EXPLORING AUTHENTICITY ON THE SOCIAL MEDIA APP BEREAL

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Introduction and Related Work

BeReal, the latest social media app to gain popularity (Chan, 2022), explicitly frames itself as a more "authentic" alternative to dominant platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Duffy & Gerrard, 2022). Users can post only once per day, in a random two-minute window controlled by the app. Posts consist of an image that combines photos from a smartphone's front- and back-facing cameras. They cannot be edited, and posts made outside the two-minute window are marked late. These features individually are not novel (Newton, 2022), but the app packages them as an overt response to current cultural frustration with "all things 'fake'" (Duffy & Gerrard, 2022). This strategy is not novel either; Salisbury and Pooley (2017, p. 1) found that "nearly all [new] SNSs [social network sites] invoked authenticity…in their promotional materials." How persuasive is this marketing tactic, especially among a generation that has grown up with social media? To explore this question, we are interviewing young adult BeReal users about how they use the app and to what extent they experience BeReal as a space for authenticity.

Much social media scholarship has focused on authenticity in relation to labor, branding, and celebrity, finding that users experience tension between presenting a "true" reflection of their identities online while also protecting themselves and their brands from harm (e.g., Abidin, 2022; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Hund, 2023). Indeed, such tension may be inherent to the concept of authenticity, which simultaneously impels people "to find and express your true self but also to carefully curate your impressions" (Pooley, 2010, p. 72). Our initial findings indicate that young adults experience impression management challenges on BeReal (Reddy & Kumar, 2023), which is expected given the performative nature of social media (Pooley, 2010). In this paper, we focus on the extent to which young adults consider BeReal to facilitate authentic interactions. Our ongoing analysis suggests that while participants find BeReal to provide a blend of what

Salisbury and Pooley (2017) call *real-time* and *spontaneous* authenticity, on a deeper level, participants question whether social platforms can ever act as vessels for authenticity.

Data Collection and Analysis

From December 2022 through February 2023, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 undergraduate students at a large university in the U.S. We recruited participants by posting fliers in the university student center, campus libraries, academic buildings, and dormitories. Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes, with most lasting 40 minutes. All took place in-person, except one that occurred virtually. Each participant received a USD$25 credit to their on-campus spending account. The study was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Interviews began with warm-up questions asking participants to describe their typical social media use. We then asked questions about their general use of BeReal, the kinds of pictures they post on the app, their reactions to BeReal features like the random notification and time limits, their thoughts about authenticity and social media, and how BeReal compared to other social media apps they used. For our initial analysis, we wrote analytic memos for each interview and identified patterns related to our research question. We devised a set of codes based on these patterns and are applying this inductively developed codebook to the interviews. Our analysis is ongoing, and we present preliminary findings below.

Findings

Participants describe BeReal posts as mundane and emotionally "neutral," depicting people doing homework, walking to class, watching TV, and lying in bed. One participant likened BeReal posts to "old Instagram," saying the app seems to be appealing to nostalgia and "the good ol' days" of social media. But unlike other platforms, BeReal tells users when to post. The result is images that are taken hastily in the middle of a task, but also pictures that start to look the same; participants report seeing the same bedrooms, angles, and activities every day.

For some participants, posting and seeing banal updates on BeReal of what their friends are doing now does manifest as a blend of *real-time* and *spontaneous* authenticity (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017). One participant said the images of daily mundanities bring her comfort, allowing her to feel more free compared to the self-critique evoked by Instagram. Participants also note the difference between capturing a moment on BeReal versus a regular phone camera. One participant recalled taking a BeReal at an opportune time in the middle of a hockey game, stating that the image stands out compared to the more posed pictures taken on the same day because it was captured "in the moment."

However, other participants perceived limits on BeReal's capability for authenticity. One called BeReal "a teaspoon of authenticity. It just shows location and condition." They said they could see how the setup of the app helps provide a "realer" image but explained that "authenticity means absolute transparency and truth, which is a private

practice not a public practice. There is too much to gain from editing yourself." This appeals to the notion of authenticity as congruence (Abidin, 2022), where one's "true" identity is visible through their self-presentation. However, by distinguishing between private and public practices, the participant suggests that authenticity can perhaps never transcend into public self-presentation.

Indeed, participants noted that BeReal's lack of editing features and filters did not achieve the ambitious goal of stripping away self-editing, since they still found ways to construct images that portrayed particular visions of themselves. For instance, some participants put off posting because they knew they would be at an event later, not paying much mind to the "late" label on their image. Others noted that the app's two-minute limit leaves enough time to change tabs from Netflix to homework on a laptop, move to get a friend in the picture, or find an angle that makes them look the nicest. Another participant who was also skeptical about BeReal's promise of "realness" said that if someone wants to construct a particular image, they always can. They explained that an Instagram user who only posts about exciting activities like a Bahamas vacation will only post on BeReal when they're with a big group of friends, always consciously portraying a particular vision of their life, regardless of what social media platform they're using. This participant's perspective on authenticity places more weight on the intentions and personality of the user rather than the affordances of a given platform. Indeed, some participants questioned the premise of being authentic on social media. One said, "To be really honest, being authentic would be not showing up on social media and just calling my friend on FaceTime."

Discussion

Our initial findings suggest that while our young adult participants do consider BeReal a space for certain kinds of authenticity, many question how far such authenticity goes, asking whether social media can be a venue for authenticity at all. New social media platforms regularly use claims of authenticity as a way to differentiate themselves from dominant platforms (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017). Aligning with Banet-Weiser's (2012) argument that authenticity is central to brand culture, our research indicates that young adults may recognize such claims as the marketing tactics they often are.

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