
Miscellaneous

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Social Position (Still) Matters: A Digital Analysis of Class Differences on Instagram Communications

Abstract

In the digital age, the technological design of social media platforms has had a twofold effect on communication, diversifying the social conversation and intensifying the dynamics of social power and position. This study examines this duality through a qualitative analysis of 200 openly accessible Instagram profiles of Spanish *traperas*—young women whose fashion style incorporates elements of trap culture. The study aimed to examine how class position manifests in the digital communication practices of self-presentation among this sample of social media users. After identifying the communicative principles and aesthetic conventions of Instagram, the analysis explores the specific uses—appropriations—that *traperas* made of the visual tools and functionalities of the platform in their self-presentation, paying particular attention to class-related differences. The results indicate a digitally mediated repositioning of the elements that constitute social class, questioning claims for the dissolution of class boundaries on social media platforms.

Keywords

Communication, social media, affordances, self-presentation; social positions; digital analysis.

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1. Introduction

The dominance of social media platforms has redefined communication and everyday practices, transforming traditional notions of social interaction. This shift has reshaped how social reality is perceived, the meanings attributed to it, and the ways in which subjectivity and self-presentation are constructed and expressed (Chambers, 2021). While these dynamics have intersected, and continue to intersect, with diverse sociocultural dimensions, such as age, gender, and race (Noble, 2018), this study focuses specifically on how social class manifests and interacts with digital practices in Spanish young women. The decision to centre social class is a deliberate choice, providing a foundational framework for future research that can incorporate these intersecting factors.

On social media, users manage and shape their identities, image and personal characteristics through the functionalities and editing tools—filters and other effects—provided by these platforms (Caro Castaño, 2017). This has popularised the idea that each person has equal possibilities of curating their image online, overlooking structural factors and that constrain these possibilities (Weingartner, 2021). According to Tiindenberg and Whelan (2017), social media platforms personalise, amplify and dynamise self-presentation. It has also been argued that they make it possible for those who have been marginalised from traditional non-horizontal media, such as television and radio, to produce and share content (Mihelj, Leguina, & Downey, 2019). However, these opportunities are not equally distributed and are shaped by systemic inequalities linked to race, gender class, and other intersecting dimensions (Büchi & Hargittai, 2021; Thomas and Wilson, 2024; Rubio-Martín y Gordo, 2024; Hollenbaugh, 2021).

Focusing on social class, much of the existing research examines the ‘digital divide’, exploring inequalities in access and different uses of technology (Lythreatis, et al, 2022; Acilar & Sæbø, 2023). While these studies are quite interesting, often rely on pre-existing categories, such as economic or cultural capital, to compare how people from different social classes engage with technology. However, in an era when it is increasingly difficult to sociologically discern who is behind each screen, it is possible to identify social class distinctions directly through visual communicative practices on digital platforms? Which specific visual practices make it possible to distinguish social positions within the contemporary digital landscape?

This article aligns with the view that social transformation deriving from changes in communication through online media does not necessarily lead to the dissolution of social boundaries but rather reconfigures the visual elements used in communication that allow these positions to be identified (Barbeta-Viñas & Sánchez-Gelabert, 2023; Fernández-Rodríguez & Heikkilä, 2020; Mihelj et al., 2019; Weingartner, 2021). From the outset, the theoretical framework of this study emphasises that the persistence of systemic inequalities, particularly class-based ones, requires examining how these hierarchies are reproduced and reshaped in digital spaces. In this respect, the analysis focuses on examining how social class positions can be manifested and reinforced in the contemporary use of digital social media. Specifically, the analysis examines how diverse class positions are established and embedded in the communicative logic of these social media platforms’ design.

To address these questions, the study centres on the use of these tools by a sample of 200 Spanish *traperas*—female youth who have adopted aspects of the trap music style—in their digital self-presentation. This group was selected because trap culture illustrates how social media platforms purport to dissolve class boundaries in many Western societies. Despite its origins in working-class suburban North America and its connection to rap (Castro, 2019), trap has attained worldwide mainstream popularity across diverse social media platforms. Its success has been so great that the distinctive elements of its aesthetic have become a key component of the way many youths—from different social positions—achieve visibility and recognition on social media (Woody, Liu, Rom, Smith, & Wasse Miller, 2021). The trap style also exemplifies a vertiginous change in the self-presentation of female youth over the last decade (Evans; 2023). Social media has played a key part in potentiating the empowerment of *traperas* and their visibility in a male-dominated and masculinised environment (Besora, 2020; Conti, 2020). Nevertheless, while this empowerment challenges traditional gendered discourses, research shows that digital misogyny and sexual violence persist (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023). In a social group where the boundaries of class have supposedly

dissolved, studying young *traperas* allowed me to examine if class position is still an organising principle of digital social interaction, as is the case with gendered social dynamics.

As such, the research explores the connection between the communicative logic in Instagram's design and the visual practices of the *traperas* in the study and their social position. This approach allows for an exploration of how platform affordances and their aesthetic conventions mediate and reinforce class-based distinctions in the digital age. An analysis was conducted of *traperas'* use of Instagram's visual editing tools for creating and presenting content. Instagram, widely used by Spanish youth (IAB, 2017, 2024), is particularly relevant for its affordances in curating self-presentation, a central aspect of communication (Leaver et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2020; Yenilmez Kacar, 2024). To contribute to the study of power relations and class dynamics on social media platforms, this article begins with a theoretical analysis that identifies the principles of visual communication and the aesthetic conventions shaping interactions on Instagram. This conceptual framework allows for the establishment of analytical categories to examine the visual communication practices of young *traperas*.

Subsequently, an empirical exploration investigates how these groups utilise Instagram visual tools—such as filters, effects, camera options and feed composition—for self-presentation. Based on their communicative practices, three ideal types of *traperas* were identified: (1) adaptive and professional, (2) consistent and specific, and (3) direct and discontinuous.

In the final stage of the analysis, a dialogue was established between a) the appropriations of design functionalities, b) the codes and repertoires of the different social classes and c) the communicative principles of Instagram. This integrated approach revealed distinct levels of adherence of the *traperas* to the socio-digital practices that enhance visibility on Instagram. It also provided insights into how underlying logics of power and social position manifest in our increasingly digital society.

2. Theoretical framework

To understand the dynamics of power and social position on Instagram, it is essential to consider how the communicative logic of the platform's design influences self-presentation. Addressing these questions requires adopting a relational and dynamic conception that considers how social interaction is shaped by micro-settings and digital communicative frames (Goffman, 1959). This approach permits an examination of how communicative interaction on Instagram is formed not just by the fluid nature of self-presentation but also by the social structures and digital platform economies (Liang, 2022; Dijck & Poell, 2013).

On social media platforms, communicative interaction begins with the creation of a user profile and the need to “self-promote” personal qualities to gain visibility through images (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Although self-promotion is not exclusive to the digital environment, it is intrinsically connected to the strategies deployed by platforms to capture audience attention (Caro Castaño, 2017)). Platform owners' profit from the conversion of information produced, shared and consumed by users into data (Srnicsek & De Sutter, 2016). However, the abundance of information on social media has transformed consumers' attention into a scarce and highly valuable resource within the information economy, where influencers actively compete to capture and sustain it (Kubler, 2023). Preceded by email chains and blogs, digital communication on social media platforms transforms how attention is captured. Wu (2017) explains how email chains promoted the circulation, contagion and viralisation of information, reinforcing a need to produce provocative and easy to consume content. For their part, blogs intensified sensationalist and personalised content that could

compete for television audiences, which became a key strategy for maximising visualisations on social media.

In this context, self-promotion merges with self-disclosure, as profiles function as shop windows designed to attract attention and amplify opportunities for social validation, reinforcing the logic of digital attention and intensifying the competition for visibility (Zulli, 2017; Kubler, 2023). The dynamics of the digital environment means that users construct their self-presentation as a “personal digital frame” (Caro Castaño, 2017) that they present to an “invisible audience”, characterized by its fragmented and unpredictable nature, distinguishing it from the immediate and context-bound dynamics of physical, in-person communication (Zhang, 2021)

The personal digital frames developed by users on social media platforms are highly self-referential, meaning that digital communications media constantly alludes to its own logics and functionalities. This is similar to how talk shows developed in the mid-twentieth century, often recirculating the content of other programmes. Through this self-referential language, media no longer needed to allude to external events to attract audiences, constituting themselves as a closed system (Williams, 1978).

The same occurs with personal branding. The communicative logic of digital social media encourages users to self-promote by constantly referencing their own lives and experiences. However, this must be done through specific tools and functionalities—filters, visual effects, photography and editing tools. The curation of self-presentation on social media has reached the point that users design and share the most mundane elements of their everyday lives, even what they have had for breakfast (Manovich, 2017).

Selective self-presentation on social media platforms is complicated by the fact that users present themselves to an invisible audience (Moreno-Barreneche, 2019), introducing the need for new communication norms. Because users are aiming to maximise their visibility and attract as large an audience as possible, but without knowing who precisely they are self-presenting to, social media communications favour not only detailed disclosure of users’ lives but that content be highly generalisable—relevant to as wide an audience as possible (Lee & Kim, 2020). This new model of self-presentation has generated a wave of micro-celebrities or influencers, forcing major entertainment figures, like Rihanna or Ellen DeGeneres, to share audiences’ attention (Khamis et al., 2017). Furthermore, self-promotion to invisible audiences leads users to present themselves tangentially on social media posts, through tiny ‘desirable’ or ‘aspirational’ fragments of their everyday lives. What is more, users are encouraged, more and more, to do so as individuals, rather than groups, and to be evermore original with the content of their publications, even though the digital environment is saturated with information.

However, this dynamic cannot be analysed from a purely capitalist logic, which configures users’ possibilities of success as being uniquely dependent on their own capacity, or lack of, to maximise platforms’ capabilities to create a unique, original and attractive personal brand. On the contrary, people’s experiences, personal history and socioeconomic and cultural context play a key role in the communicative process (Douglas, 1996), as examined in the following section.

2.1. Technological appropriation and social position

Exploring how social media platforms affect self-presentation from the perspective of social differences implies not just studying how platforms shape self-presentation but also how users’ appropriate platforms’ functionalities. These uses and adaptations of digital technology can manifest across varying levels of intensity and involve diverse ways of engaging with social

media platforms, shaped by the affordances they offer and the specific contexts of their use (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). From a critical perspective, therefore, understanding the connection between self-presentation and the appropriation of social media functionalities requires us to consider how users' digital interactions are shaped by their social context and cultural values.

Schäfer (2011) understands affordances to be communicative capacities perceived by users during their interactions with technology design that transcend the initial purpose for which the technology was conceived, and which are influenced by social and cultural context (Toboso-Marín, 2013). Although interaction with the design of technologies might appear to take place at an individual level, this is not the case. Rather, the shared values, interests, representations and practices of different social groups influence how people engage with technology, highlighting the complexity of digital social interaction (Bourdieu, 1984).

The variability of technological affordances is reflected in the enormous multiplicity of forms of self-presentation on social media platforms. Although two people from different social groups choose a similar profile picture, the result will be different, based on complementary information and adaptations: the inclusion of comments, emojis or hashtags. These seemingly subtle differences in self-presentation practices carry significant weight, as each reflects distinct social values that influence their desirability within the digital attention economy, where strategic curation often aligns with societal expectations and approval (Chen et al., 2023; Moreno, 2015).

This process arises from the fact that any communicative environment is governed by a series of principles that aim to improve the effectiveness and attractiveness of content. In other words, the norms, mandates and aesthetic conventions that shape how users communicate on social media platforms. Manifest in their design and user interface, the communicative logic and conventions of social media platforms influence the success of different types of self-presentation. On Instagram, for example, users are expected to use visually attractive photos to present themselves (Leaver et al., 2020).

Of course, the configuration of these principles is not impartial; it is affected by the social power structures and socio-digital hegemonies that dominate the dynamics of self-presentation discussed above. Within digital environments, norms and conventions for acceptable communications establish a frame within which the social dynamics of relations of power delineate the possibilities for action (Hall, 1984; Willis, 2004). For these reasons, the strategies of self-promotion employed by a design professional will differ from someone with only a low or moderate level of knowledge of photographic composition and retouching.

In hybrid societies, the physical and digital coexist to such a degree that work, and family have lost importance in personal and social identity in favour of the invisibility offered by social media platforms (Alonso, Fernández Rodríguez & Ibáñez Rojo, 2020). This makes social hierarchies extremely important. Indeed, it has provoked the emergence of social phenomena like that depicted in the *Nosedive* episode of the dystopian television series *Black Mirror* (Wright, 2016). In this fictional scenario, social media have become so fundamental to everyday life that citizens' social position is directly linked to their digital reputation—the rating of their published content based on views and reactions—which determines their level of access to everything from restaurant menus to healthcare services. Although this may seem fantastical, today's society is not that different; user profile views have a direct impact on social possibilities. For example, if a person's LinkedIn profile is better positioned because the associated content receives a relatively higher number of interactions, their possibility of

finding employment or better compensated work goes up. The same principle can be applied to how companies and brands give gifts or free tickets to those with greater ‘influence’ on social media.

In summary, to understand the effects of the digital environment on personal lives requires considering the self-presentation of each social group as context-situated phenomenon. For this reason, the present study explores how social class positions are expressed, mediated and reinforced through the communicative affordances of Instagram by the *traperas* without relying on prior socioeconomic information. Specifically, it aims to: analyze the principles of visual communication and aesthetic conventions that shape interactions on Instagram, focusing on *traperas* digital self-presentation practices; Investigating how *traperas* appropriate Instagram’s functionalities, focusing on the use of filters, effects, and other image-editing tools; and identify class-based patterns in the use of Instagram's functionalities among *traperas* considering how *traperas* Instagram visual affordances have broader implications for understanding class dynamics in digital spaces.

3. Material and methods

To explore the relations of power and class position on Instagram, a qualitative analysis was conducted on audiovisual material produced by a sample of 200 *traperas*. The sampling procedure–data extraction–was designed to enable an analysis of these young women’s socio-digital practices of self-presentation. The data was collected between January and March 2020, with some material originating from posts published up to a year prior. This dataset remains relevant to the study's objectives as the communicative practices of *traperas* reflect broader structural dynamics of class, which tend to persist over time. While the data captures a specific time frame, it addresses enduring structural dynamics that are not limited to short-term trends or platform updates. These practices illustrate broader social processes, offering insights into lasting patterns of digital interaction and self-presentation in the context of trap culture, yet extending beyond its specific framework.

3.1. Sampling

A purposive sampling procedure was used to select appropriate user openly accessed profiles based on three inclusion criteria. The Instagram profiles had to be: (1) women (based on profile names, profile photograph, profile content and comments), (2) located in Spain (determined directly or indirectly on the basis of profile content) and (3) publicly accessible (no requirement to solicit friendship to access the profile). While this approach introduces a potential bias toward users with greater public visibility, it aligns with the study’s objectives of exploring class positions through Instagram’s visual affordances, without prior information about the users (such as traditional socioeconomic variables).

To ensure that the users were *traperas*, thirteen characteristics were identified, representing the most visible elements of the style and self-presentation of *traperas* on social media. These criteria were developed as an explorative typology of the social media representation of these women, based on an analysis of images from diverse digital sources (for more information, see Barrio & Gordo, 2021). To generate a representative and diverse sample of *traperas*, a minimum requirement was established: each profile needed to meet at least five of the thirteen characteristics to be included in the sample. This decision was based on an exhaustive analysis of the variability and consistency of the stylistic elements of each type of *traperas* defined in the development of the typologies (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample inclusion criteria for *traperas* on Instagram.

Characteristics
African-style braids – The use of African-style hair braids
Acrylic nails – The use of acrylic or long gel nails with striking decorations
Pronounced eyeliner – The use of pronounced eyeliner
Sports clothes – Predominance of sports clothing
Imitation brands – Presence of clothing imitating prestigious brands
Flamboyant clothing – The use of tight-fitting or eye-catching garments
Tattoos and piercings – Visible presence of tattoos and/or body piercings
Dyed hair – Hair partially or fully dyed with fluorescent colours
Photos of the user's buttocks – Photographs of the user's buttocks as a prominent element of the image
Countercultural images – Images associated with sub or counter cultural movements
Images of urban periphery – images containing backdrops of urban outskirts or periphery
Images posting on the ground: Images with the user making elaborate poses while on the ground
Striking makeup – The use of colourful, antinatural and striking makeup

Source. Author's elaboration.

To develop a suitable sample, ten key informants were identified, strategically selected for their prominent position within the *trap* style during the exploratory phase of the qualitative analysis. These informants were Instagram users with a significant number of followers, a high level of participation on the platform and a close match to the distinctive stylistic elements of trap (see Table 1). These ten users served as the starting point for the purposive sampling procedure but were not included in the analysis. New users' profiles were identified by reviewing the followers of these ten key informants. Followers meeting the inclusion criteria were added to the sample, with a maximum of five profiles selected from any one user. This process was repeated for each newly added profile, ensuring both variety and representativeness within the sample.

Once a profile had been selected, the images and visual metadata from its feed were extracted (Rogers, 2021). Given the focus of the research on self-presentation, the selected images had to a) include the profile owner and b) be displayed on the user's Instagram feed, which plays a central role in design practices and strategies to capture audience attention (Zulli, 2017). The final sample included 200 Instagram profiles and 1,432 images. In line with similar studies (Manovich, 2017; Mirzoeff, 2016; Stokes & Price, 2017) and given that each profile has an overall composition and transversal characteristics and meanings, this process was repeated until discursive saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 2006).

3.2. Approach to the analysis

The analysis was carried out in three phases: 1) theoretical development of categories, 2) socio-semiotic and discursive analysis of the *traperas* of visual functionalities of Instagram and 3) integration of both phases to explore the dynamics of power and social positioning on Instagram.

In the first phase, the focus was placed on examining the visual communicative principles in Instagram design. This involved analysing how the platform's functionalities and aesthetic conventions are structured to predispose users toward certain forms of digital interaction. The development of these communicative principles was based on a review of the literature (Aires,

2020; Leaver et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2020; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020) and the Instagram features manual (Instagram, 2021).

The analysis identified a wide range design-driven conventions and dominant practices related to the use of filters and other visual effects, image editing tools, camera functionalities (framing and composition) and other visual aspects of the platform, such as feed composition. Together, these tools and practices were organised into five communicative principles that provided the basis of the analytical framework.

In the second phase, a social semiotic and discursive analysis was conducted on the images used by the sample of *traperas* to present themselves on Instagram, with the aim of exploring the specific appropriations of the platform's tools and visual functionalities. Since direct access to the communicative decisions of these women was not possible, an analytic logic based on Gehl's (2014) proposals for reverse engineering on social media. This approach suggests that the design logic of social media platforms can be understood by analysing the ends results of appropriations—in this case, the visual self-presentation of the *traperas*—to deduce how design and functionality influences digital practices.

The situated images and visual compositions of the study subjects serve as an objective reflection of social structures and their social positions (Bourdieu, 1990). Through the analysis of the images, I could examine which filters and visual effects, image editing and photographic styles and feed compositions the *traperas* used to give form to their digital self-presentation and subsequently categorise them based on three ideal types of appropriations on Instagram.

Finally, these three ideal types of appropriation—along with their codes, repertoires and communicative resources—were linked to three possible social classes they represented: upper-, middle- and working-class. The theoretical definition of the communicative codes of the different social classes was based on the work of Bernstein (1995) and Hall (1973) and is summarised in Table 2. Eight profiles, for which prior knowledge of the users' social class was available, were included as a control mechanism to validate the categorization process. Additionally, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to strengthen the methodological framework and ensure the robustness of the results (see Barrio, 2022).

By comparing the three modes of appropriation on Instagram with the five communicative principles, it was possible to explore the different levels of adhesion of each group to Instagram's visual communicative practices.

Table 2. Communicative codes and social class.

Social class	Codes	Discursive structures	Visual communicative resources
Upper	Elaborate	Complex and formal	Broad, visual, symbolic and extensive
Middle	Mixed	Conventional, variable levels of tone and formality	Adaptable, practical, direct, balanced and moderate
Working	Restricted	Simple, direct and informal	Circular, unambitious and limited

Source: Elaborated based on Bernstein (1995) and Hall (1973).

4. Results

4.1. The visual communicative principles of Instagram

Based on the analytic approach, five communicative principles of Instagram were identified. These principles, detailed in Table 3, provide a revealing perspective of the communicative practices that are considered visually appropriate, attractive and engaging in the social context of Instagram.

Table 3. The visual communicative principles of Instagram.

Principle	Description
<i>Instagrammism</i>	Combines the platform's functionalities to create specific and artistic images like an interior design aesthetic that incorporates aspects of Kinfolk minimalism with urban and digital elements. It also incorporates the influence of competitive photography (Manovich, 2017; Tifentale & Manovich, 2018).
Impact and originality	A focus on creating impact through visual dissonance and disconcerting images, but in a way that is integrated to the whole of feed and visually appealing. This principle materialises in visually complex, eclectic, antinatural and difficult to decode compositions (Bødker, 2016).
Filters and effects	Predefined and standardised Instagram filters and effects stand in opposition to the professional creative design aesthetic and retouching. Adapting filters and effects to each image aims to integrate visual information and amplify its impact and desirability at the same time as increasing its visual complexity.
Design aesthetic	Focused on professional, elaborate and complex finishes, this principle emphasises the importance of arranging and presenting diverse content clearly and diversely (Gerritzen & Lovink, 2019). Aspects such as composition, lines, texture, saturation, colours and the quality of images are fundamental to the creation of "authentic" and impactful content (Zulli, 2017).
Fragmented presentation	Refers to the production of content that is brief and diverse, while avoiding superficiality or casualness. This principle aims to produce content that is easier to consume than complex images (Caro Castaño, 2017).

Source: Author's elaboration.

The visual communicative principles highlight the importance of generating specific visual content that is short, easily consumed, diverse, original and that has the capacity to transmit complex and interconnected ideas that create a harmonious whole. Visual complexity manifests through artistic and minimalist design that is also highly nuanced and incorporates numerous digital elements. Professional quality digital finishes, integrated textures, composition and framing all play a crucial role in enhancing the visibility of a personal brand on Instagram. In general terms, these types of appropriations are evident in a large proportion of the profiles in the sample. While the majority of the *traperas* in the study appeared to appropriate these visual functionalities, in line with the five principles, the analysis of specific appropriations permits the identification of similarities and differences between groups.

4.2. Specific appropriations on Instagram

The socio-semiotic and discursive analysis of the images published by *traperas* on Instagram led to the development of three ideal types of appropriation on the platform: 1) adaptive and professional, 2) consistent and specific and 3) direct and discontinuous. This typology is based on differentiated uses of filters and effects, image editing, photographic techniques and the overall composition or curation of *traperas* Instagram feeds, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

4.2.1. Adaptive and professional appropriations

The results of the study indicate that the adaptive and professional appropriations, defined by their versatility and stylistic coherence, are highly consistent in their use of filters and effects. These group of women preferred to use filters that apply soft and desaturated finishes to create a balanced and luminous aesthetic. Although their profiles have a consistent overall style, the use of filters was adapted to each image, allowing them to create an abstract and suggestive

symbolism rather than the direct transmission of emotion. The profiles in this category displayed a cohesive or harmonious aesthetic that adapted filter intensity to get a 'natural' finish. The image editing evidenced careful adjustment of exposition, contrast and saturation to maintain suitable tonal balance and lighting. While this group preferred image cropping and framing that centred the object in the compositions, their images also displayed visual depth through background content. Retouching focused on correcting imperfections and adding points of colour, but only very lightly. Special effects were used selectively, employing colour or tone gradients to highlight specific areas and to create artistic effects.

Camera appropriations were used to achieve careful visual compositions, such as placing the object of the photograph in the centre of the composition—adding dynamism—but in way that was balanced and in harmony with other secondary objects, giving them importance and improving their visibility. It is also common for the *traperas* in this group to experiment with perspectives and angles, but only within the boundaries of the overall style they adhered to. Backgrounds are important in the images, often integrating natural or architectural features that convey emotion in a nuanced way.

Regarding appropriations related to the configuration and composition of their feeds, the women in this group stood out for the creation of a visually cohesive and attractive whole. This was achieved by connecting photographs and images through similar colours, patterns and the repetition of themes that created a unified harmonious whole that occupied the entire frame of the feed, thereby increasing its visual impact. Although they showed little deviation in the type and format of the content they published, they did introduce variations to help maintain interest. Collectively, these strategies allowed them to give equal weight to both individual images and the overall composition of their feeds.

4.2.2. Consistent and specific appropriations

Consistent and specific appropriations on Instagram relates to those *traperas* that maintained a specific visual aesthetic that is easy to understand, albeit less symbolic than adaptive and professional type appropriations. The analysis found that this group were highly consistent in their use of filters and effects, though they tended towards a greater use of contrast. The medium to high visual intensity and more explicit use of filters resulted in a more straightforward presentation that utilised symbols but less abstractly than the first group.

In terms of editing, these *traperas* adjusted exposure, contrast and saturation to foreground their own image, prioritising it over the backgrounds. They were more open to using alternative lighting effects and used saturation corrections to reduce the importance of the background. The images showed little experimentation with texture but occasionally they added blurs or lighting effects to give variety to the feed. In terms of composition, there was less emphasis on symmetry, and they tended to use harder shadows. Attempts to catch moments of spontaneity in images was less evident, rather displays of emotion seemed to be more designed or intentional (less natural) and mainly focused on the person appearing in the photograph.

In terms of feed configurations, this group tended to maintain a certain visual uniformity, evident in a consistent style based on colours, filters and composition, but it also resulted in a more repetitive effect than in the first group. They occasionally experimented with the orientation of photos to create dynamism, but this had the effect of making the aesthetic of the profile or feed appear less polished. Although the conceptual organisation of their feeds was not as developed as the first group, they did avail of strong narrative sequences and thematic mosaics, which gave their profiles significant coherence.

4.2.3. Direct and discontinuous appropriations

Direct and discontinuous appropriations relate to a straightforward communication style characterised by low visual coherence or harmony, evident in a notable lack of consistency in the use of filters and effects. In general, the women in this group used filters with strong saturation and sombre tones, creating a contrast-heavy aesthetic that aimed to enhance the composition but at the same time distracted from its content. Rather than adapting filters to suit content, this group tended to use presets, giving rise to an aesthetic that is rigid and poorly integrated, yet more direct. In terms of editing, they appeared to prefer unnatural finishes and often combined distinct editing styles.

In terms of photographic conventions, these appropriations tended to displace the perspective and balance of the composition, such that their own image was not as foregrounded as in the other two groups. Although they experimented with textures and layers in the images, the resulting aesthetic shows minimal levels of integration or cohesion. The profiles of these *traperas*, as such, embraced visual dissonance, exploring low-light contexts with heavy shadows, making their images less clean but more daring than the other two groups. In general, the image backgrounds contributed little to the communicative intent of the image.

Although there are commonalities across the images, their feeds featured a wide range of editing styles, compositions and themes. This resulted in lower visual integration, caused by fragmentation and discontinuity, with low harmony or balance in the structural composition of the images on the feed. These young women paid less attention to spacing between their images and occasionally included images of lower quality or that were more spontaneous and less planned than the other two groups.

4.3. Social positions and the visual communicative principles of Instagram

Having identified the different forms of appropriation of visual functionalities on Instagram by the sample of *traperas*, the next step of the analysis was to examine the communicative codes and repertoires that the appropriations were associated with. This analysis found that adaptive and professional appropriations demonstrated a strong alignment with the communicative codes of the upper social classes—the use of elaborate codes, extensive visual and communicative resources and complex communicative structures, characterised by a more formal style. Their communicative practices suggest artistic appropriations of the cultural mainstream. They stand out for their complexity and use of a wide range of resources that appeal to a broad audience. In this sense, they can use platform functionalities in a highly regulated manner and are guided by a strong conceptual framework that allows them to create versatile and dynamic content.

For their part, consistent and specific appropriations are associated with the communicative codes of the middle classes, those employing mixed communicative conventions adaptable to different contexts. The appropriations that these young women make of the Instagram platform are at an intermediate, yet fluid, point that establishes a bridge between the other two groups. As such, their publications are integrated but less generalisable than the more affluent group. Both symbolic and direct, while their code is elaborate, there is circular tendency to their visual resources and communicative structures. Overall, they balance trends with accessibility.

Finally, direct and discontinuous appropriations are closer to the codes and repertoires associated with working-class social groups, characterised by having more restrictive communicative codes, limited visual uses and simpler, more direct and informal communicative structures than the other two groups. The communicative intent of this group of *traperas* is not

to project their images to broader audiences, rather their codes seemed to be strongly rooted in the specific contexts of their lives, meaning that they produced content that is more varied but also discontinuous and poorly integrated to the platform's functionalities (Table 4).

Table 4. Level of adhesion to the visual communicative principles of Instagram among *traperas*.

Ideal types of appropriation	(#1) Instagrammism	(#2) Impact and originality	(#3) Filters and effects	(#4) Design aesthetic	(#5) Fragmented presentation
Adaptive and professional	High	Medium-high	High-very high	High	High
Consistent and specific	Medium-low	Medium-high	Medium	Medium-low	Medium-high
Direct and discontinuous	Low-very low	Medium	Low	Low	Medium-low



Source: Author's elaboration

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this analysis was to critically examine the configuration of social positions in the socio-digital hierarchies of social media platforms. This involved interrogating the claim that the current technosocial landscape promotes equitable coexistence among people from different social positions, thus reducing the impact of traditional social barriers, such as those related to social class or gender (Mihelj et al., 2019).

The results show that the *traperas* whose codes and repertoires are more closely aligned to upper-class social groups more faithfully reproduced the visual principles of Instagram, whose communicative logics are embedded in the design of the images they published on their profiles. In contrast, those whose capital is closer to working-class groups show lower affinity with the logics of integration and continuity promoted by the platform. The originality and spontaneity of the appropriations of the *traperas* closer to working-class social groups are valued in Instagram's attention markets. However, their communicative practices do not tend to follow the principles of Instagramism or integrated and harmonious self-presentation. In contrast, the more integrated, socially ambitious and symbolic appropriations, such as those of the upper-class group-artistic appropriations of the cultural mainstream—and even the bridging appropriations of the middle-classes, allow for the generalisation of content and the generation of broad communicative responses. These appropriations favour the development of a personal brand suitable for mainstream attention markets and which strengthens the connection with 'invisible audiences' (Caro Castaño, 2017; Zhang, 2021).

In other words, to capture attention, having images aesthetically curated in the Kinfolk style is not enough, they must also be provocative, have unnatural and distinctive elements, such as tattoo filters or flashy GIFs. Although these elements were traditionally associated with the working classes, they are now crucial to all social groups seeking attention. Nevertheless, the appropriations of the upper-class group are much more closely aligned with the visual principles of the platform, potentially making them more effective in capturing attention. These findings encourage us to think about how processes of digital relegation or social hierarchisation operate on social media platforms.

The analysis suggests that, in the case of this sample of *traperas*, the boundaries of social class are not dissolving on Instagram; rather, the dynamics of power and position persist in digitally mediated social class dynamics, reflected in the way people appropriate the platform's tools and functionalities. The design of this digital environment currently favours artistic appropriations of the cultural mainstream; that is, individuals whose self-presentation is defined by their use of tools and functionalities associated with the codes and repertoires of the most affluent social groups.

Therefore, the study findings indicate that, rather than being individual, reconversion strategies are heavily influenced by users' social positions (Fernández Rodríguez & Heikkilä, 2020; Weingartner, 2021). The digital environments created by social media, however, promote an illusion, or digitised representation, of social diversity accessible through the interfaces of smartphones. This suggests that it is now possible to incorporate elements from various social groups into our self-presentation (homogeneity) while highlighting the singularity and originality of the resulting combination (individuality). This conception of social interaction on digital space aligns with highly individualised and market-oriented socio-digital logic.

The existence of principles, conventions and forms of use embodied in and through the design of digital platforms sheds light on the hierarchies mobilised within these environments and reveals that certain types of self-presentation are favoured over others. In this respect, the differences in the appropriations of social media tools and functionalities are also an indicator of social class differences. Therefore, when conducting studies in digital spaces, it is essential to pay attention to their design, affordances and the appropriations that each social group makes based on their social position (Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández, & Coromina, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2020; Yenilmez Kacar, 2024). Only in this way it is possible to explore how these environments contribute to the configuration of contemporary social barriers (Douglas, 1996; Hebdige, 2012).

Finally, the results reveals the importance of studying social differences on social media platforms from a perspective that considers the nuances and microvariations of use (Manovich, 2017). Likewise, the study of self-presentation must be attentive to the different ways of appropriating the available technological possibilities and tools. However, to fully understand how social differences operate in the context of digitisation, it is necessary to examine the nuances of micro-interactions, where power relations and social positions manifest.

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