

Un-Filtered: Assessing Authenticity in the Online Social Media Landscape

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1 Introduction

Social media has taken the world by storm, with millions of users flocking to popular platforms like Instagram and Snapchat to share their daily lives and connect with others. However, concerns about authenticity on these platforms have been raised repeatedly. Authenticity is a crucial aspect of social media, and it can be defined as presenting oneself on these platforms the same way they present themselves in their daily life. Haimson et al.[5] defines authenticity as presenting a “true” and consistent self across online and offline contexts, which necessitates sharing both positive and negative content on social media.

Despite the widespread usage of social media, there is a growing skepticism about the authenticity of content on these platforms. While many people strive to present their true selves online, others resort to editing pictures and using filters to enhance their appearance, which can be seen as inauthentic. The authenticity of social media platforms has been questioned repeatedly, and this has led to the development of new applications like BeReal.

In this report, we will examine three relevant platforms: **Instagram, Snapchat, and BeReal**. These platforms share some collective features, but they also maintain distinct identities. Understanding the perspective of authenticity desired by a diverse set of populations is crucial, and this report aims to explore the different approaches taken by these platforms to promote authenticity.

2 Motivation

From previous studies like “Insta v/s Finsta”[1], we have found that expectation for authentic performance by peers might itself increase pressure on users. Also, Goffman’s theory [2] of presentation of self being dependent on recognition of the spectators is convoluted in the world of social media. Online authenticity is considered highly subjective and is often seen as a social construct [3]. Users online perceive authenticity by assessing various cues, which include the alignment of the message with the user’s online persona, the consistency of the user’s behavior, and the transparency of the person’s actions and intentions. The proposed work aims to conduct a comprehensive study on the roles which social media platforms and their features play in allowing users to be their authentic selves. The study focuses on photo and video-based memories sharing sites like BeReal, Snapchat, and Instagram.

BeReal[4] is an app that has been amassing massive popularity on the internet. The app enables users to capture a photo using their front and rear camera to depict their authentic experience without relying on filters, likes, and other social pressures apparent in Instagram and Snapchat. With no prior literature focusing on the impact of the application, the proposed work intends to study how users perceive authenticity on BeReal compared to its competitors like Instagram and Snapchat.

While one aspect of our study shall focus on understanding factors which drive authenticity, we also try to understand what drives engagement on a platform. We believe that combining the two factors and creating a social media platform which gamifies and attempts to normalize being authentic as the new ‘cool’, could be a fascinating way to get people to connect with the world with an more authentic version of themselves as compared to their behaviour on current platforms. The work also intends to conceptualize and propose a new platform that assimilates all the best practices of the studied social media platforms to promote the highest authenticity and amenity.

3 Limitations of Prior Work

Oliver Haimson [5] explores the concept of authenticity on the internet. The research argues that the platforms, social norms, and expectations constrain the user’s effort to present an authentic self. Despite its novel contributions, the research work suffers from sampling bias as it primarily focuses on the experiences of young people in the United States, which may not be representative of other populations or cultural contexts.

Tae Rang Choi compares users’ self-expression and privacy concerns on Instagram and Snapchat. Having been published in 2018, the paper does not capture how Instagram and Snapchat have evolved over the last half a decade. With no current literature on BeReal, we believe that conducting a new, comprehensive study on BeReal, Instagram, and Snapchat would offer a unique feature-centric perspective on authenticity.

4 Methodology

4.1 Platforms

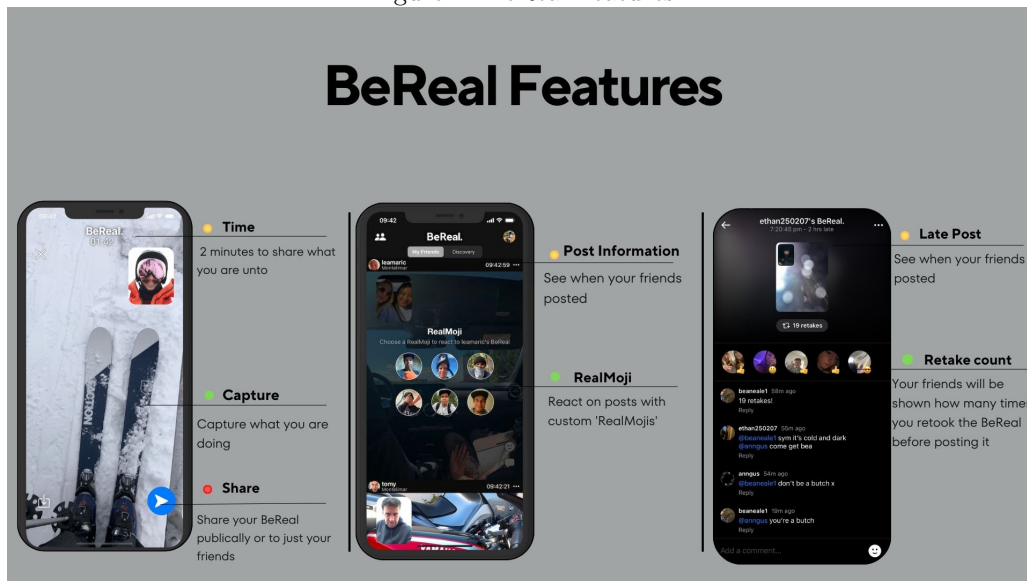
The proposed work analyzes three photo/video memory-sharing platforms: BeReal, Instagram, and Snapchat. These three platforms are picked as they are widely used and provide a platform for users to share visual media that can shape how others perceive them. These platforms have become ubiquitous in modern-day social interactions and have played a pivotal role in changing how people communicate. The platforms equip the users to present themselves in a certain way. This self-presentation can be used to build social capital, gain popularity, or create a specific persona they want others to see. We now cover some of the flagship features offered by these platforms, which could enhance the users' amenability to being authentic on the web. These feature helps to capture spontaneous moments and provides a glimpse into the user's real-life experiences. **Figure 1.** displays the features of BeReal.

4.1.1 BeReal

BeReal is a photo/video memory-sharing platform founded in 2018 by a former Facebook employee Chris Kenna. The app has gained popularity among millennials for its focus on promoting authenticity and addressing the issue of "fake" content on social media platforms.

Some groundbreaking features which promote authenticity are daily notifications at random times to capture what you are up to and your selfie within a 2 min window. The app also requires users to take the selfie in a single take, without the ability to edit or retake the photo. The failure to capture your BeReal within the time window and a single take would be indicated to the user's friends, thus encouraging users to be more honest and authentic.

Figure 1: BeReal Features



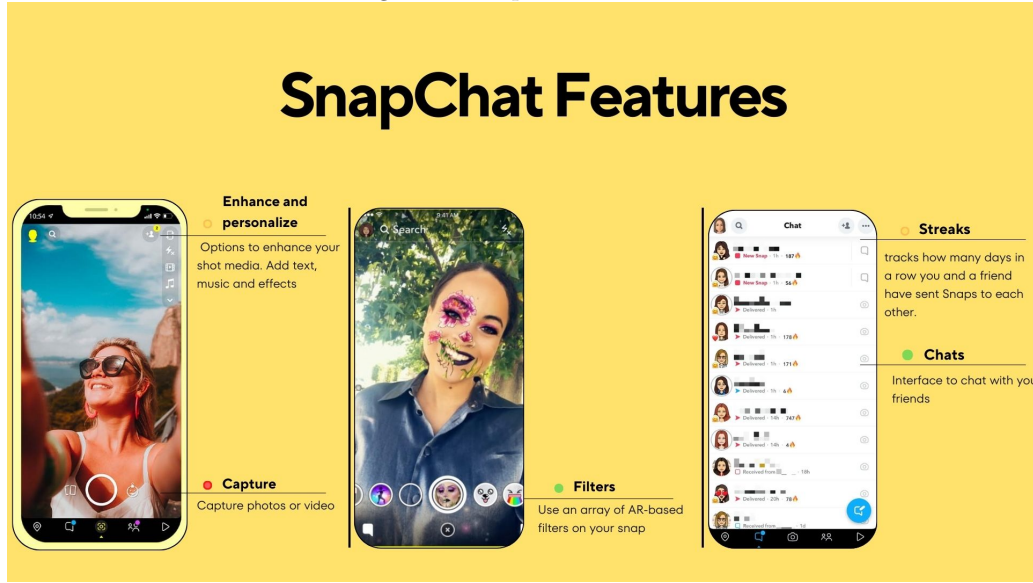
4.1.2 Snapchat

Another popular media-sharing platform that gained extreme popularity in the mid-2010s is Snapchat. Snapchat pioneered the use of filters, allowing users to add fun visual effects to their photos and videos. Snapchat also has a feature called "streaks," which tracks how many days in a row you and your friend sent Snaps to each other. This gamification feature encourages the users to engage daily with the platform and maintain consistent interactions with their friends. Snapchat's chat feature allows users to have a group and one-on-one conversations with friends. This thus makes Snapchat a very personal and intimate platform for sharing your life.

4.1.3 Instagram

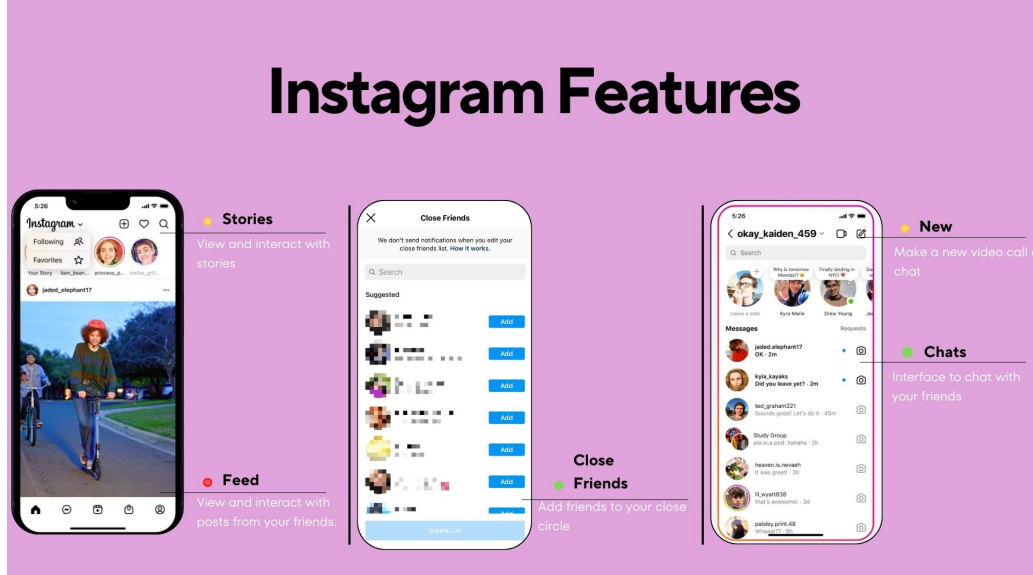
Instagram is arguably one of the world's most popular social media platforms, amassing over a billion active monthly users as of 2021. Despite its recent criticisms over the algorithms determining the content users see in their feeds, Instagram remains highly demanded among people. To brief on the main features of Instagram that deserve mention regarding authenticity, Instagram introduced the "close friends" feature, which allows

Figure 2: SnapChat Features



users to create a list of select followers who can view their more intimate and personal stories. Instagram also introduced Instagram live, which enables users to broadcast live videos to their followers and thus allows them to share their experiences in real time. Besides these features, Instagram is known for its well-curated posts and Snapchat-like chat feature for interactions with your followers.

Figure 3: Instagram Features



4.2 Research Questions

Keeping our motivation for this study in mind, we identified three topics that we mainly wanted to focus on: identity, features, and change. To expand on these three points, we start with identity. As a basis for understanding how users interact with social media and how different social media platforms influence different types of interactions, one of our goals is to see how users represent themselves online and identify what pressures there are to maintain an online persona. We also try to identify what specific features have been implemented that encourage users to be authentic. As for these features, we want to find ways we can modify or combine the features that would best allow users to feel comfortable posting authentically. With this, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1. Do users feel the burden of maintaining a specific image or persona on social media?

RQ2. What features on social media platforms influence authenticity?

RQ3. What changes to these features might increase the amenability sense of authenticity?

4.3 Interview

To answer our first two research questions, we took the approach of conducting interviews and design workshops to best answer our questions. We gathered a small pool of interviewees and participants who had used at least two of the three platforms. We interviewed nine individuals about their usage and experiences with the three platforms and conducted design workshops with three separate individuals to focus more on the features of the platforms. The majority of our interviewees and workshop participants were adults in their early to mid-twenties who had a background in computer science. More than half were based in San Diego, but we had some participants from India and Washington DC. We made sure to interview those who had used all three platforms before.

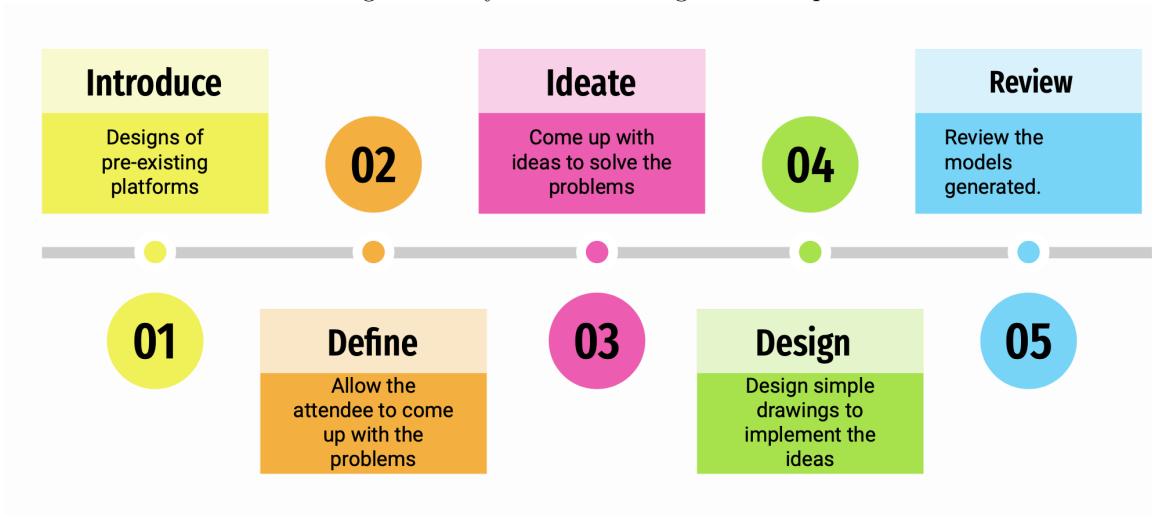
4.4 Asynchronous Design Workshop

For the next part of our study and to answer our third research question, we conduct asynchronous design thinking workshops to allow the participants to propose a new platform that includes/enhances the best existing features of these platform. An asynchronous design thinking workshop offers several potential benefits for exploring issues of authenticity. We believe that authenticity is very subjective and self-reflective and needs reduced group-thinking.

Secondly, it provides the participants more flexibility to work at their own pace and schedule, thus allowing them to be more creative and thoughtful with their responses. This would result in more nuanced responses. Additionally, it can increase participation from diverse groups, including introverts, individuals with disabilities, and those from different geographic locations, providing a broader range of perspectives and insights from different cultural contexts. Lastly, asynchronous workshops offer a cost-effective approach that eliminates the need for renting spaces and saves travel expenses.

To make the workshop more engaging and less mundane, we had a set of exercises and questionnaires as precursors to allow the participants to get some warm-up and better define their idea of authenticity.

Figure 4: Asynchronous Design Workshop



The steps for the proposed workshop are:

1. **Introduce:** The participant is first introduced to the project's intentions and is given a comprehensive view of each social media platform.
2. **Define:** Upon introduction, the participant is now encouraged to jot down all the inconveniences they face while trying to be authentic online. This would allow the participant to understand their problems better and thus provide solid solutions to battle them.
3. **Ideate:** After mentioning the problems, the participant jots down high-level ideas to potentially develop a concrete solution. These ideas will be used in the next step to propose the design.

4. **Design:** The participant draws the design for their ideas in this step. The participant is given flexibility with time and the choice of the medium to make the design.
5. **Review:** The resulting design is reviewed, and the participant is asked to defend their design choices and explain why they chose the methods they did.

5 Research Design and Methods

Our research revolves around the reasons that allow users to be authentic and so we aim to take a quantitative root by conduct feature-centric surveys and interviews to allow us to pin down the factors that Instagram, Snapchat, and BeReal use to create an environment for users to be their real selves and what elements make them addictive. And we plan to study the results in a qualitative manner by analysing the data categorized on distinct parameters to compare the three apps in consideration, thereby comprehending the requirements of the users for promoting more authenticity. After assimilating all of our findings, we propose to find a common ground on the triangulated features in these social platforms intersected with the needs of everyday users with the purpose of harboring authentication on social media. Finally, accumulating our research and findings, we will put forward a futuristic social media platform where users feel comfortable making genuine posts and “realness” is not seen as a social pressure rather enjoyed as a constituent of interaction.

6 Results

6.1 Interview

While some questions in these interviews were feature-centric, we also asked some questions to understand the kind of pressure or hindrance faced by the interviewees during their normal usage of these platforms. All of our participants more or less joined these platforms due to peer pressure from their immediate friend circles. Over time it developed into an easier method of keeping a tab on friends. There were some participants who tried these platforms because of a fascinating feature. For example, in 2016 some of our candidates shifted from facebook to instagram because the idea of a graphic heavy platform coupled with the concept of disappearing stories after 24 hours drew a lot of attention. Snapchat took it another step forward by creating an image centric chat interface adding the disappearing feature to all messages/stories, which resulted in a high usage. As for recent times, BeReal has attracted a lot of crowd and attention primarily due to features like random notification, lack of filters and it’s simplistic design focussed on authenticity. We found that out of all platforms, instagram was the least uninstalled primarily due to its engaging nature. Our candidates used it to post content after any special event/occasion. They claimed that it was a very good platform to connect with people, do some small talk, staying up to date with their friends/celebs life. Furthermore they mentioned it also aided their real-life meetups later on simply because they were updated with some context about their lives due to instagram. Snapchat on the other hand was uninstalled by a bunch (primarily due to pressure of maintaining streaks), and the crowd mentioned that their usage of the app was distributed in bursts of 2-3 mins accruing upto an hour over the day. Lastly, BeReal due to the intended design of a simple interface and goal of making it a non-engaging platform, led to some candidates losing users. However, the ones who use it do not mind it much given it only asks for their time once in the whole day.

Next, we summarize the kind of existing pressures or thought process user’s have while engaging with these platforms. We believed this would help us understand what factors drive their authenticity levels. First with Instagram, all candidates mentioned that because of the nature of the app where there is a wide audience viewing their content, it made them extra-conscious. Some candidates thought that over time it has grown into a platform where people maintain a persona of who they wish-to-be or how they wish to be perceived. instagram was used primarily to post the happy bits of life, aesthetically pleasing pictures. Users mentioned that since there existed a feedback system (story reacts, comments) between the user and their viewers, it did influence their posting habits indirectly. Some candidates mentioned that they feel the pressure of upholding the already existing persona or pattern of uploading. For Snapchat, people claimed it to be “informal” than instagram, primarily because they share content with only their close friends thus making it easier to be authentic. The fact that all content disappeared within 24 hours of posting relieved the users of any pressure to send something cool or portray themselves in a certain manner. Users claimed they felt less judged as compared to instagram. Lastly for BeReal, our candidates presented some interesting insights. They claimed there was absolutely no stress of judgement on the platform primarily because of the environment created by other users, i.e it allows everyone to be goofier because they see others doing it too. While some pressure existed because of face being captured with every click, candidates mentioned it was definitely much more authentic than the rest. One of

our candidates claimed "BeReal is boring, but boring is real." This idea essentially helped users be reassured about sharing not just the pretty moments of their day/life.

Next, we focus on the features which influenced authenticity on these platforms. For Instagram, candidates mentioned that the fact that content posted on the platform except stories being permanent encouraged good uploads. They mentioned that there was a lot more thought and steps involved before they could post content on the platform, like thinking about filters, aesthetics, looks, captions, etc which automatically didn't foster authenticity on the platform. For Snapchat, all candidates agreed that the ease of snapping, the spontaneity (real-time) and automatic deletion helped them be authentic. Chat feature helped users catch up with each other once a while. Things like streaks helped people stick to the platform and upload content regularly. While some mentioned playing with filters was fun, others mentioned that filters create a false perception of one. Lastly, things like screenshot/saving alerts helped users be reassured about things being ephemeral on the platform. For BeReal, users mentioned it was a nice escape from curated content on all other platforms. It had fun features like RealMoji, showing retake counts, random notification, etc which gamified and kept the platform a bit interesting. It also provided users with the ephemerality as provided in Snapchat. The 2 min window to upload content fostered real-time uploads making it more authentic. Lastly, users mentioned that them having to post something before they can view other content of their close friends ensured that the authentic environment is preserved.

6.1.1 Feature-centric Categories

We delved into which features specifically impact authenticity of social media platforms. Six feature-centric categories were identified: Ephemerality, Real-time, Consistency, Chat Features, Close Friends, and Gamification. In this section, we will present the results of our analysis for each feature-centric category.

1. **Ephemerality:** The ephemerality of social media platforms refers to the temporary nature of the content posted, which disappears after a certain period. Our analysis suggests that the 24-hour deletion feature makes it easier for users to be authentic. Participants reported feeling more comfortable sharing content since it is not permanent, allowing them to be less self-conscious about their online persona. They appreciated not having to constantly curate a perfect online image, which they deemed inauthentic.
2. **Real-time:** The real-time feature of social media platforms allows users to post content instantly, without overthinking or editing. Our analysis indicates that this feature enhances authenticity by enabling users to showcase unpolished and unedited aspects of their lives. Participants expressed that the real-time aspect of Snapchat and BeReal gives a genuine view of their lives and removes the pressure to present a curated image.
3. **Consistency:** Consistency refers to the frequency of posting content on social media platforms. Our analysis indicates that consistent prompts to post content can be tedious, but boring content can be more authentic. Participants expressed annoyance at the daily prompts of posting on BeReal, but they appreciated the unexciting and mundane content that they could share. They felt that this feature allowed them to be more genuine and less performative.
4. **Chat Features:** The chat feature of social media platforms allows users to engage in more meaningful conversations. Our analysis indicates that this feature enhances authenticity by enabling deeper and more heartfelt conversations. Participants expressed that the chat feature on Snapchat has allowed them to interact in a more personal and authentic way.
5. **Close Friends:** The close friends feature of social media platforms allows users to share content with a select group of people. Our analysis indicates that this feature enhances authenticity by allowing for more intimate sharing without the pressure of broadcasting to everyone. Participants appreciated the ability to send private snaps to their close friends without having to worry about their public persona.
6. **Gamification:** Gamification refers to the use of game elements in social media platforms, such as filters, rewards, lenses, and RealMoji. Our analysis indicates that this feature enhances authenticity by allowing users to express themselves in fun and creative ways. Participants appreciated the engaging nature of Snapchat, including the streaks and filters that encouraged them to share content in a unique and authentic way.

In conclusion, our analysis suggests that the features of social media platforms have a significant impact on authenticity. The ephemerality, real-time, consistency, chat features, close friends, and gamification features all have unique ways of promoting authenticity. Understanding the role of these features can help social media

platforms better cater to their users' authenticity needs.

6.2 Design Thinking Workshop

1. Design Idea - Vlogging Platform

- (a) **Problems with the existing platforms:** Image based platforms have a fundamental authenticity issue - there's only so much about someone's personality that images can capture. Hence, despite best efforts, even authenticity-first platforms such as BeReal can fail to convey someone's interests and opinions on any topic. My proposed idea lifts many desirable features from BeReal and upgrades the expressive power of the platform by prioritizing video content.
- (b) **Design Proposed:** Like BeReal, users will be randomly notified to post on the platform except now, they must record a short video of what they are doing or answer a random prompt given by the platform. This vlogging and random interview style of engagement holds many advantages over the image-based variant: it can capture a user's opinion (as they must answer the prompt), capture their personality (as talking is more revealing than an image-caption combo).

In addition to the above, adding the option to message individuals privately might also reduce friction on the app. Without this option, some users hesitate to comment on posts, as they aren't familiar with those who can view the comment. Direct messages could enable more engagement within the app and cater to a more shy audience.

Figure 5: Design 1- Vlogging Platform



- (c) **Potential Downsides:** A potential downside of this platform is the difficulty in recording videos/speaking in public spaces. As a result, variations of this idea could be tested, including: video content only after work hours, select few video prompts every month (with the platform retaining its image-first approach), and the opportunity to select from multiple prompts.

2. Design Idea - Combination Platform

- (a) **Problems with the existing platforms:** Various platforms have very different features that all can help with promoting authenticity. The design workshop participant proposed to combine these features to best allow the user to post unedited and genuine photos.
- (b) **Design Proposed:** The participant identified the following features as the most important and popular from the three platforms. From BeReal, timed posts, photos from both the front and rear camera, "Your Memories" and RealMojis. From Snapchat, 24 hour stories, private stories, archived posts and stories, and "Memories". Finally from Instagram, the chat feature.

Figure 6: Design 2 - Combination Platform



The home page contains the 24 hour story feature and private story option from Snapchat and the timed post feature from BeReal. The intention of this was that the participant mainly used Instagram as a filtered reality, where they would only select pictures they perceived as good enough to show their followers. While with Snapchat and BeReal, they had more authentic experiences since they could post to a select audience and the posts would be removed after 24 hours. With the reactions, they felt that RealMojis were a much more authentic type of reaction. The hearts on Instagram were "too limiting", in a way that users are unable to truly show how they feel about the post. RealMojis change this and allow for users to react to posts in a range of emotions.

Borrowed from Snapchat and BeReal, there would be a section for archived posts and stories after they have been taken down. On the anniversaries of the posts, they will bubble up to the top of the archived page, from which the user has the option to share it to their story. The participant noted that this was one of their favorite features from Snapchat and BeReal because they would be able to look back at pictures they had taken in the past and reminisce about it.

The participant credited Instagram's chat feature to be the main feature of the platform where they have been able to have authentic interactions. Therefore, the proposed platform has a messaging system where the users can swipe up on stories or send posts to users in order to start conversations. The participant had mentioned that they had had many heart-to-heart conversations through messages and Instagram's chat feature was the best compared to Snapchat.

Ultimately, the participant credits privacy as the main component to aid in authenticity. With all three platforms allowing the users some option to choose who their audience is, whether it be private stories in Snapchat or select audience for BeReal posts, being able to designate who sees what makes users feel more comfortable with posting more authentic photos.

- (c) **Potential Downsides:** A downside to this proposed platform is that with just combining features of apps that people are familiar with, there is no new attracting feature that might catch the attention of people to want to download the app. If users are already using all three platforms BeReal, Snapchat, and Instagram, have no issues posting on all three, and have established themselves on the platform already, they might not be willing to download another app. Still, by finding novel ways to implement the features that we have identified to foster authenticity, we can add an interesting feature to this platform to captivate new users.

3. Design Idea - Reward Points Platform

- (a) **Problems with the existing platforms:** Existing social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are based on a culture of oversharing, where users feel pressured to post only the most perfect and curated versions of their lives. This pressure to present a perfect image can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and stress. Additionally, the algorithm-driven nature of these platforms has

created a "stalking culture," where users obsessively check each other's profiles, which can lead to issues such as jealousy and even cyberbullying. Furthermore, these platforms rely heavily on the use of filters and editing tools that can distort reality, leading to a lack of authenticity and trust between users. This has led to a demand for a platform that rewards users for being genuine and unfiltered.

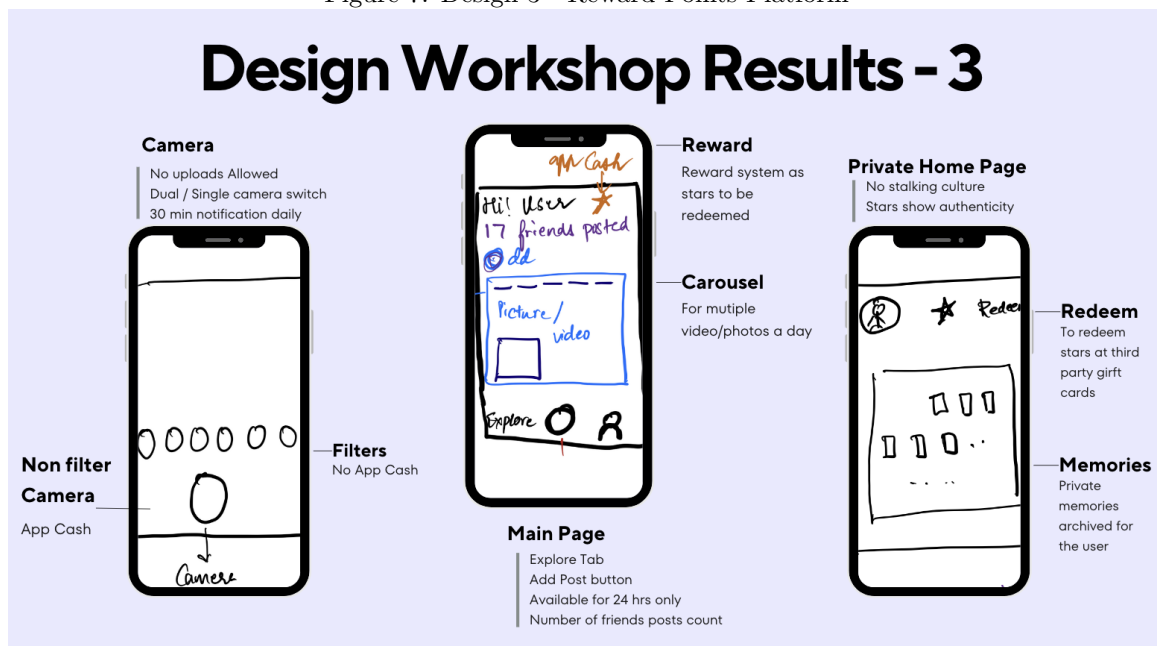
- (b) **Design Proposed:** The proposed platform is designed to address the problems of existing social media platforms by creating a space where users can be rewarded for being their authentic selves. By offering stars as a form of currency that can be redeemed for rewards, the platform encourages users to be themselves and share moments from their everyday lives without the pressure of likes and followers. This could potentially lead to a more authentic and genuine user experience, as users are no longer focused on curating a perfect online persona but rather on sharing their true selves with their friends. Moreover, the reward system also encourages users to engage more with the platform and with each other. By earning stars for their posts, users have a tangible and quantifiable measure of their contributions to the platform, which can increase their sense of ownership and investment in the community. This, in turn, can lead to more interactions and conversations among users, further enhancing the authenticity and social value of the platform. The platform will have three main sections: the Main Page, the Camera Page, and the Private Home Page.

The Main Page will feature an Explore Tab where users can discover new content and an Add Post button that allows them to post unfiltered pictures and videos. Posts will be available for 24 hours only, creating a sense of urgency and exclusivity. Users will also be able to see the number of posts their friends have made, encouraging healthy competition and social interaction. A carousel feature will allow users to post multiple videos and photos in a day. The platform will have a reward system in the form of stars that can be redeemed for app cash.

The Camera Page will feature an unfiltered camera that rewards users with stars for using it. The unfiltered camera allows users to capture and share raw moments, without the pressure of filters or edits. Posts created with the unfiltered camera earn additional reward points, creating further incentive to share authentic content. However, users can still choose to use filters if they prefer, though these posts will not earn reward points. Uploading from the camera page is not allowed to ensure that all content is created in the moment.

The Private Home Page will have a "no stalking culture" where stars or app cash will show authenticity. Users will be able to access their memories page with all stories for private view so that the users feel comfortable sharing personal moments without fear of harassment.

Figure 7: Design 3 - Reward Points Platform



- (c) **Potential Downsides:** One potential downside of our platform is that it may be less appealing to users who enjoy the curation and editing process of traditional social media platforms. Additionally, the reliance on reward points may create a sense of competition and pressure to constantly create new

content or it may lead to users posting low-quality or inappropriate content solely for the purpose of earning stars. However, the platform could implement measures such as moderation and user reporting to mitigate these risks and maintain a positive user experience.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, authenticity in social media is an ongoing conversation that has been gaining importance in recent years. With the emergence of platforms like BeReal that prioritize presenting one's true self, it is clear that users are looking for a more authentic experience. The ephemerality of posts on BeReal reinforces the notion that authenticity is proportional to ephemerality. In addition, the gamification of the platform through a reward system, filters, and streaks incentivizes users to remain consistent in their presentation of themselves. Chat-based interfaces over comment sections provide a more personal and private way of interacting, which is conducive to authentic conversations. The ability to privately archive posts and stories is also an important feature that allows users to maintain their privacy while also being able to revisit and reflect on their experiences. Finally, a reduced audience is amenable to authenticity, as it allows users to feel more comfortable being their true selves. The reduced time-frame on BeReal inherently encourages authenticity, as users only have 24 hours to post, which promotes sharing in-the-moment experiences and unfiltered content. In summary, BeReal provides a platform that caters to the growing desire for authenticity in social media, and its features promote a more genuine and personal experience, but of course it can be improved further to promote more authentic interactions.

8 Limitations and Future Work

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