Introduction

Advances in the Internet and information technology gave rise to widely accessible electronic commerce (e-commerce) during the 1990s [1]. This new channel of selling allowed businesses to lower communication and sales costs while providing more detailed and up-to-date information to consumers [2]. Despite the dot-com bubble in the early 2000s, e-commerce has grown in total sales throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Even more telling is how much sales have grown compared to traditional commerce. Between 2010 and 2019, e-commerce revenue grew by 313 percent while traditional retail revenue grew just 42 percent (Greenspan, 2021). Within e-commerce, mobile shopping experienced one of the biggest amounts of growth, from US$2.2 billion in sales during 2010 to US$128.4 billion during 2019 (Greenspan, 2021). An estimate from Insider Intelligence asserted that mobile commerce (m-commerce) accounted for 45 percent of all e-commerce sales during 2020 (Meola, 2020). From these statistics, not only is e-commerce an increasingly important sales venue, but m-commerce is one of the most important subsets within the larger venue.

Also according to Insider Intelligence, Instagram is one of the most effective platforms in terms of driving social
commerce (Lipsman, 2021). In 2014, Instagram described itself as “a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures,” but in the years since it has angled to be a legitimate commercial social media site [3]. In 2016, Instagram allowed certain companies to tag their posts with buttons that would take the viewer to more details about the product and eventually a page where it could be purchased (Alba, 2018). In March 2019, Instagram introduced in-app checkouts (Pardes, 2019) and in May 2020 introduced Instagram Shops, which allows users to create curated collections of products for sale (Instagram Business Team, 2020). Forbes has called Instagram “a key component of e-commerce” and a platform that “[stimulates] passive desires of users before functional needs arise” (Svirskis, 2020). In other words, Instagram is an app that is looking to be at the forefront of social media commerce (s-commerce) and m-commerce.

Forbes has called Instagram “a key component of e-commerce” and a platform that “[stimulates] passive desires of users before functional needs arise” (Svirskis, 2020). In other words, Instagram is an app that is looking to be at the forefront of social media commerce (s-commerce) and m-commerce.

As has been well documented, the rise in e-commerce coincided with the stagnation and even decline of brick-and-mortar businesses. One industry that speaks to the general decline of brick-and-mortar commerce is bookselling. A 2011 article from Publisher’s Weekly notes that there were 1,100 fewer physical bookstores in the United States in 2011 than there were in 1991 (Milliot, 2011). Some argue that this decline in brick-and-mortar bookstores is directly connected to the rise in e-commerce, notably Amazon.com, and the public’s growing comfort buying products online (Cummings, n.d.).

Antiquarian and collectible booksellers have been particularly affected by the rise of e-commerce. In a series of interviews posted on the YouTube page of the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of America (ABAA), multiple members spoke about closing their open shops in response to growing sales traffic online (Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of America, n.d.). For veteran sellers, this was an unwelcome and lamentable development. To some, the shift online was a move away from the personalized relational selling on which they had built their businesses. Whereas antiquarian and collectible booksellers in the past relied on issuing printed catalogs to mail-order subscribers and directly quoting material to clients based on knowing their interests, antiquarian and collectible bookselling in the age of e-commerce is increasingly comprised of passive selling — publishing listings on bookselling database sites (e.g., Amazon, AbeBooks, Biblio, Alibris, eBay) and waiting for customers to find the listings themselves. Some members expressed feeling disconnected from their e-customers, which is only made worse by some venues (e.g., Amazon, eBay) forbidding sellers from directly contacting customers to direct sales off of the site (eBay, 2021).

As a way to bridge the gap between the tradition of personal, relational selling and more impersonal e-commerce, some booksellers have turned to Instagram. Given its nature as a highly visual medium that has shown increasing focus on establishing itself as a legitimate commercial platform, it makes sense that booksellers have taken to this particular social media app. However, the visual and textual rhetorical strategies of antiquarian and collectible booksellers on the app have not been studied. This case study attempts to fill that gap by analyzing the posts from three different sellers: The Rare Book Sleuth (@rarebooksleuth); Honey & Wax Booksellers (@honeyandwaxbks); and Martin Hartzold, Bookseller (@midwesternamericana). Each seller is a frequent poster on Instagram and represents a different specialty of antiquarian and collectible bookselling. The Rare Book Sleuth specializes in literary modern first editions; Honey & Wax deals in general antiquarian materials with a focus on illustrations, the book arts, and material related to women; and Martin Hartzold offers automotive and advertising ephemera and vernacular material.

By analyzing the visual and textual rhetoric as well as the user engagement of these sellers’ posts, this study will seek to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the common visual rhetorical strategies employed by antiquarian and collectible bookselling Instagram pages?
RQ2: How are viewers (potential customers) engaging with the posts?
RQ3: To what extent are antiquarian and collectible booksellers attempting to maintain personal connections to viewers (potential customers) while posting to a public audience?

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**Literature review**

According to uses and gratification theory as discussed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, audiences are active agents that seek out media to meet their needs [4]. The authors argued that audiences derive satisfaction from either media content, exposure to media, and/or the social context of the media exposure [5]. To provide a clearer understanding of
how audiences use media for different purposes, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch suggested delineating the unique aspects of a particular medium, specifically its characteristic contents, typical attributes, and typical exposure situations [6]. Instagram posts use both visual (i.e., images) and textual (i.e., captions, hashtags) rhetoric to engage the audience.

That audience, according to the Pew Research Center (2021), is most likely to be a younger one, with 71 percent of people age 18–29 reporting they have used Instagram compared to only 48 percent of people age 30–49, the next highest demographic. Wallsbeck and Johansson (2014) supported this idea in their research, finding that Gen Y (i.e., millennials) are the most frequent users of Instagram [7]. Not only do millennials use Instagram more than any other generation, but they are also projected to be the largest generational cohort going forward, making them the most important purchasing demographic [8]. Gronbach (2008) called millennials “superconsumers” and noted that their “appetite for consumption is already 500 percent greater” than their parents’ generation. In addition to their sheer volume, penchant for consumption, and proclivity for Instagram, millennials are an “emotional and globalized generation” [9]. Wallsbeck and Johansson (2014) delineated millennials from previous generations by the millennials’ impatience and passion for society and the environment [10].

Taken as a whole, Instagram users follow brands to receive inspiration, updates, and information [11]. Research from Ahmadinejad and Najafi Asli (2017) revealed the same three uses at the top of the list, but their findings had the order from most-to-least important as information, updates, inspiration [12]. Regardless of the order, it seems clear that most users follow brands and businesses on social media for some combination of the three reasons found by Wallsbeck and Johansson as well as Ahmadinejad and Najafi Asli. However, Heller Baird and Parasnis (2011) discovered a perception gap between what businesses think users want and what users actually want. They asked social media users in general why they interact with businesses via social sites, revealing seeking discounts, purchases, and reviews as the top three reasons. When businesses were asked why they think customers follow them via social sites, they listed learning about new products, getting general information, and submitting opinions on current products as the top three reasons. The businesses ranked the top two reasons named by users (seeking discounts, seeking purchases) at the bottom of their list [13]. This preference for discounts and opportunities to purchase products was supported by survey results from Ahmadinejad and Najafi Asli (2017) in which more than 50 percent of respondents reported strongly liking or liking commercial social media posts from businesses [14]. Interestingly, even though users liked seeing commercial posts and followed businesses to receive discounts and make purchases, they came to see businesses as “more human-like” when they used Instagram in particular [15]. This finding is particularly relevant considering the more socially conscious consumer habits of millennials and the relational selling tactics of traditional in-person antiquarian bookselling.

One possible explanation for this apparent link between a more human-like appearance, commercial posts, and e-commerce transactions is the way businesses can use Instagram to build trust. Hajli explained that trust becomes increasingly important in the absence of physical interaction between buyers and sellers (Ventre, et al., 2020). In social commerce constructs (SCCs) like Instagram, businesses can build trust by interacting with potential customers (Ventre, et al., 2020). However, Ventre, et al. (2020) found that users engaging in social media commerce (s-commerce) do not necessarily need emotional support to make online purchases. They pointed to the fact that digital natives are accustomed to using social media for both personal and commercial purposes and therefore “do not require social support to have trust in social networks, nor do they require high levels of trust to carry out s-commerce activities” (Ventre, et al., 2020). For non-digital natives or users otherwise more hesitant to engage in s-commerce, businesses can use concepts from trust transfer theory to build trust with customers through social media (Ventre, et al., 2020). The more businesses regularly posted about their products, services, and “behind the scenes” operations, the more they contributed to the online community and the more trust they engendered with their customers [16]. This idea is further supported by research that showed consumers preferred businesses to post on a daily basis, finding ways to engage with customers even when customers might not be directly purchasing the business’s products [17]. Wallsbeck and Johansson (2014) concluded that, because of these opportunities for daily engagement, “Instagram is a great forum for brands who are acting personal and tend to have strong relationships with their Instagram followers, which could make the brand to be seen as a friend” [18].

Returning to uses and gratification theory, it is important to note the typical attributes of an Instagram post to better understand how businesses can benefit from its brand building and sales opportunities. At its core, Instagram is a visual social medium. Argyris, et al. (2020) noted the lack of literature regarding visual analysis of social media posts due to technical challenges [19]. However, their research into sales of lululemon products driven by Instagram influencers led to the conception of the terms visual congruence and visual congruence-induced social influence (VCSI) [20]. They defined visual congruence as “the extent to which the themes of images posted by two parties overlap,” and VCSI as a way to “denote the new mechanisms of conducting influence through visual elements,
mediated by increased interactions” [21]. Their case study revealed that influencers drove sales by crafting posts that visually conveyed authenticity, “realness” and shared interests with the target audience [22]. By posting images that revealed a shared interest, influencers were able to bypass in the audience “the rigorous verification often required when accepting an unfamiliar object” [23]. This visual congruence eventually created a strong-tie relationship because of the increased perception of intimacy, affiliation, and interaction between the influencer and the audience [24]. Interestingly, Argyris, et al. (2020) specifically attributed the formation of the strong-tie relationship to the visual narratives, not the textual ones that often accompanied them [25]. The importance of carefully narrated images on Instagram is further supported in a study by Purba, et al. (2020) that found video and carousel posts increase a user’s popularity. Argyris, et al. (2020) ultimately concluded that “the positive effect of visual congruence on [Follower-Brand] engagement is fully mediated by [Follower-Influencer] engagement” [26]. One potential explanation for this phenomena is the finding from Song, et al. (2018) that image objects were better predictors of a user’s age and gender than were tags (Purba, et al., 2020). The researchers concluded that the cliché “a picture is worth a thousand words” is relevant to Instagram posts.

Though visuals might be the factor most responsible for driving engagement and building trust, text plays a role as well. The captions accompanying images provide users another way to convey their personality. Similar to VSCI, when the audience noticed a similarity between their own personality and that of the poster, they felt more enjoyment, more seen, and more trusting [27]. Regardless of the content of the caption, there was a preference for brevity though that can be disregarded in instances where the caption functioned as a storytelling microblog (Herman, 2019). Instagram only previews two lines of text, placing more importance on crafting an engaging opening line (Herman, 2019). One user was quoted as saying that they saw more engagement with posts when they front-loaded the information in the caption (Eldor, 2020). Blogs focused on establishing an Instagram caption style guide emphasized the importance of connecting the caption back to the social media goals of the business or brand (Herman, 2019; Eldor, 2020). Jason Portnoy of the advertising agency JPORT Media encouraged users to add value to the audience in the caption by providing tips and tricks or other educational information (Eldor, 2020). This aligns with the finding from Wallsbeck and Johannson (2014) that commercial social media posts were more successful when the audience thought the posts added value (i.e., information about products and the company’s ethics, discounts) to their lives [28]. Other suggestions from Portnoy — writing with human emotion and personality, using storytelling techniques, using emojis — also aligned with the research that businesses can increase sales by using social media to create a more human-like appearance to customers [29].

Hashtags are a way for businesses to connect their posts to a relevant audience (Mustapic, 2020). Graves, et al. (2016) wrote that hashtags represent a “casual hangout for converging on the same topic” [30]. Not only do hashtags allow otherwise unreached users to connect with content, they can increase engagement and follower growth (Mustapic, 2020). Shogun’s “The complete guide to using Instagram hashtags for ecommerce” categorized hashtags as trending, niche, or branded, asserting that most businesses should build their social media commerce around niche hashtags (Mustapic, 2020). Rauschnabel, et al. (2019) identified this kind of hashtagging as motivated by a desire to bond, which “becomes possible by means of an ‘internal’ language that only members of an insider group would understand and from having shared experiences that inspire bonding-motivated hashtags” [31]. This is logical because of the casual hangout function identified by Graves, et al. (2016): users post hashtags to connect to a community, and businesses can enter the community by using the most popular relevant niche hashtags. Wang, et al. found that using popular hashtags increased the reach of a post [32]. However, Purba, et al. (2020) found that using popular hashtags actually lowered engagement rate because posts were less visible due to the increased noise on popular hashtags. They did find that using more hashtags, specifically 11, increased engagement rate. Though hashtags can increase engagement, the best predictor of increased popularity and follower growth was posting regularly and posting videos and carousel images (Purba, et al., 2020). According to results from All Hashtag, the most popular hashtags related to “books” are as shown below.
Figure 1: Top 30 hashtags related to “books”.

Results from Best-Hashtags show the most popular hashtags related to “rarebooks” as shown below.

Figure 2: Top 30 hashtags related to “rarebooks”.

Overall, the research showed that consumers engaging in social media commerce are an active audience (Ventre, et al., 2020) that is at once looking to make purchases, receive discounts, and have value added to their lives as a result of engaging with businesses on social media [33]. Businesses can meet these needs by creating posts that resonate with the audience through visual congruence, relevant captions, and niche hashtags.

Methods

Data was collected during March 2021 from each seller’s Instagram posts from October through December 2020. The data was separated into three categories: visual rhetoric, textual rhetoric, and engagement. Each post was analyzed for these three categories, with discrete data being coded by hand into a spreadsheet.

Visual rhetoric

The visuals of each post were analyzed for the following:
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- Number of images
- Filters (contrast, exposure, saturation)
- Border
- Focus (full subject, detail)
- Placement of subject (center; ⅓ or ⅔ left, right, top bottom)
- Color scheme

Data were only recorded for the visual rhetoric of the first image in each post because that is what appears when a user scrolls through the app. Though Instagram allows users to apply a variety of filters, this study was limited to contrast, exposure, and saturation because they are objectively verifiable using a tool like Photoshop. Without access to more information, it is difficult to determine what specific Instagram filters have been used. Future research — perhaps using machine learning — could provide a more robust and complete account of the filters. There was a similar limitation to color scheme. Without an algorithm to determine groupings of similar patterns, the category in this study is a record of the colors featured in the first image of each post, namely the color(s) that stands out at a quick glance to simulate the scrolling experience of Instagram.

**Textual rhetoric**

The text of each post was analyzed for the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of business</th>
<th>Storytelling (about product or history)</th>
<th>Overt commerce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>Activism</td>
<td>Bookseller life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
<td>Hashtags</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This information was parsed by a human reader going through each post individually. An x was placed in each column when the caption of the post featured that particular rhetorical element. The tone was subjectively determined after analyzing the caption for the other textual data. The hashtags were copy-and-pasted directly from Instagram into the spreadsheet. Future research could incorporate machine learning to identify tone more objectively.

**Engagement**

The engagement for each post was analyzed for the following:

- Total likes
- Total comments
- Kinds of comments

*Kinds of comments* was further analyzed with the codes shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General compliment</th>
<th>Connection to subject</th>
<th>Compliment image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bookseller reply</td>
<td>Comment on subject</td>
<td>Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer to question</td>
<td>Compliment bookseller</td>
<td>Compliment subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Desire to purchase</td>
<td>Reply to bookseller reply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on image</td>
<td>Personal comment to bookseller</td>
<td>Tag user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on sale</td>
<td>Question about sale</td>
<td>Criticism of subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total likes were taken from Instagram on the day the post was analyzed. Though posts can receive likes and comments anytime, given these posts were between three to five months old, the number of likes and comments is unlikely to change drastically (Thomas, 2021). Each comment was read and classified according to the categories above, which were created while coding the comments.
Data and findings

**Visual rhetoric**

Tables 1 through 5 display that data for the visual rhetoric. To keep the tables clean and meaningful, only the most used border (Table 1) and color scheme (Table 2) are presented. These numbers are presented as a percentage of all the borders and color schemes recorded from each seller’s posts. All other tables present that total number of each variable.

### Table 1: Visual rhetoric — Borders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Posts (n)</th>
<th>Images (n)</th>
<th>Most used border (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>100 — Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100 — White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44 — White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Visual rhetoric — Color scheme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Posts (n)</th>
<th>Most used color scheme (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22 — Black-and-White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>26 — Tan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25 — Black-and-White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: Visual rhetoric — Filters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Posts (n)</th>
<th>High contrast (n)</th>
<th>Overexposed (n)</th>
<th>Saturated (n)</th>
<th>None (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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### Table 4: Visual rhetoric — Placement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Posts (n)</th>
<th>Left (n)</th>
<th>Right (n)</th>
<th>Top (n)</th>
<th>Bottom (n)</th>
<th>Center (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5: Visual rhetoric — Focus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Posts (n)</th>
<th>Full subject (n)</th>
<th>Detail (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Textual rhetoric**

Table 6 presents the number of each kind of caption content noted in each bookseller’s posts. Table 7 presents the total number of tones noted in each bookseller’s posts. The numbers across each row can add up to a number greater than the number of posts because posts can contain multiple kinds of content and convey multiple tones.

### Table 6: Textual rhetoric — Caption content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Posts (n)</th>
<th>Description of business (n)</th>
<th>Storytelling (n)</th>
<th>Overt commerce (n)</th>
<th>Philanthropy (n)</th>
<th>Activism (n)</th>
<th>Bookseller life (n)</th>
<th>Miscellaneous (n)</th>
<th>Personal (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookseller</td>
<td>Posts (n)</td>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Celebratory</td>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td>Self-referential</td>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>Inquisitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
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<td>------------</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures 3–5 are word clouds depicting the relative popularity of all the hashtags used by each bookseller. The bigger the word appears, the more often the hashtag appeared in the bookseller’s posts.

Figure 3: Hashtag word cloud for Honey and Wax.
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Figure 4: Hashtag word cloud for The Rare Book Sleuth.

Figure 5: Hashtag word cloud for Martin Hartzold, Bookseller.
**Engagement**

Table 8 displays the average number of likes and comments, rounded to the nearest whole number, received by each bookseller’s posts. Table 9 shows the number of comments on each bookseller’s posts, organized by kind of comment.

### Table 8: Engagement — Likes and comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bookseller</th>
<th>Posts (n)</th>
<th>Likes (average)</th>
<th>Comments (average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honey and Wax</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rare Book Sleuth</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 9: Engagement — Comments by kind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of comment</th>
<th>Honey and Wax</th>
<th>The Rare Book Sleuth</th>
<th>Martin Hartzold, Bookseller</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General compliment</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliment image</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliment subject</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliment bookseller</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on image</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on subject</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
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Analysis and discussion

**RQ1:** What are the common visual rhetorical strategies employed by antiquarian and collectible bookselling Instagram pages?

**Visual rhetoric**

While there is variance between the booksellers’ pages, there are consistent rhetorical patterns within each page. The Rare Book Sleuth has the most visual consistency in terms of borders, filters, placement, and focus. Almost all of the subjects are pictured in full, centered within a white border, and often edited with high contrast and overexposure. These strategies eliminate any distractions, allowing the viewer to focus entirely on the subject. The white border functions to illuminate the subject, as does the exposure. This makes sense for a dealer specializing in modern first editions where inventory is not necessarily scarce or rare and quality is one of the most important factors buyers consider before making a purchase. Given that social media users react positively to posts they perceive as adding value to their lives, it is reasonable for The Rare Book Sleuth to focus his posts entirely on showing the books as completely as possible in one image.

Though less prominent than the white border used by The Rare Book Sleuth, the black line border on Honey & Wax posts functions as a kind of brand signifier. Every post features the border, so when users scroll through Instagram they can start to associate the border with Honey & Wax. They also develop their brand identity by posting mostly high contrast, saturated details of their inventory. In contrast to the art-like dust jackets featured on modern first editions, many of the books sold by Honey & Wax are known as brown books, or leatherbound volumes with a more utilitarian aesthetic. Featuring the outside of brown books would be less visually appealing than the details of the contents within. So, in addition to the black line border, users can come to associate close-ups of book illustrations with the Honey & Wax brand. The composition of their posts also conveys a connection to art and illustrations. They featured the most varied placement of the subject within the image, with half being centered and a fairly even distribution within the other locations. This could be a way to signal to the viewer that Honey & Wax is a business with a focus on illustrated books, book arts, and the book as an object. On a commercial level, artistically framing details of a product without also revealing the entirety of it could be a decision meant to drive traffic to the Honey & Wax Web site. Their Instagram posts mostly feature one image, but the listings on the Web site often provide more. Not only do the images signal the visually minded approach of the business, but they also intrigue customers in hopes they browse the website for additional images and purchasing opportunities.

Honey & Wax also uses the content of the images to signal the values of the business. They have a feminist and female empowerment ethos as evidenced by their sponsorship of a prize awarded to women collectors. Historically, the antiquarian book trade has been a male-dominated one despite important women like Leona Rostenberg, Madeleine Stern, Belle da Costa Greene, to name a few. Women appeared in more than 33 percent of their Instagram posts and were referenced in the caption almost 40 percent of the time. In this way, Honey & Wax is literally making women more visible in the antiquarian book trade by inserting them into people’s feeds as they browse Instagram.

If The Rare Book Sleuth aesthetic is defined by bright white borders with a centralized full subject image and Honey & Wax by black line borders surrounding saturated details of illustrations, then the Martin Hartzold, Bookseller aesthetic is defined by its lack of any recognizable patterns. His posts featured the most variance in borders and focus while also using the least amount of filters. His images appear mostly unedited, which signals a commitment to realistically displaying the products as they are. Given his focus on ephemera and vernacular works, this strategy is appropriate. The value in his posts comes naturally from sharing unique works. Unlike modern first editions books with print runs in the hundreds or even hundreds of thousands, much of the material offered by Martin Hartzold is one-
of-a-kind. The white border that is featured in almost half of his posts is simply the result of scanning photographs that already contain a white border. The black-and-white and sepia toned color schemes are less a conscious choice than they are the result of dealing in black-and-white and sepia toned photographs. Though it might not be as intentional as the aesthetics of the other booksellers in this case study, Martin Hartzold still has an identifiable aesthetic.

**Textual rhetoric**

The textual rhetoric of the captions mostly fell into two categories: storytelling and overt commerce. Storytelling combined both physical descriptions of the product as well as descriptions of its contents or historical significance. In antiquarian bookselling, notes in addition to those describing the condition of the product are often called “pitches.” These are ways of adding value to a product whose value is otherwise arbitrary. The Rare Book Sleuth often included both physical descriptions and pitches for their products. Considering their specialization in modern first editions, this strategy is reasonable. There is a common saying among booksellers that a book — particularly a modern book — will only sell if it is the best copy, the cheapest copy, or the only copy. By including a detailed condition description alongside the price, The Rare Book Sleuth is helping customers determine whether their copy is the best or the cheapest. Their textual rhetoric was almost entirely sales-oriented with only two posts containing bookseller life content, and even then the tone of the caption was informational and commercial.

In contrast to the physical description-oriented posts of The Rare Book Sleuth, Honey & Wax rarely provided detailed descriptions, instead opting to use the caption to provide historical information related to the product. Similar to the strategy of predominantly using detail instead of full subject images, the decision to forego detailed description notes could be a strategy to drive Instagram users to the business’s Web site. Honey & Wax posts featured the fewest number of overt calls for commerce (9 total, 18 percent of posts), which could signal that they view Instagram less as a commercial platform and more of a relationship-building one. That idea is further supported by their number of posts containing “bookseller life” and “personal” content. Prior research shows that social media users like when businesses post behind-the-scenes views, a strategy employed by Honey & Wax in 38 percent of the posts analyzed in this study. In fact, Honey & Wax included personal content in the caption almost as often as they included overt calls for commerce (8 and 9, respectively).

Martin Hartzold mixes the commercial strategies of The Rare Book Sleuth with the personal strategies of Honey & Wax. By advertising prices and encouraging views to direct message (DM) for more details, Martin Hartzold signals a belief that Instagram is a legitimate venue for selling products. This is further supported by his creating the Instagram-exclusive “shadow fair” that ran during the same time as the ABAA-sponsored Boston Antiquarian Book Fair. Still, his textual rhetoric was less singularly focused on selling than that of The Rare Book Sleuth. Martin Hartzold’s posts featured the most humor (8 total, 25 percent of posts) and self references (7 total, 22 percent of posts). The often humorous tone establishes the business as one that is approachable and friendly. He also uses humor as a way to pitch some of his products (e.g., a catalogue of ugly couches). By creating an established sense of humor for the business, Martin Hartzold is able to create a kind of textual congruence between his business and the Instagram users viewing his posts. That is, potential customers can bond with the business of Martin Hartzold, Bookseller through a shared sense of humor. This, in turn, could be a way to form a strong-tie relationship that is proven to increase sales in s-commerce.

Regardless of the content and tone of the captions, every bookseller used hashtags in their posts. The word clouds shown in Figures 3–5 illustrate the different communities each bookseller tried to reach. The Rare Book Sleuth tried to reach the widest audience, often using general and popular hashtags like book, firstedtion, rarebook, and bookporn. It should be noted that these popular hashtags were often used alongside hashtags specific to the subject of the post (i.e., book title, author’s name, character names, genre). Honey & Wax used a similar strategy by often including general and popular hashtags like bookstagram and rarebooks. However, the more specific hashtags reveal their focus on illustrations, art, and the book arts. The hashtags used by Martin Hartzold, Bookseller connect his posts to the audiences that might be interested in looking at and potentially buying his material, namely people interested in automobiles and advertising. Each bookseller often tagged posts with a combination of more general, popular hashtags and more detailed, unpopular ones to find a wide audience and users interested in the subject of their posts.

**RQ2: How are viewers (potential customers) engaging with the posts?**

Users engaged with the booksellers’ posts in ways consistent with previous research. As previously found in Ahmadinejad and Najafi Asli’s study, people are hesitant to comment on a business’s posts on social media (92). The average number of likes far outpaced the average number of comments per post. Still, the likes are important. Not only do the signal that a user finds value or resonance with the subject or content of the post, but it also contributes to
Instagram’s algorithm displaying the account that created the post higher up in the user’s feed in the future (Thomas, 2021). While likes might not necessarily signal the strong-tie relationships that better predict engagement in social commerce, they do make it more likely that a user will see posts from a particular page in the future.

When users do take the time to leave comments, they are overwhelmingly positive. Comments left on posts from The Rare Book Sleuth and Honey & Wax were compliments of some kind (general, image, subject, bookseller) more than 60 percent of the time. It is unsurprising that the comments are mostly positive given that users likely saw the post as a result of following the page or seeing it in the discover feed based on what the algorithm predicted they would like.

Another explanation connects to the research from Graves, et al. (2016) that showed hashtags connect people to a community. Some users attempted to connect more people to the community by tagging them in a comment. This happened on multiple posts from each bookseller, and in a few instances the tagged user replied to the comment. Like other users, the tagged users often replied with compliments or other positive sentiments. Through hashtags and user tagging, the people bond over seeing books and related materials they enjoy, leaving positive comments that could function as positive reinforcement to increase the chance of a page posting similar content in the future.

One surprise was just how little overt commerce appeared in user comments. Even when users make overt calls to commerce in the post, users do not engage in commerce directly in the comments. Only 15 of the 497 comments were tagged as desire to purchase. Given the 163 posts analyzed for this study, it appears that booksellers can expect users to express a desire to purchase a product about one in every 10 posts. Of course, this does not take into account any purchase inquiries that took place outside of the public comments on Instagram. It is possible that users feel more comfortable communicating with businesses privately to complete a transaction. In fact, this hesitancy to publicly engage in commerce might be anticipated by some businesses, leading them to include the fairly common DM for details in commercial posts.

Overall, the engagement seen in these booksellers’ posts is consistent with previous findings that users are more likely to leave likes than comments. Though the likes might seem less meaningful, they play an important role in Instagram’s algorithm and increase the likelihood of a user seeing future posts from a particular page. With more time and exposure to a page’s posts, it is possible that people who had previously only been leaving likes will feel more of a connection and leave comments.

**RQ3: To what extent are antiquarian and collectible booksellers attempting to maintain personal connections to viewers (potential customers) while posting to a public audience?**

The booksellers studied here cultivate and maintain connections by posting frequently and within the established expectations of their business. As discussed above, each bookseller has a distinctive visual and textual rhetoric that allows users to connect a post to a particular bookseller. Honey & Wax and Martin Hartzold, Bookseller provide their audience with a peek behind the curtain with their personal and bookseller life posts. These posts invite users to acknowledge the people behind the products. Additionally, Martin Hartzold, Bookseller often includes humor and self-references in their posts to establish a human-like social media presence that reflects the human that runs the social media account.

The Rare Book Sleuth almost never includes personal information in their posts, but they do maintain connections in two ways. They engage with user comments by liking and responding to them, often answering questions or leaving generally positive comments. Similar to a user’s ability to potentially influence the future posts by leaving a like, businesses might be able to influence future engagement by reacting and responding to current engagement (VirTasktic, 2020). Seeing that a business liked a comment or took the time to reply to a comment signals to users that the time they take to write a comment is not wasted. In fact, it might be the start of a relationship that could benefit them in some way. In addition to being involved in the comments section of their posts, The Rare Book Sleuth maintains connections by having users leave comments explaining their personal connections to the subjects of his posts. Though The Rare Book Sleuth never explicitly calls for users to leave these kinds of comments, the users do so at a rate higher than those engaging with the other two booksellers. This could possibly be explained by the nature of dealing in modern first editions, especially literary ones. People have nostalgic reactions to seeing a book they read at a formative moment in their lives. If not sharing nostalgia, the connection to subject comments on The Rare Book Sleuth posts function as reviews, and mostly positive ones. These kinds of comments are not necessarily the actions of The Rare Book Sleuth, but they do create a sense of community that keeps users connected to the business’s page. In a way, the Instagram page for The Rare Book Sleuth becomes a kind of book club or message board where people can share their personal experiences with particular books.

Finally, it is suspected that the booksellers use visual congruence to signal a shared interest and aesthetic to users. For
example, Honey & Wax often tags their posts with #bookstagram, and their posts visually align with the bookstagram aesthetic (i.e., bright lighting, consistent composition, creative framing and placement of the subject) (Page Anchor, 2017). The Rare Book Sleuth often uses #rarebook, which other users also use to tag generally well-lit, full subject images of antiquarian and collectible books. Then there is Martin Hartzold, Bookseller, whose most used hashtag #archives is often used by institutions and librarians to show off their archival collections. Much like the scanned photos and catalogues featured on the page of Martin Hartzold, Bookseller, the Instagram feed for the hashtag shows scanned photographs from various eras, manuscript diaries, and other ephemera. The study from Argyris, et al. (2020) revealed that visual congruence mediated interactions and created a stronger relationship between pages, meaning that the booksellers establish and maintain connections with users simply by posting relevant material and tagging it in a way that reaches the intended users.

Conclusion

This case study has shown how booksellers with different specialties within the antiquarian book trade use Instagram to adapt to the era of e-commerce. Previous studies have focused on the relationship between retailers, larger businesses, and influencers, but not much focuses on the direct connections between smaller businesses and consumers themselves. Still, the findings of this study are in line with what has been found previously. Each seller used Instagram for the following purposes:

- To provide discounts and/or purchasing opportunities
- To provide a behind-the-scenes look at their business operation
- To create a sense of community and connection

These uses, which are the cornerstones of what social media users want from businesses using social media, show that antiquarian booksellers are successfully adapting to the virtual marketplace. Whereas traditional face-to-face bookselling relied on strong-tie relationships built through mostly physical interactions, s- and m-commerce bookselling still appears to be cultivating strong-ties and community connections through frequent on-brand posting. By presenting the subjects of their posts in a stylized way, composing a caption relevant to the audience, and tagging it so the post reaches the intended audience, the booksellers are able to have meaningful interactions with users — and potential customers — that would not have been possible otherwise.

Future research

Though the research here affirms the findings of other studies, this study could be continued to determine the extent to which posts from booksellers are visually congruent with posts from their audience. Analyzing the visual rhetoric of posts from users who engage with the booksellers’ posts would help to define the role of antiquarian booksellers on Instagram: do they function as a business, as influencers, or as some combination of the two?

Related to that idea, the data collected in this study regarding likes and user comments could be analyzed to understand the ties between the bookseller and the audience. Do the same users like and comment, denoting a strong-tie community, or do users leave likes and comments only occasionally?

Finally, to obtain a clearer understanding of the commercial benefits of Instagram, interviews with the booksellers could be conducted. The booksellers would be able to provide insight into how they intentionality or unintentionally use visual and textual rhetoric and user engagement strategies to cultivate customers. These interviews could also provide details about commercial interactions that take place outside of public comments (i.e., in direct messages, e-mail messages, other correspondence).

About the author

Willy Stastny is a high school English teacher and antiquarian bookseller (@carpetbaggerbooks on Instagram). His academic interests lie in the intersection between literature, modernity, media, and pedagogy.

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Notes

6. Ibid.
11. Wallsbeck and Johannson, 2014, p. 44.
19. Argyris, et al., 2020, p. 3.
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