

THESIS SUMMARY

Admilson Veloso da Silva

FOREVER EPHEMERAL?

AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF YOUTH SELF-PRESENTATION WITH
INSTAGRAM STORIES IN THE CONTEXT OF VISUAL MOBILE
COMMUNICATION

Supervisor:

Ágnes Veszelszki, Ph.D.

Budapest

2024

Department of Communication and Media Science

THESIS SUMMARY

Admilson Veloso da Silva

FOREVER EPHEMERAL?

AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF YOUTH SELF-PRESENTATION WITH
INSTAGRAM STORIES IN THE CONTEXT OF VISUAL MOBILE COMMUNICATION

Supervisor:

Ágnes Veszelszki, Ph.D.

Budapest

2024

© Admilson Veloso da Silva

Table of Contents

1. Research background and justification of the topic	3
2. Methodology	10
3. Main findings of the dissertation	13
3.1. <i>Themes about Instagram: Social connections, affordances, and visual exploration</i>	15
3.2. <i>Themes about Stories: Ephemerality, quick communication, strategic self-presentation, and visual expression</i>	16
4. Main references	21
5. List of own (or co-authored) publications related to the topic	23

1. Research background and justification of the topic

Picture this: The first thing that most of us do after waking up is to grab our smartphones. Besides turning off an alarm, it almost feels like opening curtains to the world. App notifications summarize what happened overnight. With a quick swipe, while preparing to eat breakfast or on the way to school/work, some may share visual pieces of our days online, painting a routinary image of our lives, one brushstroke at a time. Throughout the day, selfies, food, architecture, quotes, landscapes, songs, and other elements depict the latest experiences on Instagram Stories to those who follow us – or to anyone on Instagram, in the case of open accounts. The ephemeral content feature reached one billion users in 2023 (Kemp, 2023) and includes a set of creative tools to design visual content. However, the shared moments are visible for only 24 hours unless saved as a “Highlight”. After this specific duration, the stories automatically expire to give way to new everyday scenes – in a cycle of seeing, registering, sharing, and disappearing.

From “mundane” moments like a cup of coffee to more “significant” events like a birthday celebration, everything is worthy of being registered and shared on ephemeral content platforms. Taking into consideration Instagram’s popularity on a general level and the ubiquity of mobile phone photography in our daily lives, it is not with surprise that this social media has become a common topic in contemporary communication science research. Leaver et al. (2020) explain that the platform has altered the understanding of visual social media cultures; Serafinelli and Villi (2017) indicate that smartphone mediation for image production/sharing online can affect how we think visually of events, people, and our surroundings. The integration of smartphones connected with the internet, camera phones, and Instagram Stories has become an almost unnoticeable part of many young people’s lives, allowing them to document and share their experiences with the world, one snapshot at a time. However, Stories is only one example of how ephemeral communication occurs on social media, but this practice is also spread across other platforms, such as Telegram, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, BeReal, and Snapchat.

Although Instagram has become the favorite platform of those aged 16-24 years old globally as of 2023 (Kemp, 2023), the academic study of Instagram Stories is still an area in development, with very few authors analyzing youth practices with the feature from a qualitative and multidisciplinary perspective. Barnea et al. (2023) identified, based on an empirical study, that ephemeral images can affect information processing and content-

consuming behavior, with users of these features (e.g., Instagram Stories) spending more time and attention viewing the ephemeral images in comparison to perpetual content users. I don't want to take a technologically deterministic perspective on this work but rather indicate how Instagram usage for self-presentation is interconnected to social-cultural practices that seem common in an era of visual mobile communication.

The tendency of growth in social media usage, such as Instagram, is likely to continue since the number of Internet users is still on the rise and nearly doubled in the past ten years, from 2.53 billion to 5.16 billion (Kemp, 2023). In times of ephemerality, self-presentation gets help from images that continuously expose the lived, the observed, and the imagined. With additions of filters, figures, GIFs, emojis, and Augmented Reality functions, other virtual universes can be built on the photographed world. Hence, the research puzzle of this investigation centers on the in-depth exploration of how ephemeral visual content, particularly Instagram Stories, influences the self-presentation and visibility practices of youth in the context of visual mobile communication. Despite Instagram's widespread popularity and the pervasive role of smartphone cameras in documenting and sharing everyday experiences, the academic examination of Instagram Stories remains underdeveloped. Hence, this research qualitatively (Jaeger & Halliday, 1998) analyzes and answers three questions:

1. **RQ1:** *How does online ephemeral content influence visibility practices among the youth in the context of visual mobile communication?*
2. **RQ2:** *What specific strategies are used for visual self-presentation mediated by ephemeral images on Instagram Stories?*
3. **RQ3:** *What characteristics distinguish the use of ephemeral images as a communication practice on visual social media?*

In alignment with these questions, the general objective of this dissertation can be summarized as follows: To analyze, within visual mobile communication, the influence of ephemeral images from Instagram Stories in the self-presentation of the youth born in the 21st century (aged 18-22 years old). A more focused set of specific objectives, also directly connected to the previous RQs, reflects on the contribution to theory, analyzes the ephemeral images, and describes the characteristics of those studied online experiences:

- **Theory:** *To provide a theoretical basis on how social media applications with ephemeral content intersect with visual mobile communication.*

- **Images:** *To typify the visual self-presentation strategies mediated by ephemeral content of Instagram Stories among the youth.*
- **Experiences:** *To investigate the characteristics that distinguish the use of ephemeral images as a communication practice among the youth on visual social media.*

To answer these questions and meet these objectives, the research draws on three main lines of knowledge: Visual mobile communication, visual social media studies, and self-presentation on social media. The popularization of smartphones has transformed visual communication as a practice, reshaping how people create, share, and consume visual content (Ling & Horst, 2011; Hand, 2020). While mobile communication began in the 1990s, it was the widespread adoption of smartphones in the early 21st century that made visual mobile communication a pervasive part of daily life. By early 2023, an estimated 5.44 billion people globally owned mobile phones (Kemp, 2023). Technological advancements such as GSM, WAP, and mobile broadband were important in enhancing the functionality of these devices, making mobile communication more accessible and immediate (Ling & Horst, 2011).

Equally, academic research on visual mobile communication has also evolved over the past two decades, initially focusing on MMS and photo messaging to investigate the integration of visual elements into mobile interactions. Scholars such as Kristóf Nyíri (2003) emphasized the combination of visual and verbal communication in these human connections, while Mikko Villi's work (2010, 2015) analyzed the impact of camera phones on both communication and photography. In this sense, the instant capture and sharing of images and videos have affected personal interactions, allowing people to document their lives and engage with others in real time. This immediacy of visual mobile communication foments a sense of mediated presence, enhancing the shared experience of events as they happen (Villi, 2010).

However, these practices go beyond personal interactions, influencing how individuals perceive and engage with the world. This is evident in everyday activities, such as attending concerts or public events, where capturing and sharing moments has become an integral part of the experience. The development in visual mobile communication now includes augmented and virtual reality features, seen in platforms like Instagram Stories and Snapchat, allowing users to create immersive visual content (Veloso da Silva, 2021). Furthermore, smart mobile technology have contributed to the circulation of photography, as explained by Serafinelli and Villi (2017), henceforth allowing the interconnection of two areas: digital technology and the

new mediated practices. “With smart mobile devices, photography has become so ubiquitous that the existence of events, people, and objects seems to be directly connected with being photographed” (p. 3).

Building on the evolution of visual communication through smartphones, ephemeral social media applications on these smart devices are now spaces for sharing transient content, redefining how users engage with visuals in their daily lives. Instagram Stories, launched in 2016, exemplifies this shift, rapidly gaining over one billion users by 2023 (Kemp, 2023). These platforms allow users to post content that disappears after 24 hours, fomenting an immediate connection between the creator and viewer. For some authors (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Serafinelli & Villi, 2017; Russmann & Svensson, 2017; Hand, 2017; 2020) there has been more recently a shift towards visual images in social media as a whole, especially after the rise of Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat in the second decade of the century, with image-sharing being an integral part of the online experiences. Such an argument can be associated with Serafinelli and Villi (2017), who exemplify this by showing that the social media platform usage has been connected to a specific verb (to *Instagram*) and that photo-sharing has turned into a way to connect people with their experiences (p. 9).

Hand (2020) explains that since the beginning of the 21st century, there have been many changes in photographic practices, in the technologies available for registering/sharing photos, and in the images themselves, which are also aligned with a transformation in the widespread presence, interpretations, and cultural significance of visuals (p. 310). Further developments occurred in the connection of images and social media: “photography has become embedded in a greater variety of social practices, and social media is now primarily visual in its infrastructure, aesthetics, and uses” (p. 310), thus establishing a direct relationship between the platforms and visual communication (Hand, 2020, p. 311).

The feature analyzed in this study, Instagram Stories, was officially released by Instagram in August 2016, when the platform also opened the possibility of publishing longer videos and reached over one billion users by 2023 (Kemp, 2023). The feature was a market response from the Facebook Group (from 2021 named Meta Platforms) after the failure of acquiring its direct competitor, the app Snapchat, which had made it popular among youth to share “ephemeral” visual messages that disappeared after a short period. Since there isn’t still a clear concept of what a story is, it is defined here as ephemeral content automatically programmed to disappear from a social media platform after a specific time. The duration, technical characteristics,

design, and format of the content may vary from platform to platform. In its official disclosure of the new social media application feature, Instagram highlights the ephemerality characteristics and encourages its users to post more, with no worries about the amount of published material.

With Instagram Stories, you do not have to worry about over-posting. Instead, you can share as much as you want throughout the day — as creatively as you want. You can bring your story to life in new ways with text and drawing tools. Photos and videos will disappear after 24 hours and will not appear in your profile grid or post line. [...] Instagram has always been a place to share the moments you want to remember. Now you can share your highlight moments and everything else between them, too. (Instagram, 2016, para. 2-6).

Georgakopoulou (2021) points out how stories on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat are more than fleeting glimpses into everyday life; they are socio-technical formats that shape how users present themselves and interact with their audience. This emphasis on authenticity, spontaneity, and the mundane reflects the evolving norms of digital storytelling, where the line between public and private becomes increasingly blurred. Instagram, and specifically Instagram Stories, has become by 2024 the most used platform with ephemerality built-in, but it's possible to notice that ephemeral content has spread across other social media: Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, YouTube, TikTok, BeReal, and Telegram all have adopted it at a point. WhatsApp and Facebook, which both belong to the same group as Instagram Stories (Meta Platforms), launched it in 2017 and are still available in 2024. Other initiatives, such as Skype Highlights, YouTube Stories, LinkedIn Stories, and Twitter Fleets, were discontinued over time.



Figure 1. Image depicting the practical applicability of creativity on Instagram Stories.
 (Source: Instagram/Reproduction - October 03, 2017)

Although this study focuses on Instagram Stories, the discussion about ephemerality and the changes in how humans experience time comes from a long way in academic history, beyond social media studies. Hand (2020) suggests that social media images on a general level are immediate and ephemeral, based on the constant amount of content shared on these platforms in real-time, the ways the images circulate, and the pace they are consumed and discarded. Contrastingly, they are also enduring, to an extent: “An image might be viewed and discarded immediately on a smartphone but will be simultaneously archived across social media by default” (p. 317).

According to Lipovetsky (1990), the concept of ephemerality is directly connected to the reproductivity and accessibility capacities of capitalist societies, not only to an aesthetic that insists on capturing a viewer’s attention. Hence, attributes of gadget-centered consumption (e.g., videogames, phones, etc.) bring those characteristics perceived in fashion (seasonal, disposable) to a broader material environment, with the intensity and pace of information consumption also accelerating. Thus, not only the duration of a product is relevant, but also the language needs to be understood quickly, characters should not be too complex, and speed is a supreme ruler.

In this context, the advent of ephemeral social media content, such as Instagram Stories and Snapchat, has also contributed to the development of new strategies for self-presentation on the Internet. The transient, in-the-moment visuals that disappear after a set period contrast with

the more permanent nature of traditional social media posts and denote a sense of authenticity and immediacy, enabling users to present themselves more casually and with less fear of long-term scrutiny (Bayer et al., 2016). In the case of Snapchat, the platform affordances restrict the duration of the information and how it can be produced/consumed, favoring mundane quotidian content on the go: “thus [a snap] represents a deliberative, shared experience that is temporally bounded. In doing so, Snapchat facilitates a distinctive sharing practice that is both in-the-moment and momentary” (Bayer et al., 2016, p. 4).

However, even on platforms designed to promote more authentic sharing, like BeReal, users still face pressures to portray their lives in interesting ways, showing that the challenge of impression management persists across different social media spaces. A recent study about impression management among college students on BeReal conducted by Reddy and Kumar (2023) questioned whether a structured user experience, such as the one offered by the application, would reduce the pressures of social media posting. Their initial findings suggest that, although the youth expressed appreciation towards watching their friends’ mundane events, there are still issues regarding self-presentation. This can be seen in the fact that participants worry about when they receive the notification to post, indicating that some moments of the day would be more worthy of being shared online.

Hollenbaugh (2021) reviews contemporary literature produced on self-presentation in social media and connects it to previous theories, including Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective. The researcher points out three main ways in which these platforms have affected self-presentation in comparison with previous forms: “Decreasing anonymity for users, contributions from audiences, and increased context collapse have shaped self-presentation in social media” (p. 81). First, the reduction of online anonymity over the past two decades, as seen in platforms like Facebook/Meta and Twitter that require users to confirm their identities, influences the type of content users feel comfortable sharing, potentially reducing deceptive information. Second, audience contributions, such as likes and comments, impact a user’s self-presentation, with platforms offering ephemeral content, like Snapchat and Instagram Stories, encouraging more authentic sharing. Lastly, the challenge of managing diverse audiences with varying levels of intimacy on social media complicates self-presentation, as users must balance competing goals for different groups (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 88).

Therefore, intimacy, privacy control, and different levels of visibility are interconnected parts of these platforms that can be used for self-presentation. However, the social and technological

affordances vary among different social media, they may change over time, and even be presented in distinct ways within features in the same social media. For instance, a person can maintain an open account on Instagram and post carefully selected and edited content (persistent) with hashtags and geotags on their feed to a vast audience – in this case, the entirety of Instagram users –, while sharing more casual visual information to their list of Close Friends on Instagram Stories (ephemeral).

2. Methodology

This research employs a mixed qualitative methodological approach, integrating focus groups, netnography, and semi-structured interviews to investigate youth's visual communication on Instagram Stories. This multi-method approach is designed to capture the complexity and depth of the participants' experiences and behaviors, aligning with the interpretive paradigm of communication research (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015), which emphasizes understanding the meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to their communicative practices, rather than predicting behaviors.

I recruited participants through an online form distributed via social media platforms, as well as email invitations to students at Corvinus University of Budapest. The recruitment used the snowball effect to reach a heterogeneous sample of youth aged 18-22 who use Instagram and live in Budapest. For this purpose, the form included filters to ensure participants met the study criteria and provided information about the research objectives and ethical considerations. Ultimately, 43 people from 20 different nationalities were selected to participate in the study, which was divided into six focus groups held at Corvinus. I also conducted a pilot study in the second semester of 2021 to test and refine the research methods, following the guidelines of van Teijlingen & Hundley (2002). This pilot included one focus group, two weeks of netnography, and two semi-structured interviews.

The focus groups were designed to explore participants' experiences and perspectives on Instagram Stories, with each session recorded and transcribed for the posterior thematic analysis. During the meetings, participants discussed various aspects of their visual communication practices, including content creation, sharing behaviors, and the impact of Instagram's ephemeral nature on their self-presentation.

Multimodal Methodologies		Stage of the Research	Research Questions
			Stage 1 - Pilot Research
Thematic Analysis (Hybrid)	Focus Groups	Stage 2	RQ1, RQ2
	Netnography	Stage 3	RQ1, RQ2
	Semi-structured interviews	Stage 4	RQ1, RQ3
	Revision of themes (TA) and findings	Stage 5	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3

Table 1. Stages of the methodological study design.
(Source: Own elaboration)

Morgan (1996) defines focus groups “as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 130). Thus, the method is characterized as being collective, usually conducted with 5-12 participants, and generating a debate in which a moderator seeks in-depth contributions from the participants about a topic. Furthermore, the author emphasizes that it has three essential components: 1) it is devoted to data collection; 2) the interaction in a group discussion is the source of the data; and 3) the researcher has an active role in the process (p. 130).

Date	Focus Group Code	Number of Participants	Nationalities
December 4th, 2021	FGP01	6	5
April 22nd, 2022	FG01	6	5
June 10th, 2022	FG02	9	8
September 22nd, 2022	FG03	5	5
September 23rd, 2022	FG04	6	4
September 30th, 2022	FG05	11	8

Table 2. Schedule of focus groups with Instagram Stories users.
(Source: Own elaboration)

Following the focus groups, the netnography involved creating a research-specific Instagram account to follow participants and collect data from their Stories over a two-week period. Netnography (Kozinets, 2020) is a research method that combines various practices and viewpoints from different fields, such as computer science, cultural studies, media anthropology, education, and marketing. It is a form of ethnography that has established parameters and guidelines for data collection, which involve simplifying, searching, scouting, selection, and saving operations. This method allowed for the collection of real-time visual

content and metadata about participants' Instagram activity, including screen recordings of Stories, which provided evidence of how participants visually represent themselves and interact with their audience on Instagram.

Kozinets (2010) defines 5 main steps in the research process to guide netnographies (p. 61), which covers from the planning phase for the definition of research questions, going over the identification of the site and community to be analyzed, the specific observation and data collection procedure and concluding with the data analysis/interpretation and the report of findings. Ensuring the ethical procedures is discussed as a sixth step that follows the entire research.

The last method for data collection was the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with participants who were active during the netnography phase. When planning for this type of interview, Smith (1995) suggests that the investigator should prepare in advance a set of questions based on the data they expect to obtain from respondents, but allow for flexibility in the process, since new inquiries/themes may arise as the conversation happens. The researcher indicates some positive characteristics for the use of this qualitative method: "It facilitates rapport/empathy, allows a greater flexibility of coverage and enables the interview to enter novel areas, and it tends to produce richer data" (Smith, 1995, p. 12).

The interview guide for this research consisted of 15 questions, elaborated and tested with two participants in the pilot research and later on conducted with 18 more interviewees (N = 20). These interviews aimed to explore their self-presentation strategies and motivations on Instagram Stories. Moreover, participants were also asked to discuss specific images they had shared on Stories, providing concrete examples of their visual self-presentation practices.

I employed Thematic analysis (TA) to analyze the collected data, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involved coding the data using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach to identify and analyze patterns and themes. A codebook was developed based on existing literature on self-presentation and Instagram studies, guiding the initial coding process. Braun and Clarke (2006) propose a step-by-step guide for conducting thematic analysis, which consists of six phases that go from the familiarization with the data to the production of a report, as clearly described in *Table 3* reproduced from the author's work (p. 87). However, they explain that this is not a linear process and many times a researcher will have to go back and forth throughout the phases to develop their thematic analysis.

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 3. Phases of thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke.
(Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

The data collected from focus groups, netnography, and interviews were organized and stored systematically. Transcripts of focus groups and interviews were prepared in Word files, while Instagram data were cataloged in an Excel spreadsheet and stored on Google Drive. The data were then transferred to MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, for coding and thematic analysis. This process involved repeated cycles of coding and theme development, ensuring consistency and depth in the analysis.

Throughout the research, I aimed to follow clear and transparent procedures, while also guaranteeing ethical considerations. In this sense, participants were fully informed about the research objectives, data usage, and their rights, and consent was obtained for all data collection activities. Additionally, I took measures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, following guidelines from the Global Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO ERC). On top of that, the ephemeral nature of Instagram Stories requires careful handling of data to respect participants' privacy. Finally, I also followed ethical guidelines from Kozinets (2010), emphasizing transparency in the research.

3. Main findings of the dissertation

The data analysis is structured into three main steps, each with its subsections. Initially, I present participants' demographics and contextual information to provide the background for their self-presentation. This approach, as proposed by Vicsek (2007), considers situational factors to enhance the understanding of the context and is based on forms filled out during the focus group sessions. The second step explores Instagram usage in the context of self-presentation, supported by thematic analysis data, identifying the primary themes related to Instagram's role in visual communication. The third step provides a detailed analysis of how

Instagram Stories are used for visual mobile communication, combining evidence from focus groups, netnography, and interviews, as depicted in the thematic map below:

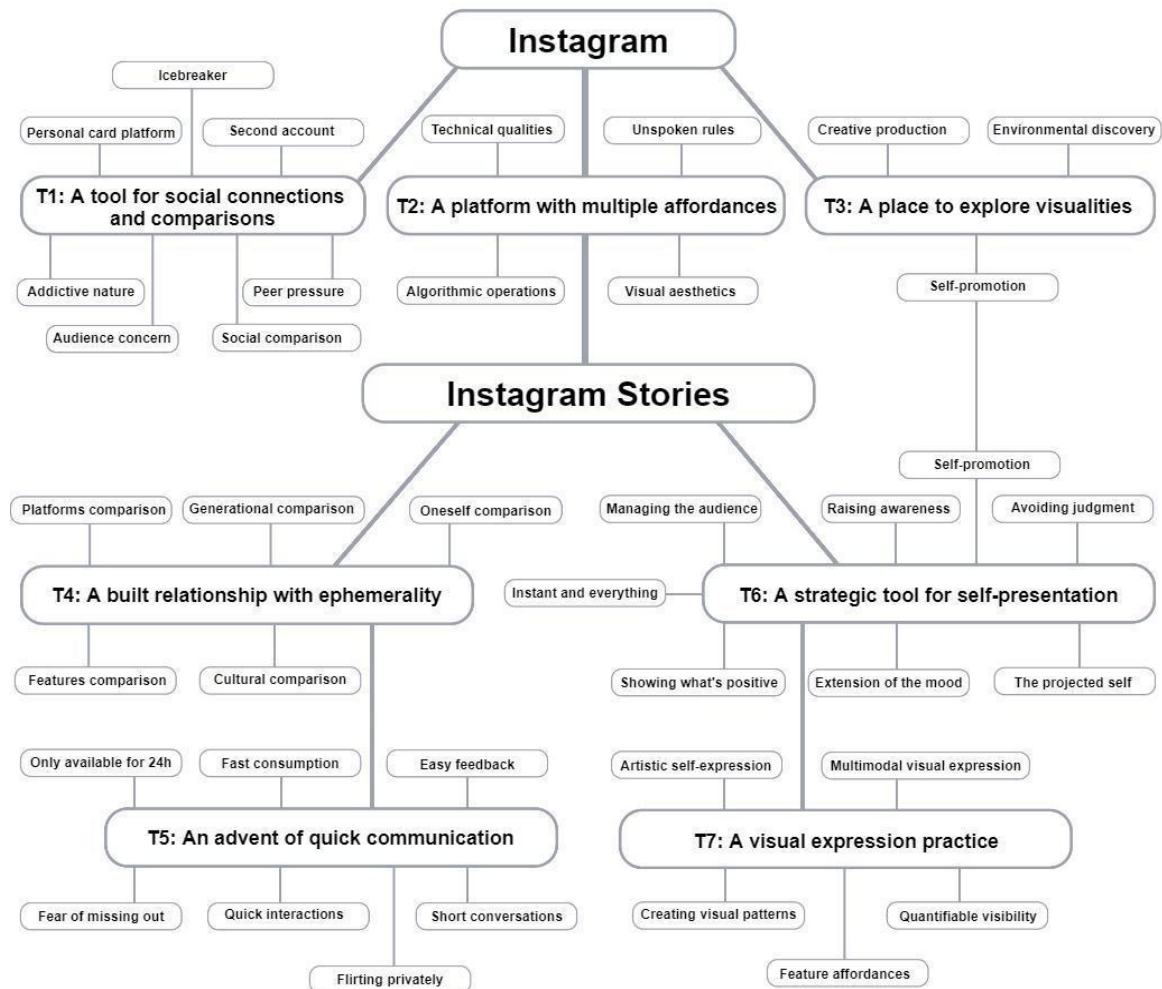


Figure 2. Visualization of the thematic analysis map. (Source: Own elaboration)

The participants in my research were asked to indicate the five most used applications on their smartphones. Not surprisingly, Instagram was the most recurring app among their answers (20%) and was mentioned by 42 of the 43 participants, followed by WhatsApp (11%), TikTok (10,6%), YouTube (7,5%), and Spotify (5,5%). Respondents were asked to indicate when their Instagram account was created, and they were instructed about how to check it on their smartphones. Out of the 43 participants, 33 were already Instagram users when the feature Stories was first introduced, in 2016. Finally, participants indicated the audiences that they connect to on Instagram: They are following mainly friends (31,5%), influencers (20%), university colleagues (12,3%), and family members (11,5%). When it comes to the accounts that they allow to follow them, their friends appear in the first place (40,6%), with university

colleagues in the sequence (20,8%), their family in third (19,8%), strangers or unknown people in fourth (14,2%).

3.1. Themes about Instagram: Social connections, affordances, and visual exploration

Three main themes are presented below and can be seen in the *thematic map* (Figure 2), covering how the users talk about Instagram to connect with peers and for interpersonal communication; their description of the platform based on its affordances and functionalities; and the appropriation of the application to explore visualities, be it their own self-presentation or discovering broader visual opportunities (e.g., checking how a place look like on photos). The first theme discusses how Instagram is used for maintaining social connections and engaging in social comparisons. Participants frequently use the platform to stay connected with friends and family, and to observe and compare their lives with others. This is exemplified by FG01P05, who talks about how it functions as personal card: “For example, ‘They study in this school’ or ‘They are interested in this music because they were in this concert’ or, ‘They love this food’”, explain the user, complementing that “it just makes you more united with people, you get more information about them and find some common points”.

The second theme focuses on the technical characteristics that facilitate various forms of visual communication (T2: “*Instagram as a platform with multiple affordances*”). These affordances include features such as filters, tags, and story functions that enable users to creatively express themselves and interact with their audience. A summary of these practical applicabilities is provided by FG05P04:

“There are several features from other apps. For example, we have the Stories which were first on Snapchat; we also have the feed, which makes us think of Facebook. Then with the new Reels videos, it’s a bit like TikTok. So, I think it’s one app (Instagram) where we have several of these functions combined, which makes it easier to just be on one app and do all these different things without having to switch between them. So that’s why I personally spend a lot of time on Instagram instead of on those apps separately” (FG05P04).

The third theme examines how Instagram serves as a space for exploring different visual styles and aesthetics (T3: “*Instagram as a place to explore visualities*”). Participants use the platform to experiment with visual content, often inspired by trends and influences within their social networks. The topics brought to debate by participants include digital photography and image

creation, the app appropriation for self-promotion through visual means, and the ways it enables users to explore their environment, events, and the world visually. For FG01P05, visual exploration through Instagram can even determine their purchase choices, as images may reveal the quality of products. “For example, if I want to send flowers to my mother or buy some cakes, I can check their profile to ensure that the content and the product that they provide for customers is of good quality.”

3.2. Themes about Stories: Ephemerality, quick communication, strategic self-presentation, and visual expression

In this section, I present the four remaining themes, exploring differences between platforms, features, generations, and cultures (*Theme 4*), how ephemeral content aligns with quick communication practices like Stories’ 24-hour duration and fast interactions (*Theme 5*), participants’ self-presentation strategies (*Theme 6*), and their multimodal visual expression, including artistic expression and the use of AR and filters (*Theme 7*).

Themes and topics developed in the analysis		
Themes	Topics	Description
Theme 1: Instagram as a tool for social connections and comparisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal card platform - Icebreaker - Audience concern - Second account - Peer pressure - Social comparison - Addictive nature 	T1 highlights how Instagram serves as a tool to connect with others, showcase interests, and exchange messages, while also raising concerns about controlling visibility, self-presentation, and the impact on mental health.
Theme 2: Instagram as a platform with multiple affordances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technical qualities - Algorithmic operations - Visual aesthetics - Unspoken rules 	T2 discusses why Instagram is favored over other social media platforms, indicating its multiple affordances such as user-friendliness, organization, editing options, visual aesthetics, and the unspoken rules for its proper use.
Theme 3: Instagram as a place to explore visualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creative production - Self-promotion - Environmental discovery 	T3 discusses how Instagram is used for exploring visual elements, encompassing digital content production, pictorial self-promotion, and visual discovery of one’s environment, impacting travel choices and purchasing decisions based on visual representations of

			products and places.
	Theme 4: Instagram Stories as a built relationship with ephemerality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Platforms comparison - Features comparison - Generations comparison - Oneself comparison - Cultures comparison 	T4 explores Stories' position as an early adopter of transient content, the informal and self-expressive nature of Stories compared to the Feed, generational differences regarding its use, personal usage changes over time, and cultural variations in content curation and societal norms.
	Theme 5: Instagram Stories as an advent of quick communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Only available for 24h - Fast consumption - Fear of missing out (FOMO) - Easy feedback - Quick interactions - Short conversations - Flirting privately 	T5 discusses Stories as a place for quick communication, allowing swift and ephemeral interactions through its features, the phenomenon of fast-paced content consumption, easy and immediate feedback, short interactions and conversations, and private courtship.
	Theme 6: Instagram Stories as a strategic tool for self-presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-promotion - Avoid judgment - Raising awareness - Managing the audience - Showing what's positive - Extension of the mood - Instant and everything - The projected self 	T6 explores how stories are utilized by young people as a strategic tool for self-presentation, allowing them to curate and project desired aspects of their lives, raise awareness for causes, avoid lasting judgment, and maintain connections with peers.
	Theme 7: Instagram Stories as a visual expression practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multimodal visual expression - Artistic self-expression - Creating visual patterns - Feature affordances - Quantifiable visibility 	T7 delves into the use of stories as a visual expression practice, highlighting its multimodality capability, and the scope for artistic self-expression, resulting in curated pictorial content patterns and measurable visibility practices.

Table 4. Distribution of themes and topics developed in the analysis.
(Source: Own elaboration)

The fourth theme (T4: “*Instagram Stories as a built relationship with ephemerality*”) covers the concept of ephemerality in Instagram Stories. Participants appreciate the temporary nature of Stories, which allows them to share moments without the long-term commitment associated with permanent posts. This ephemeral quality encourages more spontaneous and authentic sharing, influencing how users engage with the platform and present themselves. According to FG02P08, their Feed content tends to be more curated to present a certain image, while their stories are more lighthearted and humorous: “I find that my stories are more fun, a lot more of

my friends, maybe a silly photo. Something that's not as aesthetic as a post on my feed. So, they are more self-expressive than my actual posts".

The fifth theme (T5: "*Instagram Stories as an advent of quick communication*") explores how Instagram Stories represents a contemporary type communication that is faster and immediate. The immediacy of Stories makes them ideal for sharing updates and engaging in real-time interactions. This is evidenced in the comment of FG05P07: "I think it just kinda makes it special. The fact that it's gonna disappear at some point. You know that certain people will be able to see it and people will miss it." The reasons to opt for a transient format is further explained by FP04P04: "I think you can consume information really fast on the Stories, while on a feed it could be so really slow and boring".

The sixth theme T6: "*Instagram Stories as a Strategic Self-Presentation Tool*" discusses how the youth apply Stories for self-presentation. Participants often curate their content to project a specific image or narrative, balancing authenticity with the desire to manage impressions. For participant FG03P01, the platform facilitates impression management: "It's a quick way to create a perception of who you are to other people. You promote yourself in a way that, you know... So, it's just a representation of yourself and what you do basically." The perception that they can avoid being scrutinized by the public eye is indicated by FGP01P02 as a reason to use Stories: "It might be because I don't want to be judged. Some people may look at my feed and judge me based on that. If I post on Stories, it's a current [momentaneous] situation, it's fine."

The seventh theme (T7: "*Visual Expression through Instagram Stories*") examines how visuality is used for self-expression. Participants utilize Stories to express their creativity and personal style, often using various tools and features to enhance their visual content. FGP01P04 cites regularly adding the temperature and the time stickers, beyond other components. "Sometimes I post with the location because it gets more views, and with GIFs: 'Good morning', or the day of the week, such as 'Happy Thursday', just to put a hint of my personality in the post." Although most participants have grown up immersed in digital technologies such as smartphones, and are fluent in image manipulation, some value the authenticity of immediate and unfiltered visuals, as noted by FG01P02: "On Stories, people are more... more alive I think, they are more natural." This type of genuine content reflecting on "real-life" offline experiences can generate more engagement, according to FG01P05: "I found out that people

react more to those stories that are more realistic, and I personally love more of those stories that are realistic.”

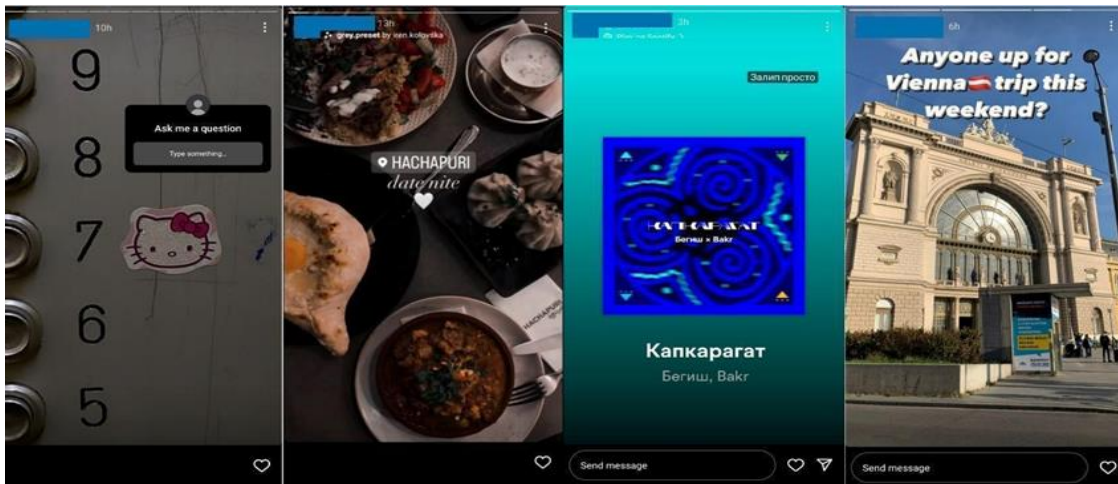


Figure 3. Representation of multimodal visual content on Instagram Stories.
(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

In *Figure 3*, we can see four examples with diverse multimodality usage over the images, incorporating textual, audio, and visual functions. In the first story, a user shared an image from an elevator in which there is a sticker of the Hello Kitty character, and a question box icon is added for their followers to interact and send inquiries. The second post shows a few dishes on a table and was shot with a preset filter from Instagram, over which the user added the geolocation tag of a restaurant, followed by the words “date nite” (*sic*) and a white heart emoji, thus conveying that they were spending time with a beloved person. The third content shows the cross-app compatibility with Spotify, shared through another app, and represents the song that this user was listening to, with the addition of the words “just obsessed” (in Russian). The last image depicts a train station in Budapest and has the sentence on the top of it: “Anyone up for Vienna [*Austrian flag emoji*] trip this weekend?”, thus inviting their followers to interact and showing visually with the emoji where they were traveling to.

Below, I present a summary of the main characteristics identified in the research as youth self-presentation strategy on Stories:

1. **Curated Authenticity:** Sharing seemingly spontaneous yet carefully curated moments to appear authentic while managing impressions.
2. **Selective Sharing:** Choosing specific moments or aspects of their lives to share, often those that are fun, exciting, or aesthetically pleasing.
3. **Audience Segmentation:** Using Instagram’s features like Close Friends to share content with select groups, maintaining different personas for different audiences.

4. **Interactive Engagement:** Utilizing features like polls, questions, and stickers to engage followers and appear approachable and interactive.
5. **Highlighting Temporality:** Taking advantage of the temporary nature of Stories to experiment with content that might not fit their permanent feed, allowing for more playful and less polished self-representation.
6. **Emphasizing Relatability:** Sharing everyday activities and experiences to build a relatable and personal connection with followers.

The findings in this research have practical implications for social media platforms, marketers, and researchers. For platforms, understanding youth self-presentation practices can guide feature development to enhance user engagement and satisfaction. Marketers can utilize insights on ephemeral content usage to create more effective advertising strategies targeting young audiences. Researchers benefit from a comprehensive methodological approach that can be replicated and expanded in future studies.

4. Main references

- Barnea, U., Meyer, R. J., and Nave, G. (2023). The Effects of Content Ephemerality on Information Processing, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 60(4), pp. 750-766. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437221131047>
- Bayer, J. B., Ellison, N., Schoenebeck, S. Y., and Falk, E. B. (2016). Sharing the small moments: ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat, *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(7), pp. 956-977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1084349>
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Croucher S. M. and Cronn-Mills D. (2015). *Understanding communication research methods: a theoretical and practical approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2021). Small stories as curated formats on social media: The intersection of affordances, values & practices, *System*, 102, 102620. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102620>
- Hand, M. (2017). Visuality in social media: Researching images, circulations and practices, in L. Sloan & A. Quan-Haase (eds.) *The SAGE handbook of social media research methods*. London: Sage, pp. 217–231.
- Hand, M. (2020). Photography Meets Social Media: Image Making and Sharing in a Continually Networked Present, in *The Handbook of Photography Studies*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, pp. 310–326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474242233.ch-020>
- Highfield, T. and Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji, *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), pp. 47-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1155332>
- Hollenbaugh, E. E. (2021). Self-Presentation in Social Media: Review and Research Opportunities, *Review of Communication Research*, 9, pp. 80-98. Available at: <https://rcommunicationr.org/index.php/rcr/article/view/15/15>
- Instagram (2016). Introducing Instagram Stories. Available at: <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-instagram-stories> (Accessed: 15 November 2022).
- Jaeger, R. G. and Halliday, T. R. (1998). On Confirmatory versus Exploratory Research, *Herpetologica*, 54, S64–S66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3893289>
- Kemp, S. (2023) Digital 2023. We Are Social Report. Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2023/01/digital-2023/> (Accessed: 13 April 2023).
- Kozinets R. V. (2020). *Netnography: the essential guide to qualitative social media research* (Third Edition). London: Sage.
- Leaver, T., Highfield, T., and Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 264 pp. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2020-0029>

- Ling, R. and Horst, H. A. (2011). Mobile communication in the global south, *New Media & Society*, 13(3), pp. 363–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810393899>
- Lipovetsky, G. (1987/1990). *El imperio de lo efímero: La moda y su destino en las sociedades modernas*. Translated by Felipe Hernández y Carmen López. Barcelona, Spain: Editorial Anagrama S.A, 1990.
- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus Groups, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22(1), pp. 129–152. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129>
- Nyíri, K. (2003). Pictorial Meaning and Mobile Communication, in K. Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, pp. 157-184.
- Reddy, A. and Kumar, P. C. (2023). College students and impression management on BeReal, *Flow Journal*, published on February 10, 2023. Available at: https://www.flowjournal.org/2023/02/college_students_impression_management_ber_eal/ (Accessed: 21 March 2023).
- Russmann, U. and Svensson, J. (2017). Introduction to Visual Communication in the Age of Social Media: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges, *Media and Communication*, 5(4), pp. 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v5i4.1263>
- Serafinelli, E. and Villi, M. (2017). Mobile Mediated Visualities. An Empirical Study of Visual Practices on Instagram, *Digital Culture & Society*, 3, pp. 165-182. <https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2017-0210>
- Smith, J. A. (1995). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis, In J. A. Smith, R. Harre, and L. Van Langenhove (Eds.) *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, pp. 9-26. London: Sage. ISBN 9780803977334.
- van Teijlingen, E., and Hundley, V. (2002). The importance of pilot studies, *Nurs Stand.*, 16(40), pp. 33-6. <https://doi.org/10.7748/ns2002.06.16.40.33.c3214>
- Veloso da Silva, A. (2021). Visual communication in the age of digital-networked images: an analysis of Instagram Stories features, in INMECS21, 1. Uluslararası Medya ve Kültürel Çalışmalar Konferansı, “*Dijital Dünyada İletişim, Sanat ve Kültür*”, 6-7 Eylül 2021, Hasan Kalyoncu Üniversitesi, GAZİANTEP, Konferans Bildiri Kitapçığı. Hasan Kalyoncu University, Gaziantep, Turkey, pp. 264-275
- Vicsek, L. (2007). A Scheme for Analyzing the Results of Focus Groups, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 6(4), pp. 20–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690700600402>
- Villi, M. (2010). *Visual mobile communication: Camera phone photo messages as ritual communication and mediated presence*. WS Bookwell Ltd: Finland, Jyväskylä.
- Villi, M. (2015). “Hey, I’m here Right Now”: Camera phone photographs and mediated presence, *photographies*, 8(1), pp. 3-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2014.968937>

5. List of own (or co-authored) publications related to the topic

- Veloso da Silva, A. & Rédai, V. P. (2024). Hungary's Gen Z Workforce: Analysing Youth Perspectives on Employer Branding and Their Perception of the National Job Market, *Youth and Generation Studies*, Volume 1. Issue 1. ISSN: 3004-2151 (Online)
- Veloso da Silva, A. & Muratalieva, A. (2023). Stories of Afghanistan Beyond the War: Visual Mobile Communication Via @everydayafg on Instagram, *FILOLOGIA.HU*, XIV Year (2023), 1–4, pp 3–22. doi: 10.59648/filologia.2023.1-4.1
- Veloso da Silva, A. & López, A. M. C. (2023). Debating Feminism on Instagram: A Critical Discourse Analysis of @LasIgualdas in Colombia. *Information & Media*, 96, 136-152. DOI: 10.15388/Im.2023.96.70
- Veloso da Silva, A. & Yiming, T. (2023). Fencing on Instagram: Examining self-presentation as branding strategies of professional fencers, *Obra Digital*, (24), 51–71. DOI: 10.25029/od.2023.384.24
- Veloso da Silva, A. (2022). Vincent Miller, Understanding Digital Culture (2nd ed.). *International Journal of Communication (IJoC)*, Vol 16, Book Review. USC Annenberg Press: California, USA. ISSN: 1932-8036
- Veloso da Silva, A. (2021). Visual communication in the age of digital-networked images: an analysis of Instagram Stories features. In INMECS21, 1. Uluslararası Medya ve Kültürel Çalışmalar Konferansı, *Dijital Dünyada İletişim, Sanat ve Kültür*, Editor Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Pınar TINAZ. Gaziantep: Hasan Kalyoncu Üniversitesi (p. 264-274). ISBN: 978-605-71314-0-9.
- Veloso da Silva, A. (2021). Mobile Connection, Digital Generation and Visibility: A study on the use of smartphone applications among adolescents in Brazil, *International Journal of Balkan Studies*, V. 1, pp. 10-20. ISSN: 2788-6476
- Veloso da Silva, A. (2020). #Favela: Transformação social e disputas de visibilidade no Instagram na era da Cultura Digital. [#Favela: social change and visibility disputes on Instagram in the age of digital culture]. In (Eds.) Marta R. Maia and Mateus Yuri Passos, *Narrativas midiáticas contemporâneas: epistemologias dissidentes*. Santa Cruz do Sul: Catarse, 2020.
- Veloso da Silva, A. (2017). *Mediatização da Visibilidade na Cultura Digital: análise da #Me na ferramenta de publicação efêmera Stories do app de rede social Instagram* [MEDIATIZATION OF VISIBILITY IN DIGITAL CULTURE: analysis of the #Me in the ephemeral publishing tool Stories of the social network Instagram]. In Anais do IX Encontro dos Programas de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação Social de Minas Gerais (ECOMIG) – 2017. Belo Horizonte: ECOMIG.