Instagram as a narrative platform
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Abstract
Even though Instagram has been the subject of numerous studies, none of them have systematically investigated its potential as a narrative medium. This article argues that Instagram’s narrative capabilities are comparable to those of literature and film. To support our claims, we analyze a number of prominent female Instagram creators and demonstrate how they employ the platform’s diverse features, functionalities, and interface to create multi-year biographical narratives. Furthermore, we discuss the applicability of theories developed in literary and film studies in analyzing Instagram’s narrative capabilities. By employing Bakhtin’s influential chronotope concept, we examine in depth how these narratives make specific use of space and time. Additionally, we compare time construction in film and Instagram narratives using the cinema studies’ theory of narrative time in movies.

Contents
Introduction
Examples of Instagram narratives
The story, plot, and screen duration
Heroes of the Instagram narrative
The chronotope and Instagram narratives
The temporality of Instagram narratives
The spatial duality of the Instagram narrative
The space of the interface
The fictional and real space of the narrative
Conclusion

Introduction
Instagram is one of the most popular social networking platforms, known for its focus on images and videos. In this article, we argue that Instagram is also a narrative platform with narrative capabilities comparable to those of literature and film.

While scholarly analysis of narratives began with written and verbal text, and then moved on to cinema, more recently, scholars have focused on narrative mechanisms in digital media. Marie-Laure Ryan (2004) developed “cross-medial narratology” by examining five types of media: verbal discourse, still images, moving images, music, and digital media. The study of narrative is an important topic in the discipline of game studies. Espen Aarseth (2012) was among the first to develop a narrative theory for games that include all of the features found in traditional narrative. Although Instagram has been the focus of many
studies, we were unable to find any publications that systematically investigated its narrative potential similarly to Ryan and Aarseth for other types of media. Many studies of Instagram published so far use the paradigm of celebrity studies. For example, researchers describe the methods used to achieve popularity on Instagram (Boerman, 2020; Abidin, 2018), the development of a strong personal brand (Liu and Suh, 2017), and strategies of self-representation for particular types of blogs (Smith and Sanderson, 2015). Social sciences and cyberpsychology often focus on the social and psychological motivations for using Instagram (Huang and Su, 2018) and the emergence of communities on Instagram (Lee, et al., 2015). Instagram was also studied as a new visual medium (Manovich, 2017). Others focused on the use of Instagram by specific subcultural groups (Leaver, et al., 2020).

When narrative on Instagram does appear as a research topic, it is usually confined to a limited description of digital storytelling as the function of Stories (Amancio, 2017). By contrast, our aim is to provide a general analysis of Instagram as a narrative platform and to show how Instagram creators exploit many functions and affordances of this medium to create different types of narratives. We believe that Instagram is currently the most developed narrative networked interactive algorithmic digital platform, and that by closely examining it, we can see mechanisms that will be used and further developed in future digital narrative technologies.

A unique feature that distinguishes Instagram today from other social networks is its strongly pronounced multimediality, i.e., the simultaneous combination of text, static images, audio, and video. On most other social media platforms, one type of media dominates: text on Facebook, videos on YouTube and TikTok, photography on Pinterest, audio on Clubhouse. This does not mean that every Instagram user leverages all media and formats available on Instagram. An account may only contain still images and no video. Alternatively, an image may have no caption or a caption with only a few, sometimes unrelated, sentences. Nonetheless, the technical affordances of this social network make it possible to fully utilize all types of content in creating a unified narrative.

We are not claiming that most Instagram accounts are narrative. Based on our extensive research over a number of years, we believe that the majority of popular and professional Instagram accounts can be classified as either “narrative” or “modular.” Modular accounts, unlike narrative accounts, do not have preconceived plots that develop over time and space. Instead, all of the posts in such accounts have a strong stylistic coherence. They all use the same color palettes and camera angles. The content is also repeated, with a few different subjects alternating over time (see Figure 1).
The other popular type of Instagram accounts, which we labeled “narrative,” aim to create a coherent narrative by employing a variety of techniques found in narratives in literature, film, and television. While the world shown in a modular account does not change over time, a narrative account tells a detailed story. It creates a plot that spans time and space and involves multiple characters. In other words, if the goal of a modular account is to “show” (environments, people, objects, etc.), the goal of a narrative account is to “tell” (a story).

Many Instagram accounts also use both modular and narrative techniques. In fact, due to the way that Instagram’s interface is organized, certain modularity can be found to varying degrees in any account [1]. Media “objects” such as image posts and Stories [2] are added over time and presented as separate entities to the account’s viewer. This interface also suggests that narrativity is restricted to the Stories sections. So, if you don’t regularly share Stories on Instagram, we should not expect to discover storylines in your normal posts either. However, as we discovered, many Instagrammers use platform techniques that were not built for storytelling — such as writing long image captions that convey stories — to create prolonged
Our investigation is focused on the second, narrative kind of Instagram accounts. Similar to how scholars looked at narratives in literature, cinema, graphic novels, games, and other media, we can discuss many different dimensions of Instagram narratives such as characters, performativity, diegesis and mimesis, and others. In this study we will focus on the two such key dimensions: space and time. Our analysis draws on the original work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his influential concept of chronotope developed originally in 1920s. For Bakhtin, this concept “expresses the inseparability of space and time” in literature; it also “defines genre and generic distinctions,” and “determines to a significant degree the image of human in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981). Looking at how creators construct chronotopes in their Instagram narratives reveals that these narratives are more than just records of specific lives — they are complex
Instagram as a narrative platform

artistic works. At the same time, using the concept originally developed for the study of literature highlights both similarities and differences between literary and Instagram narratives.

Instagram narrative accounts may present a variety of stories. Examples of one type of such stories will be presented in order to demonstrate our theoretical analysis of narrative construction in Instagram. However, we think that the majority of the characteristics we list are common to all types. In light of this, even though we do not cover a wide range of story types (discussing them all would make this paper much longer), we believe that the analysis of the distinctive qualities of Instagram narrative construction covers most of them. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time such analysis is being offered.

Examples of Instagram narratives

In order to analyze Instagram as a narrative platform, we examined many popular accounts in different countries. However, we do not claim that the narrative strategies that we will describe below capture full variety of Instagram’s narratives. People employ Instagram for different purposes (accounts that aim to earn money through product placement, promoting business, etc. vs. non-commercial accounts), in different cultural contexts (the subject matter and style of accounts can vary widely in different countries), and with different levels of professionalism (a professional team creating photos and video for posts vs. a single person without any photography training using her mobile phone). Additionally, a sizable number of famous people have accounts on Instagram who first gained fame in other media, such as television or movies. Prominent examples include the accounts of famous footballers (Cristiano Ronaldo, @cristiano, 296 million followers), actresses (Jennifer Anniston, @jenniferaniston, 37.4 million followers), and singers (Jennifer Lopez, @jlo, 158 million followers). According to our observations, such celebrities accounts use different strategies than the popular accounts of people who were not known before, and therefore we decided not to use them in our analysis.

We picked a country with a well-developed Instagram culture for our case studies, but not the United States. Given the percentage of U.S. users on these platforms, the number of scholarly publications about social media use in the U.S. is disproportionately high. In comparison to the number of social media users in the United States, India has 2.16 times more, and China has 3.37 times more. The United States ranks only 31st among countries in terms of the proportion of their population that uses social media (72.3 percent) (Kemp, 2021).

What about Instagram? The top 10 nations in terms of Instagram users in October 2021 were (in descending order) India, United States, Brazil, Indonesia, Russia, Turkey, Japan, Mexico, United Kingdom, and Germany (Kemp, 2021). Since both authors of this paper are native Russian speakers and one of us lives in Russia, it was logical for us to select Russian Instagrammers for analysis and examples. As of October 2021, Instagram was the second most used social network in Russia, ahead of Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube (Chernii, 2021).

The accounts we chose for the case studies showcase a variety of multimedia narration techniques available on Instagram. We chose two female Russian Instagram creators because they are Instagram natives with no other media presence prior to launching their Instagram profiles. Both of them are working mothers and owners of successful businesses directly connected to their Instagram popularity. One is Valeria Chekalina (see Figure 3) and the other is Nadezhda Serova (see Figure 4).
Figure 3: Valeria Chekalina, @ler_chek, 9.2 million followers.
These are not, however, the only types of female Instagram heroines who are popular with Russian audiences. For instance, Olesya Malinskaya (see Figure 5) exemplifies the type of “it-girl,” a model and an owner of fashion company. Another type is represented by Alexandra Mitroshina (see Figure 6) a journalist, radio host, and blogger who often writes on feminist and political topics. (We list the rounded number of followers for each account as of January 2022). Malinskaya and Mitroshina, like Chekalina and Serova, are Instagram natives who had no public exposure prior to opening their accounts.
Figure 5: Olesya Malinskaya, @olesya_malinskaya, 1.8 million followers.
Figure 6: Aleksandra Mitroshina, @alexandramitroshina, 2.5 million followers.

All of these Instagrammers are portraying similar female role models based on the ideals of an independent and self-sufficient woman, successfully realizing her potential in all aspects of life. With the exception of Aleksandra Mitroshina, motherhood and marriage are central themes for all of our protagonists, despite the fact that they are all successful business owners. To answer why this particular gender image became popular in contemporary Russia would require a separate, in-depth study. However, we can assume that interest in this female ideal on the part of young Instagram audience has its roots in the changing position of women in Russia — a reconsideration of gender roles in a family following the collapse of USSR in 1991.

In general, the popularity of Instagram accounts, as well as accounts on other social media networks and blogs operated by very successful young women, can be explained by young people’s increasing desire for role models that they can trust and follow. In today’s society, the government, traditional media, schools, and even parents are unable to elicit the same level of trust that they once had. Because of the cultural divide between generations and the rapid speed of social and cultural changes in society, they have been
Instagram as a narrative platform

Unable to provide credible role models for the following generation. Popular, successful, and energetic young women are nearly the same age as their fans, and they can be reached at any time through their Instagram accounts. This allows them to serve as role models. This is a part of the larger process in the last few years when individual social media “influencers” emerged as figures that are trusted and imitated, at the expense of traditional media and advertising created by large and often impersonal organizations.

The narrative mood in such female Instagrammers’ accounts is generally positive. To maintain a “real” image, an Instagrammer would occasionally bring up negative aspects of her daily life, which would then become story points. These include her children’s illnesses, disagreements with her husband, or a bad mood in the morning — all of which can be communicated in Stories to strengthen emotional connections with an audience. Such contrasting “imperfect” moments add to a story’s “reality effect,” as described by Roland Barthes (1982), while simultaneously heightening dramatic tension that draws an audience in.

A variety of montage and framing tactics, a meticulously planned script for the development of narrative over time, and a highly emotional performance by the tale’s hero for her million-strong audience are all common aspects of these Instagram accounts. While Instagram was originally designed to allow users to share their amateur photographs with a small group of friends, most of the popular Instagram female influencers accounts that we examined had very professional photos frequently created with the assistance of professional photographers or larger teams. At the same time, the unedited “raw” sides of Instagrammers’ lives are deliberately shown in their Stories.

If we draw a parallel between Instagram and cinema, these accounts could be compared to films that have been made by highly-skilled professionals who know how to use perfectly techniques of script writing, acting, cinematography, and editing. In other words, in comparison to all other Instagram accounts, very successful female influencer accounts could be thought of as equivalents of big-budget Hollywood films. In the twentieth century, Hollywood was frequently referred as a “dream factory,” producing highly entertaining and escapist cultural products that appealed to the public seeking a break from the stresses of everyday life (Hayward, 2006; French, 2010). Some of these films also featured characters who demonstrated new and unconventional ways of behaving. These characters became powerful role models for moviegoers, who emulated their styles, manner of speech, and new values. Previously expensive production methods are now inexpensive and widely available (e.g., cameras in mobile phones and widely accessible video editing software). As a result, today the “dream factory” can be often found in the small screens of our phones connected to social networks. Popular Instagram accounts are used to create ideals and role models for younger generations.

The story, plot, and screen duration

The Instagram narrative, like most other forms of literary or cinematic storytelling, revolves around a specific plot. Despite many differences between these mediums, the structure of Instagram narrative can be compared to that of cinema. We will examine construction of Instagram narratives using concepts developed in film studies to analyze cinematic narration. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2008), there are three types of narrative time in cinema: story duration, plot duration, and screen duration.

Plot duration refers to a limited number of the actual events that are shown in a film. Story duration is “the set of all the events in a narrative, both ones explicitly presented and those the viewer infers” [3]. As Bordwell and Thompson explain, “the story goes beyond the plot in suggesting some diegetic events that we never witness” [4]. In other words, the story is created entirely in the mind of the viewer. If the plot only depicts a portion of the film characters’ lives, the story is their past, present, and possibly future, which are not depicted in the plot but are logically inferred by the viewer. Finally, the third type of narrative time is the screen duration which refers to the actual physical time of a film.
Let us examine Garry Marshall’s film *Pretty Woman* to illustrate how these three types of narrative time interact in practice [5]. The screen duration of this movie is 119 minutes. The plot duration is six days, during which the heroine, Vivien Ward, decides to accompany financial magnate Edward Lewis for a fee on his trip to close an important deal. The story duration includes the past lives of both characters, outlined for the viewers only in general terms. The audience is left to ponder what kinds of relationships Vivian had in the past, what circumstances influenced her decision to begin working as an escort, and so on. The story’s duration also includes the time spent on daily activities such as sleeping or eating. They are not depicted in the film but the audience can infer them.

In Instagram stories, all three categories of narrative time are transformed. The plot of an Instagram narrative can be developed over several years and thousands of posts. In contrast to cinema, in Instagram plot duration and screen duration have the same length. This plot, which develops and appears for the audience as a result of the blogger’s daily activity, becomes a virtually endless duration of the narrative’s screen time. Many Russian narrative Instagram accounts gained popularity in 2015–2016 and now their narrative has been evolving for more than six or seven years. Thus, if an Instagrammer has been sharing posts and Stories for six years, screen and plot durations are both six years.

The third type of narrative time — story duration — operates similarly to film narratives in Instagram because account followers create a story based on the explicitly presented plot events. But unlike a fictional movie, which frequently leaves hints about the characters’ pasts without explicitly showing them, an Instagrammer frequently shares a retrospective analysis of their experience. The protagonist constantly returns to stories about the process of self-improvement which are very important to many Instagram narratives. Such reflections add authenticity and drama to the narrative. They are also consistent with the narrative formula of a romantic adventure (Cawelti, 1976).

To demonstrate how the plot and the story of the Instagram narrative are transformed over a long period of screen time, we will look at the account of Nadezhda Serova (@nadin_serovski, 8.3 million followers). Nadezhda’s Instagram account presents the formulaic success story of an “ordinary girl from the provinces.” According to her story, she was born in 1994 in the small Russian town Ivanovo in a poor family. She graduated from the Ivanovo City University, but never worked a single day in her field. Following graduation, Nadezhda was hired as an administrator and then as a brow stylist in a beauty salon. She started an Instagram account in 2012, and in 2016 her audience rapidly grew, reaching 10,000 subscribers. In 2018 her account gained one million subscribers. While constantly posting on her Instagram, she also developed several large media projects using her account, including the “Make money” marathon about Internet professions, the “Brow-brow” online school for brow masters, and the “I choose myself” project dedicated to the development of femininity and the creation of strong relationships.

The beginning of Nadezhda’s Instagram journey, and hence the beginning of the plot of her narrative, is connected with the image of an ideal couple — her and Nikita Serov (@serovski, 3.4 million followers), also an Instagrammer whom Nadezhda married in 2016. Nadezhda’s account is filled with numerous colorful photos of her husband and young children, Rodion and Athena. Family holidays, travel, children’s costume shots, purchases of new cars and real estate — all these events are the constituent elements of the plot of her narrative. The story of Nadezhda and Nikita Serov’s relationship had been developed in front of a multi-million audience for more than five years, and nothing hinted at a breach of the idyll. However, in the fall of 2021, the couple announced their breakup, which shocked her subscribers. This plot twist became a turning point both from an autobiographical and narrative point of view because traditional family values were fundamental to Nadezhda’s public persona on Instagram.

The content of numerous popular Instagram narratives is exemplified by Nadezhda Serova’s Instagram account. Of course, stories vary depending on the circumstances that existed before each Instagrammer began to tell their unique stories. In any case, the characters reveal plot development as the story moves forward in some way.
Heroes of the Instagram narrative

The formation of a narrative around one protagonist, the owner of the Instagram account and its main character, leads to the unification of the story, plot, and screen duration. In this regard, Instagram storytelling always demonstrates a fixed internal focalization [6]. The blogger-hero not only interprets their own life aesthetically in the visual content of the account, but also functions as a “focal character”, from whose subjective viewpoint the audience explores the world of narration [7].

However, the Instagram narrative also features many other major and minor characters. The unique format of the narrative duration and the necessarily present internal focalization of the narrative allows for a more detailed analysis of their images in the Instagram narrative.

The characters of the Instagram narrative typically include the main character and her spouse, children, friends, business assistants, or even pets. The story of each character is familiar to the audience: the focal character, the Instagrammer herself, reminisces about how these characters appeared in her life/Instagram, what they have achieved together, and what difficulties they have encountered. New characters cannot appear on the Instagram account without a backstory and explanation of their role in the plot. A deliberate “silence” regarding a new character enhances interest of the audience since the process of introducing a new character frequently turns into an intrigue that retains subscribers’ attention.

The account of Nadezhda Serova illustrates well how to introduce a new character from the viewpoint of the main plot. After the divorce, the next stage in the development of Nadezhda’s Instagram narration begins with the appearance of a new character. A “secret” image of a young man, whose face had not appeared in Nadezhda’s previous posts or Stories, fueled the audience’s curiosity. Several posts with “Mr. X”, as the Instagrammer herself calls him, emerged among the images of her children and pictures from creative photo shoots. In one picture, both characters are in the shade against the background of a sunset over the sea (see Figure 7). In another series of photographs, the couple is depicted as a figure skater and a hockey player, whose face is hidden by a helmet (see Figure 8). In yet another post, both are dressed as tango dancers and a wide-brimmed hat partially covers the man’s face (see Figure 9). The Instagrammer skillfully integrates the new character into her story while generating intrigue about the identity of the mystery man. Though they can hear the man’s voice in her Stories, her subscribers must continue to speculate about his identity.
Figure 7: Nadezhda Serova, 2022. “Post to Instagram” (25 February), at https://www.instagram.com/p/CaZLM2wtuEl/?igshid=NmNmNjAwNzg=, accessed 10 May 2022.
Figure 8: Nadezhda Serova, 2022. “Post to Instagram” (16 March), at https://www.instagram.com/p/CbKFOr2O_cB/?igshid=NmNmNjAwNzg=, accessed 10 May 2022.
The study of narratives in artistic works dominates much of the humanities. However, most studies only focus on particular media such as cinema or literature. One exception is the work of Marie-Laure Ryan who developed concepts of the narrative that could be applied to literary, visual, digital, and other media. Ryan (2007) analyzed a number of previous definitions of narrative, suggesting four criteria: it is as a discourse that communicates a story, which itself is created using four dimension: a spatial dimension, which consists of a world populated by heroes and objects; a temporal dimension, which allows for the world to change in time; a mental dimension, i.e., the psychological and emotional aspects of the hero’s behavior; and a
formal-pragmatic dimension where the events are assembled into a causal chain, interpreted by the audience.

The inclusion of spatial and temporal dimensions in Ryan’s definition of narrative is very relevant for an analysis of Instagram’s narratives. While other scholars have also analyzed these dimensions, in this section we will use a theory developed by Russian literary scholar and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). In parallel with a number of Russian formalists who worked in 1920s, he was one of the first to study the structural properties of artistic narration and its dependence on the categories of space and time.

Where did the term “chronotope” came from? Influenced by Einstein’s theory of relativity, in the 1920s Russian physiologist Aleksei Ukhtomsky introduced this concept to define the integrity of space and time in the material world (Ukhtomsky, 2002). Bakhtin adopted this concept for the study of literature. In his “Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel,” Bakhtin defined the chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” [8].

The concept of a literary chronotope is very relevant for an analysis of digital narratives, including Instagram narratives. The concept of an unbreakable interconnection in narrative space and time is extremely significant. In particular, the space of a social network interface acts as the structural basis for a digital narrative evolving over time.

For Bakhtin, almost every literary narrative is chronotopic. He considered a number of major chronotopes (“those that are most fundamental and wide-ranging”), which enable the emergence and resolution of plot lines [9]. These include the encounter chronotope (marked by emotional intensity and the overcoming of social and spatial barriers), as well as the road chronotope (a “road” both in the literal sense of a real path from A to B, and in the metaphorical sense of the life journey of a character) [10]. Both of these chronotopes played an important role in the plots in literary genres considered by Bakhtin, which included the ancient novel of wandering, medieval chivalric romance, picaresque novel, and historical novel [11]. Dante’s Divina Commedia can serve as a particularly effective example of the chronotopes of the road and the encounter. Its plot is constructed around Dante’s journey is in three parts, Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, with encounters with many characters in the afterlife.

In our view, digital narratives also depend on chronotopes. They differ from literary narratives in the techniques used to create them in the digital environment, as well as the merging of author, narrator, and protagonist, which, with the exception of autobiographical novels, is not typically found in classical literary narration.

According to Bakhtin, major chronotopes consist of elements that interact with each other. There are minor chronotopes, which are components of the major ones and are dialogically connected. This dialogue in time and space frequently extends beyond the world of virtual images into the reality of readers. The same observation can be made about digital Instagram narratives: the viewer is drawn into the chronotope by the spatial and temporal cycles of the narrative, causing the activity of the Instagrammer and the audience to synchronize, as it does in theatre. The chronotope of the Instagram narrative might also enter into the everyday reality of viewers by inviting them to join a live broadcast or an off-line meeting at a particular time. Alternatively, it might induce their desire to constantly check an Instagram account that they follow in anticipation of an unfolding of some drama, which had been clearly hinted at by posts shared over time. Facilitated by the interactivity of Instagram, the chronotope creates a specific spatial-temporal continuum for the protagonist/author and reader/follower.

As an example of a typical chronotope in Instagram narratives, below we will consider the “success story”. It describes how the popular heroine, who is conventionally attractive and successful, rises to the top of the social ladder. In most cases, she begins as an average girl from the provinces, working hard at her mundane job, dreaming of a better life. In defiance of the disapproving gaze of those around her, and after a series of defeats/victories and meetings/goodbyes, the heroine manages to move to Moscow, purchase a big apartment in prestigious area, and join an elite talent agency in the Russian entertainment industry.
Luxurious clothing, jewellery, expensive cars, and trips become a part of her life, but inside she remains the same girl from the provinces who changed her life through sheer willpower.

The story of Valeria Chekalina (@ler_ckek, 9.3 million followers), who moved to Moscow from the small city of Tolyatti, is one of many with a similar plot line. Valeria arrived at Moscow State University wearing a dress and shoes that she had purchased with the last of her savings. At this point she met her future husband, Artiom Chekalin.

Despite the loss of several of her husband’s businesses and her parents’ outright opposition to her desire to work on her Instagram account, she was able to maintain her honest Instagram narrative. It became an outlet for this mother of twins (Alisa and Bogdan) helping her with the challenges of everyday life. Having endured every trial, including a difficult period in her relationship with Artiom, Valeria succeeded in creating a strong personal brand. She was successful in winning the trust of her subscribers, who were prepared to buy cosmetics from her now multimillion-dollar brand, Letique, as well as numerous media products, such as “The ideal body,” a fitness marathon, and so called “Money marathons”. She credits her honesty and passion for life in her posts as the reasons for her success.

Similar plot lines were highly popular in Russian television series from the early 2000s. Its continued significance could be linked to the economic and social disparity between the center and periphery in Russia [12]. This spatial asymmetry fuels demand for similar plots on popular Instagram accounts with million-strong audiences that include not only Muscovites, but also residents of remote parts of Russia.

The following two sections will provide a detailed analysis of different temporalities that can be found in Instagram narratives and in real-fictional space where these narratives are being developed.

The temporality of Instagram narratives

Time is a key category of the chronotope for Bakhtin. This is due to the fact that different plots allow time to exist in far more variations than space, and character development occurs primarily over time. Therefore, we will begin our analysis of the narrative chronotopes in Instagram blogs with a description of specific temporality, enabled by a number of technical features of this social network.

Note that time is not an unambiguously dominant category for Instagram narratives, as defined by Bakhtin for literature. In our view, space is a more important category for these blogs, because visual organization is determined by the special space of the interactive Instagram interface. Of course, the development of the main character (“played” by the Instagrammer) takes place over time. However, indicators of this development, such as an increase in income, manifest themselves in changes to her spatial environment. The Instagrammer improves her family residence, she travels to more luxurious and prestigious hotels with each passing year, and each new car is more expensive than the last.

Temporality in an Instagram account is a multifaceted category, which can take different shapes as a consequence of the technical capabilities of Instagram. The passage of time can unfold in at least three ways: as a series of static photographs (and sometimes videos) with text; fifteen-second Stories that disappear after 24 hours; and “highlights”.

“The feed” of an Instagram account is a visual representation of an Instagrammer’s life narrative. Each picture posted in the feed serves as focal point for the development of a continuing storyline. The average frequency of posts for the representative Instagrammers that we selected is one every two or three days (in contrast to the number of posts on stories, which could easily reach 30–60 per day). They always represent either an ongoing state, or mark an event that will play an important role in the future development of an autobiographical narrative.
In the feed, which consists of photos and videos with accompanying text, a particular moment in time appears to materialize and is captured visually. A number of devices contribute to the materialization of time in virtual space: depth of field typical of professional landscape photography (see Figures 10 and 11); a number of dynamic photo fragments (see Figures 12–14); and posting series of images together [13], each one adding to an unfolding reality that actually is a reflection of frozen photographic images (in this sense, photography itself is a chronotope concentrated in a digital medium).

“Stories” reflect a different sort of temporality that is distinguished by the relative synchrony between real time, where the observer is located, and time as it unfolds in Stories. The effect of this dramatic synchronicity, the immersion into the “here and now” of the narrative, is achieved thanks to a certain feature of the Instagram interface. For example, each Story publication shows the amount of time that has passed since publication (e.g., “6 hr.”). Moreover, the very fact that these 15-second videos and photos disappear after 24 hours is intended to reflect the elusiveness of physical time.

The Instagrammers that we selected for detailed analysis utilized Instagram Stories very frequently, perfecting their craft over time. On average, they published around 30–40 Stories a day. This creates the effect for the viewer that she is co-present. This effect is significantly heightened if the user recognizes the physical locations surrounding the Instagrammer in her Stories. In this way, the subscriber, as an external observer, finds herself drawn into the chronotope of the Stories.
In reality, naturalness and the transience of Stories are often carefully constructed. First, Instagrammers frequently show pre-recorded videos of events that have already passed. This is done both to improve short videos during editing making them more attractive for viewers, and to guarantee safety for the blogger celebrity, whose whereabouts can be deduced by her subscribers from tagged locations in stories.

Second, Stories can be kept forever by adding to the Highlights menu, which, as of this writing, is located directly below the Instagram account’s bio. Key plot points may become permanent as highlights, providing a full description of a memorable event in the life of the blogger such as the birth of children, the launch of a new project, a birthday, and so on.

“Highlights” form a third type of temporality in Instagram narrative. Initially experienced by the protagonist in real time through Stories, certain Stories are then selected, organized into thematic groups, and made permanent as the Highlights. For example, in the account of Nadezhda Serova (@nadin_serovski) a Highlight titled “My childbirth” allows you to see all the Stories shot before, during and in the days immediately after the birth of her children. Another Highlight captures the story of her plastic surgery, including making the process of preparing for the operation and her post-operative recovery (see Figures 15–16). In addition to these highly intimate moments, Highlights might contain recordings of Stories from birthdays, memorable trips, and awards ceremonies where winning Instagrammers received expensive gifts.
Figure 15: Highlights on the Instagram account of Nadezhda Serova (@nadin_serovski, 8.3 million followers).
Figure 16: Highlights on the Instagram account of Nadezhda Serova (@nadin_serovski, 8.3 million followers).

Because of the use of these various temporal techniques, an Instagram user discovering an Instagrammer’s account for the first time will see a narrative that has already been shaped in space and time, in which the past (photos with text in the feed and Highlights) and present (current Stories) are both captured. Meanwhile, the characters of a given Instagram story are focusing on creating the future.

The spatial duality of the Instagram narrative

In video games, literature, cinema, TV, graphic novels, and other types of media narratives can take place in real or fictional locations. They can also be situated in the past or future. In contrast, the narratives in Instagram, especially in Instagram Stories, always happen in the present in real physical space — an
apartment of a protagonist, her car, a coffee shop, or a beach in Thailand, Bali, or Mexico. (Some of the photos can be also created in the physical space of a professional photo studio). This is one important difference between Instagram narratives and narratives in other media.

Like all digital media formats, Instagram is also characterized by its own interactive interface which organizes information (posts, Stories, etc.) relative to space and time. Thus, the space of an Instagram narrative is marked by a duality: it is divided between digital space (the social network’s interface) and a real physical environment, edited and artistically depicted in the narrative.

The space of the interface

Narration in all types of media, including non-interactive media, is dependent on the spatial organization of the medium, which serves as its foundation. When you pick up a book or turn on the television, you are interacting with the technical components of the medium which allow you to consider a story. For instance, a reader experiences the materiality of a book when she understands, by an approximation of the page count, where she is located in the narration at that moment (at the beginning, middle, or as the plot development is moving to an end). In Instagram, the audience is oriented in narrative space by an audience-centered time-marking mechanism: the posts are not marked by a specific date, but by the number of days or weeks that have passed since their initial publication (Hochman and Manovich, 2013). The banner at the top of the screen in Instagram fulfills a similar function for Stories, indicating their number and how many hours ago that they were watched.

To interact with a narrative on Instagram or another social network such as YouTube, or other sorts of digital media (for example, a video game), the user must engage with its interface. The main page of any Instagram profile contains at least three icons, in addition to a short self-description by the account owner — which is not dissimilar to the title page of a play. From left to right, the icons are: a) a grid of photographs posted by the account owner; b) Reels and IGTV (videos with different duration); c) posts tagging the account owner (see Figure 17). In terms of narrative functions, the last interface element is particularly interesting. Clicking on this icon opens a view showing posts of other users where an account owner has been tagged.
This means that an individual can be viewed from two different perspectives. The default view of the page shows us the Instagrammer’s self-representation via her image and video posts presented as a grid (see Figure 17). The alternative view organized in the same way shows us a collective view of the Instagrammer from outside, looking in (see Figure 18). This automatically generated aggregated view does not have any obvious analog in other media to the best of our knowledge. Also note that in contrast to a carefully constructed narrative in the main view (edited photos organized by Instagrammer in a particular sequence), the alternative view is not a narrative, since it collects all images in Instagram where other users marked this Instagrammer.
Ordinary users are most frequently tagged by others in photographs that have been taken at an event, a special location, or in the company of several people. By exploring this section of individual’s account, you are able to deepen your understanding of a given person, finding out more about their social circle and interests. For dedicated and successful Instagrammers, this section functions somewhat differently. The tags are often used to draw attention to a particular project or product that bears no relation to the actual Instagrammer. Consequently, this section of the profile becomes full of ads, and not of other people or plots to be narrated. Tagging the account of a celebrity on Instagram increases the chances that your post will be seen by a large number of people. While today this function of Instagram interface is often used for commercial ends, originally it played a narrative role. This is an example of a larger phenomenon in digital media interfaces: the function of an interface element can change over time, as it is adapted by users to serve different purposes.
The fictional and real space of the narrative

Instagram narratives, like documentary films, photography, and often literature, take place in real, specific settings. Each image or video presents a specific point in physical space. In other words, while narrative in many art forms takes place in a fictional setting, an Instagram narrative is usually “broadcast” from a series of real-world locales, whose familiarity can assist the viewer place themselves within the blog’s chronotope.

While time is the most significant category in Bakhtin’s chronotope, space, according to Vladimir Propp (2000), it is the most crucial compositional factor for plot structure in novels, epics, and fairy tales [14]. In these literary genres, the hero’s “spatial transference” controls the plot’s events. For example, in Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes, each chapter takes place in a new location, introducing a new chronotope and replacing certain characters with others. In Instagram narratives about the lives of successful, modern women, spatial transference is just as important as it is in fairy tales. Movement in space does not just serve as a backdrop for psychological drama, which inevitably appears in these narratives. It is also one of the major topics discussed, and it serves as a convenient frame for the narrative to fill.

Aside from actual travels, specific locations that are mentioned in tales in the narrative on a regular basis have a vital spatial role for returning readers [15]. By presenting the movements of Instagrammer between these everyday locations as she strives to complete her plan for the day, the narratives establish a particular Instagram chronotope of the “busy day.” In this chronotope time, space, and the heroes are all intricately linked to the plot’s progression. If the busy, daily routine falls apart, it can lead to a disruption in the narrative or even result in the account owner giving up her account completely.

The need to diversify content without investing additional costs to organize new photo backgrounds and spaces may explain the cyclical alternation of a few everyday locations. On an average day, the heroines in the accounts that we studied often changed locations at least four times. They started almost every morning by recording Stories from their bed or bathroom area, where they prepared for the day. Later, they shared Stories about their breakfast, which they may have had either in the kitchen at home, in a café, or in a car while they were driving.

An Instagrammer’s home, or hotel room, is an unmistakably private environment, into which subscribers are welcomed as close friends. Given this, a “room tour” (a detailed tour of the home) is a typical part of Instagram narratives. When an Instagrammer’s home is not revealed, “gaps” appear in a narration, complicating followers’ ideas about a given story [16]. Moreover, it is not considered inappropriate to show a messy room or even crying children in Stories. Without these elements, which cut through the image of a “perfect” family, it would be difficult to break the fourth wall and achieve the same sense of co-presence, as the narration would appear overly edited.

The car of the blogger, which embodies the chronotope of the road, is second in importance in the personal space of a narrative. Followers learn how a given car model was chosen and how the automobile was acquired. The vehicle itself frequently appears in the location where a heroine devises her daily plan, which would then be followed by her audience.

Public places also always appear in Instagram narratives. Sometimes they act as key locations for meetings. They might be streets, hotels, or shopping malls where Instagrammers can rendezvous with each other or with their followers. Most of the time, Instagrammers are open to speaking with subscribers that they meet; it is a fact that they announce in their Stories repeatedly. This willingness to communicate stems from their desire to create an image of a down-to-earth, sincere individual, capable of gaining the trust of all of their followers.
Travel holds a special position in Instagram narratives since it is an important characteristic of contemporary life for those who can afford it. For Instagrammers, travelling also offers perfect opportunities to diversify content and incorporate new spatial elements in a narrative. Photos created during travels and posted on Instagram accounts of our heroines are not any less or more creative than those taken in the city where a heroine normally lives, as both are shot by professional photographers. In fact, there are many professional Russian photographers who live permanently in Bali, which is commonly featured in vacation shots, hired essentially on demand to create specific images.

Travels are also essential for the plot evolution of narratives. The spatial movements of Instagrammers make possible development of new plot lines in narratives. One of the most common narrative purposes of travels is for a heroine to reflect on her life and recognize her accomplishments. A given Instagrammer deliberately focuses her attention of her followers on these moments, which summarize the overall narrative as it has developed so far as well as remind followers about its overall trajectory. For example, Valeria Chekalina (@ler_chek) travelled with her family to the United Arab Emirates in April 2021. After a flight on Emirates in first class, they spent the entire holiday in the Burj Al Arab (العرب برج), the famous and expensive sail-shaped hotel in Dubai. Beginning with boarding the plane, the entire trip was accompanied with memories of the family’s first vacation to Dubai, which had happened many years ago. During their first trip, they flew in economy and took selfies in front of the Burj Al Arab, where they could now stay for their entire trip in the best rooms.

Because a large percentage of the @ler_chek audience has been following her account for some time, they are sensitive to all of the contrasts and achievements as a plot development. As a result, travel can be seen as a crucial component of the story, suggesting a specific social trajectory and the symbolic success of the protagonists.

Conclusion

While Instagram is commonly thought of as a photo- and video-centric social media platform, our research has shown that it can also be used to generate long narratives. Rather than being simple diaries of an account owner’s life, these narratives that develop over many years, were constructed and presented using many special techniques and devices. In a sense, Instagram narratives are not any less complex than narratives created in literature, films, video games, and other media.

Our analysis of narrativity in Instagram focused on its temporal and spatial dimensions. This was inspired by Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope and his analysis of time and space constructions in literary text. We also examined the roles of Instagram interface in narrative construction. In the future, we plan to discuss other important aspects of Instagram narratives, such as the role of main and episodic characters as well as the performative characteristics of these narratives.

We identified parallels between digital interactive networked narration on Instagram and storytelling in other media, such as literature and cinema. By analyzing these connections, we revealed a continuity between seemingly disparate types of media and also demonstrated how older forms of text-based narration have changed in a digital era.

The examples that we describe in this paper demonstrate that Instagram is not just an image and video social network but also a platform for creating and participating in multifaceted “worlds,” constructed using multimedia narrative affordances of the network. Based on our research, we firmly believe that Instagram acts a ground for experiments where new techniques of digital narration are being developed and tested, and that these techniques may become more prominent on other new platforms in the future.
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Notes

1. Repetition is also unavoidable in digital narratives, whose plot lines are inevitably limited.

2. “Stories” are videos with a duration of less than 15 seconds. They vanish from Instagram accounts 24 hours after they are posted. In 2016, Instagram borrowed this feature from another social media platform, Snapchat.


6. Gérard Genette (1980) introduced the term “focalization” to describe a narrative viewpoint in the early 1970s as a development of the ideas of Jean Pouillon and Tzvetan Todorov.


10. These chronotoposes and their corresponding functions are frequently encountered in Instagram narratives.


15. This format is common in Stories, but less so in the main account’s view, which includes individual photographs and videos. A narrative-driven Instagram account treats each photo or video as a unique and dramatic event to be remembered. The originality of each post will be reduced if there are too many recurrent places in the feed.


17. Trips, for example, frequently coincide with a family member’s birthday, providing an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of a family relationship.

References


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