

Casual Instagram

Proposal

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Accompanying [Video Annotated Bibliography](#)

Background

“Casual Instagram” — a trend that has spread across the Instagram and TikTok feeds of the majority of Generation Z. The trend involves posting on Instagram, typically using the Carousel feature, a feature that allows users to select up to 10 photos for one post, coined by Gen Z as a “photo dump,” and making this post as casual as possible. The ultimate goal is to look as if you are not trying too hard or you do not care about posting on Instagram (Cavender, 2021; Crossley, 2020). Coincidentally, these posts tend to be the most curated and time-consuming, because the ultimate goal of looking effortless actually takes a lot of effort (Ng, 2022). A prominent example of this type of posting can be seen through the influencer Emma Chamberlain. Emma, a 20-year-old YouTuber with over 1.5 billion views and 11.3 million subscribers on YouTube (“About emma chamberlain,” n.d.), has shifted her entire Instagram feed to embody casual posting. Examples of these posts include a blurry stack of books, zoomed in photos of her crying, broken acrylic nails, and bloody Band-Aids (emma chamberlain, 2022b, 2021b, 2021a, 2022a). Her posts are a clear representation of the casual Instagram trend, where Emma is presenting herself in an informal, sometimes unappealing way. Contrary to this, public figures like Kylie Jenner are hardly ever seen on Instagram without a full face of makeup and professional-quality photos. While she has explored the concept of photo dumps (Kylie, 2021a), they are the minority among her heavily posed and curated photographs, such as her maternity photo shoots and promo for her makeup line, Kylie Cosmetics (Kylie, 2021c, 2021b).

Posting on social media has always been a modern example of self-presentation, with the intent being to either enhance or confirm what others’ views of you are (Schlosser, 2019). However, the shift to casual Instagram in the past year has changed what it means to self-present on social media and what those expectations are.

Synthesis

Self-presentation on social media, and more holistically, impression management, has been a large part of my research because the way people post with casual Instagram is a new form of self-presentation. Schlosser (2019) brought forth conversation in the field about the two main methods of sharing information about oneself (Schlosser, 2019). These methods are called self-disclosing and self-presenting (Schlosser, 2019). Self-disclosing is a way of presenting a version of oneself that verifies their pre-existing self-impression and typically is truthful (Schlosser, 2019). Conversely, self-presenting has the motive of making others see a positive image of oneself, and

often this stretches the truth (Schlosser, 2019). These terms, with similar definitions, are also described by Zheng et al. (2020) as self-verification and self-enhancement, respectively. These concepts in terms of social media are rooted heavily in the psychological theory of impression management. Impression management, a term first used by sociologist Erving Goffman in 1959, is described by Leary (2001) as “the processes by which people control how they are perceived by others.” The theories of impression management can be applied to those who use social media because every aspect of feedback on social media (likes, follows, comments) rewards those who are best perceived by others (Hong et al., 2020).

Another main theme of this research is the impacts of self-presentation on the person posting, the poster, and those viewing their account, the viewer (Fan et al., 2019). Fan et al. (2019) found that sharing posts on social media can actually raise the poster’s enjoyment levels while on social media, while Schlosser (2019) found that an altered, positive, self-presentation on social media can lead to lower enjoyment in real-life experiences. Additionally, Fan et al. (2019) describe in their research that seeing other people’s positive posts can lower the cognitive and mental well-being of a viewer. So while Hong et al. (2020) say that these posts are more likely to be interacted with, once off social media, Fan et al. (2019) show that a viewer might feel higher levels of sadness and even cognitive decline. In regards to posts being interacted with, there are a lot of consistencies between interaction on social media and the ideologies of the “what is beautiful is good” assumption (Harris & Bardey, 2019). By this, Harris and Bardey (2019) mean that people are more likely to have a positive impression of posters whom they find attractive and whose feeds are aesthetically pleasing. This, perhaps, could contribute to the decline in emotional well-being that Fan et al. (2019) discuss because seeing and acknowledging accounts of those you find beautiful could likely lower levels of self-esteem.

The research of Schlosser (2019) and Zheng et al. (2020) contributes to the idea that people are more likely to present an altered self-image on social media than a realistic one. Schlosser (2019) concludes in their research that “those posting on social media have become performers who present an edited version of themselves that they believe will be best received by others” (p. 4). This conclusion implies that performance on social media is a long-practiced technique that has evolved for each person to best suit how they want to be seen through social media. Zheng et al. (2020) added onto this idea by also specifying that regardless of how close someone is with their followers, they are just as likely to post an altered version of themselves. Zheng et al. (2020) continue by showing that in close relationships and distant relationships, the level of performance appears to be the same, which was not expected initially in this research.

These points lead me to the conversation about the shift from performative Instagram to casual Instagram (Crossley, 2020). Crossley (2020) establishes that this trend occurred because a lot of people in Generation Z find that trying too hard when posting on social media, or over-altering their self-image, is uncool. The research of Hong et al. (2020) supports this, saying that those who are more obviously trying to present an ideal or artificial version of themselves will be less likely to receive positive engagement or engagement in general, likely due to a lack of authenticity. As can be seen from the previously discussed research, the gold standard for posting on social media has largely been the goal of altering one’s self-image; however, there has been a massive shift in the culture of social media in the past year, and this shift has resulted in making Instagram casual.

Casual Instagram might be a new balance between altering one's self-image (Schlosser, 2019; Zheng et al., 2020), while still being likeable and not appearing too falsified (Hong et al., 2020).

Limits

While much of the current literature does discuss varying kinds of self-presentation on social media, most of this research was done in 2019, with the exception of some in early 2020, times when trends like casual Instagram either did not exist or were not as prominent. This means that while their discussions of artificial self-presentation are correct, the authors have failed to include research rooted in veiling that modified self. By this I mean that casual Instagram still might be a version of performance, just with the attempt to cover up that performance, and not much has been said about the desire to appear natural on social media while still posting a falsified version of your life. This presents a gap in current research that does not discuss how there has been a shift in the formality of social media and the fact that people are leaning towards this more authentic and relaxed version of posting with the undertones of performance still present.

Problem

The overarching theme that I will be addressing in this paper is in what ways the expectations of self-presentation have changed throughout the past few years. This change on social media can be seen through the development of influencers and their culture, and then the sudden shift away from that to a more casual form of social media that only grows by the day. To explore this, I am using the theory of impression management introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman in 1959 (Leary, 2001). Impression management and its key characteristics will help explain why people might want to follow trends like casual Instagram on social media, the thought process behind posting, and whether or not casual Instagram is a form of altering one's self-image. This is because impression management defines why and how individuals might alter what they present to the world due to how others might react to them, which includes how people interact with someone's content on social media. I will be using impression management to observe posts from influencers who follow the casual Instagram trend, like Emma Chamberlain, and those who aren't, like Kylie Jenner, and exploring the impacts on these posts through like-counts, comments, and audience.

Furthermore, I will be exploring how this shift away from influencer culture is likely linked to the rise in TikTok, where just about anyone can get famous. This trend was incredibly influential across all platforms of social media and potentially made people realize that they do not need to follow the posting cycles of influencers but can instead post what they want to. All of these patterns on social media will aid me in answering my questions of how expectations of how we should self-present have shifted on social media, especially among Generation Z.

Questions

How have society's expectations of how people should self-present on social media shifted in the past year?

What are the impacts (through like-count, comment type, and audience) of celebrities posting casually versus standard posting?

And what do the interactions look like for myself and my peers posting casually versus posed (ex: like-count and comment discrepancies)?

How has this trend carried over to other social media apps, and what impacts does it have on those platforms?

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