AUTHENTICITY
& INSTAGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

Instagram is intended to connect individuals, but more often that not, it is used to curate highly edited, illusory versions of themselves. People are not at fault for this. Rather, the platforms that enable and even promote this behavior are to blame.

Through this project, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of why and how people use Instagram, how authenticity plays into social media, and how best to design a social media platform so that users feel like they are posting authentically. We specifically focused on redesigning Instagram to promote an authentic user experience. By doing so, we hope to create more open spaces, conducive to deeper connections, and more meaningful presentations of one's self.

RELATED WORK

Through our research, we could not identify any current, intentional attempts to remedy the problem of in-authenticity on social media. Rather, we found that most platforms **encourage** superficial behavior through highlighting social currency (e.g. follower count) and ads that target users' flaws. Some individuals have picked up on this trend and launched Instagram "rebellions" in protest. However, two platforms that inadvertently promote authenticity are Google+ and Snapchat.

Instagram Rebellions

Several Instagram users have taken to creating satirical Instagram accounts to rebel against the expectations of perfection and to poke fun at ingenuine common posting trends. One example of this is @SocalityBarbie, "a fantastic Instagram account satirizing the great millennial adventurer trend in photography. It's an endless barrage of pensive selfies in exotic locales, arty snapshots of coffee, and just the right filter on everything" (Wired).
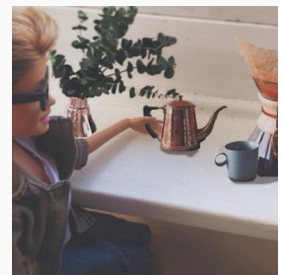
Another account that partakes in in similar, but much more literal satire is @satiregram. This feed is dedicated to descriptions of typical Instagram posts. Here's one particularly potent example:

Some users have taken to criticizing Instagram more directly. Essena O'Neill, an Instagram-famous model who quit the platform, made the following statement about Instagram after weeks of silence post-quitting.

> "Social media, especially how I used it, isn't real. It's contrived images and edited clips ranked against each other. It's a system based on social approval, likes, validation... It's perfectly orchestrated self-absorbed judgment."

Essena also went back and re-wrote several of her post's captions to reflect what she was truly thinking or feeling at the time.

Platforms that provide authenticity

While few platforms purposefully promote authentic posting, we recognized Snapchat and Google+ as two that have features that allow for authenticity. Google+ utilizes different "circles" for groups of people users wanted to share to. We liked that idea because it allows users to differentiate content based on who will see it. Snapchat uses

temporary photo sharing, which allows people to feel more comfortable in what content they share based. Due to the temporary nature of Snapchats, users feel that their posts did not have to be flawless, and instead could be candid shots from their real lives.

METHOD

After doing initial research on existing works that offered different approaches to image sharing on social media, we decided to take a step back and develop a deeper understanding of our problem space. Our own experiences with the platform, coupled with the implications of Instagram accounts such as Essena O'Neill's and SocalityBarbie, offered some initial insights on user behavior on Instagram and how pressure to post appealing and high quality content might lead to disingenuous, homogenous behavior. Furthermore, it shed some light on how the nature of social media platforms and the use of social currency indicators could shape these actions.

Research Papers

To better understand the psychology behind decision making on Instagram, and the influence of social media platforms as a context for user behavior, we read five research papers on these topics.

Some papers offered insight on how the context of a social media platform can nudge users toward certain behaviors. "Performances of the Self on Twitter" suggests that users adjust their "performances of the self" to fit the context of community wide conversation. This implies that because interactions are being placed within the context of a social media platform, users are likely to shift behavior to connect with, gain sympathy and understanding from, and entertain audiences, all while maintaining a sense of personal identity. "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately" also discusses the topic of an imagined audience, and shows that when users deal with multiple audiences online, they utilize different techniques to appeal to each one, in a way mimicking the multiplicity of real-life interaction. Others pointed toward the potential for virtual interactions on social media to foster development of "alternate forms of the self". "Can You See The Real Me?" suggests that the Internet, when compared to face to face interaction, offers users the ability to showcase their "true self" and project idealized qualities onto their partners. It suggests that online communication, when done right, can lead to deep and meaningful relationships at a "breathtaking speed" due to the nature of Internet interactions. Other papers like "Follow Me and Like My Beautiful Selfies" and "Let Me Take a Selfie" offer a contrasting perspective, pointing at the negative consequences that photo-sharing on the Internet that produce. In these papers, narcissism is shown to be directly linked with the desire for a large social network. Furthermore, peer comparison is shown to be influenced by social currency indicators, like the number of likes or followers a user has. Some users develop unhealthy and unrealistic standards for beauty, and resort to harmful practices to achieve a "desirable"

appearance. Others still might engage in social comparison with those they think they are superior to, to boost their own self esteem. Insights from these papers point at the delicate balance between positive and negative consequences of interactions on the Internet.

User Interviews

To complement this knowledge, we also sought to better understand the social media platforms that are commonly used nowadays, how usage and behavior might vary from platform to platform, and the features that users like and dislike about each one. We were also curious about how platform features might shape the way users interact with each other while on the app.

Specifically, we were fascinated by the trend of users having multiple Instagram accounts: an Insta and a Finsta (fake Insta). From our prior knowledge, the former tends to be more curated and reserved for posts of higher quality, while the latter tends to be more unfiltered and removed from the need to garner likes. We wondered what the influences were behind user motives on both kinds of account and how this dichotomy came to exist on a single platform. We noticed the same kind of trend of unfiltered, relaxed image posting on Snapchat as well and wanted to gather more information from examining users in real life.

We interviewed five Instagram users at CMU that vary in their use of image sharing social media platforms. For each user, we asked them about their intentions behind downloading Instagram, their common interactions with other users' content and within the app in general, the number of accounts they have, and the type of content they post. We repeated these questions for the other social media platforms users frequently used. Finally, users were asked to demonstrate their typical thought process while using Instagram while performing a walkthrough. To wrap up, we asked each user what they believed "authenticity" to mean, either as a standalone word or in the context of social media.

From our interviews, we saw that overall, users seemed to care a lot about self-presentation on Instagram. Many interviewees mentioned thinking carefully about filters, composition, and caption choices and whether or not they would be well received by people they follow. One extreme of this was a user thinking of possible kinds of pictures to post on Instagram, and *then* getting that particular type of photo taken. There was also a split between people that disliked the "competitive" nature of Instagram and those that enjoyed the high level of quality that Instagram photos tended to have. An interviewee commented that as a designer, they appreciated the fact that looking at the high quality feeds of others inspired their own work. Others still mentioned that although Instagram involved a lot of work (selecting photos, filtering them, and adding

appropriate captions), they still enjoyed being able to select special "highlights" of their lives to display on the platform, showcase them to friends, and learn more about the "highlights" of others' lives as well. Another interesting aspect was the use of multiple accounts. Users expressed their joy in being able to see different sides of people's personalities through the variety in content. Along this vein, users also created different accounts, meant to cater to specific interests, like graphic design, photography, and finstas, and to different groups of people.
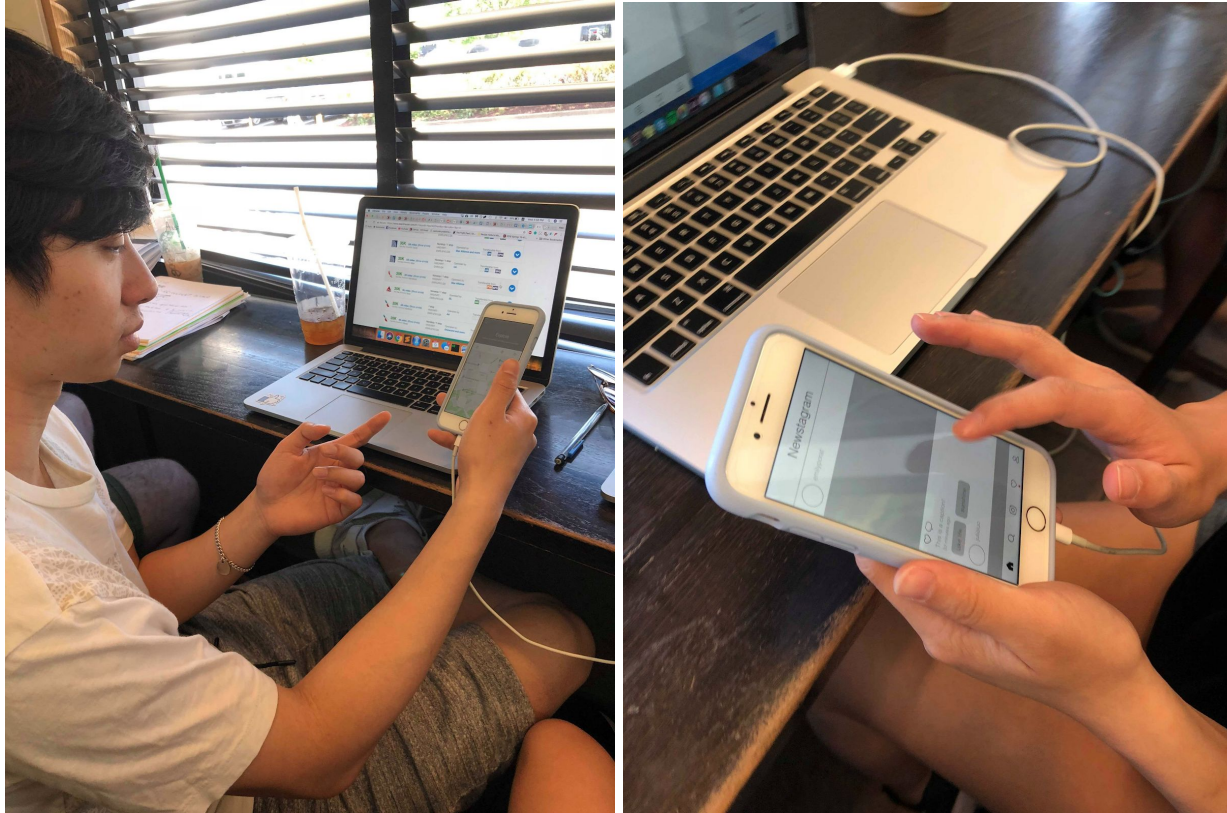
Initial Wireframes and Speed Dating

In creating our initial wireframes, we thought carefully about the insights collected from our research. Originally, we had approached the project with a goal of making Instagram more "authentic" and less prone to the homogeneity and calculated nature of posts nowadays. However, the results of our interviews and our struggle to craft a definition of "authenticity" for us to build toward made it clear that "authenticity" meant different things for everyone. A user could be authentic in their passion for curating beautiful, quality posts while another could see unfiltered, candid photos as their ideal of authentic. An endeavor to de-emphasize the over-curation of photos might be against the wishes of our target market, and enacting such a wide cultural change might be infeasible. Thus, we evolved our end goal to focus on fostering an environment where users would feel comfortable expressing their truest selves and posting the content they want to post, whether it's ultra-curated, completely unfiltered, or somewhere in between.
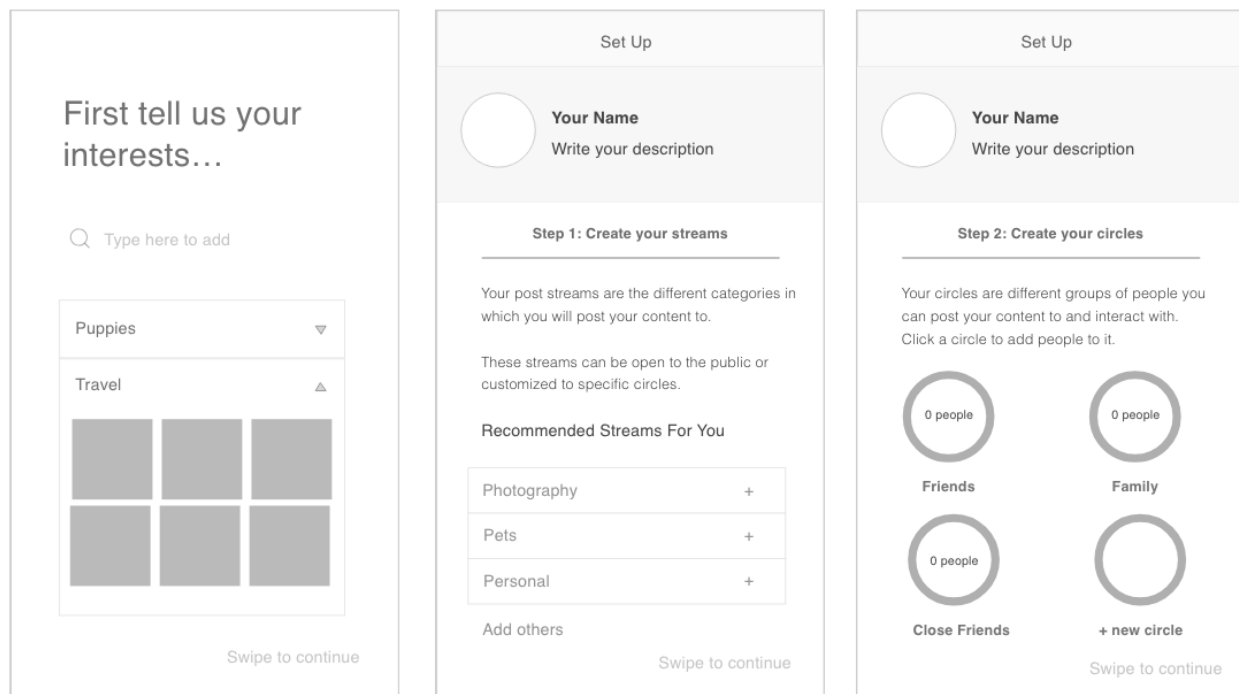
Our initial ideas centered around returning the focus of Instagram to user interests. We introduced the ideas of "circles", which are user-curated groups of friends. We also created "streams", allowing users to host multiple themed feeds, all in the same account. Furthermore, we recognized the idea that users might want to show different kinds of content to different friend circles, we made it so that users can designate which circles can see certain streams. We also took away indicators of social currency. Instead of showing amassed numbers for likes and followers, users would still receive notifications but would not be able to see the consolidated numbers. Finally, we revamped Instagram's Explore page. Users had mentioned that they purposely avoided clicking on certain types of content to avoid seeing similar items pop up on their Explore page. Furthermore, they expressed frustration at the seeming lack of variety and the ineffectiveness of the current algorithm. Our changes made it possible to filter explore queries by geographic location, chronology, and keyword.

After speed dating our initial wireframes with five users to test for intuitiveness, whether or not they would enjoy using the app or prefer the changes compared to how Instagram is now, and whether or not we achieved our goal of creating a comfortable, accepting environment for users. We also collected suggestions users might have for improvement.

The majority of users commented on our automatic tags and explore page with possible improvements. Users enjoyed the use of automatic tags (generated for photos depending on content) because they allowed for facilitated search, which they felt Instagram doesn't currently provide. However, they were worried that automatic tags would sometimes be incorrect or irrelevant, and suggested manual tag entry as a way to prevent against that. Users also commented on the functionality of the explore page. Most of them enjoyed the different filtering methods and thought they were simple and effective. Although they thought it was a large improvement over the current explore page, they suggested combining current functions, like searching by tag and by location, to make the feature more powerful.

Speed dating with people at Starbucks

We later conducted a second round of speed dating with three users to acquire further feedback, comments from which are included in the following section.

R E S U L T S

Our final wireframes took into account the suggestions given to us during user speed dating. Improvements and tweaks were made to features like the explore page, the initial account setup which included streams and circles, photo tags, and commenting and liking photos.

The final product starts the user off at a login screen prompting them to sign up. Upon signup, users are directed to input topics they're interested in. These selected interests will be a primary driver of the content that they will see on their Explore feed. Next, users are directed to create circles and streams. Following our second round of speed dating, we decided to switch the order in which these are created (circles first, and then streams), following user feedback on how to make this process more intuitive. We also adjusted the descriptions of each to make sure people knew that circles were user-designated groups of friends, and that streams were feeds that focused on a

particular topic.

The next big component, photo tags, were designed to automatically populate according to photo content in the "post a photo" screen. Following speed dating advice, we decided to also include a manual entry component as well as the option to "x" out pre-populated tags. This would allow for facilitated photo posting, but also give users control over how their photos are recognized through tags, and to fix pre-populated tags if they're wrong. Overall, this feature will play heavily into the Explore feed and allow users more facilitated search of relevant content.

In our final wireframes, Instagram's Explore feed got a huge makeover. Since our app focused on user interests, we really wanted to ensure that if users wanted to search for something, the results shown to them would be relevant, and the process would be simple and painless. Furthermore, we wanted the Explore feed to do something more than just show photos, but to also be able to help connect members of the community. Our Explore feed is comprised of four methods to search by. The first, list view, allows users to search by topic. The second, grid view, is organized by recency. The third allows users to search for photos tagged by geographical location. Finally, the fourth offers users the chance to meet others that share their interests. If the users chooses to let an algorithm match them with someone, they are shown a screen that displays the tags that resulted in each match. Users can then add or adjust these tags to refine the search. Anti-tags can also be added so the algorithm can avoid photos tagged with those keywords. The matchmaking algorithm can also be adjusted to combine user matching through tags with matching by proximity. Users can also see photos from their match's visible streams, and are given options to message or follow the account.

Lastly, after our second round of speed dating, we adjusted the way users interact with photos. Currently, we included a pop-up notification with each user "like" that also includes a prompt to message them. If the app detects that the user is a "serial" liker, this pop-up will no longer show up after each like, to avoid disrupting the user experience. After gathering speed dating feedback on commenting, we also made adjustments to that feature. Previously, when a user comments on a photo, their comment will be sent to the other person's inbox as a direct message. However, some interviewees commented that the feature might make it daunting for someone who might not want to initiate a conversation, or might not expect a reply to their comment. To that, we added the option to "like" a comment within the direct message. Hopefully, this feature will still spark conversation between users, but will also allow users to simply "like" a comment if they want to acknowledge a message or comment.

DISCUSSION

Over the course of this project, we learned a lot about current social media problems and trends that related specifically to Instagram but also exist in similar forms outside of the

platform. We also learned about the "haziness" that is social media and how contextual some issues are. Social medias all contain bubbles and circles that have different behaviors within their community. In this course we initially set out to make Instagram more "authentic" and create a platform that promotes better behavior and less negative and fake feelings. As we researched and developed ideas, we spent more and more time realizing that authenticity is a broad idea, and even as we defined our own version of it, making Instagram more authentic is a large and difficult culture change. With this thought we extended our project to include improvements in Instagram that involved allowing better interactions between people and better discovery of content and others. From this entire process of researching both authenticity and social media interactions, we had a few interesting discoveries and takeaways.

Decision Making on Instagram

We came into the platform of Instagram already knowing that a subset of users care about curating a specific type of feed. Team members explained how they themselves fell into the trap of posting the less relevant picture of their memorable event just because the picture was more aesthetic. Many people we initially interviewed talked about this need to post high quality content. Some chose to ignore this behavior and post what they wanted, others simply quit the platform, while many just chose to adapt. We brought our high-fi prototypes that allowed for multiple streams, so users could separate content, allowing for them to feel more comfortable posting all different types of posts. During user-testing and speed dating, many members explained that they like the separation of content but some said that they would only make their "non aesthetic" posts available for only certain people to see. This prompts us to examine future changes in the UI or the culture that would continue to break down the barriers that people put up in the content they post.

Besides making decisions about what to post, some Instagram users we talked to explained that they have to be extremely cautious on the platform because Instagram's algorithm will take account into any picture a user clicks on. A user said she only clicks on content that are design and art related so that her explore feed looks like such, even despite temptation to click on photos of influencers, memes, etc. We caught this cautiousness to be an unnecessary problem and created our automatic tagging system for this specific reason, allowing for seamless searching of content and an explore page based off your content posted and content you specifically select. We got incredibly positive feedback on this feature and we attribute this to the way we balanced decision making. Currently Instagram makes the decision for you on what to put in your explore content and they also do not allow for basic searching of a photo's content, only their hashtags. But these hashtags are on the user to add to the description of their photo. Our users from testing explained the need to make the decision on what they want to see in their explore and searches, but also loved the automatic tagging because of the speed and editability of it. We identified that perhaps users prefer technology to automatically do

their work for them, but to an extend in which they can alter or adjust the decision.

The Idea of 'Basic' and the Meaning of Authenticity

When we first set out on our mission to make Instagram "authentic" we were directly targeting a specific type of user and specific types of posts that we deemed "fake". We called these posts fake because they were illustrating only the glamorous and aesthetic parts of someone's life. We even got some pushback during our initial interviews that people came to Instagram to view content that was high quality and more aesthetic. At the same time we were getting comments on people's dislike for "basic-ness" on Instagram and that many people tried hard to avoid being basic. We found these ideas (being basic, being fake, etc) quite interesting and we even made our own definition of authenticity to combat the vagueness of our project. But we realize that there might be translation errors in our research and development. While trying to combat "fakeness" and make Instagram a platform where people can express themselves openly and authentically, some people felt as if we were simply trying to eliminate a certain population of users. That big social media influencers and people who care about the high quality aspect of Instagram would just move to a different platform. These points made us consider if our changes to Instagram's platform would be enough to change the culture or would just drive out those who wouldn't like it. Currently people are deleting their accounts in rebellion of the "fakeness" instead of contributing better content and trying to change the culture. Is it possible that our new features would cause a rebellion from a different side of users? Future steps and research definitely require us to look into the idea of changing a culture and people's mindsets.

We also worried that the need to not be "basic" drives people to not be open about content. The connotation of being basic is quite negative, despite basicness often pertaining to popular trends and mainstream culture. Our system captures a way for people to feel less judged and feel more open to how they post their content, but there could be more in terms of making users feel less pressured to be "different" or "special".

Instagram Bubbles

Our team also recognized the limitations to our study and product. The three of us are all avid Instagram users and are currently college students at Carnegie Mellon. Our perception and experience with Instagram is relatively limited due to the people we surround ourselves with, especially since the population at Carnegie Mellon is relatively uniform and does not represent the entire population of Instagram well. While we looked towards many research studies and some that took place in other countries to get an idea of social media in different populations, we still believe that our research easily missed some crucial perspectives. For example, the younger high school and middle school age group uses Instagram much differently than us who are currently in college. For those high school students, Instagram replaces Facebook for them, which is not the

case for most of us at Carnegie Mellon. We also understand that our bubble at Carnegie Mellon are users that are in a higher income bracket and are mostly liberal. We think a very important path for this project would be to research more diverse audiences, test with these audiences, and identify differences and needs across these populations. Early on, we identified that Instagram breeds a culture of making life look more luxurious and glamorous. How does that affect people of different socioeconomic backgrounds? We imagine that the different perspectives would bring interesting research insights. Perhaps a part of making Instagram more authentic could include making Instagram more approachable and usable for all types of participants.

C O N C L U S I O N

Over the course of this project, we learned a lot about current social media problems and trends that related specifically to Instagram but also exist in similar forms outside of the platform. We also learned about the "haziness" that is social media and how contextual some issues are. Social medias all contain bubbles and circles that have different behaviors within their community. In this course we initially set out to make Instagram more "authentic" and create a platform that promotes better behavior and less negative and fake feelings. As we researched and developed ideas, we spent more and more time realizing that authenticity is a broad idea, and even as we defined our own version of it, making Instagram more authentic is a large and difficult culture change. With this thought we extended our project to include improvements in Instagram that involved allowing better interactions between people and better discovery of content and others. From this entire process of researching both authenticity and social media interactions, we had a few interesting discoveries and takeaways.

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