Instagram users less likely to engage with political or controversial images, study finds
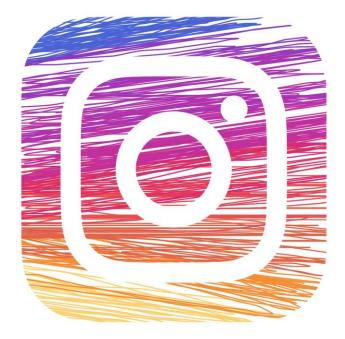
February 1 2018, by Cailin Riley

Although an average of 4.2 billion "likes" occur on the popular media-sharing app Instagram every day, researchers still are trying to understand why certain types of content attract more engagement than others. News organizations in particular are trying to determine what strategies work best for cutting through social media clutter to get the news out to their audiences. A new study from the University of Missouri recently found that although Instagram users vary on their purposes for using the platform, the majority are drawn to Instagram for social news and entertainment and are less likely to engage with political or controversial images. The study also identifies several strategies for increasing engagement with audiences.

"The reasons that users avoid political or controversial news photos are multifaceted," said T.J. Thomson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Journalism. "Some users said they felt badly about 'liking' a photo of a tragedy while others said they turn to other sources when they seek serious news stories. Many people view Instagram as an oasis where they can escape from the troubles and concerns of everyday life."

Thomson and Keith Greenwood, an associate professor of journalism, identified the following three user groups that emerged from the study's sample:

- Feature lovers, who mostly engaged with exciting photos that showcase adventure and travel
- News hounds, who engaged most strongly with photos concerning politics and global culture
- Optimists, who engaged with uplifting, positive and funny images.

While the majority of users in the groups preferred feature images to news images, the researchers found that news images can garner strong engagement if they are presented in ways both aesthetically pleasing and empowering.

"Most users in our study preferred simple, clean images," Greenwood said. "So news organizations might draw in more engagement from users if they post images that are representative of the story they're telling, but are still friendly to the eye."

Researchers determined other factors that might impact an image's engagement:

- People- - the fewer the people in an image, the greater the likelihood that someone will comment on or like the photo. Moreover, posts with visible facial features are more likely to draw engagements.
- Watermarks—images with watermarks, or stamps, noting the image creator were more unpopular than original content without markings.
- Landmarks—participants were less likely to engage with posts that originated in their local community or featured recognizable landmarks, in favor of images showcasing exotic, unfamiliar locales.

"We suspect that because these familiar landmarks are often seen by these users and are shared in other media throughout the community, Instagram users are more drawn to photos that show a place they wouldn't see every day," Greenwood said. "Photos of exotic, faraway places also reflect many positive characteristics that people relate to, such as beauty, adventure and uniqueness."

"I 'like' that: Exploring the characteristics that promote social media

engagement with news photographs," was published in *Visual Communication Quarterly*.

More information: T.J. Thomson et al, I "Like" That: Exploring the Characteristics That Promote Social Media Engagement With News Photographs, *Visual Communication Quarterly* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/15551393.2017.1388701](#)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia