
Finsta: Creating “Fake” Spaces for Authentic Performance

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ABSTRACT

Finsta is a “fake” Instagram account that some people maintain in addition to their real Instagram account (*rinsta*) for a more authentic performance. We draw on Goffman’s theatrical metaphor and use a mixed-methods approach to explore how and why people do the work of performing their identity across these distinct presentations of the self. We found that finsta users deliberately partition their audience and mostly maintain a small audience of close friends to avoid context collapse. Additionally, we discovered that finsta is a space where distinct norms shape performance: humor, authenticity, and “unfiltered” self-expression. Given that finsta users are mostly teenagers and young adults, we ask how an expectation for authentic performance by peers might itself increase pressure on users.

KEYWORDS

Instagram; finsta; social performance; social media; context collapse

INTRODUCTION

Fake Instagram accounts, commonly known as *finsta*, are used by some Instagram users who want to share a “less edited, less filtered” versions of their lives with a segment of their audience [2]. Mostly

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common among teens and young adults, finsta has become a common element of contemporary youth culture in the U.S. There are 18 definitions of finsta on the Urban Dictionary [1], describing a “private” space for a person’s “closest friends” where they can be “unfiltered” and “funny” “without persecution from sororities, jobs and society as a whole.” But what are the conditions under which large groups of young adults feel the need to create *fake accounts to be authentic*? And given that finsta is a popular cultural phenomenon, what types of social performance and norms define it?

Building on Goffman’s foundational work on the presentation of self [6], and Hogan’s [7] and Marwick and boyd’s [10] adaptations of these theories for social media, we explore how finsta users distinguish their audience and behavior on their finsta. We conducted a survey about Instagram use with 81 participants, we followed up with 3 of those participants with a more in depth study consisting of a diary study, interview, and reaction to mock-ups. Our guiding research questions are:

- How do people characterize their finsta audiences?
- What is the nature of social performances that occur on finsta?
- How does audience influence social pressures experienced on finsta?

We found that people set up finstas as a space to share content that would not be deemed acceptable on other more public platforms and to post self-disclosures with a greater degree of control [2]. Finstas are often guarded spaces that only other finstas follow. Second, we found that social norms on finsta dictate what is acceptable or normal [4], these include: humor, authenticity, frivolity, and self-deprecation (e.g. ugly selfies). Finally, we ask whether finstas can be viewed as a subversive space where young adults seek refuge from the pressure of the perfect performance on rinsta, or whether social conventions and norms of finsta create additional (albeit different) anxieties.

RELATED WORK

Much of the existing literature on social media behavior relies on Goffman’s theory on the performance of self (e.g. [5], [7], and [10]). Goffman’s theory that a person’s behavior is influenced by the audience perceiving them is complicated by the asynchronicity of social media and the many different social contexts that overlap in online spaces. Marwick and boyd refer to the challenge of overlapping social contexts as context collapse [10]. Context collapse is directly related to the social media user’s sense of their audience and effort to appeal to them. Similarly, other research suggests that social media users spend more time and effort on posting the perfect photo or caption when it will be seen by a wider, more diverse audience, as more effort is required to reconcile the needs of various social contexts [3, 8].

Returning to the issue of asynchronicity, Hogan [7] offers an interpretation of social media behavior as creating an exhibit, rather than an active performance, to account for the temporality of online interactions. Zhao et al. [12] build on this with an exploration of how a person’s social media

Table 1: Most finsta users in our survey were white, female, and below 25 years old. Finsta users made up 17.28% of total responses. Variable buckets containing zero values for total respondents were removed.

	Finsta users	Total
Gender		
Female	13 (93%)	55
Male	1 (7%)	23
Non-Binary	0	2
Decline to State	0	1
Race		
White	9 (65%)	40
Asian	1 (7%)	23
Black or African American	0	4
Hispanic or Latino	1 (7%)	3
Two or More Races	2 (14%)	4
Middle East or North African	0	1
Other	0	4
Decline to State or Missing	1 (7%)	4
Age		
18-20	6 (43%)	11
21-23	6 (43%)	12
24-26	1 (7%)	26
27-29	0	15
30-32	0	7
33-35	0	2
36-38	0	2
39-40	0	1
47-49	0	1
Missing	1 (1%)	4

activity can become a personal archive, documenting the past and prompting personal reflection. We approached our research with these concepts from the literature in mind, but worked inductively to expose the emergent themes through a mix of methods discussed in the next section [11].

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This research investigates the meaning behind these accounts for users, focusing on concepts such as performance, context collapse, and social pressure. Thus, we took a qualitative approach, triangulating insights from a survey, diary study, and interviews. We distributed an online survey through the research team’s personal network, University Facebook pages, and Slack channels. The survey asked respondents about their Instagram use and frequency, who they consider to be the audience of their account(s), the purpose of their account(s), and demographic questions. We received a total of 81 responses to the survey. Participants who replied that they had more than one Instagram account were subsequently asked if they considered one of those accounts a finsta. Thus, finsta users were self-identified.

We followed up with three of the participants in our survey who were finsta users and asked them to complete a week-long diary study about their Instagram and finsta activity. We sent daily text message reminders prompting participants to record reflections based on few broad questions. These responses gave us a sampling of users’ day-to-day experience with the platform and provided material to prompt specific questions during subsequent interviews. Following the diary study, we conducted 45-minute, semi-structured interviews with each of the three participants. During these sessions, we asked participants to reflect on who they consider to be the audience for their main Instagram and their finsta accounts, how their posting behavior differs across the two accounts, and whether either account causes or relieves stress.

We inductively coded open-ended survey responses, diary study responses and interviews for emergent themes [9]. Each member of the research team coded one of the three different data sources. Then, we combined similar or overlapping themes to create a set of representative categories. Because of the survey’s small sample size ($n=81$), we use descriptive rather than inferential statistics to report on the population.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 81 total survey respondents, 67 (82.7%) had only one Instagram account, while 14 (17.3%) had multiple accounts and identified at least one as a finsta. In this sample, the majority of finsta users were female and all finsta users were under the age of 25. Table 1 presents a summary of demographic information of survey respondents. Most finsta users in our survey were white, female, and less than

Table 2: Finsta users are highly active on social media but their activity on finsta covers a wider range.

	Finsta users	Total
Social media use		
Multiple times a day	14 (100%)	73
Once a day	0	8
Instagram use		
Multiple times a day	13 (93%)	59
Once a day	1 (1%)	11
Once a week	0	8
Once every few weeks	0	1
Less than once a month	0	2
Finsta use		
Multiple times a day	2 (14%)	2
Once a day	2 (21%)	3
Once a week	3 (21%)	3
Once every few weeks	2 (14%)	2
Less than once a month	2 (14%)	2

25 years old. There were also highly active on social media (Table 2). Below we present the key themes regarding the use of finsta aggregated through the survey, diary studies, and interviews.

Finsta as remedy for context collapse

Participants usually had a clear category for their finsta audience, whereas their regular Instagram audience included broader groups, creating context collapse [10].

My regular insta audience is very broad: kids from high school, people from college, co-workers, and some random photographers and artists who I guess stumbled upon my account. (S5)

Finstas are for small, closer friend groups. Finstas are a direct response to context collapse and present a way to carve out a defined space for a single social context on a platform that encourages single-streamed content. The difference in audiences between a finsta and rinsta is a key distinguishing factor. Finstas are often reserved for closest friends, while regular Instagram accounts are for broader social networks:

My closest friends are the audience for my finsta. Everyone I know, well or not, is the audience for my regular insta. (S8)

Participants expressed discomfort with the idea of content crossover between their finsta and rinsta:

My finsta is for funny posts about my friends [...] that I wouldn't want all my followers to see. (S14)

There is more than one type of finsta. There are many contexts within a person's social life, and a finsta is typically created as a space for just one of those contexts. Therefore, there are many kinds of finstas:

Some people treat their finstas... as like an excuse to post pictures of themselves where they think they look good but don't want to post it on their real accounts ... Or people use it as a platform to rant about things... They'll just post a picture of their face and a huge paragraph caption. (P3)

Humor, authenticity, and self-deprecation categorize finsta performance

With the exception of people who have no followers, finstas are a space of performance to an audience. Finsta users perform for different reasons and embrace different values on their finstas compared to their rinsta.

Finstas are a space for private and unfiltered expression. "Unfiltered" can mean content that would otherwise be filtered out for the sake of certain social contexts, but in the privacy of a Finsta can be shared:

Generally the content that is shared on finstas is in some way inappropriate, embarrassing, or not something you would like to be seen by family or less close friends because it shows negative characteristics. (S2)

Humor and authenticity are valued within Finsta communities. “Authentic” does not mean un-performed, but is its own norm of performance enforced by the finsta audience [6]. Similarly, humor indicates that even when trying to be less curated, finsta users are still trying to be something:

Instagram is “oh look here’s all these cool things I’ve done, my life is awesome.” “Finsta is here look I’m a real person, my life is a mess too. (P1)

Reduced pressures of finsta performances

Interview participants mentioned stress or concern regarding their collection of Instagram posts that must look good on the whole e.g., having the right “flow” or presenting a consistent “aesthetic.” Notably, these sentiments were only expressed for rinsta feeds, not finsta feeds. This indicates that users feel less pressure related to their performance on a finsta.

This view of a social media feed as a static and lasting artefact echoes Hogan [7] and Zhao et al.'s [12] discussion of the exhibition and archival functions of social media feeds. None of the interview participants viewed their finsta feeds as a personal archive for reflection, but these uses were mentioned by several survey respondents:

I have had this account since sophomore year of high school, so now almost six years so it is interesting to see how I’ve changed since I rarely post on my real Instagram. (P10)

This indicates that with a larger sample of finsta users such archival uses of finstas is likely to be expressed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While the theory of context collapse [10] provides a way to describe a common problem on social media, finstas are a direct attempt by users to overcome it. Through finstas, people take agency over their audiences and use the platform in ways other than it’s signalled intent: the accumulation of followers and likes. The act of creating and maintaining a finsta is also social, as people often use their finsta to follow other finstas. Therefore, while Goffman describes presentation of the self as an individual act of performance, finstas display how “setting the stage” for a performance is fundamentally social.

Further research is needed to more deeply understand the multiple uses of finsta. First, a larger range of finsta experiences will be captured in future work. For example, participants described peers who used finsta as a journal and place to provide “paragraph-long rants” (P3). Expanding

our sample to capture more range and diversity is a natural next step in this work. Second, we would like continue exploring subject-positionality. For example, participants described comparisons made between "self" and "other" users, and this presents a rich opportunity to understand how the perception of other's motivations on finsta may factor into one's perception of audience. Third, we would like to understand whether finsta accounts may be a fad. For example, we are keen to assess whether finsta accounts developed based on situations and contexts which may become irrelevant over time. Several participants mentioned utilizing Finstas in adolescent and early adult life stages such as middle school, high school, and college, but we would like to learn whether these motivations persist in later adulthood. Lastly, we would like to explore whether the unique values and expectations associated with finsta communities generates other forms of social pressure to perform or induces new anxieties.

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