



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Strategie di Comunicazione
Classe LM-92

Tesi di Laurea

BeReal or BeFake? Diving into Social Media Authenticity

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Anno Accademico 2023 / 2024

Abstract

This Master's Thesis explores the concept of authenticity on social media, focusing specifically on the BeReal platform.

To provide a foundation, Chapter One begins with a theoretical framework that defines authenticity, particularly from a psychological perspective, and examines its relevance in digital environments and social media.

After that, Chapter Two provides an analysis of the application BeReal, delving into its features and affordances, and highlighting the possible interactions with the app.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology and findings from interviews conducted with sixteen BeReal users. The interviews reveal diverse perspectives on what constitutes authenticity and how it is manifested through user interactions with the app's features. The collected data highlights authenticity's subjective nature and its varied interpretation among different users.

Chapter Four synthesizes these findings, comparing them with theoretical frameworks and existing literature on authenticity. Finally, proposals of areas for future research are suggested, emphasizing the need for larger, more diverse samples, and longitudinal analyses to deepen the understanding of authenticity in digital environments.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank some people who were there for me these past few years.
My parents and my sister, for their love and really precious support;
My friends, those who are still here with me year after year, city after city, and those who brought their spark in more recently;
My boyfriend, for his patience and attempts to learn communication for me.
Thank you all for being the responders of endless calls and emotional supporters these years - and especially these last few months.
That's all folks.

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Introduction

What does it mean to be authentic?

It may appear as a completely abstract question, of difficult theorization. In order to make it more accessible, the context of authenticity could be narrowed down to one that more than 5 billion users experience every day: social media (Internet and Social Media Users in the World 2024, 2024).

What does it mean to be authentic on social media?

This version of the question does not seem particularly more approachable, but two pathways could make it more clear. In fact, all social media platforms have communities, scope, features: a proper identity. At the same time, users should have an idea of how they behave on social media, what they do, what they like about a platform, which features they do not use, and so on.

This Master Thesis project aims to combine users' perceptions of authenticity regarding a peculiar social media platform that claims to be made exactly to enhance real behaviors: BeReal.

Considering the global attention that this social media has received only in the past two years (iPhone App of the Year, n.d.) and the claims that the BeReal team makes to accompany new features and community relations, high levels of authenticity and "real" behaviors are expected by its users. Or is it?

In this Master's Thesis research, the reader will find an attempt at analysis of authenticity related to BeReal.

To start, a theoretical framework is provided, analyzing how authenticity has been defined, mostly from a psychological point of view, and what the intersections are with the digital environment and social media in particular.

Backed by a more thorough understanding of how authenticity can be understood and defined, the second chapter will shift to the second fundamental section, proposing an analysis of the features of BeReal. Like all social media apps, BeReal offers new features and with such affordances, users interact and establish their own preferences and patterns. For this reason, it is fundamental to fully understand the functioning of features and affordances within the app.

The key to this research is the realization of discursive interviews that have allowed me to get the most realistic experiential answers from people using the app and interacting with its features.

Finally, the conversations engaged with the sixteen users interviewed allowed us to formulate some possible connections between the conceptualization of authenticity and BeReal, with its features and users' usage patterns.

In addition, mostly because of the technical and logistical constraints related to the realization of a master's degree thesis project, a handful of aspects could be implemented and further investigated by fellow students and the academic community, possibly as well as developers for other social media applications.

Chapter 1

1.1 Defining authenticity

Authenticity is a broad concept that can be looked at from many different perspectives. The scholar community has tried to define authenticity for decades, in several study fields (as in Straub, 2012, p.10). As many philosophers of the past already started analyzing the concept of authenticity (Heidegger, Sartre, and the existentialists), and more recent scholars have continued their work on it, I believe that, for the purposes of this study, only a few things need to be highlighted.

I would like to analyze the concept of authenticity for individuals and their self-perception, authenticity concerning the context and the relation with other people, and finally the concept of authenticity with respect to technology and online spaces.

As Straub concisely stated: “There are, of course, different kinds of authenticity” (Straub, 2012, p.11). I would interpret it as follows: there is not a unique global definition of authenticity because it depends on several factors. Of these, without diving too deep into psychology or philosophy, we shall mention: the individual, their perception of their own authenticity, and the context in which the individual considers their authenticity.

We could start our analysis with the definition of authenticity provided by Sartre:

“... (your) choosing freely without rationalizing or pretending that someone or something made you choose the way you did, and fully accepting the consequences of your choices” (as in Wang & Skovira, 2017, p.1).

Having considered several studies on the definition of authenticity, I will here briefly analyze the facets of this concept needed for my research.

Firstly, authenticity has been widely considered as an intrinsic human characteristic. According to Ryan & Dec’s self-determination theory (2000, as is Neufeld-Wall, 2023, p.5), inherently, human beings tend to prioritize acting in accordance with their intrinsic motives, although the degree to which they actually do so varies among individuals. This has been clearly stated in the self-congruence theory. Self-congruity refers to the alignment between a person's image and an individual's self-concept, where the self-concept is described as the whole of thoughts and emotions pertaining to an individual as a subject (Rosenberg, 1979, as in Neufeld-Wall, 2023, p.4). Basically one behaves as they believe is right, as their emotions tell them. One feels authentic when

they do not perceive a mismatch between their inner core values and their outer behaviors. This acting according to intrinsic values avoids the so-called self alienation, that is the feeling of acting against one's conscious awareness. It would be, for example, a person going very often to do shopping, while actually hating shopping. A person who believes in altruism and helping people in need, no matter the circumstances, would likely feel self-alienated if they ignored a homeless person kindly asking for some change. Moreover, these behaviors, in order for one to keep being authentic, need to be consistent across situations and roles, as demonstrated in a study conducted by Boucher (2011, as in Jongman-Sereno, p.134). According to this theory, a helpful-by-nature man should behave consistently with their nature, be so at school as a teacher with children and colleagues, at home as a father, when volunteering, when playing cards with friends, etc. This concept of roles and boundaries is particularly important in the technological and online environments, where such may not be as defined as in "real life".

"Situations matter, to a certain degree" (Wang & Skovira, 2017, p.4).

Maintaining authenticity requires effort, as it is not only a matter of self-consciousness, but it is also affected by external context-related factors such as peer pressure, expectations, social hierarchies, and other influences (Haimson et al., 2021). The same situation outlined here above, someone ignoring a homeless person, can be explained by the social group the individual belongs to and its expectations. If they are passing by the homeless person with a group of Boy Scout friends, the individual is expected to feel free to follow their core values and help the homeless.

In a completely different context, the fear of being judged by a group of posh colleagues could deter the individual from acting as they would prefer to, possibly causing some inner questioning within themselves about their core belief in altruism and helping those less fortunate.

Furthermore, authenticity is not automatic. Notably, Wang & Skovira (2017) in their paper gather and explain, based on past literature review, three dimensions of authenticity: authentic self, authentic being, and authentic context.

As we have seen, "To the self, authenticity as an existential object shows up as a consequence of a person's choices within a situation." (Wang & Skovira, 2017, p.2). If the aim of one's choice is solely its external outcome, then the self-presented is inauthentic. An inauthentic self cares mostly about appearances and less about the

consequences of their deceptive actions of self and others. An authentic self, ideally, forgets about oneself and is solely present in the situation, interacting with others and being fully themselves.

For those who perceive and recognize this separation between self and others, and therefore the possibility of causing disrespect and harm to them, authenticity is innate. Some others recognize the potential to break this harmony of reciprocity with others, but they require a mental effort to keep their authenticity and not harm. Finally, there are those who live authenticity as an aim, for the external outcome it generates. Still, this last category needs a “cognitive shock”. This theory, reported by Wang and Skovira (2017), was already discussed by Heidegger (1927, as in Varga & Guignon, 2023) and, as much as it may seem deeply theoretical, I believe that it can be further understood if we superimpose the concept of “not causing harm” to “behaving according to one’s self ethic and morality”. In fact, when one’s actions are deceiving or utter lies, for whatever reason, their image might get irreparably compromised and the relationship with the interlocutor and the context is disrupted.

Taking the example mentioned above, there are many ways in which one can help the homeless person, assuming that it is a moral imperative. Hence, notwithstanding the method adopted, a performed core value shows authenticity. One can provide help to the homeless heartily and unconditionally. But they could also do so only when they are with other compassionate friends, maybe as a whole group. Finally, they could help the homeless person in front of their posh colleagues to show blatant generosity, and they might not even truly believe that they should have helped that person in need in the first place, but need to do it in front of their colleagues to show they are the “kind-hearted one” they are supposed to be.

A case of maintaining a “fake authenticity”.

Finally, the concept of authentic context is further explained as a matter of subjective choices, that are tightly connected to the way in which the event or issue happens, as part of a “context of possibilities” (Wang & Skovira, 2017). “Social interactions and media place us in these situations of possible authenticity” (Barrett, 1964, pp. 68-69, as in Wang & Skovira, 2017, p.4).

To summarize, the aspects that I believe to be relevant to fully understand the research in this study are as follows:

Authenticity requires alignment of behavior with one’s deep and internal values.

Authenticity requires consistency across situations and roles.

Authenticity as an intrinsic value is inevitably affected by societal expectations, influences, and different contexts, although they should be independent of them as much as possible.

Inauthenticity can be detrimental to the situation itself in which an event happens, and to the people involved, one self’s included.

Authenticity is subjectively perceived and is not automatically achieved, requiring different levels of effort, if any, by each individual.

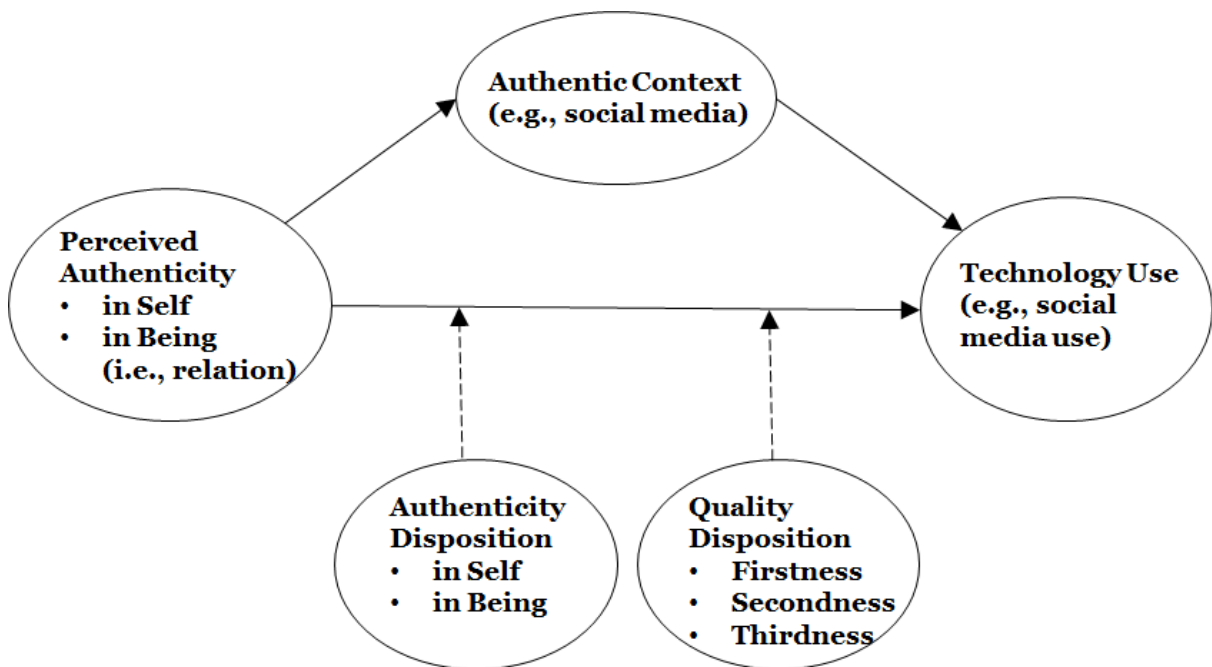


Image 1: Levels of authenticity and their interrelations.

1.2 Authenticity and technology

Simon, as well as Pallud and Straub (as in Wang & Skovira, 2017, p.1) and many others, push the discussion on authenticity even further, introducing the environment of new technologies. In fact, they seem to agree on the fact that technology, as “man-made as opposed to natural,” simply implies the impossibility of achieving authenticity in the technological environment.

One could raise an interesting question here: can a person’s self-disposition toward

authenticity predict their usage of technology? (Wang & Skovira, 2017, p.2). I shall try to provide an answer in the research part of my study. It is clear, as we have seen and can intuitively understand, that authenticity is experienced differently by everyone. While it is also true that everyone can use their technological tools, like apps and social media, the way they prefer, maybe there is a shared area in which one domain influences the other and vice versa.

McLuhan (1994) has been credited as the author of the famous statement: “We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.” I believe that not only this is true, but also that tools can be declined, entering the social media context, as social media platforms themselves and as single *affordances* of those apps. One’s desire to be authentic (and the way they will enact such desire) can influence the choice of apps and their affordances, much as available, common, or trending affordances can influence one’s authenticity. In particular, affordances are defined as “the quality or property of an object that defines its possible uses or makes clear how it can or should be used” (Merriam-Webster, *Affordance*, 2024)

In fact, a person who uses a specific social media platform or app is identified and categorized both by themselves and by others as a user of that specific application. The app is in turn stereotyped as being used by a specific audience with specific characteristics. I would interpret this as shaping and being shaped by the tool, and an individual’s authenticity with them. In particular, I believe that how one (doesn’t) decide to be or appear authentic on an app can greatly shift their type of usage. An example of two popular behaviors on Instagram will shortly be introduced, concerning the app, its affordances, and authenticity. Moreover, this aspect will be further investigated in the following research-focused chapter of this thesis, analyzing the newcomer of social media applications: BeReal.

Supporting the observations above, Wang and Skovira (2017, p.2) argue that:

“Authenticity, like any other traits in a person and/or in a relationship to others, can be fluid, flexible, dynamic and hence shapeable. It is a trait in spontaneous presence of the self, in relation to others, open to all contextual possibilities; yet it also has a deep root in morality. Social media is a new contextual environment to shape and reshape authenticity”.

Authenticity and social media are two frameworks that intertwine on a theoretical level

possibly even more than authenticity and technology at broad. In particular, this is due to the fact that when talking about social media, the subject shifts from “general” users, adults included, to specifically and stereotypically young people. This is not necessarily true at all times, as there are social media apps with higher and lower average users’ ages, such as the difference between Facebook’s and TikTok’s (Statista & DataReportal, 2024a; Statista & DataReportal, 2024b). Most youth, learning to approach life and building their own characters, possibly their approach to authenticity as well, come across screens and social media and integrate them into their daily lives. On social media, to be authentic, great importance is given to self-consistency (Davis, 2014; Darr, 2022). This can be declined both as actions online matching one’s perception of “true” self and consistency between online and offline presence, reflecting the theoretical background we explored so far. Research shows that adolescents actively seek continuity between their online and offline selves (e.g. Davis, 2014). Furthermore, for what regards the perception of one’s “true” self, the mode of usage of social media can play a role. In fact, the active engagement of users on such media platforms has been associated with feelings of positivity and an authentic expression of self online. Conversely, passive usage such as scrolling and liking, rather than actively posting original content, tend to decrease these positive effects (Darr, 2022).

Moreover, on Instagram, some new trends have appeared that seem to push towards the active usage of the app, but possibly pushing even further authenticity (Davis, 2014). Here, I will only briefly present two of these trends and how they take place on the platform, as I believe that this active and creative use of the app manipulates existing app affordances to fit the need for more authenticity in such online places. For instance, Generation Z has introduced on Instagram the concept of “photo dump”. It uses the posting format of the carousel (multiple photos, up to 15) to show unpolished photos, supposedly unedited, as opposed to traditional posts. Photos are “dumped” on the feed, as they are, not cherry-picked, suggesting a more authentic presentation of the user and their experiences, contrary to what would be the photo selection and editing process ahead of the old-fashioned posting.

On Instagram, another phenomenon that is largely known and used by youth is the creation of “Finstas” or Fake Instagram accounts as a means to authentically express themselves, particularly when they feel a mismatch with the portrayal of their identity on

their primary account (Darr, 2022). These phenomena bring to the surface two interesting aspects. Firstly, authenticity and its markers, namely unedited photos or more “real” accounts, can somehow be a way to show off (Abidin, 2017, as in Siepen, 2023, p.12). Secondly, Finstas bring about the concept of context collapse: this occurs when boundaries between multiple audiences become blurred, making it challenging for young people to maintain authenticity in the virtual space (Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Darr, 2022). Unlike the offline world, where individuals can adjust their self-presentation based on specific social contexts - such as workplace, family, and religious environment - social networks erase such boundaries, complicating the ability to appear authentic or genuine (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Finstas could be seen then as examples of individuals trying to create and establish more neat boundaries using the app affordances available, such as the possibility to create several accounts by the same person. Moreover, research indicates that individuals may dramatically alter their self-presentation based on the social media platform they are using and often conform to peer practices (Darr, 2022). In fact, as investigated by Davis (2014), according to the majority of youth, online environments are synonyms of peer contexts. Peer pressure and solidarity, being driving forces in life development (Kandel, 1986), make it inevitable to attempt to please and differentiate oneself from the masses, even if this entails having to “split” one’s personality into categories and multiple online profiles to fit.

I would like to highlight here the seeming opposition to the theory explained at the beginning of this chapter, explaining that authenticity requires consistency across situations and roles. I would argue that authenticity should ideally overrun the boundaries of different situations and environments, keeping oneself authentic through them. However, it is likely still complex to navigate for youth - and for adults as well - possibly confining consistency amongst platforms and roles to an ideal objective, rather difficult to accomplish.

For what regards, once again, a more theoretical understanding of the relationship between social media with authenticity, Wang and Skovira (2017) argue that three relational positions, not mutually exclusive I may add, can be individuated.

Firstly, social media serves as a platform for self-presentation, offering immediate accessibility and widespread reach. However, its value lies solely in its facilitation of communication. Whether the portrayal on social media reflects one's genuine life or not

determines its authenticity. If the intention behind self-presentation is to deceive, social media becomes a powerful tool for such widespread deception. What truly matters is the disposition towards authenticity, rather than the context or the medium itself (Pallud and Straub, 2007).

Secondly, the representation of oneself in media is merely a snapshot, providing a limited view of one's identity. It does not include the entirety of one's true experiences. Meaning that one can be authentic on social media and not outside of it and vice-versa, the two environments not being a proxy for one another.

Finally, engaging extensively in online communication may diminish the amount of time spent experiencing real-life moments and interactions, if we take the assumption that “real life” is solely outside of social media.

The online authenticity paradox seems to lay amongst those three points of view: it doesn't imply that every individual seeks to present themselves uniformly across all online and offline contexts. In fact, most people find ways to maintain some level of authenticity online by leveraging various channels such as private messages, multiple accounts, and distinct online networks (Haimson et al., 2021).

To complete this brief analysis of the overlap between social media and authenticity, I believe it is fundamental to summarize the results of the research conducted by Haimson et al. (2021). It has to be noted that there might be a sample bias in this case, as the people interviewed had recently experienced major life transitions. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the answers summarized by the authors did not show major conceptual flaws due to the sample characteristics, making it a valuable example of existing research on the identified topic. The researchers asked participants several questions, and from the answers they gathered, they tried to answer the broad question: “What does it mean to be authentic?”

Numerous participants expressed the importance of maintaining authenticity online, even though they also recognized its subjective nature. The most prevalent descriptions of online authenticity included presenting one's identity consistently across various online and offline spheres and sharing online both positive and negative aspects of life.

Moreover, participants frequently expressed disapproval towards individuals in their networks whom they perceived as lacking authenticity, particularly if those were possibly trying to present a particular image of themselves to seek validation, or bowing to external

pressures. Others presented a more complex and faceted approach to authenticity, recognizing variations between online presentations on different platforms, networks, and for different audiences.

Interestingly, media scholars Marees, Banjac, and Hanusch (2021, as cited in Siepen, 2023) link authenticity with the concept of transparency, which is some sort of “rawness”, sharing personal, sometimes uncomfortable details. This is a further marker of digital intimacy, facilitated by “honest” encounters online and sharing of relatable imperfections and negativity, too.

Ultimately, all these markers mentioned above characterize online authenticity: spontaneity, consistency, truthfulness, rawness, transparency, and intimacy (Siepen, 2023). However, in this discussion, we have also hovered several times over the possibility of authenticity being interpreted as a “performative construction” (Siepen, 2023). Authenticity can be indeed identified as a tool employed for a specific purpose: stating one’s uniqueness and differentiating oneself from other users in online environments (Marwick, 2013). Marwick states that “in online environments saturated with celebrity culture and marketing rhetoric, authenticity has a significant presence” (Marwick, 2013). In widely commercialized environments, such as social media, flooded with advertisements and blatantly marketed personalities, authenticity can indicate a non-commercial space (Banet-Waiser, 2012 & Potter, 2011 as in Siepen, 2023, p.11). But possibly at this point, a paradox can be highlighted, as argued by information technology scholars Uski and Lampinen: “authentic representations are positioned in the context of having to be framed as such by external forces” (2016, as in Siepen, 2023, p.13). And wouldn’t this imply a stretch on authenticity needing to be ostentatious and blatant simply in order to be recognized, therefore not being “straightforwardly true and unintentional” anymore? If authenticity needs to be recognized on online platforms to differentiate one from the masses, can it still be called authentic? If the content on social media, having such a wide audience, is the prey of marketers for the sole purpose of profit, the quality of the content becomes undoubtedly questionable (Wang & Skovira, 2017). If we consider the frequency with which individuals even market themselves, their whole online personality, does it make the “quality” of such individuals questionable, too? Does authenticity overlap with such quality? These seem to be the conclusions reached by Wang & Skovira (2017), as well as White (2006, as cited in Siepen, 2023). White, in a

discussion around liveness, argues that monetization practices pose a risk to the establishment of authenticity and liveness. The concept of liveness, as an affordance of social media platforms and in relation to authenticity deserves a short parenthesis at the end of this literature review and is defined in the Oxford Research Encyclopedias (Kim, 2017) as:

“so versatile and mobile is the semantic range of liveness that it is probably wiser to approach the notion by exploring what set of concepts “liveness” is often artificially pitted against: in various disciplines of music, performance, and media studies, “digital,” “mediatized,” “recorded,” “secondhand,” “rehearsed,” and “inauthentic” tend to be brought into the paradigm.”

In fact, the possibility to present content “on the spot”, ideally unedited, makes the perception of such content more authentic. For instance, a photo dump posted on the feed a month after a vacation will likely be perceived as more authentic than a “traditional” carousel post. Those same photos posted during or immediately after the same vacation will likely be less mediatized and more of a spontaneous publication. Even more, a set of Instagram stories posted during the vacation itself will appear as live, non-curated.

Nevertheless, zooming out of the analysis of single affordances of Instagram, here taken as an example of “traditional” social media platforms, such as Facebook and Snapchat too, the side effect of such media with enormous audiences is still marketing. The majority of app affordances on Instagram seems to favor the production of polished content, to market such content or oneself’s image. In the following chapters, I will analyze the relationship between single app affordances and authenticity with reference to the “new entry” of the social media league: BeReal.

Chapter 2

2.1 Understanding the app: BeReal

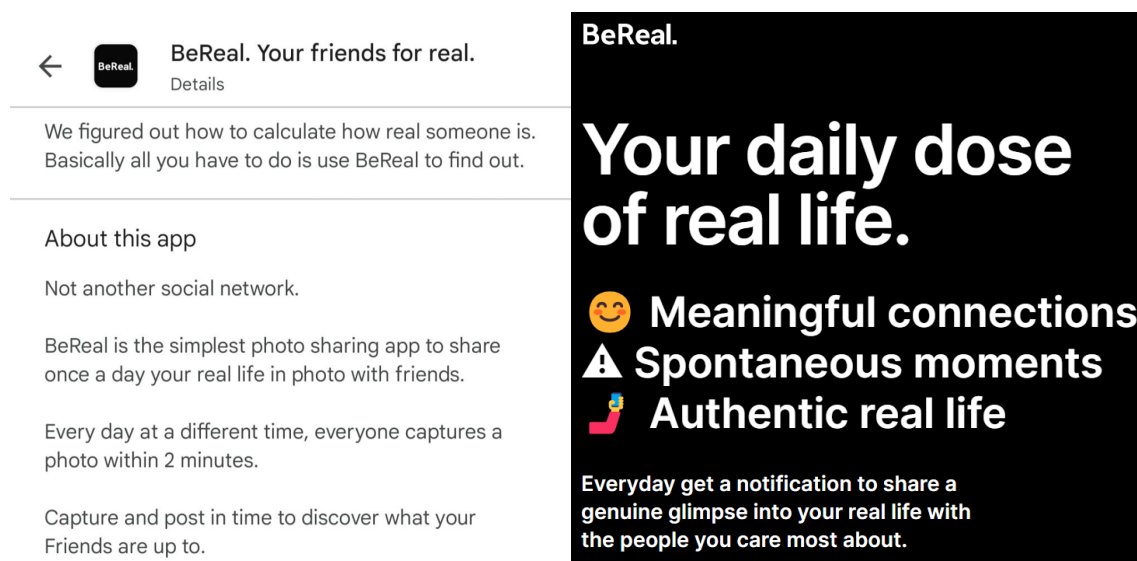
In this chapter, I will focus my analysis on BeReal, giving a short introduction to the app, its history, and the way its team interacts with the users. Then, I will analyze more in detail the app's affordances with a particular focus on the possible impact they have on authenticity, and vice versa. I will finally conclude with a broader reasoning on BeReal and authenticity. I will dedicate the next chapter to investigating the relations between users, affordances, and authenticity based on the results of my research.

BeReal is the app that claims to be “the most authentic way to stay connected with everyone you care about” (*BeReal. Your Friends for Real. App Store.*, 2024). Claiming authenticity since the very beginning, BeReal was launched in December 2019 by the French Barreyat and Perreau. The timing was not splendid, due to the worldwide pandemic spread in early 2020, yet the app “exploded” in the Summer of 2022, reaching 73.5 million active users in August that year (BeReal Revenue and Usage Statistics, 2024). The app supposedly owes its success to the different take it offers on social media (Silberling, 2023). This new fresh approach and some local early marketing strategies are likely what brought the app to win the iPhone App of the Year for 2022:

“The photo-sharing app BeReal offered a truly authentic look. (...) We had a new favorite part of our day this year: getting notified it was “Time to BeReal.” (...) A big part of BeReal’s fun is never knowing when the daily notification will arrive. It’s caught us lazing in bed, about to dig into our lunch, daydreaming at our desk. (...) Those simple rules distinguish BeReal from any other social or photo-sharing app—and actually helped us see our friends in new ways. (...) Each unplanned photo, caught from a different perspective, stitched together a new kind of experience, challenging the all-too-common notion that only the most glamorous moments in our lives are worth sharing.

In addition to this innovative way of using social media, BeReal does not do online advertisement campaigns, focusing mostly on the social media presence of the founders and team. As of April 2024, even the newest feature introducing brands is clearly said not to be an advertisement (*BeReal. Your Friends for Real.*, 2024). Barreyat and Perreau often highlighted on social media, without ever recurring explicitly to guerrilla marketing or

direct attacks on “opponent” social networks, the outstanding and differentiating features of their app, while doing so on bigger and older platforms, with broader audiences. In fact, due to the characteristics of BeReal that, I will shortly explain, the app only recently became suitable for communication to large and indiscriminate audiences even by the BeReal team itself. For this reason, the main contact points between the app authors and their audience were other social media, such as X and Instagram, the App Store and Google Play, and the official website. The “realness” of the photos and relationships BeReal advocates for reflects on their very direct communication style, as shown in their website, where they also communicate with their users: news, help center, updates, announcements, and even two competitions launched during 2023 (BeReal, 2024; BeReal. Your Friends for Real., 2024). The simple, direct, colloquial language they chose to use reflects greatly the fresh style that their young target audience understands and uses daily. Furthermore, the team always emphasizes their commitment to attention to users’ requests, supposedly following which, the new upgrades are created.



Images 2, 3: BeReal’s self-presentation on Google Play and their official website

Press

We're grateful for the response to BeReal, which is keeping us very busy. We want to take a brief moment to answer some of the questions that have come up in the media and are on people's minds. What matters most to us is building the best product for our users.

We want for ourselves what we want for our users – not to chase fame or the spotlight or to be tethered to metrics like the number of followers or number of downloads. We don't share our numbers, even though we see lots of rumored estimates online. In the spirit of authenticity and veracity, we'll say to take these figures for what they are...estimates :).

Our product is what our users want to make it – whether it's seeing what your grandparents are up to today or staying in touch with your best friends across the globe, BeReal is here to connect you to the people that matter to you.

BeReal is free to use, and we don't have ads. You may be wondering if we'll have ads or how we think about monetizing the app. First, we want to stick around for as long as you'll have us, but working with brands is not our priority. There are a lot of cool things we want to build, and we're very lucky to be able to prioritize our time this way. We assure you, once we're ready to share information, you'll know.

Thanks to all our users for their love, feedback, and suggestions... we're on it.

To stay current with what's new from us, please visit our [Help Center](#).

For press related inquiries, you can contact us at pr@bere.al

BeReal Team

Image 4: “Press” section on BeReal’s website

As we can see in particular in the first two images above, the creators highlight how using BeReal allows users to “be real”, while also stressing greatly the aim of connecting people, as well as the uniqueness of the app and its users. Then, in the “Press” image we can see how they express a focal point I will further develop in this and in the following chapter: “Our product is what our users want to make it”.

Although the few examples they enumerate after that key sentence are still in the realm of connecting people, I would here amplify the statement to all of the app affordances. In fact, I believe that BeReal’s affordances allow numerous user practices to flourish, all different from one another and still somehow influencing each other.

For this reason, and to better understand the references that will be made in the interviews in the next chapter, I will here analyze the BeReal features available, updated to 15 April 2024. I will also express my reasoning around authenticity for each feature, trying to be objective, in order to have the broadest possible analysis, open to all opposite points of view on such affordances and features.

I believe it is important, however, to highlight that I am a Gen-Z user myself of several social media apps, BeReal included, therefore I may occasionally express my personal opinion when it seems to be shared by a broad community of the social media realm, based on common knowledge about my generation and online commentaries.

2.2 BeReal's affordances

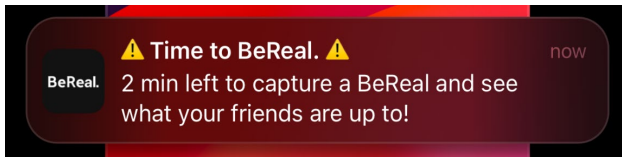


Image 5: It's time to BeReal notification

Time to BeReal. The functioning of the app is based on the simple concept that everyone within the same geographical area will receive one daily notification on their phone, all at the same time. This notification comes at a completely random moment throughout the day, usually when most people are awake: roughly between 7 am and 10 pm (*BeReal Time History*, 2024). From the instant in which the user receives the notification, a countdown of 2 minutes starts, exhorting them to capture the BeReal of the day. A BeReal is an almost simultaneous double-sided picture. A photo will be shot from the internal camera side - the selfie one - and another picture will be taken from the external main camera of the phone. I specify that the photos are not exactly simultaneous: the user can decide which shot to give more importance and adjust the view from that side, while the other photo will be taken within only a few seconds - an amount of time not precise nor constant. The outcome result is then subject to two aspects: on one hand, the user is allowed to adjust the photo framing before clicking the superimposed shutter release button; on the other hand, the second photo will be shot without preview, so the user will have much less control over that.

It can also be interesting to notice that users can zoom in and out, highlighting or excluding details from their photos, somehow directing and reworking the shots.

Friends. Another key feature of BeReal is that users cannot see their friends' photos if they haven't posted their own beforehand. Users will only be able to see the usernames of those who have already posted their BeReal, but the photos will be blurred and will only become visible once one's own photo is shared, without any consequence if it is already past the two-minute timeframe.

Moreover, the only way in which a user can add a new friend on BeReal is by having their phone number saved in the address book, or by knowing their BeReal username. There is almost no chance to create connections with strangers. Even the "People You May Know" list is based on people from the address book who recently created a BeReal

profile or friends of friends that, based on the shared connections, users may know already. This stresses the importance for BeReal to “keep the circle small”, to keep posting as private as possible. No importance is attributed to numbers: followers/friends, reactions, comments.

Additionally, I would argue that the claim of BeReal being an “unedited” platform for real photos clashes strongly with the majority of the photos that the app team shares on the app’s official website and social media profiles. If users take their BeReal on time from Monday to Friday, we can imagine there is a very high probability that these will be “boring” BeReals. Books, computers, and libraries would be the main subjects during school and university courses for younger users and university students. If those working have even the chance of taking their daily photo on time, that will likely be in the same office or factory setting. However, the representation that the BeReal team often chooses to give in their signature photos might be far from authentic, detached from common-people reality. Even most photos shown recently on the official BeReal profiles (e.g. on Instagram) depict realities and far-from-normal lives: vacations, amazing sceneries, and perfect outfits.

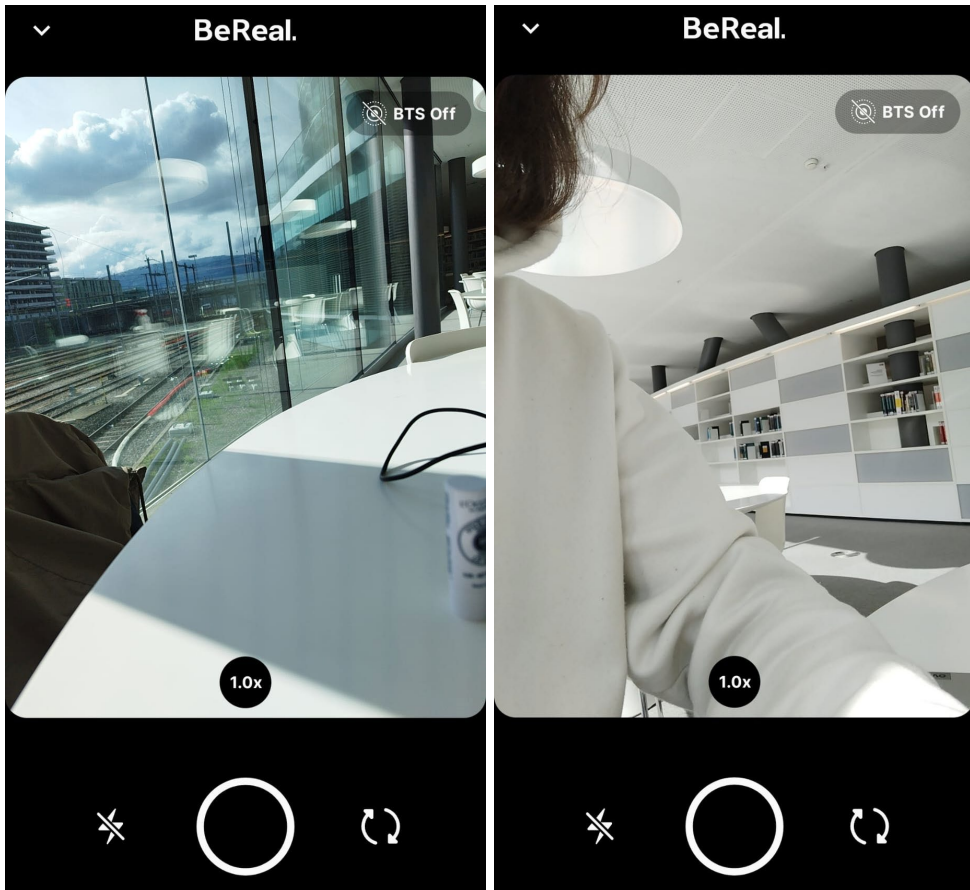


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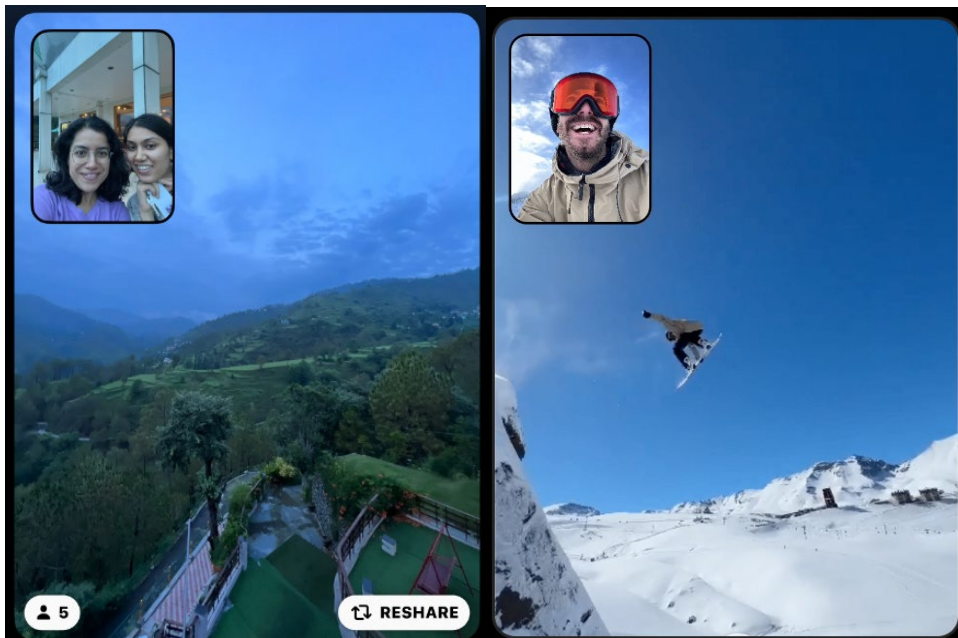


Bereal really put into perspective how boring other peoples lives are. i lost all sense of fomo when i saw my friends that are stuck in front of computers all day and thats probably most of their day

Image 6: A Reddit’s user opinion on BeReal and the kind of lives the app shows



Images 7, 8: Internal-external camera layout when taking a BeReal





Images 9, 10, 11: Unrealistic life representations on the BeReal website and social media

Retakes. What happens if a user doesn't catch the notification in two minutes and therefore is not able to post the BeReal on time? They will still be able to post the BeReal after the two-minute window, whether they decide to do it as soon as they notice the notification, when they remember about it, or when they believe the moment they are living is worth being captured on a BeReal. There will be almost no consequences at all. In fact, users will be able to post a "Late BeReal" at any time before the notification of the following day. There are two consequences of posting late: friends with the dedicated notification activated will receive a notification about one of their friends posting late, and the Late BeReal will be flagged with a small time indicator next to the username.

Realmoji and comments. Realmojis are reactions, somehow like the Instagram stories' reactions or messaging reactions, such as WhatsApp ones. However, they still show a chance to show authenticity, if they desire so.

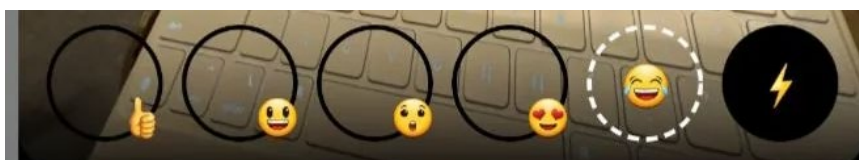


Image 12: Still-blank Realmojis

Firstly, users must take a photo for each standard realmoji. They are encouraged to take a photo of themselves mimicking the emoji, so the reaction they'll post under friends' posts will be unique, like each user is, but still recognizable, like an emoji. They are typically not changed, at least not frequently, therefore their usage is rapid and does not require taking another photo every time to react to someone else's photo, clearly decreasing slightly the potential authenticity of the feature.

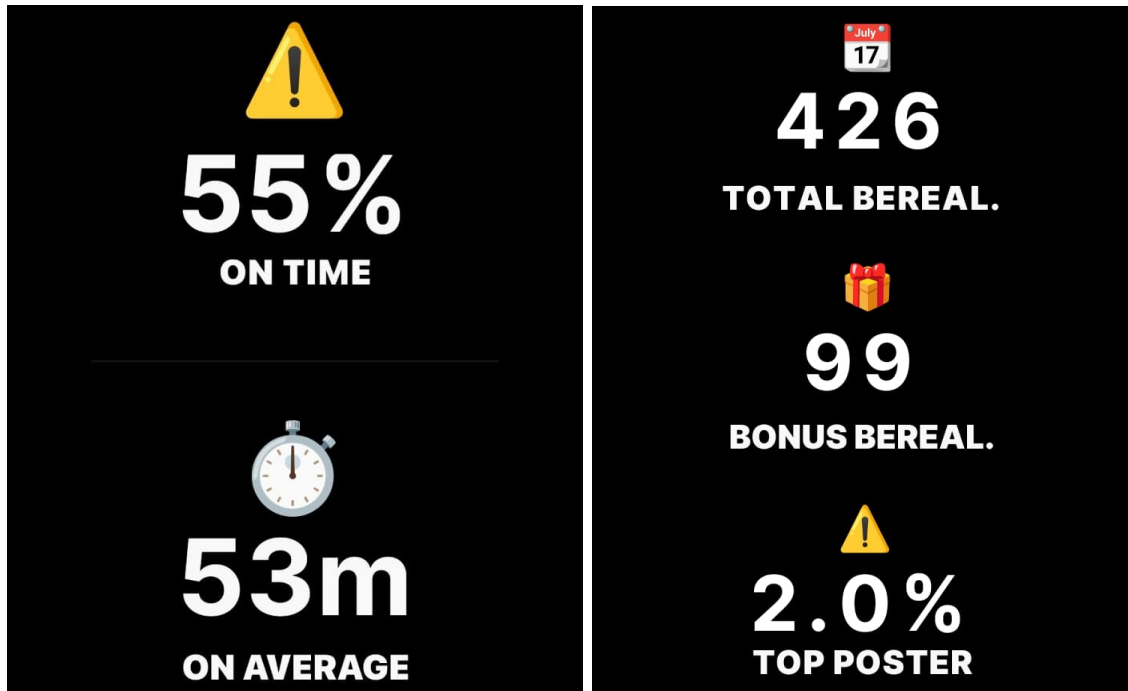
Secondly, the user can use an extra non-standard realmoji, shot instantaneously to express the feeling and genuine reaction to a friend's BeReal. the Instant Realmoji will be a one-time reaction, allowing the user to create it instantly every time they want.

There is also the possibility of commenting below someone's BeReal, possibly starting a short conversation with them, and increasing the contact with friends that BeReal highlights frequently in its purposes as an app.

Memories. BeReal offers a Memories section, where every daily BeReal will automatically be stored, creating a sort of gallery ordered chronologically. Realmojis and Comments are saved too, with each BeReal, so one can go back and revisit moments and interactions with their friends. It seems like a new feature is being tested, allowing users to share a memory as a new BeReal, in addition to the usual daily one.

ReCap video. Like other apps and platforms, such as Spotify, BeReal created an end-of-year custom video for each user. 2022 was the first edition, and it was greatly appreciated by users all over the world, as it contained all their BeReals shot that year in a rapid sequence. The video was quite simple, showing all the memories recorded on the app, likely also pushing on the nostalgia factor to associate BeReal with a "parallel gallery" for users to go through.

The 2023 edition, however, was not as appreciated, as it focused more on numbers, such as how many reactions a user gave, how many they received, and who was identified as their "closest friend" based on realmojis and comments exchanged. Interestingly, BeReal also calculated the average "lateness" of one's BeReals throughout the year, also showing their BeReal with the most retakes, the most "on time", and the most "late BeReal". The beloved video with all the BeReals one has taken during the year is shown only at the very end of the 2023 yearly ReCap, in a much-shortened version, too.



Images 13, 14: Data from the 2023 BeReal ReCap

Location. BeReal offers also the possibility - not compulsory - to add the location to one's BeReals. If users grant consent, it is only displayed if the geolocalisation is active on their phone while shooting the BeReal, and there is no option to manually insert it or add it later. If the user doesn't have the geolocalisation activated prior to shooting the BeReal, the location will simply not be shown. The location can only be an indication of where a user is located in the precise instant in which they shoot the double-sided photo. Location cannot be counterfeited to show, for example, that a user is at a beach in Hawaii instead of the rainy crammed city center: it can only show the authentic location of the user.

BeReal Audio. On April 19th, 2023 the Spotify Newsroom announced the collaboration with BeReal, allowing users of the social media to share what they are listening to in the moment in which they take their daily photo (Goldrick, 2023). The same feature is available for users of Apple Music as well. Similarly to the Location, BeReal requires access to the user's Spotify account, and it is not compulsory to accept this feature. Another similarity with Location is that BeReal Audio too cannot be "hacked": whatever song the user is listening to in the moment in which they shoot the BeReal, will be the song appearing with the photos. This should push authenticity, as this is a characteristic of the precise moment pictured, enhancing the sense of truthfulness of

the photo, and possibly offering a more immersive experience as well. However, it is easily understandable that in practice BeReal Audio can be easily “bypassed”: if one decides to post on time, two minutes should be more than enough to open the Spotify app running in the background and change song. Music is often seen as a particularly personal choice characterizing one’s persona, so it is easily foreseeable that people will attempt to show a particular song that matches the idea of themselves they want to give to their audience, manipulating authenticity.

If a user is not interested in posting within the two-minutes window, the counterfeiting process can become even more accurate, as the strict time factor is completely eliminated. This gives free choice to the user on how they desire to appear, without limit to manipulating this aspect of their depiction.

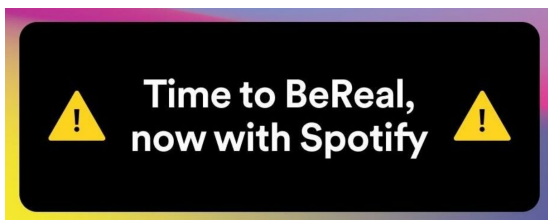


Image 15: Collaboration between Spotify and BeReal

Bonus BeReal. Probably the first turning point in the BeReal updates history is signed by the advent of Bonus BeReal. The functioning of this new feature, announced on April 26, 2023, is as follows: if a user posts on time, they will “unlock” two more photos, on top of the first one. The photo format is the same as a normal BeReal, to be published whenever one desires so, before the new notification of the following day. Until this moment, it seemed almost obvious that the only “method” to be authentic on the app was to publish the BeReal strictly on time. However, this feature could be considered in two ways: one that corroborates this theory, and one implying that all photos on BeReal are “real”.

It is surely a particular feature, as one could argue that it pushes people to public on time, hence being authentic, with the reward of two unauthentic pictures. It is undeniable that when the BeReal notification goes off, users are not always doing something interesting, or there might be something else they would like to publish, but cannot do so due to the two-minutes window. There might be an underlying desire for users to publish later or earlier than the notification moment.

The opposite theory could be that, because of the impossibility of retouching photos and the obligation to show all the surroundings front-back when taking a BeReal, all the content produced on the app is intrinsically authentic, as it shows the reality in which users find themselves. For this reason, the presence of more photos on BeReal simply stand for more authentic snapshots or real lives. We could take as an indicator in support of this ideas the fact that the two extra photos do not have a different name than the first one, nor are labeled in a particular way. On the other hand, the Late BeReal is named in a way that suggests a difference from the norm: Late as opposed to “on time”, while Bonus does not bring the same nuance.

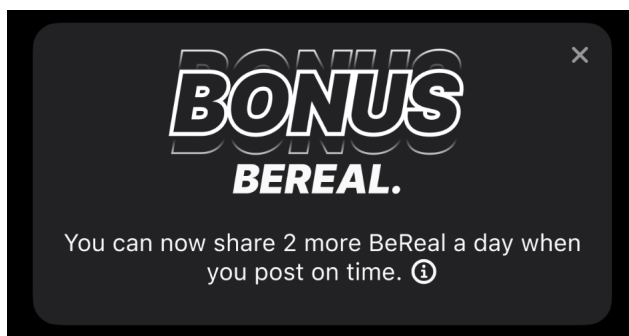


Image 16: BeReal in-app banner introducing the Bonus BeReal feature

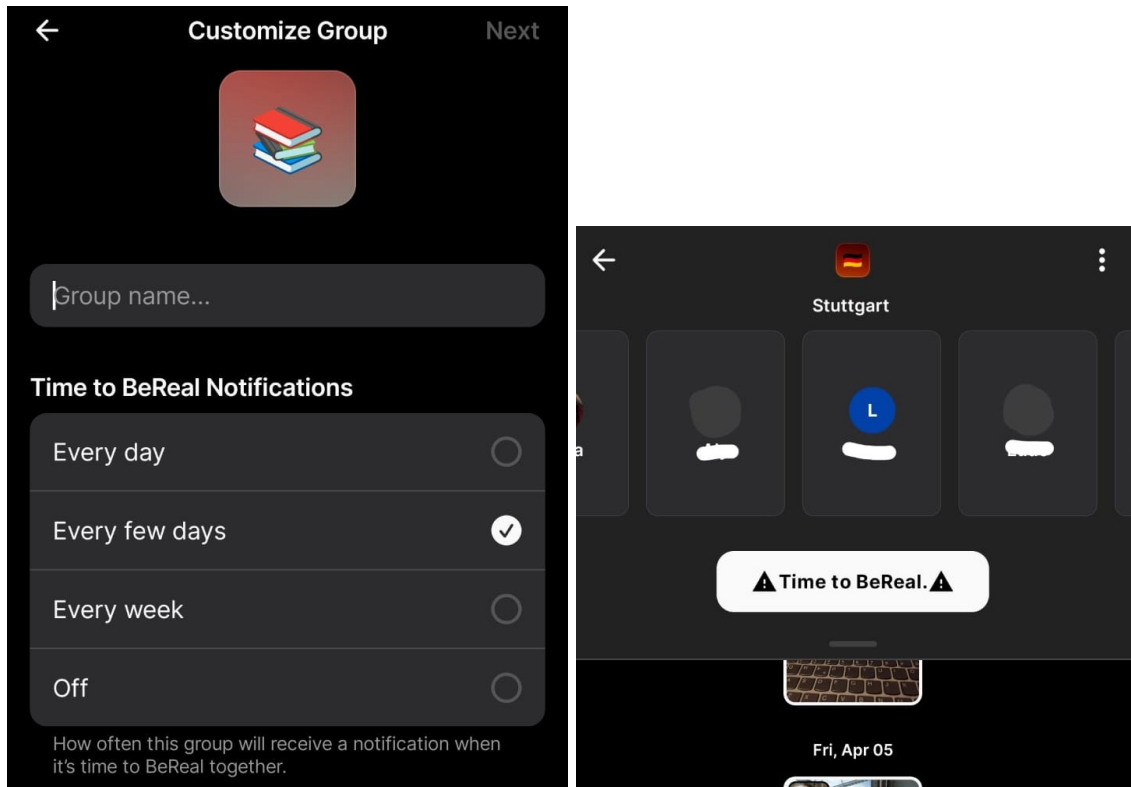
RealChat and RealGroups. Trying to highlight once more the effort of the app to connect friends, BeReal started testing RealChat in June 2023. The app, however, never landed a global phase, soon replacing the feature with RealGroups in December 2023.

“RealChat is BeReal's messenger for deeper connections. Connect meaningfully and spontaneously. You can only RealChat with your friends.” (RealChat, n.d.)

RealChat was probably an attempt of BeReal to incorporate another feature that could prolong the users presence on the app, and targeted the app’s central aim of building meaningful and true connections among users. The app never disclosed the reasons for the failure of that feature, but it could be tied to the low level of security provided by the app. They did not assure end-to-end encryption, arguing that it would have been users’ responsibility to beware of the content of their messages (*RealChat*, n.d.; Silberling, 2023). A seemingly odd way to delete messages - compared to other messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Telegram - might have also been a reason to abandon this feature. RealGroups, on the other hand, launched at the end of 2023, is a still active feature. There is unfortunately no way to get any data on the frequency of usage of such features,

therefore it is impossible to guess and analyze the success of such.

This particular feature is not thought to be used as a two-person chat, but it is possible to create groups made only of two people. The groups come with a notable peculiarity: the possibility of having dedicated BeReal notifications. The group creator can decide how often they will be randomly triggered for all participants, and can even trigger the notification themselves.



Images 17, 18: Creation of a RealGroup and feature appearance in-app

Friends of Friends. By the end of August 2023, the BeReal team announced another feature, replacing an old one: the “Friends of Friends” page took over the “Discovery” page (*BeReal. Your Friends for Real.*, 2023). The Discovery page was very likely a feature too far from the core identity of BeReal: it allowed to see BeReals of other people from all over the world. Users only needed to give consent to appear themselves on this Discovery page to see other people’s BeReals, and they could then react and leave comments below those strangers’ photos. This complete unrelatedness with the people one could find on the Discovery page had nothing to do with the concept of authenticity and connecting with friends that BeReal advocates. It looked very similar to the Instagram “Explore” page, which is used to discover new content rather than engage with one’s

friends.

The new function replacing Discover matches slightly more accurately the “*your friends for real*” BeReal motto. In fact, after granting consent, BeReal connects a user with all their second connections - hence Friends of Friends - who conversely gave consent to be on the list. It should theoretically connect people who may know each other, but not enough to have each other's telephonic contact.

“Say goodbye to the old Discovery Feed: We love to experiment, and Discovery Feed was something that didn’t quite make the cut. Now that users can explore posts from people who are already within the orbit of their close circle, the global Discovery Feed will be eliminated 📌.”

Pins. In the same update announced on August 21, 2023, the Friends of Friends page was accompanied by Pins and Mentions. The Pins function allows to choose three BeReals from the memories, without a time limit, and to fix them in the user’s profile, below the profile picture and bio, to showcase them to their friends at all times. The pinned photos can be changed at any time, and they are not a compulsory feature. Pins function somehow like Instagram Highlights, but in a much more simplified way: users cannot create “folders” with multiple photos each. People who use the three Pins will probably choose photos that depict their funniest moments, or in the company of their closest friends. It is highly unlikely that one would want to pin the BeReal taken at the library or at the office after a full day of work because it would be uninteresting and surely not flattering for their lifestyle showcase.

Mention, Tag, Repost. The option to mention friends in comments had been highly requested by users (*BeReal. Your Friends for Real.*, 2023). Then, the team introduced the tagging function, with which users can tag their friends in their photos. Finally, the great update of December 2023 included Reposts, that give the chance to repost a BeReal where one was tagged as one’s own. Reposts can be used as Bonus BeReals even if the first BeReal of the day was not posted on time.

All these features surely increase the relational aspect of BeReal, encouraging users to take their daily photos together and create connections by mentioning, tagging, and reposting the BeReals. It can even be argued that the possibility of reposting as a Bonus BeReal even when the first one of the day was not on time could be seen as the “rule” of connecting friends overrides the “rule” of being on time. Nevertheless, I believe that

authenticity can be found in both situations, but this reasoning will be more fruitful based on the research data showcased in the next chapter.

Behind The Scenes (BTS). On 12. December 2023 four updates were announced on the BeReal website: Tag, RealGroups, 2023 Recap, and Behind The Scenes (BTS) (*BeReal. Your Friends for Real.*, 2023).

Behind The Scenes is the most innovative update of the four, unrelated to any previous feature, as it introduces a completely new format to the app: videos. It is, once again, not a compulsory feature, therefore users can toggle the option off. It captures on video the few seconds - not a controllable definite amount of time - of the chosen main camera, whether it's the frontal or selfie one. Videos were never yet shared on BeReal and the purpose of this introduction should be to bring even more authenticity to the app, to show those moments before the BeReal is shot.

It could be argued that, even if users cannot completely control the frame of the video, as it is not shown prior to the "official" BeReal shot, they can still have some time to use it to their advantage, whether that implies authenticity or not. One could purposely show their well-thought outfit in the perfect shot of a Late BeReal or simply adjust the camera to show a piece of work they are onto at the moment. In either case, videos offer a place with limited control of the user, where they can still enlarge the picture and show more of themselves and their surroundings.

Streaks. Before the end of January 2024, another update was announced: BeReal Streaks. Taking from other social media experiences, BeReal added a compulsory function that counts the number of consecutive days in which a user shoots their photo, with no distinction between on-time and Late BeReals. Probably as for Snapchat, this feature aimed to encourage users to engage at least once per day with the app. Interestingly, this same Streak system on Snapchat has been related to behaviors such as FOMO, problematic smartphone use, and social media self-control issues (van Essen & Van Ouytsel, 2023).

RealPeople and RealBrands. In early February 2024, BeReal introduced one of the most impactful updates: the introduction of recognized celebrities and brands. Initially, users can only interact with these accounts by sending Realmojis, and after a prolonged interaction of this nature, they attain the status of RealFans. RealFans gain access to the comment sections of RealPeople's BeReals and can view their latest photos.

A similar mechanism applies to RealBrands. RealFans can also tag their favorite brands and celebrities in their BeReals for a chance to be reposted by them.

Acknowledging potential concerns from users regarding the deviation from BeReal's original mission and aesthetic, the company addressed these concerns directly to explain their standpoint behind these new features:

We know what you're thinking... "how does something like this fit in with BeReal's mission?" 🤔

Our mission is to create a more authentic world and keep you connected with the people you really care about. People want to see more of the faces behind the filters, the people behind the brands, and the chaotic moments that make life so human. **RealPeople & RealBrands have to post on time, just like everyone else...no filters...just spur of the moment authentic BeReal.**

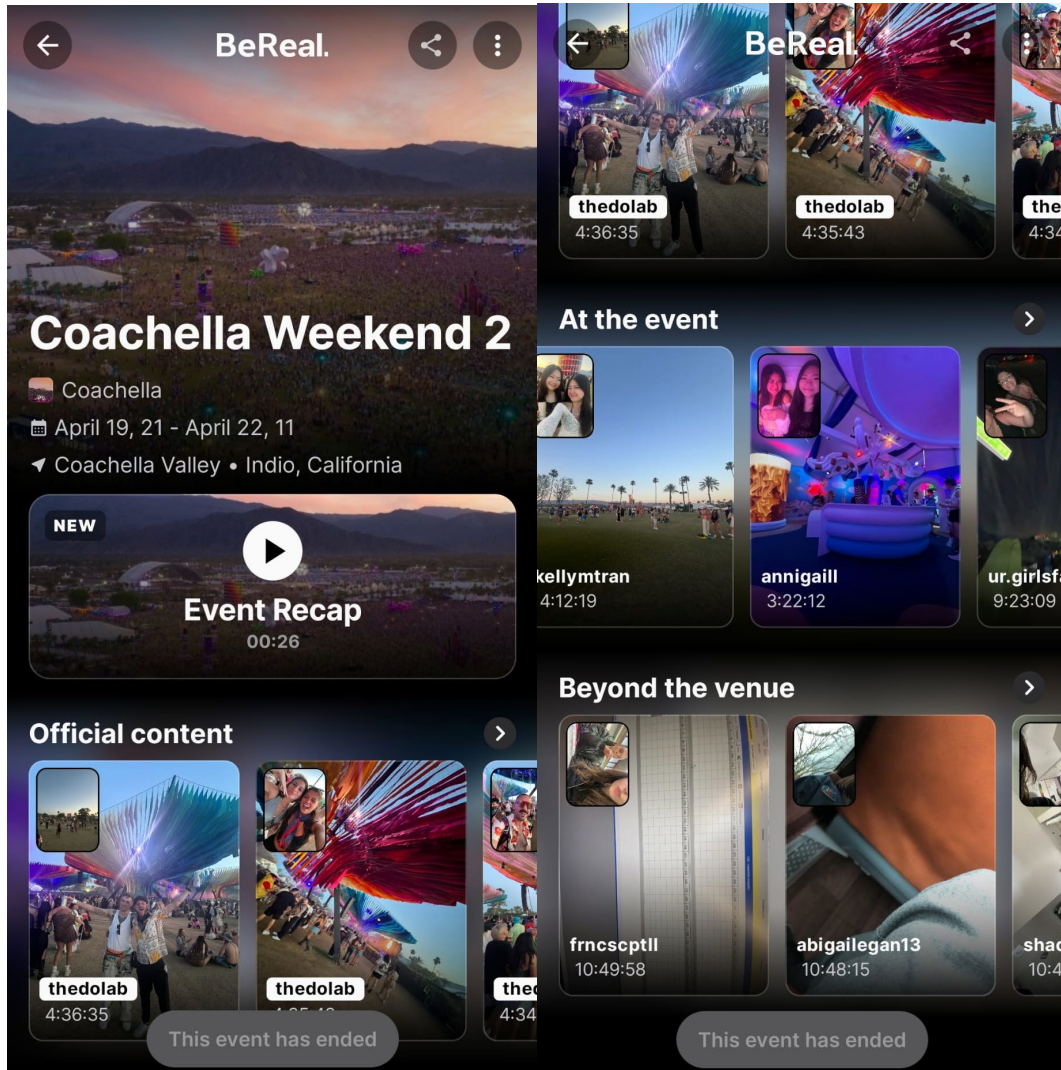
P.S. Your friends will always be our number one priority on BeReal. If you don't want to add any RealPeople and RealBrands, then your experience on BeReal will stay exactly the same as it is today. Your friends are what we are built for so don't ever stop sharing your realest moments with them.

Image 19: BeReal's official stance regarding RealPeople and RealBrands update

The user community's response to these updates appears to be mixed, as evident from discussions on Reddit and comments on the BeReal team's Instagram posts (*BeReal (@bereal)* • *Instagram Photos and Videos*, n.d.; tjsanzen, 2024; whatdivoc_s, 2022). While some users express disagreement with the app's assertion that celebrities on BeReal are equivalent to ordinary individuals, hence the feature name "RealPeople," others appreciate the opportunity to connect with celebrities and favorite brands. Those supportive of the update suggest that detractors should simply ignore the feature altogether and not engage with it, as it is completely optional.

RealEvents. Launched in April 2024, RealEvents is the newest feature introduced by BeReal, aimed at enhancing users' engagement with real-world experiences. With a focus on celebrating authentic human moments, RealEvents allows users to share in events such as Coachella, the first official Event, regardless of their physical presence at the event. Users can post up to six BeReals specifically tailored to the event feed, fostering a collective sharing of memories and experiences among attendees, both in person and remotely. Each event is accompanied by a dedicated notification, prompting users to participate in real-time, and offering a unique shareable video recap sharing the collective highlights from the event. RealEvents is said to expand on BeReal's core principle of

sharing moments and making memories, offering users access to exclusive behind-the-scenes and onstage content unique to the platform, as well as content by fellow attendees. The team even hinted at the possibility for users to create their own Events in the upcoming future, allowing even more base engagement and cross-users connections.



Images 20, 21: Welcome-page of the first RealEvent: Coachella

Roulette. The last update that is still in the testing stage allows users to post as a BeReal a randomly picked image from their gallery. Users can post one Roulette photo per day in addition to the first BeReal and Bonus Bereal. The app requests access to users' galleries for this feature but ensures that no photo will be posted before the confirmation of the user, who ultimately has always been able to choose what to post and what to keep private and unpublished. This might be even more detrimental to authenticity and posting

promptly, as users would yet not be able to freely choose the photo, but should be able to re-draw up to three times (*Roulette*, n.d.).

2.3 Authenticity on BeReal

As I have briefly mentioned in this chapter, every feature in BeReal can somehow support authenticity on the app or deter it. What I argue, is the importance of each user's distinct approach to BeReal and the single affordances, creating a vast spectrum of possible uses. Because of the very nature of BeReal, for users it is almost impossible to participate only passively in the app, "consuming" the content of other users without producing any. Active engagement already creates a positive environment in which users find themselves, as it associated with feelings of positivity and authentic expression of self online, contrary to passive engagement (Darr & Doss, 2022).

These two aspect pertaining app usages spectrum and active engagement, I believe, intertwine to explain or support most of the questions and reasoning that can be performed around BeReal.

Neufeld-Wall (2023) introduces in her thesis a series of questions around authenticity on BeReal, and I will here provide the answers she elicited through her research, and the suggestions for further research that I tackled with my research.

The broader research question "Does BeReal as a social media platform embody and encourage the elements of authenticity prioritized by Gen Z?" produced two different arguments: "Gen-Z's Background with BeReal", "Do individuals behave authentically on BeReal?". In particular, answering the second topic, participants in the study expressed a commitment to authenticity on the BeReal app but acknowledged various factors that may affect their ability to post content promptly. Delays in posting were often intentional, driven by factors such as waiting for significant events. However, missed notifications were commonly attributed to being occupied in environments where phone use was restricted or forgetting about the notification altogether. While timeliness of posting was not seen as the sole determinant of authenticity, most participants indicated that timely posts are perceived as more authentic. Interestingly, participants noted that their own behavior on the app has become less authentic over time, possibly influenced by the platform's growing popularity and the desire to curate content for reactions from friends.

Based also on this last observation, Neufeld-Wall suggests that both app features and popularity have kept evolving, inducing a change of authentic approach as time goes on. Interestingly, she also suggests to isolate the aspect that allow for a digital content to be identified as authentic or inauthentic according to users. Finally, some participants highlighted the authenticity of older social media users' "pure" online behavior. Hence, it is suggested to engage members from various generations who actively use also other social media platforms to gauge their perceptions of authenticity and their experiences. This last proposal, in particular, can create an opportunity to investigate an age- and occupation- question expressed as well in the previous chapter of this thesis: “Can a person’s self-disposition toward authenticity predict their usage of technology?” for what concerns the BeReal case.

Chapter 3

3.1 Sample and research method

In this chapter, I will present the research questions I formulated, and the outcome of the interviews I conducted.

Being the aim of this study the research of relations between authenticity and a particular social media platform, I have decided to look for answers and connections amongst its direct contemporary users, as they are surely those who are more acquainted with the affordances and the dynamics in the application. For this reason, the data I required was purely qualitative, descriptive in nature. Hence, the chosen path to gather such data was to conduct interviews with a selected amount of users.

Due to the relevance of subjectivity I was expecting to encounter in research, and in order to allow the interviewees to express themselves freely and with narrations as detailed as they desired, I decided to proceed with the conduction of discursive interviews.

Discursive interviews, as described by Ullrich (2022), delve into the "social patterns of interpretation," reconstructing how individuals construct meaning and understand their experiences. This method goes beyond simply gathering facts; it analyzes the justifications and reasoning behind responses, offering a deeper understanding of an individual's perspective. Used primarily in qualitative research, discursive interviews are ideal for exploring lived experiences and viewpoints within a sociological context. The interview structure itself is flexible, allowing participants to elaborate and provide their unique interpretations. This focus on in-depth exploration fosters a collaborative environment where the researcher and interviewee work together to uncover the rich tapestry of social understanding.

For what regards the sampling method, as Ullrich (2022, p.69) explains,

“The general goal of all qualitative sampling strategies can therefore be considered to be to find units of inquiry that contain the data suitable for this purpose in the most comprehensive and appropriate form possible.”

For analyzing collective representations through discursive interviews, the sampling task must be expanded. It should not only focus on selecting the “right” individuals to capture these representations but also strive to include a wide range of categories of “data bearers” pertinent to the research question within the study sample.

The participants in this study were selected using the snowballing method. The first reason for this choice was the difficulty of finding all the participants with different characteristics. For instance, I did not know directly any working female under 23 years old. Furtherly, I was aware of the potential bias of selecting all the participants from my connections, because of the exposure to the same environment and common connections too, possibly influencing each other as a group of peers. These factors led me to identify some initial participants who understood the field of interest of the research and had contacts with people who also met the sampling criteria.

The sample chosen was composed of sixteen interviewees. To comprise a fairly representative sample of the global population of BeReal users, interviewees were selected to be part of the intersections of three discriminants: age, occupation, and gender. Moreover, all interviewees were recruited as current users of BeReal.

Participants were evenly divided into two age groups: the first group comprised individuals aged 18 to 22, and the second group comprised individuals aged 23 to 27.

In the same way, to diversify the occupational and educational background in the sample, interviewees could belong to either a “student” or a “worker” category. The occupation of those in the first category was primarily high school or university students, allowing for part-time employment or student jobs, nonetheless the latter not being the main focus at the time of the interview. Those in the “working” category were full-time employees when the interview was undertaken.

The last level of differentiation in the sample regarded the gender of the interviewees: to ensure equality in the representation, half of the interviewees were females and the other half males.

All interviewees have declared that, at the time of the interviews, they were regularly using the application. Only two interviewees later explained that they very recently deleted the app, or stopped using it altogether. However, I verified that they had a sufficiently up-to-date knowledge of the features and affordances, finding them knowledgeable enough to be reliable for the research.

To guarantee anonymity, when presenting quotes from the interviews, I will provide real information about the interviewee (age, gender, occupation), but I will associate a name of fantasy.

Furthermore, the interviews have been conducted either in person or via Zoom call. The registrations were later transcribed.

The need to fully explain myself and understand thoroughly what the interviewee was explaining during the conversation, the languages of conversation have been limited to Italian and English - eight interviews per language. However, not all the interviewees are mother-tongue speakers of either of the two languages: nine interviewees are native Italian speakers, six interviewees are native French speakers, and one is native German speaker. When quoting the interviews held in Italian, in the upcoming part of this same chapter, I translated the selected piece into English.

		18-22	23-27	
M	STUD	2	2	4
	WORK	2	2	4
F	STUD	2	2	4
	WORK	2	2	4
		8	8	16

Table 1: categorization of interviewees by age, gender, and occupation

The interviews have been analyzed, without the usage of any software, following as closely as possible the theory explained by Ullrich (2022, p.123-127).

“Indexing” is the term commonly used to convey the process, often also referred to as coding, of assigning codes to text passages. Ideally, all text passages in an interview transcript should be assigned at least one code. The codes should be derived inductively from the text material. However, many codes are likely to originate from guideline questions and are somewhat predetermined by them, as I experienced during the coding process for this research.

The repeated grouping and relating of codes, as well as the necessity to recode text passages and reformulate codes, require significantly more effort than the initial coding. Nevertheless, recoding, grouping, and relating codes have been essential steps in the

interpretation process, as they enforced a thorough examination of the data material. The indexing process, combined with the initial research purposes and guideline questions of these interviews, brought me to identify the following research questions or research topics:

R1: Definition of authenticity.

R2: Authenticity on BeReal

R2.1: Do users think they are authentic on BeReal - usage and content posted?

R2.2: Do users think that other people are authentic on BeReal - usage and content posted?

R3: Authenticity on other social media (Instagram)

R3.1: Do users think they are authentic on other social media - usage and content posted?

R3.2: Do users think that other people are authentic on other social media - usage and content posted?

R4: BeReal app affordances and authenticity

To introduce the answers I elicited to the main four research questions, I think it can be interesting to note two things: the duration of usage of BeReal by the interviewees and what they liked and disliked about the app. It is essential to capture the overall sentiments of users about the app, as it helps establish the initial atmosphere and set the tone effectively.

> *When did you install BeReal?*

The vast majority of users installed the app for the first time either during the summer of 2022, when it started going viral globally (*BeReal Revenue and Usage Statistics, 2024*), or at the end of the same year, between December 2022 and January 2023.

It is also notable, that some users installed the app only to use it a few times or only a few months, then uninstall it or put it aside for a couple of months (4-6 months), and finally restart using it. The reasons behind these choices are mainly connected to the scarce presence of friends when the users first installed the app, meaning there was not enough content nor interaction on the app to make it worth the usage. In addition, these users felt

that the app was lacking something: it was simply too boring. This same criticism has been widely shared also by those who declared to use the app rather frequently.

> What do you like about BeReal?

Nevertheless, users pointed out that they liked many aspects of the app.

Foremost, the main reason why users appreciate BeReal is for the possibility to see what their friends are doing and to keep in touch with them, especially with friends geographically distant. Seeing a BeReal of a friend gives a glimpse into their lives and what they normally do, increasing a feeling of closeness to them, that has been achieved without actively calling or text messaging:

“that makes it really, really convenient. Low energy way of staying connected with friends.”

James, M, 22

Another interesting aspect pointed out by some interviewees is that they like BeReal because it is not a “static” app, meaning that everyone must post a photo at least once per day in order to interact with the app itself and see their friends’ content. Moreover, the photos that one posts usually are about ordinary day-to-day lives, similar to those of their friends: some users appreciated particularly the light-heartedness with which BeReals are posted, with much less overthinking associated than with other social media apps. This less judgemental environment also decreases the feeling of jealousy one can experiment with posts on other apps, such as the frequently-mentioned Instagram. One user highlighted how on Instagram, it seems like everyone is constantly on vacation, which triggers jealousy and FOMO (fear of missing out).

Finally, several users particularly appreciated the Memories section of BeReal, reminiscing about their past experiences while navigating through their calendars.

> What don't you like about BeReal?

The main aspect of the app that the interviewees struggle to appreciate is the simplicity of the app itself, describing it as rather monotone. About half of the users highlighted that

they got tired - in the past or at the moment of the interview - of seeing and posting always the same kind of photo.

“The days I use it, it’s because I’m doing something different than studying”

Maya, F, 23

Furthermore, a few interviewees said that they did not appreciate the possibility of posting Late BeReals at all, because it allows for too much time to manipulate the double shot. Some others, instead, argued that because of their daily routines and little time available during the daytime, they struggle to post on time, and are therefore forced to post Late BeReals: it is not a social media for those working “a 9-5 job”. Because of this, a couple of interviewees suggested that the time frame be enlarged to somewhat 5/10 minutes, but without allowing for Late BeReals after that.

Finally, many interviewees noticed an increase in the number of features in the app, making it more and more different from its original simple form. This view seems to be opposite from that explained just at the beginning of this paragraph

R1: Definition of authenticity

The interviewees were aware of the general topic of our conversation, so it was inevitable that they would relate it to social media and BeReal when defining authenticity. However, to gain a deeper understanding of the common ground we were exploring, it was essential to delve further into an attempt at definition.

In fact, users mainly referred to two aspects of authenticity: a personal and interrelational one, and another one focused on the relationship between the individual and social media. On the individual side, interviewees identified an “authentic person” as someone who does not behave differently according to context and people, but also as someone who understands their own inner core values and conveys those feelings and thoughts to the outside world, with words and behaviors.

Conversely, a user highlighted the importance of acknowledging the real-life constraints on being authentic, which can be understood as having less control over expressing one's thoughts and feelings. In professional settings, not all opinions and emotions are

acceptable. For example, in customer-facing roles, it is often necessary to conceal a low mood, even if this might be seen as compromising authenticity.

About a third of the interviewees mentioned that an authentic person should not use “filters”, “masks”, or “makeup” to hide some part of themselves: they should be “the way they are”, weaknesses included.

“So someone authentic - to answer your question - would be someone that doesn't really care about what other people think of their life, and doesn't need to show like a prime version of their life.”

Mark, M, 27

A handful of users highlighted how the word “real” is the most appropriate term to define authenticity: to be real.

Bridging with the social media environment, three users presented respectively three somehow different theories about how an authentic person should be in relation to social media.

The first one sustained that someone authentic does not change between reality and social media, implying therefore that everything shown on social media corresponds to what can be verified in reality about their life.

A second one explained that social media is just a representation of one’s self, a selection of life snapshots, but that does not imply that one cannot be “real” in real life. Social media shows a part of one’s real life.

The third interviewee illustrated how everyone is authentic but solely related to how they live their real lives. In fact, one can be authentic only outside of social media.

R2: Authenticity on BeReal

Regardless of individual experiences and choices on how to use the app, the large majority of users agreed on two aspects concerning BeReal and authenticity: BeReal is more authentic than other social media, and the photos shot in the two-minute frame are more authentic than the Late BeReals.

Some interviewees found that it's easier to be authentic on BeReal because of the simple structure of the app itself, but also because everyone is posting the same kind of boring photos, therefore for users it is easier to "share themselves".

Moreover, one cannot post an old photo for the sake of sharing something captivating, and filters are not available at all.

Those who do not post within the assigned time are judged automatically as unauthentic because they are held up as those who take their time to set up glamorous shots, not to be authentic. Some even proposed that the app should not allow Late BeReals at all.

On the other hand, two practices are leading BeReal to become a less and less authentic environment: the possibility mentioned above to post late and staged photos, combined with adding new features. A handful of interviewees, in fact, noted that BeReal is turning into a less authentic environment than it was some months ago. Users said that they felt a shift happening: people understood the mechanism of the two minutes and they realized that they had enough time to stage a fashionable photo even in that small amount of time, and in the worst case, they could still post late for the sake of a glamorous shot. Moreover, the new features added in the last few months seem to be generally seen as "distracting" BeReal and its users from the original aim of encouraging authenticity.

Finally, a few users mentioned that in their opinion celebrities and brands are not really in the position to post anything truly authentic, due to the strict control they need to have on the image of themselves they offer. For this reason, being immersed in an environment that claims to have authentic photos, but in reality, staged photos are largely available, seems to be perceived as a legitimization for users not to be authentic themselves. The same reasoning of an influencing environment has been expressed for what regards one's friends on social media.

"I wouldn't say it's 100% authentic, but it's more authentic than other social media for sure"

Hanna, F, 24

R2.1: Do users think they are authentic on BeReal - usage and content posted?

Overall, there seem to be two ways to approach the "*It's time to BeReal!*" notification:

some people post within the two-minute time frame or as soon as they see the notification, and some others decide to wait.

About half of the users interviewed reported enjoying posting on time and doing it most days. If they do not see the notification before they run out of time, they will very likely catch up and do the BeReal as soon as they see it, even if it will appear as Late BeReal. For these people, in these conditions, doing a Late BeReal is not a synonym of scarce authenticity, because they will still take their photo as soon as possible, regardless of the environment and appearance of the users themselves. They overall value the authenticity that they associate with not choosing the moment in which to shoot the BeReal, that is the reason why they do not wait for the most attractive moment of the day even after realizing that they “lost” the two-minute frame. Moreover, the two most cited reasons to post the BeReal on time are the two additional BeReals users unlock when posting within two minutes and seeing other people’s photos as soon as they are published. Interestingly, those same persons who pointed to the two extra pictures as a pull factor to post their first BeReal on time also mentioned often forgetting to publish those two extra photos, and none of them expressed any particular disturbance associated.

“I'm sad when I cannot do it on time. (...) I'm happy of putting BeReal on time. It's like, it gives you this small, small boost of dopamine. Yeah, I've managed to post in time!”

Bernard, M, 24

For instance, an interviewee explained that she is employed in a position in almost constant contact with customers, forcing her to delay the BeReal moment even when she notices the notification via her smartwatch. Nevertheless, she does not feel ashamed to shoot her photo in the work uniform, nor has she expressed any bother or feeling of unauthenticity in taking a Late BeReal due to her job. The same feeling has been explained by another interviewee, saying that when he is with his friends he enjoys shooting the BeReal with them. However, if posting the photo on time entails interrupting a meaningful human interaction, he would rather “lose” the two-minute frame, as the time spent with his friends is more important than a BeReal on time, exactly like work is prioritized for the majority of working interviewees.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are those users who are not particularly interested in posting on time. About half of the participants attributed little value to posting within the assigned time frame. In fact, they prefer to take the BeReal when they see or are experiencing something different from their daily routines, regardless of whether it is work or study. About half of the interviewees in this group highlighted that they do not necessarily plan the moment in which they will actually take the photo. It is not relevant if they see the notification and have the time and ability to shoot the BeReal - and the same reasoning applies to seeing the notification after the time frame has elapsed but being able to take the photo instantly. If the user feels they are not engaging in anything interesting, they would rather leave the boredom and the ordinary out of their BeReals and take the photo at a later time. Exactly because of this reasoning, simply waiting for a “better” moment and not planning the moment in which they will take their BeReal, some users admitted that they often forget to shoot their daily photo, and will only realize so with the BeReal notification of the following day.

“I was already programming in those two minutes, and I was like “Okay, how can I use the other two?” and that’s why I did it in the two minutes, otherwise no... really not.”

Sophie, F, 21

A few interviewees, on the other hand, explained that they deliberately ignore the BeReal notification and plan when they are going to take their BeReal, usually coinciding with the image of themselves they want to give or to notable moments with friends.

“If every day you take a BeReal of the coolest moment you had and that way looking back you can be like “oh, months ago I had this amazing dinner with friends” or whatever, which I would like to remember, and that’s obviously a lot nicer memory than just being like, four months ago this day, I was laying in bed watching a show or drinking tea.”

James, M, 22

A handful of users, in fact, highlighted how they do not wish to share negative moments or episodes of their lives in which they experience adverse emotions: they use BeReal - as well as other social media platforms - to enjoy positive content, whether it is explicitly

motivational or travel related, for instance. For this reason, they do not wish to disclose their “low” moments, and BeReal makes no exception to this social media philosophy. Finally, it is noteworthy that certain users observed an evolution in their engagement patterns: initially, upon installing the app, they consistently posted authentic content punctually. However, as time progressed, they lost interest in the daily appointment with the BeReal notification due to the repetitive nature of their posts, leading them to “cherry-pick” the moments they chose to share. Ultimately, with the introduction of the two additional BeReal, their motivation was refreshed, resulting in a more frequent return to timely posting.

With the insights above explained, it is now also possible to attempt to tackle a question presented in the first chapter: can a person’s self-disposition toward authenticity predict their usage of technology?

Comparing the individual theorizations of authenticity and the declared and perceived sense of authenticity specifically on BeReal, I am able to derive some preliminary findings and formulate an initial outline based on the current data.

Slightly more than half of the users defined authenticity as strictly about how people show themselves. These interviewees described an authentic user as someone who does not stage their life and does not select and modify a reality purposely to show to others. Among those same users, only one then described their behavior as unauthentic, and only another one oscillated between authenticity and unrealness. Hence, the vast majority of users who conceptualized authenticity as an unstaged, unselected, and unmodified portrayal of one’s life use BeReal in a way that they judge being authentic.

R2.2: Do users think that other people are authentic on BeReal - usage and content posted?

About half of the interviewees said that their connections on BeReal behave authentically. To be reminded, once more, that for some users it is considered to be authentic also post a Late BeReal, as long as the content portrayed is “everyday life” and is shot as soon as the person in question sees the notification and has time to follow through with the double-sided photo. Some interviewees in this group also noted that the authentic environment—where friends post genuine, unstaged photos—serves as an additional

incentive to avoid overthinking the process of taking a BeReal photo, which contrasts with the tendency on other social media platforms.

Approximately one-fourth of the interviewees observed that their friends post sporadically, with some adhering more to authenticity than others.

The remaining users indicated that their friends seem to put considerable thought into the photo-taking process, often waiting for the most interesting moment of the day or skipping the post altogether if nothing noteworthy occurs.

Interestingly, a small number of users across all three categories mentioned that a significant number of their friends rarely, if ever, post their BeReal photos. They inferred that these friends either uninstalled the application or stopped using it altogether.

Two interviewees, when delving into the behaviors of their friends, raised an observation that I decided to further analyze: younger users, circa below 20 years old, would be less “real” than older ones, around 25 years old.

Hence, I decided to investigate whether there could be an age-related correlation with the self-perception of authenticity, to verify this hypothesis arising from the interviewees themselves.

The overall self-perception of authenticity and the perception of others' authenticity do not differ drastically. About half of the interviewees claimed they were authentic, while the remaining half admitted they were not as genuine as they could be, or not genuine at all. Approximately the same ratio of users interviewed declared that their friends were “real” on the app, and around the same number were not so authentic - or not at all.

Focusing solely on what users think of their own behavior and authenticity, it appears that the younger age group (<22) tends to struggle more with authenticity: almost all the interviewees who admitted they do not behave at all in a "real" or "authentic" manner on BeReal belong to this younger age group.

Additionally, the vast majority of those who stated they are not always "real" or "authentic", or they never behave this way, are also from the younger age group.

Conversely, most interviewees who believe they are "real" or "authentic" belong to the older age group (>22).

	nickname	am I real?	are my friends real?
M-24-STU	Bernard	yes	yes
F-23-STU	Maya	no	yes
F-18-STU	Heather	sometimes	no
F-21-STU	Sophie	no	sometimes
F-21-LAV	Ginny	yes	yes
F-21-LAV	Jane	no	no
F-27-LAV	Madeline	yes	sometimes
M-26-STU	Sean	yes	yes
F-24-STU	Hanna	sometimes	
M-21-STU	John	no	yes
M-26-LAV	Luke	yes	sometimes
F-24-LAV	Alice	yes	yes
M-22-STU	Vincent	sometimes	sometimes
M-22-LAV	James	no	no
M-22-LAV	Gabe	yes	no
M-27-LAV	Mark	yes	yes
		8 yes	7 yes
		3 sometimes	4 sometimes
		5 no	4 no

Table 2: synthesis and schematization of interviewees' opinions

R3: Authenticity on other social media (Instagram)

The almost totality of interviewees, when referring to other social media, talked about Instagram. Only a few mentioned TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter.

Users have increasingly noticed that the sheer volume of posts and stories shared by someone on Instagram does not equate to authenticity. Rather, the true measure lies in the subject matter of the content. Many users have highlighted that the extensive effort to stage and curate content to appear as polished and "Insta-worthy" as possible actually distances it from reality and authenticity.

Instagram is often perceived as a platform lacking in genuine authenticity, especially when it comes to portraying everyday life. Moreover, the pressure to maintain a certain image and the tendency to share only the most polished, curated aspects of life contribute to an environment where authenticity feels out of place. Users yearn for more genuine, relatable content that reflects true everyday experiences rather than idealized versions of life. In this context, Instagram seems to be evolving into a platform where authenticity is overshadowed by the pursuit of perfection and image management.

“It was the case at the beginning, like when people were posting just pictures of anything. And then as there was more and more people to the app and the dynamic changed, now it's more like a professional thing. So Instagram is really nice, really polished and you don't find a lot of pictures that are, like, not calculated, let's say.”

Sean, M, 26

The point seems to lay on how spontaneously the content is posted: the more spontaneous, the less staged and polished, and the more authentic is perceived and faithfully depicting the life of the user.

R3.1: Do users think they are authentic on other social media - usage and content posted?

Three usage patterns encompass slightly more than half of the interviewees: either do not post at all on Instagram, or they select accurately the kind of photos they post, or they share more frequently and indiscriminately. The larger group is composed of those who use Instagram more as consumers than as producers, very rarely posting anything,

regardless of the format (post, reel, story). A slightly less numerous section explained that they post a specific type of content, such as motivational and “happy mood” or travel and leisure content solely. In fact, this is the same kind of photos and videos that they want to see on other people’s profiles on social media.

More than half of the interviewees shared some level of insecurity about the content-sharing process on Instagram. Largely because of the higher number of followers and viewers of one’s publications, which grows even higher if one keeps their profile open, users feel like Instagram is surely not a private space, possibly not even a “safe space”. About a quarter of the interviewees stated that they devote considerable thought to every single photo or video they want to publish, especially if the shot depicts themselves, often resulting in a decrease in posting oneself.

Finally, a few interviewees raised the topic of Instagram being the “Swiss knife” of social media, as it contains all the functionalities that one might look for on social media, and smartphones at large as well. On Instagram users can share photos, videos, time-limited content, look for content by keywords, chat, call, video call, etc.

However, because of all these features, some users recognized forms of addiction and sadness connected to the excessive use of Instagram, a phenomenon that is getting increasingly more support from the scientific community (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018). In these ever-growing amount of features on Instagram, some interviewees recognized overlappings with other social media: the 24-hours-lasting Stories seem to be coming from Snapchat’s Snaps, as well as the Filters, while the Reels suggest a parallelism with TikTok’s videos. The “Close Friends” option on Instagram could be seen as a more private environment, with fewer friends with whom to share one’s stories. Once again, this would prove why many users use Instagram and find everything they want on this platform.

“Instagram has this thing that keeps you on the app without you even realizing. You can follow what your friends do, but then if you con the Search bar you can see everyone: people you don’t know, videos of all sorts. Because it has become a sort of Internet now. You can also look for pieces of videos, I mean, you can even search for a recipe on Instagram.”

Jane, F, 21

R3.2: Do users think that other people are authentic on other social media - usage and content posted?

Regarding the usage of other social media, such as Instagram, by other users, interviewees highlighted two main points.

Firstly, they noted more attention to detail and to a very high quality of the posted content, accurately selected. The shots selected also seem to be very positive and strictly regarding joyful moments. Some users appreciated this kind of “safe mental space”, while others expressed doubts about the authenticity of the representation users give of themselves on such social media.

Secondly, interviewees highlighted how interaction with friends is simply not a priority on social media like Instagram, where users easily reach hundreds - if not thousands - of followers and followed people. It seems like authentic relationships cannot be held in such environments. Even on other social media like Twitter, a user expressed their perplexion on authenticity:

“Twitter, I don't see the point of sharing your thoughts with random people. They won't relate or they might relate, but they're not your friends, so I don't care, but on BeReal there are your friends, so they can comment on what you say.”

Vincent, M, 22

Interviewees have shared that they rarely see anyone posting candid, unfiltered content anymore. The majority of what appears on Instagram tends to be either professional and work-related or meticulously curated to showcase a weeks-old vacation in the best possible light. In both scenarios, users feel there is little room for genuine self-expression or authentic representation. This meticulous curation of content creates a significant disconnect between what is posted and the reality of the individual's daily life. Users have observed that what people post on Instagram is rarely captured in the moment, making it increasingly difficult to relate it to the real person behind the content. This growing disconnection makes it challenging for users to see Instagram as an authentic reflection of people's lives.

R4: BeReal app affordances and authenticity

Of all the BeReal features and functionalities I have offered a panoramic of in the previous chapter, the interviewed users focused on a few, reasoning on their contribution - if any - to authenticity.

Firstly, almost half of the interviewees pointed out that the first and most important feature favoring authenticity is the shortness and randomness of the “*It’s time to BeReal!*” time frame. The double-sided photo offers little escape from an authentic representation of self and surroundings.

Moreover, the absence of filters and tools to work on the photos before publishing them has been highlighted as a pull factor for authenticity, often put in contrast with other social media.

Opposite opinions have been given about the need for users to publish their BeReal in order to see their friends: a few users thought that it enhances authentic practices, especially because most of the activity on the app is said to take place in the first minutes or few hours after the notification. For these reasons, users who want to see their friends’ content are pushed to take their BeReal on time or at least not too late, especially if they also desire to have interactions with their friends. One user, on the other hand, described a frequent practice amongst their connections, that is posting a black BeReal, depicting nothing on both sides of the photo, just to be able to look at other people’s BeReals, sometimes even deleting the “empty” photo once the user has scrolled all the content on the app. Clearly, this practice demonstrates how a fundamental characteristic of BeReal can be subverted through specific user behavior.

For what regards connections on the app, all users who expressed their opinion on the matter explained that the small number of friends, and the fact that users are not incentivized to grow a large community, allows them to be more authentic as they feel less judgment and embarrassment from posting ordinary or non-polished content.

Two features of BeReal have been declared about a half dozen times in favor of authenticity, which are the visibility of how many retakes have been taken and how late a BeReal has been published. These two precautions allow users to distinguish on-time and unrehearsed BeReals from the “unauthentic” ones. It has been argued that the ability to retake a photo must be granted, to avoid publishing inadvertently private content, but the Late BeReal feature could be deleted altogether to really push authenticity.

Although not all users integrate Location and Audio in their BeReals, about half of them found those features to enhance authenticity, as they put the photos in their real and almost unstageable context.

A much more controversial characteristic of the app is the two Bonus BeReals that are unlocked every time a user posts their first photo within two minutes after the notification. Overall, about half of the interviewees expressed that this feature surely pushes users to post an authentic first picture as soon as they receive the notification, with no time to prepare for the double photo. Thanks to this feature, users post more often on time, hence a more authentic first photo. Nevertheless, almost all users who gave their opinion on the matter highlighted that the second and third photos are far from authentic, looking more like the kind of content posted on other social media, such as Instagram.

All things considered, the majority of users would be prone to consider this feature as positively impacting authenticity. Only a few interviewees strongly disagreed, explaining that those additional photos are produced in a far-from-authentic way, having nothing to do with the declared intent of the app.

“(…) it’s a bit less real, but it’s still more real than Instagram”

Ginny, F, 21

Only a few interviewees expressed their opinion on the possibility of choosing three BeReals from the archives and pinning them in one’s profile, making them visible to everyone all the time, and it was harshly negative. They felt that it bears no relation to authenticity: showing the best three moments of the past months, likely the most memorable occasions and glamorous shots, does not provide any additional authenticity. Showing one’s best sides and positive moments has not been associated with authenticity by most users.

Behind The Scenes (BTS) is another feature that received mostly praise. Only about a quarter of users expressed their opinion on this feature, but thoroughly explained their point of view. The majority of them felt that BTS is a positive tool for authenticity, as it shows the surroundings of the user in real time. It has been suggested, however, that to force users to capture even more authentic moments, BTS could be a compulsory feature, or it could be randomly activated by the app, without the chance to enable it manually.

Streaks have been widely criticized as bothersome, as they are perceived as a method for the app to aggressively prompt users - via numerous notifications - to post their daily BeReal. While this mechanism undoubtedly incentivizes frequent engagement with the app, a few users have observed that the photos taken in response to these notifications are often Late BeReals, so there is no guarantee that the captures will be anywhere near authentic.

Finally, Real People and Real Brands were the latest updates analyzed and the last to be released, hence a smaller number of interviewees have experienced them at the moment of the interviews. Of the about half dozen interviewees who expressed their opinions, only one could see some benefit to authenticity in these features: celebrities and brands could lead by example and push their followers to be more authentic, considering BeReal a “better” and less fake social media than others.

Of a completely different opinion were all the other interviewees who had the chance to experience these updates. They all expressed dislike towards such features and highlighted how they are too market-related, having nothing to do with authenticity. Brands and celebrities must exclusively highlight their positive aspects to attract customers and fans, rendering their presence on social media platforms like BeReal entirely hypocritical.

Chapter 4

In this conclusive chapter, I am going to outline the most notable answers and gather all the information for possible future research, following this brief study.

This study has provided a comprehensive look at how users perceive and engage with authenticity on BeReal, highlighting both the app's strengths and areas for improvement.

4.1 Findings

R1: Definition of authenticity.

On a theoretical level, users have endeavored to define authenticity both intrinsically and in connection with social media. The latter has been more precisely delineated through the analysis of usage patterns across various apps and the users' perceptions of authenticity within them. A considerable amount of thought has been invested in conceptualizing authenticity as an abstract notion.

The explanations and definitions provided by interviewees have generally aligned with the findings of the literature review presented at the beginning of this research. Notably, users emphasized core inner values, suggesting that authenticity is a quality to be discovered within oneself. This intrinsic authenticity is then expressed outwardly, where it can be perceived by others.

Regarding authenticity in the context of social media, it appears that these platforms are not widely regarded as environments conducive to genuine self-expression. Furthermore, different perspectives on social media usage seem to underscore how varying patterns of use are underpinned by differing conceptions of authenticity. For example, one user might argue that posting after hours is inherently inauthentic, while another might contend that such behavior does not necessarily compromise authenticity. This discrepancy can be attributed to divergent underlying theories of what constitutes authenticity.

The nuanced discussions of authenticity both in its abstract form and in relation to social media reveal a complex interplay between self-perception and external expression. The divergence in opinions about what is considered authentic behavior on social media platforms highlights the subjective nature of authenticity itself. This subjective nature suggests that authenticity is not a one-size-fits-all concept but is rather shaped by individual beliefs, values, and experiences.

Moreover, the literature review underscores the importance of inner-core values in the quest for authenticity, a theme echoed by the interviewees. Authenticity, as derived from these inner values, is then communicated to the outside world, where it interacts with societal perceptions and judgments. In the realm of social media, this interaction often becomes more complex due to the performative aspects inherent in digital self-presentation.

R2: Authenticity on BeReal

Overall, it seems that BeReal offers a more authentic environment compared to other social media platforms. However, when considering social media per se, several aspects can mislead authenticity or be easily circumvented. The majority of interviewees explicitly stated or implied that posting the BeReal within the assigned time frame is synonymous with authentic behavior. Posting a Late BeReal has rarely been associated with authenticity, though not universally: the clearest determinant is the reason behind users taking their shot after the time has elapsed and their decision-making process when they choose to post despite being aware of the delay.

One of the most intriguing findings of this research is the potential correlation between user age and patterns of authenticity on BeReal. It appears that older users tend to exhibit more authentic behavior, while younger generations are perceived as less authentic. It is important to note that this observation is merely indicative and would require further studies and investigation to be substantiated.

Moreover, the continuous addition of new features seems to drive shifts in user engagement, particularly highlighted by the introduction of the two Bonus BeReals. These changes have influenced the relationship between authenticity and user patterns over time. The evolving features prompt users to adapt their behavior, which in turn impacts their expression of authenticity on the platform.

Another significant insight from the interviewees is the observed decrease in insecurities and overthinking related to the content posted on BeReal, as compared to other social media platforms. BeReal seems to foster an environment that is perceived as a safer space for users to express their true selves through photos. This stands in stark contrast to the often highly curated and performative nature of other social media environments.

Finally, it is possible that a person's self-disposition towards authenticity, as they attempt to define it, could be a predictor of their usage of BeReal. This might be suggested by the high likelihood of a match between users perceiving authenticity as one's portrayal without staging, selection, and modification, and users' usage patterns, unveiling high levels of authentic behaviors and practices.

R3: Authenticity on other social media (Instagram)

It has been challenging to categorize all types of app usage into a single or a few behavioral patterns. However, users consistently highlighted that Instagram, the most frequently cited social media platform, is perceived as less authentic than BeReal. Insecurities have been a significant part of the conversation about authenticity on Instagram. Users feel compelled to present an enhanced version of themselves constantly. The reasons behind this approach are rooted in the high level of exposure (to friends and followers) and the overall atmosphere of the app, which discourages authentic behaviors. Despite the diversity in how users interact with the app, a clear consensus emerged regarding the comparative authenticity of Instagram and BeReal. Instagram is often seen as a platform where users feel pressured to curate and stage their lives meticulously.

R4: BeReal app affordances and authenticity

The prospect of identifying a predominant usage pattern proved to be unsuccessful, as the landscape of usages and user appropriations is wide and diverse. Several features have been divisive among users. Even the oldest, "original" features, which ostensibly promote authentic behaviors, can be circumvented. This indicates that despite the platform's design intentions, user practices can vary significantly, sometimes undermining the goal of authenticity.

Moreover, given the high emphasis placed on features aimed at fostering connections and cultivating relationships in promotions and social media presence, it was expected that these aspects would hold substantial importance in conversations with interviewees. Surprisingly, this was not the case. The anticipated prominence of social connection features did not emerge as a major theme in user discussions, suggesting a disconnect between promotional narratives and actual user experiences.

Another key finding is the role of the continuously expanding feature set in attracting users to the app. The constant introduction of new features serves as a pull factor, keeping the user experience fresh by combating monotony. However, this abundance of features has also been frequently mentioned as detrimental to the perception of BeReal as an app for authenticity. The proliferation of features can dilute the app's core mission of promoting genuine, unfiltered self-expression.

4.2 Further Research

Based on the above-mentioned results, further research could be explored.

By continuing to explore these themes, scholars and developers alike can contribute to creating social media environments that promote genuine, meaningful connections. At the same time, paralleling platform-specific user behaviors and a hands-on understanding of authenticity could deepen the understanding of such intertwined fields and the influence of one on the other.

Expanding the Sample Size.

Given that this study was based on a relatively small sample of 16 participants, expanding the sample size is a crucial area for future research. Conducting studies with a larger and more diverse group of users would provide more generalizable insights and help validate the findings of this research. A larger sample could also uncover additional patterns and nuances in user behavior and perceptions of authenticity, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of how different demographics engage with BeReal. By including participants from varied backgrounds, age groups, and geographic locations, future research can better capture the diverse ways in which people experience and perceive authenticity on social media platforms.

Inclusion of Different Nationalities.

An important extension to this research would be to include participants from different nationalities.

Some features on BeReal and other social media platforms are tested in specific regions before their official release. This means that user experiences can vary significantly based

on geographical location. This research could reveal region-specific trends and preferences, helping developers tailor features to better meet the expectations of a global audience.

Moreover, social media behaviors and pressures differ across cultures. Group behaviors, social norms, and peer influences can vary widely, impacting how authenticity is perceived and enacted. A cross-national study would help identify these cultural variations and how different social contexts influence the use of BeReal.

Longitudinal Studies on User Engagement.

Given the noted fluctuations in user engagement with BeReal, a longitudinal study could provide deeper insights into the factors influencing sustained usage. Tracking users over an extended period would help identify the critical junctures where users decide to uninstall or reactivate the app and the underlying reasons for these decisions.

Enhancing Authenticity Through Feature Innovation.

Exploring how new or modified features could enhance authenticity on social media platforms like BeReal presents an exciting research opportunity that could be developed in partnership with the BeReal team. Experimental studies testing features such as longer randomized posting windows, compulsory BTS, or mandatory Instant RealMojis - as suggested by some interviewees - could provide insights for developers aiming to create more authentic social media experiences.

Impact of Forced Spontaneity on Mental Health.

The concept of forced spontaneity – a core feature of BeReal – calls for further examination, particularly its psychological impact. Investigating how this enforced posting affects users' mental health, stress levels, and overall social media satisfaction could provide valuable insights. This line of inquiry could also explore whether features like Streaks and Behind The Scenes contribute positively or negatively to users' well-being.

Comparative Analysis Across Social Media Platforms.

While this study primarily compared BeReal with Instagram, expanding the comparative analysis to include other platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook could offer a broader understanding of how different social media environments influence perceptions of authenticity. Such comparative studies could reveal platform-specific affordances that either promote or hinder authentic user engagement.

Correlation Between Authenticity Perception and Usage Patterns.

From a sociological perspective, it would be valuable to investigate the correlation between how users perceive authenticity and their social media usage patterns. Enlarging the study sample and including multiple social media platforms could reveal if there is a significant relationship between definitions of authenticity and usage patterns. It would be crucial to define if how individuals define and intend authenticity for themselves and others correlate with different usage behaviors across various social media platforms.

Understanding these correlations could provide deeper insights into the role of authenticity in social media engagement and inform the design of features that promote genuine interactions.

Expanding the research in these directions would enhance the understanding of authenticity in the digital age, providing a richer, more comprehensive picture of user interactions with BeReal and other social media platforms.

Authenticity Perceptions and Social Media Usage Patterns.

The preliminary findings suggest a strong correlation between users' conceptualizations of authenticity and their behavior on BeReal. This correlation indicates that individuals who define authenticity as an unstaged, unselected, and unmodified portrayal of their lives tend to use BeReal in a manner they perceive as authentic. Future research should explore whether this pattern holds across a larger and more diverse sample, including participants from different cultural backgrounds and social contexts. More targeted questions around authenticity - both related to social media and to a more theoretical sphere - could also provide further details and nuances regarding self-disposition and theoretical definition.

Moreover, conducting similar studies across different social media platforms would provide valuable comparative insights. Investigating how authenticity perceptions and

usage patterns vary across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat could reveal platform-specific dynamics and affordances that are influenced by authenticity self-dispositions.

Conclusions

This thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of how authenticity is perceived and expressed on the social media platform BeReal. Through a theoretical framework, feature analysis, and user interviews, several key insights have emerged.

Users have a varied understanding of authenticity, with many viewing it as an intrinsic quality that should be reflected in outward behavior. This resonates with psychological theories of self-congruence, where authenticity involves acting in accordance with one's inner values and beliefs. However, on social media, authenticity is more complex than in theory, being clearly influenced by the platform's features and the different users' interpretations of what is genuine behavior.

The study found that BeReal's unique features are perceived differently in terms of authenticity. The interviews revealed a broad spectrum of user experiences, highlighting how social media platforms, including BeReal, can both support and undermine authentic self-expression. Users noted that while the app theoretically encourages spontaneous sharing, the desire for social validation and the influence of other social media platforms' usage patterns can mislead the potentially “good intentions” of BeReal and lead to less authentic behavior over time.

The study also suggests that perceptions of authenticity are not static. As BeReal evolves and gains popularity, users' behaviors and attitudes towards what is considered authentic on the platform may change. This underscores the need for ongoing research to understand how new features and user trends impact the expression of authenticity online.

Future studies could involve larger and more diverse samples, including users from different age groups, occupations, and cultural backgrounds. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various demographics perceive and engage with authenticity on social media. Longitudinal research would also help track changes in user behavior and perceptions of authenticity over time.

Comparing BeReal with other social media platforms could offer insights into the unique and shared features that promote or hinder authentic self-expression in the Social Media landscape at large.

In conclusion, while BeReal provides a novel approach to social media by promoting spontaneous and unfiltered sharing, its impact on authenticity is multifaceted and evolving. Continued research is essential to fully grasp the complexities of authenticity in the digital age and to guide the development of platforms that genuinely support authentic self-expression.

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Images and Tables

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Table 1: Bertocchi, M., 01/06/2024

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