very select standard of “health” or “fitness”. Just like the child in the previous image, the focus is on those that look young and healthy. Not only that, but the trend tends to focus on women. In these images, the individuals seem to be presenting themselves to the photographer or the audience. The individuals are barely clothed and only two out of the six presented are even in an environment that is used for fitness. The only representation of someone who does not fit the well toned, curvaceous, and muscled body is a photo that shows a transformation from a body that doesn’t fit the expectations to one that does. I feel that this tells young women and men that the expectation isn’t that they take care of their mental health but their physical health. This standard is sometimes impossible for some people to obtain and yet it is set and described as typical.



On social media we choose to represent ourselves as we want to be not who we really are. Returning to the image from Afghanistan, we see the mosque in the background that tells viewers that Afghanistan is a religious country that values praying and making moral choices. The mosque itself is a symbol that is recognized as representing an old tradition of worship dating back centuries in the Islamic world.

But we must consider all dimensions of diversity when we look at our visual culture. The one thing that I do not see represented in this photograph is the turmoil that exists in Afghanistan as a result of war. When I used Google to complete the same search that I did for photographs on Instagram for “Afghanistan” Instead of a series of photographs of ideal landscapes, happy children and a spiritual world I was confronted with this:



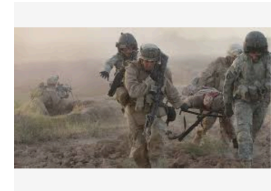
Undercut' Progress in Afghanistan
voanews.com



NATO to add 3,000 additional troops in ...
cbc.ca



Afghanistan - Wikipedia
en.wikipedia.org



Mission Accomplished' Will Never Co...
foreignpolicy.com



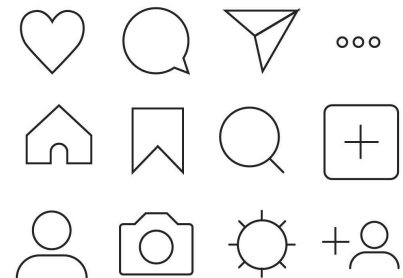
9 hours ago



17 hours ago



To understand why these two searches show two drastically different worlds, we must look at the Institutions that created them or the platforms. On one hand, Instagram photos are generated by its users. The photographs that you see are taken from the perspective of someone who exists in that world. On the other hand, Google decides what comes up in its image search by using an algorithm created by the developers hired by the company that is run by mostly white, American men. Similarly, these images are presented to us by Google and Instagram not only as representations of the world but as a means to collect data for a corporations benefit. One of the ways that they collect this data is through the platforms icons. The “heart” is used to show that someone likes or values the image. The symbol of the heart used to represent love. In this day and age it has lost its severity and has become something that we give away freely. Judging by the icons on the right, we can see that instagram not only uses visual culture to make their platform navigable but it also take frequently used symbols to quickly present ideas. In comments and on Facebook they use these symbols not only as a way to represent ideas but also to represent the emotions we feel when we look at an image. Instead of an intelligent critique we are using emotions to determine the success of images.



In addition to the institution the images are uploaded to we should also consider the tools that are involved in the creation of these works. Photographers have come a long way since film. With the use of the camera phone we are able to instantly capture everyday life and then share it with the rest of the online world. This immediate

nature of communication leads us into a world where we highly value constant communication. I believe that this leads to the idea that we must always present ourselves to a larger audience. At the same time, because of the instant nature of photography, when we post out images to social media we then immediately become the audience along with the collective of the internet. Does this mean that Instagram is bringing us closer?

Student Inquiry Prompts:

“How do we use social media to develop our identities?”

“How does Instagram present women?”

“How does Instagram present American culture in comparison to other cultures?”

“Do you see patterns in these representation?”

Catalyst for Change:

Millennials are “Digital Natives” who place a large amount of value on their digital presence. “Pippa Norris, in her chapter on “The Bridging and Bonding Role of Online Communities,” asks whether online groups serve as a bridge or bonding function for larger society. She discusses how, perhaps, “textual communication via the internet strips away the standard visual and aural cues of social identity, including those of gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status—plausibly promoting heterogeneity, where no one knows that you are a ‘dog on the internet’ (Holmes 1997)” This is an interesting point. While the images are presenting a cultural value that is ages old, it also inspires a new way of thinkings.

Let consider the #metoo movement. This social movement was a way for women who have been sexually abused or assaulted to share their stories through social media. In American it built a huge political conversation on what sexual harassment truly looks like. The movement was able to spread across the internet and therefore the world leading to the women suddenly being considered as valid and heard in their accusations. In addition, the #blacklivesmatter movement was a way to bring awareness to the treatment of African Americans by the police that had led to and uprival of demonstrators who want change.

Student Inquiry Prompts:

“How do you see social media changing or affecting the future?”

Conclusion:

Culture and identity is determined by many things. Some of these things are determined individually through experiences, and some of these are done through the standards determined by culture. In the 21st century, one of the largest influencers of the visual culture is the internet and the social media platforms that are used to communicate these values and identities. Through these questions and prompts provided by these questions I hope to lead my students down a path that allows them not only to wonder who they are as individuals but also who culture says they are.

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/children/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/identity-development>

https://elearning.psu.edu/courses/aed812/sites/edu.courses.aed812/files/content/weir_global_feminism.pdf