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BEING REAL: GEN-Z, SELF-PRESENTATION, AND
AUTHENTICITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA
MAYA NEUFELD-WALL

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

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Being Real: Gen-Z, Self-Presentation, and Authenticity on Social Media

Maya Neufeld-Wall

Trinity University, Department of Communication

Senior Honors Thesis

Abstract

What does it mean to truly be real? This question of authenticity is one that scholars have been asking for years, and it is now echoed by members of Generation-Z as they trailblaze a new frontier for media through social media platforms that encourage authenticity. Considering this shift in social media practices, Gen-Z users appear to be implementing a ‘realer’ approach to social media than previous generations’ edited and filtered content. However, does this ‘real’ content actually feel real to the users creating and consuming it? The abstract nature of the concept of authenticity creates a significant amount of ambiguity surrounding one singular definition and suggests that there is consistent development occurring in terms of Generation Z’s perception of authenticity, as well as their expectation of this characteristic from their peers on social media. Although authenticity is important to Gen-Z, research shows that members of this group can also be likely to shift their self-presentation dramatically based on the social media platform they are using, and follow practices of conformity with their own peers (Darr, 2022). The new social media platform BeReal offers a new opportunity for users to self-present authentically and could change the way that users define authenticity as a whole. In this study, Gen-Z social media users underwent in-depth qualitative interviews examining their perceptions and definitions of authenticity in order to offer commentary on how much Gen-Z is prioritizing authenticity on social media, and how well social media platforms are measuring up to their expectations.

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Introduction

What does it mean to truly be real? The question of authenticity is one that scholars have been asking for years, and it is now echoed by members of Generation-Z as they trailblaze a new frontier for media through social media platforms that encourage authenticity. One such platform, aptly titled BeReal, has taken the internet by storm in 2022, encouraging users to post an unplanned photo at a random interval throughout the day. On Instagram, users are beginning to post unedited, unpolished photos from their daily lives in the form of ‘photo dumps’ more frequently. Considering this shift in social media practices, Gen-Z users appear to be implementing a ‘realer’ approach to social media, compared with previous generations’ edited and filtered content. However, does this ‘real’ content actually feel real to the users creating and consuming it? The abstract nature of the concept of authenticity creates a significant amount of ambiguity surrounding one singular definition and suggests that there is consistent development occurring in terms of Generation Z’s perception of authenticity, as well as their expectation of this characteristic from their peers on social media.

Review of Existing Literature

Authenticity

For years, the definition of authenticity has been up for debate in the scholarly community, from Horney in 1951 and Erving Goffman’s 1973 *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* to Bailey and Matz in 2020. According to Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019), there are four broad categories that encapsulate existing definitions of authenticity, taking into consideration the existing breadth of scholarship on authenticity: (1) self-congruence, (2) the person-centered approach, (3) intrinsically motivated behavior, and (4) subjective feelings of authenticity.

(1) Self-congruence is defined as behaving in adherence with who one really is or what one is really like. This concept takes into account a person's physiological states, emotions, and beliefs. (Wood, Linley, Maltby, et al., 2008) One such belief is integrity, which has been defined as acting in accordance with one's personal values or morals. This concept assesses the degree to which people's behavior varies across situations or social roles. For example, an athlete on a sports team might behave in a more high-energy and outgoing manner with teammates but might allow the side of their personality that aligns more with a quiet, thoughtful mentality to emerge with roommates or friends who share those traits. However, rather than switching from one type of persona to another depending on the situation, when individuals behave consistently with the self they feel they are the most truly aligned with, they are practicing self-congruence. According to a study by Boucher in 2011, people perceived themselves as more authentic when their behavior remained consistent across situations and roles (Boucher, 2011).

(2) According to Jongman-Sereno, the next approach is the person-centered approach, which involves distancing oneself from societal expectations (Jongman-Sereno, 2019). The person-centered approach argues that authenticity involves congruence between three aspects of human functioning: internal experience, described as the true self; awareness of experience, the noticing of the self; and external behavior, which is the expression of the self (Barrett-Lennard, 1998). When people become aware of the components of their true self that make up the inner experience and behave in ways that coincide with these experiences, the more authentic they are. For example, if a person realizes that they are interested in writing, and then pursues that interest externally, they will feel fulfilled because they are living authentically, according to the person. People achieve true authenticity when their internal experiences and behavior are free of outside influences and other people's expectations.

(3) Ryan and Deci's 2004 self-determination theory is a defining factor of a third approach to the authentic self, which is established through intrinsically motivated behavior. Self-determination theory states that human beings inherently value acting congruently with their intrinsic motives but differ in the degree to which they actually do so (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is the most autonomous source of motivation- it is the desire to engage in behaviors solely because they are inherently interesting or pleasurable (Ryan & Deci, 1985). This idea of intrinsic motivation contrasts with extrinsic motivators such as externally regulated behavior, introjected regulation of behavior, regulation through identification, and integrated regulation. For example, performance based solely on external incentives, such as a prize or social status, would be external motivation and would conflict with the idea of performance motivated by a genuine interest and attachment to the subject. Utilizing this self-determination theory, authenticity can be assessed by determining the degree to which people choose to behave in a certain way for intrinsic reasons rather than because of extrinsic pressures and motivators.

(4) Jongman-Sereno's final categorization of authenticity theory is subjective feelings of authenticity, which focuses on individuals' feelings of self-congruence or authenticity, meaning that authenticity is defined by how well people *think* they are acting in accordance with their true selves. This category is difficult to measure objectively because people do not always understand their motivations for actions, and therefore emotions do not always reflect true self-congruence. People tend to feel more authentic when they behave in socially desirable ways, so this definition can be problematic in terms of accuracy. However, Heppner's 2008 study found that authenticity, autonomy, competence, and relatedness were positively and significantly related to daily reports of self-esteem (Heppner et al., 2008). When individuals felt that they were acting in accordance with their true selves, they were happier in their day-to-day life.

Many scholars have also used Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliouisis, and Joseph's 2008 tripartite conception of authenticity to inform modern studies of authenticity, which incorporates influence from all four of Jongman-Sereno's categories. The tripartite conception involves three main components: self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influence.

Self-alienation describes the lack of a sense of identity through the subjective feeling of not knowing oneself. By not understanding oneself, a person creates a disconnect between the person they present and who they truly are. According to Wood, et al., when there is a mismatch between their conscious awareness and their actual experience, individuals experience self-alienation. This mismatch causes the individual to feel out of touch with themselves. If a person strongly dislikes sports but finds themselves participating in various sporting activities and organizations, they might feel a sense of disconnect from their inner self, since they are not behaving congruently with their internal desires.

Accepting external influence involves the extent to which an individual might accept the influence of others and the belief that it is necessary to conform to these external expectations. For example, if many individuals place a high value on Instagram likes, a person might choose to post content that might garner more likes to achieve value from the greater majority.

Authentic living involves behaving in ways that are consistent with an intentional awareness of one's inner physiological states and emotions. The congruence between perceived experience and behavior is key with this aspect and requires the individual to behave in alignment with one's own values. For example, a person might make the choice to pursue a career in art if they have a true passion for art. This element reflects true feelings of authenticity, while the other two aspects of the conception identify ways in which inauthenticity is expressed (Wood, 2008).

Much of the existing literature that has attempted to define authenticity focuses on the idea from a psychological perspective, however; it is important also to acknowledge the difference between individual authenticity and brand authenticity, which operates under its own framework. According to Moulard, Raggio, and Folse (2011), brand authenticity is a consumer's perception of the degree to which a supposed authenticity entity corresponds with or is true to something else, known as a referent. Moulard argues that authenticity can be measured in one or more of three central dimensions: true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, and true-to-self. True-to-ideal describes the ways in which a brand's presence measures up to the "best" or most ideal presentation of those elements online. The true-to-fact concept outlines how well a brand's message aligns with the object truth, including hard data. Finally, the true-to-self component explains how much a brand's online self-presentation aligns with its true identity. Because users of social media are inherently consumers, this framework could inform how many users perceive authenticity on social media in combination with the psychological frameworks that might define their perception of life outside of the virtual dimension.

Social Media and Authenticity

As of 2021, 84% of Americans aged 18-29 use at least one social media platform- as do 66% of all American men and 78% of all American women (Pew Research Center). 71% of 18-29 year olds use Instagram, 48% use TikTok, 65% use Snapchat, and 95% use YouTube- and over half of all users of these platforms say they check each on a daily basis (Pew Research Center). Clearly, social media is a space where a large portion of the American population between the ages of 18 and 29 spend a significant portion of their time, and thus have ample opportunity for virtual interaction and self-presentation. Users of social media platforms, as a whole, face tension between presenting themselves in an idealized or authentic way, according to

one 2020 study (Bailey, 2020). This tension raises an important question: is authenticity a priority for users of social media now? According to a 2022 study by Hu, Hu, and Hou, several of the main motivators of social media use are entertainment, socialization, self-promotion, and the desire to gain information (Hu, et al. 2022). Another study by Wang, Tchernev, and Solloway stated that drivers of social media use are based on emotional, cognitive, social, and habitual practices- but social media use does not gratify all of these drivers. Over time, the ungratified needs build up and drive increased social media use. Furthermore, solitude and interpersonal support increase social media use and moderate the effects of needs on social media use (Wang, et al. 2012).

A 2019 study of university undergraduates found that the most frequently used social media sites at the time (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat) attracted users who sought information, social interaction, self-expression, and self-profiling from using social media (Adebisi, 2019). Another study estimated the degree of self-idealized versus authentic self-expression as the level of similarity between users' self-reported personality and automated personality judgments made on the basis of likes and status updates. This study found that all individuals who are more authentic in their self-expression report greater life satisfaction consistently across personality profiles- for the participants, authentic posting positively affected mood and view of self. Personal choices about self-expression on social media platforms may also drive whether engaging with social media helps or harms an individual's well-being (Bailey, 2020). Individual uses of social media also play a significant role in the relationship between social media, authenticity, and well-being. One study examining Facebook usage habits found that passively using Facebook to only consume content shared by others was negatively

connected with well-being, using Facebook actively instead to share content and communicate with friends did not have the same negative connection with well-being (Verduyn, 2015).

Some studies have been conducted in an attempt to define how young people specifically perceive authenticity on social media. One study discovered that young people perceive authenticity as “self-consistency” between their online and offline behaviors (Davis, 2014) while another argues that authenticity can be determined by whether individuals believe that their actions match their perception of their “true” self (Darr, 2022). Overall, these studies suggest that users’ commitment to interaction and activity on social media can be connected with positive feelings and a sense of authentic self-presentation online, while more passive uses of social media (scrolling, liking, rather than posting organic content) are likely to lessen these positive effects.

Gen Z Social Media Practices

‘Digital natives,’ a term penned by Prensky in 2001, refers to people who were born into a time full of technology (Prensky, 2001). As a part of this group, Gen-Zers have several unique characteristics that set them apart from previous generations. Because the online landscape is highly commercialized, this group is considered to be more brand-savvy, and are influenced by the opinion of others, but are also independently-minded and harbor a desire for self-expression (Goldring & Azab, 2021). Use and self-presentation on social media for Gen Z are significant and have changed over time. For some, social media can be a chance to present themselves in a different light. One 2014 study reports that 30% of teenage girls who use Facebook define their online identity as more confident than their identity offline, and over 50% reported the same for their presence on Twitter (Binns, 2014). These online presences are very intentional, according to a 2019 study by Vitelar. This study concluded that Gen-Zers value individual expression

highly as well as inclusivity while utilizing analytic and pragmatic decision-making skills (Vitelar, 2019). Furthermore, Pew reported in 2018 that about 30% of teenagers delete or hide social media posts they do not want their parents to see (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Clearly, the way Gen-Zers present themselves on social media is regulated to an extent, but there is also a concern for authenticity that informs their self-presentation on social media. Youths identify authenticity as self-consistency between on and offline behaviors, according to Davis (2014), and there have been several social media trends that have suggested a desire for authentic performance on social media from Generation Z. The first is the concept of the “photo dump” on Instagram. Ever since Instagram introduced the photo carousel in 2017, users have been able to share up to ten pictures or videos. “Dumping, as opposed to old-fashioned posting, is a way of participating in the Instagram economy without seeming like you’re taking it too seriously; of being simultaneously curated and carefree,” writes Emilia Petrarca for The Cut. “To share one nice-looking photo of your life is to say: *I want you to know that I have a nice life*. But dumping ten shitty photos (with maybe one enviable image buried in there) is the lifestyle porn equivalent of sharing a smiley-face-shrugging emoji ” (Petrarcha, 2021).

However, Darr argues that because of the phenomenon of context collapse, where boundaries between multiple audiences are blurred, it can be challenging for young people to pursue authenticity in the virtual space (Darr, 2022). In Darr’s study, the participants understood themselves as skilled at creating a more idealized identity on their main Instagram account but would use Finstas, or fake Instagram accounts, to express their “true selves” because they found the performance on the main account unsatisfying (Darr, 2022). Context collapse can also be described as an inherent feature of social media (Boyd, 2010). In the offline world, individuals can alter their self-presentation based on individual social contexts, such as the workplace,

school environment, and social environments with peers. However, social networking sites blur and erase such boundaries, which “problematizes the individual’s ability to shift between these selves and come off as authentic or fake” (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Another factor that can affect the motivation to present authentically online is self-objectification. Common for women especially, self-objectification is the tendency to see the self as a physical, often sexualized object (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This is commonly associated with heightened anxiety about self-presentation in online interactions. One 2021 study found that women’s self-objectification is associated with a desire for approval from others and this desire manifests in a heightened willingness to modify self-presentation (Chen, 2021).

It is clear that authenticity is a characteristic that is important to Gen-Z through their media practices and trusting behaviors, however; research shows that members of this group are also likely to shift their self-presentation dramatically based on the social media platform they are using, and follow practices of conformity with their own peers (Darr, 2022). Although social media platforms do offer up ways to perform authenticity without truly being authentic, as defined by the tripartite conception of authenticity, it is true that Gen-Z users of social media are also increasingly taking on practices that embody elements of authenticity, such as Finstas, ‘photo dumping’ on Instagram, and new platforms like social media application BeReal.

BeReal: A Platform Redefining Traditional Media

The newest addition to the suite of apps many members of Generation Z have downloaded onto their smartphones is a French photo-sharing application called BeReal. Since the beginning of 2021, downloads of the app have risen by 315% and it now ranks fourth in the list of most downloaded social media apps, just behind Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest (Cheong, 2022). This app encourages users to show one another who they really are- removing

filters and opportunities to stage, overthink, or edit photos. At a randomly selected time once a day, the app will send out a notification to users telling them “It’s time to BeReal,” after which all users have two minutes to snap a photo of what they are doing at that moment. The photo captures both the front and back of the camera, and the app discourages retakes and will only allow one chance per day for a BeReal to be deleted. Individuals can only view their friends’ BeReals after they post their own (Pitcher, 2022). Users do have the chance to post late if they are busy or miss the notification, but friends on the app will see exactly how many minutes or hours late individuals are once they post. Additionally, users are not able to ‘like’ others’ BeReals in the same way that they could an Instagram post. Instead, they have to get their face involved with Realmojis that express what they are feeling visually with a photo of their face in the moment, rather than a symbol like a heart or other emoji. One 18-year-old told ABC Chicago that the platform emphasized authenticity which is resonating among teens because of the absence of competition on the platform (ABC).

While the early days of many social media platforms showcased less filtered and cultivated content from users as they familiarized themselves with the platforms, as time went on, entrepreneurs and business owners have created a ‘creator economy’ that utilizes platforms for influencer marketing. This new tactic now populates users’ feeds with curated content and glamorized photos that create a surreal and idealized version of life that is increasingly difficult to recreate in reality (Mileva, 2022). Furthermore, the increasing frequency of ad placement and specialization in social media feeds creates even more of a capitalistic and business-related environment on social media platforms. The knowledge that an ad is targeted can directly conflict with the authentic living component of the tripartite theory of authenticity (Wood, 2008) and create even more of a disconnect between perceptions of reality on and offline. In addition,

the flood of targeted ads makes it more difficult for users to follow through on the original purpose of these platforms- to connect with friends and family and keep up with their lives (Mileva, 2022). These factors and more contribute to an association between negative self-perception and mental health and social media use, which also impacts external factors in users' lives, including sleep quality (Alonzo, 2021). Additionally, the use of social networking sites is associated with high levels of negative self-comparison and increased instances of suicidal ideation among youths (Spitzer, 2022). For creators themselves, the nature of online algorithms keeps them sticking to one niche to retain one audience online, and influencers across platforms feel pressure to maintain a photo-worthy lifestyle in order to support their livelihood and keep their viewers engaged (Pitcher, 2022).

BeReal is an app that is trying to change all of this. The lack of filters or the ability to pre-curate the content already makes it much easier for users to get a glimpse of what their friends are up to in their day-to-day lives. The lack of advertisements or embedded links, tags, or online shop fronts also prevents the app from becoming another space for commerce. Currently, the platform is funded by venture capitalists and does not make any money independently. If the app were to be sold or choose to start making a profit by implementing ads, the benefits of a commerce-free space would dissolve (BeReal, 2022). Additionally, the app is smaller-scale, with many people becoming 'friends' primarily with people they know in real life. As a result, there is less space for influence on BeReal and not as much pressure to curate. According to ABC, psychiatrists have even suggested that the app has the potential to help children who are struggling with self-worth and anxiety issues (ABC News, 2022). However, despite the intention of the app to encourage authenticity and promote a more 'real' climate of sharing on social media, this is a possibility that some find difficult to believe. Neema Githere, artist and scholar

of the digital diaspora, told Vice, “These platforms simply cannot hold the true range of who we are and what we hold, so this trend of trying to be authentic online is a bit of a trap that serves to further keep us attached to these platforms – stuck in the same performance spirals. The attempt to be ‘authentic’ is a premature endeavor in the face of widespread algorithmic nudging” (Pitcher, 2022).

The concept behind BeReal aligns well with previous studies examining teenagers and their perception of authenticity on social media. One 2022 study took an in-depth look at teens and their behavior on secondary Instagram accounts, also known as ‘spam’ accounts or ‘Finstas’ (Dar, 2022). This study found that participants perceived their Finstas to be more authentic than their main accounts because of several factors. First, the account was used to communicate to a smaller, more niche audience, and participants noted that they felt comfortable posting spontaneously, utilizing humor, and posting about gossip and events going on in their real lives more so than they could on their main Instagram account (Darr, 2022). These three key components are all present on BeReal: most, if not all, of the content references and captures real-life events, the community consuming content is much smaller and more personal, and as a result, users are more comfortable posting humorous content.

However, one barrier to true authenticity on the app is the idea that users could potentially post a ‘Late,’ which is a BeReal taken outside of the given two minutes when the notification is initially sent out (Perreau, 2022). Because people *can* post late, it gives them the ability to wait until they are doing something that they perceive to be engaging to their audience, and then post, which creates the impression that they are “being real” but are actually constructing their reality in a way that does not align with the goals of the app. If users see their friends posting particularly exciting content, they may feel pressured to post equally exciting

content themselves or choose to post late with their friends to feel a sense of belonging. These choices allow Gen-Z users to step away from the tripartite definition of authenticity, despite the fact that the app is set up with the resources to allow this definition to be fulfilled. Specifically, the app encourages users to showcase the component of authentic living on social media. By presenting a more authentic version of the self online, users might experience a lessened sense of self-alienation, since there is a higher level of consistency between versions of the self. Finally, because there is so much information about others present on social media, the component that involves accepting external influence is something that BeReal hopes to diminish, encouraging users to think less about cultivating content for others and more about posting in the moment.

The rapid development of trends on social media suggests that Gen-Z audiences, because they are so adaptable, might also have a shifting definition of authenticity that might not wholly align with Wood's tripartite definition, or any of the other established definitions and methods for explaining authenticity. The existing scholarship is comprehensive, however, it is difficult to keep up with new expressions of authenticity as the opportunities for self-presentation on social media platforms shift. In 2022, how does Generation Z conceptualize social media authenticity? Is it possible that this new generation still generally follows the tripartite conception involving self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influence (Wood, 2008)? Does their definition incorporate any elements of Moulard's principles of brand authenticity, since a portion of Gen-Zers' self-presentation occurs online (Moulard, 2011)? Authentic living is a priority for this group, however; studies have shown that Gen Z also is vulnerable to outside influences, such as context collapse when managing different 'versions' of the self on social media (Boyd, 2010), self-objectification (Chen, 2021), and pressure to conform with peers' behavior (Darr, 2022). The purpose of the present study is to discern the ways in which Gen-Zers conceptualize social

media authenticity, and whether this definition fits alongside Wood's tripartite conceptualization. Furthermore, this study aims to identify how important the perception of authenticity is to Gen-Z users, as well as the differences between individuals' current definitions and the frameworks laid out in previous scholarship.

Research Questions

R1: In what way does Gen Z conceptualize social media authenticity?

R2: How important is it to Gen Z to be authentic on social media?

R3: How different are Gen Z's perceptions of authenticity from the definitions that exist in previous scholarship?

R4: Does BeReal as a social media platform embody and encourage the elements of authenticity prioritized by Gen Z?

R5: What kinds of changes to social media could be implemented to facilitate the components of authenticity that Generation Z values?

Method

Data for this study was collected from interviews with 12 members of Generation Z ("Gen-Z"), defined as individuals born between the years of 1997 and 2015. Participants were identified through word-of-mouth recruitment. The purpose of the interviews was to establish an in-depth understanding of Gen-Z's perception of authenticity on social media platforms and the way they define and frame authenticity on their own. BeReal was discussed in the interviews not only as a novel platform that is attempting to redefine the practice of authenticity on social media but also as a framework for participants to better define and explain their own perceptions of the concept. The interviews were conducted individually via Zoom, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, and took place between February 1st and March 15th, 2023. In order to qualify for

participation, individuals fit in the age group of Gen-Z and had experience actively using and participating on social media platforms, particularly BeReal. These qualifications produced a sample of informed users that were able to share valuable information on social media and authenticity. This particular sect of the generation was selected because as digital natives, college-aged social media users in particular have been using digital platforms for long enough that they can accurately speak to change over time in their experiences.

After the interviews, participants filled out a short survey that collected quantitative data about social media use, including which platforms they use regularly and how many hours each week they use their respective platforms. The survey also collected demographic information about the participants. Although the survey was quantitative, the extended interviews themselves remained qualitative, focusing on identifying concepts and trends that identified commonalities in the opinions of the generation as a whole. A qualitative approach is necessary for this project because it aims to capture the intricacies of the individual experience on social media, as well as anecdotes and examples that provide a strong base for the limited field of research concerning BeReal. The individual experiences that this project highlights add an element of depth to the study that quantitative data alone could not provide. Participants were asked to explain what type of behavior and characteristics they perceive to be inauthentic on social media, if they think it is possible for users to be truly authentic on social media, and how they identify this authenticity. The next section of questions focused on the newer developments in social media that might encourage authenticity, specifically highlighting BeReal. Participants were encouraged to reflect on what social media apps could do to promote authenticity in their users. For the full list of interview questions, see Appendix A.

Participants

This study focused on members of Gen-Z between the ages of 19 and 22. 33% of participants were 22, 33% were 21, 17% were 20, and 17% were 19. The average age was 20.8. Participants identified as 46% White, 31% Hispanic/LatinX, 15% Black, and 8% Asian. 58% of participants identified as female, and 42% identified as male. 50% of participants had completed some college, 33% had completed high school, and 17% had a Bachelor's degree. 50% of participants reported living in the Southwest, 25% in the Midwest, 17% in the Southeast, and 8% in the Northeast. Participants were also asked to indicate which social media platforms they use regularly. 92% of participants reported regularly using Instagram, 83% regularly used BeReal, 42% used TikTok, 83% used Snapchat, 33% used Twitter, 33% used LinkedIn, 25% used Pinterest, and 1% used Reddit. On average, this group of participants spent 10.75 hours on social media per week. The sample's most highly used platform is Instagram, with an average of 5.18 hours of usage per week, followed by TikTok, with an average of 3.83 hours per week. All participants have at one point been a regular user of BeReal. All participants currently attend some form of higher education or have recently graduated.

Qualitative Data Analysis

For this project, data was collected through recorded Zoom interviews. A Zoom-generated transcript of these interviews was acquired and corrected by the researcher via thorough review and re-transcription of each conversation. When all transcriptions were complete, the researcher created a spreadsheet divided by research question and pasted interview quotes in each section that were pertinent to the research question at hand. Once all interview data had been organized in this way, the researcher reviewed each quote and identified the main

themes, using existing knowledge of authenticity studies and context from the interviews. All themes were then grouped into three categories, and nuances were identified and explained further in the Discussion section of this paper.

Results

R1: In what way does Gen Z conceptualize social media authenticity?

Authenticity on Social Media:

When asked to define the concept of authenticity in general without a clear relation to social media platforms, participants responded with definitions that embodied tenants of three main themes: the rejection of external influence, the embodiment of internal self, and accuracy. In regards to social media, in particular, similar themes also commonly presented themselves among participant responses.

Rejection of external influence.

Many participants specified a lack of consideration for external influence and the explicit rejection of any external influence in their definition of authenticity. “When you’re with certain people and you’re never considering how your behavior will change how they view you, or how this will alter their perception of you, then you’re being authentic,” one participant stated. A similar important element seemed to be the act of posting without consideration of peer pressure or obligation to participate in trends. “Instead of focusing on a certain aesthetic to please other people, it’s just whatever you want to post of your life.” “If you feel obligated to post, you might not be the most authentic.” Finally, participants viewed authenticity as the lack of visible effort put into posts- less cultivation, lower quality, and appearance of thoughtlessness would come across as more authentic.

I think I relate authenticity, and inauthenticity, to how much effort I can tell is being put behind the post. So if I see a picture with bad quality, or even if someone takes a picture in the restroom, and it's a phone mirror picture. It clearly shows that they don't care to follow the norms of posting the best high-quality picture. Whereas if you see someone actually going out of their way, and taking pictures with great quality, you could tell that their caption has some thought into it, whereas others just will be like, here's your selfie, and they don't really care. I definitely relate quality and effort into what I consider authentic and inauthentic.

Embodiment of internal self.

Others defined authenticity as the act of embodying the reality of the internal self and acting on internal desires, goals, and values. "It's just being true to yourself, and true to your values, and not being a specific type of person, just trying to be you." For participants, this translates on social media as content that expresses humor, passions, and enjoyment—posts where users share what they love or care about feel more authentic to them. "The photos I choose to post are ones I find interesting. I want to show what I'm doing, because I'm proud of myself for doing it." "When I find myself expressing my love for my friends and my pets and food, and science and politics, things that I'm really interested in and passionate about- that's being authentic on social media," said one participant. Another participant described true authenticity as approaching social media having reflected on their personal brand, and knowing what they would like to put forth online. "I look at authenticity in relation to social media and try to figure out how to translate the person that I am through captions and photos and posts. I think going about that just comes with reflection."

Accuracy.

Another authenticity category that emerged from the interviews pointed to the prioritization of accuracy, truth, and explicit reality when conceptualizing authenticity. "I would

associate self-confidence with authenticity, knowing that what you present to others is the rawest form of your personality. You're not trying to hide anything." Additionally, many participants also connected the concept of authenticity with not only internal knowledge of the idea but also the ability to externally present that idea to others. "Something that is real, and perceived as real," one participant said. "Authenticity is envisioning a version of yourself how you want other people to envision you," another commented. "And so you start to believe it about yourself." When posted photos are visually accurate to reality, Gen-Zers are likely to perceive them as more authentic. This idea of visual accuracy would include a lack of or minimal use of filters and editing. "I've seen people doing more realistic approaches [to social media]," one participant said. "Not wearing as much makeup, showing their routine, and taking away filters." Another referenced the concept of truth and reality as authentic on social media, saying, "Being authentic is not leaving anything out and being very clear. An authentic person has flaws, and they show their flaws on social media. They share their opinions and feelings."

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that although all participants stated characteristics of social media usage that would suggest authenticity, many prefaced these statements with the idea that it is impossible to be fully authentic on social media at all.

I think no one can truly be authentic on social media. I can say I don't care what I post, it's my page. But at the end of the day I care about what people say or what people think of my pictures. It is really hard to be authentic on a platform where you can't tell if someone is being authentic just because of how fake the platform may be.

Inauthenticity on Social Media

When asked about specific factors that highlight inauthentic behavior on social media, participants restated what had already been an inverse theme of authenticity: trendiness, over-

editing, and staged content. One significant element of these practices that many participants mentioned was performative activism.

Inauthentic to me is performative activism. You know how to recognize it because it's the common reposting of something- or if you are posting about it authentically, you might write something about it. Or I might not necessarily even post about it if I'm not passionate about it, because I feel like sometimes everyone's posting almost makes you inauthentic.

Another piece of Instagram cultivation is the idea of taking photos with the purpose of posting them on social media, rather than having a genuine desire to capture the moment or keep it for memories. Several participants used this practice of intentional photoshoots as examples of a time that they felt they had behaved inauthentically online. "There was one day where I went out of my way to go take pictures with my roommates, and we were like, "we haven't posted on Instagram," one participant explained. "If I find myself trying to get something for Instagram, I feel inauthentic." However, many also mentioned that they could discern when a user was being inauthentic by comparing their behavior online to their personality and presence in real life.

If you're presenting yourself doing charity work, or saying things on Instagram that seem nice and sweet, but in reality, you're kind of a mean person, or you treat people terribly... I wouldn't say that's authentic, because you're kind of making people believe that you're something you're not and in order to be authentic you have to be your true self.

Another explained,

If I'm really close friends with somebody, and I know that they're going through some mental health thing, if they're anxious or depressed, or something, and in all of their

posts, they're like, oh, I'm the happiest person alive, and it just sort of doesn't make any sense if there's that disconnect.

For users that these participants did not know personally, this group found it more difficult to discern authentic versus inauthentic content. For these types of accounts, participants most commonly defined their authenticity in relation to their presence online as a whole, and the level of inconsistency with other things they had posted in the past. “You can't just take one post in a vacuum. You have to see a lot of the other posts and figure it out. Seeing if it matches all of their other ones, or if there's a really big contrast between this post and all the other ones.”

R2: How important is it to Gen Z to be authentic on social media?

How important is social media authenticity on an individual level?

This group of participants had truly varied responses when asked about their own opinion of authentic self-presentation's importance on social media. Many explained that the responsibility of being authentic should be up to the individual, based on the reasons that users are on social platforms in the first place. “I think that being authentic on social media is important, but social media is what you make of it, both as someone who posts and someone who views posts. I think authenticity is a pretty individual thing, in terms of importance.” Another commented, “If you're on social media to build a brand, then be as inauthentic as you'd like. If that's your goal, then go crazy. If your goal is for other people to think you're satisfied with your life, then you wouldn't be as authentic.” Many participants emphasized that social media as a platform is not designed to encourage authentic self-presentation. “No matter how hard someone can try to be authentic, it's just hard because of how these platforms are set up. When what you want to share is influenced by other factors, it gets harder to be authentic.”

Most participants did state that authenticity would be a positive concept to implement, however.

I think the world would be a better place if we were all a little more authentic. There is enough comparison in daily life already- we are naturally competitive and always want to show off and one-up each other. On platforms where you can post anything you want, that is so detrimental to someone's mental health.

Alternately, one participant suggested that harm reduction on social media should be prioritized over authenticity as a concept.

It's fine to not be authentic as long as it's not detrimental for some reason. You should allow everyone to live the way they want to live. If someone is sixteen and racist and posting about things they don't understand, they might be acting authentically, but they are just hurting themselves later on.

Is authenticity important to Gen-Z as a whole?

When asked if they perceived authenticity on social media to be important to Gen-Z as a group, participants again had widely varying responses. Due to the fact that Gen-Z was raised by a generation that is not digitally native, one participant noted, the group is encouraged to be inauthentic out of fear of a digital footprint following them to jobs and affecting their lives down the line. "Think about what you're posting because other people are going to see it- they're going to judge you based on that, and you know employers will look at your posts."

Others thought differently, explaining that often authenticity is seen as a positive thing in general on social media. "I think it goes hand in hand with just being more accepting in general. Obviously we still post the highlight reels, but at the same time, I think our generation is more open to conversations about mental health and body positivity." Participants mentioned other

factors such as a turn to more video content as drivers of authenticity, as well as movements like photo dumps and the Covid-19 pandemic bringing out a more authentic side to social media users.

However, many participants referenced a shift in the content on Instagram now versus content when they first started using the platform as more inauthentic, suggesting that authenticity is not the priority on social media that it once was. “I’ve been on social media since I was eleven,” one participant shared. “I was always authentic... I would just post whatever I wanted.” Another participant agreed, saying “When I was younger and posting on Instagram, I would post stupid stuff, memes I had on my phone, because I thought it was funny. I’d get two likes, but I didn’t care, because I thought it was funny. But then, as I started understanding more about social media, I think that kind of died away.” Due to this shift, it is harder for users to be successful on social media without being somewhat inauthentic. “I feel like [Gen-Zers] would like to say [authenticity] is a priority,” said a participant. “But I think overall, how you’re perceived trumps your intent. You can want to be as authentic as you want, but if you’re still being perceived in a certain way, that stays with you because it can affect your self-confidence and how you view yourself.”

Finally, participants also brought up their perceived correlation between familiarity with social media and level of authenticity. Members of older generations are more likely to act authentically on social media because they have less stake in the game, several participants suggested.

The older that you get, the less you care about what people think. Boomers will post these really pure selfies that I know Gen-Zers would never post. To me, that screams

authenticity, because they probably just saw this thing, and they were like, ‘Oh my God, this is awesome. Let me post it so people can see it.’

Overall, the majority of participants did state that authenticity was a priority, or at least a goal, for members of Gen-Z on social media. However, many also acknowledged the struggle to achieve authenticity- despite the generation’s desire to embody the concept through their online presence.

R3: How different are Gen Z’s perceptions of authenticity from the definitions that exist in previous scholarship?

This table breaks down the three most prominent themes from the interviews with this study’s participants and their relationship to existing scholarship on authenticity. In order to compare themes from interview data with existing themes in authenticity research, the researcher reviewed all literature and created a new table highlighting key points from each definition, and identified the ways in which the interview themes differed from the existing themes, as well as how they were similar. This table functions to highlight key relationships between themes gathered from Gen-Z participant data and existing themes that will be explored later in the Discussion section of this paper.

Gen-Z: Themes of Authenticity	Previous Scholarship on Authenticity
Rejection of external influence	This tenant aligns closely with Wood’s idea of Accepting External Influence from the Tripartite Conception of authenticity. These are the beliefs to which one must conform to meet the expectations of others. This also relates to Jonman-Sereno and Leary’s Person-Centered approach, which involves distancing oneself from societal expectations and relinquishing externally motivated goals.
Embodiment of internal self	This theme reflects elements of Wood, Linley, and Maly’s idea of self-congruence. This idea requires behaving in adherence with who one really is, taking into account emotions and beliefs, including integrity. Integrity, defined as acting in accordance with one’s personal values and morals, is especially important to this group.
Accuracy	This is a theme not strongly acknowledged in studies of personal authenticity, but it is present in Moulard’s study of brand authenticity. Of the three elements of brand authenticity laid out by Moulard, the idea of accuracy best reflects his true-to-fact element, which outlines how well a brand’s message aligns with the objective truth, including hard data.

R4: Does BeReal as a social media platform embody and encourage the elements of authenticity prioritized by Gen Z?

Gen-Z’s Background with BeReal

When asked about their motivations for downloading the application BeReal, all participants stated that their desire to use the app was a direct result of influence from friends. Participants would see friends taking BeReals, or talking about the app, and all explained that they were curious enough based on their peers’ behavior to create an account and see for themselves. Most participants thought it was strange at first, but got into the routine of the app after a few weeks of posting and observing their friends’ behavior on the app. Almost all

participants said they enjoyed using BeReal, although not all post on time or care about the guidelines set out by the app to promote authenticity. “I like using it so far because it’s just kind of silly. I’m not very good at posting on time, but I don’t really care.” Participants enjoyed using the app because they can look back through their own memories, see what friends are up to during the day, and stay in contact with people who live far away. “I like seeing normal things that people are up to, and not just the exciting stuff,” one participant said. “Oh, this person’s going to class, this person is getting Starbucks. Things like that.” Another stated, “If I find something interesting about my day, I share it. I’m interested in what people post, because it shows me what they’re interested in too.”

Do individuals behave authentically on BeReal?

In terms of authentic behavior on the app, all participants said that they attempt to be authentic, but almost all shared caveats to this concept. Many explained that they try to take the photo on time, but every so often they will wait purposefully. Motivators for waiting to post included a desire to incorporate a funny idea, struggles with anxiety, and waiting for a significant event to occur. However, the most commonly stated reason for missing a notification was because participants were in class or in an environment where they were not comfortable taking out their phone, or they simply forgot about the notification. Most participants acknowledged that posting on time is not the sole determinant of authenticity on BeReal. “I don’t think it necessarily has to be right on time,” one participant said. “But it’s all about your purpose when posting.” Another shared, “If I know there’s something really fun in my day, I’ll save it until that moment. I guess in a way it’s authentic, because you’re showing yourself doing something in your life. But at the same time, you’re saving it to make it look more fun.”

Nevertheless, nearly all participants said that they would perceive content on BeReal to be more authentic if it were posted on time, although the inverse is not always true. Most participants also said that they are more inauthentic now than they were when originally using the app.

I would try [to post on time] most of the time,” one participant said. “But I would start thinking about a funny little idea I could incorporate into my post. Here’s a funny caption that goes with that. I look good in this, I look bad, etc.

Self-esteem also plays a role in participants’ decisions to post.

Sometimes I will stage things a bit. If I’m feeling gross one day, I might not post at all. So I’ve become less authentic over time, probably because I’ve started to add more people I’m less close to, and that fact has altered my authenticity.

The wider popularity of the app has affected other participants’ ability to behave authentically as well because several feel the desire to curate their content to get a reaction from their friends on the app.

To the definition [of authenticity], I was definitely more authentic before. But the way I post now brings out more of my personality. If I can make someone smile with whatever dumb thing I post, then I think that’s truly who I am. But in relation to the parameters of the app, take a picture, post and go...I definitely did that much more before. There’s many definitions of the word. It’s a complex word.

As a whole, the motivation behind the posting versus the post itself seems to be the key to authenticity on BeReal for this sample. If the content was posted in a way that fulfills the users’ goals for the app or exhibits their personality, it is seen as authentic. But in general, the posts that are the most authentic are the ones made closest to the notification.

R5: What kinds of changes to social media could be implemented to facilitate the components of authenticity that Generation Z values?

Participants stated several changes that could increase the presence of authentic content on social media. Encouraging more prominent content creators to promote authenticity, the removal of beautifying filters and editing, and more live-streaming and content with a limited lifespan were all suggestions that could help to encourage authenticity. “Freedom of speech also plays a big role in freedom of posting, and obviously that comes with consequences, because people will post crazy stuff, but it makes things much more authentic if people can express whatever they want to,” one participant said. BeReal also struck many as a good starting point that encouraged authenticity more than other platforms. “I think BeReal is headed in the right direction, just because they are an app that’s self-aware and the creators know how inauthentic the bigger social media apps are.”

However, participants mentioned that attempting to make these changes on existing social media platforms would be futile. Many stated that they felt it was too late for current apps to implement elements to encourage authenticity, and that these elements would have to be in place from the app’s conception, not implemented in hindsight.

You can’t change how Instagram works. You can’t alter the blueprint of the platform to make it more authentic. You can come up with a new idea like BeReal, that trends more towards authenticity, but it’s something that you have to go in with the notion of rather than retroactively baking things in.

Furthermore, participants pointed out that it should be in the hands of the users to promote authentic behavior, rather than assigning responsibility to the platforms themselves. If platforms

attempted to regulate authenticity, these changes might drive individuals from using the platforms.

It comes down to the user's discretion and humanity as a whole. We choose how to portray ourselves and if we want to pursue authenticity or if we don't, because you can make social media whatever you want.

Using the example of BeReal, participants pointed out that if the app made its posting guidelines stricter, it would technically be more authentic, but fewer people would be motivated to post at all.

If BeReal really wanted to make itself completely authentic- like you can't post at all after the set time- that's putting too much control over people, and people aren't going to like that. And some people just aren't comfortable being completely and fully authentic. To that end, it was also stated that people might not be ready for a fully authentic experience on social media, and perhaps that experience should not happen at all. "It all lies within the user, because whatever format you create, people will find a way to curate the posts and make them more inauthentic just because they can," one participant said. In regards to determining an authentic platform, another participant asked, "Where does that stop? Who is the judge and jury? Who could tell you what is and isn't authentic to you? I don't think there's a way to do it, and therefore it shouldn't be done."

Discussion

Scholars and market researchers have identified Generation Z as a generation that values authenticity. The emergence of trends like photo dumps, Finstas, and the creation of apps like BeReal suggest an existing perception that Gen-Zers have the desire for more authentic outlets on social media. This study sought to examine what it truly means to Generation-Z to "BeReal"

on social media. Because the concept is one that is so abstract in nature, it is important to hone in on the core characteristics that make up Gen-Z's definition and how those characteristics actually affect their behavior on social media in relation to authenticity.

According to the series of twelve interviews conducted for this study, Gen-Zers identified social media authenticity to have three main components: the rejection of external influence, the embodiment of the internal self, and accuracy. Two of these components, rejection of external influence and embodiment of the internal self, align with two of the three components of Wood's tripartite conception of authenticity. These components are accepting external influence and self-congruence. Even when referencing inauthenticity, participants did not incorporate the third component, self-alienation, as much as the other two. They identified pressure to participate in trends as a factor due more to the influence of others, rather than a disconnect from the self specifically. When discussing inauthenticity on social media, Gen-Zers defined it singularly in relation to others, while they explained authenticity in relation to both others and to their internal selves. In short, participants would attribute more inauthentic behavior to external factors and authentic behavior to internal factors. For example, they would share that they behaved inauthentically because they felt pressure from peers to participate in a trend, rather than feeling a disconnect from their true internal selves when they participated in the trend. Alternately, participants would describe authentic behavior more in terms of an internal desire to share content they were interested in or passionate about.

There are several potential explanations for this omission, one being the fact that this element deals with more of an internal, psychological outlook on the self, which participants may not have been prepared to discuss in the interviews. In addition to the fact that this topic is more difficult to discuss, it is also one that participants may not have considered at all as an isolated

factor apart from the other elements of authentic behavior. Perhaps, for Gen-Z, the internal and external selves have become too intertwined to separate. Context collapse is an established experience for this generation, and this omission could be a further manifestation of this effect (Darr, 2022). Finally, it is possible that this third element is simply outdated and needs reframing from more recent research.

Several components of Moulard's study of brand authenticity were also reflected in responses. Moulard mentions true-to-fact as one element, which was highly valued by these participants. True-to-fact aligned with the theme of accuracy, which participants mentioned in relation to self-presentation on social media especially. The idea that participants interpreted lower-quality photos or photos that appeared to be unstaged as more authentic suggests that there may be a slight disconnect between the concept of social media authenticity and that of authenticity in general. Because the environment is much more restricted than in-person opportunities for self-expression, it is likely that the psychological concept of authenticity would involve different parameters when applied to more limited platforms like those available on social media. When asked about important elements of authenticity in a broader sense, participants were less likely to mention accuracy to fact as an element versus when they were asked about authenticity on social media in particular. This disconnect is highlighted because participant definitions included references to characteristics of both brand authenticity and individual authenticity, suggesting that participants see self-presentation on social media as brand presentation to an extent. These participants are highly aware of how branded social media has become and mentioned the idea of a "personal brand," as well as the fact that social media is a highlight reel. This idea of a personal brand becoming a factor within the different world of

social media authenticity highlights the slight gap between online and offline presentations of and elements of authenticity.

However, just because the content is branded does not mean it is inherently inauthentic to this group. Instead, results show that participants simply have a more nuanced definition of social media authenticity- seeing individuals online as both people who they know in real life and as brands that exist in an online environment. The authentic coexistence of an online, limited version of the self alongside a more holistic self-expression in person is a new concept and one that, according to these participants, is possible. According to this group, self-reflection is necessary to align the “personal brand” with their internal selves, but this brand does not require the elements of authenticity they would prioritize in person.

This overt awareness of branding as a highly popularized use of social media is also what has indicated to this group that it is increasingly difficult to deliver authentic content online. When asked if they consider authenticity on social media to be a priority, many thought the decision to pursue authenticity should be up to the individual and their goals online, rather than a point-blank obligation. Additionally, because the landscape of social media has changed so much since its conception, many participants thought authenticity to be completely impossible- or much less possible- than in the early days of social media when ads, trends, calculated editing, and online commerce were much less prevalent.

BeReal as a platform has seemed much more authentic to participants for similar reasons. They listed traits on the app that reflect characteristics of Instagram or Facebook at their conception: a lack of editing, sharing of humorous content, and most of all, a lack of cultivation and effort. Characteristics that participants valued in BeReal are also traits that align with their listed elements of authenticity: genuine interest in their peers, less pressure to put forth high-

quality content, and the ability to witness everyday behavior from others that provided an insight that would be unavailable on Instagram. Expressed interest in peers would fulfill the embodiment of the internal self element since users shared a genuine interest. Less pressure to put forth high-quality content suggests less of a need for cultivation, which would connect to the accuracy theme. Finally, the presence of everyday behavior from others has allowed for further rejection of external influence.

Nevertheless, BeReal is not perfect, and for some participants, elements of authenticity are at odds with one another. According to some, the app is set up with parameters that promote accuracy, which is only one of the three listed themes of authenticity. Posting on time, according to most participants, is the best way to fulfill this element of authenticity, and it is much harder to be inauthentic when posting on time. However, when asked if it was possible to post late and still be authentic, participants had more complicated answers. Although late posting was less authentic, it still offered the opportunity for other authentic gratifications, specifically the embodiment of internal self component. Gen-Zers identify the complexity in the term when they point out the difference between being literally true versus a more abstract truth of the self-art, interests, elements that are not necessarily visually accurate to reality but could communicate parts of the individuals' personalities that an unedited, visually accurate photo could not.

Even when posting late, participants felt they were behaving authentically because they were sharing content they found interesting, or that they thought might bring their friends joy. One participant said that cultivating their BeReal to be humorous embodied their personality in some ways just as much as taking and posting a selfie as soon as they received the notification. However, because there was not authentic signifier of the on-time post, the determination of authenticity from other users was less straightforward. Because their definition of authenticity

became broader than simply accuracy, Gen-Zers find it more difficult to identify content that is or is not truly authentic.

It is hard for others to discern the difference between a fellow user accurately embodying their internal self and acting inauthentically, which is why Gen-Zers struggle to identify authentic behavior from users they do not know in real life. For those they do know, the most common method of identifying authenticity was finding consistency between behavior on and offline. Users explained that they have a nuanced understanding of who their friends are and how they act, including their voice, personality, and relevant life events. The depth provided by real-life, interpersonal relationships was the necessary key to interpreting the less-forthcoming online environment. Factors such as captions, editing, and photo choices were more likely to signify inauthenticity if they did not seem to be in alignment with offline behavior.

When asked about authenticity determinants for celebrities or influencers, participants struggled more to discern what was authentic, mainly comparing their current self-presentation to the history of their presence online. However, many participants offered a disclaimer when discussing those they did not know in person, mentioning that they perceived these accounts to be more business-minded and did not often seek authenticity from these accounts over other functions like information and interesting content. Because they did not know these users in real life, authenticity was less relevant. In these cases, participants defined the accounts less as individuals and more in connection with the branded elements discussed earlier. This connection with brands and less of a need for authenticity suggests a need for users to understand their function on social media, similar to those of celebrities or influencers. Are they there to be authentic, or are they online to provide information or entertainment as well?

Many participants cited that insecurity and perceived pressure prevent them from posting authentically all of the time, aligning with Wood's idea of Accepting External Influence. Most attempt to be authentic, but are not afraid to acknowledge that there are instances when they are willing or even motivated to compromise authenticity in favor of other motivations. There is not a strong sense of judgment that comes across towards people who are inauthentic- in general, participants frown on inauthenticity but are quick to point out that the platforms themselves are a tough environment for authentic self-presentation. Their confidence in intention alongside vulnerability to external influences is consistent with existing research about Gen-Z as a group (Darr, 2022). Although elements like the frequency of posts and the lack of a static feed brought BeReal closer to the complex definition of authenticity that Gen-Zers crave, it seems that the app's parameters alone are not enough to encourage users to post truly authentic content, according to their definition.

The fact that Gen-Zers characterize BeReal as one of the most authentic platforms currently existing alongside the fact that all three values themes of authenticity do not fully work under the conceit of the app suggests that social media platforms as a whole are not designed to effectively encourage authenticity in the way that Gen-Z defines it. Many participants outright stated this fact, saying that there is no possible way to be truly authentic on social media because of the structures and practices that are already in place with existing platforms. For these reasons, Gen-Zers overall do not see modifications of platforms to encourage authenticity as a viable option. Even on BeReal, participants offered suggestions that would increase the accuracy and rejection of external influence elements of authenticity, such as extending the timer and not allowing users to post late or retake their photos. These changes would assign more parameters to the use of the app that would allow users to only see what their friends were doing at that

moment and would eliminate the opportunity to post late to seem cool or showcase a fun activity. In response to this possibility, participants acknowledged that increased restrictions would quell participation and overall use. Furthermore, these restrictions could also reduce authentic self-presentation in ways that gratify the embodiment of the internal self. Participants emphasized that for the most part, authenticity should stem from internal motivation because users will find a way to be inauthentic- despite increased regulation- if they so desire. As a whole, Gen-Zers do not believe that restricting platforms more is an effective path towards authenticity. Instead, users must decide for themselves how they should self-present, and weigh the uses and gratifications of social media in their own life when formulating their approach.

Limitations

Although this project was carefully thought out and approached with intentionality, there are several limiting factors that were unavoidable and are important to take into consideration when interpreting results and discussion. Firstly, the sample size of participants was only twelve. This small sample size was necessary due to the timeline of the project, and conducting, transcribing, and analyzing a larger number of interviews would not have been possible given the constraints of this thesis. Furthermore, all participants were college-educated and do not represent the variance in socioeconomic status that is true to the population of the United States. The experience of those outside the scope of higher education may be different, and the privileges afforded to this sample should be acknowledged alongside the results from their interviews. Additionally, the sample was skewed female and was concentrated in the majority of participants from the Southwest, and 66% were attendees of Trinity University. To achieve more universally applicable results, this study would have to expand its sample size and incorporate more diversity in terms of education level, region, and institution.

It is also essential to acknowledge that participants commonly will under-report or underplay topics that might paint them in a bad light, or that they might be embarrassed to talk about. Participants may have under-reported their social media use on the follow-up survey. Although the interviews were facilitated in as unbiased a manner as possible, insecurities and discomfort from participants are inevitable due to the relatively personal nature of the interview questions. Participants may have felt embarrassed about or simply not put ample thought into their own conception of authenticity, and answered less truthfully because they intentionally or unintentionally would have wanted to make themselves seem more thoughtful, intelligent, or consistent with their peers. Authenticity as a concept is also highly abstract, which makes it inherently more difficult to define in comparison to a more objective concept, especially since individuals in the sample group often were attempting to trace back the origin of a *feeling* of authenticity or inauthenticity, rather than listed characteristics.

Finally, the researcher for this project is also a member of Gen-Z, and this project is by nature qualitative. With the unique position as a user and researcher in the midst of the ever-changing landscape of existing social media platforms, the researcher is afforded an original perspective on the present subject, and is well-positioned as an expert to interpret participants' responses and synthesize them with existing scholarship. However, because the research is qualitative, it is important to acknowledge that there could be more than one way to interpret participants' responses, and the ways in which the researcher has chosen to identify themes and make connections may not be the most accurate possible way. All quotes were taken in context, but it is also possible that participants intended them differently when originally stated, and that meaning could have been convoluted in the process of data cleaning and interpretation. Overall, the data was interpreted to the best of the researcher's ability.

Future Research

To amplify the effects of this existing research, future projects could expand the scope of the process. Because BeReal is such a new platform, the opportunities to learn about how users approach it are constantly evolving and will continue to evolve as the app updates inherently. Additionally, since BeReal is new, there is limited research in existence. This project contributes to some of the earliest instances of qualitative research on the topic and therefore assists in laying a foundation for future research. This information also provides insight into the uses and gratifications for BeReal in particular, which can be utilized by media scholars and app developers alike to make the app better for users. This study has shown that uses and gratifications in terms of authenticity have changed over time for users as the app has expanded in popularity and the audience for content has increased, and this issue will only continue to become more prevalent as time goes on.

The knowledge of Gen-Z's perspectives on the future of authenticity on social media platforms can also allow scholars to place more effort into media literacy education that might encourage users to act authentically on social media, rather than encouraging platforms to improve on their own. Many participants emphasized the importance of user intent when pursuing authenticity, and increased media literacy and mental health advocacy are steps that could be taken to realize this aspect of authentic self-presentation more widely and effectively.

Furthermore, several participants mentioned the "pure" online behavior of older social media users as authentic. Asking members of different generations who are present on these platforms about their perception of authenticity and experience on the platforms could also provide valuable insights and an opportunity to contrast results with Gen-Z's opinions. Another avenue for future research would be to focus more on isolating the digital aspect of digital

authenticity. Diving deeper into users' strategies for identifying authentic or inauthentic content when they have no existing interpersonal relationship with the creators would provide more insight into the way authenticity operates on social media platforms alone.

Implications

This research provides an updated understanding of Gen-Z's unique view of social media, and suggests how they as audience members and consumers would approach future developments in the social media landscape. Additionally, the project sheds light on Gen-Z's uses and gratifications of social media. They do not always approach social media with the need or expectation to see authentic content, although they appreciate and accept it when they do. They understand the parameters of platforms that prevent users from putting forth the most authentic content possible and acknowledge that not all users are capable of acting authentically due to limiting factors such as mental health, peer pressure, and self-esteem. Furthermore, Gen-Z understands that the expression of authenticity is multidimensional and expands beyond accuracy to more abstract concepts like self-expression, humor, and creativity that can be visualized on social media in creative ways. As a group, they are conflicted in their perspective on authenticity- some value it more highly than others, and all rely on offline relationships to corroborate their judgment of another user's authenticity.

This study expands on existing research concerning Gen-Z as a group, further strengthening the idea that the generation has contrasting characteristics. For members of this group, knowledge of how their peers view social media can serve to humanize what may appear to be an unforgiving online landscape. Knowing that some users strive to put themselves forward authentically, and would value and appreciate an authentic self-presentation, can inspire other users to share a less cultivated side of themselves online. Even for users who might struggle to be

authentic, knowing that others go through the same process and worry about similar factors can afford a sense of relief that they are not alone. The results of this study can encourage all social media users to take all self-presentation on social media platforms with a grain of salt. According to this group, it is nearly impossible to project a wholly accurate sense of the self, and all value offline relationships more highly in showcasing a sense of the true self. While authenticity can remain an aim for social media, it is clear that many understand the complicated process of sharing themselves online.

Aligning this knowledge with past research in authenticity studies also reveals the differences and similarities between Generation Z's definition of authenticity and the definitions commonly accepted in the existing literature. After considering these definitions from a more modern perspective in the context of the digital landscape, there are some elements of the historical definitions that remain present, and some that show up less. Unexpected parallels, such as the parallels to brand authenticity, also add more clarity to the concept of digital authenticity specifically.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. When you think of authenticity, what does it look like to you right now?
2. What does it look like to be authentic on social media?
3. What does it look like to be inauthentic on social media?
4. Can you tell me examples of times when you felt you were behaving authentically and times when you felt you were behaving inauthentically on social media?
5. What's an example of a person you follow or an influencer behaving in a particularly authentic or inauthentic way on social media? What about their post or content communicated to you that they were being authentic?
6. What's your history using BeReal? What made you download it? What did you think of the app when you got it, and what do you think of it now?
7. Do you feel that you behave authentically on BeReal?
8. Do you believe that BeReal as a social media platform encourages authenticity more than other platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, or Tiktok? If so, how?
9. Should users be trying to be authentic on social media?
10. Do you believe that this is a priority for your generation?
11. Is there anything that social media platforms could do to promote more authenticity from their users?