



BRINGING VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY:

An Analysis of Student-Generated Social Media Photographs

April Hines, H el ene Huet, and Hannah Toombs*

INTRODUCTION

At a time when library services are quickly evolving, it can be difficult for staff to truly understand their users and how best to serve them. How big is the gap between student experiences and librarian assumptions? At a large public university, a team analyzed more than 1,500 student generated photos taken in (or related to) their library across multiple social media platforms using a geo-location or common hashtag. Students are indeed regularly posting photos of themselves interacting with library spaces and technologies, their study materials, library collections, artistic views of the building, and much more. The content is a treasure trove of unmediated data that can play a key role in helping library staff better understand how students view and use their spaces and resources.

To determine the most effective way to leverage this digital content, the team hired a graduate student intern specializing in visual anthropology to assist with collecting, organizing, and analyzing the photographs and captions. The intern's expertise in using pictures to better understand communities proved to be critical to the project. They collected five years worth of publicly available images posted by students on social media via screen capture. They then coded the images based on common trends and themes as well as analyzed them using visual anthropology theory and methods.

The compiled photos ultimately revealed twenty common themes including library architecture, personal study spaces, selfies, graduation/nostalgia, humor, motivation and "wishing to be somewhere else." Additionally, the team conducted a focus group using a variation of the photovoice qualitative method to ask students how they interpret many of the images taken by their peers, and how such content relates to their own experiences.

*April Hines, *Journalism and Mass Communications Librarian, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, aprhine@ufl.edu*; H el ene Huet, *European Studies Librarian, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, huet@ufl.edu*; Hannah Toombs, *PhD Candidate, Dept. of Anthropology, Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida, toombshannah@ufl.edu*

The final analysis of the images as well as the feedback from the students was instrumental in not only assessing user needs, but in revitalizing library marketing and outreach efforts.

This paper will explain how to find user generated social media images related to libraries and describe best practices for collecting, organizing, and analyzing such data using visual anthropology methods. Researchers will reveal the results of their own study, highlighting the trends and themes that emerged and how that content contributed to their assessment of user experiences. Next, the authors will describe what they learned from discussing the images with a student focus group, and how they used that information to enhance their marketing and outreach strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature search focused on articles that discussed using social media images to engage patrons in the library as well as evaluating photographs and videos to better understand user library experiences. Articles on leveraging student generated social media data to revive marketing strategies in higher education were also examined. Finally, the team reviewed studies that outlined the three visual anthropology theories that were used to analyze the images collected in the project. In previous studies, it is important to note that while many sought to understand their audiences through user generated visual content, most of the images or videos were solicited by the institutions themselves. This study attempts to bridge the gap in the literature on the value of using unmediated social media photographs to reach students more effectively in an academic library setting.

At the University of Montevallo, librarian Lauren Wallis leveraged student input by designing a guided Instagram program for first-year English composition classes.¹ Students were asked to work in groups while taking photos in the building that responded to a variety of prompts, such as “the weirdest book in the reference section,” and post them on a library Instagram account. The program proved to alleviate library anxiety, as students were able to interpret an unfamiliar library space through a comfortable and engaging platform. Library staff were also able to assess what services and resources were confusing or interesting to students.

Kinsley, Schoonover, and Spittler used GoPro videos as an ethnographic tool for better understanding the library wayfinding behaviors of their users at Florida State University.² By also executing a think aloud protocol, researchers were able to view the authentic experiences of students as they made their way through library spaces looking for books and other resources. Librarians could see their building and services through the eyes of students in real-time and used that feedback to identify trouble spots and make impactful changes to signage and directories.

According to Lili Luo from the School of Information at San Jose State University, another method that can be extremely beneficial when assessing a library’s user community is the photovoice qualitative method.³ Luo argues that photovoice can assist library staff to more effectively gauge user needs and perceptions to enhance marketing and outreach efforts directed at target audiences. Photovoice is often used in community-based participatory research, where community members take photos related to a particular issue and tell their stories behind the photos in a facilitated discussion. In her article, Luo explains that photovoice is rarely used in library and information sciences yet can allow libraries to understand their users in a more nuanced way that goes beyond what is typically generated from interviews or focus groups.

Julien, Given and Opryshko used the photovoice method to further examine the individual information practices of undergraduate students at a large Canadian University to design more effective information literacy instruction.⁴ At one phase of the project, 18 first year students were asked to photograph their information seeking activities related to their coursework, and to document the resources and technology tools they used to carry out their work. The project team credited the photovoice method for grounding their research in student perceptions and experiences and allowing them to create the most responsive instructional content possible.

The State Library of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia sought to engage their users through a social photography project where community members were asked to take selfies that answered the question “what does the face of New South Wales look like in 2018?” and post them to Instagram using the hashtag #NewSelfWales.⁵ By doing so, participants could see their images portrayed on a four-month in-gallery exhibition in the library. The photographs were then captured by library staff and added to the library’s already extensive digital collection

of paintings and photographs. The project not only enhanced user engagement and experiences but also allowed the library to play the role of public memory collector. Library staff found that selfies can truly reveal a wealth of information about social and cultural life within a particular geographic area.

Librarians at North Carolina State University attempted to get students to interact with their new library of the future in a more meaningful way by creating a platform that would pull in and display all student generated Instagram content that used the hashtag #huntlibrary.⁶ Not only did they foster student engagement, but they also preserved and archived the coinciding images as part of the historic library launch. Like New South Wales, they also displayed the images on massive MicroTiles in the Hunt Library. Three months after the launch of the My #HuntLibrary platform, the project team received nearly 1700 images from more than 600 individual users.

Bolat and O’Sullivan discussed the importance of student generated social media content for reenergizing marketing efforts in higher education.⁷ In their study, they conducted an ethnographic analysis of student posts in the “This is Where I Study” Facebook group—an online community that sums up university life in the UK. All posts are shared by students for students. In this project, researchers analyzed content to listen and learn from students to engage with them further. They argue that the big data sets that can be pulled from social media platforms can be incredibly beneficial for developing proactive branding strategies.

The project described in this article aims to add to these studies by looking more specifically at utilizing visual anthropology theory and methods to analyze unmediated student generated social media images to better understand users in an academic library setting. The researchers were looking to both assess patron library experiences and to better design more student-focused library outreach and marketing efforts.

THEORY

In the current study, visual and digital anthropology theory facilitate the interpretation of student-generated social media content, particularly in relation to how students represent themselves through imagery produced or shared within library spaces. The authors applied three central theories in this study to better interpret the relationship between student-produced images and university library spaces, including “Presentation of Self” theory, the impact of captions in the interpretation of image, and social economy and cultural capital.

Presentation of Self

Goffman’s “Presentation of Self” theory provides a strong basis for interpretation of student-produced images.⁸ As will be described in depth in future sections, one of the most popular categories of images coded in the study, referred to as “wishing to be somewhere else” (see Table 1), consisted of images geotagged or hashtagged in library spaces, yet the images were produced at another location. Similarly, many of the photos do not depict students studying even if they are produced and shared within the library. Goffman’s theory offers a potential framework through which to understand the motivations behind the production of this category of images: Presentation of self theory argues that actors within social interactions consistently attempt to achieve some goal or end through their actions. They behave in a particular way to present a specific image of themselves which may or may not be true to the reality of their identity or social situation.

Goffman’s theory provides a basis for which to better understand why students are connecting their visual content to library spaces, and more specifically, how they identify themselves in a particular way to their peers within that space. Serrano-Puche⁹ explores this idea in greater detail by applying Goffman’s Presentation of Self theory to analyze the ways in which individuals form an identity or represent themselves on social media platforms. He highlights the differences between communication which takes place through imagery online, and that which takes place in reality. The author argues that by producing and sharing images through digital mediums, users are able to create a new “sense of self” online. In the present study, this idea will be explored in relation to the way students produce and share images in the university libraries.

The Power of Caption and Image

Pink argues for the power of captions in shaping a viewer's interpretation of an image.¹⁰ A photograph or video can take on new meaning when accompanied by text, influencing the way in which the subject of the photo is seen or identified. This is applicable in the context of the current study in terms of the way in which undergraduate students, particularly in Instagram content, shape how followers view their posts by creating a caption or geotag which influences the meaning of the image. This idea is supported by Serrano-Puche's previously mentioned "new sense of self" argument, again emphasizing the ability of social media users to create a new reality or communicate a particular message based on caption and image.

Social Economy and Cultural Capital

As will be discussed throughout the following sections, the impact of student generated visual social media content is greatly expanded through the amount of "likes," reposts, and other reactions students receive in relation to the images they produce and share within library spaces. When images generate a widespread reaction, students are able to accumulate *cultural capital*, a value or status connected to their perceived social standing, reputation, and influence. Ibrahim discusses how this accumulation of cultural capital is created from "banal imaging" or the "aestheticization" of everyday life.¹¹ Images produced or shared by students may initially seem like common or everyday scenes, such as a study space in the library, a cup of coffee, the library's exterior, or other content, yet the continuous validation, reaction, and circulation of that content creates a kind of "digital economy," produced and shared with others to build one's social status and identity. Application of this concept helps us to understand both student motivations behind producing and posting certain types of visual content in the library, and supports the idea of UF Libraries serving a "dual function" as both a social and academic space.

These multiple applications of visual and digital theory related to social media, image, and identity will be revisited in the results and analysis section to interpret data collected throughout this study.

METHODOLOGY

During this three-month study, researchers collected over five years' worth (2012-early 2018) of student-produced visual social media content for coding and analysis. The data collected included any photos, videos, or other visual content produced in UF library spaces, geotagged in the library, or containing a hashtag related to the library that was posted to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat. Photo posts were collected using screenshots and videos were collected through screen recording via iPhone. While there are six libraries on the University of Florida campus, visual content collected in this study was limited to Library West (the Humanities and Social Sciences library) and Marston Science Library, the two most frequently used libraries.

The authors organized the visual content based on social media platform (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter), location (Library West or Marston Science Library), year produced (2013-2018), and by code theme. All content was uploaded to a shared Google Drive space for coding and analysis, and each item was provided with a specific catalogue number to identify the image or video based on year and location. This study employed thematic analysis to identify repeated categories and trends across visual social media content.¹²

To better understand themes identified across this content, the researchers conducted a focus group with UF undergraduate students who frequently used library spaces. Participants included 11 undergraduate students from freshman to senior year, all of different majors, who used either Library West or Marston Science Library regularly. Participants were recruited on a volunteer basis and compensated with free lunch, and included both female and male students, though gender was not a demographic used to analyze visual content in this study. During the focus group, students were asked to react to a selection of videos and images collected over the course of the study and comment on potential motivations for creating that content, how they personally utilize visual social media within university library space, and how they thought the images could be used to better serve student needs within the library. The focus group was conducted in two parts, including a test focus group with library staff and the focus group with undergraduate students.

Focus group and coded visual data were then combined with information from the literature review portion of the study to interpret results through the lens of visual anthropology. Student feedback and coded data were supported through a theoretical focus on “presentation of self” on social media related to the libraries, the power of caption in shaping interpretation of social media images, and student ability to “build social capital” through the content they created and shared via social media.

Coded categories varied across social media platforms. The largest volume of visual content was found on Instagram (over 1,500 images and videos), and identified themes included the following:

TABLE 1	
Instagram Thematic Codes	
Code	Definition
Selfies & Posed Photos	Photos students take of themselves; posed aesthetic images of students
Landscape & Architecture	Photos of the library exterior or architecture
Study Spaces	Photos of student workspaces in the library
Coffee & Food	Photos of food and beverages students have while at or around the library
Academics	Content related to library materials, study topics, or course material
Social Posts	Photos that depict students socializing with others, either within library spaces or geotagged at the library
Sub Accounts	Niche or “inside joke” accounts associated with library spaces
Humor	Images associated with the library that are meant to be funny
Art	Images of art installations in or around the library, student-generated art within the library
Graduation & Nostalgia	Graduation photos taken in, around, or geotagged at the library
Memes	Humorous images associated with the library or posted from library spaces
Personal Relationships	Romantic or friendship relationships depicted within or associated with the library
Pets & Animals	Animals in and around the library
Promotions	Advertising tagged at the library
Wishing to be Somewhere Else	Image of an appealing place or moment, geotagged at the library with a caption that depicts a student’s desire to be elsewhere

Snapchat, the platform which features the second most extensive body of visual content (183 images and videos), proved more difficult to code, as the majority of images fell under the category of “humor.” At the time of the study, the “campus story” feature on Snapchat remained a popular image sharing platform with students. The campus story was a shared forum on Snapchat where any student could send their snap to be viewed by the University of Florida student community, rather than sending it directly to their own story or to another person. Both Library West and Marston Science Library had their own respective “campus stories” at the time of data collection, and content collected within this social media category came from those shared forums. All Snapchat content was produced and shared within library spaces, unlike the Instagram posts. To better organize Snapchat visual data, another thematic analysis was conducted to sort the primarily humor-themed posts into the following categories:

TABLE 2	
Snapchat Thematic Codes	
Code	Definition
Studying	Images that depict students studying specific subjects or courses, or snaps taken from the library asking if anyone else was currently in the space studying
"Not Studying"	Non-academic related snaps, such as aesthetic posts (architecture), or doing a non-study activity in the library space, such as watching Netflix
Coffee & Food	Images of food and drinks students purchase or bring into the library
Humor	Any non-academic content intended to be "funny": examples include photos of desk graffiti, selfies with humorous captions, interesting or out of the ordinary items found in the library (wine bottle in a library trash can), etc.
"Help Me"	Posts exaggerating study exhaustion or fatigue; often accompanied by captions like "dying", etc.

Images collected on Facebook and Twitter were far more limited than those on Instagram and Snapchat. This result was expected, as Instagram and Snapchat are image sharing platforms. Additionally, much of the visual content posted to Instagram can be simultaneously posted to other social media platforms depending on the user's settings, meaning a majority of the content was a repeat of what appeared on other platforms.

RESULTS

The data collected from the more than 1,500 social media posts and the student focus group responses revealed that Instagram and Snapchat were the most popular image-sharing social media platforms used in library spaces. Students remarked that Snapchat was their preferred social media outlet to use in the library, as it served as a "mental break" from studying or doing homework. Further, they claimed visual social media use in the library created a sense of community, a method by which students could socialize and relate to one another while sharing the experience of working within campus spaces.

A common theme seen among Snapchat videos and screenshots collected in the study was a humorous or sarcastic category in which students posted photos of themselves looking exhausted or with a caption saying something like "help me," portraying the idea that studying was a massive challenge causing them to feel exhausted. As one student remarked during the focus group, sharing and viewing content like this creates a shared sense of experience: "It's relatable... I guess it makes the struggle of what you're doing easier... if you make a joke, it alleviates some of the stress."

Much of the content posted on Instagram revealed the ways that students use visual social media to relate to the library space, as well as how they socialized with one another within that space. The largest category of student-produced images on this platform was "architecture and landscape" images which depicted aesthetically pleasing photos of library interiors or exteriors. Students in the focus group shared that they themselves had all created, shared, and liked similar images in the past. According to their responses, they felt that aesthetic images of campus libraries encouraged them to study in those spaces. Junior and senior students expressed that it created a sense of nostalgia, or even pride in their university, an idea also reflected in the "Graduation and Nostalgia" category of photos. Students in the focus groups shared that they would likely take their own graduate photos in front of either Library West or Marston Science Library because of that sense of nostalgia or attachment.

The second largest category of Instagram content, referred to as "Wishing to be Somewhere Else," revealed motivations behind spending time within library spaces. In these photos, students have a UF Library listed as their location, yet are posting vacation shots of all sorts of places, from tropical islands to scenic mountain views. Captions and focus group comments revealed that undergrads use these photos to help them through especially stressful times of the semester, as they fantasize about previous Spring Break trips or use summer

plans to motivate them through finals. While they are physically studying in the library, their minds are often somewhere else.

A third popular category were social photos, which portrayed students either socializing with friends within library spaces or socializing with friends outside of the library at places like football games or bars while still tagging the library as a way to indicate that's where they probably should be instead. In reacting to these images, students in the focus group expressed that the university libraries, particularly Library West, could be considered a social space, or a space to "be seen" by peers: "I... have definitely heard people talking about going to West to be 'facey' because of things like this." The library is not always viewed as an academic environment, but a social one. By geotagging photos at the university libraries, even if the image or video was not produced in that space, students could reach a wider audience of their peers and generate a response, in this way becoming more "seen" by those in their social environment.

Finally, two connected and important categories of images are "Coffee & Food", and "Study Spaces". Indeed, for many students, the library is "home." They will bring their pillows and blankets to be comfortable while studying (or resting). They bring snacks and their own caramel syrup for their coffees. One photo shows students working in a group study room with a video of a fireplace on the screen behind them. A student in the focus group even declared that "Library West is my first home. I spend more time here than my apartment." This sense of "home" reinforces the social aspect of the libraries: not only are students coming there to study, but they are also coming to hang out with their friends in a space that makes them feel safe.

Following what was learned through the analysis of the social media content and the focus group, library staff started collaborating more with the library social media coordinator to create fun, relatable memes and social media posts. Students really engage with this type of content and are more likely to follow library social media accounts and pay attention to the content if the posts are amusing. In addition to that, library staff decided to change the type of merchandising usually given out at events. Librarians learned that students wanted more branded library merchandising so it was decided to distribute mugs, totes, stress balls, and highlighters that all had a message in connection with the library. The tote bag for instance said, "Totes at Lib West."

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, as the coronavirus pandemic caused major changes to library services and resources in 2020, the project team was encouraged to learn that students were still posting social media images using UF library hashtags and location tags, even while physical library spaces were closed. Except that they were now posting photos of their curbside book pickup bags or wearing masks while studying outside on library grounds. Students still tagged the library in their graduation pictures and posted nostalgic photos reminiscing of better days when they could study in the library with friends.

Librarians used the feedback and insights collected from the student generated photographs to inform their outreach and marketing efforts even when library spaces and services were dramatically altered during the pandemic. For example, because students revealed that the library was often a second (or sometimes a first) home to them, library staff recorded video streams of popular locations throughout the libraries and posted them on Youtube, so students could play them on their screens while studying remotely—allowing them to feel like they were still in the library next to their favorite window. And in response to students indicating that the library is very much a social place where they come to interact with their peers, the library also created virtual postcards that students could send to their friends during finals week via Instagram stories to tell them how much they miss studying with them at the library.

As students continued to document their library experiences on social media, it became clear that this project is the gift that keeps on giving. Plans for future research involve updating content by pulling in more recent social media image posts from the last two years as well as exploring new platforms that have emerged such as TikTok. Organizing additional student focus groups to solicit even more feedback on the updated visual content can provide a more nuanced understanding when analyzing images and help library staff in determining what virtual or remote resources or marketing materials the library can create for students. Questions such as "How has student interaction with library spaces and services changed in light of Covid-19?"

and “Have the categories of content identified in the thematic coding process changed in the past two years?” will attempt to be answered.

The team is also interested in developing a virtual or physical exhibit showcasing some of the high-quality photographs (especially those that fell in the “Architecture and Landscape” category) with student permission to further engage students in a community memory project. More possibilities continue to emerge, and the benefits of collecting and organizing truly unmediated student generated photographs, in addition to analyzing that content through a visual anthropology lens, has allowed library staff to understand their audiences in a much more meaningful way. Such insights have led to the creation of highly student-focused marketing and outreach strategies that bridge the gap between academic librarians and undergraduate students.

NOTES

1. Lauren Wallis, “#selfiesinthestacks: Sharing the Library with Instagram,” *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 19, no. 3-4 (2015): 181-206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875301.2014.983287>.
2. Kirsten Kinsley, Dan Schoonover, and Jasmine Spittler, “GoPro as an ethnographic tool: A wayfinding study in an academic library,” *Journal of Access Services* 13, no. 1 (2016): 7-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15367967.2016.1154465>.
3. Lili Luo, “Photovoice: a creative method to engage library user community,” *Library Hi Tech* 35, no. 1 (2016): 179-185.
4. Heidi Julien, Lisa Given, and Anna Opryshko, “Photovoice: A promising method for studies of individuals’ information practices,” *Library and Information Science Research* 35, no. 4 (2013): 257-263.
5. Kyle Budge, “Remember Me: Instagram, Selfies and Libraries,” *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 69, no. 1 (2020): 3-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2019.1688507>.
6. Jason Casden, “My #HuntLibrary: Using Instagram to Crowdfund the Story of a New Library,” *ACRL TechConnect* (blog), Association of College and Research Libraries, April 29, 2013, <https://acrl.ala.org/techconnect/post/my-huntlibrary-using-instagram-to-crowdfund-the-story-of-a-new-library/>.
7. Elvira Bolat and Helen O’Sullivan, “Radicalising the marketing of higher education: learning from student-generated social media data,” *Journal of Marketing Management* 33, no. 9-10 (2017): 742-763, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2017.1328458>.
8. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).
9. Javier Serrano-Puche, “La presentación de la persona en las redes sociales: una aproximación desde la obra de Erving Goffman,” *Analisi* 46, (2012): 1-17.
10. Sarah Pink, “Ethnographic Photography and Printed Text,” in *Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research*, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2007), 147-167.
11. Yasmin Ibrahim, “Instagramming Life: Banal Imaging and the Poetics of the Everyday,” *Journal of Media Practice* 16, no. 4 (2015): 42-54.
12. Johnny Saldaña, “An Introduction to Codes and Coding,” in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2008), Chapter 1.