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RECLAIMING AUTHENTICITY WITHIN THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

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The tension between authenticity and attention has become a central axis of social media as a domain of expression and social practice. Authenticity is considered a master-narrative of social media self-presentation (Santer et al 2023), but what exactly comes across as and feels authentic is not necessarily self-evident, easy, or uniform (Haimson et al 2021). Predominant conceptualizations of attention-authenticity on social media emerge from work on what influencers and content-creators do to be perceived as authentic. On social media, attention often translates into revenue (Goldhaber 1997), and within this attention economy, projecting authenticity is strategically valuable for creators in order to amass more or better kinds of attention or to disavow its commodification. These practices and dynamics have been analyzed via a range of conceptual frameworks like calculated authenticity (Pooley 2010), contrived authenticity (Abidin 2017) and authenticity labor (Duffy and Hund 2015, McRae 2017).

Our presentation approaches the intersection of attention and authenticity from an analytical perspective of everyday users, and through that adds nuance towards understanding the dynamics of attention-authenticity in its everyday manifestations.

Methods and data

Our presentation draws on a meta-analysis of selected data from a range of our research projects over the past 13 years - an ethnography with sex-bloggers on Tumblr and with beachcombers on Instagram, Facebook and Etsy; interviews with users of BeReal, auto-ethnographies by everyday social media users. We re-read fieldnotes and interview transcripts with an eye out for discussions of authenticity, recoding them for emergent themes and patterns. This is how we noted the recurring orientation against the grain of attention. Based on this analysis we explore how social media users (1) experience and navigate the tensions between attention and authenticity, (2) describe recurring strategies for reaffirming their sense authenticity, and (3) explore how the

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experienced tension of attention-authenticity as well as the strategies for navigating it depend on the perceived affordances of particular social media spaces.

Findings

1. Tension between attention and authenticity

The tension between attention and authenticity is experienced in a variety of ways. First, even everyday users' social media experience seems to be shaped by a tacit imperative of attention, where a situationally specific level of popularity propels them to consider capitalizing on it. For example, Penny, a NSFW tumblr blogger told us that even though she was not at all interested in it: *"There were times when I looked into monetizing it (...) but that was really because people were like ... have you thought about it, you should, you have this huge audience."*

Second, pathologizing 'attention seeking' seems to be an internalized norm. Thus, the young adults in the autoethnography study would label some creators "pathetic" for their "desperate desire for attention" and through that delegitimize them as inauthentic, or treat with suspicion content that they interpreted as overly reliant on attention hacking – using specific photographs or hashtags. As one of our participants said, it made him feel manipulated, when a yoga teacher was "using her ass," to trick him into looking at sponsored content about a green juice. This internalized judgement of 'attention-seeking' was also directed towards oneself. Thus, in interviews with tumblr sex bloggers the pleasure of receiving attention was acknowledged, but often qualified in a variety of ways. Informants would point out that while attention was nice, they ultimately were posting "just for myself" or desired attention less "obvious" forms of attention. As one of our informants said about posting sexy selfies: *"I'm not necessarily seeking praise. I'm trying to take good pictures, whatever they are, whatever the subject (...) so you know, when people say that the pictures are good, like the lighting is good or the colors are good, that actually means more to me than if they think that you're physically attractive."*

2. Reaffirming authenticity

This tension between attention and authenticity – both in the sense of the internalized social norm that seeking attention is problematic, and the concurrent yet contradictory social media norm that attention should be exchanged for something else, propels users to reaffirm their sense of authenticity. We saw this in the registers of *love* (where one's intrinsic passion is highlighted), *lifestyle* (where a particular way of being or social position is underscored, often in relation to labor), and *greater good* (where giving advice for the sake of helping, or speaking about a particular topic (e.g. polyamory) in order to diversify the normative discourse around it is the key.)

In the Instagram world of beachcombing visual language of love abounds -beachcomber's typical posts videos of finding sea glass with exclamations of love. The rhetoric of addiction is also prominent in the use of hashtags and usernames (e.g. seaglassaddict) to emphasize the unbridled passion that takes one to beach. The latter

also helps highlight the lifestyle aspect of the practice further bolstered by regular inclusion of landscape, sunsets and beach imagery that highlight the multisensory experience of walking on the beach. Expressions of love and lifestyle are particularly prominent for beachcombers who sell some of their sea glass. Despite its widespread global circulation, beachcombers do not like the idea that sea glass is a commodity, or the prospect that beachcombing is a form of labor. Love and lifestyle as Instagram framings are a way for beachcombers to disavow both, not just in the sense of their social media self-presentation, but also in the sense of their identity and community membership.

3. Navigating platform affordances

Finally, our analysis indicates that the tensions of attention-authenticity and the strategies for navigating them are importantly shaped by the perceived socio-technical affordances (Evans et al 2017) of particular socially mediated spaces. Our participants' interpretation of attention, what it is, and what threats it portends, emerges from their perception of platform affordances and of the social norms and platform vernaculars of their communities. While some networked publics or ways of being on Instagram are experienced as attention economies *par excellence* (e.g. public fitness accounts on Instagram) other spaces, through a confluence of platform features (e.g. Tumblr's poor search feature, or BeReal's reciprocal visibility and temporal limitations) and community vernaculars and practices (e.g. pseudonymous participation, insider jargon in hashtags), might be experienced as inviting participation less motivated by attention and more by a variety of intrinsic reasons associated with authenticity.

Thus, we argue, different attention dynamics lead to different forms of operationalization of authenticity. Our interviewed BeReal users, for example, shared that they would ignore the app timer, choosing to post 'late,' but during more exciting parts of their day. The self-presentation is still authentic in the sense that it aligns with what the person is doing, just not in the punctual way intended by the app developers. Authenticity becomes flexible, in some way akin to what Mirzoeff (2015) writes about the flexibility of looking, where the norm has changed to allow alteration of photos as long as interpreting them as representations of the real does not become absurd. Existing work on influencer practices has highlighted the performative aspects of authenticity (e.g. appearing more amateurish or more vulnerable in order to generate and justify attention); our analysis contributes two further nuances. In the pairing of attention-authenticity, both, not just the authenticity can be tweaked to achieve an optimal participation; and within the gradients of the attention imperative of social media, authenticity becomes flexible without necessarily losing its meaning, value or becoming entirely instrumental.

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