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Non-boundaries of style represented in fashion Instagram: a social media platform as a digital space–time

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Abstract

This study qualitatively examines the “non-boundaries of style” represented in fashion on a social media platform. The term “non-boundary” refers to a nonlinear boundary or distinction based on the more flexible time and space in the digital era, rather than a space at a certain time. Based on a theoretical review of media ecology, that is, how the media environment transforms human experience and affects society and culture, the spatial and temporal aspects of digital platforms were characterized as transcendental, open social, realistic virtual, and aesthetic spaces in everyday lives. The fashion-related images from the Instagram account of global fashion influencer Susanna Lau (@susiebubble), uploaded from May 2012–June 2019, were then analyzed, including their titles, caption content, hashtags, and followers’ commentary. Analysis showed that the images represent a digital lifestyle and trace the non-boundaries of style across the binaries of work–leisure, public–private, real–virtual, and geography–culture.

Keywords: Non-boundary of style, Social media platform, Digital space–time, Fashion Instagram, Media ecology

Introduction

Everyday life is rapidly shifting toward a mobile digital paradigm. As MacDowall and de Souza (2018) noted, recent scholarship on the uses of social media has opened up productive ways of thinking about the relationship between user-generated content and new forms of sociality and social practice. Instagram—the photo- and video-sharing platform—has received relatively little scholarly attention compared to, for example, Twitter and Facebook. However, it has gained considerable attention as a digital media space that visualizes the changing aspects of everyday life in the age of digital culture. For instance, Faleatua (2018) explored three young women’s self-representation practices on Instagram as “authentic self-branding,” while Becker (2016) pointed out that Instagram serves as an “image-maker,” expanding individuals’ influence horizons. Kang (2018) treated Instagram as a new space in which people today establish their identities, presenting or staging themselves in various ways shaped by social norms and knowledge.

As blogs and Instagram accounts, which started out as private domains, began to attract many followers, they expanded into the public domain and intensified and broadened their impact. Fashion blogging emerged in the mid-2000s, and bloggers have now become mainstream influencers in fashion, influencer marketing agency and market research firm with Mediakix (2018) forecasting that the market size of Instagram influencer marketing would reach USD 2.3 billion by 2020. Choi and Lee (2019) also emphasized the effects of fashion vlogger attributes on attitudes toward products and on content sharing, as well as the need to understand vlogging as a form of marketing for fashion retailers. Instagram, now the main sphere of activity for global influencers, is actively used as a marketing tool in the fashion industry to visually depict idealized digital-cultural-era lifestyles.

Previous work on media space and fashion has interpreted the former as a cultural space reflecting self-identity (Duffy and Hund 2015; Rocamora 2012, 2013, 2017; Suh and Kim 2014; Tilton 2015). Tilton (2015) connected this to self-identity creation through fashion and dress practices. Duffy and Hund (2015) noted that fashion blogging is a highly successful, publicly visible form of digital cultural production. In discussing the impact of the fashion blogosphere and new technologies on fashion, Rocamora (2012, 2017) stated that digital camera use for self-fashioning represents the mediatization of fashion extending into ordinary self-practice. Zhang and Juhlin (2020) also examined the fashionization of digital devices in their study of the representation of mobile phones in fashion magazines.

The present study interprets the online media environment as characterized by a new space–time structure: flexible, timeless, and transcendental space, offering open connectivity across geographic boundaries. Through this framework, it approaches Instagram from the perspective of media ecology, a field concerned with how the media environment expands and transforms human experience, society, and culture (Lee 2006; Scolari 2012; Strate 2004). The open Internet media environment has had an incalculable impact on human life, with concomitant research attention; however, there is, to date, insufficient empirical research on social media, fashion, and lifestyle as a cultural complex.

This study examines the digital space–time characteristics and daily style evident in fashion images through a case study of global fashion influencer Susanna Lau’s Instagram account, “@susiebubble.” Lau is British and belongs to a family originally from Hong Kong. She began as a non-professional fashion blogger in 2006 when personal blogs were starting out as digital platforms through which users could portray their personal lifestyles. Today, Lau is almost certainly the most globally influential fashion blogger and influencer, posting content featuring delightful prose and a unique fashion sense.

Three research questions are examined: (1) Can image-driven social media—such as Instagram—be considered a digital space–time from a media ecology perspective? (2) What are the characteristics of space–time in the digital media environment, and how are they reflected on Instagram? (3) In Lau’s Instagram, how are the characteristics of digital space–time expressed through fashion images in terms of no-boundaries of style? In this study, the term “non-boundary” refers to a nonlinear boundary or distinction based on a more flexible time and space in the digital era, rather than a space for a certain time.

Literature review

Media ecology

Media ecology is the study of media as an environment (Postman 1968). Its core concerns include “what impact communication media have on human perception, understanding, emotion and value; how interaction with the media promotes or disturbs our survival opportunities; and the effects on media structure, content and people as a media environment in the ecological aspect” (Strate 2004, para. 4). In other words, media ecology studies focus on “the changing process of the communication method and system in which culture is produced and shared,” “styles/forms of technology and information,” and “the process in which communication codes, etc. form the human society” (Strate and Lee 2002, para. 1–3).

Ong (1977) raised the question of media ecology via “ecological concern”—“a new state of consciousness, the ultimate in open-system awareness” (p. 324). McLuhan (2003) argued that just as fish live in water, human individuals live in media. This environment shapes new technologies, ranging from writing to television, wheels, and planes (Scolari 2012). In the present study, media ecology is the mutually formative arrangement of various media. New media acts as an alternate or supplement to old media, rather than excluding them; thus, relations between media evolve into their most efficient state (Bolter and Grusin 2000; McLuhan 2003).

According to Ong (1977), from the media ecological perspective, the Internet as an open system improves originality, freedom, exploration, and discovery. This is because the hypertext media of the Internet provide users with network ideas, as well as private and public publications, and also enable them to freely explore and expand their ideas by following links in multiple directions without boundaries (p. 324). According to Strate (2004), “hypertext” media, including the Internet, are open, unbounded networks that enable us to follow network links in such multiple directions. Moreover, Postman (2000) raised the issue of how human–media interactions give a culture its characteristics. Collectively, McLuhan, Ong, and Postman have characterized media as an ecology, an open system involving imagination and play, with an eye for how media may impact our future—a necessary concern in the twenty-first-century media environment, where complex information and communication technologies (ICT) dominate everyday life (Strate 2004).

Space–time characteristics in digital social media

The various aspects of digital space–time in the online media environment can be classified into four categories, based on previous media ecology studies: (1) *transcendental* space, which is flexible, timeless, and free from linear time; (2) *social* space, which provides connectivity, transcends geographical boundaries, and is open to anyone; (3) *virtual* space, an extension and expansion of reality with unclear boundaries; and (4) *aesthetic* space, where humans are creative subjects that capture everyday moments in unique images.

Transcendental space Mumford (1934) argued that clocks—an instrument of modern technology—reinforced the mechanical ideology of capitalist society. The flow of labor, which had previously been keeping pace with the organic rhythm of nature, gradually

became standardized and systemized by mechanical time. As people began to work according to linear time and created the rhythm in which we now typically work and rest, a division of space emerged—for example, working spaces and resting spaces—as part of the crystallization of the modern lifestyle (Lee 2006, para. 20). Applying this to the cyber context, Strate (1999) presented three levels of cyberspace: ontology, which includes notions of cyberspace as space–time; physical, perceptual, and virtual space; and the synthesis of various cyberspaces, such as media, aesthetic, data, and personal and social spaces. In the digital media environment, cyberspace, with its new space–time concept, diversifies the conventional experience of linear time.

Strate et al. (1996) claimed that in the Internet space, people experience a dreamlike and timeless state referred to as “sacred time,” uninfluenced by the linear time of reality. Internet users choose their own communication conditions and experience “the present in which there is constant temporal dislocation and dynamic interaction away from the linear time flow of reality” (Lee 2006, para. 23). Virtual space makes infinite imagination possible and enables people to extend the spatial concept of reality into a virtual space; digital time helps us overcome the limitations of analog time (Yoon 2007). This capacity is rooted in the space–time characteristics of digital media: it is free from matter and open to infinite expansion and replication (Park 2015). Therefore, the experience of time in the Internet space is no longer attached to a geographical place. People can communicate in a variety of ways, regardless of normative life rhythms based on mechanical time, and even restructure their working hours to be free from the traditional “9-to-5” timings. While the influence of mechanical time in one’s lifestyle facilitates a distinction between the time spent inside the home and outside, or allow one to take a break from work, the digital space facilitates mutual interpenetration of work and leisure times and spaces (Lee 2006). The present study examines how this non-fixed, flexible, timeless, and temporal nature of time in the online media environment expresses the rhythms of everyday life in Lau’s Instagram, while focusing on work and leisure.

Open social space Media ecology theory maintains that the Internet is an open network system that intensifies originality, freedom, exploration, and discovery (Ong 1977; Strate 2004). The Internet’s connectivity allows constantly changing, amorphous social relations, or “liquid tribalism,” and a corresponding sense of space (Lee 2006). Online network communities formed beyond geographical places or national borders engage in a relatively more dynamic, simultaneous, and horizontal communication than offline communication in a “cyclical space” of free activity and movement based on the concept of fluidity introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (2001/1980).

Yun and Rho (2009) claimed that online media represent a fluid space in which social relations remain in flux, irrespective of their static or differentiated/separated nature in the physical space (Deleuze and Guattari 2001/1980). This fluidity in the digital media space has decentralized fashion geography, which has moved from a typical map of trendsetters to a “fashion blogosphere,” in which people who were not formerly part of the fashion system are now included (Rocamora 2013, para. 159). Social media platforms such as blogs and Instagram have become virtual spaces for fashion experts and non-professionals worldwide to express their unique styles and tastes, blurring the lines between them and facilitating the rise of the fashion influencer. Producing and sharing images in the digital space–time of social media has a ripple effect as such images spread

infinitely through the network. Na and Kang (2018) highlighted the importance of fashion information diffusion in social networking sites (SNSs) and the need for studying the network structure and extension pattern in mobile-based SNSs.

Communication media such as radio and television enabled individual enjoyment of various lifestyles from one's own home. However, the online media environment and the interactions therein break down the traditional sense of a home space and, in turn, the boundaries of family. This is because the Internet—as an open communication space with both a personal and social character—cannot be firmly divided into public and private spheres. Recently, everyday life elements such as fashion, food, and childcare have received attention as key materials for media use. For example, Kang (2018) used the example of “eatstagram, which broadcasts the personal act of eating through the private media of a mobile camera” and leads to the emergence of a “public space” (p. 26). Lee (2006) introduced the idea of “parasocial relationships” in social media, which are imaginary relationships in which one person has considerable knowledge about another person but not vice versa, such as celebrity–fan or influencer–follower relationships (para. 17–18). Strauß and Nentwich (2013) observed that social network sites blur the boundary between public and private spaces, while Burkell et al. (2014) questioned whether social media such as Facebook is a public or private space, ultimately asserting that online social spaces are indeed loci of public display rather than private revelation. Therefore, this study investigates how fashion Instagram expresses the spatial relations between private and public domains through fashion images, based on the digital space–time characteristics of a decentralized open network, liquid fluidity, and open social space.

Realistic virtual space Media evolves alongside, mediates, and interferes with human communication and, in so doing, transforms our concept of space. Many researchers have claimed that the boundary between reality and virtuality is unclear in the digital media environment and that virtual reality has a great potential to expand and transcend linear space–time. Lévy (1995) claimed that the logic of virtualization, brought on by digital media, enables an exodus to a new order that no longer systemizes in a familiar way or is answerable to routine perceptual methods: a deterritorialized space that (Lévy argues) will bring abundant potential to reality. Further, Ibrahim (2018) stated that the virtual world stands for a new social world in which there is an interface between the user and the social world's immateriality (p. 455), while the virtual space is defined through its immateriality as a space of imagery and hyper-reality. Lee et al. (2003, para. 216) defined the virtual world as a world of simulation comprising images represented by a computer, which are regenerated through programmatic manipulation after transforming their existence into digital information.

Lefebvre (2001/1974) noted that space is not just a physical arrangement of objects but a total concept that includes the social behavior of humans, spatial layout of everyday life, social and spatial imagination, and prospects for humans in a historical space. Virtual space in the digital media environment ultimately originates from human consciousness and mimesis, maintaining familiar and realistic elements. This allows it to “turn imagination into reality,” thus imitating a real space (Kim 2016, para. 83). Digital social media platforms such as Instagram let people share and expand their realities while simultaneously allowing users to display their own virtual personalities and

actualize creative egos beyond the limitations of (non-virtual) reality. As such, the present study examines how Lau's fashion Instagram achieves the virtual expansion and transcendence of reality in the digital space of creative imagination.

Aesthetic space in everyday life Visualization is a dominant trend in the cultural styles of modernity, lending crucial importance to visual literacy, that is, the ability to perceive, analyze, evaluate, and produce visual messages (Lacy 1987). Visual literacy makes visual communication possible by enabling visual thinking and the creative consumption and production of images (Hwang 2001; Kim 2004).

Rose (2016) stated that, as visual literacy in/for digital media develops, images on social media function to visualize everyday modern life while establishing a venue for public cultural practices. Instagram promotes a style of sociocultural visual communication in which meanings are exchanged through images (Hand 2017). Casual visual records of daily life have become more popular with the advent of mobile phone cameras, the Internet, and social media. Ibrahim (2018) mentioned that the ubiquitous imaging of our everyday lives through mobile devices has created a fluidity between our visuality and modes of online production (p. 453). The first Instagram image was a picture of a dog, taken by chance by co-founder Kevin Systrom near a taco stand; when posted, this image captured, recorded, and shared a natural moment from everyday life (Waxman 2014). Since Systrom's post, Instagram has become a popular medium for capturing and sharing normal, daily routine activities through real-time images.

Lefebvre (2005/1968, p. 61) emphasized the importance of a "cultural revolution that brings out creative activities and incomplete works in ordinary and routine everyday life." In today's digital paradigm, many people use their Instagram accounts as visual spaces to compose collections of their everyday moments—they are diary-like spaces in which people can record their daily life in images and videos, regardless of time and place, and public spaces that expand social connectivity by facilitating communication. Suh (2020) stated that, with its appropriation of time and space, fashion Instagram can be a creative aesthetic space for sharing daily life. Fashion influencers and users on Instagram engage their personal spaces to express themselves through the visual medium of fashion, form an independent identity rooted in fashion and lifestyle, and grow and expand into the social space. Moreover, giving and/or receiving influences over social media represents a daily aesthetic spatiality based on an open network platform beyond geographical bounds, which can create more fusions of cultural taste.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the digital media environment from the media ecology perspective.

Methods

This study qualitatively considers how the characteristics of digital space–time found within a social media platform embody lifestyle changes through fashion images, reflecting the ambiguous boundaries of time, space, and culture. First, four characteristics or forms of digital space–time were defined from a media ecology perspective: transcendental space, open social space without boundaries, realistic virtual space, and aesthetic space in everyday life.

Second, the empirical study was carried out using visual methodology. Visual images and technologies have become both a method of exploration and a means of representing

Table 1 Characteristics of digital space–time from the perspective of media ecology

| The characteristics of digital space–time | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| Media ecology perspective | Transcendental space | Nonlinear, flexible, temporal, and time-less time |
| | Open social space without boundaries | Open network, liquid tribalism, decentralization, personal and social space |
| | Realistic virtual space | New virtual reality on the digital platform, hyper-reality, space of creative imagination |
| | Aesthetic space in everyday life | Images of everyday moments, visual communication space |

ethnographic knowledge (Pink 2013). Rose (2016) and Pink (2012) introduced an approach that interprets visual culture with visual materials, ranging from archival photography and documentary film to websites and social media. Visual studies are a rapidly expanding field of qualitative research with strong combinatory potential with, for example, narrative methods (which depend on storytelling as a means of researching, organizing, and explaining a particular case under study), such as interviews, or with reflexive analyses that describe the hidden context of an image (Kingsley 2009).

Visual research examines “the production, organization and interpretation of imagery” (Prosser 2007, p. 13). A postmodern conception posits that “all images, despite their relationship to the world, are socially and technically constructed” (Harper 1998, p. 29) and that their meaning depends on the viewer and the context of viewing. Thus, rather than focusing solely on a visual image, researchers should consider its relationship with other forms of data (Kingsley 2009, p. 542), including memories, diaries, photographs, notes, artifacts, and so on. For example, Keller (2015) conducted a discursive, ideological textual analysis of self-produced media by fashion blogger Tavi Gevinson and the media coverage of her.

Rose (2016) presented three sites in which the meanings of an image are made: “the site of production that tracks the technological and genre traditions of images, the site of image that estimates the influence of image such as meaning and construction, and the site of audience that examines by who and how images are accepted” (Kang 2018, p. 16). Aiming to determine the meaning and influence of Lau’s fashion posts on Instagram, this study treated Instagram as what Rose called the site of image: as a popular form of social media that visually expresses various aspects of everyday life in the digital era, Instagram and its fashion posts are key elements that represent daily life in its shifting specificity. Therefore, this study focused on Instagram images posted by Susanna Lau, who has been one of the world’s most recognized and active influencers over the past 15 years.

Lau started as a fashion blogger through her blog, *Style Bubble*, in March 2006. In 2012, with over 151,000 followers, she was labeled “the self-made queen of independent UK fashion blogging” when she collaborated with journalist William Oliver for a book about top fashion blogs (Oliver and Bubble 2012). In 2014, Lau was the first blogger (as opposed to mainstream journalists) to be asked by the Fashion Museum, Bath, to select an outfit to represent 2013 in its *Dress of the Year* collection (Fashion Museum Bath 2014). She began to publish fashion images on her blog based on her everyday personal life and space and has continued to share her personal experiences. Along with thousands of fashion images recording the changing trends in fashion and online visual

content, there are also blurbs and other text accompanying each one, including followers' comments and hashtags/at-tags addressing fashion houses and other bloggers. This study analyzed the 5817 images that were uploaded to Lau's Instagram from May 2012, when she opened her account, to June 2019.


Data collection followed the "Facebook data policy" regarding sharing content on Facebook products, especially with regard to researchers and academics. The publisher has designated the contents of Instagram accounts as an open source accessible to readers, and Instagram by Facebook allows scholars to use its content freely for academic and non-commercial purposes (Facebook 2020). Regarding the portrait rights of Instagrammers and other people featured in their photos, an IRB exemption was requested and received (No. 1044396-202007-HR-148-01, Gachon University) according to the rules for secondary data research studies that use personal online data that is already available to the public.

Harper (2003) discussed the important role of empirical research participants in determining the significance of image data through photo-elicitation, instead of the researcher being the sole interpreter of the images. In this study, image elicitation was conducted by five experts (including designers, professors, and Ph.D. students) who were experienced in the visual methodology of fashion, culture, and social media. Since a total of 5817 images had been uploaded in the 7 years Lau had been active on Instagram, the first representative activity type was summarized by organizing the images into four groups: one for each 2-year period from 2012 to 2018 (that is, 2012–2014, etc.) and one for the additional year (2018 to 2019). The images were also classified into four content categories: personal daily appearance, street style, fashion show promotion, and brand collaboration. The experts identified 300 representative images reflecting digital space–time characteristics based on the research framework and theoretical background. Images introducing designer collections, promoting events, and introducing products or venues were excluded—unless they included Lau herself—in order to focus on images representing her personal life. When many similar images on the same topic were selected, the most representative of that topic was chosen.

The 300 images were then subjected to an integrated secondary assessment by the same experts, who qualitatively and narratively reviewed the images, content, hashtags, and comments in conversation based on the detailed analytical framework (Table 1). Several descriptive categories were defined: nonlinear, flexible, temporal, and timeless time; open network, liquid tribalism, and decentralization; personal and social space; new virtual reality on the digital platform, hyper-reality, and space for creative imagination; and images of everyday moments and the visual communication space.

Finally, the 20 images that most clearly exhibited digital space–time characteristics were selected for further analysis. These digital space–time characteristics were classified based on semantic similarities into the no-boundaries between work and leisure, public and private spaces, reality and virtuality, and different cultural tastes (Table 2). In a digital space such as Instagram, transcendental time is evident, collapsing the boundaries between night and day, and weekdays and weekends, to blur work and leisure into a lifestyle wherein both coexist. The non-boundary of the private and public domains in digital space appears in Instagram, indicating the personal-yet-social aspect of this digital social platform. The digital space also demonstrates the non-boundary between reality and virtuality; it enables

Table 2 Characteristics of digital space–time and non-boundaries of style

| Theoretical review | | Qualitative visual methodology | Instagram case study | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|-------------------------|
| Characteristics of digital space–time | Transcendental space |  | Non-boundary between work and leisure | Non-boundaries of style |
| | Open social space without boundaries | | Non-boundary between public and private | |
| | Realistic virtual space | | Non-boundary between reality and virtuality | |
| | Aesthetic space in everyday life | | Non-boundary of cultural taste | |

the expansion and transcendence of reality and mutual movement between reality and virtuality in Instagram through the optical illusion effect of digital media. Furthermore, the deterritorialized digital space–time characteristics of social media are expanded into the aesthetic space in everyday life, expressing individual tastes and styles between and beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. These characteristics can be examined in fashion Instagram as no-boundaries in style. The characteristics of digital space–time have a complex impact on determining the four main types of no-boundaries as they do not specifically correspond with each non-boundary category one by one. Moreover, the concept of “aesthetic space in everyday life,” as the fourth attribute of digital space–time, acts and influences more as a means of expressing the four different non-boundary categories.

Table 2 illustrates the research model, which used the characteristics of digital space–time and the no-boundaries of style to analyze Lau’s Instagram fashion images.

Results and discussion

The non-boundary between work and leisure

Several trends have emerged with the advancement of digital society, including the division and convergence of the physical world and cyberspace; the blurring of the lines between the public and private domains; the destruction of the space–time cycle of labor and rest, which was normalized in industrial society; and the convergence of everyday life, visualized in multiple ways. ICT is gradually positioning itself as a technology that defines and dominates everyday life (Kim and Park 2010). In digital space–time, dynamic interactions continue in the present, and the boundaries between weekdays and weekends, day and night, and work and leisure become unclear (Ibrahim 2018). Time develops a transcendental character, and mutual penetration occurs between different times and spaces.

This non-boundary of work and leisure is evident in Lau’s Instagram account, in which fashion images are depicted as playful everydayness. Figure 1 portrays Lau relaxing at a hotel in the trendy Soho area of New York City in a scene of apparent leisure; however, she is actually staying at the Soho Grand Hotel for work, attending the reveal of the New York Collection. The way she is lying on the bed in a Marques Almeida dress with a MacBook at hand and mentioning Nutella cookies in the hashtags and comments situate this scene as blurring the lines between work and rest.



Fig. 1 Soho Grand Hotel. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BnqbmMJhvEv/>. Accessed 5 September 2019

The hotel room, generally regarded as a space of leisure, is here also a space for work. The scene may suggest that Lau is enjoying some relaxing personal time after viewing the collection, but the image evidences the extension of work into the personal: she is using this tableau of apparent leisure to publicize Almeida, Apple, and Nutella. Since many influencers post about their global business trips to fashion weeks and photo-shoots, such posts of hotels, their surroundings, and fashion, which seem leisurely at first glance but actually serve a promotional purpose, are common on their Instagram accounts, thus removing the distinction between work and leisure.

Figure 2 shows Lau wearing a unique face-print swimsuit and cap by a pool, reading a fashion magazine and taking a selfie. In fact, this image is staged to advertise the cap in collaboration with “*System Magazine*,” as well as the British denim brand “Such A Fan,” which features face illustrations on their signature items.

In Fig. 3, Lau is pictured in the Mediterranean while traveling near Athens, Greece. The summer resort look she sports, along with the beautiful vacation spot, is a great inspiration for her followers. It is unclear whether the image itself is from a vacation or a work-related photoshoot, thus expressing a playful dailiness that collapses the boundaries of work and leisure in Lau’s lifestyle.

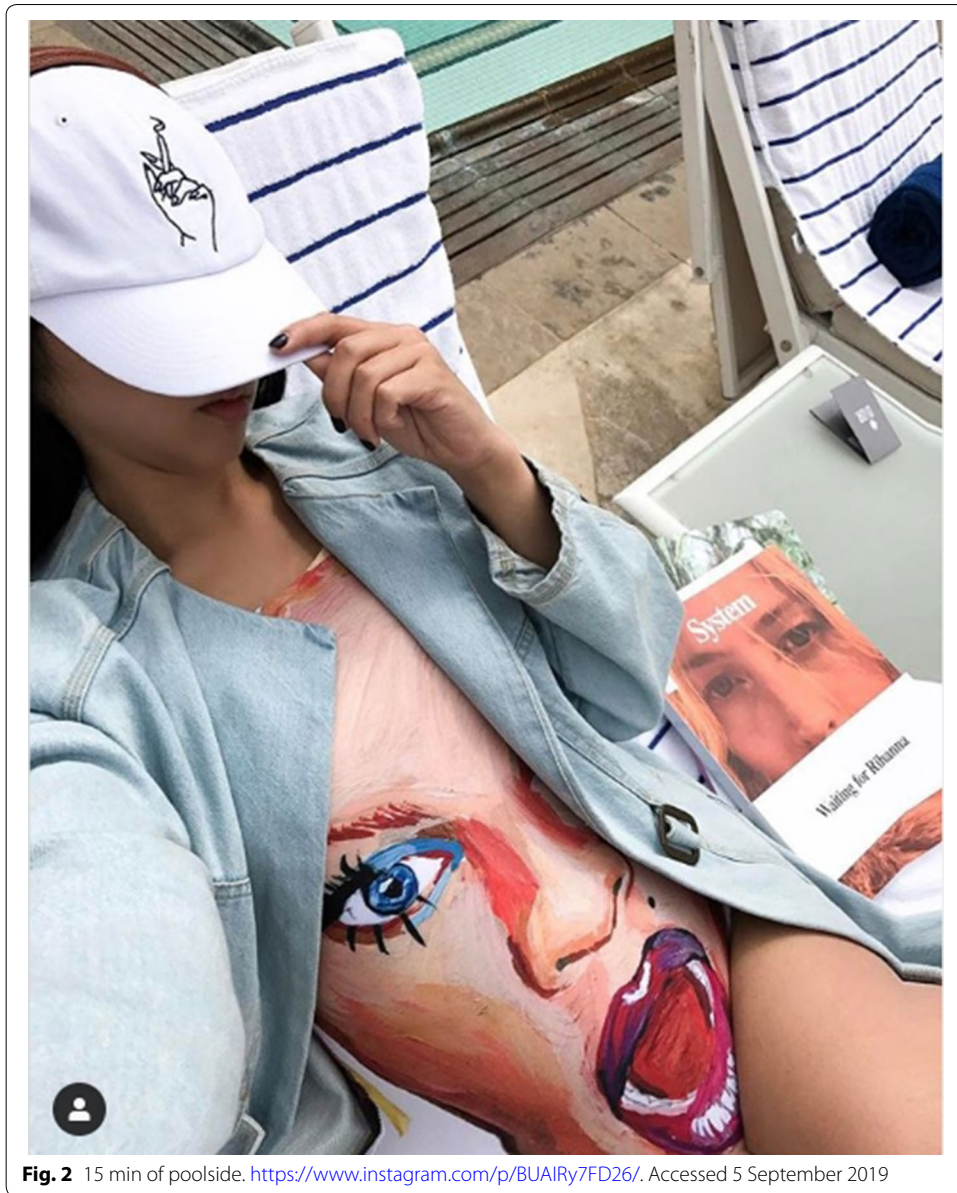


Fig. 2 15 min of poolside. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BUAIRy7FD26/>. Accessed 5 September 2019

Next, Fig. 4 features Lau on the phone at a bus stop, while Fig. 5 shows her working at a café with a laptop. These images indicate both the destruction and expansion of the boundaries of the industrial era's typical working hours and spaces, such as the office; here, work and everyday life merge once more. In Fig. 4, Lau talks about how she works online as she moves from one place to another during Paris Fashion Week F/W 2019, a message enhanced and foregrounded by the fact that the vintage, past-and-present crossover style she presented here received considerable attention.

Figure 5's caption details that Lau is typing at the Grain Café, suggesting that she is working instead of relaxing, while the image's hashtags suggest that Lau is advertising the Hogan sneakers she wears in the image. The deeper point of this first set of images is that they evidence the ways in which labor in the digital era—no longer answerable



Fig. 3 The perfect Greek sentiment. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByNQC5AAudj/>. Accessed 5 September 2019

to the industrial era's limitations of time and space—saturates everyday life. Accordingly, the fashion images on Lau's Instagram depict this blurred line between work and leisure, reflecting the transcendental characteristic of digital space–time. Furthermore, Lau portrays this lifestyle, in which work and play coexist beyond the norms of linear time and industrial space, as being characterized by a playful dailiness.

The non-boundary between the public and private domains

Elements standard to everyday life, such as food, fashion, and childcare, have become the key foci of today's media (Kang 2018). Social media in particular has characteristics that involve both private and public domains (Kang 2018, para. 8) as its platforms



Fig. 4 Working out of le bus stop. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs2myMTh1-0/>. Accessed 5 September 2019

can collapse the social into the individual and the public into the private. While SNSs present social media platforms as social networks per se, they more precisely involve spatial structures in which users form social networks by broadcasting their private lives; that is, the social emerges in SNSs strictly from a personal territory (Kang 2013). Along these lines, most fashion bloggers express themselves online in extremely private spaces, such as their bedrooms, when they first begin blogging (Suh 2020; Suh and Kim 2014); however, as they grow into influencers with many followers, their settings, as well as the scope of their social activities, broaden. Here, social media provides the opportunity for the private space of the home to expand into the public space.



Fig. 5 Tapping away at grain store. <https://www.instagram.com/p/1A5yYkKajC/>. Accessed 14 September 2019

The analysis revealed the digital space–time characteristics of this mixing of the private and public: Lau has constantly shared her everyday life since she began blogging and has, thus, revealed many personal aspects of her life—such as dating, marriage, and childbirth—in her fashion posts. For example, Fig. 6 shows Lau’s afternoon routine and presents a discussion of the hardships of childcare as a working mother who takes frequent business trips and is subject to an unpredictable schedule. Here, Lau has just picked up her child from nursery and is feeding her while getting ready to go to attend the Serpentine summer party. She claims that she risks getting her clothes dirty, constantly fixes her makeup in between maternal duties, and always keeps her shoes ready by her side (which had made the word “shoes” familiar to her daughter, Niko, who had only just started to speak). Lau, as a mother feeding her child so sweetly in the kitchen, presents a private moment in the extremely private domain of her home; however, the image also depicts a Chanel dress and high heels, which recall Lau’s work in the public domain.

Figure 7 shows Lau’s family spending Christmas Eve together in the sophisticated dining space that frequently appears on her Instagram. Here, she is sharing her private



Fig. 6 Babysitting and Serpentine summer party. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bkiir07hHjO/>. Accessed 14 September 2019

experiences with her husband and child, in the private space of her home, with the public through this fashion image of her family’s “Christmas look.”

Thereafter, Fig. 8 shows Lau and Niko playing in their front yard, while the hashtags reveal that she is publicizing her Chanel dress and party props by Meri Meri Party. Lau and Niko are wearing cheerful, lovely dresses and enjoying mother–daughter playtime in their private domain; however, the post is also being used to publicly advertise fashion products. These spatial characteristics of Lau’s Instagram further express the ambiguous boundary and crossover between the private and public domains.

Along similar lines, Fig. 9 features Lau and Niko attending Prada Mode Hong Kong together. Prada hosted this project, inviting various artists to Art Basel Hong Kong,



Fig. 7 Auditioning for next year's round of Christmas. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdFrCG-lkmC/>. Accessed 14 September 2019

where Lau introduced “Dolls’ House,” a photo-installation by Jamie Diamond inspired by the mother–child relationship, and talked about her own experiences of motherhood. Lau’s introduction of the piece justifies her attendance at this public brand event with her daughter, to which she was invited as an influencer, and exemplifies the transfer of the strictly private domain of motherhood into the public domain.

Last, Fig. 10 features a scene in which Lau and her friend and colleague, global fashion influencer, Bryan Gray Yambao, appear to be having a pajama party at a house in Sweden. Lau has often posted images at various events that show off her close friendship with Yambao, who is also active on Instagram (@Bryanboycom). The caption details that Lau and Yambao staged the pajama party scene to promote a list of



Fig. 8 Chanelofficial outfit Esterfied with merimeriparty. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bwh7y-4H2uS/>. Accessed 20 September 2019

Christmas items available from the online designer shopping mall Matches Fashion. A pajama party refers to an overnight party in which close friends spend the night together and have fun, thus, representing a private experience. Nevertheless, the ultimate objective of this post was to promote Matches Fashion, and the geometrically patterned boxes featured in the image are exclusive to the brand. Ultimately, this image represents a case of individual sociality, in which the private domain of the pajama party expands into the public domain of Christmas marketing. As an open communication space, the Internet cannot be firmly divided into public and private spaces. As such, the private and public domains mutually and fluidly interpenetrate, demonstrating the emergence of a non-boundary and crossover of the public and



private through the movement, expansion, and coexistence of these two conventionally binarized realms.

The non-boundary between reality and virtuality

Through digital technology, humans have become capable of creating new times and spaces, and there has been a growing desire for experiences in a virtual space in which reality can be expanded and transcended. Furthermore, the use of digital media has become more natural than ever, and the overall improvement of visual media literacy has led individual members of the public to produce a high level of media content. In the social media space, users have come to communicate easily with various visual images, which have created realistic virtual spaces or transferred virtual reality into everyday life



Fig. 10 Xmas spirit early with @matchesfashion. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqYB5E7BVfC/>. Accessed 20 September 2019

so that experience in virtual space is accepted as superior to experience in reality (Kang, 2018).

The image in Fig. 11 suggests that Lau collaborated with the famous collage artist Kalen Hollomon and participated in Berlin Fashion Week. The way Kalen's fingers appear to pick up Lau and place her in the Fashion Week venue presents both a virtual aspect and a reality in which Lau actually attends Fashion Week.

The image in Fig. 12 captures Lau's hair decorated with trendy tinsel strands, which sparkle whenever she moves her head. The sparkles are exaggerated and expressed virtually using digital media literacy, that is, through a cinemagraph that shows animated moving pictures, thereby maximizing the visual effect through the expansion of reality.

In Fig. 13, Lau seems to be exploring outer space, through a collage similar to that in Fig. 11. She appears at the Space Collection dressed in an aviator jacket featuring a NASA logo and holding a messenger bag by the brand Coach. The caption reveals that she is "tracking a hidden figure on a plane," and the image was inspired by the surreal other-worldly work of Steven Quinn, a collage artist and street photographer. As a fashion influencer, Lau here evokes the techniques of a contemporary artist to depict the surreal virtuality of performing a mission in outer space through digital media.



Fig. 11 Travelling with Kalen Holloman's hand to MBfashionweek. https://www.instagram.com/p/qT2DOSKaQ_/. Accessed 22 September 2019

Figure 14 features a fairy-tale-like image of Lau and Niko playing at London's Alexandra Palace (known locally as "Ally Pally") on a snowy day in December. With a snow-covered log cabin and pine trees behind them, they look as though they are in a Christmas snow globe. In fact, the photo was taken using a backdrop image of a snow-covered log cabin and trees; as such, this digital media represents reality in a more idealized direction through an optical illusion, as intended by Lau, thereby offering viewers a fantasy about the real world, as well as vicarious pleasure through virtual reality.

Figure 15 shows Lau publicizing the perfume Arizona by the American design duo Proenza Schouler. In the post, she describes herself as being surrounded by the sky, tinged in Arizona's pinkish peach tone (which inspired the fragrance), mysterious rocks, and white cacti. She claims to feel as though she is "dream tripping," by which she means that her inner self is admiring the mysteriousness and beauty of an unknown world that is far from reality, expressing herself through the visual image as though she were "actually" in a virtual reality. In this way, digital social media such as Instagram enable users to expand and transcend the time and space of reality and cross over the non-boundary between reality and virtuality in a realistic virtuality built of fashion images.



The non-boundary of cultural taste

Image-oriented social media such as Instagram can be an aesthetic space for visualizing various aspects of everyday life, as well as a space to express oneself through fashion and establish one's own style identity (Suh 2020). The data analysis found that, with the expansion of the scope of physical activities performed by fashion influencers on Instagram from private homes to various global places, fashion images are increasingly staged in a hybrid and crossover style that exhibits a non-boundary in cultural tastes across various times and places. Notably, Lau demonstrates a varied, global ethnic taste in her Instagram fashion posts, portraying her own unique style as she travels the world for work and leisure.



Fig. 13 Reliving the space race. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BUxFtPyFuOv/>. Accessed 22 September 2019

Figure 16 shows Lau at the Port Eliot Festival, an arts and culture event held annually in Cornwall, England. She is posing with crochet designer Katie Jones, who pursues a vintage “granny” look, and is wearing one of Jones’s designs. The Port Eliot Festival is an event filled with music, dancing, art, fashion, food, and camping in nature and symbolizes Lau’s lifestyle and fashion in the sense that it exhibits a convergence of cultural tastes.

Figure 17 features Lau at a fishing village called Xingping in China, with the caption, “When a cormorant fisher woman insists on re-styling you.” Here, Lau is wearing a dress printed with the image of a traditional fisherwoman and a bamboo hat. The half-length puff sleeves and side-panel skirt of the dress exhibit a contrast in monochromatic beige, creating a modern silhouette. Lau also adds a casual touch to the look with black socks and sneakers, depicting her own unique style inspired by a fisherwoman—an expression of the re-styling highlighted in her caption.

Figure 18 is an image of Lau announcing her participation in a T-shirt project to sponsor the education of girls and the movement against child brides through the World Human Relief organization. Lau donated the proceeds from the sale of a Turkish-belly-dancer-influenced cone bra T-shirt, designed by Turkish fashion designer Dilara Findikoglu, who is deeply involved in women’s rights. Lau matched her T-shirt with pale



Fig. 14 Alexandra Palace. https://www.instagram.com/p/BrljnNqBl_u/. Accessed 3 October 2019

pink denim for a tone-on-tone effect. Meanwhile, her hair's updo, complete with a red ribbon, mixes her belly-dancer style with a more casual, everyday look.

Figure 19 is an image Lau uploaded on July 5, 2016, featuring an outfit she wore the day before, with colors symbolizing US Independence Day (July 4) and France's Bastille Day (July 14). Lau's look here combines red, white, and blue—the symbolic colors of the UK (where she is from), the US, and France—to create a deconstructed style comprising a dress by Jacquemus, a corset by Prada, a cape by Woolrich People, and a bag by JW Anderson; “deconstruction” in this context refers to an avant-garde, unique, and layered style created by reconstructing the shape and form of clothing apart from the proportions of the human body and traditional stereotypes of beauty. Lau's deconstructed style expresses both the non-boundary and overlap of cultural taste in digital space–time.

Lastly, Fig. 20 imbues a “back to school” feeling, set in the Akihabara area of Tokyo on August 24, 2018, just before the start of school in the first week of September. The photo was taken in Taito Station, a prominent arcade and home to popular anime souvenirs, surreal and high-tech virtual games, photo-sticker booths, and games with cash prizes, making it a popular place among teenagers. Here, Lau is dressed in a school uniform jacket and a plaid miniskirt, resembling the garb of the teenagers who come to enjoy the games there. Her outfit also involves a touch of Lau's signature layering style, along with



Fig. 15 Dream tripping. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BFDwQeWhywQ/>. Accessed 3 October 2019

a bubble hairstyle, unique glasses, and “ugly” sneakers that yield a typical-yet-trendy school look.

Thus, Instagram here represents a deterritorialized digital space–time and is promoted as a place where fashion influencers can express diverse cultures in their own fashion imaginations beyond national and geographical boundaries. Through Lau’s sharing of her *mélange* of cultural tastes with her many Instagram followers, the non-boundary and crossover style in her look can affect fashion trends.

Conclusion

Theoretical contributions

New concepts of space and time are the key foundations of the new digital ecosystem that is emerging in the present era. Recent research into digital media influences on lifestyle and culture has increased. The present study contributes a qualitative analysis of digital time, space, and fashion in the form of lifestyle content, along with an Instagram case study through its exploration of the digital media era’s new space–time concept by taking a media ecology perspective of Lau’s Instagram fashion account.

This study contributes to the theory of media ecology by furthering the understanding of the digital media environment, especially the spatio-temporality of



Fig. 16 Port Elliot festival. <https://www.instagram.com/p/5z0BEJqavL/>. Accessed 3 October 2019

social media. It qualitatively demonstrates that the digital media space exhibits non-boundary and crossover characteristics; it is a (1) transcendental space that is flexible, timeless, and free from the linear concept of time; (2) social space that provides connectivity, transcending geographical boundaries and being open to anyone; (3) virtual space that is an extension and expansion of reality with unclear boundaries; and (4) aesthetic space in which human beings are the creative subjects who capture everyday moments in unique images. These features involve ambiguous boundaries between the daily space and time, public and private domains, reality and virtuality, and geographical and cultural distinctions.

The meaningful findings also contribute to research into social media influence on fashion and lifestyle. The ultimate aim of this study is to understand the major lifestyle changes and style characteristics conveyed by fashion images on social media. The case study of Lau's Instagram situates the platform as an aesthetic space in everyday life, in which digital space–time phenomena manifest in various images. In particular, the analysis found that digital space–time characteristics appear on Lau's posts to engage with the non-boundaries of work and leisure, public and private domains, reality and virtuality, and cultural tastes.



Fig. 17 When a cormorant fisher woman insists on restyling you. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bv06h11B7rU/>. Accessed 4 October 2019

First, a transcendental time was evident in Lau's digital space that collapsed the boundaries between night and day, weekdays and weekends, and work and leisure, characterizing a lifestyle in which work and play coexist. Lau also portrays labor in the digital era—that is, work performed beyond the limits of industrial time and space using a computer and smartphone—as a fun part of everyday life, a form of play. Second, the non-boundary of the private and public domains in digital space appears in Lau's Instagram when she mixes the conventionally (extremely) private experiences of dating, marriage, childbirth, and childcare with her public work as an influencer on her Instagram account, the vehicle for her influencing work. Moreover, Lau's posts portray public activities being carried out in private places, as well as private moments



Fig. 18 Vive la Dilara Revolution. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bqw6q0uhEc4/>. Accessed 4 October 2019

with her family transferred to public places, showing the personal-yet-social aspect of the digital space. Third, Instagram demonstrates the non-boundary between reality and virtuality; it enables the expansion and transcendence of reality and the mutual movement between reality and virtuality through the optical illusion effects of digital media. Fourth, the deterritorialized digital space–time characteristics of social media are expanded into the aesthetic space in everyday life, expressing individual tastes and styles between and beyond geographical and cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, this study can be considered a meaningful addition to the qualitative research on visual methodology and netnography (an adaptation of ethnography for online cultures and communities) since it applies a qualitative, interpretive research methodology using visual archive content analysis to a social media platform. The



Fig. 19 Going for 4th July colours or anticipating Bastille Day. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHeyuN7jXYJ/>. Accessed 5 October 2019

data collection by experts and the integrative analysis of fashion images, thematic titles, social tags, and comments on the selected Instagram account can be employed as a methodology for future research on online cultures through investigations of social media content.

Practical implications

The initial practical goal of this research was to understand lifestyle changes at the societal level in the digital media environment through an Instagram case study. Fashion influencers on Instagram not only express their aesthetic identities and create new styles in various situations and places but also have a big impact on the public and the fashion industry's attitudes and styling methods. The results of this study demonstrate that the ambiguities of space–time boundaries and cultural crossovers in digitalized daily life are changing people's way of dressing, as reflected in the fashion trends shown in influencers' social media fashion images. This requires them to visualize the potential needs and behavioral changes of fashion consumers, and these phenomena have become the conceptual basis for product development and production in the fashion industry.

The research findings also present practical implications for senior managers in developing design concepts and marketing approaches based on current consumer lifestyles.



Fig. 20 Back to school feeling. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bm05oUMBef/>, Accessed 5 October 2019 All images reprinted from www.instagram.com/susiebubble/

First, the non-boundary and crossover between day and night, work and leisure, and private and public domains in digital social media brings more flexible ways of dressing beyond time and space, for example, the non-boundary and crossover between formal and casual wear, casual and evening wear, formal and resort wear, etc. In addition, the non-boundary of geographic spaces brings a cultural crossover into fashion images in a hybrid style that depicts the cultural traits of various times and places interpolated through individual tastes. As these non-boundaries of tastes and styles are shared with so many people on social media, they expand into actual fashion trends.

The study's results demonstrate how advanced digital media literacy is used on social media to communicate with others using visual images, which leads to the

creation of a realistic virtual space or transfer of virtual reality to everyday life. Fashion images can depict virtual reality, thus offering viewers a fantasy, as well as vicarious pleasure. Practically, in terms of brand advertising in the fashion industry, this study encourages the use of visual technology on social media platforms to develop various content that can stimulate and satisfy consumer needs and aspirations. It also suggests the importance of personal storytelling on social media platforms, which allows the same design product to be represented differently depending on the individuality and attractiveness of the consumer.

Limitations and future research

There is a limit to the generalizability of the present results as the study focuses on the Instagram account of only one fashion influencer, albeit an influential one with a large output (5817 images over 7 years considered here, collected by experts for validity). Moreover, only four characteristics of the non-boundary of style were analyzed, categorized through reference to a typical case of digital media space–time characteristics reflected by fashion. As such, this study is unable to represent all types of fashion images depicted on Instagram, and the results should be supplemented and expanded by further research on the Instagram accounts of major influencers, including comparative research. Future research including male influencers can further illuminate the roles of specific lifestyles, needs, and attitudes toward fashion, as well as fashion practices expressed through social media by fashion consumers.

In the digital media environment, the fashion industry must weave itself into the everyday life of consumers and respond more sensitively to individual needs. Understanding and analyzing various aspects of everyday life and everyday modes of sartorial expression on digital platforms such as Instagram will, therefore, continue to be an important challenge for researchers and will stand as the groundwork of a digital paradigm for the fashion industry. Finally, research from various perspectives must explore lifestyle, culture, and related sartorial changes emerging with the development of digital media.

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Authors' contributions

The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

All images analyzed during the current study are available on Susanna Lau's Instagram account (<http://www.instagram.com/susiebubble/>).

Ethics declarations

This research was conducted under the exemption and supervision of Gachon University Institutional Review Board (IRB Exemption No. 1044396-202007-HR-148-01) regarding ethical issues.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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