Time to BeReal: The Rise of Fabricated Authenticity on Social Media

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Whether or not authentic communication and connection can take place on social media is a highly controversial topic among academics. Many scholars argue that social media perpetuates inauthenticity, and that true authentic communication cannot take place on digital platforms or in digital settings (Staehler 228). However, a new app has come out to challenge these assumptions—launched in December of 2019, BeReal boasts itself as the wholly authentic social media, where users can "discover who [their] friends are in their daily life" (*BeReal*). By posting a spontaneous photo from the front and back-facing cameras at a specific time every day (one decided upon by the app), users share a peek into their 'real,' 'authentic' lives with friends. The arguments of most social media scholars have not yet had a chance to address this recently developed app, nor discuss whether BeReal is meeting its self-proclaimed mission of authentically connecting friends with one another. This paper will precisely address this issue, with special attention to how BeReal has created a perception of authenticity and whether its perception of authenticity has been a key factor in the app's success.

Therefore, this paper will work to address the following questions: 1) What is authenticity? 2) How has BeReal achieved the perception of authenticity? 3) Is BeReal's authenticity fabricated or genuine? I predict that BeReal has achieved the perception of authenticity through its marketing and its design. Furthermore, I predict that

BeReal is not promoting genuine authenticity, but rather a façade of authenticity for users. By using Lehman and colleagues' framework of authenticity, my paper argues that BeReal does not support a level of consistency between users' self-concept and self-presentation, and thus fails to promote true authenticity. This research will add to the ongoing conversation of whether authentic communication is possible on social media and contribute new scholarship regarding the widely celebrated app BeReal. Furthermore, it will work to critique social media and bring awareness to the harms of social interaction on digital platforms, which are becoming routine in our digital society. By doing so, this paper can act as a tool to further dissect social media culture within both scholarly and non-academic circles.

Authenticity Defined: What It Is and Why We Like It

An exact definition of authenticity is difficult to find. Due to its subjective nature, many scholars disagree when it comes to classifying authenticity as one thing compared to another. Authenticity is elusive—what makes 'authentic German food' authentic may differ from what makes an 'authentic Van Gogh painting' authentic (Newman and Smith 609). The first example may have to do with cultural roots or regional properties such as ingredients, while the second may simply refer to a painting that Van Gogh actually painted.

What is authenticity? According to Sartre, authenticity is "choosing freely without rationalizing or pretending that someone or something made you choose the way you did, and fully accepting the consequences of your choices" (Wang and Skovira 1). This suggests that authenticity is rooted in a level of consistency between desire and choice, therefore as something only possible in agents of action, rather than inanimate objects. To fulfill the demands of authenticity according to this definition, there must be desire, choice, and self-acceptance.

But some scholars disagree. Lehman and colleagues explain that authenticity "refers to that which is 'real' or 'genuine' or 'true'" (2). For something to be real, genuine, or true, it does not need to be an agent of choice, but rather *consistent* between what it presents itself to be and what it really is. Authenticity as consistency means "an entity is authentic to the extent that it is consistent in terms of its external expressions on the one hand, and its internal values and beliefs on the other hand" (Lehman et al. 5). This rests upon the idea that there is a "consistency between the 'front' and 'back' stages…[where] the backstage represents the 'true self,' whereas the front stage may or may not be an accurate portrayal of it" (Lehman et al. 7). This definition of authenticity relies on two terms: self-concept and self-presentation.

Self-concept relates to the idea of the backstage self and is simply that feeling of who we truly are (Lehman et al. 7). This is what exists at one's core—it is composed of who one holds themself to be. Behaving in accordance with one's self-concept is integral to mental and emotional well-being, according to a variety of philosophical and psychological theories (Schlegel et al. 1). Some scholars argue that the abstract sense of meaning in one's life derives from "feeling that one is in touch with and enacting goals that are expressions of whom one believes he or she really is," or, in other words, a level of consistency between one's front and backstage self (Schlegel et al. 4). Lehman et al. further support this idea, citing specific psychological benefits such as "increased well-being, higher self-esteem [and] shame-free guilt" which arise out of one's consistency between behaviour and true self-concept (8). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that "feelings of authenticity can also lead to social benefits such as a greater sense of belonging" (Lehman et al. 8). With these viewpoints in mind, the importance of behaving in a way that supports one's self-concept is viewed as integral to attaining personal fulfillment and purpose.

Self-presentation, on the other hand, relates to the idea of the front stage self, where one may act or present themselves in a certain way that is not congruent with their backstage self (Lehman et al. 8). This is what exists beyond one's core beliefs and is often triggered by a desire for social approval and acceptance. Often, people abandon their 'true-selves' to appear more attractive, either socially or physically, to peers and outsiders. This is known as surface acting, which "refers to the regulation of observable expressions" (Lehman et al. 9). These incongruences between who one really is and who they present themselves to be can lead to negative self-evaluations and feelings (Jongman-Sereno and Leary). According to a study highlighted by Lehman and colleagues, those who presented themselves in ways that did not reflect their 'true-self' reaped the consequence of reduced well-being (9). In this paper, the concept of authenticity as consistency will work to prove that BeReal as an entity is not authentic, and that its users are not authentically presenting themselves. This will highlight the negative consequences that an app such as BeReal, or other social media platforms, may have on users' psychological well-being.

Social Media: Promoting Inauthentic Self-Presentation

It is no surprise that social media puts stress on the well-being of its users. As social media has grown more familiar, so has the awareness of its consequences, such as poor self-esteem and phone addiction. However, for many users, social media has the potential to be used as a positive tool to connect with friends and express creativity and opinions. For those in marginalized communities, social media can be an effective means to connect with similar people. For example, members of the LGBTQ+ community may "benefit from greater access to supportive interactions" and connections with other community members (Biernesser et al. 2).

But for most users, social media perpetuates a greater level of harm than good. As the number of social media platforms has increased over the past two decades, so have the rates of mental health problems, especially among youth—who are its heaviest users (Abi-Jaoude et al. 136). Many scholars do not view these occurrences as isolated phenomena, but rather interconnected events that are contingent on one another. According to the Canadian Medical Association, "teenagers reporting moderate to serious mental distress increased from 24% in 2013 to 39% in 2017" in the province of Ontario (Abi-Jaoude et al. 136). What could be the cause of such mental distress? Evidence suggests social media and phone addiction (Abi-Jaoude et al. 136). Seabrook and colleagues explain that social media addiction is linked with depression and anxiety, and one study indicated "that 41.9% of adolescents had a Facebook addiction" (9). Furthermore, popular apps like TikTok, with more than 78.7 million active users in the U.S. alone, have been proven to not only be addictive, but linked with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and stress (Maguire and Pellosmaa 4). This could indicate that a huge proportion of adolescents across the globe are suffering not only from an addiction to social media, but also from depression and anxiety that is arising out of their technology addiction.

Much of the depression and anxiety that develops from the use of social media is derived from the need to self-present online. According to Mun and Kim, "humans have a basic desire to be approved of by others or groups [and] an intrinsic desire to be recognized for their value and ability" (2). It is no surprise then that self-presentation on social media is abundant, where users have complete control over how they present themselves to friends and larger audiences (Mun and Kim 2). Having constant access to a large audience facilitates self-presentation on social media (Skogen et al. 2). On social media, users routinely lie as means of presenting themselves, creating falsities surrounding physical attraction, hobbies, and even age or background to appear more attractive to their followers—but these falsities have consequences (Mun and

Kim 1). Upon a review of 21 studies, Skogen and colleagues discovered that there were strong links between "false self-presentation… low self-esteem and higher levels of social anxiety" (3). Mun and Kim also found data to suggest that false self-presentation is associated with depression, stress, and loneliness (2). One reason why inauthentic self-presentation is so damaging to one's mental health is because the absence of authenticity encourages "people to engage in forced, unnatural behaviour, leaving them feeling unfulfilled or devalued" (Mengers 13). This fictitious act is not only artificial but creates negative self-images and feelings.

While false self-presentation requires more emotional labour, authentic self-expression works to decrease depression and requires less emotional labour (Mun and Kim 2). In fact, a study by Bailey et al. revealed that life satisfaction increases for those who are authentic in their expression on social media (1). With such information in mind, the appeal of BeReal becomes clearer. For users who are tired, sad, and lonely due to their regular online platforms, an app which presents itself as the antithesis of traditional social media looks like a quick fix to satisfy their addiction while not being as damaging as other platforms.

BeReal: A New, 'Authentic' Social Media

It is no secret that almost all social media networks claim that they are either authentic or promote authenticity among users (Salisbury and Pooley 1). In fact, nearly all social networking sites analyzed in Salisbury and Pooley's research used words "like 'real life' and 'genuine'… in their promotional materials" (1). This is not a coincidence; rather, it is corporate manipulation and extortion of humanity's desire for authenticity. Humans are always in search for authenticity, so much so that it has become "one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing" (Brown et al. 21). Many studies have found that authenticity is not only attractive but is "the very essence

of well-being" (Mengers 13). In fact, people are so preoccupied with authenticity that they are "motivated to be perceived as authentic for an array of interpersonal reasons," such as the pressures applied in digital settings (Jongman-Sereno and Leary 139). This craving for authenticity is reflected in nearly every one of the world's most prominent social media platforms. Facebook, for instance, relies on users to use their real names in their accounts, prompting what Salisbury and Pooley classify as nominal authenticity—a "single-identity, real-name virtue" (8). Twitter markets itself as possessing real-time authenticity, based on the idea of "fleeting and to-the-minute Tweets" (Salisbury and Pooley 8). Tumblr, on the other hand, coaxes users with its creative authenticity, which encourages creative self-expression from users in the form of writing, artwork, and photography (Salisbury and Pooley 8). Each social media giant, regardless of its form and function, relies on a different type of authenticity to draw in users.

Like the social media platforms that preceded it, BeReal also claims to be a platform for authenticity. What is different about BeReal, though, is its complete abandonment of the typical features of photo-sharing apps, along with its 'behind-the-scenes' style approach to photo sharing. Unlike other photo-centred social media apps such as Snapchat, VSCO, and Instagram, BeReal has no filter or edit buttons, but instead forces users to upload a 'raw' photo in the moment (Asmelash par. 4). In fact, BeReal takes away all pressure to post the polished photo that Instagram or VSCO may promote through its very structure. Once a day, users are sent a notification which states "2 min left to capture a BeReal and see what your friends are up to!" (*BeReal*). A two-minute countdown is activated, wherein users must take a photo through their front and back-facing cameras, documenting what they are doing precisely at that moment in time, whether it be working out at the gym or eating a bowl of cereal in sweatpants. If users post after the two-minute time frame is up, their friends (added through a request process on the app) will be notified that they were late in posting and therefore were not

'being real.' By the time the next day's notification goes off, the previous day's photo will be deleted.

This structure of spontaneity is meant to promote what Salisbury and Pooley classify as "spontaneous authenticity… a fleeting, low-stakes exchange without reputational consequences" (13). Spontaneous authenticity is rooted in the concept of immediacy, where the medium for inauthentic self-presentation is removed (Salisbury and Pooley 13). Without a chance to edit or overanalyze, users simply post or share images quickly, with the idea that these posts show something organic, or something *real* about themselves and their lives. This classification of spontaneity appears to be what BeReal uses to support its self-proclaimed achievement of authenticity. On its website, the app shares that it is "the first social network where people spontaneously share their real life" (*BeReal)*. Its point of differentiation lies in the fact that *it* decides when users post, not the other way around, and that it has removed typical editing features of other social media platforms—but is that enough?

Discussion

Although BeReal may promote a sort of authenticity with its structure of spontaneity, it fails to be truly authentic through the lens of authenticity as consistency (Lehman et al.). The structure of the app's posting mechanisms allows for inauthenticity, relating back to Lehman and colleagues' classification of self-presentation (8). Although the app communicates when users post late BeReals, the allowance of late posts permits users to wait until they are doing something more exciting, wearing something more fashionable, or some other factor that will garner social points from friends online. By allowing users to post late BeReals and retake their shots, the argument of spontaneous authenticity is weakened. Although users still are not able to edit their images with traditional filters, they can continue to retake photos until they appear how they would like to be perceived.

The search for exterior validation further perpetuates inauthentic self-presentation from users. According to Choukas-Bradley et al., “photo-based social media sites [are] now a central part of adolescents’ lives” who check such social media sites at least once an hour (164). Despite apps like BeReal, which claim to promote authenticity, people are drawn into self-presenting in ways that are incongruent with their ‘true-selves.’ Often on social media, users engage in the idea of self-construction, or the attempt “to create impressions of [oneself] in the minds of others… to construct a particular identity for [oneself]” (Potima 4). Since people self-present for an audience, with the success of one’s self-presentation relying upon acceptance from an external audience, social media has catalysed the abundance of self-presenting due to the structure of posting for an excess number of followers (Hollenbaugh 81). Despite the app not possessing traditional likes (such as those found on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter), users are able to react to others’ posts with a heart, thumbs up, or live reaction. Although reactions are not likes, they are nevertheless social comments from peers, which can be addicting to users. Macit and colleagues point out that there is the release of dopamine, a neuro-chemical responsible for the pleasure feeling, from users who receive positive feedback on social media (892). The presence of these reactions on BeReal promotes a craving for validation and addiction reliant on dopamine release, both of which influence users to self-present in a way that may not reflect their authentic self-concept.

BeReal’s structure promotes even more self-presentation and ongoing harm to its users than other social media, due to the ever-looming possibility of the post-mechanism going off. This is highlighted by an argument put forth by Choukas-Bradley and colleagues, which says that “photo-based social media sites, which emphasize physical appearance, allow the possibility that at any moment, an individual’s photograph could be broadcast to an audience of peers” (164). This ongoing stress, catalyzed by

BeReal's unpredictability, may further perpetuate self-presentation in users' actual lives, permeating beyond only the sphere of the digital world. This structure of unpredictability encourages users to constantly engage in exciting social behaviours or always present themselves in a positive manner, so that when the BeReal notification goes off, they can receive more external validation through reactions on the app. If users are not engaging in exciting activities, they may feel pressure to post a late BeReal, waiting for a better moment to showcase their 'authentic,' or perhaps more pointedly, inauthentic self.

In fact, the structure of most social media sites promotes inauthenticity. Despite the marketing efforts of social media managers, the true intention behind the world's leading apps such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook is not to promote authenticity, but to reap the capital gain. Furthermore, social media platforms constantly perpetuate inauthentic self-presentation and self-curation, inspired by social pressures to look attractive for a crowd of followers—fiscally, socially, or physically (Dickson par. 2). Although glimpses of authenticity can be found on each social media giant, such as those discussed by Salisbury and Pooley, it is important to remember that the 'truest' authenticity comes from interactions away from a screen, rather than behind one (8).

Conclusion

Authenticity, according to Lehman et al., is about consistency between one's self concept and one's self-presentation (7). At its core, BeReal is a photo-sharing app that relies on users' need for validation from peers. This structure of social media does not encourage a form of self-presentation that aligns with one's true self-concept, but rather an altered self-presentation that highlights the exciting undertakings one may be experiencing. Despite labelling itself as the authentic social media, BeReal sets up a structure where users think their peers are posting what they are genuinely

doing in the moment, but rather allows them to wait for the picture-perfect moment to take their photo. Although BeReal can be seen to have some forms of authenticity, such as Salisbury and Pooley's spontaneous authenticity, I argue that this is not enough to classify the app as truly authentic (13). Despite encouraging this so-called spontaneity, it does not force users to adhere to it, and therefore cannot claim the title of spontaneous authenticity.

As new social media platforms continue to emerge in our increasingly digitized society, it is important for users to critically assess the declarations of these companies. Although BeReal has gained widespread acceptance of its self-proclaimed authenticity from users across the globe, this paper argues that the app does not adhere to the measures necessary to promote true authenticity from customers. By comparing an analysis of BeReal and its functions with Lehman and colleagues' concept of authenticity as consistency (5-12), this paper works to argue that BeReal promotes inauthentic self-presentation rather than harbouring an honest self-concept from users. Furthermore, this paper highlights the consistent harm perpetuated by social media, such as levels of depression and anxiety, which consistently arise out of inauthentic self-presentation online and social media addiction (Seabrook et al. 9). By analyzing BeReal alongside a general analysis of social media, the true nature of BeReal can be better understood.

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