

#UndertheInfluence: Analyzing Instagram Influencer Posts with CHAT

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In this article, Adams examines how and why Instagram influencer posts are a genre and how everyday Instagram users can be impacted by this genre when they encounter it. Using ISU's version of cultural-historical activity theory (PCHAT) to analyze a sample of Instagram posts created by influencers who are currently active on the social media app, Adams argues that Instagram influencers plan, create, and promote their posts in a specific way in order to successfully advertise brands, products, and services to their followers.

I used to be the type of person who hated keeping up with social media, but that all changed the day I was introduced to the glamorous world of Instagram influencers. Seeing pictures of regular people just like me lounging on gorgeous, sandy beaches with cocktails in hand, or grinning for the camera as they showed off their latest twenty-four karat gold face masks was enough to leave me with a serious case of social media FOMO. I wondered how these people, who should've been living average lives like mine, had managed to find themselves whisked away to a land of fun and luxury. I must admit that following the lives of Instagram influencers made me a little jealous (okay, maybe more than a little), but I was also incredibly intrigued. Surely being a social media influencer couldn't involve that much effort; you post a few photos of yourself online, reach out to some companies and beg them to send you free stuff, and the rest just takes care of itself . . . right?

Well, actually, it's not that simple. The work of an Instagram influencer may not seem like much work at first glance, but it can, in fact, be a full-time job. Unlike the typical Instagram user who likely just sees the app as a place

to connect with friends, post their best selfies for clout, and perhaps slide into the occasional DM (Direct Message), Instagram influencers create their posts with the specific intent of marketing brands, services, and products to their followers, in hopes of making a profit. Not only that, but by promoting these brands through Instagram's platform, these influencers are providing companies with valuable exposure to their target audience: millennials and Gen Z. By looking at Instagram influencer posts using a framework based on cultural-historical activity theory that is used by the ISU Writing program, PCHAT for short, we can start to see how the work of Instagram influencers is actually a form of carefully-crafted marketing that isn't nearly as easy to execute as it may look.

CHATting About IG

The Illinois State University (ISU) Writing Program website defines PCHAT as something “to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world.” We can view Instagram influencer posts as a type of text that exists within the **genre** of Instagram posts. A genre is “a kind of production that is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable” (ISU Writing Program). In other words, every Instagram post in existence has features and characteristics, sometimes referred to as **conventions**, that help us to recognize it as an Instagram post. For example, some conventions of the Instagram post genre include hashtags, photos or video clips, text captions, and a number indicating many users have “liked” the post underneath it.

Instagram influencer posts are a subgenre of Instagram posts. Along with adhering to the conventions of the standard Instagram post genre, influencer posts on Instagram come with their own unique set of conventions as well. For example, because Instagram influencer posts are used to promote products and services, influencers always include the name of the brand, product, and/or the company they are marketing in their post tags and captions. Instagram may seem like a platform that exists solely for pleasure and not for business, but that is not the case for the community of influencers using the app. An Instagram influencer must be able to successfully convince their followers of their credibility, reliability, emotional authenticity, and knowledge of the products they promote if they want their followers to buy the things they advertise so they can make a profit and maintain strong relationships with their sponsorship partners. Every influencer post we see is planned out and created in a specific way for a specific purpose—to effectively market a service or product. Influencers are acting as expert

resources with valuable opinions on the brands, services, and products they promote every time they make a new post, which means that casual Instagram users are being subconsciously swayed and influenced by these social media professionals whenever they scroll through their Instagram feeds—and they may not even realize it!

This makes us active participants in the complex **activity system** that is Instagram. According to the ISU Writing Program website, activity systems are “cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal. As a lens, the activity system helps us to analyze the psychological and social processes of achieving that goal.” As I mentioned earlier, the primary goal of social media influencers is to convince their followers to buy the things they’re marketing online, which means their followers aren’t just being impacted by influencers from a social perspective, but from a financial one as well. In this article, I’ll be using the PCHAT terms representation, activity, and socialization to analyze posts from a sample of influencers currently active on Instagram and break down how and why Instagram influencers plan, create, and promote their posts the way they do. I’ll then discuss what PCHAT has helped me learn as a user of social media.

On Instagram Straight Reppin’

In her article *Just CHATing*, Joyce Walker uses the CHAT term **representation** to refer to how “the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it), as well as all the activities and materials that shape how people do this” (75). Representation plays a large role in how Instagram influencers plan their posts; as professional brand ambassadors, they have to think carefully about how each individual element of an Instagram post will help them to successfully sell something. Even things that may seem insignificant in the planning of an Instagram post can end up having a big impact on how the advertisement will be received and how many people will see it. For example, Instagram captions can be up to 2,200 characters long, but many influencers choose to make their captions shorter so that people who see their posts won’t get distracted, bored, or intimidated by the posts’ lengths and scroll past them.

Hashtags are another genre convention of the Instagram caption that is strategically planned out by an influencer. Instagram users can include up to thirty different hashtags in the caption of their post, and also have the option to include another thirty hashtags in the first comment of their post. Hashtags can make or break whether influencers will get high levels of user

engagement on their posts. All of the content on Instagram is categorized and made discoverable to Instagram users using hashtags. Because of this, hashtag use is one of the main ways Instagram influencers get new followers. If an influencer uses a popular, frequently used hashtag (like #fashion, for example, which currently has roughly 734 million Instagram posts listed under it), then there will be more opportunities for their post to be viewed by more people.

On the flip side, the hashtags an influencer chooses could also be so popular that those who use them in their post captions may find themselves lost in the shuffle of the other millions of Instagrammers also using the hashtag. Some influencers even purposefully choose to use hashtags with lower amounts of online traffic so that they have a higher chance of getting their posts featured to a niche audience.

In Figure 1, Instagram influencer @iamceciliafoss includes only four hashtags in her post caption. Two of the hashtags are popular ones: #stronger has been used on Instagram 5.4 million times, and #ad has been used a whopping 10.3 million times. However, her other two hashtag choices are not as frequently used as the other two. The hashtag #Strongersweden has been used on Instagram roughly 46,300 times and #strongerlabel has been used a little over 1,500 times. Cecilia's post is currently listed on Instagram as one of the top posts categorized under the hashtag #strongerlabel, which means that when Instagram users look up that specific hashtag, her Instagram post is one of the first five that appears in the search results (Figure 2). Because



Figure 1: A screenshot of an Instagram post from influencer @iamceciliafoss advertising athleticwear for the fitness clothing brand Stronger.

Found at <http://www.instagram.com/p/B24gnWivBOMT/>.

of this, Instagram users who are not currently following Cecilia, but do follow the #strongerlabel hashtag, will be much more likely to see her post and potentially follow her.

Since hashtags are usually included in the caption of an Instagram post, using too many of them in a caption can sometimes be off-putting to Instagram users viewing content. To remedy this issue, some Instagrammers have taken up a practice, commonly referred to as “hashtag hiding,” in which they strategically place a row of dots, emojis, and/or other symbols in line breaks above their hashtags so that their followers will have to click the “more” button in order to see them (Figures 3 and 4).

The time when an influencer chooses to upload their Instagram post to the app can also impact how many people will end up seeing it. Instagram is more frequently used at certain times of day, so it isn’t uncommon for influencers to schedule their posts for optimized times in hopes of getting higher

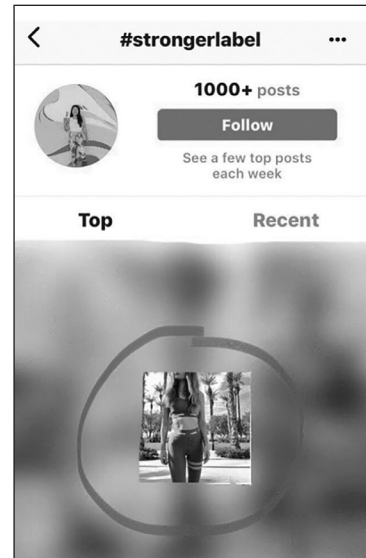


Figure 2: A screenshot of the Instagram explore page for the #strongerlabel hashtag featuring Cecilia’s post. Found at <http://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/strongerlabel>.



Figure 3: A screenshot of an Instagram caption that incorporates hashtag hiding. This image shows what the visible portion of the Instagram caption looks like when it first appears on an Instagram user’s feed. Found at <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmD8BBInlNY/>.

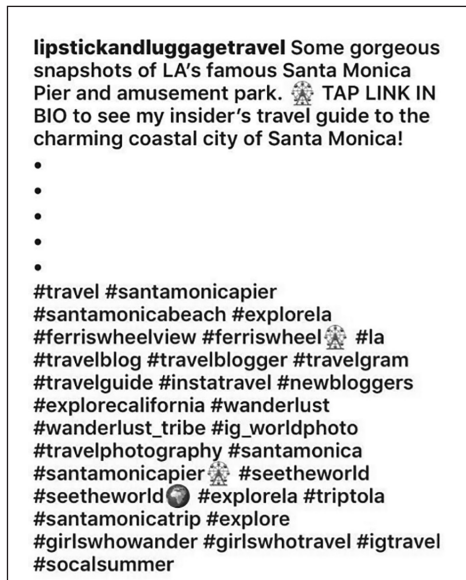


Figure 4: A screenshot of the same Instagram caption pictured in Figure 3, but this image shows what the expanded caption looks like once you click “more.” Found at <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmD8BBInlNY/>.

amounts of engagement on their advertisements and growing their follower count. Some influencers even invest in apps or software to track the amount of engagement they get on each post based on the time of day they upload to Instagram and which hashtags they use. This helps influencers determine the best times to use Instagram and which hashtags they should include in their posts in order to get the most likes and comments.

Now that I've taken some time to talk about some elements of representation that influencers commonly use in their work, I'd like to take a look at a post from an influencer currently active in the Instagram community and analyze what kinds of representation could have impacted her planning process. This post comes to us from @emmawlker, an influencer, video creator, and fashion writer.

By analyzing the genre conventions featured in Emma's Instagram post, we can start to identify all the different elements of the post that she conceptualized and planned through the process of representation to help determine what the final product of her advertisement for HelloFresh, a meal kit delivery company, would look like. Right off the bat, I noticed that the photo included in Emma's post is a compilation of four separate images collaged together. In the first photo, she's holding up the recipe card for the meal kit; in the second, she's holding the recipe card in one hand and a



Figure 5: @emmawlker's sponsored Instagram post for the meal kit delivery company HelloFresh. Found at https://www.instagram.com/p/B0_sD2nncYz/.

spatula in the other, giving her followers insight into what types of cooking tools are used to make the recipe. In the third photo, she's begun the meal creation process, and appears to be sautéing some of the ingredients in a pan, and in the final photo, she's holding the finished recipe in a bowl and has a forkful of noodles in her line of sight, presumably getting ready to take a bite of her fully-prepared meal! It's possible that she planned to use four different photos in her post to highlight the entire process of using the HelloFresh meal kit from start to finish so that her followers would have a clearer idea of what to expect if they ordered the kit for themselves. Since Emma decided to make a photo collage for this specific Instagram post, she also had to plan out what tools she would need to create the photo collage. Because four images are framed by a digital border, this shows she also made the conscious decision to use some kind of graphic design tool or digital editing software to create the finished image for her post.

Another instance of representation impacting Emma's Instagram-post-planning process can be found by looking at her caption for the picture. She states in the caption that she has partnered up with HelloFresh to give her followers an exclusive code to get \$80 off their first monthly meal kit purchase; this means that she had to communicate with HelloFresh's company to secure this brand deal in the first place, and likely participated in some sort of meeting with members of the company to discuss and agree to the terms of the sponsorship and plan out exactly what information HelloFresh needed her post to include to best market the meal kit to her followers.

Getting Your Act(ivity) Together

The next PCHAT term I'd like to discuss is **activity**. Walker says, "Activity is a term that encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create text (writing, drawing, walking across the hall to ask someone else what they think, getting peer review, etc.)" (76). The Instagram app functions as an activity system "aimed at achieving a goal" (ISU Writing Program). The goal, or goals, of activity systems are "achieved through the work of people and the tools they use," and different genres can function as some of those tools. In the case of the activity system that is the Instagram app, Instagram posts are a genre that was created to help achieve the goals of the app and its creators. One of those goals is to help the app's owners and investors make as much money as possible through the Instagram platform. Even though the app is free for members of Instagram to use, it is currently worth over \$100 billion dollars; according to Instagram co-founder Kevin Systrom, one of the other goals the founders of Instagram hope to achieve

is making Instagram “not just a photo-sharing app,” but “the way you share your life when you’re on the go” (Simon; Lagorio-Chafkin).

So, what exactly does the CHAT term “activity” have to do with the goals of Instagram? Because the Instagram post genre is a tool “that the participant(s) [of Instagram] use to achieve” the goals of the app/activity system, these goals cannot be reached without Instagram users actively engaging in the practices necessary to help reach them. Since many Instagram influencers use the app and their promotional posts as a tool to earn income, the activities they choose to engage (or not engage) in—and the ways they execute these forms of activity—can have a tremendous impact on the overall quality of their Instagram posts.

Using this next Instagram post from @kevinwathey, a yoga company owner and brand ambassador for a mindfulness and wellness-inspired jewelry company, we can take a closer look at the vital role activity plays in the work of professional Instagram influencers.

Looking at Kevin’s post, the first thing my eye is drawn to is the photo. He’s pictured sitting cross-legged on a yoga mat with a backdrop of plants, palm trees, and a colorful sky behind him. This leads me to think about what types of activity Kevin had to engage in to create this post. The text included with the image states that the photo was taken in Poipu, a beach on the southern side of the island of Kaua’i, Hawaii. To get to Poipu, Kevin likely



Figure 6: @kevinwathey’s Instagram post promoting a yoga resort trip offered through his company, Synchronicity Yoga. Found at <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bu4LLT7FMsc/>.

had to engage in all sorts of activities—buying a plane ticket, booking a flight to the island of Kauaʻi, and transporting himself to Poipu beach to take this photo. Not only that, but Kevin also made the decision to feature a photo of himself in the lotus position, a yoga pose, so we can consider the physical action of him doing yoga to be yet another form of activity that had to occur for this post to be created.

Because cultural-historical activity theory situates the study of genres as something complex, fluid, and inherently social, activity is a component of PCHAT that often involves more than one person. In the caption of his Instagram post, Kevin credits another Instagram user for taking his photo. Kevin’s decision to collaborate with a photographer in order to get his picture taken for this post is an example of another form of activity that had to take place for this post to be made. Choosing his photographer for the photo and coordinating a time to take the picture for his post can be regarded as more of the many types of activity Kevin engaged in as part of the Instagram-post creation process.

It is also important to note that activity doesn’t just impact the way an Instagram user takes a photo for a post, but can affect how they create the content featured in the post itself as well. For instance, Kevin took part in the action of brainstorming what he wanted to write in his post caption, then engaged in the action of physically writing out the caption on a touchscreen or keyboard. Brainstorming and writing are two more kinds of activity Kevin participated in to aid in achieving the goal of successfully marketing his company’s yoga resort trip to other Instagram users.

Putting the “Social” in Social Media

The last PCHAT term I’d like to focus on is **socialization**. Walker says, “socialization describes the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices” (76). As a form of social media, it’s likely no surprise that socialization is frequently taking place within the activity system of Instagram. I’ll be using this next Instagram post from @whittyjaz, a skincare, fitness, and wellness blogger, to discuss how socialization specifically impacts influencers and their followers on Instagram.

When looking at the text caption of Jazmine’s Instagram post, you’ll notice that she ends her caption with some open-ended questions for her



Figure 7: A screenshot of an Instagram post from influencer @whittyjaz posing with a brand of packing cubes. Found at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1b99QsnEQO/>.

followers: “What outside-of-the-box ways do you use packing cubes, or what do you think you could use them for?” Posing these questions not only encourages Jazmine’s followers to respond to her in the comments, which would in turn raise the amount of follower engagement she receives on the post, but also asks her followers to think about how the product she is promoting could be useful to them in their everyday lives. If someone responds to Jazmine’s questions by sharing what they would like to use the packing cubes for, they could become that much more invested in purchasing the product for themselves. Jazmine’s interactions show how the genre of the Instagram post has the potential to be transformed through socialization; as her followers respond to her questions in the comments with answers about how they might use the packing cubes, in turn, other Instagram users will see those comments and be inspired to think about it as well. Every time an Instagram user responds to Jazmine’s questions in the comments, they are essentially helping to market the product alongside her.

For some influencers, engaging with their followers on Instagram is another way socialization affects their work. Many Instagram users want to know if the influencers they follow are trustworthy, credible, and emotionally authentic. Some influencers on Instagram have gotten a bad rap from the public for promoting products that they don’t like, or that don’t work as

well as they claim they do, just to get free products from companies and make money off the advertisements, which is sometimes negatively referred to on social media as a practice called “shilling.”

On the other hand, influencers like Jazmine take a more straightforward approach to promoting the things they advertise. Figure 8 shows an interaction in the comment section of Jazmine’s post between her and a follower. The follower says in their comment that they thought about purchasing the packing cubes, but typically roll their clothes as a packing technique instead. In her response to the comment, Jazmine admits that while she doesn’t know how good the cubes are for saving space, she enjoys using them because they help her stay organized when packing. She then goes on to share another way she uses the cubes, as a way to pack dirty clothes at the end of a trip, and says that she has “honestly been surprised by them.” Jazmine’s comment provides her followers with evidence of her authenticity and reliability as an influencer, which in turn could help convince her followers that she is trustworthy and that the opinions she shares about the packing cubes are honest ones.



Figure 8: A screenshot of a portion of the comment section from @whittyjaz’s Instagram post. Found at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1b99QynEQO/>.

Exercising My Insta-Agency

By taking time to analyze the genre of Instagram influencer posts more closely than I ever have before using PCHAT, I’ve learned a lot about my role as a consumer, both through the content on my Instagram feed and the products and services I purchase being promoted by influencers on social media. As an active participant in the complex activity system that is Instagram, I believe that it’s my responsibility to be smart about the influencers I choose to support and the things I see being advertised that I choose to purchase, and one of the best ways for me to do that is by thinking more deeply about the choices influencers make in their Instagram-post creation process and considering how those choices affect me as a viewer of that content.

After being introduced to the framework of PCHAT and learning just how complex of a genre Instagram influencer posts can be, I now have a

handy list of go-to questions I ask myself before buying something I see an influencer promote:

- Is this influencer someone I view as reliable, credible, trustworthy, and emotionally authentic?
- Has this influencer provided me with any visible proof or testimony that this product is as good as they claim it is?
- Does this influencer exclusively post sponsored content, or do they make personal posts too?
- Is this influencer interacting regularly with their followers, and if so, do I believe these interactions are positive and authentic ones?

Using these questions helps me feel confident that the influencers I support fiscally are ones I can also stand behind as people, and without learning about the framework of PCHAT, I never would have realized just how much thought, planning, and effort goes into the creation of a single Instagram influencer post, or just how much agency regular users of Instagram, like myself, have in shaping how the activity system of Instagram functions and transforms as we engage with the posts, products, and people that exist within it.

Analyzing Instagram posts, a genre that I encounter frequently in my personal life, has also allowed me to see the benefits of using cultural-historical activity theory to better analyze, understand, and create the genres I encounter as a student. Although research papers and academic articles aren't always the easiest genres for me to understand, before I began analyzing Instagram influencer posts using PCHAT, that was a genre I didn't understand very well either. Now, I see PCHAT as a tool that I can use to analyze all kinds of genres, whether that genre is a daunting history textbook or an ad for the world's comfiest pair of leggings from my favorite influencer.

Acknowledgments

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Cecilia: @iamceciliafoss

Emma: @emmawalker

Kevin: @kevinwathey

Jazmine: @whittyjaz

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