

the curation of everyday life on Instagram

a research proposal

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research proposal

The curation of everyday life on Instagram

An entire society captivated by the Internet; the use of social media has seeped into our daily activities. Grabbing a coffee is not complete without taking the time to snap a photo for Instagram, and an evening out with friends can't pass by without the visual proof of you having fun. In this era of digital self-branding, it is unthinkable to go outside and conduct daily tasks without having a camera to archive your activities. In a society that seeks self-worth in the crooks of the Internet, is it still possible to detach oneself from the curation of our online identity in our daily life?

This research proposal aims to explore to what extent the curation of our life online influences our daily life offline. Using Erving Goffman's theory on 'The Representation of Self in Everyday Life' as a means of comparison, I will look at the process of the curation of everyday life in the 20th century, before the existence of social media sites.

Later on I will apply this theory to our present social media savvy society. At this stage I will also include the findings from my survey on the Instagram behavior of Millennials. Furthermore I will look at this phenomenon's implications for the future by applying two case studies. The first case study concerns Instagram Famous Es-sena O'Neill, whom after she gained a celebrity status through social media, closed down all her accounts and stated everything she posted was fake. The second case study is the one of Amalia Ulman, a visual artist who tricked her followers into believing she adopted a new life as an 'Instagram star'.

Specifically focusing on Instagram, a social media platform characterized by both utter perfection and the showcasing of our everyday life, I will discuss the paradoxical nature of this platform and the possible consequences that come along when using Instagram as a way of sharing daily activities.

Knowledge on the development of this movement in our social media driven society and its possible consequences for our daily lives can lead to insights in a variety of fields, such as psychology, technology and marketing; to engage with or react upon its evolution and to seize its opportunities.

Pre-Instagram – Humans as social con artists

Even though the criteria of a desirable image and the ways to convey this image have changed over time, the idea of consciously adapting the self to social situations is not necessarily a new given. In 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' (1959), Goffman defines the root of social behaviour as a collective endeavour to avoid shame, loss of face and embarrassment. His focus is on the idea that we stage a performance, consciously putting on a mask in social circumstances as to achieve certain purposes. Here Goffman divides our lives into a front stage and a back stage; the backstage representing "authenticity" and the front stage "manipulation". This shows that in as early as the 20th century, our everyday life performance took part in shaping our identity and dividing our behaviour into private and public. Goffman calls this performance similar to that of a con artist, manipulating and controlling representation as a means to leave a favourable impression and shape others' ideas and views. This constant monetizing is often paired with a certain level of alienation from the self, and this as Goffman puts it "makes every man his own jailer". It seems however that this performance is one conducted by everyone and by all means necessary. In his explanation of the dramaturgical perspective: all the world as a stage, the underlying motivation behind this restrictive sacrifice is, how I understand it, a consequence of our obsession with likability; the mechanism to guard us from the terrifying hole of unpopularity and the possible shame and embarrassment that might come along with it. Within our current society, performing a controlled and believable self-image is maximized through the use of social media, and as SNS's importance rose, the online world adopted the role of Goffman's front stage.

Present - Normalizing insincerity

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective has made its appearance online, leading towards a curation of all daily activities in a realm of filters, Photoshop and carefully coordinated compositions. After the rapid integration of Facebook into everyday life, Instagram was introduced as the social media site characterized with perfection and aspiration. What this platform made instantly clear is that likability can be directly measured through the amount of likes and followers. A social currency that can be

gained only by adopting the implicit rules and manners of the social media platform, the main one being stylization of all images.

The beginner years of Instagram knew the popularization of its exclusive filters. Due to its stylistic and attractive character, many saw the opportunity to use Instagram as a platform to showcase their talent; a visual portfolio accessible to all and perfectly in line with the platform's popular aesthetic. This phenomenon escalated in the possibility to claim that Instagram IS a talent, a way of branding of the self. The important shift might have led us to the use of Instagram as a showcasing of everyday life, in accordance with its aesthetic, rules and now also, as close as possible to whatever the "Instagram Famous" are doing at the moment. Whereas sharing our personal life on Facebook connected us to our friends, Instagram feeds into our obsession with fame and recognition. As Livingstone (2008, p.9) cited Ziehe in her theory on 'Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation': "lifestyles are characterized by, first, self-attention, a subjective disposition which raises the question... of a successful life as an everyday expectation, second, stylisation, in which objects, situations and actions are placed into a coherent sign arrangement and "presented", and third, reflexivity, whereby life styles are an expression of an orientation pressure which has turned inwards." Instagram saw an opening in the market and jumped on it; giving everyone the opportunity to become a celebrity just by following an algorithm, completely disrupting any remains of the idea that a celebrity should have a distinctive talent. The platform created a desire and maybe so a certain level of pressure to become recognized, otherwise what is the point of having an Instagram account if you do not live up to its expectations? "Although most individuals do not attempt to become a celebrity, many of them often end up organizing life according to the underlying codes of the celebrities' culture, seeking recognition through a repackaging of the self as unique, talented, and situated within a personal screenplay." (Hedges as cited by Wittkower 2009) This "repackaging" is often perceived as fake, however simultaneously adopted by the same people pointing out its insincerity. To support this statement, I questioned a group of twenty millennials about their opinion and behavior on Instagram. All of these people stated Instagram is a hundred percent fake, yet when I asked them to rate the insincerity of their own Instagram profiles, their ratings were noticeably low. The vast majority also admitted to editing their Instagram photos, showing that their perception of "fake" changes from "forging" to "enhancing" when talking about their own profiles, and that the line between these two is very fine

in the context of Instagram profiles, as its use automatically implicates stylization. This is evident in another result of the survey, where I showed the participants three photos (see A. in appendix) accompanied with the question: "which one do you like the most and why?" Out of twenty people, fifty-five percent preferred the third photo, displaying a woman poses in a nonchalant manner with her cat. When asked why, the ones who stated their reason said this photo had the most spontaneous and authentic feel to it. What the contestants did not know is that the woman on this photo is a model, deliberately posing in a certain way and tweaking the setting, props and lighting to make her photo appear spontaneous and off guard. The last important finding of my survey brings us back to Goffman. Here I asked the participants why they post on Instagram. I gave them a few options, including 'other' where they could formulate a specific response. Where most of them answered they do so to "showcase their life", two of them responded they use Instagram as a sort of online diary. What I conclude out of this survey is that overall Instagram is viewed as staged, whilst at the same time it is also seen as a way to showcase everyday life. The correlation with Goffman's 'Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' theory is apparent and uncovers some of the dangers and risks many have noted when discussing Goffman's theory in the context of social media. Author Andy Orman imagined Goffman's theory in our present society, suggesting that "our conscious presentations of the self are meant to be scaffolding, and can be taken down once it has performed its purpose." Here we have the knowledge that we can gradually relax the front if we have succeeded in our goal. "But on the Internet, our front is being presented to the entire world for all time, and therefore can never be relaxed. We also have to worry, even more than real-life performers, over the essential question of whether we can sustain our performance." Where I explained that at the beginning of the emergence of social media, our online surroundings took on the role of the front stage; it might now be presumed that the back and the front stage are no longer distinguished from each other and are gradually merging into one. When analysing Goffman's theory, Jurgenson and Rey (2012, p. 65-66) argued that within the context of social media we "overlook that the front stage and back stage, the visible and invisible, are dialectically linked", and that "our lives have become all front stage." This shift leads to significant consequences for our offline selves.

As I indicated before, Instagram suggests an enhanced and expurgated self-presentation, where users adopt an identity under an aspirational self-performance. This

process of self–reinvention may often enough lead to an internalization of self–consciously adopted values, and a transition from aspirational attributes into more permanent and unselfconsciously held elements of character. Sometimes we just fake it, but sometimes we fake it until we make it. (Wittkower 2014)

Secondly, when the boundaries between the public and the private presentation of self get increasingly blurry (Horst and Hjorth as cited by Wittkower 2014) it becomes harder to recognize this internalisation. We are not always aware of when we are performing a truthful exposure of an existing self or facet of ourselves, and when we are performing an aspirational or even fairly fictionalized self. Indeed, we may wish to question whether there is any clear self to be found outside of various self–performances, to which we could even possibly be “truthful”. (Wittkower 2014)

Future – The deconstruction of daily life

One of the outcomes of my research that alarmed me the most is how willing we are to accept the crafted images put out on social media as a way to communicate a perfected self. An example to illustrate this idea is the social experiment of Amalia Ulman. The visual artist is known for bringing to surface controversial topics surrounding social behavior and used a bus accident she was in as an opportunity to change her Instagram identity drastically. The operations she had to go through as a consequence of the accident were presented as a ‘boob job’ (see Fig. 1) and ‘nose correction’ on Instagram. She started taking photos sipping drinks at highly exclusive parties, and practicing yoga (see Fig. 2) in expensive resorts (see Fig 3). When her following sensed a change, she explained to them that the bus accident sparked a lifestyle change within her. Picture by picture she carefully generated an identity that embodied a wealthy, mysterious and glamorous Instagram star. “Everything was scripted,” Ulman tells The Telegraph (2016). “I spent a month researching the whole thing. There was a beginning, a climax and an end. I dyed my hair. I changed my wardrobe. I was acting: it wasn’t me.” When after months, she revealed everything was part of her artwork ‘Excellences & Perfections’; her followers were offended and felt used by her performance. In an interview with Amalia Ulman, Aria Dean (2015) explains this reaction as following: “Every day, in every gesture, people consciously or subconsciously construct an online identity whose authenticity goes mostly unin-

terrogated until it is visibly disrupted. Since the Internet's permeation of everyday life, popular opinion has moved away from theorizing it as a neutral space where any one can be anyone. Instead, we now tend to view it as a basic extension of our offline social world". Ulman (as cited by Aria Dean 2015) suggests that "maybe we can abandon our lives and let go in the immersive fictional constructions of our timelines."

I have already touched upon the toll the merge of Goffman's front and back stage has on our psyche, our society as a whole, and more importantly our daily activities. However to convert these theoretical thoughts into more tangible conclusions, we can take a look at the case study of former Instagram celebrity Essena O'Neill (2015). What happened to her is a clear example of how our constructed online identity has a vast impact on our daily activities as well as our own wellbeing. O'Neill came under fire when a video of her revealing everything she posted on Instagram was staged and that the industry pressured her into lying, circulated around the Internet. After having a very successful Instagram account for two years, she used her platform to 'reveal the truth' about her Instagram posts, captioning her old photos with statements like "There is nothing zen about... proving your zen on Instagram." (see Fig. 4) And "This is what I like to call a perfectly contrived candid shot. Nothing is candid about this." (see Fig. 5) After her stunt wheeled in double the amount of followers, she made a video exposing her sponsored content and everything that went into forging a 'spontaneous' activity on Instagram. She emphasized the amount of importance she put on the amount of likes and followers she got by posting a perfect version of her life and the internal struggle she suffered with of promoting a glamorous life as reality. After the video everyone she knew, as well as the press and people on social media started turning on her. She explains in an interview with Time.com (2016) "I was just shocked and honestly just confused... the way it all turned so negative just numbed me...As if I was making it all up? For what? Money? Fame? I had that before so that makes sense? That I was a genius manipulator and knew this would make world news? I was a hypocrite because I used social media to explain my story to the half a million people that once idolised me? That I was a fraud, a hoax, a brilliant actor just because I was smiling in the pictures and said those smiles weren't real? Seeing people I knew making videos as if my personal life, tears and obvious vulnerability... as if it was some kind of joke to them? I couldn't believe people couldn't

just call me first, but wanted to make such a public spectrum.” This correlates with what happened after Amalia Ulman revealed her “performance” was fake, however hers was deliberate, whilst Essena O’Neill’s performance was one she internalized and made part of her everyday life. It created a big reality gap as a consequence of an expectation she felt she had to live up to. “When consciously playing a role”, Goffman says “and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves — the role we are striving to live up to — this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be.” (Goffman as cited by Wittkower 2014) What made Essena’s performance impossible to sustain is the fact that she reduced her self-worth to an amount of followers and likes, eventually collapsing under the feeling of not being good enough if not always performing. Fellow blogger and Instagram famous Daryl Lindsey (2015) reacted upon O’Neill’s situation, saying “she’s been taught her whole life that a little “heart” button defines her self worth. We now live in a world of instant sharing, and that world has created a culture in which all of our self-love comes from the affirmations of others instead of from somewhere within ourselves.” Sherry Turkle (as cited by The World Heritage Encyclopedia n.d.) mentions that “since no action or comment can be kept private anymore, people have developed a sense of self-control, similar to the prisoners in Panopticon, who don’t know whether they are being watched or not, so they develop a habit of always being on their best behaviour. As people find it increasingly difficult to keep anything off the indestructible book that is Internet, they discipline themselves to avoid doing something they will regret.” The connection to the Panopticon explains one of the dangers that by internalising our performance, and measuring our self-worth to the likes of others, we lose ourselves in a search for conformation and live our lives accordingly, like the actor on a stage, waiting for the crowd to cheer him on.

In this research proposal, I questioned whether it could be that when adopting the very definition of curating; to “select, organize, and present” in our online existence, we in fact lose the act of being present and repeat a Goffmanian performance that alienates what our daily activities entail in a non-virtual world.

I first explored the idea of Goffman’s life as a stage, where the backstage embodied authenticity and the front stage manipulation. I considered the possibility that when social media became part of our lives, the online world adopted the role of Goffman’s front stage. I later on came to the conclusion that with the rise of Instagram as a plat-

form of self-branding and showcasing of everyday life, our front stage and backstage might now be dialectically linked and that both our online and offline lives are front stage.

Concrete, I looked into the online behavior of Millennials on Instagram concluding that first of all the line between 'faking' and 'enhancing' is extremely fine. Whereas we consider others' Instagram profile as fake, we see our own profiles as merely enhanced and second, that overall Instagram is viewed as staged, whilst at the same time it is also seen as a way to showcase everyday life.

I then explored the consequences this phenomenon can have on our psyche, our society as a whole, and more importantly our daily activities. It is possible that this process of self-reinvention online may lead to an internalization of self-consciously adopted values, and a transition from aspirational attributes into more permanent and unselfconsciously held elements of character. When the front stage (public) and the back stage (private) merge it becomes harder to recognize this internalization within ourselves, which leads to an alienation of the self outside this performance.

Viewing our online selves as a basic extension of our offline world and thus the Internet's permeation of everyday life caused us to be extremely willing to accept 'perfect-ed' images on social media. The danger that comes with this is that when this perfected image gets disrupted, it creates disbelief and disappointment.

Lastly, one of the most important consequences of this phenomenon is that when sustaining this performance, we may have the tendency to reduce our self-worth to likes and followers, losing ourselves in a search for conformation and live our lives accordingly.

To come to further conclusions and new insights on this topic, I would start with a more extensive analysis of Instagram waves and trends from the beginning of its existence to now. From this research I could deduct more angles and correlations between our online presentation and offline behaviour. Secondly, it would be helpful to conduct larger scale questionnaires as well as in-depth interviews with Instagram Famous and/or early adopters of Instagram in their daily lives in order to capture possible behavioural paradoxes and insights into a connection between the use of social media as a way to showcase everyday life, and everyday life itself. To explore different directions of this phenomenon, it could be interesting to look further into the theory of the Panopticon and connect this to our online and offline performance. Another branch that could be further looked into is the connection of this concept with

celebrity theory. Lastly, a theory that I haven't yet explored but could be very interesting when combined with the curation of everyday life in our image driven society is Debord's theory 'The Society of the Spectacle'. This would uncover unexplored insights and seek possible explanation of the development of this movement in commodity fetishism, and thus create a more complete analysis of the phenomenon I am presenting.

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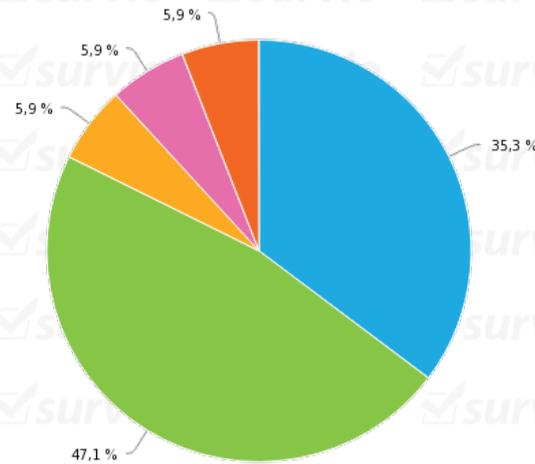
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Videos

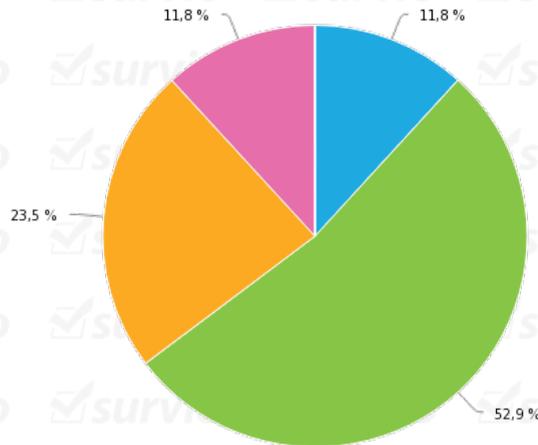
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How much time do you spend on taking an Instagram photo?



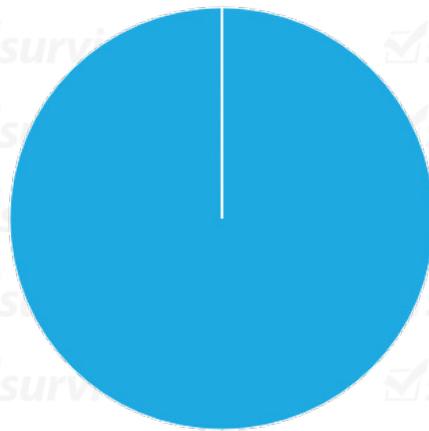
● 0-5 min ● +/- 10 min ● 15-20 min ● 30 min ● 35+ min

What about editing?



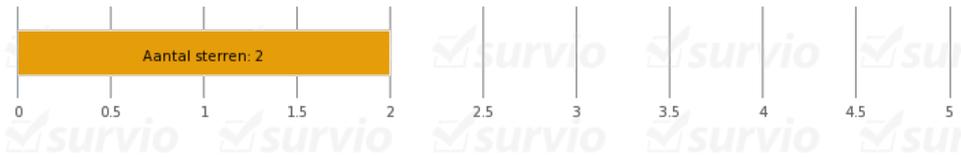
● I don't edit my Instagram photos ● +/- 5 min ● +/- 10 min ● +/- 20 min ● 30+ min

Do you think Instagram is fake?



● yes ● no

how much does your your representation on Instagram differ from your life offline? (1 - nothing, 5 - a lot)



Why do you post pictures on Instagram? (pick as many as you like)



Other: ●

for creative professions it's also a little like a portfolio

Professional Chanel to showcase my personal inspiration....

To share what i'm doing and where i'm going with friends.

To keep some sort of online diary

To get likes

[Voeg voetnoten toe voor dit resultaat](#)

C.



essenaoneill

FOLLOW

24.1k likes

80w

essenaoneill There is nothing zen about trying to look zen, taking a photo of you trying to be zen and proving your zen on Instagram.

view all 1,288 comments

sabrinadegroot True that @sharreckless
 davidpellett @ahhhnaaww have you seen emmy's pur barr insta photo? Very timely

davidpellett @ahhhnaaww gchat today??

magdah @mob93

georgie_eastwood @claaire.xiao love this girls account- read the captions!

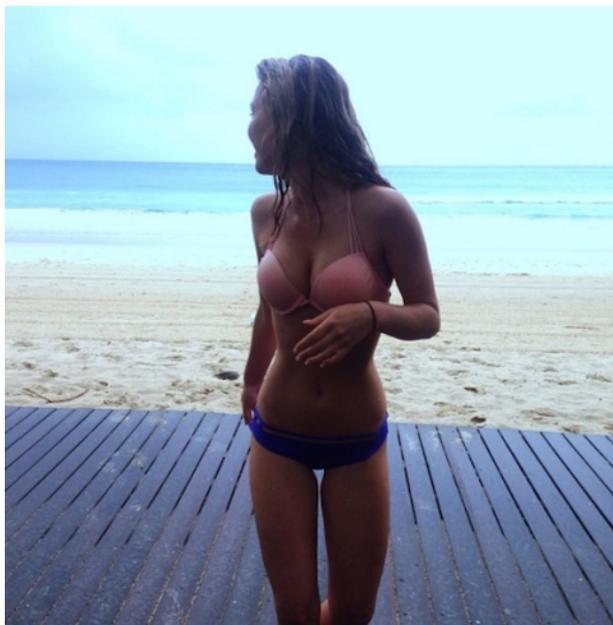
biancastagliano @alristich

bjorknesbrian @marizeitune da uma olhada nas legendas dessa menina. Ela fala tudo que eu sempre falo!

katystory @sidosfomex lalala! this

♡ Add a comment...

...



essenaoneill

FOLLOW

20.3k likes

90w

essenaoneill Edit real caption: This is what I like to call a perfectly contrived candid shot. Nothing is candid about this. While yes going for a morning jog and ocean swim before school was fun, I felt the strong desire to pose with my thighs just apart #thighgap boobs pushed up #vsdoublepaddingtop and face away because obviously my body is my most likeable asset. Like this photo for my efforts to convince you that I'm really really hot #celebrityconstruct

view all 711 comments

spisha @falala_malik @weikidee

thelobstermobster @kat_bouz read her captions. This girl is a boss.

katers_gonnakate @che_sweets this girls Instagram is the coolest thing. She took down a lot of photos and edited the captions of the ones she kept

♡ Add a comment...

...