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To be or not to be(real): GenZ and the construction of the " authentic " self on social media

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Alla mia famiglia, e ai miei compagni di viaggio
Waves don't die

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ABSTRACT

As social networking sites continue to grow and evolve, so do the codes and rules that characterize how users share picture content. Understanding the motives and psychological mechanisms behind these changes is essential to fully comprehend the dynamics of social media. This research provides a first-hand insight into what lies behind the seemingly authentic surface of Gen Z's casual posting trend, focusing on photo dumps and BeReals. Via 18 semi-structured interviews we show that, for those of the Z Generation, the display of low (vs. high) effort cues is positively (vs. negatively) linked to perceptions of one's authenticity, impacting likability. Said low-effort cues are represented by what we referred to as *fabricated mess* in photo dumps and specific platform features for BeReals (e.g retakes and/or time of posting). Furthermore, we also demonstrate that impression management tactics are the driving force behind Gen Z's staged authenticity claims on social media. Even though the platform nudges adopted by BeReal alleviate the self-presentational worries of its users, the concerns still come into play in specific contexts.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

I feel like when it first started, it was, at least for me, is like a literal 12-year-old. You know, people were taking like, pictures of their makeup or their nails and like their outfit and it was kind of more sharing and then you know, became super, I think hyper curated and similar to kind of like the fashion and the trend industry. I think social media kind of goes through the same trend cycles. So, we kind of became so hyper curated to get, you know, the perfect Instagram picture of, you know, the perfect pose. Perfect background, it's edited to the nines, you've got faceapp, you've got facetune, and you've edited the background, etcetera, etcetera. I think we kind of got to that point. And then kind of a lot of people realized as much as that's fun, and I totally think that that can be an art form in itself. We kind of did the total opposite. So then it was way less. You know, not really any edits anymore. People didn't really care as much about themes. It's a little more casual, and I think people are just enjoying that a little bit more. You're not sitting there editing your Instagram photo for three hours anymore, that sort of thing. It's more raw, more authentic, I guess.

<div align="right">Ava (female, age 25)</div>

1.1 Phenomenon, Managerial Relevance and Problem

Customers crave authenticity, which is considered "one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing" (Brown et al., 2003; Nunes et al., 2021). Recently, this quest for genuineness has been particularly relevant in the domain of social media. After years of filtered and photo-shopped shots, Gen Zers[1] seem to be increasingly turned off by fake curated posts and prefer those that provide a more authentic look at the world we live in (Suciu, 2022), such as photo dumps. The Z-Generation wants to get picture sharing to what it used to be at the beginning, subverting the codes and rules that made Instagram and the whole realm of social networking platforms a "highlight reel of the picture-perfect parts of your life" (Crossley, 2020). Casual posting has replaced the hyper-edited aesthetics that characterized the SNSs landscape between 2014 and 2019. Presets[2] and perfectionism are out, and authenticity is – allegedly – in. As a matter of fact, statistics show that authenticity is the most important value for those born between 1996 and 2012, with 92% indicating that being authentic is extremely important (Merriman, 2023).

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[1] Generation Z (also known as Gen Z, Z-Generation or Centennials) is broadly defined by Parker et al. (2023) as "the generation that was born between the 1996 and 2012, following Millennials". This generation has been raised on the internet and social media, with some of the oldest finishing college by 2020 and entering the workforce (Lottering et al., 2023).

[2] Instagram presets are defined by Trend (2021) as "filters you use consistently on your Instagram posts. These presets are a combination of different photo settings that help you get a very specific look to a photo." They can be used across all content to convey a cohesive, delectable feed.

Figure 1: Photo dump's rise in popularity for Gen Z over the past few years

Source: Glimpse. (2023). Photo Dump. *Glimpse*. https://meetglimpse.com/trend/photo-dump/

BeReal, the new social media app that was on the tip of everyone's tongue in 2022, is the epitome of this trend. The app aims at encouraging authenticity (Brandon, 2022): once a day, at random, within a two-minute window, people are prompted to "be real" and capture their unfiltered life using the phone's selfie and back camera at the same time. With no influencers, no ads, and no followers, BeReal, which claims to be the "Anti-Instagram" has seen 7.67 million year-to-date downloads, with monthly active users growing by 315% in 2022, with 13.89 million downloads in September only, according to Perez (2022). In fact, the company's value went from $30 million in July 2021, to $600 million in August of 2022 (Sklencar, 2023).

Figure 2: BeReals downloads in September 2022
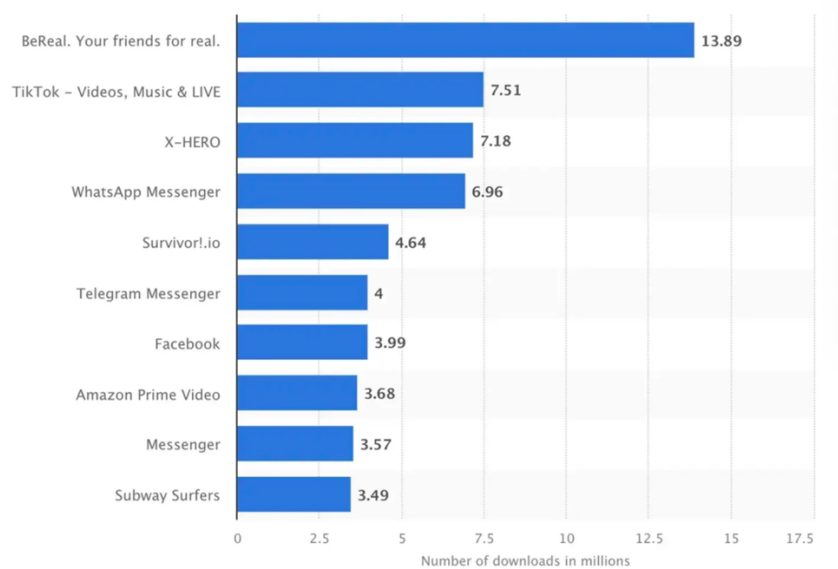
Source: Statista. (2023, February 7). *Leading iPhone apps worldwide 2022, by downloads.* https://www.statista.com/statistics/695791/top-iphone-apps-worldwide-by-number-of-downloads/

Users posting casually claim to be posting whatever they want, without filtering content. Nonetheless, there is an irony to the casual posting shift becoming a trend itself. For example, influencer Emma Chamberlain is known to the public for sharing odd combinations of hazy casual photographs. Her followers allegedly appreciate her authentic aesthetic, which she achieved through posting casually. However, when social media is your source of income, how authentic can you be? Besides, under the casual posting hashtag on TikTok there are tons of videos showcasing what people's Instagram should look like if they want to start posting casually (Crossley, 2020). At first glance, it seems that the days of constant narcissistic behavior on social media are over, and that authenticity will take the lead in 2023. However, *is this quest for online authenticity, authentic, after all?*

Understanding and decoding the motives and patterns behind trends is extremely relevant to fully comprehending the dynamics of SNSs (Social Networking Sites). This knowledge is key for brands and influencers, as it helps them to stay ahead of the game and avoid falling into the trap of marketing myopia (Bretous, 2022). The shift towards casual posting and the surge in popularity of BeReal is a relatively new trend. Therefore, no past research has tried to conceptualize it. We aim at closing this gap in the literature, gaining a *first-hand insight into what lies behind the surface of Gen Z's so-called online authenticity in picture content* via a qualitative semi-structured interview-based study. First, we want to examine how authenticity in pictures is encoded across the social media landscape, specifically focusing on Instagram's photo dumps and BeReals. Considering the existing differences between platforms allows for a better understanding of the phenomenon and the possible evolutions of the pursuit of genuineness online. Furthermore, we seek to gain knowledge of the psychological mechanisms behind the trend. Social media has always been a performance, and the question that arises now reflecting the advent of casual posting is if maintaining a casual presence is as easy as it may seem (Khatri, 2022).

The subject of this investigation will be the Z-Generation, the first digitally native generation, directly born in the digital world, with social media being a constant in its life course (Davies, 2020). According to McKinsey & Company (2023), those belonging to the Z Generation are extremely online, spending six or more hours per day on their phone. As they grew up on (and with) social media, they curate their online selves, much more carefully than those prior to them. Gen Zers are the ones driving the change across the social media landscape, from both a user-base and business perspective (Strang, 2022; Feger, 2022), rebelling against the normative and rehearsed aesthetics that characterized Millennials' posting style. Thus, focusing specifically on them will allow for a better understanding of the driving force behind current trends and evolutions.

1.2 Theoretical Background

The primary objective of the following thesis project is to *gain a first exploratory insight into the existing patterns and interrelationships within the casual posting trend*. Still, a pre-understanding of the phenomenon is relevant to have a starting point in its codification and conceptualization.

Previous research on the #nomakeup movement has highlighted how customers often evaluate others' attractiveness in relation to the amount of effort they perceived was put into one's appearance, with low (vs. high) effort, leading to augment (vs. discount) an individual's attractiveness (Smith et al., 2021). Rosanna K. Smith et al. (2021) posits that, rather than diminishing the importance placed on being perceived as attractive, the call to look natural shifts the attention on the amount of effort that is perceived to be put into someone's look. Consequently, in line with self-presentational theory consumers construct a natural appearance via artificial appearance-enhancement products (aka cosmetics) to signal low effort to others. This impression management tactics allows customers to gain the enhancing effect resulting from the use of makeup (Nash et al., 2006), without the discounting effect of other's awareness that this enhancement involved some sort of effort. We propose that a similar process might lie behind the dynamics of casual posting and aim at uncovering both the nature and the cause of it in this thesis project. Therefore, the following study wants to build on the findings of Smith et al. (2021) by examining a similar mechanism in the novel context of Gen Z's social media usage behavior, specifically referred to pictures. Within the past few years, glossy perfection has lost is appeal, and authenticity has gained prominence, becoming the norm in the social media world. Gen Zers are now influenced to post more genuine moments, in order to gain likes. Nonetheless, SNSs are meticulously arranged environments, that allow its owners to decide which content to share with the public (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). Because of this, individuals usually try to construct a positive image for themselves online (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). In fact, previous studies have found that users often employ impression management tactics to improve their image (Kim & Lee, 2011). This is because, when people share photos of themselves, they experience self-presentational worries that come from reflecting on how others will evaluate them (Barasch et al., 2017). Stemming from this, the current work aims at proving that the casual posting movement, rather than reducing self-presentational concerns, focuses on the effort others perceive when looking at a certain picture. People regard content as more (or less) authentic based on cues of low (vs. high) effort. Hence, the quest for authenticity makes users more aware of how their perceived likeability may be affected by others' perceptions of the amount of effort put into a post. Thus, when taking part in the casual posting dynamic, instead of posting "authentic" life bits, individuals might be constructing authenticity by signaling low effort to gain consensus. Potential low-effort cues could represented by by the removal of the codes that characterized performative posting, and other hints related to app based features (e.g., specific features of BeReal). Therefore, when deciding which pictures to share via photo dumps, they might choose to post those that appear low effort but are still showcasing their best self. In this way, they capitalize from the appeal of the post, and their authenticity perceptions benefit from the low-effort signal. Hence, the phenomenon of casual posting actually isn't casual.

Rather, it is a collective disillusionment that attempts to translate authenticity onto social media, which is an oxymoron in and of itself (Phung, 2022). As a matter of fact, Gen Zers have been accustomed to online self-presentation throughout their whole life course (Duffy & Gerrard, 2022).

1.3 Overview of the study

This study will be the first to uncover the codification of online authenticity for Gen Z and the psychological mechanisms behind it. A qualitative research design will be employed, as it will help providing an initial understanding of the said phenomenon. Qualitative research is useful to gain insights into people's feelings and thoughts. Besides, it helps setting the basis for future stand-alone quantitative studies around the themes that can emerge from the analysis (Wright & Austin, 2015). Specifically, we will use semi-structured interviews. Two groups of participants will be enquired: 5 professionals working in the social media field, and 13 Gen Z users of both Instagram and BeReal. The professional knowledge will provide a starting point for the analysis of the user interview data. Furthermore, interviewing people that are using the platform will help in understanding the psychological mechanisms behind the casual posting wave. This will grant a 360 view of the phenomenon from both a managerial and a user standpoint. The informant's experiences and perspectives will be repeatedly compared to our conceptual framework, to best contextualize (and conceptualize) the interview data. Overall, studies like this one can help grasping initial knowledge on untapped avenues of research.

1.4 Contributions

The following study will yield various contributions, from both a theoretical and a managerial standpoint.

As it will map out a first conceptualization of the casual posting phenomenon, it will close a relevant gap in the literature. Moreover, by shedding light on the specific codes and cues that contribute to the construction and portrayal, and authenticity of Gen Z, we will also add to the extant knowledge in the domain of social media signaling. More specifically, the study will extend the work of Rosanna K. Smith et al. (2021) to the novel domain of SNSs, investigating the relationship between authenticity and low-effort cues. Additionally, it will provide a deeper comprehension of how people deal with the conflict between social norms and genuine self-expression, thus adding to the current body of knowledge on impression management techniques on social media. Overall, we will foster a deep understanding of the relationship between casual posting and authenticity for Gen Z.

This study will be useful to both brands and influencers. The social network landscape is constantly evolving, leaving businesses scrambling to keep up with trends. Hence, knowing what lies behind the casual posting wave will help them remain relevant to younger generations. Besides, this research will give relevant

insights into the relationship between authenticity and effort, and what cues can make up for an authentic image in the eyes of the Z-Generation. For influencers, having an authentic image is critical, since an influencer that has an authentic connection with its audience, is seen as providing high-value word-of-mouth recommendations (Hoos, 2022). Hence, knowing how to signal authenticity becomes extremely important.

Lastly, the current thesis project also has the potential of providing relevant knowledge to both platform developers and behavioral economists. To them, understanding how authenticity is codified across the social media landscape, and how genuine self-expression can be fostered, can be important. By delving into the perceptions and experiences of Gen Z users, this study will help them in the construction of different techniques to overcome self-presentational worries on social media. As SNSs are proven to have a negative effect on people's self-esteem (Gallagher, 2017), knowledge on how to encourage truly authentic content is crucial.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Evolution of the Codes of Social Media over the last decade

It's like, fashion eras and stuff, there's always a peak. And then it's totally the opposite. So, in my opinion, it came from this thing where maybe there was this constant flow of these feeds, always the same perfect photos, same perfect poses, same places, and all that jazz. And, like, people got tired of it, you know? At some point, they were like, "Enough, can't take it anymore." But why, though? Seriously, let's change things up.

Alessia (female, age 24)

Millions of people around the world today use Social Networking Sites (SNS) to create and share sophisticated cultural artifacts in the form of pictures. These media platforms are strongly influenced by the social, cultural, and aesthetic values of our time, and they continuously change during their histories, becoming a window into the cultural codes of a young and hyperconnected global generation (Manovich, 2020). Since its launch in 2010, Instagram and its feed[3] have experienced countless changes and updates, turning what started as an online album into a meticulously managed visual identity (Morgan, 2022). Initially, people were posting pictures of random moments of their daily lives, without a set of pre-constructed rules. However, as the social network grew, so did the highly curated, professional, and flawlessly filtered version of its users. According to Manovich (2020) between 2014 and 2015, Instagram shifted from being a platform where individuals shared spontaneous moments, to becoming a visibly curated personal account, with a structured set of unwritten rules. The use of SNSs became codified around two central themes: temporal rhythm and visual coherence. Temporal rhythm is defined as the alternation between different kinds of pictures in systematic ways, and it requires the user to vary the compositions, as well as the subjects of its pictures when posting. Visual Coherence, on the other hand, is established via the consistent use of a specific color palette when posting. To achieve these standards, the use of editing app such as VSCOcam[4], gained popularity. Thus, in the mid-2010s, *performative posting* became the dominant code of Instagram and the whole realm of social media, and hyper-curated, structured, and posed content took the place of random food shots.

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[3] The Instagram Feed is "a mobile-first destination where people share photos and videos, connect with their community and explore the things they care about." (Meta, 2023)

[4] VSCO, also called VSCO Cam, is a photography app where you can create an account and upload or take photos, edit and add filters, and share them with other VSCO users or on other social media sites. The app was launched in 2012 by Visual Supply Company. The company also sell presets (collections of filters for editing) for use in photo editing software programs (Jean, 2015).

Figure 3: Visual exemplifications of the shift in Instagram posting codes over the years
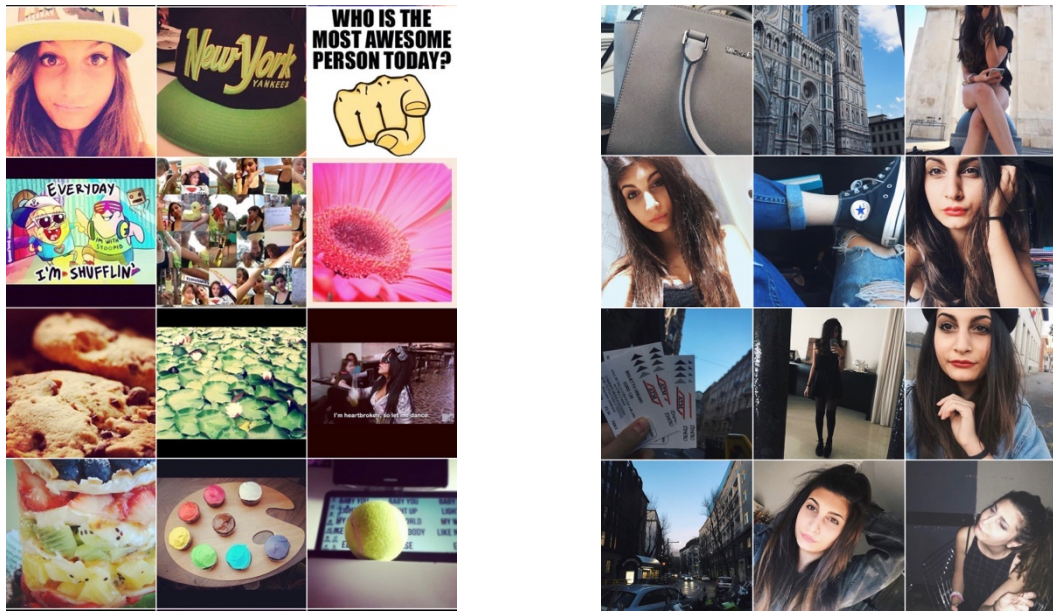
Source: Author's personal Instagram feed (2012-left; 2016-right)

In 2020, however, the pandemic, the climate crisis, and the advent of TikTok[5] forever shifted the way customers conceived the use of social media altogether (Porter, 2022). As COVID-19 normalized the less-than-glamorous lockdown living (Morgan, 2022), the hyper-crafted aesthetics of performative posting became out of touch. As TikTok – driven by its authenticity, creativity, and accessibility – spurred in popularity, individuals started looking for realness on other social networks as well. As Generation Z started crowding social networking websites, users got tired of overly curated posts and their idealized narrative, preferring those that give out a more authentic portrait of reality. The 2020s seemed to have welcomed a new era of social media, throwing out filters and aspirational content, in favor of a new seemingly authentic wave. In 2023, online perfectionism is out, and casual posting, photo dumps, and the use of apps like BeReal are in. A new cultural paradigm has emerged.

Casual posting can be defined as "a style of posting where you are trying to convey to your audience that you don't care about how they perceive you", thus projecting a nonchalant, almost accidental, beauty to the online public (Morgan, 2022). It has been described as digital anarchy, as those to post casually allegedly refuse to fall into the social media pressure trap to present yourself as perfect (Crossley, 2020). It represents a conscious effort by Gen Z to try and make digital platforms authentic again after they started becoming more commercialized over the past decade (Dubey, 2022). The trend was first picked up in mid-2020, when pioneers began showing off their random feeds, inspiring others do to the same. Emma Chamberlain, 21 years-old youtuber and Influencer, was a frontrunner of this posting style. The content creator is famous for sharing

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[5] TikTok is defined as "a video-sharing app that allows users to create and share short-form videos on any topic". It's mainly mobile-based, although you can still watch TikTok videos using the web app. The platform allows users to get creative with their content using filters, stickers, voiceovers, sound effects, and background music. The boasts 1 billion active users on a monthly basis (Geyser, 2022). According to Wallaroo Media (2023), 60% of TikTok users are between the ages of 16-24.

candid-like moments across her social media accounts, coming across as what is described by users with the terms "effortless and relatable" (Jackson, 2022) .

Source: Emma Chamberlain [emmachamberlain]. (2021, July 22). 🚗 🚗 🚗 🚗 [Carousel].
Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CRoxs0JLYLh/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=
Emma Chamberlain [emmachamberlain]. (2021, June 2).
[Picture]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CPoUpSvLhim/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=
Emma Chamberlain [emmachamberlain]. (2021, February 16). *CRYING SELFIE* 🥴 🥴 🥴 🥴
[Picture]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CLXHzsorrV-/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

As of 2023, the casual posting hashtag has 4.5M views on TikTok, and it has become the norm in the social media world. The Gen Z Casual aesthetic has replaced the rules characterized the previously dominant code, made of color schemes and rhythm. In fact, for a lot of people it is awkward to post flattering pictures. For example, influencer Max Baledge (@max_baledge) had to find a funny caption for his sponsored post to overcome the fact that the brand he was collaborating with picked pictures that were "too posed" (Porter, 2022).

The main medium via which users post casually on Instagram is the *photo dump*, which, unlike a classic carousel of carefully selected content, consists of "a collection of images and videos which are meant to appear uncurated, unedited, and unposed" (Hirose, 2022).
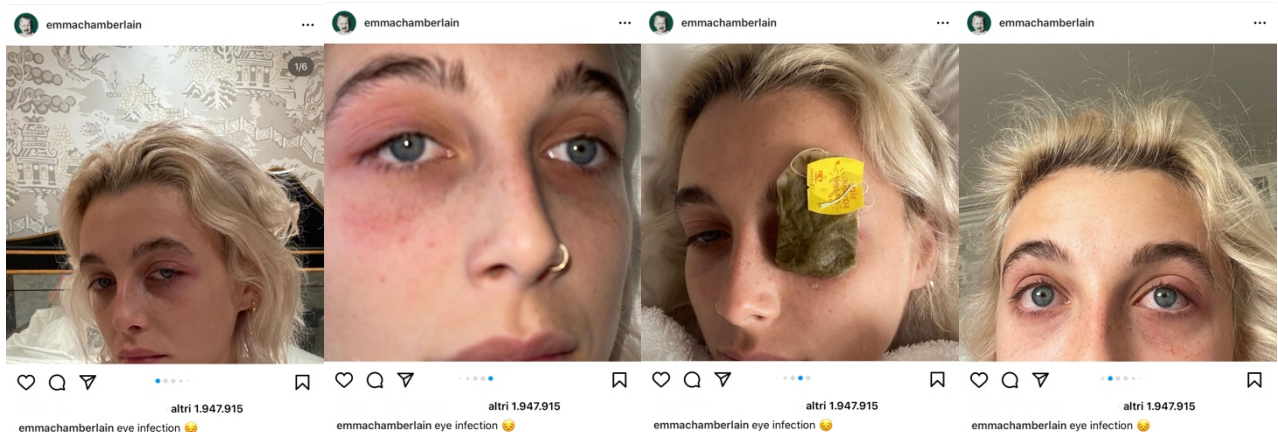
Figure 5: Kylie Jenner - Curated carousel
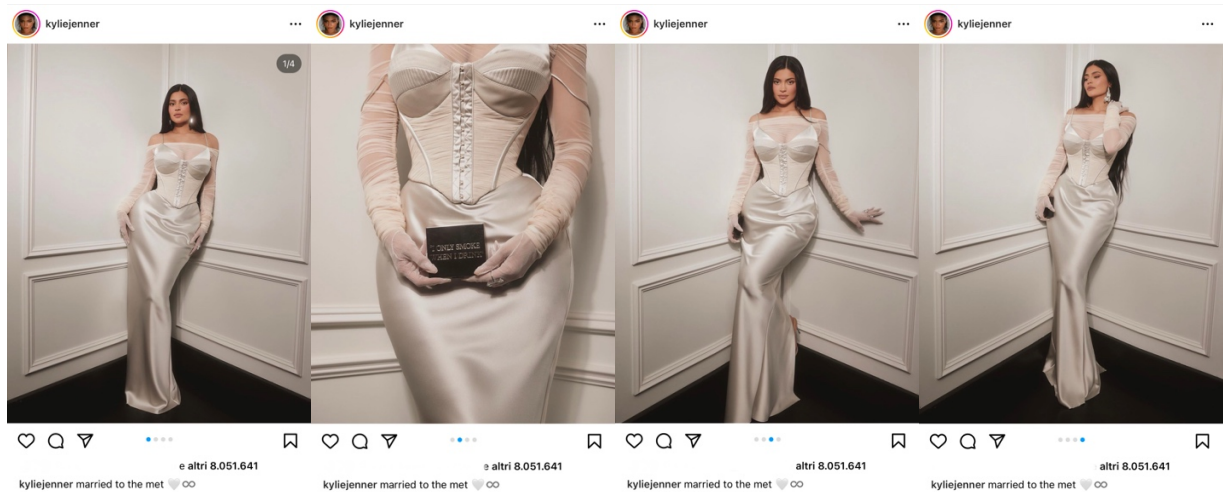
Source: Kylie Jenner [kyliejenner]. (2022, May 3). *married to the met* 🤍 ∞

[Carousel]. Instagram. www.instagram.com/p/CdHHK-OpJNp/?igshid=YmRhY2Q4MGU=

Figure 6: Emma Chamberlain - Photo dump

Source: Emma Chamberlain [emmachamberlain]. (2022, May 19). *eye infection* 😌

[Carousel]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CduTX2rowdk/?igshid=YmRhY2Q4MGU=

Dumps surged in popularity between 2022 and 2023, growing by +81% (Glimpse, 2023). In fact, even Dua Lipa, Bella Hadid and the President Of the United States have started posting blurry carousels of images to better connect with their Gen Z audience (Demeku, 2022). In the name of "online authenticity", it is now common among users to share photo dumps, usually consisting of a seemingly random mix of "good pics", blurry seflies, a meme or two, and, lately, even a BeReal.

Figure 7: Celebrities' photo dumps

Sources: Dua Lipa [dualipa]. (2021, April 14). *A photo dump consisting of mainly mirror selfies and pizza* 🍕💃♀
[Carousel]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CNpPwGqMOEN/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=
Bella Hadid [bellahadid]. (2023, February 13). [Carousel]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/Com6uhJOTIE/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=
Joe Biden [potus]. (2022, January 29) *Photo dump 1.23-1.29* [Carousel]. Instagram.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CZVB52zP0M2/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

BeReal, the photo sharing app released in 2020, that spurred in popularity over the last year, appears to be the epitome of this new autenthic wave of social media. Its slogan reading "Your Friends, For Real", seems like the setup for the perfect authentic social media (Beard, 2022). A BeReal alert goes off once a day, giving users a two-minute window to capture what they are currently doing synchronously through the phone's selfie and back camera. Users can only see others' daily BeReals if they post one themselves, and previous ones disappear from the feed (Nguyen, 2022). As no one knows when the notification will go off, it is difficult to plan the perfect picture ahead of time. Besides, although the app allows users to retake their BeReal, it also informs friends how many tries it took (Beard, 2022). Additionally, it shows if one posted late, and by how much.

Figure 8: BeReal's Interface
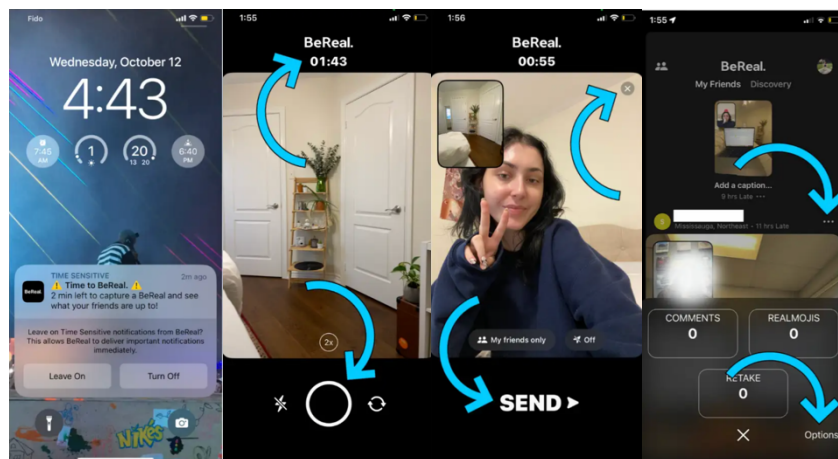
Source: Gagliardi, A. (2022, October 26). 3 Things We Learned Using the BeReal App for 30 Days | Later. Later.
https://later.com/blog/bereal/

What makes the app so different is also the erasure of likes, replaced by the so called "reactions", and followers. In fact, individuals can only see the daily shots of their friends. With no influencers, no ads, and no followers, the true "Anti-Instagram" appears to be the closest to reality a social network can get. Thus, since online authenticity has taken the lead in the 20s, BeReal has seen 7.67 million year-to-date downloads, with monthly active users growing by 315% in 2022, according to Perez (2022).

BeReal is not the only app representative of the ongoing shift of the rules of SNSs, Poparazzi and Dispo are trying to convey a more authentic social media experience too. Poparazzi, launched on May 24, 2021, has some unusual posting rules. Users cannot share pictures of themselves on their profiles at all. Instead, they can only post on their friends' walls. The purpose is to showcase "the real you, by your real friends" (Rubio-Licht, 2022). Dispo on the other hand, wants to encourage a "live in the moment" mindset. The app replicates the aesthetic and user experience of a Disposable Camera: pictures are taken via a small retro-inspired viewfinder and are available and developed only at 9 a.m. of the following day (Walsh, 2021). Even though these apps do not share the same skyrocketing popularity that BeReal is having, they are a symbol of the fact that the social media world is changing.

Figure 9: Poparazzi and Dispo Interface and User Experience
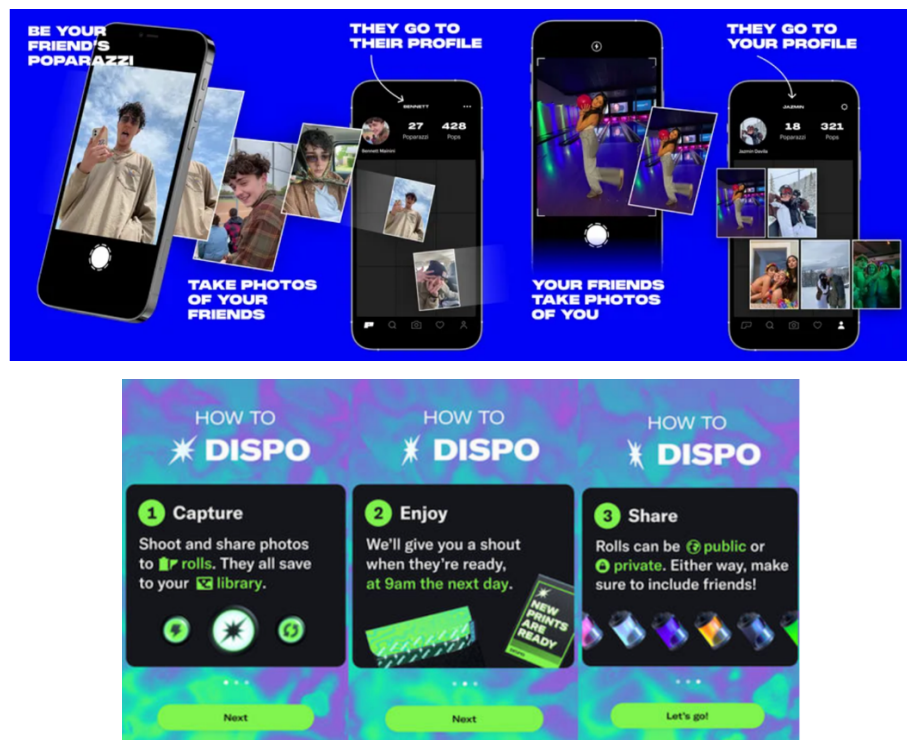
Sources: Rubio-Licht, N. (2022, June 19). Poparazzi, BeReal and the rise of the anti-Instagram. *Protocol*. https://www.protocol.com/poparazzi-instagram-social-media

Patel, N. (2021, August 28). *Dispo 101: All About The Dispo App*. Neil Patel. https://neilpatel.com/blog/dispo-app/#:~:text=All%20you%20do%20is%20take,roll%20or%20edit%20your%20photos.

Overall, this shift towards online authenticity has been pervasive, impacting not only the way people use and conceive media platforms but also how to do business. The concept of the influencer itself has

changed: in 2023, rather than planning photoshoots and showing their followers what they bought from Zara, most of Gen Z's favorite users are known, instead, for posting funny, and usually weird, content (Porter, 2022). James Nord, CEO of Fohr, an influencer-management platform, says he sees this having an impact on his clients daily: "What worked for people before, does not work anymore" (Lorenz, 2019). Thus, to stay on trend, Influencers have to abandone the look of glossy perfection. Brands are also favoring a more relatable type of content (Hirose, 2022; Gagliardi, 2022). For example, Ulta has joined BeReal, introducing people to their "behind the scenes", whereas Crocs has jumped on the photo dump wave.

Figure 10: Brands joining the casual instagram wave
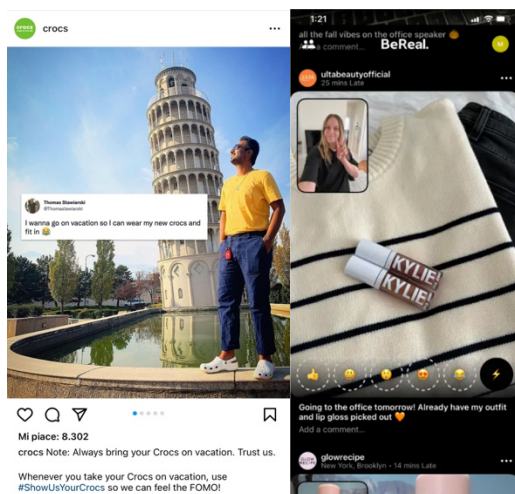
Source: Crocs [crocs]. (2022, April 22). *Note: Always bring your Crocs on vacation. Trust us. Whenever you take your crocs on vacation, use #ShowUsYourCrocs so we can feel the FOMO! #travel vacation #Crocs*
[Carousel] Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccp79fYM5Qy/?igshid=YmRhY2Q4MGU=
Gagliardi, A. (2022, October 26). 3 Things We Learned Using the BeReal App for 30 Days | Later. Later. https://later.com/blog/bereal/

Posting casually actually pays off: carousels are favored by the Instagram algorithm, making it more likely to get likes, followers, and brand deals (McLachlan, 2023; Hirose, 2022). Moreover, securing an iconic BeReal has become another opportunity to go viral (Cavender, 2022): @emily.green posted one with Harry Styles, getting over 700.000 impressions and over 200.000 likes. What appeared to be a step towards true authenticity online, has now become a "super-smart visibility and engagement tactic", according to Demeku (2022). Thus, *what actually lies behind this new authenticity wave of social media?*

2.2 Authenticity and Effort

Authenticity, defined as "an expression of one's true nature, or the absence of trying to signal things to others" (Berger & Barasch, 2018a), is considered a valued feature of people's personalities, (Anderson, 1968) and communications (Barasch et al., 2016). Appearing authentic increases liking as it creates the impression that one isn't acting in order to achieve a hidden objective (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). On the other hand, misrepresentation of oneself leads to a decrease in liking and trust (Tyler et al., 2006). Research on consumer preference towards more authentic content has been studied across many domains, and has recently been

extended to the context of SNS and photo taking goals and signals. Consistently with previous findings on the offline world, it has emerged this quest for genuiness is also relevant in the realm of social media, as authenticity is considered an important element for building trust and credibility with one's audience (Cano, 2019). For Gen Z users authenticity online appears to be extremely menaingful, as proven by the recent casual posting revolution. In fact, authenticity is considered the most important value for the Z-Generation (Merriman, 2023).

Although the relevance of (perceived) authentic picture content for Gen Z on social media has been established (De Rycker, 2023; Berger & Barasch, 2018a), the codes and components that make up an "authentic post" in the eyes of Gen Z users have yet to be fully understood. Authenticity is shown to be a holistic assessment determined by different context-dependent components (Nunes et al., 2021). As social media continues to evolve, so do the tools users can adopt to express themselves and signal to others, and those used to form perceptions (e.g., photos; Barasch et al., 2017). Authenticity perceptions of a post could for example be influenced by various factors, such as pose, content of the picture itself, editing style adopted, and more. We specifically focus on picture content, depicting the cues that make up for an authentic picture in the eyes of Gen Z. We draw on previous research in the domain of the #nomakeup movement and relate the codification of authenticity in the casual posting era to cues of low (vs. high) effort displayed.

#Nomakeup looks first became popular in the mid-2010s when women started posting pictures of themselves claiming to be natural and makeup free. Alicia Keys pioneered the movement aiming to "create a conversation and empower people to embrace their appearance without makeup". Furthermore, celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, Lady Gaga, Nicole Scherzinger, and Kylie Jenner accommodated the makeup-free approach advertised by Keys, by posting #nomakeup selfies on social media (Heron, 2021). Women were advertising a more authentic kind of beauty, going against the "expectation of female flawlessness" (Macmillan, 2023). However, the reality behind the movement was far less natural than how it was sponsored. Alicia Keys' makeup artist gave interviews stating how much effort that went into achieving her daily look. Rather than not wearing any makeup at all, women were claiming to be bare faced, while applying makeup so deftly that it made it look like they had any on to begin with (Dubey, 2022). According to Rosanna K. Smith et al. (2021) the reason behind the fake #nomakeup claims lies in *attribution theory*, which suggests that people are intuitive scientists, trying to assess the cause of individuals' behavior and actions, as well as intuitive politicians, strategically trying to manage how others view the cause of their actions (Tetlock, 1981). People often assess an individual's attractiveness based on the perceived amount of effort put towards his/her appearance. Since low (vs. high) effort leads others to augment (vs. discount), one's attractiveness ratings, women strategically present how much effort they put into their appearance to influence how others augment (vs. discount) their attractiveness (Smith et al., 2021). The call to look natural does not reduce the value placed on looking attractive. Instead, it focuses on another aspect of appearance-enhancing procedures: the amount of effort

others believe was put into one's appearance. Since those who wear makeup are often seen as misrepresenting themselves (Samper et al., 2017), women undergo appearance-enhancing efforts to construct a natural look, to then signal a low effort by highlighting that their appearance is natural (e.g., using the hashtag #nomakeup). The positive effect is twofold: they receive a boost in attractiveness with the use of appearance enhancement products (Nash et al., 2006), and also take advantage of the attributional principles by signaling a low effort to others, which further augments one's attractiveness ratings. Since effort is thought to facilitate attractiveness, its absence (i.e., no makeup) augments perceived attractiveness. We propose that a similar process might lie behind the "anti-Instagram" movement. Therefore, the following work wants to extend that of Smith et al. (2021) by examining a similar mechanism in the novel context of Gen Z's social media usage behavior.

We state that Gen Z users assess one's authenticity in relation to the perceived amount of effort he/she put into their post. More specifically, in line with attribution theory, we suggest that Gen Zers might augment (vs. discount) perceptions of one's authenticity, in relation to the display of certain cues of low (vs. high) effort. This, in turn, impacts the likability of his or her post. In this regard, different sets of cues could be adopted by users. On Instagram, said hints could be represented by the content of the post itself (posed vs. candid; messy vs. organized; filtered vs. unfiltered). For example, it appears as observers react more favorably to candid-like photos, as they perceive the person to be more authentic and, thus, likable. Staged photos visibly involve self-presentational effort, and do not provide information on who someone actually is, leading to the perception of trying to misrepresent oneself. Candid shots on the other end, appear to provide hints about people's true selves (Berger & Barasch, 2018a). Accordingly, Emma Chamberlain's pink eye photo dump is more likely to be perceived as a low-effort post by the audience compared to Kylie Jenner's carousel, as it showcases a need for self-expression, and not for showing off. Hence, the content appears to be more candid and casual, and not driven by impression management tactics, making it more likable in the eyes of the public. The (lack of) editing or filters, which appear to be commonly associated with deception by Gen Z (Flora, 2022), could also make up for hints of effort. Additional indications could be given out by the social networks' interface, like the number of retakes, and/or time of posting shown on BeReal.

Discerning the way that authenticity is codified in posting activities, as well as uncovering role that effort plays in the online behavior of Gen Z is crucial to comprehend what truly lies behind the claimed authenticity of the newly emerging casual posting trend within the context of social media. This helps to shed-light on the realm of social media signaling, which is novel and not yet fully comprehended (Valsesia & Diehl, 2021). To fill this gap in the literature, we aim at understanding the relationship between effort and authenticity, as well as exploring the various kinds of existing low-effort cues across Instagram and BeReal with the current thesis project. Said low-effort cues could represented by seemingly candid shots, the removal of the codes that characterized performative posting, and the choice of specific apps.
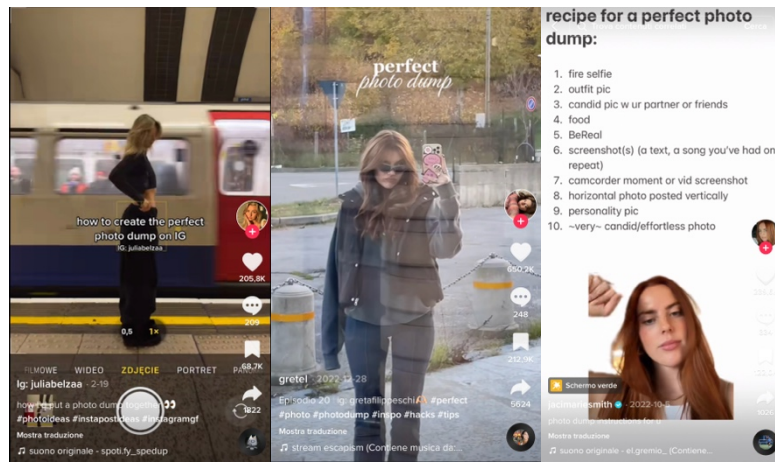
2.3 Self-Presentational Concerns

As stated previously, the main aim of this thesis project is twofold. First, we want to understand in what ways authenticity is codified across the social media landscape, by secifically focusing on photo dumps for Instragram, and BeReal. We suggest that the evaluation and codification might be related to cues of low-effort. Furthermore, we wish to uncover the psychological mechanisms that lie behind the casual posting movement. Thus the role of self-presentational concerns has to be considered. To date, a voluminous body of literature in the field of social psychology has focused on the *self-presentation* concept, also referred to as *impression management* (Chen, 2010; Chua & Chang, 2016; DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Goffman, 1959). The theory, first introduced by Goffman in 1959, implies that every individual performs a certain role while appearing in public. More specifically, using the metaphor of a theoretical play, Goffman described someone managing self-presentation as an actor playing a scene on stage, controlling what the audience sees (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). This tendency might be due to the fundamental motive of every human being to present oneself in a positive light to gain positive reactions from those forming an impression (Leary 1995; Leary & Kowalski 1990). Individuals, through their actions, aim at leaving a favorable image to others when communicating. They do so by controlling the information they disclose about themselves, using social scripts, or accentuating or downplaying certain aspects of the self (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Goffman, 1959). Such reasoning is consistent with attribution theory (Brandt et al., 2011; Folkes, 1988; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973; Tetlock, 1981; Weary et al., 2012).

Over the years, self-presentational perspectives have been applied to various offline domains such as consumption patterns, eating behavior motives, and dating (Iredale, 2008; Leary et al., 1994). Recently, said theories have been extended to the online world, focusing on social media users' behaviors and reasoning as well. Studies on the matter show that impresson management concerns and tecniques are also relevant in today's SNSs context. As a matter of fact, social networking platforms and personal accounts are highly organized spaces (Vazire & Gosling, 2004), where owners decide which content to publish, share, or delete (Dutot, 2020). Hence, by means of these features, users inevitably construct and manage impressions of their self, engaging in a self-presentation that is even more detailed than in the case of face-to-face interactions (Bargh et al. 2002; Haferkamp and Krämer 2010). More specifically, it has been found that, on social networking sites, users do not merely perform on stage but create "artifacts" and "exhibition spaces" to show one another. Differently from an actor that performs live to its audience, an artifact can be defined as the outcome of past performances which remains for others to see. SNS feeds are artifacts, while also functioning as stages where the actors (aka the users) perform (Hogan, 2010). The relevance of impression management in the online realm becomes even more outstanding when taking into account the severe impact that social netoworking sites have on one's self esteem (Dutot, 2020; Lamp et al., 2019). Although positive online appraisals are positively associated with users' confidence, they also appear to provoke an increased dependance on social approval, which is paradoxically related to decreased self-esteem (Meeus et al., 2019).

Data points such as "Likes" and "Followers", which validate the user's online self, determine what is worthy to be photographed, shared, and endorsed. Basically, likes have become the social capital in the current attention economy (Longley, 2018). People generally want to curate an overall positive image through their posting activities (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). Thus, when sharing content on SNSs, individuals face self-presentation concerns that arise from considering how others will evaluate them (Barasch et al., 2017). Recent empirical studies has, in fact, discovered how Facebook users engage in self-presentational strategies to enhance their subject's well-being (Kim & Lee, 2011).

Even though extant studies have tried to uncover the role that impression management plays in online posting activities, most fail to take into a consideration recent developments in the realm of social media. This thesis shares the assumption that self-presentational concerns drive individuals online posting activities, but aims at extending its scope, specifically researching the motives behind the online behavior of Gen Z customers, and focusing on posting activities on Instagram and BeReal. Casual posting allegedly opposes traditional impression management practices, favoring a more authentic image when sharing content online. For example, the rules of Bereal go against that of other SNS. With no followers, it appears as if the usual data points of the social media world have disappeared, eliminating impression management concerns when posting. However, when analyzing the role of self-presentation in the casual posting era, the characteristics of the Z-Generation need to be taken into account. According to research conducted by the social media agency Flagship Social (Melendi, 2020), Gen Z spends more time on social networking sites than any other generation, using it as way to brand themselves personally and professionally (Dubey, 2022). Gen Z is the first "digitally native" generation, never knowing a world without social media (at least theoretically). Its members have been socialized to the art of strategic self-presentation from as far back as they can recall (Duffy & Gerrard, 2022). In fact, the Z-Generation seems to place greater value on positive self-presentation when compared to all other age groups (Kilubi, 2020). Therefore we propose that, the emerging casual posting code, carried out by Gen Zers, does not actually correspond to a reduction of the value placed on the perception of the self on social media. As polished images go out of style, and seemingly authentic shots become the new norm, users are influenced to share *seeemingly* candid-like moments, that make them *appear* more genuine and likable. Rather than disregarding social norms and pressure altogether, this shift created a new set of rules for the SNS world. "Candid" pictures and BeReals are favored by the algorythm, and also elicit more favorable responses (Berger & Barasch, 2018a). Hence, although 1 in 3 Gen Zers say "I would rather be considered unique than real" (Swartz et al., 2017), it is reasonable to assume that, nonetheless, their online image is still carefully crafted and image-conscious. For example there are instructional videos on TikTok that detail how to create the perfect photo dump. Namely, a BeReal, an #OOTD picture, a random screenshot, food shot, a "personality pic", and candid pictures (Dubey, 2022).

Overall, in line with self-presentation and attribution theory theory we propose that calls for authenticity online make users more sensitive to the fact that others may augment (or discount) their likability in response to a signal of low (vs. high) effort in posing for and posting the picture. Therefore, due to self-presentational concerns, Gen Zers might not be truly authentic online, but rather construct their authentic image by posting seemingly authentic content (e.g., BeReals and photo dumps), which is actually staged and posed, so that other will believe that they are not putting effort into their posting activities. This could be done by carefully selecting specific cues, to appear unedited and genuine, aligning with the casual posting dynamic and gaining consensus. For example, when crafting photo dumps Gen Zers might decide to share pictures that look candid-like but are still portraying the best version of themselves. By doing so, the user's authenticity perceptions benefit from the signal of low effort (of either posting something casual, or posting on a "casual" app such as BeReal), while also making the most from the uniqueness or aesthetic appeal of the post. For example, TikTokker @bee.austin posted a TikTok of the BeReal she took with Matty Healy, which garnered millions of views and thousands of likes (Cavender, 2022). As the app is supposed to capture authentic moments, the fact that the "casual" instant captured is an extraordinary experience, makes it even more like-worthy than if it were to be a "polished" shot. By doing so, users are able to gain the enhancing effect of looking good and interesting on social media, without the discounting effect of others' awareness that this enhancement involved effort.

Figure 9: @bee.austin's Viral TikTok about her BeReal with Matty Healey
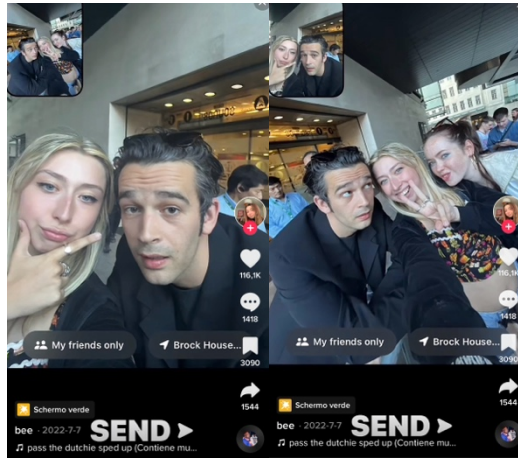
Source: Austin, B. [@bee.austin]. (2022, July 7). [Video]. TikTok. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMYpPT3ux/

The current thesis project aims at closing current gaps in the realm of impression managament research, by focusing on Gen Z's online posting activities, specifically photo dumps and BeReals. In this regard, we suggest that self-presentational concerns still drive Gen Z online behavior. Social media continues to be a place of performance, however, the rules and codes of said performance have changed. As users understand that authenticity has been identified as a valuable attribute to possess when connecting to an audience (Cano, 2019), they will try to convey an authentic image when posting online to increase their likability and gain popularity. Now, rather than being pressured to look perfect, individuals are being pressured to look authentic. Casual posting has become the #nomakeup look of social media.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

The main aim of the following research is exploratory, seeking to gain a deep understanding of the main codes and categories that lie behind the recent developments in the realm of Gen Z Social media use. Nonetheless, the reviewed literature and the hypothesis that stem from it are used to construct a conceptual framework that will drive the analysis of the interview material. Although in critical theory, pre-understanding is regarded as an obstacle to be overcome, hermeneutic philosophers place the emphasis on its enabling role and advocate on drawing from it as a starting point for data interpretation (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Thus, the developed theoretical knowledge will give this research an additional basis to make sense of customers behavior, to construct a coherent account.

For these hypotheses, it is important to note that, given the explorative and qualitative nature of the study, establishing causality is not possible, from scientific standpoint. Hence, we will focus on depicting the connections that our interviewees make between the various concepts, and certain links we describe via our conceptual understanding might result as more (or less)nrelevant than others.

Figure 11: Conceptual framework
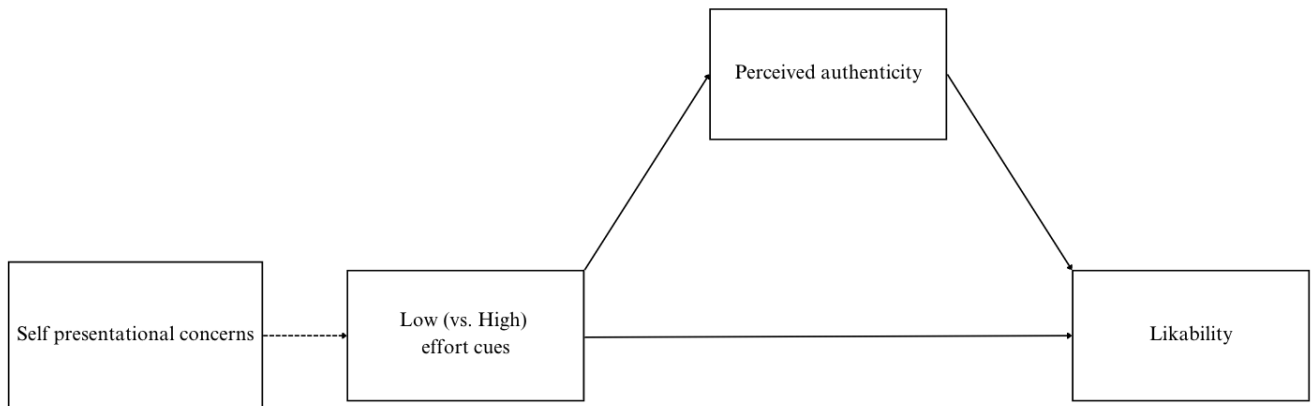
Assumption (stemming from the current trends in the social media landscape): Authentic content is preferred by Gen Z customers

Hence, H0: *Seemingly Authentic (vs. Polished) pictures are positively related to likability*

H1: *Gen Zers augment (vs. discount) perceptions of one's authenticity, in relation to the display of certain cues of low (vs. high) effort, impacting likability*

H2: *Self-presentational concerns drive fake authenticity claims on social media executed via the staging of low effort cues*

CHAPTER 3 – RESULTS & DISCUSSION: GEN Z AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE "AUTHENTIC" SELF ON SOCIAL MEDIA

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Research Design

The primary objective of this thesis project is to try to understand and codify what lies behind the seemingly authentic surface of the new casual posting wave, specifically focusing on picture content shared on apps like Instagram and BeReal by Gen Z. Given its novelty, no extant research has attempted to develop a first conceptualization of said trend. Thus, this will be the first study that tries to unveil the psychological mechanisms and motives that drove the recent evolutions in the Z-Generation social media use. To do so, we employed a qualitative interview-based research design, which is considered suitable when trying to investigate new fields of study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Qualitative research can help to generate first-hand insights, which can be later tested via quantitative computational analysis.

3.1.2 Participants

To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, we decided to interview two different groups of participants (see APPENDIX A and B). The first group of participants was purposefully selected based on their extensive experience in the field of social media, from both a social media manager and a reporter standpoint. Via purposive sampling, a total of 5 key informants were recruited, 1 male and 3 females, whose age ranged between 23 and 34 years. We used their professional knowledge as a starting point in the data analysis process, as well as to better comprehend the relationship between current trends and SNSs marketing practices. The second group of participants consisted of 13 Gen Zers (2 males, 11 females), frequent users of both Instagram and BeReal, with an average age of 23 years, mostly students. Interviewing actual Gen Z users of the platforms was essential to unveil the psychological mechanisms behind the casual posting wave. A snowball sampling procedure was employed for their recruitment. Thus, we identified the first set of informants. Then, we built the subsequent sample based on their recommendations. Purposive sampling was also adopted to assure the representation of different nationalities. Hence, 3 people were scouted directly from Instagram, by looking through the #BeReal hashtag.

3.1.3 Data Collection

A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and April 2023 to gather rich and detailed interview data. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to be able to cover a good range of topics while avoiding missing relevant information participants could decide to share spontaneously. We developed two different interview guides (see APPENDIX C and D), one for each group of informants, stemming from the research questions first, and the different kinds of information needed from each cohort, second. The

interview guide for the professionals was organized around four main topics 1) their professional opinion on the Gen Z's casual posting wave, 2) their professional opinion on Gen Z's use of BeReal, 3) their professional opinion on how brand/and or influencers can navigate these recent developments in the realm of social media, 4) their professional opinion on which issues brand/and or influencers can encounter when trying to appeal to Gen Z on social media. On the other hand, we structured the user's group interview guide around three main areas of inquiry 1) the informants' everyday experiences with (and opinions on) the casual posting wave, 2) their experiences with (and opinions on) the use of BeReal, 3) their personal opinion on authenticity in the online world. Furthermore, during the interviews, we asked participants from the user group to evaluate two different carousels (see APPENDIX E and F). The first carousel displayed pictures representative of the codes and rules of performative posting (aka curated carousel). The second carousel comprised photos of the casual posting aesthetic, mimicking a photo dump. All pictures were taken from the same Instagram profile, but the face of the person was not showcased. This was necessary to avoid attributing differences in evaluations to the look of the subject. This evaluation task was set up to gain a deeper understanding of the role played by effort in the codification of authenticity for Gen Z, without asking direct questions that could harm the objectivity of the research due to social desirability bias. All in all, the guides were necessary to achieve optimum use of interview time and keep the interview focused on the desired line of action. We pilot-tested both guides on two people to assess the clarity and refine the questions. All interviews were conducted via Google Meet and lasted approximately 25 minutes. To capture interview data effectively, audio recordings were made and later transcribed verbatim for data analysis. The software Descript was used for a first transcription, which was then crosschecked multiple times. We obtained informed consent for the recording and storage of interview materials of all participants verbally at the beginning of each interview. Quotes from foreign language speakers are translated into English. To guarantee confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the study.

3.1.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis process consisted of three iterative activities: 1) continuously comparing the experiences and opinions of our informants, to identify recurring patterns, 2) navigating between the existing pieces of media on the topic (TikToks, Youtube videos, Web Articles), and our growing understanding to solidify out theoretical insights, 3) crosschecking our findings with the conceptual framework developed, to confirm our hypothesis and spot unexpected/interesting results. We used the conceptual framework and the extensive review of growing information on the casual posting topic to inform and contextualize the emerging themes and categories derived from the interviews. In particular, the conceptual framework was employed as an analytical tool to identify different patterns and connections between the data and key concepts such as self-presentational concerns, impression management tactics and attribution theory. By grounding the findings in established theories, the validity and reliability of the data interpretation are enhanced. Besides, adopting a conceptual framework as an enabler for data analysis helps to situate the study and its results within an existing body of knowledge. This allows for relevant comparisons with pre-existing literature and facilitates the

generalizability of the findings beyond the context of this thesis. This iterative process was adopted to identify initial codes, which were then organized into a broader set of themes and contextualized both diachronically and synchronically.

As is often common for qualitative research, no single informant provides a complete view of the phenomenon. Instead, a holistic understanding emerges from the collection of various empirical snapshots gathered (Siebert et al., 2020). Therefore, we completed our iterative process at theoretical saturation. The findings were shared with a selected group of informants to validate the accuracy of the data interpretation.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Introduction

As the social media landscape continues to evolve, so do the rules that characterize it. Having a complete understanding of such codifications is necessary not only to comprehend how trends are shaped but also to shed light on the ever-growing interrelationships between social media and human behavior. The purpose of this thesis project is to conceptualize the casual posting trend and unveil the psychological mechanism behind it. The following section presents the results of the qualitative analysis of the interview data. The findings are organized according to the major themes that emerged from our interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The first section is structured around the enrichment of our conceptual framework to unveil the codes of the casual posting dynamic, focusing on photo dumps. Furthermore, the psychological mechanisms behind it are explored. In the second part, we drew from our interview data to contextualize the BeReal app within the current casual posting wave. Here, the relevant differences in the app's interface are acknowledged.

3.2.2 Emerging Themes and Codes

GEN Z AND AUTHENTICITY IN PHOTO DUMPS – FABRICATED MESS

> So even the so-called authentic aesthetic of Gen Z is actually coded in some way. I mean, it's all those recurring poses that can be like the blurry photos or the wide-angle shots, selfies, and that whole set of things. Anyway, whether you like it or not, it's a forced authenticity. It's not really about the photo itself, it's about how you place it, how you present it, so it's still a kind of performance.
>
> <div align="right">Sara – Social Media Specialist (female, age 34)</div>

Authenticity and Effort: relationship and cues

Our data, stemming from Gen Z evaluations of the two selected carousels, revealed the existence of a relationship between the perceived amount of effort put into a post, and the authenticity assessment of the posts' subject. As Arjun (male, age 26) discussed:

She [the girl in the curated carousel] has done some hard work in posting something like this, but I don't think that she is, uh, very real. When it comes to the second one [the photo dump], I feel this is more authentic and real because this particular person is showing her daily life, that how she's probably trying to travel. She's going to travel somewhere and or probably showing that how, how messy, um, how real her life is. That she probably entered into a, looks like she's traveling an Airbnb where her clothes are all shattered or something like that. Looks like more of a hotel room. And then the second one, it, the third picture in which she's actually in a, in a bus or a, looks like a kind of a transport, which I don't know, the picture looks way more authentic as if she's trying to just portray what she's doing at that particular moment instead of being extremely fake about it. And also sharing, uh, her daily life by seeing that she's like on the fourth picture, that, uh, she's with her friends. It looks more authentic because it is, it is less, uh, less classy, less. Uh, there is less effort done, especially when it comes to showcase the world. So she, she, as a person, looks more, uh, real as compared to the first one [the curated carousel], according to me. So I think your effort like the more effort you put into it in a certain type of way, would make it less authentic.

Hence, in his view displaying high effort in a carousel, diminished for the perceived authenticity of a post. Diana (female, age 21) also shared a similar view on the assessment of one's authenticity based on the effort displayed:

I think she [the girl in the curated carousel] is inspiring her content from there [Pinterest]. When I see it, I would assume that this trend was let's say three maybe two, three years ago right now people tend not to post any more pictures like the second photo or the last one with a coffee. It was a thing before however, yeah, it's a nice overall when I'm looking at like how the aesthetic is, but I would say that it started to be too old. Yeah. And let's see the second one. Okay, when it comes to the second one [the photo dump], I would say that is just a normal person posting what she is doing. It is authentic. She's not trying to follow a type of content like the first person [the girl in the curated carousel] that, in my opinion, is inspiring herself maybe from other people or from Pinterest. Now the second one [the photo dump] is just posting what she's doing. She was doing like the luggage, she was traveling by bus and then she was looking at her laptop so is just sharing with the people what she is doing, not really putting effort or caring much about the image and the overall aesthetics of the page.

For Arjun and Diana, pictures showcasing hints of low (vs. high) effort make one look more (vs. less) authentic. This kind of content seemingly exhibits less self-presentational worries and provides more information about one's true self, enhancing likability. Thus, the initial understanding and the conceptual framework initially developed, appears to hold value, providing support for our H1. Following the same line, in this context, our interviewers seemed to associate cues of high effort with the codes related to the performative posting aesthetic, namely visual coherence and temporal rhythm. As explained by Alessia (female, age 24):

> Okay, the first block [the curated carousel]. They were photos that seemed very curated to me. You could tell that there was thought behind what was being captured. In contrast, the second block [the photo dump] was much more spontaneous and unfiltered. Even in terms of color filters, there wasn't much attention to detail. In the first case [the case of the curated carousel], it looked like a typical old influencer's feed, with symmetrical compositions and vibrant colors, focusing mainly on the sky. Actually, the text was very specific, using only one monochromatic color, like kind of old influencers. I mean, no one does that really. On the other hand, the photos in the second block [in the photo dump] depicted everyday life scenes, and they didn't even pay attention to what they were posting. Like the one with the camera and the suitcase, you know? They were random pictures. More fun, I liked them more.

Matteo (male, age 23) also described a correlation between the aesthetics of performative posting and high effort, and its link with likability:

> The first one [the curated carousel] seems a bit more curated because it tends to have the same colors, there's something in common. Like, they put thought in it. The second one [the photo dump], which I think is a bit more similar to my feed, is a bit more random. Basically, something I would like posting.

Furthermore, based on our analysis of the interview transcripts, it became evident that cues of low effort in photo dumps were centered around 3 main topics: mess, relatability, and randomness. According to our participants, mess as a low-effort cue was associated with the absence of a specific aesthetic vision when capturing the pictures showcased in the photo dump. As explained by Bianca (female, age 22):

> Like the best word to describe it would be messy. Like, the idea of traveling literally looks like a hotel room in like the second picture and like the last one and so on and with the the third one and then also said definitely not as aesthetic as the first one [the curated carousel]. Because the photos are just like a random moment. It doesn't look like someone thought twice before taking this picture. I also say like looks like pictures actually like the student or young person would take in their everyday lives. And

again, these one also reminds me of like an active person like they're always doing something in each photo. […] It looks like something I have in my camera or like on a daily basis of random moments in my life. unedited, really effortless.

Sofia (female, age 22) highlighted the relevance of relatability as well and noted:

It [the photo dump] seemed more realistic to me, like even if you just take a photo of the suitcase with all the mess. I mean, it was a very realistic thing that could happen to me too. It could have been a photo I could have taken on any trip.

Thus, participants indicated that, in their view, relatability as a low-effort cue was related to the display of life patterns that one could assimilate to his/hers. On the other hand, randomness referred to the seemingly casual choice of the pictures displayed in the Dump, which did not share a coherent visual identity.

Understanding the way different content relates to authenticity in the eyes of Gen Z can be extremely relevant for those businesses and influencers that aim at appealing to this audience. In fact, Sara – Social Media Specialist (female, 34 years), mentioned that lots of old school influencers are struggling to keep up with the times:

Especially for the classic, old-school, millennial influencers, authenticity, in the feed, is not really there. You don't find it much in the feed, especially in the grid. So, in the grid, you see the first images where maybe in a carousel, the first photo is always stunning. The other photos might have some attempts to make something more exciting, authentic, it could be there, but is hard. […] I've definitely seen some influencers doing things in a more random way. Like when they try to take slightly blurry photos, and so on. They may even jokingly comment on trying to be like Gen Z. For example, Giulia Valentina, who also writes in the caption that she realizes she's not up to par because there's this thing that comes naturally to you but not to us. We have to think twice about it because we're still stuck in the classic millennial mindset.

She further elaborated on this, stating that brands are also having problems. This is because they do not understand how to attract a younger audience without losing their unique TOV:

However, when it comes to big luxury brands like Valentino, they struggle a bit more to find a tone of voice that speaks to Gen Z without compromising their core concept, which is their look. They don't want to erode their brand image, so it's a big challenge. But in the long run, I believe this authenticity

dynamic will inevitably establish itself even within luxury brands. There's no other way if they want to remain relevant.

In summary, these comments shed light on the role played by effort in authenticity evaluations, providing support for H1. The interview data also provides insight on the different cues associated with low (vs. high) effort, and their interrelationship of said cues with the casual (vs. performative) posting aesthetic. As the casual posting phenomenon is the dominant code of SNSs, and its success linked to low effort cues, the connection between low-effort hints and likability is shown. This understanding could be helpful for influencers and brands that have yet to fully comprehend this new wave of so-called authenticity.

Self-presentational concerns and staged authenticity: the concept of Fabricated Mess

In line with our conceptual framework, the interview data showcased the relevance of self-presentational concerns, when it comes to Gen Z's usual posting activities related to the casual posting aesthetic. Martina (female, age 22) shared her thoughts on the value placed on the perception on the self when it comes to posting content on SNSs:

> I get so paranoid when I have to post because I'm not like those people who just post things. Maybe for me, posting a story is already less stressful because it only lasts for twenty-four hours.

Likewise, in this extract, Ava (female, age 25) reflected on her thought process when deciding what to share on Instagram:

> I would go for like book bags, or like trash or something in the corner that looks a little less curated. But it's also one of those things where, you know, perception is everything in digital media. So you add one kind of off photo so it seems more authentic. And you know, social media is really kind of like a big game.

Ava admitted to staging a specific kind of "messy" content, to appear more authentic. From this, she further elaborated, recounting her experience with the casual posting trend, and what she really thinks lies behind its seemingly authentic and effortless surface. To her, this actually requires a lot of behind-the-scenes work:

> The trend kind of came to be effortless. Now. It's kind of a curated effortless which is something that we definitely see a lot of photo dumps. Like it's easy. I think photo dumps started as more of a like, here's 10 photos from my vacation. I'm not going to post 10 photos in a row, you can swipe them. They're not really edited. They're like random photos that I just wanted to share with my friends. And I think that has kind of grown to try and to kind of look a little more effortless. So a curated photo

dump where it's like, you'll see TikTok or something that's like how to make a good photo dump and it's like, okay, friend photo, drink photo. You know, they'll kind of give you what to do.

A similar consideration on the trend is shared by Harper – Tech Reporter (female, age 23):

Like, I think, right when photo dumps started blowing up there was this huge this there was a narrative that like they were so much more authentic, but it's just as posed and like, you take 100 Casual photos and then pick from them. Instead of taking 100 Really posed photos. It's like the same amount of effort is going into the curation. It's just that the style is different and I might even argue that it takes more effort to try to seem casual and authentic, rather than like stilted.

Hence, it appears as the casual posting dynamic, in line with our developed pre-understanding, can be collocated within the self-presentational and impression management realm. In this regard, Marie – Senior Social Media Director (female, age 28), expressed her concerns on the casual posting wave and its relationship with self-presentational worries of Gen Z:

So basically, so we were in the influencer era where you looked polished you looked post you looked perfect. And we knew we knew that you were faced tuning and filtering and posing and putting work into it and Gen Z has rejected that and it's now about like, this is just me this is a blurry photo. I don't look good. Like this is just my moment, but the thing is, is still posed and tried and perfected. And it's not. It's not real. And I think it's more problematic and less real because you look at it and you don't know, like the comparison factor is so much worse because it's not like, Oh, well I can't face-app my photos like her. I'm fine. It's why don't I look that cute when I don't even know if photos being taken on me? Why don't I look that cute when I'm just walking down the street? And so it's this desire to be real and be less polished yet it's still not real.
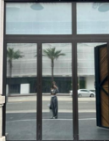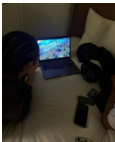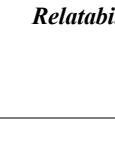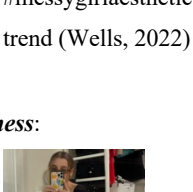
Overall, for what concerns photo dumps, we found support for H2 as well. In fact, it appears as impression management tactics still drive the online posting behavior of Gen Zers. As there is a growing understanding of the relationship between effort and authenticity, individuals who aim at increasing their subject liking will attempt an effortless aesthetic to stage authenticity. This is achieved by showcasing low-effort cues such as mess, randomness, and relatability. Within the casual posting wave, rather than true authenticity, what is encouraged is the sharing of what we conceptualize as a *fabricated mess*: the orchestration of low-effort cues (mess, randomness and relatability) when creating a photo dump. This is done the purpose of achieving a certain aesthetic which helps appearing more authentic in the eyes of others. We crystallize these findings into Table 1and 2, in which we merge our discoveries and conceptual framework with the

current body of knowledge present on the topic, to create a complete understanding of the codes of casual posting, while also showing more in depth why low effort cues are also preffered by Gen Zers.

Table 1: Uncovering the latest evolutions in the codes and aesthetic of social media

MILLENNIAL PERFROMATIVE POSTING	GEN Z'S CASUAL POSTING
Ca. 2014 – 2019 Breakthrough of social media, rise of influencers, Instagram as the main platform	Ca. 2019 – onwards Pandemic, rise of TikTok, content spread across various platforms
Visibly high effort	Seemingly low effort
Temporal rhythm, visual coherence	Fabricated mess
Showing the "perfect" self via hyper curation of oneself in picture content	Showing the "relatable" self via downplayed curation of messy and random life moments in picture content
Management of the Instagram grid and the curated carousel	Management of the photo-dump

Table 2: Fabricated mess: definition, cues and examples

CONCEPT NAME	DEFINITION	RELATED LOW-EFFORT CUES (from our data)	VISUAL EXEMPLIFICATIONS	EXEMPLIFICATIONS WITHIN THE CURRENT BODY OF KNOWLEDGE - LIKABILITY
Fabricated mess aesthetic (code of casual posting)	The orchestration of low-effort cues within a photo dump with the purpose of achieving an authentic image in the eyes of others.	• *Mess:* the apparent lack of an aesthetic vision of the subject when taking pictures. Encapsulating a random moment. • *Randomness:* the seemingly uncurated selection of shots within the photo dump. • *Relatability:* the depiction of life patterns that relate to the "normal person".	• *Mess:* • *Randomness:* • *Relatability*:	• *Mess*: ○ ○ #messygirlaesthetic trend (Wells, 2022) • *Randomness*: ○ ○ Photo dumps as a "random" collection of
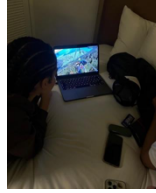
- ***Relatability***:

- o
- o Relatability as a key facet in the success of influencer activation (Bringé, 2020; Atiq et al., 2022)
- o The rise of BeReal, Dispo and Poparazzi: apps that help showcasing everyday life patterns.

moments (Townsley, 2022)

Sources: Alana Blake Champion [alanabc]. (2021, October 22).

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https://www.planoly.com/blog/instagram-photo-dump

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GEN Z AND BEREAL – NUDGING AUTHENTICITY

Well, in my opinion, BeReal is a brilliant social platform. It's truly one of the most functional social media platforms from my point of view. Because, you know, its core idea remains constant. The only thing I would change is the ability to post with a delay, because when you do it doesn't feel real anymore. But overall, it's a platform that really works. Its idea allows reflects exactly what you want

when you sign for the social platform. I really like it. Just this thing that you can post later, it kind of takes out from the sense of realness.

<div align="right">Giulia (female, age 22)</div>

I thought it like the aim of it [BeReal] was cool to combat like what's going on, like, the exhaustion of all the other social media platforms. And it was like in line with like the photo dump shift, but then as more and more people join the platform, I think you could no longer treat it the way that it was initially being treated. Because once like more distant people added you on it, you weren't going to feel as comfortable posting. You know, every day you would like for me as a working adult, me in front of my laptop, like, you know, I don't want everyone to see that. And I think also like the novelty of it started wearing off and what I noticed which is what my second article was about. Was that not only were people like waiting to take their BeReal's at a certain, like when they were doing the most cool thing that they did in the day, which I don't think is like wrong, and people should be shamed for that. But that's just like, the way that people use social media is always going to be more interesting than like the design of the platform. And then I was also seeing like, instead of getting a selfie with a celebrity I saw this first a girl posted a BeReal with Matty Healy from the 1975 on Tik Tok and it like blew up and then from there like it was way cooler to get a BeReal than to just get a selfie with a celebrity.

<div align="right">Harper – Tech Reporter (female, age 23)</div>

Nudges as both enablers and cues of authenticity

BeReal has a unique platform interface, which differentiates the user experience from that of other social networking sites. From the interview data gathered from the user group, it was observed that the assessment of effort of users is not so much related to the content of the picture itself. This appeared to be related to the apps purpose and claim, for which people would assume that, in general content displayed is more real. As, explained by Sofia (female, age 22):

BeReal is the social media I find the most authentic. The meaning seems quite straightforward. On BeReal, you have to take a quick photo, you can't use filters, you can't upload a pre-existing photo. I see it as a bit more real. Well, of course, you can still retake it there, so it's not a hundred percent real. But it's a step forward.

In the perception of our interviewees, rather than the content of the picture, direct cues of effort are given some of the app' specific features (such as the fact that others can see the number of retakes on a picture, or how late you posted). Which also impact authenticity ratings and the likability of the subject. Ava (female, age 25), elaborated on her perception of other BeReal users posting late on the app in this excerpt:

Um, on BeReal I find like, I have a friend whose BeReals are almost always like very aesthetic, but they're always like 10 hours late. I love her to death but it's one of those things like I know you got that notification. I know you waited until you were doing something fun and cute. […] I can always tell if someone takes a really good BeReal. They've had like eight retakes, and it's just like a selfie. You know, you know, I feel like we've all been there but like, you know, you are putting too much thought on it.

An analogous opinion on the link between retakes and authenticity is shared by Arjun (male, age 26):

So whenever that kind of thing, uh, pops up right in front of me, that six takes taken like six pictures taken before the final post was taken. I'm like okay, this person is not real. They are trying hard to look good. [..] I don't like it. But also, I've done that too.

Bianca (female, age 22) also highlighted the way she views the posting behavior of other users on BeReal. To her, posting too late defeats the whole purpose of the app, and makes one less authentic:

I think, like the main thing would be if they posted on time, or like 24 hours later, I think that makes the biggest difference. Because if you don't time that then yeah, that's literally what is happening in their lives at the time. But if they waited and I'm not talking about one or two hours, like it happens, easy, but if they posted like 10 hours later, then that really means like they just like waiting for something maybe so it's not like it's less authentic. And that's not the purpose of the app. It might not be the case they might have just forgotten it.

Ava, Arjun, and Bianca consider retakes and delays in posting as hints for authenticity.

From our data it also emerged that, as people do not want to be deemed as inauthentic and lower their likability, these cues also work as nudges for the self to be real on the platform. In fact, most participants claimed that they try to stick to the platform rules, because of they don't want others to see they retook a picture or posted late:

I notice the retakes and people who post late, and I even comment on them. That is why, I always post in a very random and super timely manner. I always have my phone in hand anyway.

Giulia (female, age 22)

Another feature that leads people to post on time is, is the BeReal alert itself, which holds on to people's FOMO. As Bianca (female, age 22) explained:

I'm actually really excited every time I see a notification It's BeReal time, and feel like I want to post right away. Especially if I'm like outside of my house or doing something something fun. Like, I also want to see what others are doing right away. It is really fun.

Because of these features, users claim that the app has actually helped them with the anxiety that usually comes with the social media posting experience. In fact, Bianca (female, age 22) further elaborated:

I actually really like the like the random times because they just take it forces you to take a picture like out of your comfort zone. You know, like, if you're at night in bed, you're probably not posting on Instagram. If you want to post, like you have to because of the notification. I also like the you can keep your circle of friends there quite small. Like it's not something that you're like, you know, like sharing with 1000s of people. Like for example for myself, I want to have like my close friends, not a thousand random people, otherwise its stressful.

The help provided by the app is confirmed also by other users.

In the sense that, like, if before I used to make a lot of problems, like, a lot of problems for posting, you know? I'm not one of those who, like, see something nice and immediately shares it, you know? No, maybe I consider it for a moment, but it's just a silly thing, it doesn't matter to people, who cares. But now, I make fewer problems when i want to post something on BeReal.

Sofia (female, age 22)

On the whole, it seems that the app is doing a good job in helping people to showcase their true self online. Because of the direct connection that BeReal appears to have with authenticity influencers are also joining the platform to appeal to their Gen Z audience. Marie – Social Media Director (female, age 28), shared her thoughts in this extract:

So I feel like for a lot of people, the draw of BeReal is that it's not supposed to be polished. And so it for influencers, like I said, like they have this issue where they are normal, and then they become famous and then they get polished. And BeReal is just an easy cheat code to be like, see, look, I'm not polished, I'm just like you.

Besides, being present on BeReal also indirectly helps with brand awareness, explained Lucille - PR & Digital Strategy Director (female, age 30):

> That's brand awareness for them that's reached that's a bigger audience and it helps convey that message of authenticity, so it's all good for them.

To sum up, in support of H1 it was discovered that, even on BeReal, the concept of authenticity is strictly related to that of the amount of effort displayed. This follows the reasoning of the developed conceptual framework and extends the work of Smith et al. (2021). However, we unexpectedly found that on BeReal the typical cues of fabricated mess that characterize the casual posting wave do not hold the same relevance. On BeReal, direct hints of one's effort are given by the social network's interface (number of retakes and/or time of posting). Because of this, the app can nudge its users into showcasing their true selves on the social media app. We also discovered that FOMO plays a relevant role in pushing people into being more 'real' when posting. Hence, the app's cues and hints can function as nudges given the welfare-enhancing benefits for the users: via these features, those who post on BeReal can let go of the worries that characterize the posting experience on other social media, as we discovered within the first part of this analysis. Lastly, we detected that, as BeReal can create a space for what seems to be raw authenticity, it also becomes a marketing avenue for influencers and businesses that aim at connecting with their Gen Z audience.

Self-presentational concerns and staged authenticity: circle of friends and diverse life patterns

Even though the platforms' nudges seemingly do a good job in fostering authenticity, our data revealed an interesting relationship between the number of friends one has on the app, and the realness of the content they post. As Diana (female, age 21), discussed:

> [at the beginning] I had maybe the closest friends and not have any other people added. Then, I started to add also influencers form my country and they accepted it, and people not close to me at all and imagine those people seeing you in embarrassing places or in the bathroom. […] like right now. I don't feel like posting anything and everything that I'm doing. And When I have a community that is bigger, I have to pay attention at the content because even if you can see when people are taking screenshots we can even make a photo with another phone.

Our participants indicated that a bigger group of friends on the app triggers them into placing a higher relevance on how they are perceived on BeReal, activating self-presentational concerns. Martina (female, age 22) elaborated on the topic:

The relationship with the app has changed because now even acquaintances are adding me. It has become a sort of second Instagram, so if you're a person who doesn't care and posts anything on Instagram anyway, it doesn't really change much. But for me, it's been different. I started posting less because now there are also people that I do not know well. So, if you're feeling a bit like sad on a certain day, you decide not to post it right away. And so, for me, it has become at least less authentic.

Furthermore, the relevance of said concerns seems to be related to the kind of life patterns that one gets to show on the app. In fact, interviewees shared that as times goes on, they get tired of showing the same things over and over. This is what Sara – Social Media Specialist (female, age 34), said about this phenomenon:

Well, basically, on an average day when you spend eight hours sleeping and nine hours working, what are the chances of catching a moment when you're doing something interesting? They're really small. So, fine. It's okay for a month. It's okay for two months. And then, at some point, you realize, "Maybe it's just another Saturday night on the couch for me. I don't want to share."

Ingrid (female, age 25) held a similar viewpoint. To her, users now only post when something interesting is going on:

And what I've also noticed is that some people post like they write in the in the text that oh, this was really the perfect timing for BeReal because they're actually doing something. I feel like that also says something that people are bored of the BeReal going off when you actually aren't doing anything, like the exam period when you're just sitting in front of your computer, so you're just taking the same picture every day.

Thus, it seems as if tension exists between people not wanting to be perceived as inauthentic by others, and the self-presentational concerns they start having as their circle of friends becomes bigger, and/or the life patterns the app lets them showcase are not diversified. Thus, our developed pre-understanding of the casual posting dynamic and its relationship with the self-presentation concept, continues to hold relevance even when considering BeReal. Lucille - PR & Digital Strategy Director (female, age 30), this can be dangerous, as it creates a constant comparison factor with the seemingly interesting life of others:

I think my concern is that that's going to encourage people to show that they're always having a great time or, you know, if they're, if they want to be if they're curating their image and curating their brand, they have to be on brand all the time. And, and one that isn't real, and two, that's going to lead to more mental health issues and burn out and the same sorts of issues that we've seen with Instagram. It won't be filters and overly touched up images that create the create the issue in terms of driving poor mental

health, it will be a fear of missing out or a fear that you aren't always doing something good with your life.

In fact, participants stated to have stopped posting on those days in which their BeReal does not go off when they are doing something interesting:

> If you have a lot of people around you, if your activities on a daily basis are, uh, constant, like you are doing something, you're going to the library or something. Early morning, you wake up, you make your breakfast, then you go to the library, and then you go to school, and then you go outside to party. There are a lot of factors in that. So like if your life is really engaging and it's fun, you tend to be more authentic. But if you're staying at home and working and stuff, you don't wanna showcase that to the world.
>
> <div align="right">Arjun (male, age 26)</div>

Other users have admitted to staging their BeReals, as well. Bianca (female, age 22), shared her experience:

> I think like there's like more minor staging and also just like more major ones like for example, if I'm with all of my friends, it takes like one or two minutes to gather everyone set everyone up in like certain positions on their own either side. So that's also like staging, but then there's also people that see the notification and then they're like, Oh, let me get to a nice spot or something and then take the BeReal to look cool and interesting.

Emma (female, age 22), also revealed she engages in some staging on the app. It is because she does not want to be perceived as boring, she claims:

> I mean, I am fake. I would say so. But like, no one is interested in something boring you know. So, we might as well have something interesting to share. Like, it also functions as a creative outlet, in a way.

In the opinion of Alessia (female, age 24), it is really difficult to avoid said concerns on social media:

> Well, then, when it comes to social media, I think that almost 99% of it is, like, a bit of a construction, or rather, what we post is filtered. It can't always be exactly what we experience in our everyday lives. We decide what to share. I mean, I would never go on Facebook and write, "I'm crying right now because I saw a dog." For example, you know?

Matteo (male, age 23) shared a similar view, and stated that platforms need to adapt to this, as he explained in this extract:

> So, in my opinion, since the people using these two platforms are essentially the same, their attitudes don't change. According to me, the application needs to change its approach to adapt to the things that are not working.

In summary, our interview data highlighted how BeReal's interface can functionally nudge Gen Z users into sharing more authentic versions of themselves on social media. Nonetheless we also discovered that, as the friend circle grows, self-presentational worries start to factor in when posting on the app. This is found to be especially true when users feel like they are not sharing diverse life patterns. This causes them to either stop posting or initiate some sort of staging when doing so. Hence, we found partial support for H2. According to our participants, the staging that takes place is a constraint of social media in general, in which showcasing one's true self is always hard. This is also in line with the existing articles on the matter, in which various reporters have documented changes in the way Gen Zers use the app (e.g., Cavender, 2022), and how it is hard to be authentic on SNSs. We summarize some of their takeaways in Table 3.

Table 3: Online articles documenting the latest changes in Gen Z's use of BeReal, and their struggle to maintain authenticity

ARTICLE	KEY TAKEAWAY
Cavender, 2022	As BeReal goes mainstream, what was meant to be the true authentic social media, has become just another way to share content and go viral.
Navlakha, 2023	People are slowly stopping to use BeReal because of the lack of variety they get to showcase with their daily posting activities. The app is being transformed because of the deeply ingrained social media habits.
Echols, 2023	BeReal captures some authenticity but is not entirely authentic. As more and more people join the app, the goal of realness experiences the same problems of photo dumps: users staging authentic content.
Pitcher, 2022	Even though it signals a further distance from the performative posting culture, BeReal cannot capture true authenticity. The app cannot save users from their social media behaviors, and the trend of authenticity is just another way of keeping users attached to social media platforms.
Mframa, 2022	People on BeReal now only want to share fun and unique moments, proving that there is simply no way of being truly authentic on social media. In the end, any attempt to authenticity online always comes off as fake.

3.2.3 Concluding Summary

In this section, we have drawn on our interview data to show key connections and themes that emerged from our analysis. We have established a first-hand understanding of online authenticity, specifically in relation to photo dumps. Here, in line with our pre-understanding and findings of Smith et al. (2021), the presence of low-effort cues appears to be associated with perceptions of authenticity, also impacting likability

of the pictured. Thus, H1 found support. Moreover, by delving into the experiences of our participants, we also showcased the relevance of Gen Z self-presentational concerns and the impression management tactics used to appear more authentic online. For what concerns photo dumps, casual posting of Gen Z is staged and curated, providing support with our second hypothesis. In this regard, our exploration ended with the definition of the concept of *fabricated mess*, which ties in impression management tactics and low-effort cues used in photo dumps.

Furthermore, we have examined the unique case of the BeReal app within the current casual posting dynamic. The app's distinctive structure and features, as noted by our interviewees, requires a separate analysis. On BeReal, the hints of *fabricated mess* that characterize the codification of casual posting within photo dumps are not considered relevant. Nonetheless, the developed conceptual framework holds value, as low effort cues are still seemingly associated with authenticity perceptions, also enhancing likability, supporting our first hypothesis. This is because specific features of the app (such as number of retakes or time of posting) function as direct cues for the effort put into a post. These hints also effectively nudge users into expressive their true self on the platform. However, our findings indicates that self-presentational concerns persist on BeReal as well. For our participants, these are often related to the expansion of the circle of friends and/or the life patterns one gets to display. Hence, our initial conceptual understanding is partially supported: in general, impression management tactics are avoided on BeReal, however, they start factoring in when people add more friends and/or they cannot show an interesting life on the social media.

All in all, although the unique characteristics of BeReal needed to be factored in, our developed pre-understanding was helpful to best comprehend the conceptualization of authenticity for Gen Z users across the two platforms and for what concerns the two different ways of sharing picture content. In fact, for both sections support for our initial hypothesis was (at least partially) found.

3.3 Discussion

3.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

Social media platforms serve as a portal into the codes and cultural sensibilities of their users. As SNSs grow and evolve, gaining a complete understanding of their dynamics becomes necessary. This is especially relevant when considering the behavior of Gen Z, a generation that does not remember a time without social media, and whose mental health appears to be strictly correlated with their online presence (Coe et al., 2023). In this regard, no extant study has tried to depict the codes and categories behind the new casual posting wave, unveiling what makes up for authentic picture content in the eyes of those born between 1996 and 2012. Furthermore, no past research has examined the relationship between this trend and self-presentational concerns. Our study bridges these gaps.

By delving into the perspectives of participants, we gained insights into the underlying motivations, behaviors, and social dynamics associated with casual posting across different social networking platforms. The analysis revealed the emergence of specific codes and patterns that shape the portrayal of authenticity in both photo dumps and BeReal, shedding light on the various facets influencing this trend. More specifically, we showcase how Gen Z's perception of authenticity in photo dumps is impacted by low-effort cues, building on the work of Rosanna K. Smith et al. (2021). This adds to the current knowledge on the domain of social media signaling, which is novel and whose aspects are not yet fully understood (Valsesia & Diehl, 2021). Moreover, our data provided insight into how Gen Zers are purposefully conveying low-effort cues in their posts to be perceived as authentic in the eyes of others, conceptualized in what we defined as *fabricated mess*. This contributes to the existing literature on social media and self-presentation, granting a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate the tension between self-expression and social expectations in the context of casual posting. Overall, we foster a deeper understanding of the relationship between casual posting and authenticity for Gen Z. Although photo dumps can provide an opportunity for Gen Z's self-expressions, it does not guarantee neither authenticity nor the removal of impression management techniques. This knowledge can help individuals, influencers, and brands aiming to navigate the dynamics of online authenticity and effectively engage with the casual posting trend.

Within the second section of our analysis, we deliver a first-hand comprehension of the dynamic of BeReal and its stance in the casual posting trend. Our in-depth interview data helped us gaining valuable insights into the specific features of the app that serve as direct cues for assessing effort, and thus authenticity. The analysis revealed that elements such as the timing of posts on pictures and display of retakes were considered low-effort cues and thus perceived as indicators of genuine self-expression. This enriches our understanding of how SNSs can mediate self-presentational mechanisms by shedding light into how specific app functionalities can nudge users to showcase a more authentic version of themselves. Furthermore, by investigating users' experiences, we clarify the specific contexts in which self-presentational concerns arise within the app, such as a bigger number of friends on the app, or a "boring" life. Thus, this study adds to the current body of knowledge by capturing the uniqueness of BeReal within the casual posting trend. The app appears to be a distinct avenue for self-presentation, with its own sets of cues and psychological implications. Overall, these findings help deepen our understanding of how users negotiate their identities within the digital space. Unveiling the role that app-based cues have in shaping authenticity on BeReal has relevant implications for both users and platform developers as well as behavioral economists. Users can gain insights into how their posting behavior is influenced by said cues. Platform developers and behavioral economists can use these findings to enhance the user experience and further encourage authentic self-expression within the app. Brands and businesses can also benefit from this newly gained knowledge. We further elaborate on this in the next section.

KEY FINDING	THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS
Generally, Gen Z's perception of a post's authenticity is impacted by low-effort cues	• Extends the findings of Rosanna K. Smith et al. (2021) to the novel context of social media
Gen Z's perceives cues of low effort for photo dumps are mainly centered around 3 topics: mess, randomness and relatability	• Suggests potential codifications of effort which help in the depiction of signals of seemingly authentic content, shedding light on social media signaling.
Self-presentational concerns still drive the posting activities of Gen Z customers, even in the casual posting era. Because of this, people are likely to stage authentic content.	• Closes the existing gaps in the impression management research, by focusing on recent developments in the social media landscape
Specific features of the BeReal interface act as low effort cues	• Discerns the way authenticity is codifies across different SNSs, by suggesting that different user interfaces create different possibilities for authenticity signaling
Specific features of the BeReal interface help moderating self-presentational worries, nudging users into showing their true selves	• Extends current knowledge on social media nudges by showcasing how different user interfaces can moderate impression management practices
Self-presentational worries are also activated on BeReal. They especially become relevant when one's group of friends becomes bigger and/or when one does not get to show diverse dife patterns on the app. Because of this, people are more likely to stage content on BeReal	• Closes the existing gaps in the impression management research, by focusing on recent developments in the social media landscape

3.3.2 Managerial Implications & Ethical Considerations

The current findings yield interesting managerial implications for brands and influencers, as well as platform developers.

Implications for Brands and Influencers

For customers to incorporate brand meanings into their lifestyle, brands must reflect a deep understanding of the codes and cultural categories in which the brand is embedded (such as pop culture and customer culture) (Oswald & Oswald, 2012). In the past few years, with the pandemic and the advent of TikTok, the customer landscape has changed, and a new set of codes has emerged. However, as showcased by our interview data, brands and influencers are still struggling in navigating the nuances of the casual posting dynamics. As stated by Lynsey Eaton, co-founder of the influencer-marketing agency Estate Five "Previously influencers used to say, 'Oh, that's not on brand,' or only post things shot in a certain light or with a

commonality. For the younger generation, those rules don't apply at all." (Lorenz, 2019). Our findings provide significant insight to navigate these changes. Brands and influencers can leverage the concept of *fabricated mess* to create a more authentic, and likable, image for themselves in the eyes of Gen Z customers. Furthermore, they can also use our discoveries to effectively engage with BeReal's user base. By understanding the unique cues and psychological mechanisms of the app, more authentic messaging can be conveyed. Since authenticity is closely linked to customer loyalty, this can help resonating better with the audience, thus building stronger connections. Overall, this knowledge can help professionals in the field in informing marketing strategies that tailor their content to align with customer preferences, creating more impactful messaging for the Z-Generation and avoiding marketing myopia. Additionally, by aligning their communications strategies with the principles discovered in this study, brands and influencers foster loyalty among their customer base.

Implications for Platform Developers and Behavioral Economists

Continuous improvement of the user experience based on user needs and preferences, is key for all platforms. This is especially relevant to maintain a competitive edge in the ever-changing realm of social media. Our findings provide important knowledge on the role that app-based cues have in fostering authenticity. BeReal's platform developers can use the outcome of this research to further support authentic self-expression and reduce pressure to create an interesting online persona. Here, understanding how to overcome the growing need for people to show diverse life patterns can be relevant. One of the latest developments within the app could be related to the findings of this study. The newly developed Bonus BeReal feature allows users that post right on time to share 2 more BeReals within the 24hrs time frame (Hutchinson, 2023). This could be a way in which the app is trying to encourage authenticity (posting right on time) while still allowing people to show different life patterns (via the Bonus BeReals). The outcome of this research is also relevant for the platform developers of competing apps. As social media continues to be a place for performance, with severely negative effects on the mental health of young users, informing the development of new features that support more authentic self-expression can be crucial. This knowledge also holds a similar relevance for behavioral economists that can help platforms constructing better nudging techniques to actually reduce of self-presentational concerns on SNSs, and to the sharing of truly authentic bits. Since 87% of women and 65% of men compare themselves to others on social media (Allendorf, 2022), finding new ways to encourage real, raw authenticity is increasingly relevant. On the whole, we help platform developers and behavioral economists in recognizing the strengths and limitations of specific features in their role as enablers of authenticity online.

Ethical considerations on platform nudges

A nudge is defined as "any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic consequences" (Soman, 2015). Nudges try to improve people's decisions by changing the way options are presented to them, rather than incentivizing or coercing people (Schmidt & Engelen, 2020). Sometimes, nudges appeal to the subconscious type 1 system of decision-making, drawing on people's cognitive biases to improve their choices (MeBeSafe, 2019). When using System 1, humans depend on heuristics, shortcuts, previous experiences, and emotions, rather than rational thoughts. Given that, our decision rules weigh attributes less critically (Soman, 2015). Thus, quick decisions are often biased because of external factors more than thorough judgments. This is the case of BeReal in which various kinds of biases are exploited to encourage genuine self-expression. The BeReal alert makes use of FOMO and just-in-time prompts to incentivize people to post right away. Furthermore, BeReal also uses social proof as a way to encourage users to share their realest moments. Even though encouraging true authenticity online can be important, some ethical considerations have to be accounted for. Nudges are a kind of behavioral intervention, for which it is relevant that the well-being of the recipient is considered. On a general level, it is a good thing for people to let go of self-presentational concerns when sharing content. This can help them overcome anxiety and general worries on how recipients will judge the picture content. The positive impact is especially relevant considering the negative impact that social media has on the mental health of Gen Z users, online for more than six hours a day, according to McKinsey & Company (2023). This is even more beneficial for young girls, which have been shown to be the category that is mostly negatively affected by the self-presentational worries and comparisons that characterize the SNSs realm (Haidt, 2021). Nonetheless, some harms could be caused. For example, one could be sharing sensitive details about his/her life just to comply with a BeReal alert. Besides, in the age of Cancel Culture[6] being completely honest online is not always a good idea. Even though, on the whole the features of BeReal benefit the welfare of the recipient, and therefore can be correctly classified as nudges, some problems could still arise in this sense. Thus, to preserve the welfare-enhance of the recipients, platform developers, behavioral economists and businesses should collaborate to understand how a more authentic digital environment can be fostered without creating any potential damage to its users. In this sense, examining user perceptions, concerns and experiences related to nudges can inform ethical guidelines and best practices.

3.3.4 Limitations and Future Research

This research helps fill some relevant gaps in the literature, providing valuable insights from both a theoretical and a managerial standpoint. Nonetheless, some limitations need to be addressed. One source of bias comes from the relatively small sample size (18 people in total, 13 users, and 5 managers) of the study. Although qualitative research does not require huge samples of informants, having a larger set of participants

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[6] Cancel Culture is defined by Vogels et al. (2021) as "a movement to remove celebrity status or esteem from a person, place, or thing based on offensive behavior or transgression." Attempts of Canceling have recently concerned Olivia Wilde and Adam Levine (Thomas, 2022).

can be relevant to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Future studies on the topic should therefore aim for a larger sample. Besides, as our sample mostly comprised early-twenties students, more diversity should also be taken into account when sampling. Another important limitation of this thesis project comes from the methodology adopted. While it is best to employ qualitative research when it comes to new avenues of study, this methodology has its own set of drawbacks. First and foremost, qualitative research relies on the subjective interpretation of the researcher and thus could be influenced by the researcher's own convictions. Even though efforts were made to minimize said biases, it is important to recognize that the interpretation and analysis of the interview data may have been influenced by the perspective and pre-understanding of the researcher. Secondly, our research depended on self-reported data from interviewees, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants could have tried to present themselves in a more favorable light, providing more socially acceptable answers. Hypothesis guessing could also have come into play. Thus, future research should incorporate other methods to both confirm and complement our qualitative data. Various methodologies could be considered for this objective. Quantitative research approaches could be useful to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the casual posting trend and establish causality within variables. Experimental designs or large-scale surveys could be employed to validate the observed patterns. Comparative analysis could also be useful to crystallize our understanding of how authenticity dynamics actually vary across platforms, and the reasons behind it. All in all, employing different methodologies could be helpful to account for the limits of qualitative research. We provide a list and some examples of future confirmatory studies in Table 4.

Table 5: Confirmatory studies ideas

FINDING	CONFIRMATORY STUDY PROPOSED
Within the casual posting trend, Gen Z perceptions of the authenticity of a photo dump are impacted by cues of low-effort (specifically in this case mess, randomness and relatability)	• Experimental survey • Large-scale survey • Image mining
Gen Z's perception of authenticity of a BeReal are impacted by direct cues given by the platform	• Experimental survey
Gen Z's cues for authenticity perceptions vary across platforms	• Comparative analysis • Experimental survey
Self-presentational concerns still drive the posting activities of Gen Z	• Further exploratory research (e.g., focus groups, structured interviews) • Large-scale survey

Apart from confirming and/or complementing the results of this study, future research could extend and draw upon our findings. For example, researchers could explore the interplay between the visual low-effort cues identified in our research and other components of photo dumps posts, such as captions and/or engagement metrics (likes, shares, etc.). Moreover, investigating how hints of low effort are codified in video content, also represents an intriguing research avenue. As TikTok grows in popularity by the day, understanding how authenticity is conceived on video-sharing platforms becomes extremely relevant for both

brand and businesses. Another topic worth uncovering is the different ways in which hints of low effort are perceived depending on the brand/influencer TOV. This is a real challenge that is being faced, as it emerged from our interview data. Overall, understanding how these elements make up for authenticity perceptions can help provide a more comprehensive understanding of the casual posting dynamic.

Finally, future studies should also account for the potential consequences of the trend we tried to describe in this thesis. For example, the effect on the mental health of the casual posting aesthetic should be considered: What is the effect of staging effortless content online? Do consequences differ across platforms? Ethical considerations surrounding the use of nudges and the promotion of authentic self-expression on social media is also relevant area for future research. This can help guide platform developers and stakeholders in the design of responsible features that empower users while respecting their well—being.

To facilitate future research efforts, we have created a comprehensive list of potential research questions related to our findings. This can be a valuable resource for those aiming to dive deeper into the dynamics of casual posting, authenticity nudging, and self-presentational concerns. Overall, this thesis project creates multiple avenues for further exploration. By building upon our findings future research can contribute to the ongoing discourse and give insight into the evolving nature of online authenticity, and its implications for users, platform developers, as well as businesses.

Table 6: Future Research Ideas

TOPIC	POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Gen Z and fabricated mess	• What is the interplay between the different visual low-effort cues?
	• What other visual cues could potentially be linked to low effort?
	• What is the effect of interplay between visual low-effort cues and other elements of a post (e.g., likes and/or caption)?
	• Is the staging of low effort to create authenticity perception related to one's generation or to the amount of online presence?
	• What are some effective ways in which brands and/or influencers can make use of visual low-effort cues?
	• How does TOV of a brand/influencer relate to the public's perception of visual low-effort cues?
	• How does this aesthetic translate to Video Content?
	• How does this aesthetic translate to different SNSs?
	• What is this effect of this aesthetic on mental health of Gen Z users?

Gen Z, BeReal and authenticity nudges	- How do different BeReal nudges (showing retakes, showing time of posting, FOMO) directly affect the posting behavior at the moment of taking the picture? - Do BeReal's nudges have a different effect on people pertaining to different age groups? - How does the newly developed Bonus BeReal feature affect self-presentational worries? - How can authenticity nudges be developed for other platforms? - What other nudges could be put into place to encourage authenticity? - How can platform developers and businesses collaborate to create a more authentic digital environment? - What is this effect of the use of this app on mental health of Gen Z users?

SUMMARY

The present research investigated the motives and patterns behind the rise of the casual posting aesthetic on social media, with a focus on Instagram's photo dumps and BeReal. Via 18 semi-structured interviews, we gained a first-hand understanding of the conceptualization of authenticity for Gen Z across the two platforms, and its link with low-effort cues and self-presentational concerns.

Introduction

Social networks are a window into the identities of individuals and their generation, connected by common cultural sensibilities and visual aesthetics. They serve as a lens through which we can observe the evolution of social norms and cultural categories. Because of this, understanding the reasons and psychological mechanisms behind changes in the realm of social media becomes crucial.

Social media platforms are strongly influenced by social and cultural values of our time, and they continue to change throughout their life. Instagram especially, has registered various changes in the way people approach sharing picture content on the platform, since its launch in 2010. At the beginning, users where posting photos without a set of rules. Then, around 2014, performative posting emerged, and sharing of picture content on the SNS became codified around the themes of temporal rythms and visual coherence. However, between 2019 and 2020, as Gen Zers began populating the social media realm, they started getting tired of the overly curated and hyper-crafted aesthetic of performative posting that characterized SNSs in the previous five years. In the name of online authenticity, crying selfies replaced posed shots, and Casual Posting became the dominant code of social media. On Instagram photo dumps, defined as "a collection of images and videos that are meant to appear unedited, uncurated and unposed", became the main mean via which users posted casually. This quest for authenticity quickly spread across the online realm. BeReal, a new photo-sharing app launched in 2020, seems to be the epitome of this trend, as it aims to provide a more authentic social media experience. BeReal prompts its users to share a photo once a day when a BeReal alert comes through at a random time. Since no one can know beforehand when the notification will go off, it appears impossible to plan the perfect photo. Moreover, although the app lets people retake BeReal within its two-minute time frame, it informs others of how many tries it took. Similarly, it sends your friends a separate notification if you do not share your BeReal on time. Overall, the shift towards a more genuine social media experience over the last couple of years was pervasive, having a profound impact on both social media usage and business practices. Brands and influencers have had to embrace a more relatable style of content. This strategy is beneficial, as more authentic content, such as photo dumps, is favored by the algorithm.

Gaining an understanding of the reasons and psychological mechanisms behind the latest trends and evolutions is necessary to have a full comprehension of social media and its dynamics. Due to its novelty, no extant study had tried to uncover and conceptualize the casual posting trend. This thesis project, by trying to

uncover what there is behind the surface of said shift, wanted to bridge this gap. Our primary aim was to examine *how authenticity in pictures is expressed on different social media platforms, with a specific focus on photo dumps and BeReals*. Furthermore, we also wanted to uncover *the psychological mechanisms driving this trend*. Generation Z was considered the main subject of interest, as it is the driving force behind the latest changes in SNSs codes and aesthetics. Besides, it is the first generation with social media as a constant in its life. Since Gen Zers are the ones driving the latest shift in the online realm, focusing specifically on them will create a better understanding of what lies behind the current casual posting dynamic.

Conceptual framework and Hypothesis Development

This study aimed to create a first-hand conceptualization of the key codes and categories that underlie current advancements in the realm of Gen Z social media use. Even though its main objective was exploratory, a conceptual framework was built based on existing literature, to guide the analysis of the interview data. Thus, it provided our research with an additional basis to fully comprehend customer behavior coherently. The pre-understanding was mostly built around two streams of research: attribution theory, also relating to authenticity and social signaling, and self-presentational concerns.

Authenticity is valued as a desirable quality in people's personalities and communications. As being authentic gives the impression that one is not performing to obtain a hidden objective, it enhances subject liking. This has been confirmed by research on consumer preferences across different domains. This was also proven true when it comes to the evaluation of picture content online. Nonetheless, the codes that make up an authentic post in the eyes of Gen Z users had not been studied, at the time of the start of this thesis project. As authenticity is shown to be an holistic assessment depending on multiple context-dependent components, understanding the tools that people can use to both signal to others and form perceptions on social media is key. Therefore, to depict the cues that relate to the perception of authenticity for Generation Z in picture content, we drew on previous research on the #nomakeup movement. Extant studies on the matter have shown how consumers frequently judge others' attractiveness in connection with the perceived amount of effort they think was put into one's appearance. More specifically, low (vs. high) effort is proven to enhance (vs. reduce) attractiveness in the eyes of others. Because of this, it has been posited that the call to look natural of the #nomakeup movement does not lower the importance placed on being considered attractive. Rather, it shifts the focus on how much effort is believed one has put into his or her appearance. This builds on attribution theory, which posits that people are intuitive scientists, trying to assess the nature and causes of the actions of others, as well as intuitive politicians, managing others' perceptions of their actions. Thus, as people often judge one's attractiveness based on the perceived amount of effort believed was put into his or her appearance, customers strategically present how much effort they put to influence how other people augment (or discount) their attractiveness ratings. Those that claim to be #nomakeup are undergoing appearance-enhancing efforts to construct a natural look, signaling a low effort to others. In this way, they look better, as they wear makeup,

and they are also not discounted for doing so. The current study posed that a similar mechanism was underlying the apparent quest for the authenticity of the casual posting trend. We hypothesized that Gen Z users judge a person's authenticity in picture content based on the amount of effort they perceive to be put into the post. More specifically, we proposed that Gen Zers augment (vs. discount) evaluations of others' authenticity in relation to the exhibition of specific signs of low (vs. high) effort. This, in turn, also impacts the content's likability. Understanding the codification of authenticity is crucial to comprehend the underlying motives behind the casual posting trend. This research wanted to close this gap in the literature by exploring the relationship between effort and authenticity and investigating the various low-effort cues considered relevant by Gen Z users. Examples of said cues were hypothesized to be related to the content of the post (posed vs. unposed; organized vs. messy).

To best explain why one would stage authentic content on social media, we considered the role of self-presentational mechanisms. This helped gaining an understanding of the psychological mechanisms behind the casual posting dynamic. The concept of self-presentation, also referred to as impression management, suggests that every individual plays a certain role while they are out in public. Basically, people want to leave a favorable impression on others through their behavior. They do so by emphasizing or underplaying certain aspects of their identity. Lately, these theories had been applied to social media users' behavior as well. Studies have shown that self-presentational concerns and impression management tactics come into play also in this context. Specifically, it has been highlighted that on SNS users often employ said tactics to improve their image, due to self-presentational worries that arise when thinking about how others will see them. This is especially relevant when considering the Z-Generation, a group of people that has been accustomed to the art of online self-presentation since they were born. With the aforementioned arguments in mind, we therefore hypothesized that the casual posting movement carried out by Gen Z users does not actually minimize self-presentational worries on social media. With hyper-curated aesthetics going out of style, and casual posting becoming the dominant code of the online world, users are influenced to share *seemingly* authentic shot, that make them *appear* more genuine and likable. Hence, since Gen Zers are aware that authenticity is a valuable quality to possess when posting picture content on social media, they will attempt to project an authentic image when posting in order to boost their likability. This is achieved by showcasing cues of low effort.

Overall, by building on attribution theory and self-presentational research, we posited that the phenomenon of casual posting isn't actually casual. Based on cues of low (vs. high) effort, people perceive content as being more or less authentic. This, in turn, impacts their likability, and more authentic content is preferred by Gen Zers. As a result, users become more conscious on how others evaluate the amount of effort they display into their pictures. Consequently, when participating in the dynamics of casual posting users might choose to share content that appears low effort but is still showing their best self. By doing so, they are perceived as more authentic, and thus more likable, while also profiting of off the appeal of the post. This was

reasonable to assume also considering the nature of the Gen Z and its relationship with online impression management tactics.

Methodology

The main objective of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the codes and categories behind the latest evolutions of Gen Z social media use, with a specific focus on photos shared via photo dumps and BeReals. Given the novelty of this research, we employed a qualitative interview-based design. Qualitative studies are best suited when trying to investigate new fields of research.

Two groups of participants were interviewed to get a 360 view of the phenomenon. The first group, recruited via purposive sampling, comprised 5 professionals in the social media field. The second group consisted of 13 Gen Zers users of both Instagram and BeReal. This group was recruited via snowball sampling (although it has to be noted that, to enhance diversity in the sample, 3 interviewees were purposely scouted via the #bereal on Instagram). The insight of the experts was necessary to get a professional outlook on current trends and market practices and was also used as a base for our analysis. Inquiring users, on the other end, was needed to explore the psychological mechanisms behind the casual posting wave. We then developed two different interview guides for the two groups of informants, stemming from our research objectives and the specific information needed from the two cohorts. The user's group guide also contained the evaluation of two different carousels. This evaluation assignment was designed to acquire more knowledge of the role played by effort in the codification of authenticity for Gen Z. The 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and April 2023. Consent was obtained verbally at the beginning of each interview. To best capture the data, we made audio recordings and later transcribed each interview verbatim. Lastly, the analysis process involved comparing the informant experiences, reviewing existing media pieces, and crosschecking our data with our conceptual framework. Specifically, the conceptual framework was used as a tool to identify patterns between the participants' perceptions and key theoretical concepts such as signaling, attribution theory, and self-presentational concerns. Thus, it helped contextualize the study within the current body of knowledge, allowing for relevant comparisons with the literature, and enhancing the validity and reliability of our findings.

Results

The results of our interview data provided revealed several key findings, helping in the conceptualization of the casual posting trend and unveiling the psychological mechanisms behind it. The findings are structured around the themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews and are linked to our pre-understanding (conceptual framework) and the related hypothesis.

We first developed an understanding of the phenomenon with a focus on photo dumps. The participants lived experiences shed light on the relationship between authenticity evaluations and low-effort cues. In support of H1, it appeared as the display of low-effort cues is positively linked with Gen Z's perceptions of one's authenticity, which in turn, impacted likability. Specifically, cues of mess, randomness, and relatability seemed to play a role. Besides, in line with H2, the interview data also showed that self-presentational concerns and impression management tactics still play a role in the posting activities of Gen Z users on social media. These findings were crystallized in what we defined as *fabricated mess*: the orchestration of low-effort cues (mess, randomness, and relatability) when creating a photo dump, with the sole purpose of achieving a certain aesthetic that helps one appear more authentic in the eyes of others.

The second section of our results is structured around the standing of BeReal within the casual posting dynamics, acknowledging the unique characteristics of the app, its distinctive interface, and features, to be exact. We found that, even when considering BeReal picture content, in the eyes of Gen Z users authenticity appears to be related to the (low) effort displayed, therefore supporting our first hypothesis. However, for the app, the cues typically associated with low effort did not showcase any value in the eyes of our informants. Said hints were replaced by the direct cues given out by BeReal's interface, such as the number of retakes of a picture and/or time of posting. We also discovered that, because of this, the app is able to nudge users into sharing more authentic versions of themselves on the app. In this regard, the FOMO sparked by the BeReal alert also plays a significant role. All in all, from our data emerged that, thanks to the use of nudges, Gen Z users try to stick to the rules of the app. Nonetheless, although the app's interface seems to help showcase raw authenticity on social media, we found that, as people add more friends to BeReal, self-presentational concerns started to play a role in their posting activities. More specifically, users reported that this is particularly true when they feel as if they do not share an interesting life on the app (e.g., posting being in bed not doing anything every day). Basically, a tension exists between people not wanting to be perceived as inauthentic by others and the self-presentational concerns that arise as they add more friends and/or the life patters they get to showcase on BeReal do not vary. Because of this, impression management tactics start to factor in, with individuals that either stop posting altogether or initiate some sort of staging. Hence, partial support of H2 was found.

General Discussion

Our interview data revealed interesting insights into the social dynamics, motivations, and factors underlying the casual posting trend. This was the first research that attempted to understand the relationship between authenticity, low-effort cues, and self-presentational concerns as perceived by Gen Z. Thus, by showcasing the codes and patterns involved in the construction of online authenticity for this specific age group, this study helped bridge various gaps within the current research. Besides, it also yields interesting implications across different fields.

First, by investigating the relationship between authenticity and low-effort hints, this research expanded upon the work of Smith et al. (2021). Moreover, as it gave information on both the motives and the means via which Gen Z purposefully orchestrate low-effort cues in their posts, it added to the existing literature on impression management and self-presentation, as well as social media signaling. Secondly, our interview data on BeReal revealed valuable insights into how specific functionalities of the app can serve as low-effort cues, and how they function as nudges to the self to be genuine on social media. This contributed to the current body of knowledge by providing an understanding of the relationship between app functionalities and self-presentational mechanisms. Additionally, it also helped capturing the uniqueness of BeReal within the casual posting dynamic Furthermore, we also showcased the specific contexts in which self-presentational concerns arise when using BeReal. Hence, this project also further expanded on self-presentation and impression management literature. All in all, these findings contributed to a deeper understanding of how Gen Z individuals manage their identities online, as well as what authenticity cues are used in the SNS world.

The practical relevance of our research is also to be noted. The results of this study provided information on the various codes and mechanisms that can help convey authentic messaging on both Instagram and BeReal. Reflecting the codes and cultural categories in which businesses are embedded is especially relevant to avoid marketing myopia. Thus, by showcasing knowledge on how to align content strategies with customer preferences, our research can help both brands and influencers to navigate the current changes within the social media landscape. As lots of brands are influencers are currently struggling with this, having an understanding of what lies behind the casual posting trend is key. Our findings helped in gaining information on the role that app-based cues can have in both fostering and signaling authenticity as well. This knowledge holds relevance for both platform developers and behavioral economists, as it can facilitate the construction of better nudging techniques to reduce self-presentational strategies on SNSs. In this regard, finding a way to overcome the growing necessity for people to avoid shoring a boring life can be considered of interest.

Overall, this study fills some relevant gaps in the literature, while also providing valuable insights from a managerial standpoint.

Limitations and Future Research

Notwithstanding the role of our research in bridging gaps within the current literature some limitations need to be addressed. Our main source of bias comes from the methodology adopted. Although qualitative research is indeed best suited for new research avenues, it surely comes with a specific set of drawbacks. Qualitative studies depend on the subjective interpretation of the researcher; thus, the analysis could have been impacted by the researcher's biases and own convictions. Additionally, as our findings relied on self-reported data of participants, social desirability bias could have also played a role, impacting the reliability of this study.

Lastly, the small sample size (18 informants) and the scarce representativeness of non-student individuals within the user sample, also represent a potential problem. Future research could employ other methods to confirm our qualitative data. More specifically, quantitative research approaches, such as experimental designs or large-scale surveys, could be helpful to convey a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, and of the potential causal links between the different variables at hand. Comparative analysis could also be helpful to clarify the developed understanding on how the conceptualization and construction of authenticity varies across different platforms. Overall, using various quantitative approaches could be useful to take the limitations of qualitative research into account.

Apart from confirming our results, future studies could also expand what has been found in the current thesis project. For example, understanding the interplay between low-effort cues, engagement metrics (such as likes/shares/reactions, etc.), and/or the individual's TOV could represent an intriguing avenue to study. Conveying an understanding of how low effort is codified in video content, also appears interesting. This is especially relevant considering the growth of video SNSs platform such as TikTok, in which seemingly authentic content has taken the lead. Lastly, providing insight into the potential consequences of the casual posting trend, specifically focusing on the effect on the mental health of Gen Zers, is also something researchers should consider uncovering. Ethical considerations on the use of nudges and the promotion of authenticity on social media are also a relevant area for future research. By drawing on the current thesis project's findings, future research can enrich our conceptualization and understanding and shed light on specific nuances of the conceptualization of authenticity online by Gen Z users.

APPENDIX

A) Demographic Characteristic of key professional figures informant group

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	JOB TITLE	COUNTRY OF CURRENT RESIDENCE	NATIONALITY
Harper	23	Female	Tech reporter	USA	American
Marie	28	Female	Senior Director of Social Media	USA	American
Lucille	30	Female	PR & Digital Strategy Director	England	British
Sara	34	Female	Social Media Specialist	Italy	Italian
Luca	29	Male	Tech reporter	Italy	Italian

B) Demographic Characteristic of Gen Z platforms' users informant group

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	CURRENT OCCUPATION	COUNTRY OF CURRENT RESIDENCE	NATIONALITY
Bianca	22	Female	Student	Portugal	Romanian
Ava	25	Female	Marketing Coordinator	Canada	Canadian
Arjun	26	Male	Working Student	Canada	Indian
Alessia	24	Female	Communications Assistant	Italy	Italian
Anastasia	25	Female	Travel Influencer and Marketing Specialist	Bulgaria	Bulgarian
Diana	21	Female	Student	Netherlands	Romanian
Giulia	22	Female	Student	Portugal	Italian
Martina	22	Female	Student	Italy	Italian
Matteo	23	Male	Student	Netherlands	Italian
Emma	22	Female	Student	Italy	Italian
Ingrid	25	Female	Working Student	Norway	Norwegian
Sofia	22	Female	Student	Italy	Italian
Sakura	18	Female	Student	Japan	Japanese

C) Interview guide professionals

Introduction

Do you consent to being recorded? This recording will only be used for this thesis project and only for the purposes of taking notes in order to not distract from the interview process. The recording will be deleted

after the end of the thesis project. Moreover, there are no wrong answers, and the purpose of this interview is to gather information.

Intro demographic questions:
- What is your full name?
- How old are you?
- What do you like to do in your free time? [used to set the scene and make the person being interviewed feel comfortable]
- What is your job title?

First block - Casual posting and user behavior:

You work/have worked with social media for quite some time, experiencing different changes and trends.
- As social media is being populated more and more by Gen Z, How do you think the way social media is used has evolved in the last few years?
- What do you think is more important to this generation compared to other older generations when posting online?

(Do you know what casual posting is?)
(Can you describe what you understand it to be?)
- Could you tell me a bit more about your personal opinion on the casual posting trend?
- What is your experience with casual posting?
- Why do you think this shift has taken place?
- What does this change represent?
- What do you think is the relationship between casual posting and authenticity?
- What do you think this changes says about Gen Z and its way of viewing social media

- How do you think this has influenced the content and strategies used in managing personal social media accounts? (e.g., kind of content posted by users, ways of framing the posts etc.)
- What kind of content is more popular?
- Why do you think that more authentic content is more widespread now?
- Why does casual posting work so well online?
- What role does effort play in this shift?
- Could you tell me your thoughts on the relationship between this change and Gen Z online self-presentational concerns?

Second block block - Casual posting and SMM:

- o How do you think this trend has impacted Influencers Social Media Marketing?
- How do you think this has influenced the content and strategies used in managing professional social media accounts?
- How can authenticity be credible when it comes to influencer marketing?
- How has this impacted the way brands collaborate with influencers on social media?

[Have you observed any challenges or limitations on being truly authentic on social media?]

- o Could you tell me about some challenges you have observed when it comes to influencers being authentic on social media?

Eg authenticity-brand image

Eg between authenticity and engagement

- How do you think such challenges can be addressed?

- o Can you tell me how do you think this shift has impacted (brand's) Social media Marketing?
- How do you think this has influenced the content and strategies used in managing professional social media accounts?
- How are brands approaching and working with this trend? (examples good vs bad)
- How can brand approach this trend successfully?

[Have you observed any challenges or limitations in being authentic on social media?]

- o Could you tell me about some challenges you have observed when it comes to brands being authentic on social media?

Eg authenticity-brand image

Eg between authenticity and engagement

- How do you think such challenges can be addressed?

Third Block – BeReal:

- o Could you tell me what are your thoughts on the Be-Real app?
- What are your thoughts on the app and its purpose?
  - ▪ What do you like/dislike about the app?

- o BeReal claims to be the "Anti-Instagram", What do you think about this statement?
- What are your thoughts on the relationship between BeReal and authenticity?

- How do you think this app has impacted Gen Z's self-presentational concerns?

o What is your opinion on BeReal and social media marketing?
- How can brand navigate the use of this app to their advantage?
- How can influencers navigate the use of this app to their advantage?

o Is there anything else you would like to share about your opinion on social media marketing and casual posting?

Final demographic questions:
o What is your gender?
o In which country are you currently living?
o What is your nationality?

Closing:
o Thank you for your time. Do you have any final comments or questions?

D) Interview guide users

Introduction:
Do you consent to being recorded? This recording will only be used for this thesis project and only for the purposes of taking notes in order to not distract from the interview process. The recording will be deleted after the end of the thesis project. Moreover, there are no wrong answers, and the purpose of this interview is to gather information.

Intro demographic questions:
o What is your name?
o How old are you?
o What do you like to do in your free time? [used to set the scene and make the person being interviewed feel comfortable]

First block – Social media usage and casual posting:

o Could you tell me your thoughts on the relationship between authenticity and social media?
- How do you perceive a picture to be authentic on social media?
- What cues do you consider when evaluating authenticity on social media?

- Have you observed any challenges or limitations in being authentic on social media?

o As social media is being populated more and more by our generation, how do you think the way social media is used has changed in the last few years
- What do you think is more important to your generation compared to other older generations when posting online?
- How would you describe this "new" posting style?
- Why do you think this change has taken place?
- What do you think drives this trend?
- What do you think is the relationship between this trend and authenticity?

o Do you think this has influenced the content you post on your social media accounts? (e.g., kind of content posted by users, ways of framing the posts etc.)
- Do you think this changed the way you conceive the posting process?
  - [If yes] How?
- Do you think this impacted the effort you put in your posts?
  - [If yes] How?

o Could you talk about the relationship between this shift and the way your perceive others posting activities?
- Do you think this has impacted the way you view other people's posts?
  - [If yes] How?

Photo dumps are one of the ways Gen Z shares content online

[Do you know what a photo dump is?]

[Can you describe what you understand it to be?]

[Have you ever posted a photo dump?]

o If you have ever posted a photo dump, could you explain to me your thought process on how you decide what to post?

[photo dump evaluation here]

o Could you give me your opinion on the two photo dumps I show you?

Third Block – BeReal:

[Participants were screened for using BeReal]

o Can you tell be about your experience with the BeReal app?

- Why did you download the app in the first place?
- What are your thoughts on the app and its purpose?
  - What do you like/dislike about the app?
- Why do you think BeReal became so popular?

- Could you tell me more about your thought process when posting on BeReal?
- How does posting on BeReal make you feel?
- How do you conceive authenticity on BeReal?
- Sometimes users retake BeReals,

  [do you notice it]

  If you notice it, could you tell me what do you think of people that re-take BeReals?
- [Have you ever re-taken a BeReal?]

  a. If you have ever re-taken a Bereal, could you tell me about a time in which you re-took a BeReal? Why did it happen?

  b. If you do not re-take your BeReals, could you tell me why?
- Sometimes users post their BeReals late,

  [do you notice it]

  If you notice it, could you tell me what do you think of people that post BeReals late?
- [Have you ever posted your BeReal late?]

  a. If you have ever posted your BeReal late, could you tell me about a time in which you posted your BeReal late? Why did it happen?

  b. If you do not post late, could you tell me why?
- Sometimes BeReal users do not post on a given day,

  [Have you ever not posted a BeReal?]

  If you have not posted one day, could you tell me about a time in which you did not post the daily BeReal, and why did it happen?
- [Have you ever re-posted a BeReal on another social media (Instagram/TikTok/Twitter)?]

  If you have ever re-posted a Bereal on another social media, could you tell me more about it, and why did it happen?

The BeReal app has seen a surge in popularity over the last year
- Could you tell me more about your use of the app from when you first downloaded it until now?
- Did something change?
  - [If yes]

    What changed?
  - [If yes]

What factors do you think contributed to this change in your behavior?

- o BeReal claims to be the "Anti-Instagram"? What do you think about this statement?
- • What are your thoughts on the relationship between BeReal and authenticity?
- • How do you think the way you conceive the posting process/ the effort you put in your posts changes when posting on BeReal vs other apps?
- • Could you talk about your approach to social media posting after you downloaded BeReal compared to before downloading it?

- o Is there anything else you would like to share about your opinion on the relationship between social media and authenticity?
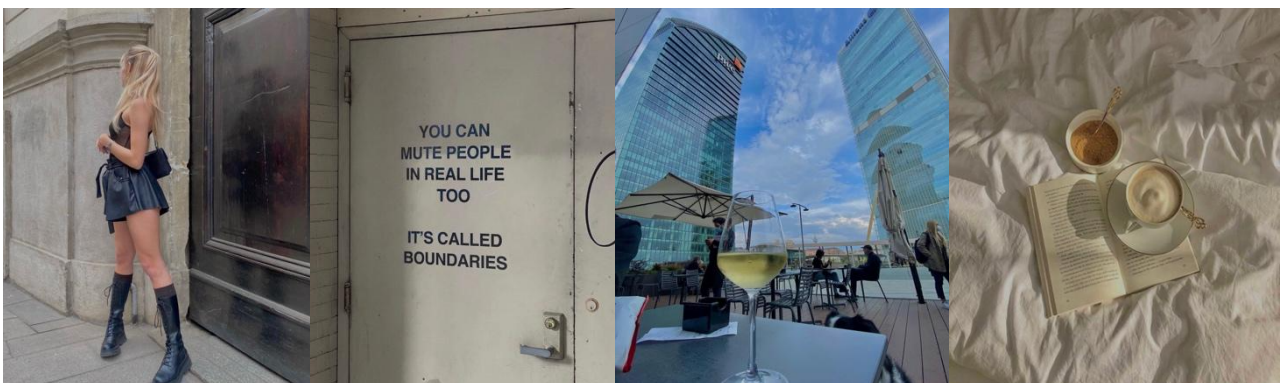
Final demographic questions:
- o What is your gender?
- o What is your nationality?
- o In which country are you currently living?
- o What is your occupation? [currently studying, working student, part time job, full time job, not working]

Closing:
- o Thank you for your time. Do you have any final comments or questions?

E) Curated carousel

F) Photo dump

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