Performance of Self and the Commodification of Feminine Authenticity

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The concept of influence has been around for much longer than the industry it has become, preceding even the internet (Solomon, 2020). It is present in everyday social interactions, from overt persuasion to subtler acts of impression (Dewar et al., 2019; Fullwood, 2019; Goffman, 1959; Maares et al., 2021). But technological affordances have provided new mechanisms to exert influence in more strategic ways, namely, to one's own advantage. In particular, this paper reviews the literature surrounding how women navigate the conditions that allow and even require the strategic use of authenticity to convey one's own identity online and ultimately, to influence an audience.

The Performance of Self

The foundational understanding of social interaction draws from Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of the performance of self. His theatrical metaphor characterizes people in social interactions as actors who put on different performances in different environments for different audiences. For example, the performance a person puts on for a potential employer can differ from that amongst family. By adjusting the performance, a person can manage their impression upon an audience, which may be the goal in itself or work to place them in a better position to influence an audience (Fullwood, 2019; Goffman, 1959). As such, the performance often involves casting oneself in a favorable light in alliance with one's personal goals or an audience's expectation.

To determine what performance to put forth and how to go about doing it, one must understand oneself from the perspective of the audience and engage in a certain degree of self-monitoring (Fullwood, 2019; Goffman, 1959; Snyder, 1987). More ominously, that is to say, one must engage in a certain degree of self-surveillance. This is a condition that women, in

particular, are intimately familiar with (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Duffy & Hund, 2019; Tolentino, 2019). John Berger (1972) describes the social presence of women as one that has historically been limited under the surveillance of men, such that if a woman is to have any hope of succeeding in the traditional sense, she must maintain an awareness of how she is seen by others, that is to say, how she is seen by men. In other words, only by watching herself under the male gaze can a woman begin to influence the impression she evokes through the performance she enacts.

While these conditions may not necessarily be as unbalanced now as they were in the past, the process of monitoring and maintaining the self prevails in new ways.

The Virtual Self

Online, the performance of self and the processes involved become even more glaring. One cannot simply exist online like one can in real life. Instead, one must be constructed and communicated in order to have an online presence (Gosine, 2007; Tolentino, 2019; van Dijck, 2013).

The construction of the virtual self is most apparent on social media platforms, where one must create a personal profile to participate (Tolentino, 2019; van Dijck, 2013). For example, on Instagram, a user must declare a username and then can further construct their profile by specifying their pronouns, uploading a profile picture, writing a descriptive bio, and more. A user can construct their own network by following other profiles, and can also work toward building their own following. This can be done by reproducing real life relationships, as well as by constructing an online profile in a specific way in order to attract a specific audience, whether imagined or real (Dewar et al., 2019; Steains, 2019). As Goffman (1959) theorized, one such strategy to achieve this is by presenting oneself favorably.

The Optimized Self

Technology offers a number of affordances that allow users greater control over the construction and communication of self. Some of the major affordances are editability, asynchronicity, lack of physical proximity, and the minimization of environmental distractors (Fullwood, 2019; Walther, 1996). In real life, the way one appears is the way one is presented, and anyone who walks by is privy to the spectacle. Online, however, one can carefully curate what is presented, how it's presented, when it's presented, and to a certain extent, to whom it is presented as well. For example, a user can choose to only share photos from flattering angles, and even so, the image can be further adjusted with filters (Hong, 2020).

However, the same affordances can also complicate the online experience. With the internet as a stage for performance, the door never closes, the show never ends, and the audience comes and goes and overlaps (Dewar et al., 2019; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Tolentino, 2019). This phenomenon of overlapping social contexts is known as "context collapse" (Dewar et al., 2019; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In such a case, it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish an audience and their expectations, not to mention aligning one's performance to it. Indeed, different audiences have different expectations (Dewar et al., 2019; Goffman, 1959; Maares et al., 2021).

One way users contend with context collapse online is by limiting their audience (Dewar et al., 2019). For example, on Instagram there are several subcommunities with targeted interests, such as bookstagram (which targets communities of readers), fitstagram (which targets those interested in fitness), foodstagram (which targets those interested in food and restaurants), and more. With a clarified sense of an audience, users can better strategize how to appeal to the audience and perform accordingly.

But despite combatting context collapse with deliberately partitioned audiences, users still struggle with the exhausting performance of optimizing oneself to be as appealing as possible (Ross, 2019). This condition gives rise to the popularity of the authentic self, diverging from Goffman's (1959) theory of the ever-favorable persona (Dewar et al., 2019; Kang & Wei, 2018; Ross, 2019; Taber & Whittaker, 2020).

The Authentic Self

Several studies explore the community of finstagrams or finstas--a portmanteau for "fake Instagram"--in which users create separate Instagram accounts in an attempt to carve out an authentic space online (Dewar et al., 2019; Kang & Wei, 2018; Ross, 2019; Taber & Whittaker, 2020). These fintas are characterized by humor, high levels of self-disclosure, and negative self-presentation. Even beyond finstas, the glossy aesthetic once pervasive across Instagram trends towards a more candid, less curated aesthetic, with some users going out of their way to make their photos appear more candid, using applications such as Huji to distort the quality of their photos to look like disposable film photos, and posting "photo dumps" to share the smaller moments of everyday life (Archer, 2021; Lorenz, 2019).

But while users report less pressure of performance, it is a performance all the same. In an attempt to subvert the performative self, users only succeed in creating a new role to perform (Dewar et al., 2019; Kang & Wei, 2018; Ross, 2019; Taber & Whittaker, 2020). Furthermore, although audiences report a distaste for overly edited images, audience consumption nonetheless shows higher engagement with images with higher production value, revealing that there is a certain degree to which authenticity is palatable, and thus, valuable (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Hong, 2020; Maares et al. 2021).

The Commodified Self

This diluted version of authenticity has been co-opted as a marketing and branding strategy in an increasingly commercialized society, at once overcoming for-profit narratives as well as garnering audience trust to be later transformed into economic capital (Genz & Brabon, 2018; Maares et al., 2021). It is characterized by transparency and visibility (Duffy & Hund, 2019), affective language such as "passion," "fun," and "independence" (Genz & Brabon, 2018), narrative consistency, online and offline congruence, and the portrayal of struggle for authenticity labor (Maares et al., 2021). To borrow Goffman's (1959) theatrical metaphor, a twisted version of the backstage moves to the front stage, and people are expected to offer their private lives as a sight to behold (Berger, 1972).

But only to an agreeable, easily commodifiable extent. It is the kind of authenticity that can sell mugs and t-shirts about pursuing your passion, hustling, running on caffeine, and being a #GirlBoss. In such conditions, work is rebranded as pleasure, beauty rebranded as self-care, and endless self-optimization is done not to satisfy the male gaze but from a woman's own agency (Genz & Brabon, 2018; Tolentino, 2019). This commodification of female authenticity becomes her vehicle to success.

Conclusion

While the performance of self was once understood to influence positive self-perception and though technology has afforded greater control over such perceptions, the optimized approach of self-presentation falls way to the authentic approach self-presentation. However, communicating the authentic self online becomes increasingly coded, and the commodification of authenticity limits self-presentation, drawing it back to something--while not altogether positive--more agreeable, with small allowances of lesser refined personal moments.

Further research can clarify the types of users engaging in the construction of self on social media platforms. Even amongst influencers, there are several different subcommunities, some of which may have a greater demographic of women and some of which may have less. It would be interesting to see to what extent the perspectives reviewed in this paper may or may not apply to a subcommunity of influencers that are mostly men.

While influencer activity is more convenient to observe due to its visible nature, it would also be interesting to investigate to what extent these conditions apply to casual users who might not have such overt economic motivations. On the other hand, economic instability creates a culture of monetizing all aspects of life, which could very well affect even casual users of social media platforms. However, privacy concerns can make this direction of research difficult on a large scale. Nevertheless, a gap exists here that will require careful ethical considerations in order to approach.

Meanwhile, future work can address research in the opposite direction as well, whereby celebrities engage in the construction of self on social media platforms.

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