The #AustralianBeachspace Project: Examining Opportunities for Research Dissemination Using Instagram
Elizabeth Ellison

Abstract

Introduction

In late 2016, I undertook a short-term, three-month project to share some of my research through my Instagram account using the categorising hashtag #AustralianBeachspace. Much of this work emerged from my PhD thesis, which is being published in journal articles, but has yet to be published in any accessible or overarching way. I wanted to experiment with the process of using a visual social media tool for research dissemination. I felt that Instagram's ability to combine text and image allowed for an aesthetically interesting way to curate this particular research project. My research is concerned with representations of the Australian beach, and thus the visual, image-based focus of Instagram seemed ideal. In this article, I briefly examine some of the existing research around academic practices of research dissemination, social media use, and the emerging research around Instagram itself. I then will examine my own experience of using Instagram as a tool for depicting curated, aesthetically-driven, research dissemination and reflect whether this use of Instagram is effective for representing and disseminating research.

Research Dissemination

Researchers, especially those backed by public funding, are always bound by the necessity of sharing the findings and transferring the knowledge gained during the research process. Research metrics are linked to workload allocations and promotion pathways for university researchers, providing clear motivation to maintain an active research presence. For most academics, the traditional research dissemination strategies involve academic publications: peer-reviewed scholarly books and journal articles.

For academics working within a higher education policy climate that centres on measuring impact and engagement, peer-reviewed publications remain the gold standard. There are indicators, however, that research dissemination strategies may need to include methods for targeting non-academic outputs. Gunn and Mintrom (21), in their recent research, "anticipate that governments will increasingly question the value of publicly funded research and seek to evaluate research impact". And this process, they argue, is not without challenges. Education Minister Simon Birmingham supports their claim by suggesting the Turnbull Government is looking to find methods for more meaningful ways of evaluating value in higher education research outcomes, "rather than only allocating funding to researchers who spend their time trying to get published in journals" (para 5).

It therefore makes sense that academics are investigating ways of using social media as a way of broadening their research dissemination, despite the fact social media metrics do not yet count towards traditional citations within the university sector.

Research Dissemination via Social Media

There has been an established practice of researchers using social media, especially blogging (Kirkup) and Twitter, as ways of sharing information about their current projects, their findings, their most recent publications, or to connect with colleagues. Gruzd, Staves, and Wilk (2348) investigated social media use by academics, suggesting "scholars are turning to social media tools professionally because they are more convenient for making new connections with peers, collaboration, and research dissemination". It is possible to see social media functioning as a new way of representing research – playing an important role in the shaping and developing of ideas, sharing those ideas, and functioning as a dissemination tool after the research has concluded.

To provide context for the use of social media in research, this section briefly covers blogging and Twitter, two methods considered somewhat separated from university frameworks, and also professional platforms, such as Academia.edu and *The Conversation*.

Perhaps the tool that has the most history in providing another avenue for academics to share their work is academic blogging. Blogging is considered an avenue that allows for discussion of topics prior to publication (Bukvova, 4; Powell, Jacob, and Chapman, 273), and often uses a more conversational tone than academic publishing. It provides opportunity to share research in long form to an open, online audience. Academic blogs have also become significant parts of online academic communities, such as the highly successful blog, *The Thesis Whisperer*, targeted for research students. However, many researchers in this space note the stigma attached to blogging (and other forms of social media) as useless or trivial; for instance, in Gruzd, Staves, and Wilk's survey of academic users of social media, an overwhelming majority of respondents suggested that institutions do not recognise these activities (2343). Because blogging is not counted in publication metrics, it is possible to dismiss this type of activity as unnecessary.

Twitter has garnered attention within the academic context because of its proliferation in conference engagement and linking citation practices of scholars (Marht, Weller, and Peters, 401–406). Twitter's platform lends itself as a place to share citations of recently published material and a way of connecting with academic peers in an informal, yet meaningful way. Veletsianos has undertaken an analysis of academic Twitter practices, and there is a rise in popularity of "Tweetable Abstracts" (Else), or the practice of refining academic abstracts into a shareable Tweet format. According to Powell, Jacob, and Chapman (272), new media (including both Twitter and the academic blog) offer opportunities to engage with an increasingly Internet-literate society in a way that is perhaps more meaningful and certainly more accessible than traditional academic journals. Like blogging, the use of Twitter within the active research phase and pre-publication, means the platform can both represent and disseminate new ideas and research findings.

Both academic blogs and Twitter are widely accessible and can be read by Internet users beyond academia. It appears likely, however, that many blogs and academic Twitter profiles are still accessed and consumed primarily by academic audiences. This is more obvious in the increasingly popular specific academic social media platforms such as ResearchGate or Academia.edu.

These websites are providing more targeted, niche communication and sharing channels for scholars working in higher education globally, and their use appears to be regularly encouraged by institutions. These sites attempt to mediate between open access and copyright in academic publishing, encouraging users to upload full-text documents of their publications as a means of generating more attention and citations (Academia.edu cites Niyazov et al's study that suggests articles posted to the site had improved citation counts). ResearchGate and Academia.edu function primarily as article repositories, albeit with added social networking opportunities that differentiate them from more traditional university repositories.

In comparison, the success of the online platform *The Conversation*, with its tagline "Academic rigour, journalistic flair", shows the growing enthusiasm and importance of engaging with more public facing outlets to share forms of academic writing. Many researchers are using *The Conversation* as a way of sharing their research findings through more accessible, shorter articles designed for the general public; these articles regularly link to the traditional academic publications as well.

Research dissemination, and how the uptake of online social networks is changing individual and institution-wide practices, is a continually expanding area of research. It is apparent that while *The Conversation* has been widely accepted and utilised as a tool of research dissemination, there is still some uncertainty about using social media as representing or disseminating findings and ideas because of the lack of impact metrics. This is perhaps even more notable in regards to Instagram, a platform that has received comparatively little discussion in academic research more broadly.

Instagram as Social Media

Instagram is a photo sharing application that launched in 2010 and has seen significant uptake by users in that time, reaching 700 million monthly active users as of April 2017 (Instagram "700 Million"). Recent additions to the service, such as the "Snapchat clone" Instagram Stories, appear to have helped boost growth (Constine, para 4). Instagram then is a major player in the social media user market, and the emergence of academic research into the platform reflect this. Early investigations include Manikonda, Hu and Kambhampati's analysis social networks, demographics, and activities of users in which they identified some clear differences in usage compared to Flickr (another photo-sharing network) and Twitter (5). Hochman and Manovich and Hochman and Schwartz examined what information visualisations generated from Instagram images can reveal about the "visual rhythms" of geographical locations such as New York City.

To provide context for the use of Instagram as a way of disseminating research through a more curated, visual approach, this section will examine professional uses of Instagram, the role of Influencers, and some of the functionalities of the platform.

Instagram is now a platform that caters for both personal and professional accounts. The user-interface allows for a streamlined and easily navigable process from taking a photo, adding filters or effects, and sharing the photo instantly. The platform has developed to include web-based access to complement the mobile application, and has also introduced Instagram Business accounts, which provide "real-time metrics", "insights into your followers", and the ability to "add information about your company" (Instagram "Instagram Business"). This also comes with the option to pay for advertisements.

Despite its name, many users of Instagram, especially those with profiles that are professional or business orientated, do not only produce instant content. While the features of Instagram, such as geotagging, timestamping, and the ability to use the camera from within the app, lend themselves to users capturing their everyday experience in the moment, more and more content is becoming carefully curated. As such, some accounts are blurring the line between personal and professional, becoming what Crystal Abidin calls Influencers, identifying the practice as when microcelebrities are able to use the "textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday lives" to generate paid advertorials (86). One effect of this, as Abidin investigates in the context of Singapore and the #OOTD (Outfit of the Day) hashtag, is the way "everyday Instagram users are beginning to model themselves after Influences" and therefore generate advertising content "that is not only encouraged by Influences and brands but also publicly utilised without remuneration" (87). Instagram, then, can be a very powerful platform for businesses to reach wide audiences, and the flexibility of caption length and visual content provides a type of viral curation practice as in the case of the #OOTD hashtag following.

Considering the focus of my #AustralianBeachspace project on Australian beaches, many of the Instagram accounts and hashtags I encountered and engaged with were tourism related. Although this will be discussed in more detail below, it is worth noting that individual Influencers exist in these fields as well and often provide advertorial content for companies like accommodation chains or related products. One example is user @katgaskin, an Influencer who both takes photos, features in photos, and provides "organic" adverts for products and services (see image). Not all her photos are adverts; some are beach or ocean images without any advertorial content in the caption. In this instance, the use of distinctive photo editing, iconic imagery (the "salty pineapple" branding), and thematic content of beach and ocean landscapes, makes for a recognisable and curated aesthetic.
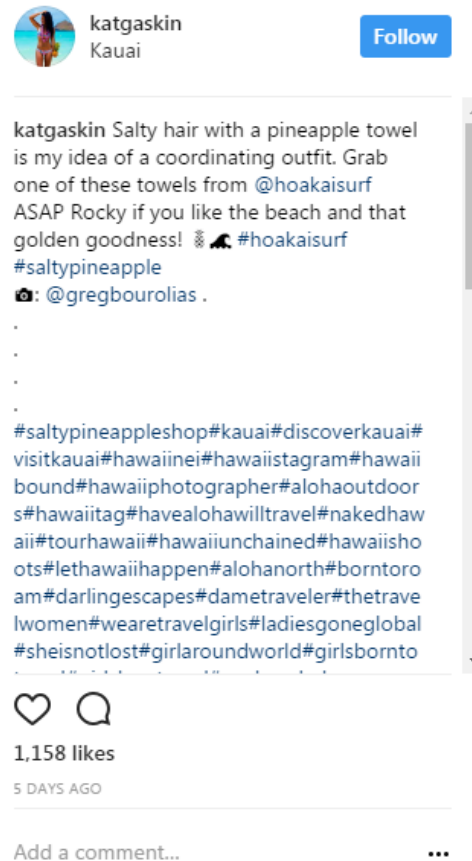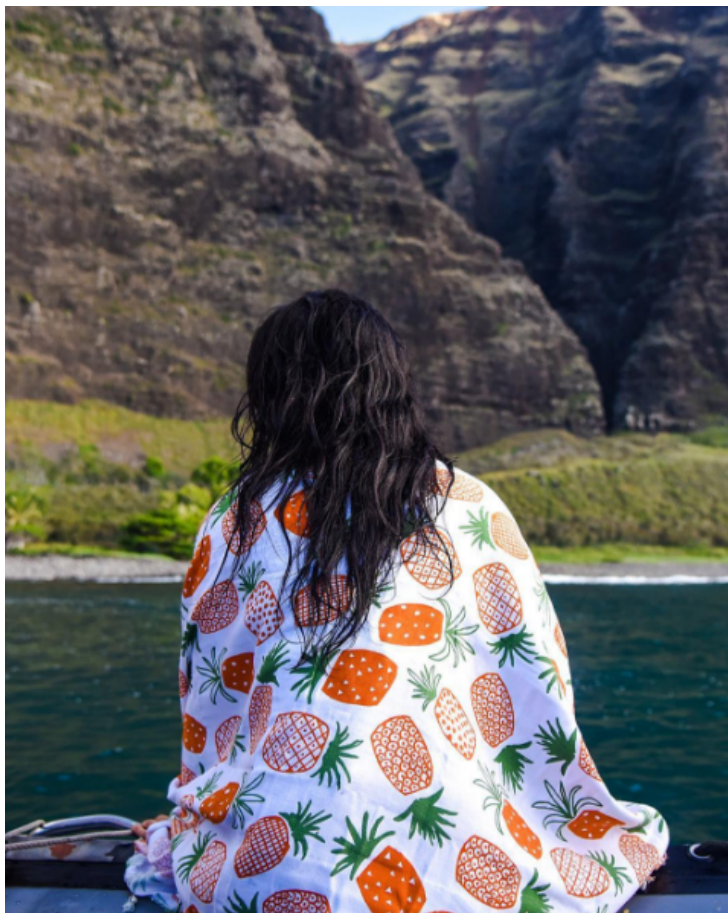
Figure 1: An example from user @katgaskin's Instagram profile that includes a mention of a product. Image sourced from @katgaskin, uploaded 2 June 2017.

@katgaskin's profile's aesthetic identity is, as such, linked with the ocean and the beach. Although her physical location regularly changes (her profile includes images from, for example, Nicaragua, Australia, and the United States), the thematic link is geographical. And research suggests the visual focus of Instagram lends itself to place-based content. As Hochman and Manovich state:

> While Instagram eliminates static timestamps, its interface strongly emphasizes physical place and users' locations. The application gives a user the option to publicly share a photo's location in two ways. Users can tag a photo to a specific venue, and then view all other photos that were taken and tagged there. If users do not choose to tag a photo to a venue, they can publically share their photos' location information on a personal 'photo-map', displaying all photos on a zoomable word map. (para 14)

This means that the use of place in the app is anchored to the visual content, not the uploader's location. While it is possible to consider Instagram's intention was to anchor the content and the uploader's location together (as in the study conducted by Weilenmann, Hillman, and Jungselius that explored how Instagram was used in the museum), this is no longer always the case. In this way, Instagram is also providing a platform for more serious photographers to share their images after they have processed and edited them and connect the image with the image content rather than the uploader's position.

This place-based focus also shares origins in tourism photography practices. For instance, Kibby's analysis of the use of Instagram as a method for capturing the "tourist gaze" in Monument Valley notes that users mostly wanted to capture the "iconic" elements of the site (most of which were landscape formations made notable through representations in popular culture).

Another area of research into Instagram use is hashtag practice (see, for example, Ferrara, Interdonato, and Tagarelli). Highfield and Leaver have generated a methodology for mapping hashtags and analysing the information this can reveal about user practices. Many Instagram accounts use hashtags to provide temporal or place based information, some specific (such as #sunrise or #newyorkcity) and some more generic (such as #weekend or #beach). Of particular relevance here is the role hashtags play in generating higher levels of user engagement. It is also worth noting the role of "algorithmic personalization" introduced by Instagram earlier in 2017 and the lukewarm user response as identified by Mahnke Skrubbeltrang, Grunnet, and Tarp's analysis, suggesting "users are concerned with algorithms dominating their experience, resulting in highly commercialised experience" (section 7).

Another key aspect of Instagram's functionality is linked to the aesthetic of the visual content: photographic filters. Now a mainstay of other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Instagram popularised the use of filters by providing easily accessible options within the app interface directly. Now, other apps such as VCSO allow for more detailed editing of images that can then be imported into Instagram; however, the pre-set filters have proven popular with large numbers of users. A study in 2014 by Araújo, Corrêa, da Silva et al found 76% of analysed images had been processed in some way.

By considering the professional uses of Instagram and the functionality of the app (geotagging; hashtagging; and filters), it is possible to summarise Instagram as a social media platform that, although initially perhaps intended to capture the everyday visual experiences of amateur photographers using their smart phone, has adapted to become a network for sharing images that can be for both personal and professional purposes. It has a focus on place, with its geotagging capacity and hashtag practices, and can include captions

The #AustralianBeachspace Project

In October 2016, I began a social media project called #AustralianBeachspace that was designed to showcase content from my PhD thesis and ongoing work into representations of Australian beaches in popular culture (a collection of the project posts only, as opposed to the ongoing Instagram profile, can be found here). The project was envisaged as a three month project; single posts (including an image and caption) were planned and uploaded six times a week (every day except Sundays). Although I have occasionally continued to use the hashtag since the project's completion (on 24 Dec. 2016), the frequency and planned nature of the posts since then has significantly changed. What has *not* changed is the strong thematic through line of my posts, all of which continue to rely heavily on beach imagery. This is distinct from other academic social media use which if often more focused on the everyday activity of academia.

Instagram was my social media choice for this project for two main reasons: I had no existing professional Instagram profile (unlike Twitter) and thus I could curate a complete project in isolation, and the subject of my PhD thesis was representations of Australian beaches in literature and film. As such, my research was appropriate for, and in fact was augmented by, visual depiction. It is also worth noting the tendency reported by myself and others (Huntsman; Booth) of academics not considering the beach an area worthy of focus. This resonates with Bech Albrechtslund and Albrechtslund's argument that "social media practices associated with leisure and playfulness" are still meaningful and worthy of examination.

Up until this point, my research outputs had been purely textual. I, therefore, needed to generate a significant number of visual elements to complement the vast amount of textual content already created. I used my PhD thesis to provide the thematic structure (I have detailed this process in more depth here), and then used the online tool Trello to plan, organise, and arrange the intended posts (image and caption). The project includes images taken by myself, my partner, and other images with no copyright limitations attached as sourced through photo sharing sites like Unsplash.com.

The images were all selected because of their visual representation of an Australian beach, and the alignment of the image with the themes of the project. For instance, one theme focused on the under-represented negative aspects of the beach. One image used in this theme was a photo of Bondi Beach ocean pool, empty at night. I carefully curated the images and arranged them according to the thematic schedule (as can be seen below) and then wrote the accompanying textual captions.

Date	Day	Theme	#	C
4/10/16	Tuesday	Intro	1	
5/10/16	Wednesday	Intro	2	
6/10/16	Thursday	Intro	3	
7/10/16	Friday	A - Healing	1	
8/10/16	Saturday	B - Badland	1	
9/10/16	Sunday			
10/10/16	Monday	C - Urban	1	
11/10/16	Tuesday	D - Lived	1	
12/10/16	Wednesday	E - Egalitarian	1	
13/10/16	Thursday	A - Healing	2	
14/10/16	Friday	B - Badland	2	
15/10/16	Saturday	C - Urban	2	
16/10/16	Sunday			
17/10/16	Monday	D - Lived	2	
18/10/16	Tuesday	E - Egalitarian	2	
19/10/16	Wednesday	A - Healing	3	
20/10/16	Thursday	B - Badland	3	

Figure 2: A sample of the schedule used for the posting of curated images and captions.

While there were some changes to the schedule throughout (for instance, my attendance at the 2016 Sculpture by the Sea exhibition prompted me to create a sixth theme), the process of content curation and creation remained the same.

Visual curation of the images was a particularly important aspect of the project, and I did use an external photo processing application to create an aesthetic across the collection. As Kibby notes, "photography is intrinsically linked with tourism" (para 9), and although not a tourism project inherently, #AustralianBeachspace certainly engaged with touristic tropes by focusing on Australian beaches, an iconic part of Australian national and cultural identity (Ellison 2017; Ellison and Hawkes 2016; Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987). However, while beaches are perhaps instinctively touristic in their focus on natural landscapes, this project was attempting to illustrate more complexity in this space (which mirrors an intention of my PhD thesis). As such, some images were chosen because of their "ordinariness" or their subversion of the iconic beach images (see below).

drlizellison

drlizellison There's a sense that because the beach is an open, egalitarian space that it is accepting of all body types. Geoffrey Dutton (1985) believes that the beach provides a type of 'democracy' for the body - people become levelled by removing their daily clothes. I think this is perhaps a little naive and this certainly comes through in visual representations: we rarely see oversized or unhealthy bodies portrayed positively in beach films. There is instead a focus on athleticism (think 'Coolangatta Gold' from 1984 for instance).
#AustralianBeachspace
📷@maxwell_sound

drlizellison #beach #seeaustralia #queensland #maroochydore #sunshinecoast #visitQLD

themacgregorgroup Nice post!

26 likes

NOVEMBER 18, 2016

Add a comment... •••

drlizellison The beach is not always a place where everyone feels equal. In 2005, Cronulla Beach (near Sydney, in New South Wales) was the site of violent riots. The incident was sparked by tensions between Anglo-Australians and Lebanese-Australians and gave rise to phrases like 'we grew here, you flew here'. The beach itself became a symbol of white Aussie pride. And yet, even though we are over ten years on, discussions of migration still dominate Australian politics. Affrica Taylor (2009, 118) wrote a book chapter discussing this moment of Australia's history, noting it as another case of "selective amnesia of the White postcolonial 'custodians'". It is worth remembering, despite the positive images of multicultural beach experiences in television shows like 'Bondi Rescue', that

15 likes

OCTOBER 29, 2016

Add a comment...

Figures 3 and 4: Two images that capture some less iconic images of Australian beaches; one that shows an authentic, ordinary summer's day and another that shows an empty beach during winter.

I relied on captions to provide the textual information about the image. I also included details about the photographer where possible, and linked all the images with the hashtag #AustralianBeachspace. The textual content, much of which emerged from ongoing and extensive research into the topic, was somewhat easier to collate. However, it required careful reworking and editing to suit the desired audience and to work in conjunction with the image. I kept captions to the approximate length of a paragraph and concerned with one point. This process forced me to distil ideas and concepts into short chunks of writing, which is distinct from other forms of academic output. This textual content was designed to be accessible beyond an academic audience, but still used a relatively formal voice (especially in comparison to more personal users of the platform).

I provided additional hashtags in a first comment, which were intended to generate some engagement. Notably, these hashtags were content related (such as #beach and #surf; they were not targeting academic hashtags). At time of writing, my follower count is 70. The most liked (or "favourited") photo from the project received 50 likes, and the most comments received was 6 (on a number of posts). Some photos published since the end of the project have received higher numbers of likes and comments. This certainly does not suggest enormous impact from this project. Hashtags utilised in this project were adopted from popular and related hashtags using the analytics tool Websta.me as well as hashtags used in similar content styled profiles, such as: #seeaustralia #thisisqueensland #visitNSW #bondibeach #sunshinecoast and so on. Notably, many of the hashtags were place-based.

The engagement of this project with users beyond academia was apparent: followers and comments on the posts are more regularly from professional photographers, tourism bodies, or location-based businesses. In fact, because of the content or place-based hashtagging practices I employed, it was difficult to attract an academic audience at all. However, although the project was intended as an experiment with public facing research dissemination, I did not actively adopt a stringent engagement strategy and have not kept metrics per day to track engagement. This is a limitation of the study and undoubtedly allows scope for further research.

Conclusion

Instagram is a platform that does not have clear pathways for reaching academic audiences in targeted ways. At this stage, little research has emerged that investigates Instagram use among academics, although it is possible to presume there are similarities with blogging or Twitter (for example, conference posting and making connections with colleagues).

However, the functionality of Instagram does lend itself to creating and curating aesthetically interesting ways of disseminating, and in fact representing, research. Ideas and findings must be depicted as images and captions, and the curatorial process of marrying visual images to complement or support textual information can make for more accessible and palatable content. Perhaps most importantly, the content is freely accessible and not locked behind paywalls or expensive academic publications. It can also be easily archived and shared.

The #AustralianBeachspace project is small-scale and not indicative of widespread academic practice. However, examining the process of creating the project and the role Instagram may play in potentially reaching a more diverse, public audience for academic research suggests scope for further investigation. Although not playing an integral role in publication metrics and traditional measures of research impact, the current changing climate of higher education policy provides motivations to continue exploring non-traditional methods for disseminating research findings and tracking research engagement and impact.

Instagram functions as a useful platform for sharing research data through a curated collection of images and captions. Rather than being a space for instant updates on the everyday life of the academic, it can also function in a more aesthetically interesting and dynamic way to share research findings and possibly generate wider, public-facing engagement for topics less likely to emerge from behind the confines of academic journal publications.

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