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Finsta: Analyzing the Unseen Part of the Instagram Iceberg

Rule one: never post more than once a day. Rule two: captions should be short, not novel-length. Rule three: only post flattering pictures of yourself. Rule four: try to keep your follower to following ratio at an acceptable rate (This American Life). These are only a handful of the rules of Instagram that have emerged in recent years as the platform gained popularity, becoming one of the most widely used forms of social media for teens and young adults. Like any other social setting, however, Instagram has norms and expectations.

Due to these unspoken rules of Instagram, many view the platform as a reflection of a generation that only seems to care about how others perceive them, rather than real-life experiences. Don’t believe me? Go ask your grandmother what she thinks of this generation. Older people and those who did not grow up with this type of technology enough to understand its complexities now go on and on about how self-absorbed Millennials and Gen-Zers are. As my friend’s immensely pessimistic (and slightly senile) grandfather put it, “those kids and their selfies are going to be the demise of society as we know it”. This group of people, mainly those in Generation X and Baby Boomers, are highly critical of the young generation’s constant use of technology and what they view as an entire generation not understanding the real world. In the article “The Real Reason Why Everyone Thinks Millennials are the Worst”, author Laura Bradley, a millennial herself, argues that older people often label these younger groups as “narcissistic, entitled, lazy, arrogant… suckers who will fall for any weird fad” (Bradley). Most importantly, Bradley asserts, millennials are seen as a reflection of “tech addiction and… individualism” (Bradley).

Not only do these generations receive criticisms from Baby Boomers, they are manipulated by companies through advertising strategies that attempt to figure out how social media users engage and use this information to appeal to young adults and sell their products. In the article “7 Ways to Engage Millennials and Gen Z on Social Media in 2018”, journalist Cristian Contreras publishes marketing strategies that companies can use to reach out to these two generations on social media in order to gain a profit. Contreras argues, in the form of a list of seven strategies, that companies should use tools such as “influencer marketing”—using celebrities to promote a brand—, interactive posts, highlighting exclusivity and urgency of buying something right now, and adapting advertising content to be personalized to different users (Contreras). All of these have the end goal, as the author emphasizes, to appeal to the lucrative millennial and Gen Z demographics” (Contreras). In other words, if companies can understand the rules of social media, they can adapt their marketing tactics to younger generations in order to expand their customer base and raise their profits.

Social constructionist theory argues that knowledge and social norms, the ways in which we think and act, are products of life experience and one’s relationship to the world around them. Rather than inherently existing, social constructionist theory argues that life concepts, such as race and gender, are purely conceptual and perpetuated by society (Galbin). This theory, therefore, goes hand in hand with the use of social media: all of these platforms and the way people interact on these apps are purely social constructs; they are unnatural, which is the name of the social media game. As the generation that is the main demographic of Instagram, young adults have created these norms which are now expectations and guidelines of typical social media usage. Rules about how often one posts, how friends should comment on each other’s pictures, and caption length are the product of an online world, which is essentially a society of its own. But there is an escape route—just as socially constructed as typical Instagram—but one that is more freeing, open, and honest: the world of ‘finsta’.

Conventional views of social media suggest that platforms such as Instagram are devoid of any authentic content; rather, they are an output of a material-obsessed, self-centered, showy younger generation. Instagram, many would contend, is a place for people to pretend that their lives are better than they are in reality. Following the approach of social constructionism, however, I contend that social media is not all photoshop and popularity contests and that teens and young adults have created an escape from this trend. ‘Finstas’ (fake instagrams) avoid this stereotype by proving to be an authentic reflection of one’s life as an escape from the construct of social media which has bred inauthenticity.

Therefore to fully comprehend the scope of the norms that teens are trying to escape, it is important to understand truly how pervasive they are and why they have such an impact on teens, children, and young adults. In the radio segment “This American Life” on the episode titled “Status Update Act 1:Finding the Self in Selfie”, two young teenage girls explain that they follow the rules of Instagram because that is “just sort of the way it is. It's like unspoken rules that everybody knows and follows” (This American Life). This interview exemplifies the fact that younger generations have grown up with this type of technology; thus, it is ingrained in their minds how to “act” in certain ways on social media websites. I argue that this is similar to any sort of development in a child, where children adapt to what is expected of them by society. It just so happens that this society is online and vastly different and more advanced than any other in technological history. Further supporting this, Valeriya Safronova, a writer for the New York Times, highlights how this societal pressure on social media has pushed young adults to use ‘finsta’ as an escape from social media “norms” because “ life isn’t all rooftop parties and 45-degree-angle selfies”, in her article “On Fake Instagram, a Chance to Be Real” (Safronova). After all, “92 percent of teenagers 13 to 17” use the platform, so it is only right that they have a creative escape route built in when the pressures become too much (Safronova). Essentially, these fake Instagrams give young adults a chance to actually showcase and build their true selves, which I argue is vastly important to the dismantling of harmful social constructs that pervade Instagram.

Scroll through Instagram and one might find influencers promoting products, models wearing tiny clothes, people who came out of seemingly nowhere that have millions of followers based solely on their prettiness and picture-perfect lives. Theresa Senft, a senior lecturer at Macquarie University in Australia for communications and media, writes about such online fame and cult followings in her excerpt “Microcelebrity and the Branded Self”. These social media users and their fame, which Senft labels “microcelebrity”, pretty much dominate the outward face of Instagram (Senft). There are brands to promote, images to keep up, money to be made, likes to be racked up; thus, the “attention economy” perpetuates (Senft). Many people look at this and therefore label the platform as potentially dangerous and damaging towards mental health. The journal article, “The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families”, by pediatricians Gwenn O’Keeffe and Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, detail how parents can be advised in order to regulate the social media use of their children and teens in order to place “emphasis… on healthy behaviors”, since these platforms come with immense risk (O’Keeffe, Pearson). These risks include cyberbullying or the posting and viewing of inappropriate content by younger children who do not have their social media use monitored (O’Keeffe, Pearson). Furthermore, using Instagram on a daily basis has been shown to result in “high levels of anxiety” and “increases in depression” for teens and young adults—although this might just come with the territory of being young and stressed—as seen in a survey conducted by the United Kingdom’s Royal Society for Public Health (MacMillan). Not only have these norms created a platform that has been deemed “the worst social media for mental health”, they also lead to the characterization of today’s teens and young adults as materialistic and fake (MacMillan). Although I concede that the immense amount of inauthenticity has the potential to negatively impact self-esteem and mental health, these negative effects are largely due to the fact that social media, namely Instagram, is uncharted territory.

Instagram gained popularity in the late 2010s and usage has skyrocketed ever since. With Facebook paving the way to a socially constructed internet community, Instagram soon followed, with millions of users, mostly teens and young adults, posting and liking pictures on a daily basis. The interactions on these sites are purely virtual, but they leave a lasting impact on users; so, even if a “like” is not truly a natural phenomenon that exists in reality, it brings about very real feelings in people who use Instagram. Thus, the aforementioned negative mental health impacts as well as the dangers of Instagram are very real. However, it would be largely incorrect to characterize an entire generation as frivolous, material-obsessed, like-seekers simply because of what Instagram appears to be on the surface. To help understand truly what I mean, any teen using the app could recognize that filtered, photoshopped model pictures are really only the tip of the Instagram iceberg.

In the article “A Modern Diary: ‘Finsta’ Accounts Serve as an Outlet for Self-Expression”, Alexandra Floersch, a content writer that specializes in marketing, uses

interview subjects as well as an expert to contend that fake Instagram accounts or ‘finstas’ are an outlet for young adults, similar to a diary. Further, she compares, with the help of her interview subjects, ‘rinstas’ (real instagrams) to their less-filtered counterpart, ‘finstas’. Assuming the validity of the iceberg analogy, where ‘rinstas’ are the tip of the iceberg, beneath the surface are ‘finstas’, which are, ironically, more of a real reflection on a person’s day-to-day thoughts than these supposedly real instagrams. For example, one such ‘finsta’ account of a friend who I will keep anonymous (after all, that is the point of ‘finsta’) captioned a photo on graduation on his real instagram as “Graduated!” only to post, hours later on his ‘finsta’, “Finally out of that school, see you never” along with an unflattering selfie holding up a peace sign. This unfiltered, dry wit commentary is the exact reason why ‘finsta’ has become such a great phenomenon: it is the exact type of humor you might use with a friend in private. So, while naysayers may continue to argue that social media is all flashy pictures and popularity contests, I maintain that the hidden level of Instagram, ‘finstas’, are used as an escape because they show real content and real life experiences.

The aforementioned labeling and sorting of social media users is not limited to friends and mutual friends, however. Employers now look on job applicants’ social media pages, such as Instagram, to ensure that they are hiring a professional and qualified candidate for a position. And so, the rules and expectations become even more stifling for teens and young adults. Again, “finsta” becomes an escape from these harsh expectations.



In the cartoon illustrated by Nitrozac and Snaggy titled “Signs of the Social Networking Times” three people begging for money are depicted, holding up signs that read “Unemployable due to the stupid stuff I put on my Facebook page” and “For me, it was an embarrassing Youtube video”(Nitrozac and Snaggy). Although exaggerated for humorous effect, this depicts a very real fear for a lot of young adults. Any employer can pick something in your social media history and use it as a reason not to hire you, no matter how qualified you may actually be. In fact, employability is a major reason that young adults cite as a factor in creating a ‘finsta’ in the first place. In the article, “‘You never really know who’s looking’: Imagined surveillance across social media platforms”, by Brooke Erin Duffy, an Ad Hoc journal reviewer in communications, and Ngai Keung Chan, a published communications author, young adults express their fear in not being viewed as a serious candidate for jobs as a reason to keep their social media pages picture perfect (Duffy, Chan). Rather, they utilize ‘finsta’ “as a social space where they could attempt to evade the concerns about surveillance and possible disciplinary outcomes” (Duffy,Chan, 9).

While employers might think that public social media profiles are genuine reflections of someone’s life, I maintain, for many reasons, that this is not the case. In the article “The Risks of Taking Facebook at Face Value: Why the Psychology of Social Networking Should Influence the Evidentiary Relevance of Facebook Photographs”, Kathryn Brown utilizes a legal perspective and the view of social media profiles in courtrooms to argue that social media posts should be carefully analyzed in order to gain relevant insight to an individual’s inner thoughts and life experiences. Most people, on the surface level of social media, do not post their real emotions and experiences, which, as explained earlier, is for a reason: to escape the social constructs devised by social media users. However, social media profiles have been used in courtrooms to paint a picture of a person that likely is not an accurate depiction, similar to how employers might pick and choose different aspects of a profile to analyze.

In an already competitive job market, employers looking through a person’s social media page can be a frightening and anxiety-inducing development for some young adults. Therefore, the rules of social media which many adults see as ridiculous, come to serve an actual purpose. Just because they serve a functional purpose, however, does not mean that these constructions are not diminishing of the benefits of social media, which is again where ‘finsta’ comes into play.

Inauthenticity is important on the surface level if it means protecting your job opportunities, although naysayers might disagree. Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, argued that having different identities on the internet was inauthentic and essentially a moral wrongdoing (Hogan). However, even in real life, social norms prevent us from showing our completely authentic selves and personalities to employers. After all, who would go into a job interview and start telling their potential employer about how hard their day was, what they did that weekend, and annoying family drama? Venting to a potential employer would be a sure way to not get that job. Furthermore, in the journal article “The Effect of Social Media on Identity Construction”, by Uğur Gündüz, an associate professor in Communications at Istanbul University, the author argues that aspects of real life communities help to shape how people interact via social media and emphasizes the importance of understanding why people play certain roles on the internet and how that environment helps construct identity. We already have different social circles in life, so is there truly any harm in doing that on the internet? I contend that there are positive aspects of creating these different pages and allowing access to different people in one’s life because we already do this in our day-to-day, young adults are just moving these social norms over to a social media platform. Gündüz argues that social networking communities highlight the human need for “feeling the self as a part of a greater body… belonging to a… community with… bonds of solidarity” (Gündüz, 5).

Further, anonymity to outsiders, the large appeal of ‘finsta’, is different than other social media sites that claim complete openness or anonymity. While many criticize the anonymous part of the web, such as websites like 4chan, an anonymous blog-style website and Reddit, ‘finsta’ largely walks away from this criticism unscathed. Unlike its completely anonymous counterparts, people who follow ‘finsta’ accounts know who they are following and details about their lives. Unlike its public profile counterparts, on the other hand, ‘finsta’ maintains the privacy and authenticity of anonymous sites. In the excerpt titled “Pseudonyms and the Rise of the Real-Name Web”, Dr. Bernie Hogan, a Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, asserts that there is immense value in anonymous social media networks. Hogan also dismisses the argument of Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, that social media profiles should be used under one’s full name, with their lives being open with whomever they allow to see their profiles. Hogan ends with the argument that neither extreme (Zuckerberg’s ideal openness of Facebook or 4chan’s complete anonymity) is productive and have dangerous implications (Hogan). Therefore, I contend that ‘finsta’ is an ideal balance between these two extremes because the entire notion of ‘finstas’ was created to fill this gap in the socially constructed world that lacks unharmful authentic content.

Other naysayers, on the other hand, may even argue that there is no need for ‘finsta’ in the first place. However, given anecdotal evidence by teens themselves, aforementioned studies, such as the one referenced by the United Kingdom’s Royal Society, that show how Instagram negatively impacts mental health, and the algorithms of the platform that reward users with likes and comments, I cannot concede that there is truth to this. However, people who argue that having two identities on social media is not acceptable, such as Mark Zuckerberg, fail to understand the pressures that come along with growing up in the age of social media.

Not only do ‘finstas’ provide an escape from the social norms of Instagram, they provide users with a chance to unlock their true selves, which has immense value for young adults and people in general. In fact, Frances McIntosh, a member of Forbes’ Coaches Council, contends in her article “This is What Happens When You Unlock Your Authentic Self” that embracing one’s true self despite being inclined to shift “our persona towards being who we think others want us to be”, is the key to success.So even if many contend that Instagram is the worst social media for mental health and it therefore needs to be closely monitored, it seems that a potential fix to these troubles is to simply scroll a little deeper into the depths of Instagram and look through someone’s ‘finsta’ to see that despite concerns of inappropriate content, ‘finstas’ are mainly filled with pictures without makeup” and captions “figuring out life, and sharing their ups and downs”—which is a very healthy way of coping with the demands of societal pressures, according to Ramona Pringle, a technology reporter, in her article, “Using a ‘Fake’ Social Media Account to Reveal Your Authentic Self” (Pringle). Even if, by the terms of social constructionist theory, there is really no such thing as an “authentic self”, as one creates identity by navigating through society, it is undoubtedly true that rigid expectations do not positively contribute to the wellbeing of an individual. Furthermore, if not truly “authentic”, perhaps the act of escaping these rigid bounds of social media rules and expectations is at least freeing in the way that believers in the authentic self contend is what happens when you discover who you truly are.

While the negative aspects of social media are generally used to characterize an entire generation of internet users, teens have used creativity to separate different spheres of their lives through the use of finstas; only letting certain people have access to their deeper thoughts and personalities and their authentic selves, similar to how people typically interact in the real world already. Preserving the mental health amongst teens, a vulnerable group filled with angst and stress, is vitally important, but maybe teens have found their own solution. Although the socially constructed universe of social media platforms has caused much distress amongst young adults, it seems as though teens have constructed an equally important antidote to the social media popularity contest craze: the finsta.

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