

Random, Messy, Funny, Raw: Finstas as Intimate Reconfigurations of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Among many young people, the creation of a *finsta*—a portmanteau of “fake” and “Instagram” which describes secondary Instagram accounts—provides an outlet to share emotional, low-quality, or indecorous content with their close friends. To study why people create and maintain finstas, we conducted a qualitative study through interviews with finsta users and content analysis of video bloggers exposing their finsta on YouTube. We found that one way that young people deal with mounting social pressures is by reconfiguring online platforms and changing their purposes, norms, expectations, and currencies. Carving out smaller spaces accessible only to close friends allows users the opportunity for a more unguarded, vulnerable, and unserious performance. Drawing on feminist theory, we term this process *intimate reconfiguration*. Through this reconfiguration finsta users repurpose an existing and widely-used social platform to create opportunities for more meaningful and reciprocal forms of social support.

Author Keywords

Performance; reconfiguration; feminist HCI; finsta

CCS Concepts

•**Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing**; Please use the 2012 Classifiers and see this link to embed them in the text: https://dl.acm.org/ccs/ccs_flat.cfm

INTRODUCTION

“See how relatable my captions were – stomach sucked in, strategic pose, pushed up boobs. I just want younger girls to know this isn’t candid life, or cool or inspirational. It’s contrived perfection made to get attention.”

– Essana O’Neill, 2015

Essana O’Neill was a micro-celebrity with over 600,000 followers who quit Instagram in 2015. She deleted much of her

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CHI ’20, April 25–30, 2020, Honolulu, HI, USA.
2020 Association of Computing Machinery.
ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-6708-0/20/04 ...\$15.00.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376424>

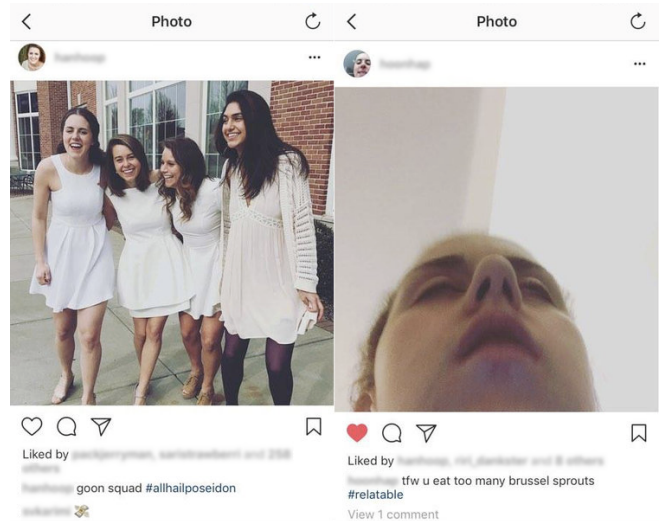


Figure 1. Two example photos from the same user’s rinsta (left) and finsta (right) exemplify common differences in the two types of accounts. We obtained permission from the owner to reprint these images.

content and re-captioned the rest to draw attention to the unbearable pressure of the performance and the “fake intimacy” involved [19]. Many young people, and in particular young women [39], experience similar social pressures. These users have responded by reconfiguring the Instagram platform, leveraging the platform itself to create something novel and distinct, replete with a new name: *finsta*.

Finstas are often private Instagram accounts with a small follower list of close friends, and feature content that is ugly, silly, vulnerable, or otherwise unacceptable on the user’s primary public account or rinsta¹ (Figure 1) [2, 16]. Finsta is defined at the intersection between the Instagram platform as technological artifact and users’ socially constructed expectations, assumptions, norms, and values. In creating finsta, users have carved out smaller spaces within a larger sociotechnical system and repurposed the platform to provide space for alternative,

¹The term “rinsta” is a portmanteau of “real” and “Instagram.” In keeping with one set of common terminology among users, in this paper, we use the term “finsta” to refer to users’ secondary accounts; “rinsta” to refer to their primary accounts, and “Instagram” to refer to the photo-sharing platform itself.

more intimate ways of being. Following Lucy Suchman [54] we term this process an *intimate reconfiguration*.

In our study of finsta we sought to learn about finsta's uses and norms and its impact on people's personal well-being and interpersonal relationships. We conducted a qualitative study which took two main approaches: we asked about finsta directly in interviews and we analyzed existing discussions about finsta on video blogs. First, we interviewed ten finsta users and asked them to reflect on their finsta account, how they decided to create it and what they use it for. Second, we sought to find people where they are by analyzing native formats of information sharing. We analyzed YouTube videos where people discuss their finsta through a popular type of video titled "exposing my finsta" in which people show posts from their finsta and discuss them.

We found that users put a lot of effort into and adopt specific practices around managing their audience on finsta to create a space where they can share content with a trusted group of close friends. They described that they use their finstas to share very different material than they would on their rinsta, including ugly, silly, introspective, and vulnerable content. Many users expressed gaining meaningful community support and experiencing therapeutic benefits from this outlet. We identify three key types of intimate reconfiguration on finsta that make this possible: 1) an unserious, messy self image in place of presenting an idealized self; 2) deep engagements with a limited number of close friends in place of superficial interactions such as likes; 3) vulnerability and disclosing negative emotions in place of the expectation of a constantly positive and upbeat performance.

We argue that in forming new norms, expectations, and cultures, intimate reconfigurations provide relief from dominant social pressures on the platform and in society more broadly and provide the opportunity for alternative social configurations to form [22]. We situate finsta in a broader cultural moment shaped by neoliberalism to better understand the pressure young people face to present a perfect self brand on social media and their strategies to push back. We also draw attention to the limitations and complexities of this strategy, which has great potential but is not immune from imposing its own pressures and expectations on users.

RELATED WORK

In this paper we rely on two main areas of related research: performance and self presentation online, and HCI literature on social media (in particular around secondary accounts and sensitive disclosure).

Performance and Self Presentation Online

Sociologist Erving Goffman proposed a conception of everyday life as a theatrical performance. In Goffman's view, individuals take on roles and perform social interactions as if life were theater, attempting to keep their performances tailored to each specific audience with which they interact and social setting through which they move [24]. Of particular relevance to this work is the concept of a "front stage" and "back stage"—Goffman describes that individuals act differently

when they are in view of their audience, when they must adhere to relevant norms and modes of behavior for the purposes of impression management, as opposed to their behaviors in more private settings hidden from audience view.

Impression management is made more challenging online because people have to grapple with social contexts that have different norms and expectations in the same place; a concept known as context collapse [7, 37]. Sociologist Bernie Hogan argues that in these cases people limit their self-presentation to the lowest common denominator of what is acceptable to the people who may view the content [28]. Communication scholar Annette Markham has argued that the Goffmanian conception of dramaturgy is further complicated in the digital era, when different (even past and present) versions of the self can co-exist in close proximity, collapsing the audience separation on which impression management relies [35].

Zhao et al. painted a multi-faceted picture of people's experiences of social media by relying on both Goffman's theatrical metaphor as well as Hogan's exhibition approach [62, 28]. They argued that people not only use social media as a stage to perform, but also as an exhibition of who they are, and as a personal archive or diary for themselves [28]. The authors describe how these overlapping regions are sometimes in tension with each other, in particular noting that past public performances, although valuable as personal archives, may no longer be appropriate for public display. While this extension of the Goffmanian performance to three regions—performance, exhibition, and personal archive—is a helpful conceptual tool, it does not fully encapsulate secondary accounts such as finta, which do not fall neatly into one of those three regions. Instead, we found that finstas combine aspects of all three but for a different purpose and audience.

The dominant culture on social media sites dictates that people are expected to present a positive image of themselves [36, 19]. The expectation for a positive self-presentation can be problematic. Research finds that when browsing other peoples' polished photos on Facebook, users may assume that those photos are representative of how the people in them actually live which makes them compare those images to their own lives and conclude that others live a happier life [13]. Social comparison on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat can lead to feelings of depression and loneliness [61, 29].

People also use social media platforms to express a range of emotions [4]. Emotion sharing is beneficial for well-being, and also helps people build social ties through shared empathy. [48]. However, it is difficult to share emotions that construct a negative self-image. Waterloo et al. find that the expression of positive emotions is perceived as more appropriate than negative emotions across a variety of platforms [60], and users of Instagram focus on positivity much more than on the other social media platforms [51]. People find it hard to reveal negative emotions, especially those related to stigmas [3]. They adopt multiple strategies to cope with the situation, such as staying anonymous [33, 15], using private chat channels such as email [21], and creating secondary accounts [36].

Secondary Accounts, Sensitive Disclosure, and Social Support on Social Media

The finsta phenomenon is part of a long history of secondary account practices, which researchers have studied across platforms for over a decade. These practices are especially important for people using social media to engage with sensitive issues, particularly those from marginalized identities.

Social media sites typically require users to present themselves within a rigid profile structure where they are expected to have one account as both the “real” and the “authentic” self [36, 26], which Alice Marwick argues that the fixity of most social media profiles is in conflict with user self-presentation strategies and diminishes user agency [36]. This requirement has existed since social networks first gained widespread popularity, with sites going as far as to purge accounts deemed “inauthentic” as Friendster did in 2003 [41], though this did not eradicate users’ practices of using secondary Friendster accounts (“Fakesters”) to engage in identity play [9, 8, 36]. Facebook also routinely removes accounts that they deem “inauthentic” and gives users the tools to report such accounts [26].

These policies are at odds with many users’ needs. Duffy and Chan, for instance, found finstas to be one of many strategies used by emerging adults (ages 18-24) in response to the possible monitoring of their social media by social institutions including family and potential employers [18]. Since the beginning of social networks’ use, researchers have identified similar strategies used by people to separate professional and personal relationships in their heterogeneous social networks [17].

The importance of allowing users space to express and separate multiple identities online is especially pronounced for people whose multiple online self-presentations are a matter of safety, such as LGBTQ users or those with stigmatized mental or physical illness—literature in this space has studied social media’s role in sensitive self-disclosure [26, 4, 37]. Social computing researcher Oliver Haimson has argued that reconstructing online identity is a rite of passage for transgender social media users, identifying users’ management of multiple identities during transition online as important in facilitating life transitions [25]. Among gay and bisexual men, Warner et al. also reported finding the use of social media apps in sensitive disclosure and identity development, finding that some HIV-positive individuals used sex-social apps in the period after diagnosis to “test the social response” to disclosure of membership in that stigmatized group [59]. Andalibi et al. showed that Instagram can be an effective source of social support for users disclosing negative emotions or actively seeking the support of their peers around issues of mental health, both because of the psychological benefits of image-based disclosure and Instagram’s use as such, along with community norms that result in positive engagement from others in response to such disclosure [4].

Not all platform policies are hostile towards users’ efforts to manage multiple identities online; some platforms have attempted to address people’s needs for greater audience control allowing users to limit the audience of some content to a subset of their connections. While we were conducting this research,

Instagram rolled out a Close Friends feature allowing users to choose a subset of their friends and broadcast some content only to that group [45]. While these features will likely be useful to some users, technical features by themselves only go so far, as evidenced by the way users’ finstas not only limit audiences but also reconfigure the capacity for action in that space.

While practices of creating secondary accounts and spaces for sensitive disclosure are not new, finstas are unique because of their widespread use and the specific cultural and social norms being created on them. McGregor studied finsta through a quantitative analysis of tweets, which indicated that finstas may be an outlet for emotional catharsis in a safe space [38]. We build on this work and study finsta as an outlet for alternative self-presentation and emotion sharing.

Reconfigurations of Technology

The concept of reconfiguration is central in this paper;

STUDY DESIGN

Our goal in this research is to dig deeper into how people learn what finsta is, why they create a finsta, what they use it for, and what effects it has on them. To answer these research questions we conducted a qualitative study.

Gathering Data

We gathered data in two main ways: directly in interviews, and indirectly through content analysis of video blogs about finsta. These two sources of data are complementary: In interviews we were able to ask people to reflect on their finsta and probe them to dig deeper into their motivations and experiences by asking questions. Analyzing native formats of information sharing on the other hand gave us a window into how people talk about their content with others without the perceived presence of researchers. For instance, in video blogs we found instances of bullying on finsta that we expect people would have hidden from us in interviews if they existed. Another motivation for these two sources was our ethical obligations. Because of the sensitive nature of finsta, our university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) did not give us permission to view the photos of finsta users we interviewed. Therefore, video bloggers who had voluntarily shared their finsta photos on YouTube, a public platform, gave us the opportunity to view and analyze finsta content.

Interviews with finsta users

We recruited 10 participants through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling [49]. Initially, we posted on our social media accounts a brief recruitment survey for people who have a finsta account. We invited those who owned at least one finsta account and were at least 18 years old to an hour-long in-person interview near a west coast campus town in the US, or through a remote video call. At the end of each interview, we asked participants if they know anyone who actively uses or has used finsta and would be open to participating in the study. If yes, we reached out and invited those potential participants.

We conducted the interviews from June to July 2019. The interviews were semi-structured and we paid participants a \$25.00

gift card for one hour of their time. We asked questions meant to probe the participants' usage of, and motivation for creating a finsta account. We did not directly look at the participants' finsta accounts and only relied on the verbal description of their account and posts. We recorded the interview as per the participants' approval, and later anonymized and transcribed it for analysis. Except for one participant who owned 3 different finsta accounts, all other participants owned one account that they called a finsta. Our participants were 21.6 years old on average and 60% were Asian, 20% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic, and 10% other. The majority of our sample (9 out of 10) identified as women. This is consistent with prior work that has found the population of finsta users is largely composed of women in their late teens to twenties [16]. We refer to the interview participants as P1-P10.

"Exposing my finsta" video blogs on YouTube

In order to gain further insight into the types of content people post on finsta in an indirect way, we searched for "exposing my finsta" in the YouTube search bar using an incognito browser. "Exposing my finsta" videos have become a popular category of videos in recent years, particularly among YouTube micro-celebrities. In these videos they present screenshots of their posts on finsta, often accompanied with a commentary discussing why they posted such content. They generally keep their finsta handle a secret. While these micro-celebrities are likely not representative of the larger user population of finsta, we found that their motivation for having a finsta account and their content was very much in line with that of regular users we had interviewed.

We selected the 10 most recent videos on YouTube that included the blogger's commentary on the content of finsta in August 2019. These videos had 408,000 views on average, and the uploaders of these videos had 146,000 subscribers on average. Additionally, we captured and analyzed 224 screenshots of content from their finsta accounts that they showed in their videos so that we may get an idea of what kinds of content are actually shared on these accounts. Although these videos are created for public consumption and are fully accessible to any person on the web we have not included any identifiable information in this paper. We refer to the YouTube video bloggers as Y1-Y10 throughout the paper.

Ethical considerations

Many finsta accounts are private, and they often contain photos and captions that are sensitive or personal to the user and others who are featured in them. We tailored our methods to protect their privacy by relying on participants' verbal description of their account during interviews rather than viewing any of that content directly, and by not reproducing any identifiable information from the YouTube videos. For instance in the process of our research on YouTube we found a host of videos exposing other peoples' finstas, we did not view or analyze those videos. There are many ways to respect and preserve the privacy of these intimate online spaces; we do not suggest that all future work must take exactly these measures, but we do propose that future researchers in this space be mindful and intentional in their orientation towards user privacy.

Limitations and opportunities for future work

Our data gathering method biases our sample to finsta users we had ready access to via our social networks and people who post video blogs on YouTube. Additionally, some video bloggers selectively exposed a portion of the posts on their finsta. While we believe the finsta content they shared is typical of finsta content because it maps onto what our interview participants also told us, we may not have an accurate proportion of each type of content. We also expect that "exposing finsta" videos have a performative nature, and the content they selected to expose may be catered to their audience. In future work we will study a larger sample size and use survey and quantitative methods to learn how widespread our findings are as well as what the properties of the finsta social network are.

Analyzing Data

The data we analyzed was made up of: 1) transcripts of the in-person interviews, 2) transcripts of YouTube videos, and 3) screenshots of finsta posts that they shared in their videos. We conducted interpretive qualitative analysis for the text data (1 and 2) [40]. We started with open coding in two phases [12]. In the first phase, we coded the transcripts on a line-by-line basis so that our code would reflect our data as closely as possible. Examples of such codes include "relationship maintenance" and "record memory." In the second phase, we focused on synthesizing the resulting codes from the first phase to extract higher level themes that our data represents. Examples of these higher level categories include "motivations", "emotions" and "content." Besides the analysis of text data, we used the screenshots of finsta posts as supplementary data to the transcripts and developed codes for them in a similar fashion. The codes for screenshots described the content of posts for instance: "crying selfie" and "photo irrelevant to caption."

Our process of coding was iterative; we continuously reviewed both our categories and data in order to find patterns within our data and synthesize our findings into resulting high level themes. During the process, We found that participants frequently referred to rinsta to contrast and contextualize their finsta usage. As a result, we added tags to our interpretive data analysis to differentiate when participants were referring to "finsta" or "rinsta". In comparing those quotes we found participants reported using features of the platform to carve out a space for finsta when rinsta could not serve their needs, which we detailed in the next section.

FINSTA

We describe our findings on finsta in three sections: setting the stage, performing finsta, and communal and personal uses of finsta. In the first section we describe the necessary groundwork for having a finsta including the process of creating an account, how users manage their audience, and how they create a safe space for the presentation of an alternative self. In the second section, we focus on users' content and interpersonal interactions on their finsta accounts, in particular their aesthetics and emotional affect, and how these differ from their rinstas. Finally, we describe the communal and personal uses that people reported their finstas have for them.

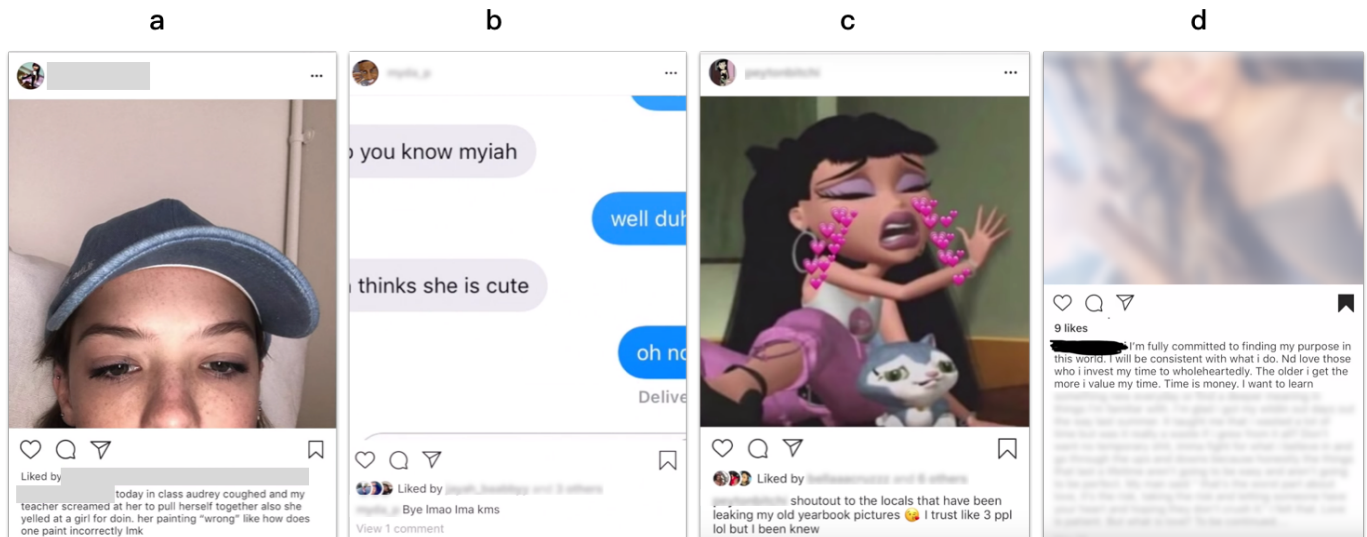


Figure 2. Example finsta posts that video bloggers on YouTube have shared under the title “exposing my finsta.” (a) A low-quality selfie. (b) A user posted a cropped screenshot of a text conversation with a friend (c) A user complained about people leaking her yearbook pictures with sarcastic caption and a meme picture. (d) A user posted a selfie and wrote a long caption to reflect on her purpose in the world.

During the interviews, we found participants constantly compare their finsta to their rinsta. Before delving into findings regarding users’ finstas, we summarize the users’ rinstas usage at the beginning of each section, and also refer to rinsta later when participants made comparisons.

Setting the Stage

In this section we first describe finsta as a safe space for an alternative self and then discuss how people create that space.

Finsta is a safe space for presentation of an alternate self

All of our participants had a rinsta account prior to the creation of their finsta account. We found that their rinsta accounts are often public. For those who had private accounts, they were open to accepting follow requests indiscriminately, including from friends, acquaintances, family, and strangers. P1 described her rinsta audience as “unregulated.” Content is accordingly shareable with a wide audience: “they’re pictures that I would be comfortable with anyone seeing” (P10).

In contrast, most participants describe finsta as a place to present an alternative self. Finsta is seen as a place to post “any other things” not captured by public facing social media channels. P6 said, “I feel like for me, it’s a social media site that has everything that I wouldn’t put on any other social media.” P9 describes it as an outlet free from the usual pressures associated with an online presence: “it’s not branded as you, necessarily, and it’s not publicly linked to your identity. I think it’s also an account where you can post whatever you want.” Here, they are not worried about being judged: “A lot of people will need that space (finsta) not to be judged. They have either very difficult or oppressive social environments either from family or from strange private groups, so for them that’s like their creative outlet so to speak” (P1).

While participants describe their self-presentation on finsta as ‘alternative,’ most of them do not see it as more real or accurate. P4 instead describes it as a place to “showcase more

of my personality.” P10 summarized, “Neither of them [is] a completely accurate representation, and together maybe they are more accurate than either one alone.”

Next, we report users’ practices around setting the stage for their finsta accounts—creating a finsta, making a profile, and choosing followers.

Motivations for account creation

We found that the finsta phenomenon spreads through interpersonal networks; most participants said they had created a finsta account after seeing their friends’ finstas. Users also reported liking the idea of a less polished account shared with close friends. One participant summarized, “Part of it was because it seemed like what everyone else was doing at the time. So, I hopped on the bandwagon. But, I also really liked the way that I could drop any pretenses that I have on my personal Instagram account” (P4).

The platform itself and its affordances also factored into some participants’ decisions to make a finsta. P8 compared Instagram to Facebook, explaining, “there is something that’s very simple about [Instagram], where it’s like, oh, add account, make a username, it’s out in the wild. If I wanted to make like a fake Facebook that would be so much work.” In addition to the lack of a real name policy and review of every new account (both central to Facebook’s account creation policy) [27], Instagram goes further by allowing users to easily switch between multiple accounts with a couple taps, a feature added following the rise in secondary account popularity [43].

Creating a finsta profile

After deciding to make an account, the next step is profile creation. We asked participants to describe their profiles—the profile photo, username, and optional short bio. Participants reported using somewhat obfuscated usernames and photos: “I chose a really ugly photo of me and zoomed in so you couldn’t tell it was me” (P4). Users suggested that straddling

the line around identifiability allowed them to connect with friends who know them personally, without broadcasting their identity to strangers; P6 explained, “I am identifiable, but I’m private also, and it’s also not like you would know exactly who I was unless you actually knew me, I think” (P6). Several participants mentioned using a nickname rather than either a real or entirely fake username.

Building an audience

In contrast to their rinstas, users reported exerting a much higher level of intentional control over the audience on their finstas: “finsta was kind like of a way that I could put controls on who sees what, or who’s even allowed to know what” (P1). Nine of the ten interview participants had private finsta accounts, visible only to their followers. Even with this level of care, P2 reported lingering privacy concerns, noting that screenshots of her finsta posts could circulate.

Eight of ten participants reported restricting followers to those they perceived as close friends. P5 has 60 followers on finsta, and she described her followers: “they’re people who I’ve definitely all met in person and have known for at least a year, and know them on a rather personal basis. I’ve had multiple conversations with them, feel comfortable telling them a lot of stuff. I would say good friends, like my inner circle.” Some participants explicitly mentioned trust as the criteria for allowing someone to follow their finstas: “I have to trust you as a person and I’ve probably already talked to you about some of the stuff that I share on my finsta before I let you into my finsta” (P4). A notable exception to this rule was made for aspirational connections—people the user wanted to build a friendship or romantic relationship with, despite not having one yet: “I really want to be friends with this person but we’re like familiar strangers so I let them follow me” (P3).

Two participants were exceptions to this norm. P7’s criteria was looser: “I just accepted them because if they wanted to follow, I didn’t really care that much” (P7). And P8 has a public account: “If you find it, like, good for you. But I’m still going to post the stuff I want to post” (P8). However, P7 and P8 said their followers are still mainly their close friends. P6 reported having a looser criteria initially, but she made her audience narrower to close friend later, because her initially-loose criteria led her to stop posting on the finsta: “I really didn’t know these people that well and they had just found me...I was putting that much personal or dramatic information but I didn’t want to really tell them” (P6).

Most of the participants were comfortable with more distant connections being aware of the existence of their finsta, but if such people sent a follow request, it would be denied: “I don’t care if people know that I have a finsta, but I wouldn’t accept them” (P10). They considered it a standard practice: “I respectfully decline their requests and just hope that they forget about it” (P4). In contrast, P1 was concerned about how request rejections would be received, and proactively blocked accounts to avoid her finsta being discovered by real-life acquaintances whom she did not want to know about her account: “it was more like a security measure, because if [non-follower acquaintances] even were aware of [my finsta]...

it’s like, they’ll confront you, and I didn’t want that kind of pressure.”

All participants reported that their followers often came from disparate social circles or parts of their lives and might not know each other. One participant reported that this resulted in cross-social group interactions on her finsta: “It’s fun to see sometimes people from different parts of my life will come together and have a conversation in the comments of my finsta or build off of each other” (P10).

Participants described the choosing of followers as a continuous and bi-directional process, in which incoming follower requests are considered, and current followers are also reviewed. P4, P5 and P10 described the removal of their followers as relatively commonplace, not in response to a particular incident but rather as a reaction to ebbing of intimacy and closeness over the normal course of a friendship: “The relationship could have soured, although I don’t think that’s really ever happened to me. More so, it’s the relationship has changed in that we haven’t put in the time to keep up” (P4).

When we asked participants about which accounts they follow from their finstas, most participants described their finsta follow relationships as reciprocal, reporting that the followers they accepted on their finsta account were the same accounts they chose to follow. Some participants expressed that they would only follow friends’ finsta accounts from their finstas.

Some participants also reported using their finstas to follow accounts they would not want to follow from their rinstas, either to avoid publicly linking their identities to those accounts, or to quarantine certain content from their main feed: “I feel like I follow meme accounts, or like accounts that... post a lot. Because I don’t really check my feed on my Finsta as much... it’s like, accounts that I want to follow or show support to, but I actually might not want to see all the time” (P8). P3 mentioned that one of her friends uses finsta exclusively for following accounts, and never for posting their own content.

Performing Finsta

Rinstas are aesthetic, self-serious, and appropriate for a general audience.

Participants experience pressure to present a polished, idealized version of themselves on their rinstas, resulting in self-focused and positive-affect content. P5 said, “I think of real Instagram (rinsta) as a way to portray your best self an everything that’s going right with your life, and all your skills and talents and everything happy.” Several users specifically mentioned happiness and positivity as the dominant emotions in their rinsta content. P4 used his finsta as an analogy: “My rinsta is kind of like my finsta, but almost the best possible version, where it’s as if I had no problems.”

Many participants reported spending significant time selecting, editing, and curating rinsta content. P4 admits that he spends a lot of time thinking about what to post, and tries to keep all his rinsta posts visually consistent: “I have a whole process for editing my photos and stuff...there are certain filters there, and settings, that I find aesthetically pleasing.” Relatedly,

participants also reported seeking validation in the form of likes and followers.

Next, we describe our findings about users' performances on finsta, including the types of content they post and their interactions with their audience.

Finsta content ranges from silly to self-reflective.

On finsta, users post content that they perceived as ugly or low quality (as shown in Figure 2, image A) and did not meet their aesthetic standards for rinsta. Many participants echoed P10's sentiment that, "I spend some time editing photos on my Rinsta and I spend zero time editing Finsta posts" (P10). The expectation of low-quality, unfiltered content seemed to be perceived as a cultural norm to most participants. P4 described, "For my Finsta, I don't edit anything. Sometimes, if I do edit it, it's almost in a way to accentuate how ugly something is. Or how chaotic or how... unfiltered, I guess, it might be."

Users also expressed sharing taboo or stigmatized content on their finstas, such as sexual, risqué, or otherwise "not safe for work" (NSFW) content. Twelve percent of images shown by YouTubers fell into this category, which including a video where Y4 described herself as "half nude," and another featuring her drug paraphernalia, causing her to say, "I feel like such a bad influence showing you guys these" (Y4). One of our interview participants expressed associating sexual content specifically with accounts belonging to her women friends: "a lot of people post, like, risqué photos on there [...] that was, like, a major thing that certain people do—it wasn't everyone [...] it was primarily the women, I would say" (P2). P5 also described her content as "happy but messy," "like getting really, really drunk with friends, and it's really happy but it's not the most positive thing to share to the rest of the world."

Participants reported using humor to signal a level of unseriousness, explicitly broadcasting their finstas as a space in contrast with their perception of Instagram as a place for serious, carefully-presented, or polished content. One participant explained that her profile photo was, "a funny picture with me just rolling my eyes or something like that. Just something that would make it obvious to people [...] that it's a fake—not, like, a fake, but a funny outlet rather than any professional or real Instagram [account]" (P7). P5 posts about dancing on both finsta and rinsta, but she noted how those were different: "on my Finsta, it's me making a bad face while dancing and I'll make fun of that whereas on my Instagram (rinsta), it's prime dancing photos, photoshoot-level."

Another important aspect of finsta accounts we identified was their use for expressing negative emotions. 29% of posts from YouTubers discussed difficult topics such as failure or disappointment, or other related emotional content such as frustration, sadness, or anger. One YouTuber explained, "a lot of my stories is me in a fucking pissed off mood" (Y9), while others showed photos they had posted while upset, including selfies of themselves crying: "I took a selfie of myself while I was crying, and I pretty much said just that life was shitty at that moment" (P5).

Several participants (P3, P4, P5, P7) specifically described their finstas as a place for venting. P7 described, "my last

post was more of a venting post where I was talking about just how there's some challenging things are happening in my life." Another interviewee described, "[On finsta] I talk about bad grades, bad tests, bad relationships and different problems that I have in relationships" (P5). In contrast, P5 did not feel like posting negative emotions on rinsta: "I would never in a million years say that I am depressed at a given time [on rinsta]. I have 800 followers on my real Instagram and most of them would be pretty uncomfortable seeing that, and I feel like I would be uncomfortable with them seeing it...[my finsta is] a place to focus on all of the negative things."

Participants found this outlet for negative emotions valuable. P3 once deleted both her finsta and rinsta to limit her social media use, but after her friend experienced a tragedy, she restored her finsta: "I was feeling very lonely...so it was something emotional that happened in my life and that was what made me get on social media again."

While in ugly or low-quality photos humor signals a level of unseriousness, humor was also commonly used to mitigate the gravity of negative emotions. We found that 13% of the posts in the YouTube screenshots we analyzed used humor to describe difficult topics or mitigate negative emotions. In Figure 2, image C shows an example post where a YouTuber complained about people leaking her yearbook pictures with sarcastic caption and a meme photo, making light of an incident that had been very upsetting to her. P7 posted on her finsta when she attended her friend's wedding: "I have a really random face, I look like I'm scared of something, and it was at her wedding shower, and so I was like, 'when all of your friends are getting married and you're like, single af' or something. So again, venting about that."

Several participants also use finsta for reflective posts, where they share their thoughts at the moment. P6 said, "I would just write, not even a reflection, it's not really planned. It's how I'm feeling in that moment." As the Instagram platform is focused on sharing images, one striking feature unique to finstas was the prevalence of text-based content. This includes posting reflective texts, tweets or screenshots of SMS conversations—for example, in Figure 2's Image B, a user posted a cropped screenshot of a text conversation with a friend in which she learned her crush was interested in someone else. Users also described posting "random" photos as a vehicle for text content in the captions. P5 said, "some of them, the photo doesn't really have to do with what I'm talking about. One is a photo of a soft serve I was eating, but the caption is me talking about how I'm really mad at my mom." As is shown in Figure 2's image D, a YouTuber reflected on her "purpose in the world" with a selfie. In YouTube screenshots, we find that 11% posts have unrelated text and pictures.

While users post about reflective thoughts and negative emotions, several participants (P3, P5, P6, P7) reflected that they did not post about those kinds of content on finsta initially. Instead, they describe their use of finstas changing over time from posting ugly, silly content to spaces where they posted reflective or emotional things: "[Before] the content was [...] funny things that I wanted my friends to see, but eventually it became more of like me reflecting about like more serious

things, or if I couldn't talk to my friends about something, I would like post about it and like hope they would read it" (P3).

Impact on Finsta Users

Finally, we describe finsta's uses and the impact it has on users. We found that people found finsta as a safe space where they could present an alternative self; vent and get emotional support; interact in ways that they found more meaningful and genuine; keep their friends up to date; and create a diary of past events.

Venting and getting emotional support

Several participants told us that they find finsta helps them to vent negative feelings and get emotional support. P5 said that writing about the experience allows her to "share the mess inside my head and put it into words and a visual" (P5).

P3 reported using finsta to passively reach out to friends, especially around sensitive issues that are hard to discuss in person: "If I couldn't talk to my friends about something, I would post about it [on finsta] and hope they would read it." P5 describes how talking about stigma on finsta works as therapy: "It's a way for people to talk about mental health and things that have a stigma [...] It's a way to talk about drugs and alcohol and sex [...] I've sometimes compared it to therapy, because you're giving voice to things that bother you, and it's a place where you can share it with several friends or just the people you feel will understand you."

The greater depth of interactions and the audience of close friends combined to garner participants a sense of emotional support and psychological safety from their finsta accounts. P5 described how she benefits from viewing others posts and receiving support besides posting: "It reminds you that there's other people going through things [...] and they can tell you, 'It will be okay' and 'This is how I got through it.' Sometimes people will share coping methods or really it's just a way to talk it out."

Notably, users reported providing the same support to their friends in return: "I always see the finsta as another opportunity to look out for my friends. If they post something that's really concerning to me, I will reach out to them in person" (P4). The shared empathy and mutual emotional support strengthens relationships with those around them: "I think it affects how I'm perceived by my friends, but I also think that it's important for them to understand what I'm going through. I think it builds empathy and sympathy" (P5).

Interactions on finsta are meaningful and genuine

Participants considered their interaction with the audience on finsta as more meaningful and genuine compared to their rinsta in general. Several participants (P3, P4, P5, P6, P10) reported that higher counts of likes and followers were valuable on rinsta, but that these interactions at times felt superficial. P3 said, "By pure volume, I interact with my friends more on my Rinsta, but in depth of interaction, I think my Finsta."

P4 explained why she thinks interactions on finsta are more genuine: "Because they [finstas] are private accounts and because these are people that I've screened, if they comment or if they make a joke with me or stuff like that, I feel it's more

genuine. Or, I think it's genuinely them that's speaking and not maybe a public facing version of them."

Keeping friends up to date

Finsta provides some participants (P2, P3, P6, P10) a channel to update their friends. Unlike rinsta where the audience is unregulated, participants see finsta as a place to share their life with their friends that are not physically together with them but are still important to them. P10 said, "I think it's a way for me to connect with or interact with people that I don't necessarily talk to as often, but are still very close friends of mine." She described the particular benefit of a finsta in comparison to other modes of communication as follows: "there definitely have been instances where I've sent the same thing to multiple group chats, and then been like, I should have just posted that on my finsta, it would have saved me tons of time rather than sending the same thing individually to multiple people."

People use rinsta and other public social media accounts to keep others up to date too. However, participants mentioned they experience anxiety to update friends on those platforms. P1 explained her anxiety: "It's to the point where you're feeling responsible to make sure that other people know what you're doing and where you're at, and if one friend group has invited you to something, and you're posting about another friend group, you have to make sure that they don't see it so they don't get offended [...] everyone is privy to this knowledge especially if it's on a public account." While participants use finsta to keep their friends up to date, they do not feel compelled to do so constantly: "If I decide to take a break from social media for a while, I don't really feel that anxious about it. It's like totally ok because the people on there are my closest friends or I know are my friends anyways, so if I don't post for a while I don't feel as weird about not posting." (P3)

Memory collection and diary

Participants described their finsta as a memory collection or diary, which derived from the combination of Instagram's archival function and finsta norms around personal sharing: "sometimes looking at my finsta and looking at all those posts is interesting for me, because it's a walk down memory lane to major, different events and times in my life" (P7). P4 concurred, saying her finsta was "like a semi-private diary. But it's kind of like a collage of all the things that have happened to me, that at the time I thought were notable enough to make note of". To P4, the presence of close friends added the accountability of those life events. P6 thinks finsta is an accurate representation of true friendships: "If you look back and you see what people comment or whatever people say at the moment, it's like, you were close in that moment."

INTIMATE RECONFIGURATIONS

In the previous section we described how people use finsta: the work of creating those spaces, users' performances on those accounts, and the impact it has on them. Finsta—the combination of Instagram's platform and the human norms, expectations, and behaviors that comprise it—is a sociotechnical assemblage residing on Instagram's infrastructure, but fundamentally different in its capacities for action from rinsta [54]. We term this repurposing of the platform to create

smaller, more intimate spaces for close friends an *intimate reconfiguration*. Next we detail three intimate reconfigurations that are central to finsta, and then situate the reconfiguration process in feminist science and technology studies theory.

Feminism directs our attention to those often taken-for-granted labors that are necessary for complex sociotechnical arrangements to work [54]. In describing these reconfigurations we will pay particular attention to the forms of labor that people perform to make finsta (and rinsta) possible.

We found three key ways that finsta users have reconfigured Instagram. These include emphasizing: (1) unseriousness and imperfection in place of an idealized self and personal branding. (2) lengthy, deep engagements in place of instant, superficial interactions (e.g. Likes) and (3) vulnerability in place of obligate positivity. Below we will describe each configuration in more detail.

Idealized Self ⇒ Unserious Messiness

In response to rinsta norms of polished aesthetics and cultivating a personal brand, users' finsta accounts reconfigure these in favor of unseriousness, humour, and imperfection.

Youth face social pressures to maintain an image of perfection online for many reasons, including pressure from peers and the potential for their online content to impact college admissions and current and potential employment [7, 47]. At the same time as social media has increased in ubiquity, the lines between the personal and the professional have blurred, leading many users to cultivate a more professional identity online [7]. One participant explained that she keeps her professional and personal social media separate, and would be concerned for her public image if her finsta content were made public: "It's very, again, very like a funny, random venting outlet and I don't think that would be a really good image that I necessarily want anyone in my professional network who doesn't really know me see" (P7).

The pressure for polished aesthetics on rinsta can be understood within the broader context of the intensification of beauty pressures on young women [19]. Women must mold and shape their bodies to emulate societal ideals of youth, heterosexuality, ability, whiteness, and thinness [6]. A host of beauty apps and filters exist that encourage women to surveil themselves through a "pedagogy of defect" and to make adjustments [5]. Under these conditions, creating space for imperfection through finsta accounts temporarily restrains those pressures and even pokes fun at them with ugly selfies.

Superficial Interactions ⇒ Deep Engagements

On finsta, users have reconfigured the norm of what they viewed as superficial, fast-paced interactions such as likes to lengthier, deeper engagements. This often took the form of lengthy captions on images and long comments: "[My] regular Instagram account gets very generic kind of comments. If I ever get comments it's usually like a 'You look so good!' Or heart emojis kind of things. Very basic [...] Whereas Finsta comments, I feel like people will talk a bit more personally and relate to it more" (P5).

Research has shown that people grow closer to others online when they engage via composed pieces such as comments and posts more so than one-click actions such as Likes [11]. Dominant forms of interaction on social media have been characterized as short, episodic, and transient; limiting peoples' ability to engage in lengthy, thoughtful reflection [57]. Finsta users have changed that norm to one where long and deep engagements are expected. This is possible because of the limited size of the audience and the fact that a person's finsta followers are usually close friends.

Obligate Positivity ⇒ Vulnerability

Finally, we found that finsta users reconfigured the requirement to present a positive, upbeat persona to space where negativity, complaining, and vulnerability were acceptable.

On my Rinsta, I'd only post really happy things. And, specifically, tailored happy things. (P4)

Researchers have argued that young women in particular are increasingly required to invest emotional or affective labour in producing selves that are agreeable for others [34]. We also found references to that labor in our research.

My Instagram is very curated. I spend a lot of time thinking about what to post. It's always really good photos of me, really good dance photos of me, or with friends when we're all dressed up or going out or styled. I look really good, a lot of them are DSLR kind of photos, highly-edited, great color balance and all of that. (P5)

On the other hand, finstas provide an escape from those pressures to present an alternative side:

I think it was just a show like a different side of me that I feel that it's like really hard for me to verbalize things emotionally sometimes or open up to my friends in a certain way. So I definitely leverage my posts so that like I could show a different side of myself that is a little bit more vulnerable and has a little bit more depth. (P3)

Therefore people use finstas as an opportunity for performances that are not necessarily positive or upbeat but may be silly, sad, or vulnerable.

Who Reconfigures Technology and How?

Feminist science and technology studies (STS) scholars have long studied how agency, or capacity for action, is shaped at the intersection of people, technology, and practice [1, 31, 53, 54, 7]. Finsta is one example of users finding creative ways to gain (or regain) agency by leveraging the existing tools available to them. In some cases, these reconfigurations can even result in concrete changes to the technological infrastructure. For example, in 2016, Instagram rolled out a highly requested feature allowing users to create and navigate between multiple accounts on the same device. Speculation among the user base and the media suggested that this represented a move by the company to cater to a younger population of users, among whom the practice of having a finsta was common [46]. This feature was unexpected, given that Facebook, Instagram's parent company, has held a strict 'real name' policy, routinely

removing “inauthentic,” pseudonymous, or duplicate accounts on the Facebook platform [27].

The social norms and technical features that comprise finsta point to teenage Instagram users as designers and creators of a sociotechnical assemblage at every level. This is despite the dominant view of design, which views centers of innovation as separate from peripheries where the fruits of that innovation are consumed [31, 32]. This view overlooks everyday design among users [58]. In online social spaces in particular, experiences are shaped more so by interactions with other actors (e.g. norms) than by the technology [44, 9]. For instance, boyd details the myriad ways in which youth find innovative ways to achieve social connections while maintaining privacy online [7]. Gender is central to understanding finsta users as designers: recognizing finsta users, who are mostly young women, as designers stands in contrast to views of sociotechnical design as the sole province of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, designers, and engineers who are predominantly men [1, 30, 54, 55].

Beyond *who* does design, feminist STS teaches us to ask *how* design is done [31, 54]. Suchman shifts our frame from the heroic designer of extraordinary new technologies to “ongoing, collective practices of sociomaterial configuration, and reconfiguration in use” [54, 52]. This necessitates a recognition of the ongoing work of design that takes place in practice by users, what Aanestad has named the in-situ work of “design in configuration” [1].

COMPLICATING FINSTA AS FEMINIST UTOPIA

In this paper we have laid out a vision of finsta as a user-designed reconfiguration of Instagram. In this section we draw attention to some of the possibilities it provides for reimagining our sociotechnical artifacts and our society, as well as a more cautionary critical take on the same.

Escaping Neoliberalism with Intimate Reconfigurations

Finstas (and rinstas) have become popular at a distinctive cultural moment shaped by neoliberalism and postfeminism [19, 20]. Much has been written about neoliberalism in recent years (see [10]), yet it remains a complex, contested, and much debated term [14, 23, 42]. Most commonly neoliberalism involves the extension of market principles to all areas of life [10, 19, 50]. Some scholars have described it as a worldview that assumes individuals as self-concerned agents not members connected to a community; with competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. From this vantage point citizens are redefined as consumers and markets are the ideal means through which people can meet their needs [42, 14]. Others have related neoliberalism to a sense of insecurity, perpetual competition, and individual isolation in society [23]. As the dominant form of public on Instagram, rinsta is culturally shaped by neoliberalism [19, 36]. This is through the norms and cultures that people have developed on rinsta and amplified by the technical affordances of Instagram (e.g. emphasis on the numbers of likes and followers as currency).

In this view, finstas can be seen as counter publics that offer a temporary suspension of dominant cultural forces. Nancy Fraser first used the term counterpublics to describe spaces such as women only voluntary associations where subordinate

groups can gather and talk [22]. For Fraser counter publics offer the potential for issues that have been overlooked, purposefully ignored, or suppressed by the dominant public to be brought forth and discussed. Fraser sees the existence of multiple publics, and counter publics in particular, as a necessary requirement for democratic deliberation. At the same time, she points out that the fact that counter publics widen discourse and contestation does not necessarily mean that they are virtuous.

Potential for Abuse

While there are many benefits to a space with less restrictive social norms, many norms serve pro-social functions, and by removing them opportunities for social exclusivity, bullying, or harassment may emerge. While finsta users in our data never explicitly admitted to such behavior, some of the screenshots we analyzed nevertheless suggested that it occurs.

Further, as we observed in the data, the lifting of norms does not leave an empty vacuum behind—other standards and expectations fill that void, not all of which are desirable. In the interviews, participants described that finsta sets new expectations for them. As P6 puts it, “I feel like there still is some expectation for you to be funny, or for you to be down to earth [on finsta].” Some finsta users reported that they feel they are expected to be open, be funny, or even be imperfect on finsta. They also feel obliged to provide emotional support. P3 reflected, “When someone lets you into that side of them or that life, you do have to take up some of that you know relationship where you’re confiding in them, they confide in you, et cetera [...] sometimes I have felt that way where I knew because it was her finsta, and because she was sharing it with only a few people, that I should say something.”

It is also worth considering the impact on the audience. For example, the corollary to users’ comfort in discussing negative emotions and weighty topics is audience exposure to such content, which may be emotionally exhausting, triggering, or merely unwanted. Two other related problems are peer pressure and content incriminating of oneself or others—regarding drugs and alcohol, one of our participants mentioned, “there’s also a lot of substances put on there which isn’t as big a deal in college, ‘cause people are of age, but I know when people are younger, [they] are still posting things like that” (P2).

Finally, these intimate reconfigurations are by definition on the same platform as the original space whose norms, culture, community, or affordances were toxic enough to warrant the reconfiguration. We might ask, then, whether keeping finsta and other similar practices on these original platforms helps maintain the relevance and primacy of the platform itself—shoring up the very toxicity those reimaginings sought to avoid, in place of radically remaking entirely new spaces.

Accountability and Expanding Frames

expanding frames from suchman so where do we go from here is finsta good or bad? it’s not that clear cut how do we hold ourselves and our communities accountable is the main question

Under these conditions it is important to pay attention to how people have reconfigured social technologies to open spaces for new possibilities. “*Not that this will save us —but it might open our imaginations*” [56].

CONCLUSION

Finstas give us a lens into the practice of intimate reconfigurations: the repurposing of an existing sociotechnical platform to subvert its function as a stage upon which users are constantly performing a palatable, presentable version of self, instead carving out a space of greater privacy and emotional support. By qualitatively analyzing the way ten interview participants and ten video bloggers describe their finsta accounts, we identified reconfiguring practices including presenting an unserious, messy image of self; valuing deep connections over a myriad of superficial interactions; and engaging in emotional vulnerability rather than obligate positivity. While imperfect, we argue that these reimaginings help users push back against dominant social forces, providing them with an intimate reprieve from the pressure to be constantly marketing oneself and presenting a coherent and palatable personal brand.

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