

Love at First Like:  
How social media is changing contemporary romance and  
communication on college campuses

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# INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an important context and location for American college students' interactions with close friends, coworkers, family members, and strangers. What kinds of interactions are now taking place online, and how do students seek to situate themselves in relation to others within the relatively novel context of social media? This thesis is an ethnographic study of how college students are using Instagram, a photo-sharing app introduced in 2010, to construct versions of themselves and interact with others, and the implications that this has on interaction and romantic connection as a whole. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic interviews with 20 college students living in the Denver-Boulder area, my thesis examines how young people are creating mediated social selves through app-based interactions and forms of intimacy. As I will explore, Instagram is both a popular forum for social activity and an increasingly important market within a digital economy of influence. Targeted advertising, sponsored posts, and the purchase of followers and likes are woven into the fabric of social media, and the highly visual nature of Instagram has proven as alluring to corporations as to the young people they seek to engage. As a result, college students are often negotiating the complexities and turmoil of friendship and romantic relationships in an increasingly economized environment.

My thesis explores these questions in relation to anthropological scholarship on digital worlds like that of Tom Boellstorff, Gabriella Coleman, and Bonnie Nardi, economic anthropological and sociological research on the commodification of intimacy including the work of Viviana Zelitzer and Kate Crawford, and Erving Goffman's research on interaction rituals and the construction of the self, along with the substantial body of anthropological

scholarship inspired by his work. Drawing on the theoretical work of these scholars and my own year-long ethnographic fieldwork with college students, I argue that emergent cultural norms and interactions mediated by and through Instagram are also influencing interactions and cultural norms in the “real world” on college campuses, specifically with regards to dating and intimacy. As I will further suggest, a close look at college students’ experiences with dating and intimacy in the Instagram era troubles longstanding distinctions between online and offline, real and artificial, public and private.

### *Note on Methods*

Anthropology is a methodologically distinctive discipline. Ethnographers rely on their own experiences and interpretations of the people and phenomena they seek to understand. In this sense, cultural anthropologists do not aim to achieve the distance between the researcher and the research subject that holds such importance in experimental sciences like cognitive psychology. Instead, the relationship between the ethnographer and her interlocutors and the experience of conducting research in a complexly social world are an important part of the inquiry. For this reason, I aim throughout this thesis to situate myself and my own experiences within this research, seeing as I not only belong to the demographic I am researching, 18 – 24-year-old college students in the Denver-Boulder area, but I am an active social media and Instagram user myself. Like many of my interview subjects, I regularly spend hours each day looking at pictures, liking and commenting on posts, and creating social media content. In this way, I am studying a cultural environment that I also actively participate in and belong to, which

was precisely what initially sparked my interest in the interconnectedness of identity, social media and interpersonal relationships.

When I use social media, I am participating in a social space in which I have never been explicitly shown how to behave, and, like my peers, I have had to experience a few trial-and-error periods regarding not only social media content creation, but interaction and communication with another person online. The process of learning the social norms of a new platform is fascinating but leaves little room for error. Experienced users are quick to correct the naïve actions of beginners, and the socialization process begins with the very first click. I learned this as a new Instagram user when I excitedly liked every single photo my friend's boyfriend had ever posted, only to find that my friend rapidly stopped liking my posts and started sending me confrontational messages about how I had been flirting with her boyfriend. Given that the internet itself is relatively new, and social media has only really taken off in the past 15 years, how is it that the millions of global users, who all belong to other cultures in their non-virtual lives, know how to conduct themselves, communicate with each other, and effectively use these platforms? Moreover, how does this rapidly-changing means of identity construction and interaction relate to other non-virtual cultural spheres?

I conducted ethnographic interviews with 20 students, ages 18-24, that are currently enrolled in a University. All of the Universities attended by interviewees are in the Denver-Boulder Metro area, including the University of Colorado Boulder, University of Denver, and Metropolitan State University. The interviews ranged from 50-90 minutes in length, all of which were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The interview questions were centered around topics of social media use, identity and self-presentation, friendships, and romantic relationships. I advertised my research on Instagram and relied on snowball sampling to then be connected to

other college students and Instagram users that I did not personally know. My interview sample included 16 women, 2 men, and 2 gender non-conforming/non-binary individuals, all of whom were given pseudonyms.

While my sample is disproportional with regards to gender, portions of my research inherently focus on the experience of being a young woman, a demographic that is seen as subject to scrutiny when it comes to physical appearance, and the target audience of the clothing and beauty product industry, which in recent years has turned to Instagram as a new marketing tool. For this reason, I feel my gendered distribution of interviewees helped strengthen the narrative within my thesis of the experiences of being a young woman and participating in the social world of Instagram, while offering the perspectives of other gendered experiences as well. Additionally, I used a form of participant observation and was given access to conversations and messages via Instagram, as well as the profiles of interviewees, and text messages that they received due to their activity on social media. Finally, I relied on the work of scholars and anthropologists before me, and a great deal of my analysis considered previously established theories in digital anthropology, linguistic anthropology, economic anthropology, and cognitive psychology.

### *Literature*

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My analysis of social media as a site for interaction, self-representation, and intimacy builds on scholarship in cultural and economic anthropology and sociology, along with related work in linguistics and social psychology. Throughout this thesis, I aim to understand the

following research questions: How are the “self” and “other” constructed through digitally mediated interactions? In other words, how—and why— do people form relationships and interact with one another in digital and mediated spaces? As Instagram evolves from a platform for sharing photos to a more complex digital marketplace, how are young people understanding relationships and experiences that are simultaneously social interactions and economic transactions? What does it mean when intimate relationships and notions of self-worth can be quantified by likes, performed in public, and easily commodified? While I see Instagram as productive of novel and emergent social formations, my research is based on an understanding of Instagram as part of young peoples' social worlds rather than a world apart. I see connections between face-to-face interactions, interactions and relationships in online spaces, and the ways in which these online relationships are being commodified. My goal with my research is to combine these three elements in a thought-provoking new way.

### *Interaction Rituals and Online Encounters*

My thesis contributes to a longstanding body of research in anthropology and sociology focused on how social interactions are made meaningful within particular cultural frameworks. Following Erving Goffman, my thesis examines social interaction as a way in which “most of the world’s work gets done” (Goffman, 1976: 74). In this framework, display and ritual in social interaction are important and often implicit means of establishing and communicating identity and positionality (Goffman, 1976). My research explores how Goffman’s notion of “face work” might help to shed light on how young people present and represent themselves online in ways that may take into account their understandings of the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the

persons with whom they are interacting (Goffman, 1967). Goffman's work on interaction rituals and face work has been influential in linguistic anthropology and social psychology, inspiring scholars interested in the intersections of language, emotion, and affect. From a linguistic anthropological perspective, if "affect permeates the entire linguistic system," it is because social referencing, the observational mechanism used by infants when trying to differentiate between good and bad which relies on the responses of those around them, plays a key role how people learn to successfully express emotion interactionally (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2009: 22). For social psychologists, Goffman's analysis of interaction ritual and face work have provided a way to understand how individuals' perceptions of themselves and others contribute to a socially-informed "ability to perceive reality as 'it really is'" (Taylor and Brown, 1988: 194).

The questions of reality, perception, self, other, identity, and affect raised by these scholars are highly relevant for my thesis. As social interactions routinely occurred through digital platforms, the young people I interviewed often described their sense of the internet and digitally mediated versions of the self as altered or "other" forms of reality. Do intimate relationships—friendships, romantic relationships—take familiar forms in this "other" reality? When authenticity and identity are in flux, how do young people go about establishing how things and people "really" are? Placing Goffman and other scholars' work on interaction and identity in conversation with recent scholarship in digital anthropology and social media studies opens new possibilities for addressing these questions. Digital anthropology is the study of digital and virtual worlds including social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram as well as dating apps like Tinder, Hinge and Bumble. Early work in this field was sometimes critiqued or regarded as illegitimate on the grounds that digital anthropology was not the study of a tangible culture with a defined geographical location but rather focused on 'virtual' cultures lacking a



valid basis for social and cultural norms (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Wilson et al., 2002). Digital anthropologists, however, have questioned facile distinctions between real and virtual and challenged the essentialist assumptions behind notions of rigidly bounded and geographically delimited cultures (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Digital ethnographies of communities like video game players, virtual reality participants, and gossiping high school students have provided perspectives on the politics, sociality, and global implications of digital media [AC4] (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Coleman 2010; Nardi, 2015; Wilson et al. 2002).

Moreover, anthropologists conducting digital ethnographies have identified systems of communication regarding listening and interacting online, specifically while using social media (Crawford, 2009). In studying social interactions such as listening and looking without participating (which Crawford has defined as “lurking”), social media users are able to participate without revealing anything vulnerable or genuine about themselves (Crawford, 2009). Crawford identified social media platforms as collective spaces where users can present ideal representations of themselves while “simultaneously creating a gap between this ideal and what is humanly manageable” (Crawford, 2009: 526). This directly correlates with Goffman’s concept of what people do and how they behave in public versus in private, as social media users can observe and “listen” entirely in private, all without publicly communicating anything. Finally, in noticing the relationship between those who post content on social media platforms and those who view content on social media, Crawford discusses the development of “ambient intimacy” via social media and what it means to connect with people and observe their lives within a virtual realm (Crawford, 2009: 528).

Additionally, these new modes of communications and interactions include communication in private regarding public representations of the self (Jones et al. 2011). As

scholars have suggested, not only does social media provoke interactions between viewers and content creators, it can enable discussion (in this case, gossip) between two or more viewers of the content, all separate and hidden from content creators themselves (Jones et al. 2011). This work emphasizes how social media users' perceptions and predictions of how others will view and perceive the content that they create informs the ways in which they represent themselves (Jones et al. 2011). In my thesis, I discuss similar ideas of perception and identity construction, and how they align with what social media users would like to post, what they feel inclined to post, and how they view and judge content created by others.

Recent scholarship in the anthropology of online communities has suggested that the emergence of online profiles has allowed for a new mode of identity construction. Further, as this work suggests, online profile identities are not static or limited to the virtual realm, but often seep into other environments and settings for communication (Wilson et al. 2002). Scholars have discussed how people view themselves as individuals and the impact that this has on the mediated representations that they create of themselves, and how this can contrast or align with their greater cultural and collective identities as members of society (Wilson et al. 2002). Wilson et al. suggests that ethnographers contextualize mediated identities, arguing that individuals' identities on social media fall within the greater context of their overall identities—in other words, researchers should examine "virtual" and "real" as situational rather than dichotomous cases of the same identity (Wilson et al. 2002). Importantly, the internet as an avenue of identity construction has not created an alternate reality, but rather expands upon existing cultural roles and ideologies; although the online environment is different, researchers have found continuity in the social positions assumed by social media users on and offline (Wilson et al. 2002).

In my thesis, I investigate how the expansion of young people's social roles into online contexts plays out in and through the romantic connections that these online sites often facilitate. I am particularly interested in how college students incorporate social media in their everyday experiences of dating and intimacy. As I will argue, online practices of flirting and courtship are particularly revealing of how young people construct themselves and perceive others online through a balance of vulnerability and control. Flirting on Instagram, I will argue, is largely a question of young people seeking to establish themselves as attractive and worthy of others' attention interest while also asserting independence and emotional detachment.

### *The Commodification of Intimacy and Economics of the Self*

One interesting area within digital studies explores the relationship between economic transactions and personal relationships online. Researchers have looked at how online interactions create relationships, and how, in turn, relationships online are commodified. Anthropologists have long established that commodification is not limited to the realm of goods and services, and in fact extends into intangible domains of feeling and experience seemingly far-removed from market exchanges. While the commodification of knowledge, identities, and intimacy is not found exclusively in the world of social media, I argue that social media platforms seem to be intensifying and normalizing the commodification of intangible things, including emotion, connection, and interpersonal relationships.

The exchange of gifts and commodities has long been of interest to economic anthropologists. C.A. Gregory's classic work on the social and cultural roles of gifts and gift giving showed the inseparability of the exchange of goods and the assignment of value, making a

case for replacing the neoclassical economic “theory of goods” with what he referred to as the “theory of commodities” (Gregory, 1982). One of the most interesting examples in his theory of commodities is marriage. Drawing on ethnographic examples, Gregory points out how marriage, often seen as the most sacred human relationship, is also accurately described in many social contexts as a “system of the gift exchange of women” (Gregory, 1982: 21). In this sense, the commodification of people and the economic value of intimate relationships is not a new consideration in anthropology, even as their emergence on and through Instagram offers a fascinating subject for ethnographic exploration (Constable, 2009; Gregory, 1982; Fine, 2002; Pearce, 2012).

Classic literature in economic sociology and anthropology also explores how people make distinctions between what can be commodified and what cannot or should not be commodified. Scholars of this field include economic anthropologist Viviana Zelizer, whose work seeks to understand the ways in which societies place social value on money, goods, and people. Her work has focused primarily on the value placed on people, pointing out that while cultural norms imply that people and relationships are not to be commodified — indicated in popular expressions like “life is invaluable,” and “love doesn’t cost a thing” — people do, in fact, commodify people and relationships, and have done so throughout much of human history (Zelizer, 2010). Zelizer offers historical examples of how monetary value is placed on things people often assume to be invaluable; like children, love, and intimacy (Zelizer, 2010). Additionally, scholars have offered the concept of “commodification of intimacy” to assess the role that the internet plays in a system of exchange of intimate relationships or encounters (Constable, 2009). Constable therefore argues that we are seeing a cultural shift from

monogamous to companionate sexual relationships, indeed, what she calls a “recreational sexual ethic” (Constable, 2009: 53).

With the recent emergence and popularization of social media, scholars have been investigating these platforms as vehicles for "self-branding" and how they are used not only to advertise goods and services, but for people to market themselves as well (Constable, 2009; Marwick, 2013). In Alice Marwick’s book Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age, she analyzes some of the contradictions of self-branding. She found that that while individuals strive to appear authentic, they are also shaping themselves in order to be business-oriented, which allows them to successfully convince viewers that their brand, i.e., themselves, is worth buying and consuming (Marwick, 2013).

If social media offers new possibilities for the marketization of the self, scholars have described this phenomenon within broader analyses of contemporary forms of capitalism. Capitalism requires emotional relationships with people that then get commodified, even though commodity exchange purports to be the exchange of non-emotionally-binding objects. If commodities can be exchanged with little emotional obligation or cultural accountability, scholars have questioned how this logic plays out when the commodities are people or relationships—things which often hold great (“priceless”) emotional value and obligation. Sociologist Eva Illouz discusses how commodification as a logic of modernity has influenced notions of selfhood and fostered a specialized emotional culture, thus influencing interpersonal interactions (Illouz, 2007). In her work *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, she discusses the influence of capitalism on the (typically American) values of self-realization and self-actualization and goals of sexual liberation and intimacy, which she argues have become crucial in the formation and expression of identity (Illouz, 2007). This gave way, especially in

the field of psychology, for new therapeutic niches in which patients were viewed as consumers, customers seeking commodities that would allow them to become their self-identified, 'best self,' a self that can overcome feelings of inadequacy and experience success (Illouz, 2007). Part of this process of capitalist self-formation is the creation of an emotional division, a splitting of public and private "selves," as is often seen in online interactions and self-representations (Illouz, 2007; Jones et al., 2011).

The increasingly public and performance-like nature of modern identities has only been enhanced by the introduction of social media. I argue that as interactions move seamlessly across physical space and digital platforms, interpersonal relationships take on the performative and aspirational qualities that scholars have discussed as characteristic features of capitalist identity and selfhood (Crawford, 2009; Illouz, 2007; Jones et al. 2011; Zelizer 2010). Jones et al. has described the virtual environment of social media with regards to perception, judgement and attraction as a "charged arena of self-display and mutual scrutiny in which participants construct desire," clearly addressing the ways in which this self-branding is not only limited to financial profit, but with attraction and physical desire as well (Jones et al. 2011: 7). In my own research, I have found that college students experience a tension between what they take to be their authentic selves and private senses of vulnerability with the possibility of representing themselves in an unrealistic and idealized way on social media. Therefore, I argue that a kind of commodification of the self, or an extension of one's identity into the realm of market exchange, is no longer confined to the experiences of celebrities and individuals that represents brands or corporations, but has become a key feature of how almost all social media users interact with their peers and present themselves on digital platforms.

## *Conclusion*

By drawing together scholarship in anthropology, sociology, and social psychology, my thesis offers an anthropologically grounded yet interdisciplinarily informed theoretical framework for understanding contemporary social interaction and intimacy online. Based on 20 ethnographic interviews with 18-24-year-old college students in the Denver-Boulder Metro area, my thesis explores themes of identity construction and presentation, perception of the self and other, self-image and the curation of one's 'brand,' intimate encounters instigated by online interaction, and how people negotiate relationships in the era of social media. The focal point of my research was the app Instagram, however I also discuss other social media sites such as Facebook and Snapchat, as well as dating apps including Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. Drawing on the scholarly literature discussed above and my ethnographic research, my thesis offers a portrait of how college students interact with each other via Instagram and what goes into the creation of mediated representations and relationships on other social media and dating platforms.

# SECTION I:

## *Overview*

Ethnographers are concerned with the study of cultural groups, and the ways in which place, language and moral values all contribute to the changing and fluid nature of social and cultural landscapes. More often than not, ethnographers are concerned with interviewing people situated somewhere within a geographical landscape, and variables of their language, dress, and ritual practices are influenced by and account for their physical environment. However, in the age of technology, where people defy geographical boundaries by video-chatting with their friend halfway across the world, and the president of the United States communicates to the world through tweets, when exploring possible topics for my senior thesis, I began to wonder whether apps and digital platforms could be considered as sites for ethnographic research.

Bringing together my training as an anthropology major and my personal experiences as an avid social media user, I was interested in how relatively new social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram might be studied as not only technical, but *cultural* phenomena. As I began talking to people and conducting the interviews that would form the research for my thesis, I learned that for the Colorado college students I spoke with, Instagram had its own set of social norms that were widely shared. Practices and values articulated on Instagram blend into everyday norms and interactions offline and across other digital platforms. However, Instagram is also a culturally productive sphere in its own right, as users seek to define themselves as both unique and normal societal participants. In this chapter, I will argue that not only have virtual places, specifically Instagram, become ingrained into the social lives of college



students, but that the interactions, relationships, and professional successes achieved in these “virtual” worlds produce very real and sometimes life-altering experiences.

My research analyzed the process of creating accounts, users’ motivations to do so, and how their understandings and practices in relation to Instagram have developed over time. Many of the Instagram users I interviewed have had accounts since 2013 or 2014. As a result, my interview subjects had extensive experience maneuvering on this platform, and were able to discuss the ways that their posts and self-presentation changed over time on the app and in what they described as their “real” lives. Given American middle-class cultural expectations that college is the time when young people should transition from dependent children to independent adults, it is possible that my college-aged interlocutors were especially attuned to their personal development and growth.

In assessing these personal changes as reflected in users’ post content, I will analyze the experiences of college students in the Denver-Boulder metro area regarding their perceptions of authenticity and “realness” when presenting themselves and viewing others on the social media platform, Instagram. I argue that there is not a dichotomy between the “real” self and the mediated representation of the self on Instagram, but rather that Instagram is a continuation and variation of ongoing social projects of identity management. In this sense, identity can be thought of as an outcome rather than the driver of interactional efforts to establish and communicate a coherent self in relation to others. If college-aged Instagram users did not have a flexible view of the self or reality, there would be no room for them to aspire to be better versions of themselves. Without this flexibility and aspiration, Instagram would be largely pointless, as my interlocutors almost always narrated their experiences with the app as driven—at least in part—by the desire to present and seek validation for their own crafted identities. The

point of Instagram, as they saw it, was to position themselves—subtly or overtly—so that they could move up in the social and economic hierarchies that give the app its structure and meaning.

You might not ever be as likeable, attractive, or “Instagram famous” as some of the people you followed, but over time, your curated gallery of images and number of followers might start to look a little bit more like hers. On the other hand, if everything that an attractive and socially successful Instagram user posted was achievable and real for the vast majority, there would be no distinction between Instagram users, no hierarchy in which one could aspire to achieve a higher ranking. Thus, Instagram offers a matrix of possibilities in which the mutable self can always aspire to a slightly better position. In this sense, “realness” on Instagram refers to the whole range of what might be possible rather than an absolute value. You are expected to put forward your “best self,” one version of the “real” you, if not its most common manifestation. Yet, as my interview subjects explained, there are also limits. “Fake” refers to these limits. To be fake is to exceed the boundaries of the flexible self, to set your sights too high, to ask for confirmation of a version of yourself that is not socially plausible. To call another user “fake” was to draw attention to an unsuccessful public performance of the self and to rearticulate the rigidly hierarchical standards of desirability, attractiveness, and success that every Instagram user seems to know, even if only in their disavowal of their relevance (“I know it's fake, but...”).

In chapter two, I will offer an in-depth examination of norms of self-presentation via mediated versions of the self and take a closer look at the ways in which Instagram users construct feelings of desire and envy, thereby turning themselves into marketable and commercialized entities. Additionally, I look at how affective experiences of vulnerability and intimacy are shaped in and through this public platform. Instagram seems to provide the user with constant and authentic access to other peoples’ lives while offering others a glimpse into the

moments of the user's own life. In this platform, the user can be both the content and the consumer, simultaneously "real and authentic" and "entirely fake." In this chapter, I analyze what I refer to as moments of performative vulnerability—mediated forms of self-representation that appear to index openness and personal connection but also produce social distance by casting the performer as an object of envy and framing viewers as imitators and admirers. I will also explore how users can experience Instagram as a social marketplace where identities and relationships are negotiated, valued, and exchanged and the self takes the form of a commodity.

# Chapter 1: Instagram and the Importance of ‘Realness’

## *Introduction*

How do Instagram users view themselves and others while using the app? In public debates, social media is often dismissed as untrustworthy or superficial. I take a different approach and instead treat reality as an empirical and experiential question. How do social media users understand and feel a “sense of reality”? What do they understand to be the “real versions” of themselves and others? I argue that while mediated representations of the self, circulated via Instagram, may not be perceived by most Instagram users as “real,” for my interview subjects, fashioning selves through Instagram was often experienced as profoundly, but only partially real. For them, the self on Instagram was merely a variant of the person’s “true self.” While virtual worlds may be thought of as clearly demarcated spaces, my ethnographic research reveals social media as part of a continuum of the social worlds that people move through and exist within. For many people, Instagram has become a mundane part of the ordinary experience of sociality. Rather than maintaining a dichotomy between the perceived “real self” and the “fake self” represented online, I have come to understand that a user’s Instagram profile is one version of a flexible and expansive self, similar to the way in which one’s “self” may differ when they are at work versus when they are on a date. Real and fake are not dichotomous variables, but shifting identifiers. I am interested in discussing the construction of virtual narratives of the self as an extension or facet of one’s identity.

Annette Markham conducted research with internet users about their online representations, their perceptions of what is “real,” and their experiences creating and

maintaining friendships and relationships with other people online (Markham, 1998). Markham found that when users were posed with the question of what was really *real*, she was struck by their answers, “To my surprise, these users told me this question was of little relevance to them; rather *everything that is experienced is real*. Notions of reality are shifting [...]” (Markham, 1998: 20). My ethnographic research supports this by showing an expansive sense of reality and experience that is also not entirely limitless. Markham found that regardless of a physical presence, users of online platforms and chat rooms still felt a sense of being when interacting with one another online (Markham, 1998). While a lot has changed in the arena of cyberspace with the introduction of social media, Markham's findings paralleled some of my own and helped me to understand how Instagram users made sense of the variously and differently mediated spaces that constituted their social worlds.

In their work on online communities, Wilson and Peterson discuss perceptions of reality and perceived “realness” online, calling into question the notion that “virtual spaces allow for fundamentally new constructions of identity” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002: 457). More recently, Tom Boellstorff et al. described research into virtual worlds as an extension of, rather than divergence from, the long tradition of ethnographic methods developed for analyzing the physical world. I draw on this understanding to claim that technological spaces do not construct a false sense of identity or mediated representation of the self, but rather are an extension of the social worlds that people already exist in.

*Instagram: Who, What, When, Where and Most Importantly, Why*

The social media platform Instagram was developed by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010, and since has become, per Raisa Bruner of Time Magazine, “a selfie-filled, multi-billion-dollar beast used by 500 million people” (Bruner, 2016). As of September of 2018, that number had risen from 500 million to 1 billion, with the ‘like button’ being hit around 4.2 billion times a day (Gotter, 2018). The visual platform allows users to post photographs for their followers and the public (depending on the user’s account settings) to see, like, or comment on. I argue that this platform has impacted the lives of college students in a number of ways, including their perception of reality, their identities as commodifiable entities, and their interpersonal and romantic relationships. The extension of society into this social media app has impacted the way that young people represent themselves, and communicate with one another, similar in many ways to the virtual and technological realms that preceded it. Already in 1998, social scientist Annette Markham was astounded by the ways in which online presence was increasingly overlapping with the real world in meaningful ways: “[P]eople having strokes or severe asthma attacks were saved because they were online when the tragedy occurred and their conversational partner called for help. Others were leaving long-term relationships to establish new relationships with people they had met online - in some cases, even before they had met their new partners face-to-face” (Markham, 1998: 16).

In order to understand how Instagram became such a global phenomenon and cultural space, I asked all of my interviewees why they created an Instagram account in the first place, and why they still have an account years later. The answer seemed to be a resounding message of conformity and peer encouragement, with the vast majority of research participants stating that they made an Instagram because their best friend, girlfriend, or older sibling told them to. Chase, a Kuwaiti student at the University of Colorado Boulder, discussed what Instagram was like

when he first made his account in 2013 and the changes that he has watched happen on the platform in the past six years:

I'd say Instagram started out as a visual storytelling platform, and over the years it's become more personalized and more commercialized, perhaps it intended to be community based but it has become more about the individual. Blogging became a thing on Instagram, and it became more commercial since people started advertising their product or small businesses.

Emma, a senior at CU Boulder passionate about outdoor sports and activities also created her account around 2013, and noticed changed within the culture and purpose of the app as well.

I think I got that (Instagram) like freshman year of high school, I wanna say like 2013 or 2014. I remember me and my best friend from high school, she was always like into photography so we like really liked playing around with that and like, obviously all the photos we took back then were pretty bad, they were like not great quality, but I think I've always liked it because it's like a photo based app [...] now my social media feed is all like great pictures of like nature and I follow so many mountain and adventure accounts and stuff like that so now like when I go on my account it's like, "Uch my life's so lame," you know?

In this example, it is clear that Emma's attitude towards Instagram has shifted over time, and while at first it may have seemed to be a novel platform for creative photo sharing, she has become more critical of it as it became a more serious part of her life. After having used it for several years, Emma now feels that the posts of others make her feel like her "life is so lame." These answers suggest a widely shared view of Instagram having developed over time toward greater commercialization, idealization and a new emphasis on the individual, ideas that were echoed by many other interviewees. I found a shared understanding that the platform depicted idealized versions of individuals, and while some Instagram users strayed from this norm, they purposefully did so. For example, Melanie, a CU Boulder student studying sociology, reflected on these idealized representations, and described how she uses humor to purposefully challenge these normative attitudes:

For me, when I was younger there was this expectation of being super thin, never repeating outfits, etc. Because everyone follows so many people that try to meet these really high

standards, when really none of this is real [...] now I use it as a funny outlet because I hate how seriously people take Instagram.

Melanie made an important statement in this comment by noting that, ‘none of this is real’ a common value shared by many interviewees, and a way that many people expressed the rationale they use to detach from the app when they think it is having a negative impact on their psyche or self-worth. To understand these negative feelings, it is worth considering that Instagram serves a marketplace of the self where people, especially young women, are fairly explicitly evaluated. If young Instagram users initially were excited by Instagram, believing they could increase their value—calculated by numbers of likes and comments and followers—by working on themselves and openly participating in this social marketplace, after some years of this experience, many began to feel discouraged.

Over time, when my interview subjects repeatedly asserted that “Instagram is not real,” I came to understand that by saying that Instagram was not real, they were arguing against the way their value was assessed in this social marketplace. By saying “Instagram is not real,” they were also articulating something like, “I believe I’m worth something more or something different than what Instagram shows.” If a user says “this is real,” then to them, the fact that people do not seem to find them popular or attractive in this marketplace of the self could be taken to imply that they not *really* popular or attractive. By “not taking it seriously,” users like Melanie could participate in the social experience of Instagram in a way that wasn’t as closely tied to the platform’s function as a market for desirability. In this way, some Instagram users sought to distance themselves from what many others experienced as the main purpose of the platform: a precise index of their value, updated in real time. Of course, even those who saw Instagram as a way to measure and enhance their self-value often discounted the importance of this function. To



reveal oneself as overly invested in one's Instagram's valuation is to risk being labeled as fake-- trying to extend one's flexible self beyond what was socially plausible.

Due to tensions surrounding what is “real” and “fake” on Instagram, many socially successful Instagram users enact what I describe as “performative vulnerability.” Performative vulnerability is the ability for an Instagram user to acknowledge their popularity, while still maintaining an illusion of approachability and personal connection with their many followers. An example would be a post in which the user looks attractive and desirable, but with a small silly detail or “imperfection” that suggests that the user is both glamorous and down-to-earth (i.e. the Instagram user is at an expensive resort in Vail, but posts a caption about how bad of a skier she is). The opposite of performative vulnerability is what I call “painful vulnerability,” which is to deny the “reality” of Instagram's valuation by creating posts indicating that one does not “take it seriously” - for example, posting a purposely unflattering or unattractive picture to show that your intention is not to establish your self-worth, but something else entirely. This places the user in a vulnerable position because the post could fail to achieve its objective, and instead be read as a failed bid for compliments and likes.

Painful vulnerability differs from performative vulnerability in that performative vulnerability is an attempt to represent a minor imperfection while maintaining an overall impression of glamor and beauty, while painful vulnerability is an attempt to participate in the marketplace of self-worth without succumbing to its dominant modes of value. Users demonstrating “painful vulnerability” more or less acknowledge their apparent approachability, but maintain that they have more important things to do than spend their time on a “fake” social platform. They compose the narrative that if only they had the time, or if only the means of

valuation were “real” ones, they too would be as successful and famous on Instagram as the influencers they follow.

The problem with painful vulnerability and the claim that Instagram and its values are not real is that for the most part, young women in the United States are assessed based on their attractiveness and popularity at all times. On Instagram it just more explicit. For better or worse, Instagram users now have a little calculator in their hand that seems to precisely indicate exactly how conventionally attractive they are, producing a numerical value that they and all of their followers can see. Thus, I would argue, Instagram distills the social pressures that female college students experience more generally in a society where women's value is so often measured in youth and beauty. So, what is real and what is fake? If my research focuses on interactions and relationships that take place on and through a platform that is often dismissed as “not real,” I would maintain that understanding how users delineate what is real from what is fake and evaluate themselves and the people they encounter on Instagram offers an important perspective on the lived realities of young people in America.

### *A Reality-Check about Real-ness*

Carmen, a 20-year old student at CU Boulder described the way in which she chooses to depict herself online, and how she chooses to exist within this virtual realm:

I definitely feel like I put a better side of myself online. I'd never put online how I feel (sadness, anxiety, depression). I would not post about that because I don't want people to know what I'm going through (...) I choose to put my best face forward.

Her statement may be perceived as an indication that she is often being inauthentic or ‘fake’ according to the statements made regarding realness, but one must consider the other social

situations that we very often exist in. For instance, at work, one would most likely choose to ‘put their best foot forward’ so to speak, or aim to make a good impression, and use discretion regarding what information they choose to share with or withhold from their co-workers. In the same way that this behavior is considered the norm within a professional setting, the idealized and even performative display of the self was commonly understood to be the norm amongst many Instagram users. As Emma put it:

I mean obviously we all have Instagrams that reflect the best parts of ourselves.

Her fellow CU Boulder peer, Meghan, expressed a similar message with expectations regarding the content that users post on Instagram:

The way I’ve used social media, each thing has its purpose; Instagram you’re reaching out to a lot of people and you’re showing a prettier side of your life, on Instagram it’s, “Here’s an edited photo with me wearing the most make up I’ve had on all week” [...] It’s funny when guys post without a filter, and an everyday photo (without alterations) and this makes you realize what Instagram really is, it revolves around material or appearance posts.

Similarly, Cassandra offered her opinion regarding the posts of her male peers, and how expectations may differ when it comes to the Instagram posts of men and women attending college in the Denver-Boulder metro area.

With boys, I don’t think it’s always as representative of them because they don’t put as much time and effort into it.

While their opinions could not be used to generalize the Instagram profiles of every male college student, she and Melanie called attention to gendered expectations of self-presentation that may have crossed over from the real world into Instagram’s virtual one:

[Instagram shows] the best parts of their lives, pressure for women to look a certain way and do certain things and I think this has a lot to do with Instagram, which is important to keep in mind [...]

The concepts of performative and painful vulnerability are not only limited to young women, as there are gendered expectations for young men as well. However, these do not appear to be as driven by appearance, and thus it could be too vulnerable for a young man to put a noticeable effort into his Instagram account, considering that there is a standard that they do not put “as much time and effort” into crafting their posts - or at least someone on Instagram should not be able to tell that they did.

For both young men and women that use Instagram, this platform is a place where a person and their friends all work together to craft this representation of a “self” that can travel across social arenas and interactions. If an individual has not done the social work of fashioning a self, to whatever degree of performative and painful vulnerability that suits their level of cyber-popularity, then it is not a reliable representation, and just someone’s opinion of themselves, unvalidated and supported by others. While this understanding of what is normally depicted on Instagram has been established by several interviewees as, “the best parts” of one’s life, many users do not use this logic to disregard the perceptions and judgements of others all together. Rather, they craft their own posts in a way that shows what they believe to be a true representation of themselves, that is then supported and validated as who they hope others see them to be, even if it does not encompass their entire identity. Due to this, one can begin to understand that even while users have a normative understanding of the limited representational authenticity on Instagram, they are also concerned with their own public perception of being authentic, real, and “themselves.”

For example, Melanie explained the changes that she made to her Instagram account after having gone through major moral changes in her personal life, and how she thought this needed to be adequately represented on Instagram.

So I recently went through my Instagram and deleted so many pictures because I used to be super Christian and I used Instagram as an outlet to express those views but those have changed in the past four years, so I didn't want my Instagram to represent views I didn't believe anymore. For me it was important because the people that I follow I know in real life and I want my social media to represent who I am and what I stand for. But even for my own friends I would say that my Instagrams accurately reflect us.

Reality is a thing that college-aged Instagram users work on to achieve, and having pictures that are inconsistent with a user's current self-presentation, would reduce its reality effect. Melanie could delete all the pictures, but it would not have the "real" feeling if this new self is not validated. This means that when users of the demographic I studied create posts, they are essentially asking their followers, "I think this is the real me, can you tell me?" Performative vulnerability is present here as well because your desired version of yourself may not be confirmed. Things that are real to you may not be really real unless other people confirm that reality. With boys it's confusing because they don't fashion themselves in the same way, it's dangerous to affirm it too much because you might accidentally affirm something that they don't feel is their best self. This is why people say, "Oh girls get so many more likes," but that reality of women's identity needs so much more social validation.

Throughout their lives, it is normal for people to go through changes regarding social, religious and moral ideologies. Social platforms like Instagram are often used to capture and share moments in users' lives and are reflections of the parts of their lives and selves that they feel are appropriate, and even important, to share with others. Thus, when core values or ideologies shift, Instagram users may be inclined to shift their public appearance as well, accounting for the personal changes in their lives and identities in a very public way. Cassandra, a CU Boulder student majoring in both Anthropology and Communications, altered her content in a similar way, with attention paid to maintaining an Instagram that was representational of her

contemporary self, while taking into account the normative expectation of idealized Instagram posts:

Everyone posts the good things about themselves. Four years ago, it's a lot of pictures of me at parties, and now it is a lot of things that I go do, and I think you can see a change, and it is representative of things I did or have done.

In his research on internet behavior and internet relationships, Adam N. Joinson discusses the value of self-disclosure on social media (Joinson, 2007). Regardless of the degree of authenticity or perceived “realness” self-disclosure is an integral part of participation on social platforms. This creates an environment where every user has the personal and independent discretion to post how and what they choose, while all adhering to a system of self-disclosure and public display.

However, while many people that I interviewed took their authenticity and genuine self-presentation seriously, there was also a strong sense among my interview subjects that a person, organization, or company could obviously create a specific and potentially false image using Instagram. Bethany, a sophomore at CU Boulder, has not posted on Instagram in over a year, however she still uses the app almost every day. She often uses Instagram to keep up with the lives of celebrities, find recipes from various chefs, and see what her friends are up to. Considering her use of Instagram as a place of observation more than self-representation, she offered interesting insight about how something like the college experience or campus lifestyle is also shown on social media. Bethany discussed the account “I’m Shmacked,” a platform that takes photography and video submissions of college students partying from schools around the country, and remarked that she feels this account can warp prospective college students’ perceptions of what the college experience will entail:

I feel like the college scene is a very stereotypical thing, and I see people partying on social media and accounts like I'm Smacked and that's not real life [...] people in high school see these accounts and they think, "Wow, college is going to be crazy!"

This potential for misrepresentation is not at all new to human behavior, and people routinely misrepresent themselves, to some degree, in a variety of social situations. Considering that reality is experienced as a continuum, as something that is dynamic and variable, "misrepresentation" has to do with the conflict that may arise within a user when the "self" that they understand to be real does not align with the "self" that they present on social media. However, platforms like Instagram where images are readily available and access to these images is constant, it is easy to visually construct a self or environment that can differ from the way that individual understands their "real self" to exist in the non-virtual reality.

On Instagram, as well as other social networks like Facebook and Snapchat (a social platform where nothing is permanently posted but users can add one another on the app and then exchange photos, videos and messages that all disappear after being viewed), these moments of public display are not only exemplified by the posts created (that last indefinitely unless deleted or archived), but also by the impermanent "stories" posted by Instagram users. These "stories" are photos or videos, similar to the permanent content on one's account, but only last for a maximum of 24 hours. Rather than being able to receive public "likes" or "comments" as with regular posts, an Instagram user can view who viewed their story and receive private messages as a response to the stories posted. This feature of the app allows for a heightened perception of "realness" considering that many stories include live photos or videos of what the individual is doing in that moment. On occasion, Instagram stories are even used as platforms to engage in a one-sided conversation with one's followers, so that a viewer of the story may feel as if they are

being personally and specifically addressed, attempting to bridge the gap between follower and friend.

As one might expect, this transition from in-person to online is not always smooth, and it challenges people to integrate different dimensions of reality, which created tension for some Instagram users that I interviewed, specifically regarding their self-esteem and self-image.

Meghan shared that in some way, her posts presented a different side of her personality than she felt was representative of her in-person self, and discussed the conflict that this situation produced:

I am introverted, but I somehow have made myself seem extroverted on social media, and it's kind of my way of being extroverted without personal contact, but in a way, it is a bad way of being extroverted. There's an image that I feel pressured to uphold.

Bethany experienced conflict regarding her self-worth and identity due to social media as well, sharing that while she did not represent herself in a way that she thought was inauthentic (like Meghan), but rather that the images she saw of other people on Instagram impacted the way she viewed herself in real life:

As I've gotten older, I've started to dislike social media more, [it is a] cool idea for the long term, like how older people use Facebook. I think that in society today it is very detrimental so people's mental health. Like body types or comparing lives in general.

This perspective, that Instagram would be better if it were used in the same way as older generations use the social media platform Facebook to reconnect with old friends and distant family members, was echoed by other interviewees. However, a majority of participants also shared that they believed that Facebook was increasingly becoming a thing of the past, something that was not as popular or important for college students as Instagram. Annabelle, a



sociology major at CU Boulder, saw both the positive and negative impacts of Instagram participation:

Sometimes it's really empowering because you post a picture of yourself and get a lot of likes, or for me like following chefs and people that cook and it can be inspirational and positive, but other times it can be negative. If I'm comparing myself either to friends or like Instagram famous people or influencers, that can be negative, and even though everyone can say and knows it's perfectly curated, when you're looking at photos there is a disconnect [...].

So why do people post and participate even though they believe that it negatively affects their feelings of self-worth? Why do Instagram users spend so much time on the platform given the established normative attitude that what is shared is not really “real”? According to Annabelle, in spite of the push-and-pull factor of a platform that appears to have a substantial impact on how users view themselves and their peers not only online but in real life, Instagram participation is about being seen and heard. In her ethnographic research on online communities and relationships, Annette Markham wrote, “Although cyberspace is nothing more or less than of a network of computer systems passing digitized strings of information back and forth through copper or fiber-optic cables, people who connect to this network often feel a *sense of presence* when they are online” (Markham, 1998; 17). This sense of presence is valuable to users, even if it is not experienced by users as their ‘truest’ or most authentic self. As Annabelle explained:

I think people post to feel relevant, like if you post then people know that you exist. People know that you're doing things with your life, you not only get to decide what people see of you but also how they see it.

## Chapter II: Instagram and the Commodification of our Relationships and Ourselves

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will look at how Instagram users construct desire, envy, and limited representations of intimacy via this social media platform. I will argue that the curation of social media content and the construction of mediated representations of the self can contribute to a commodification of individuals and their identities, which then is reflected in interpersonal relationships and friendships between Instagram users. Throughout the chapter, I draw on the work of economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer on the moral and cultural value of money and the economic value of people and morals (Zelizer, 1994). Zelizer's research explores the "multiple ways social relations and culture inform people's economic activities and institutions" (Zelizer, 1994: ix), and offers insight into tensions between different forms of value. In particular, Zelizer's work on children's life insurance in the early 19th century reveals how "value" can be used to compare the worth of one life with another—in this case, the greater economic value of insurance payments for children than for adults is indicative of the increasing cultural value of the "priceless child" in this historical era (Zelizer, 1994). While it may seem difficult to quantify the financial value of things that we see as culturally invaluable—such as a human life or an intimate relationship—Zelizer's work provides a useful framework for understanding how Instagram serves as a social and financial market where the value of people and relationships can be assessed and transformed.

If Instagram participates in the commodification of intimacy, it is by no means the first time that a technological development has influenced how lives and relations are valued. Nicole

Constable uses the term “commodification of intimacy” to refer to the “ways in which intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices; and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, echoing a global capitalist flow of goods,” (Constable, 2009: 50). Constable’s research demonstrates how globalization and financialization go hand in hand: with increasing global interconnectivity and geographic dispersion of social relations, there has been a corresponding increase in the commodification of reproductive labor (Constable, 2009). While my research does not aim to assess factors like sex work or cross-border marriages, Constable’s work informs my analysis of the ways in which Instagram facilitates some forms of commodification of personal identity and intimate relations.

Another perspective is offered by social scientist Alice Marwick’s research on celebrity, social media and self-branding in the digital age, primarily through social media platforms (Marwick, 2013). For Marwick, social media may be a place where entrepreneurship and social change are encouraged, while at the same time social hierarchy and inequality are reinscribed rather than resisted (Marwick, 2013). Marwick’s work on micro-celebrities and her analysis of vulnerability, authenticity and public personas is particularly relevant to my research and informs my analysis of the ways in which low-scale celebrity and financial success via Instagram contribute to users’ constructions of mediated representations of themselves.

These assessments of micro-celebrity and the commodification of intimacy can also be analyzed through Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” which refers to “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object,” (Berlant, 2011: 24). Berlant emphasizes how optimism involves recognition by means of reciprocal exchange, and highlights

how the desire to obtain something can coexist with the ongoing pain of continual attachment to a desired, but unachievable, opportunity (Berlant, 2011). Similarly, for many users, Instagram can serve as a problematic object, promising something that seems to always lie just out of reach.

### *Brand representation and self-value*

As a college student and avid user of the Instagram app, I am all too familiar with how companies approach young people with new ways of selling and marketing their products. I also understand the exciting allure of being invited to play a part in a glamorous brand image. In my second year of college, I had just finished a semester studying abroad in Italy and was still reeling from a difficult breakup. After living in an exciting new place and successfully conversing in a foreign language, I felt a new sense of confidence. At the same time, the break up left me with some disturbing questions—was there something wrong with me? Was I likeable, attractive? Either way, I felt daring enough to post a photo of myself in a bikini on social media. Within a few days, I had received direct messages, or DMs, on Instagram from various swimsuit companies, offering discounts on their products along with special codes that I could share with my Instagram followers that would enable them to receive discounted prices as well—all if I would post a photo of myself wearing their company’s swimsuit. When I told my family about having been contacted, they were skeptical, and while I was flattered by the idea that a company would want me as a ‘brand representative’ their doubts caused me to have my own. While I was flattered that, with only roughly 950 followers, I was considered socially successful enough to represent a swimsuit brand, did I really want to post a photo of myself in some company's bikini on the internet? Did I really want all of my friends and followers to know

that I cared enough about Instagram to publicly endorse a brand, and potentially not get the number of likes and comments that I hoped for? Finally, I agreed to buy a swimsuit at half price from one company, in exchange for a commission from every sale made with my discount code. In the end, I posted a picture, got a fair amount of attention, and sold zero bathing suits. The company, on the other hand, had one more young woman publicly endorsing their brand while paying for a swimsuit that even with a relatively large discount, surely was well within their profit margin. I do not believe that it takes an economic expert to understand how this situation benefits the swimsuit company.

However, this encounter led me to question why I opted to endorse this company in the first place. While the opportunity to make a commission was definitely a factor, the reality of the situation meant that I would have to sell ten bathing suits in order to even make enough to cover the cost of one. Moreover, I paid half of the market value for the swimsuit that I wore in the photo, when it was not something that I particularly needed or thought of prior to being approached. In reality, I made the decision when I went to the company's Instagram profile, and saw the beautiful, admirable, and diverse set of girls that led me to decide that I not only wanted to have the same swimwear as them, but I wanted to *be* them. I wanted to be one of the girls that was envied and admired for having appeared on a popular swimsuit profile, and that everyone knew was selected to represent that brand; I wanted to be a celebrity, even if only for a moment. Two months later, I scrolled one more time through the comments ("you look hot!"), and with some ambivalence, deleted the post.

*Constructing Desire and Creating Envy*

My ephemeral swimwear influencer moment—and the feelings of embarrassment, desirability, envy, and doubt it provoked—made me wonder how other young people felt about Instagram’s economy of influence and configuration of celebrity. As I began conducting interviews and more carefully observing mediated interactions online, the topics of fame and recognition were never far from the surface. College students’ interest in Instagram is not only limited to their social network of friends and family members that they know personally, but also extends to the lives of actors, musicians, and athletes, celebrities that Instagram users follow in order to keep up with their daily lives. However, this interest and even obsession with celebrity is not only limited to well-known ‘standard’ celebrities, but also to a new category of media celebrities, ‘Instagram Influencers.’ CU Boulder student Jane, who is not very interested in Instagram fame but follows a select few Instagram influencers, defined an influencer as:

[A person] who uses a particular social media platform to gain public recognition by means of idealized public portrayal of the self.

Influencers are social media users that have hundreds of thousands of followers, not on the basis of talent or skills external to Instagram, but as a direct result of their ability to create likable, attractive, and enviable content on Instagram. Many non-Instagram users might wonder what exactly draws people to liking, and more importantly following, the content that these seemingly unexceptional people post and popularize on social media. The relationship between ordinary Instagram users and the celebrities and influencers they follow can be analyzed as a form of “cruel optimism,” which Berlant argues can involve “thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition”—in this case, ordinary users seek the unlikely but seemingly attainable recognition offered by an exchange of likes or even a follow on Instagram from a micro-celebrity (Berlant, 2001: 43). In liking and following this person’s desirable and even enviable appearance and lifestyle, there is the possibility that one could either imitate them, and then receive public

recognition and approval via the likes and follows of other users, or eventually establish a relationship of reciprocity with this particular influencer, and receive likes and/or a follow from them. However, this is very unlikely, and could be seen by Berlant as an attachment to a problematic desire, in that constantly hoping for the approval of an influencer that has hundreds if not thousands of times as many followers as people that they follow, may actually harm the Instagram user rather than helping them. Furthermore, for ordinary users, hoping to be like influencers and following them due to a mix of envious admiration and inspiration could—and often does—have negative effects for users' sense of self-worth in comparison with the social and financial value ascribed to this micro-celebrity.

Part of constructing desire and envy from other Instagram users is in creating an image of likeability and overall popularity. I spoke with Jasmine, a DU Student and a self-described aspiring Instagram influencer and blogger. Raised in Denver, Jasmine described balancing cultural and ethnic identities as the daughter of a white father and Latina mother. Jasmine talked about how she saw her ethnic identification as playing an important role in her process of acquiring Instagram popularity, as she believed that she potentially reached a wider audience of followers who related to her experiences and multiracial identity. Jasmine uses apps that help her “like” other users’ photos without her having to spend time interacting with the posts, with the benefit of each automated “like” potentially leading Instagram users to view her own posts, and like them as a form of reciprocal exchange:

I use a liking system, a bot, that likes other people's content based on hashtags and locations that I input, so a lot of what I am seeing is going to be related to that of anything wellness, self-care, Latina issues, Latina women, female CEOs Etc. So very, “on brand” things.

One might wonder why Jasmine, and other hopeful Instagram influencers, invest time and money into creating “likes” and what the value of the likes really are, if they are not from people

that you know or care about. However, Instagram user and CU Boulder student studying sociology, Annabelle, described the cultural value of likes as:

The more likes someone has is kind of a status symbol, and it represents the amount of people that are looking at your things.

Thus, the value of these likes can be seen as their worth as tokens of approval and attention, even if they may not be genuine, as in the case with liking-bots and even apps that enable users to receive a like-for-like system where they earn “likes” in a database depending on their engagement with Instagram. While many people may see liking-bots to be an example of the “fakeness” or distorted reality of Instagram, it is usually difficult for an average Instagram user to discern between a like that came from a liking-bot, or a like that came from the content creator’s friend. Either way, with all Instagram users working together to maintain and support these digital versions of themselves, if everyone believes that a like is “real” then why would it not be? With the like-for-like system (which, as with all like-generating apps, does not officially meet the terms and conditions of the Instagram app), users are given a reciprocal transaction, and receive as many likes on their photos as they give to other users, allowing for the appearance of more “likes” than they would have received had they not used the app. Annabelle continued with her analysis of Instagram likes and her emotions while viewing others’ profiles and posts:

[...] sometimes [Instagram] is really empowering because you post a picture of yourself and get a lot of likes, or for me, like, I follow chefs and people that cook and it can be inspirational and positive, but other times it can be negative. If I’m comparing myself either to friends or like Instagram famous people or influencers, that can be negative, and even though everyone can say and knows it’s perfectly curated, when you’re looking at photos there is a disconnect but that’s not what comes to mind.

Annabelle’s use of the term, “Instagram famous” is synonymous with the concept of an Instagram influencer, but offers additional insight into how these individuals are viewed. While about half of the people I interviewed expressed some contempt or negative attitude toward



Instagram influencers, they all knew what this term meant, and had at least seen, if not followed, the accounts of several influencers. As with the traditional definition of celebrity associated with actors, musicians, and athletes, fame is the core of celebrity—and whether people love celebrities or hate them, they know who they are. This same notion of Instagram fame is exactly why companies find influencers to be such powerful marketing tools. Whether or not people truly like them, a vast majority of people know about them, and who they are. This allows companies to see an Instagram user with thousands of likes or followers and capitalize on the fame of these individuals, all without having to pay the rates of hiring a more conventional celebrity to advertise their products.

However, when likes are so readily available, and users have the option to either monetarily pay or pay with a sort of equal exchange system, one must consider the true ‘value’ of likes and followers in the first place. At what point does one become admirable, and worthy of ‘real’ likes, and are these likes ‘worth’ more relative to likes generated by bot? 21-year-old CU Boulder Anthropology student Reily discussed the impact that likes had on her self-worth in high school, and on the choices that her friends currently made:

There was a time in high school when I validated myself based on likes [on Instagram] and the likes that I got. Some of my friends, if they didn’t get a right amount of likes they would delete the post.

Similarly, MSU Denver student Ava explained her relationship with likes on her Instagram photos:

[A good post is] any post that gets a lot of likes, at the end of the day, it’s almost like embarrassing [when I don’t get enough likes] and then I have to consider whether or not I want to delete it. You delete posts if they don’t fit the theme anymore [...] For me, I delete a photo if I didn’t get enough likes or if I post too many selfies in a row.

*Past-Self versus Present-Self*

These statements further explain the value of likes on Instagram, insofar as users would delete their content entirely if it did not receive the desired external validation. Without the desired number of likes, a user might be perceived as having a lower social rank, given that popularity is so easily quantified via Instagram likes. In this way, the post itself is only a means to an end, the post acts as a catalyst for a numeric assessment of popularity and social belonging. Otherwise, people would not feel the need to delete their posts at all. If a post was merely a photographic representation of an event or time in someone's life, what would be the point of deleting the photo? But given the number of likes prominently displayed beneath each photo on Instagram, each post acts as an indicator of the user's real-time social value and economic potential. I presume that this is in part due to the reciprocal potential of Instagram, and that there is no limit to the amount of likes or follows that one can give out, so when Person A likes Person B's photo, but Person B does not return the favor, Person B now has the social upper hand, making their like worth more.

Meghan is a senior at CU Boulder, and in her final year is committed to writing an honors thesis in the sociology department. Having attended an all-girls high school, Meghan experienced a shift in her priorities when using Instagram, and when she entered college, gained more male followers, a direct response to the drastic change in her environment. Meghan also experienced the reciprocal nature of likes and follows with people in her own social network, stating:

I went through a major purge of people that I was following, and then I got the app that told me who follows me and who I follow, and it was almost scary how fast they unfollowed me once they saw I unfollowed them.

In order to not lose their social standing, Instagram users like Meghan carefully watch on the number of followers they have compared to the number of people that they follow, and if this ratio is ever dramatically out of proportion, they may do what Meghan did, and download an app that shows them who “follows them back” and who does not. Then, the Instagram user may decide whether or not the person is worth following anyway, or if they only did it as a means of reciprocal exchange. However, this reciprocal exchange may also work in favor of an Instagram user if they’re friends with someone else in real life, and this bond may be used as a token of obligation. Meghan described her experience when real-life friends post on social media as:

There’s the reciprocity with friends and followers, if you know the person and hang out with them a lot, that even if they post a weird post, I would be a bitch if I didn’t like it.

Personal relationships appear to translate into support on social media, regardless of envy or attraction—at least in some cases. Envy on social media may not only stem from how the individual looks, but also from an influencer’s “lifestyle” or the lifestyle that they portray on Instagram. Mia, a senior at CU Boulder, describes the value of advertising one’s ‘lifestyle’, and describes the process of self-branding as having been, “capitalized on by social media users,” such that this process then eventually, “becomes a job.” For Mia the explanation for why this method of self-branding became an effective form of marketing and advertising leading to financial transactions between companies and influencers was simple. As Mia explained, “people want to be pretty.” To build on Mia's analysis, peoples' desire to be pretty extends beyond their physical appearance. Instagram users seem to want their lifestyles, their homes, and their belongings to be “pretty.” For some users, it can be unpleasant or even off-putting to only show the “pretty,” however, at least when it comes to one’s physical appearance. Potential

influencer Jasmine described her reaction when someone does not show their life and interest on social media and only showcases their physical attractiveness, typically in the form of “selfies,”

[I don't like it when there are] too many selfies! Stop taking selfies, unless they're product promotion, and part of the aesthetic, nobody wants to go to your page and see a million photos. I'd like to see photos of what you're doing, eating, etc. I think it has to do with the amount of focus on 'me' and the purpose of your page. You shouldn't be advertising 'yourself.'

For Jasmine, unlike many of my other interviewees, Instagram appears to be purely business. She even went to far as to state that selfies (photos that one has taken of themselves) are *only* permissible when they're related to business, in her words, product promotion. This linkage to monetary value could be in accordance with an Instagram user's purpose when using the app. While Jasmine is trying to become an Influencer, and not only sell the idea of herself, but also her personal “brand,” many other college students put forth a likable and enviable image of themselves, without consciously intending to become a micro-celebrity. This construction of envy is not always as intentional for all Instagram users as it would be for someone who aspires to become an influencer, like Jasmine. Ella, a lover of the outdoors and senior at CU Boulder, described her experience with only sharing a limited amount of her life on Instagram, and how she believed that this created a sense of envy among her followers:

I think a lot of people have been like, 'Oh your life looks so cool because you'll like only post pictures of people on mountains,' and stuff like that and I'm like that's not really my life all the time, most of the time I'm doing school and like crying about it, well not really but um, I'm also not a person who shares a bunch on social media, I know people who really get into their highs and lows and get really in-depth in their captions but that will probably never be me.

Regardless of intention, young Instagram users seem to often experience some disconnect between their ordinary daily routines and the ‘daily lives’ that they put forth on social media.

MSU Denver student Blake described having had an intense journey of self-discovery, coming

out as both lesbian and gender non-conforming to their parents in high school. Blake has used social media, more specifically Facebook, as an outlet for self-expression, and prides themselves on what they describe as a limited but relatively transparent representation of themselves online. However, even when working hard to foster a sense of transparency and honesty with their friends and followers, Blake described their social media as always a partial, and potentially misleading, representation:

On social media my persona that I display tries to be vulnerable and honest, and even despite that it's still a persona. I think in real life there's some, um, I don't know I liken it to like if someone tries to write an autobiography and they try to include as much as they can and they don't try to hide anything there's still, it's still completely different to know them as a person, and I think it's similar on social media. I don't try to develop the persona of somebody who's completely different and better than me, but it's still not the same.

In order to account for the seemingly inevitable differences in one's life and their social media presence, I have found that college students understand this relationship of situational vulnerability, and intentionally crafted access to parts of one's life. Reily describes her attitude towards viewing content that she knows is not a representation of someone's everyday life, as well as a social group that she feels is more prone to using Instagram in this way:

I take Instagram and social media with a grain of salt because I know that no one is exactly how they are or how they represent themselves on social media. It's not like OMG! Callie posted a picture of her at the beach! That changes how I think about her! With sorority girls I think it's pretty obvious, and I joined a sorority because my family was in it and I really struggled with the superficiality. And I think that the superficiality and mediated representations of themselves are faker in the Greek system than outside of it because they do place value on looking like you're hot and have [Instagram] followers.

Once again, the notion of "value" is being taken into account, whether it be that value of a single "like", or the social value of having many likes and followers, that while it varies amongst college students, value is a term used frequently when discussing the topic of likes and followers on Instagram.

## *Establishing Intimacy and Ensuring Imitation*

One variable that makes a young person a target for becoming a “brand ambassador” of a company, which is usually a stepping-stone to becoming an Instagram influencer, is relatability. The new and nuanced quality of micro-celebrities versus mainstream celebrity is that micro-celebrities are usually understood as more relatable. They speak to their followers as fans but relay personal and sometimes “private” information to their fanbase, allowing them to not only feel like followers, but also like friends (Marwick, 2013). There is a process of maintaining micro-celebrity status, especially when there are so many Instagram users longing to call themselves influencers, and as Marwick stated, “Becoming a micro-celebrity requires creating a persona, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans by being “authentic.” Authenticity in this context is a quality that takes many forms, from direct interaction with admirers to the public discussion of deeply personal information, and it is tenuous at best,” (Marwick, 2013; 115). In establishing and creating one’s “brand” or branding and marketing themselves to companies and to other social media users, seen as potential followers, aspiring influencer Jasmine explained how maintaining authenticity is crucial:

Part of my brand is being really forward with everything. I write about my sex life, I write about the plastic surgery I've had. Harper's Bazaar did an expose on the plastic surgery I had. And I think you know you can get a better sense of who anybody is in person, right? But there's definitely people who know very personal things about me who I haven't necessarily had that conversation with just because of social media. I choose to admit my flaws I have no aim to put out a persona as someone who is never stressed or has anything together. Instead, I'll try to write about stress management.

While Jasmine has over 2,000 followers, in the competitive economy of Instagram influence, this is far from the hundreds of thousands of followers needed to be taken seriously as a powerful influencer. Jasmine described posting about topics that revealed her “flaws,” writing about seemingly negative experiences like stress, opening herself to a fairly broad audience, even

if she didn't have tens or hundreds of thousands of followers. While only a few interviewees mentioned the concept of self-branding or being “on brand” with oneself, there is a way in which an implicit view of individuals as brands, commercial, commodifiable entities, informed the way many of my interlocutors spoke about identity on Instagram. Marwick explains that the process of “speaking,” or creating content no matter how many people are listening, is a crucial step in establishing oneself as a micro-celebrity: “Micro-celebrity is a state of being famous to a niche group of people, but it is also a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention. There are two ways of achieving internet fame—by consciously arranging the self to achieve recognition, or by being ascribed fame by others due to one’s accomplishments” (Marwick, 2013: 114). However, as with any marketing campaign, the details that are shared are still intentional, even if they are about a more personal topic or more inherently vulnerable in nature. Sophia, a senior at CU Boulder majoring in Applied Math, saw these attempts at vulnerability in users that are not influencers, but her peers or close friends,

As far as what people post to some degree it is “nice pictures they want other people to see”, self, friends, a place they went. Represents something that they represent. Based on what I see usually it’s like sometimes success, usually happiness, looking good and attractiveness, and occasionally people will also do a post that has meaning behind it or personal significance (family death, etc.).

These are specific occasions when people, influencers or not, show planned fractions of intimacy within their lives, and when they subvert the norm of only looking and showing the enviable and attractive aspects of themselves. Meghan explained that whether or not someone was an “influencer,” social media motivates users to portray the most likable—and thus marketable—versions of themselves. The goal is to present yourself not only as an individual but as a commodity—not just a person, but also a brand. While Meghan at first distanced herself from what she described as “[this] whole thing with influencers,” as she reflected further, she pointed

out that like all users, she was inevitably part of Instagram's economy of influence. "In a way," she observed, "we become the influencers," because all Instagram users create and post content for social consumption. In this way, Meghan saw parallels between her own experiences constructing and maintaining social desirability and the more explicit self-branding that she associated with influencers, even if she lacked the thousands of followers that most people consider a prerequisite for influencer status.

### *Close Friend or Competitor?*

During my ethnographic research, I came across what I initially took to be unusually harsh and negative opinions about the effect of social media use on friendship. However, after hearing more interview subjects articulate these views, I came to see this as a widely shared experience among Instagram users. Annabelle, a student at CU Boulder, gave a simple and straightforward explanation: competition. Friendship, as I briefly explored in the previous section, can become something like an obligation on social media. Paradoxically, for many users, close friends were often the people with whom they engaged the least on social media. On social media, the distinction between "friend" and "competitor" is blurred and sometimes non-existent. Annabelle explained that she did not post on social media very often, and on Instagram only once or twice a year. While she never missed her best friends' birthdays—always celebrating these occasions with "Happy Birthday" posts (a photo or series of photos of the birthday-girl typically accompanied by a long caption conveying close friendship, private jokes, and affection) she seldom posts photos of herself, and almost never posts a picture of herself alone. Instead, Annabelle uses Instagram to follow various chefs and influencers that inspire her, and to keep up with what is going on in the lives of her friends. For this reason, even though she only posted



photos once or twice a year, Annabelle explained that she still spent a lot of time on Instagram. Annabelle reflected on how she understood herself in the role of a friend outside of social media, and how this role could come into conflict with the way she interacted with friends on Instagram:

Whoever you follow shows up in a feed. You can scroll through, and you have the option to like all of the pictures, but you can also view them without liking them. I think it's almost easier, sometimes, for people to like photos of people that they're less close with, or feel that they're less in competition with. And for girls especially, people that you follow—even close friends—you yield your likes as a sort of 'power.' I'm not gonna like your photo, but you know that I've seen it.

In this process, the value of Instagram likes gives the liker a form of power over the person who creates a post. Likes can be easily given, but they are also clearly withheld. This creates a power struggle between Instagram users that may have a close relationship in real life that does not seem to correlate with reciprocal likes on social media. As I previously mentioned, the widely held assumption among those I interviewed was that users care, at least to some extent, about the number of likes they receive on their photos. The vast majority of interview subjects mentioned that they understood to some degree that Instagram was a carefully curated inclusion into someone's life, denying a friend a like may be seen as challenging an obligation within the friendship. However, even within a friendship or close relationship it would violate social norms to discuss the lack of a 'like' on Instagram. As Meghan put it, she felt it would be, "crazy to confront someone about what they've liked," despite that fact that what they liked or did not like is "not private and anyone can see it." Partly because of unspoken rule against asking a friend about her Instagram likes, the absence of a like from a friend can be a significant source of social anxiety. When one user seems to purposefully avoid liking the posts of a real-life friend, this is often understood as a form of competition: withholding a like can be a sign of reluctance to

contribute to a friend's online public popularity out of fear of diminishing their own social relevance (measured by number of likes), as compared to that friend.

## SECTION II:

### *Overview*

While it may seem that the ease and efficiency of communicating through social media platforms makes it easier to pursue the older and more traditional forms of dating in a more efficient way, I argue that because the communication that takes place on these platforms is so often vague and ambiguous, it creates a sense of anxiety that often undermines what seems to be intimacy that is established online. This creates a paradox where Instagram makes it easier to communicate with and connect with people but simultaneously undermines the established intimacy by creating anxiety and uncertainty around in-person, face-to-face interaction. This ambiguity then creates a false sense of situational control, aided by the selection process used in common dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble. As a result, the contrast between the feeling of control when communicating via social media and the uncertainty surrounding in-person interaction can become a source of anxiety.

The newness of the discursive practices of Instagram and social media, in combination with the lack of nonverbal communication and signals, allows for a great amount of confusion and a lack of clarity when it comes to social interaction. The college student social media users I interviewed described being unsure if the feelings of emotional intimacy and connection they experienced in digital interactions were actually real and mutual. I interpret this uncertainty as connected to the open-ended and vague nature of communication online. While apps like Instagram now allow young people to connect easily regardless of geographic location, it seems that these connections are not always experienced as the kinds of closeness that students associated with more traditional dating practices. In the two chapters of this section, I explore the

relationship between young people's use of social media apps, specifically Instagram, and contemporary dating practices.

In chapter three, I give a chronological overview of the process of creating an Instagram account, connecting with fellow users, establishing oneself as a desirable subject, relating to others through intimate forms of communication, establishing and classifying romantic relationships, and finally, I will discuss how users continue to negotiate relationships via social media even after relationships have "officially" ended. I will analyze how the process of creating a social media profile is often oriented towards the construction of a desirable version of oneself, and the moral and social considerations that go into this process. By examining young people's ways of establishing and maintaining intimacy online, I offer a perspective on how digital technology seems to foster intimate relationships, but also requires a kind of public performance of intimacy that raises questions about how people make distinctions between what is public and private in contemporary forms of romance.

In chapter four, I will analyze communication via Instagram direct messaging (often referred to as DMing). This includes how technology is being used as a tool of intimate, and at times unwelcome contact and connection. With a large portion of contemporary discourse taking place online rather than in person, it is important to understand both the possibilities and limits of online communication. As such, I explore how young people work out what seems true or false and negotiate misunderstandings that may arise, shedding light on the contradictory nature of autonomy in online communication. I argue that while DMing allows users to maintain some situational control (with the ability to easily ignore or delete a conversation and thus avoid responding), the ambiguity stemming from the lack of contextual and tonal cues can work against Instagram users' ability to control the terms of their intimate interactions.

## Chapter III: Personal Relationships and the Changing Sphere of Sexual Encounters

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will explore how ideas about intimacy are communicated and represented in the context of Instagram. I argue that Instagram allows for novel forms of expressing intimacy and desire, similar to Jones et al.'s analysis of teenagers' use of Facebook as a sexually-charged arena of self-presentation (Jones et al. 2011). Drawing on their research the Mary Chayko's work, I argue that Instagram DMing (direct messaging), is a place not only for young people to communicate, but also to make and convey moral assessments of one another (Chayko, 2008; Jones et al., 2011). Like Facebook, I argue that Instagram also offers a semi-public platform that encourages public expression of personal views, thereby creating an environment where users can make morally motivated normative assessments (Jones et al., 2011). Informed by Sherry Turkle's critical perspective on how "our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other" and Kate Crawford's concept of "ambient intimacy" among social media users, I also explore the possibility that constant contact via texting, emailing, and social media coexists with a resistance to talking over the phone, or meeting up in person. (Turkle, 2017: 1; Crawford, 2009).

When I first entered the college dating pool as a sophomore—the same summer I posed in a bikini and ended up endorsing a swimsuit brand after my semester in Italy—I was presented with several avenues to pursue communication and contact with potential romantic interests. Given that I had not been single since before the creation of dating apps like Tinder and Bumble, and I hadn't previously before used apps like Instagram to flirt, I was at a total loss with how to go about "online dating" (although that phrase felt outdated, given how widespread these apps

were among my friends and classmates, who seemed to have fully integrated their use in their ideas of what constituted dating in general). Furthermore, I was presented with the daunting task of representing myself online in a way that would appeal to those that I wanted to attract, whatever that really meant, I was rather unsure. However not participating in online interaction, romantic or otherwise, seemed like a missed opportunity, and I, like many of my peers, gradually came to the realization that this phenomenon of likes, comments, and “swiping right” had somehow become the new normal.

Tinder and Bumble, created in 2012 and 2014 respectively, are dating apps where users upload a limited number of pictures of themselves (typically between two and six photos) and a short “bio” that often includes a description, quote, or list of things they would like in a partner. After making a profile, users are presented with an array of choices of individuals within their area. The users can specify preferences ranging from sex, age, location, and, with the newest dating app Hinge (created in 2017) users can even limit their dating pool based on religion, political views, and height. All of the apps offer some sort of selection feature, typically by having users swipe in one direction or another to indicate their interest—or lack thereof—in the person’s profile that they were viewing. If both parties express interest in each other, the app prompts the two individuals to message one another, allowing for communication without the need to reveal contact information like an email or phone number.

In this same sense, if conversation does not go well, or one party is no longer interested, one user can “unmatch” the other, and contact is no longer facilitated via the app. In essence, these new platforms of online dating have taken the basic concept of “first impressions” that are made several times every day, and monetized it. Dating apps have provided a platform where if people make a good first impression on each other, often based on perceived physical

attractiveness, then they can communicate without ever having to meet in person. If their virtual interactions are not satisfactory, they never actually have to meet. One feature of almost all dating platforms is the ability to connect your profile to your Instagram account, so viewers of your profile can also have access to your social media. Users choose to take advantage of this feature, or not to, for various reasons, some of which I explore in my research. Many of the Instagram users I interviewed have used at least one dating app. Some had connected their dating profile to their Instagram, and some had even met significant others on Instagram or through dating apps. What is dating like on college campuses, given the widespread use of these new technologies?

For many older people, the first reaction to dating apps is a question like: What happened to meeting a stranger in a public place, and asking for their phone number or out on a date? When I mentioned my research to my 53-year-old father, he told me that when he was dating in college, you would have to strike up a conversation in person with someone you found interesting or attractive, and that you often did this in places like supermarkets, bars, or parties. People who don't use social media or dating apps (which I also refer to with the broader term 'online dating') might assume that the elimination of the need to go out in the 'real world' and socialize has made modern dating easy and effortless. While both in-person and online conversations present social challenges, I would argue that one of the challenges of online dating is the need to construct a "desirable" representation of yourself so that a stranger might be inclined to initiate conversation.

In my ethnographic research, I spoke with Ava, a 22-year old student at Metropolitan State University in Denver. After having been raised in Nevada, moving to Colorado for high school, and having lived in Europe, California, and Colorado after graduation, Ava had

experienced a variety of dating environments, and had a lot of experience with meeting new people. There was a period of time during her trans-continental adventures that she deleted her Instagram altogether, and restarted it with entirely new pictures. During our conversation, Ava addressed the normalcy of initiating romantic conversation, or flirting, online, rather than in person, even in a more traditional social setting:

You're most likely not going to meet a stranger at bar, 8 out of 10 times if you come up to me at a bar, I'm going to think you're weird or that I'm with my friends and I want you to go away. With dating apps and Instagram it's almost safer, like I can see pictures of them, I can see what they listen to on Spotify (a popular app for listening to and downloading music) ...

I found this student's perspective particularly spot on with the reference to meeting a stranger at a bar, which can also be connected and compared to other commonly social locations, like coffee shops and supermarkets. As Turkle argues in her research, "Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that would "unplugged" does not signify, does not satisfy" (Turkle, 2017: 11). In order to be tethered to technology, however, one must actively participate in creating and maintaining an online social network. So, what is the first step of online dating, and how does one begin to enter this virtual community? It all starts with profile creation and content curation.

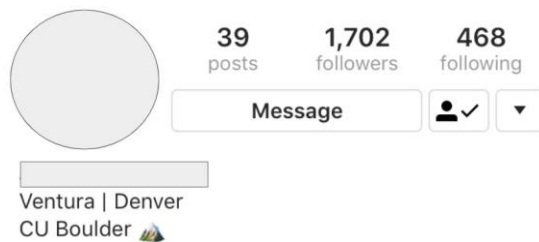
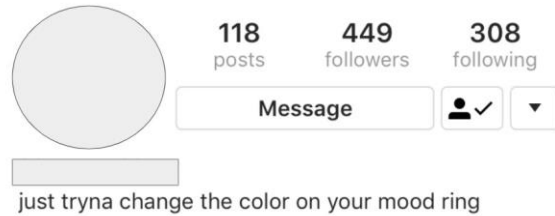
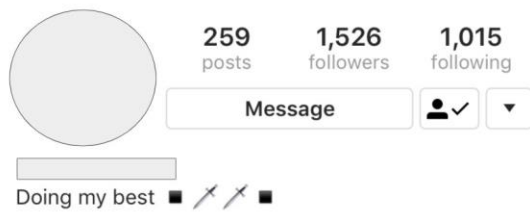
### *Making a Profile*

There are several socio-cultural forces and influences that go into creating an online dating profile or creating Instagram posts that will attract romantic or sexual attention. Not only is the user faced with the task of representing themselves physically, but they typically want their posts, captions, and bio to somewhat represent aspect(s) of their life and personality. As Jones et al. found in their research regarding teenagers use and self-presentation on Facebook, "They



describe their own efforts to project favorable images of themselves in light of often very specific social projects, and an awareness that these self-projections open them up to scrutiny. They also closely surveil the self-presentation and general activities of others on the site” (Jones et al, 2011: 32). Thus, when making a profile, users typically want to portray themselves in a way that will be likeable or attractive to others. While it is unlikely that most social media users are concerned with appearing desirable to all onlookers, which would likely be impossible given the great variability in preferences in a romantic partner, the objective is generally to appear attractive and desirable to people that you would also be attracted to. This requires the user to envision a particular social group that would include these people and then to adhere to the moral and social norms they associate with these imagined attractive strangers.

While short in length, the “bio” (short for “biography”) portion of one’s social media profile can be rather significant. With a limited number of characters, the user is asked to represent a portion of themselves, and some users include descriptive details like where they’re from, the university that they attend, their major, or their interests. Other users, depending on the social image that they want to portray - a digital-cultural concept often referred to as their “aesthetic,” opt for a witty quote, a song lyric, or other nuanced phrase to give their followers a sense of who they are. These bios are one of the numerous ways of compartmentalizing one’s identity on social media in order to establish a sense of cultural belonging. Examples of these bios from my research participants include:



Images: Bios from four interviewees; consent was obtained to include in my thesis

Jane, a gender non-conforming (using she/her pronouns) CU Boulder student interested in rock climbing, the arts, and anthropology described what bios are, as well as her own bio, and her view of how the bio of an artistic and not particularly social media-centered user might appear:

Specifically, with Tinder and Instagram they're like a little blurb under your profile picture and your name, and you use whatever words you want to describe yourself. Mine are always super simple, I guess, if you want to get to know me you should meet me in person. But I think they are fun, like my first bio on Instagram was, 'I wear socks and sandals,' and then now it's, 'I tag peoples' nostrils.' My Tinder bio was always, 'I really like fruit,' [...] My favorites are the really goofy ones, but the really goofy ones that still say something about that person. That, and good quotes.

However, Jane also was able to discern what it was that she did not particularly like in a profile, and that while goofy, relatively vague captions were her favorite, what she described as

"oversharing" tended to have the opposite effect on her, and could sometimes create barriers between Jane and the other Instagram user:

A lot of people just use lots of emojis, and also, like where they went to high school, when they graduated, where they go to college, if they're in a sorority, like I don't know, it's a lot. Or like, who they're dating. It's too much. Or when they have some like really hard political affiliation and their sexual orientation, it's a lot. Especially without an explanation [...] Sometimes I would follow people and [their bios] would be like, 'I'm a socialist! And a lesbian! and I like my eyebrows blue!' and I was like, how do I interact with this human?!

In this instance, Jane explains the potential for normative moral judgements to be made upon viewing an individual's bio, prior to even viewing their posted content. The phenomenon of judgements made by college students based on social media profiles has been described as especially taking into account, "these individuals" appearance, dress, social behaviors and sexual mores," (Cameron, 1997: 51). Given these standards of judgement, there are Instagram users who intentionally create aesthetically pleasing, sexy, or beautiful posts, and Carmen, a third-year CU Boulder student, summed up what it is like to create social media posts with this intent, and the struggle of maintaining the balance between attraction and authenticity:

I put a better side of myself online. I'd never put online how I feel; sadness, anxiety, depression. I would not post about that because I don't want people to know what I'm going through. I want people to know how good I'm doing, and that I'm doing better than them, rather than what I'm struggling with or dealing with. I choose to put my best face forward. [...] I think I'm a very cool person and I hold myself to a high standard, so I try to make myself seem cooler, and I try to show off that I have good emotions and intentions, but I think it comes off as trying too hard, and this actually makes me look lame on social media.

She then explained the kinds of responses and forms of attention that she found that her posts would receive:

Guys DM me more after I post a picture of myself, sometimes with my friends, or if I post an Instagram story of what I'm doing, [or] what I'm listening to. [I get DMs] after I post me looking good. If I posted myself looking bad, I guarantee they wouldn't message me.

Carmen sees her posts within a straightforward call-and-response relationship between her and her followers, knowing that if she posts particular content, she will receive a particular response. However, not all Instagram users see such a direct relation between purposely good-looking posts and romantic attraction. Other users indicated that they saw posts that were clearly intended to be seen as attractive by others as *too* curated and artificial. For these users, artifice was to be expected—after all, they described curating their own posts too—just in a different way. Curation, I argue, refers to intentional self-presentation that is directed to a variety of ends. One of the most important objectives of young people's processes of curation was to construct themselves as desirable in relation to a particular imagined audience, often framed around romantic interest.

### *The Initial Spark*

How do young people incorporate processes of curation in flirting and courtship practices? Blake, a 22-year-old gender-non-conforming student, described how they created posts in the hopes that the girl they were interested in would see it, and potentially be drawn to or at least attracted to them:

I've definitely amped up the posts thinking, "maybe she will see this and think of me." [I post] pictures of myself so maybe she sees me more.

The rationale behind this form of curation is based on an assumption that interest on Instagram will lead to deeper forms of attraction or interaction, which suggests the significance of being perceived of as attractive on Instagram. Of course, if online interest can lead to attraction, it can also produce a negative result. For example, sociology student Meghan described going on Instagram feeds of her male friends to gain a sense of whether she might be compatible with

them, using the app to assess their social status and friend group:

I think that guys' social media is so weird, like I wish someone could just tell them how to curate a feed. There's this one guy, and it's fitting of him, he hit me up the other night to come over, and it's kind of interesting because I feel like guys who are arrogant, their profiles match up. So you kind of just like look at that, and if you ever do feel like being with them is a good idea, then Instagram just reminds you why you don't want to be with them.

Meghan's perspective offers another interesting view of Instagram and social media curation, suggesting that curation practices are understood as productive of social differences, articulating differently gendered expressions of self. In this sense, for young people, gender and sexuality can be performed and communicated via mediated representations of the self on social media.

Meghan also brings up a way in which Instagram can serve as a source of information and guidance, playing the role of a gatekeeper. The app, or more specifically, a user's interpretation of what other people choose to post, can be read as a suggestion *not* to meet up with or be intimate with someone, almost acting like a trusted friend offering relationship advice. By offering a sense of constant access to a person, or at least a virtual representation to them, Instagram use can both increase or decrease a user's romantic feelings towards someone, and act as a crucial tool informing dating decisions. If the app's ability to communicate another user's representation of him or herself can inform students' decisions *not* to be with someone, it can also have opposite effect. Chance, a journalism major at CU Boulder described how his Instagram use increased his attraction to a classmate, explaining how a specific post caught his attention:

I knew my girlfriend, and we had a class together, but she was just another person [...] But then I saw her pictures on Instagram and Facebook and I saw her in a different way. [She] was in Mexico on vacation and she posted a picture of herself, tan and pretty and wearing her trademark flowery shirt with her long brown hair, very her-ish, and I noticed her smile was really welcoming and warm. She looked seductive in a respectful way, which are

things that attract me to a girl because I'm conservative in that way. And then two weeks later I see her on campus and then I asked her out, to a dinner and a movie.

Again, we can see Instagram offering young people a platform not just for the exchange of “likes” and “follows,” but also how it is seen as a source of meaningful information, a place where one can gain real insights about people, about real issues. In Chance's view, he was able to find evidence supporting his own constructed identity as having a conservative approach to sexuality, as well as being able to gauge from a single post whether or not this girl could potentially be a compatible match, whether they had the same core values in common. Interview subjects described similar experiences of using Instagram and gaining insight about shared hobbies and interests, religious and political affiliations, and sense of humor. These experiences are important for students, and potentially transformative. As Chance concluded, “and then in a matter of two weeks I was in love.”

*“Wanna Hang Out Sometime?”*

Initiating communication and asking someone to go on a date can be a nerve-wracking and intimidating experience, regardless of whether you met online. Sociologist Mary Chayko's research showed how people experience flirting as, “[...] both stimulating and playful and contains ambiguous sexual/romantic overtones that range from mild to pronounced,” (Chayko, 2008: 76). Chayko suggests that this playful and sexual mode of communication can at times be used to establish intimacy and even a relationship online, similar to in-person flirting. Regarding textual and technologically mediated flirting, Chayko described how, “as one’s tone of voice is absent in the written word, we must spend extra time when conversing textually to ensure that our words match our intent as closely as possible,” (Chayko, 2008: 76). If flirting takes different

forms online, what are the factors that people take into account when going on a first date with someone whom they have never met in person? Moreover, what are the social norms and rules that come into play when people cross the threshold from virtual interaction to in-person communication? If students have interacted in person to begin with, or if two people are already familiar with each other, when is it considered appropriate to communicate online? Is it socially acceptable to reference having seen one another's profiles when meeting in person? Layla, an anthropology student at CU, described her feelings about this particular issue:

You know that everyone sees each other on social media before a date, but I wouldn't like them to bring it up on the first date, I don't think I would like it at all. But one time, it kind of happened and [my date] brought up that he saw on my Instagram that I went to Europe. I like the mystery aspect even though I know it doesn't really exist.

Layla's remark caused me to reflect back on my father's analysis of contemporary dating methods and how they differ from when he was in college. When meeting someone in a grocery store, or in a bar, there is only limited knowledge one can garner from a momentary first impression, and without access to the internet, considerable time and effort would be required to learn personal details about a stranger, such as where that person had studied abroad in college. For Layla, these details were easily discoverable online, giving her access to relevant information prior to going on a date:

When [I went] on his Facebook, I found his study abroad blog and on the date, he told me information that I already knew but I pretended I didn't know.

What do her actions, and her decision not to disclose the information she had gathered to her date reveal about her feelings about social media? Among my interview subjects, some described their preference to act as if they did not know information gleaned through social media, even though it has become commonplace to find someone on social media prior to dating. Like Layla, some users liked to maintain a sense of mystery by not discussing what they learned

online. Thus, the question becomes whether or not dating apps and social media impacting the mystery of first dates and dating in general? Is this impacting the frequency and speed with which people date, and what could this mean for college dating as social media continues to evolve? How are social media users now dealing with this overload of information, and constant access to someone else's life? Layla discussed how this constant access contributed to her feelings towards a person, and how social media has impacted her dating experience overall:

[...] when I first see [a guy from a dating app] on Instagram, because it's often connected on dating apps, sometimes I don't add them to maintain the mystery factor. My Facebook and my Instagram are a life that I'm trying to exhibit, and with [the guy] it's the same thing. I wish [access to their social media] wouldn't exist because it's an idealization, and on the other hand I put them on this pedestal [...] I think I would prefer not to have the look-up thing, but I also never have really dated without the possibility except for my high school boyfriend [because he did not have social media].

The balance of mystery and exposure has become an integral part of online dating, one which even some avid Instagram and Tinder users wish that they did not have to confront. This constant exposure also allows for constant potential communication. Instagram stories, in combination with standard Instagram posts, only increase the exposure to the details of and events in one's life. However, Instagram stories allow for message responses, only increasing the ease with which Instagram users can communicate to each other and putting more pressure on the balancing act of exposure and mystique. Melanie, a sociology student and activist at CU Boulder, talked about an incident she had where she tried to initiate flirtatious conversation online, and it did not go exactly as she had hoped:

I got really drunk one night, and this really hot guy that I knew when I lived in Houston, he posted on his story of him at the gym, he's a personal trainer, and I chatted his story and said, 'Oh my god, you're so fucking hot,' and the next morning he replied and then I didn't reply and we haven't talked since. Those experiences have made me shy away from being really bold because you still don't want to be rejected.



While Melanie did get a response to her flirtatious gesture, the interaction alone did not appear to be one that sustained romantic interaction. While the correlation of suggestive comments and romantic overtures and intoxication is not at all a new phenomenon, social media offers an additional platform for these types of communication—drunken flirtation can take place with friends, in public, or online in the comfort of one’s home. This constant ability to communicate along with the ease and normalization of nonresponse is key to understanding how digital connectivity and social media use inform a new culture of dating and interaction that is instantaneous and continuous.

Moreover, flirting online presents a new challenge for young people to confront: the potential gap between who they appear to be online, and how they might be perceived when and if they were to meet in person. Blake described how they addressed this gap through eagerness to quickly meet the individual in person:

I have gone on several dates with people that I met on social media, but the social media being like Tinder, like stuff to facilitate that. But whenever that has happened we get in a conversation and then the same day or the next day I ask if they want to meet in person because I want to get to know them in person first, before I come up with a whole perception of them and then they’re totally different.

They mention one of the interesting aspects of online dating and virtual representations as a whole; that the person you are assuming someone to be may not in fact match up with your experience of them in a face to face encounter. A common fear among many people I talked to is of confronting a gap between how they—or their online paramours—are perceived on social media versus their reception in person. The "gap" can have to do with physical appearance, humor, or personality traits, all of which can be misrepresented and/or misconstrued online. There is also a concern that a person might be intentionally misrepresenting themselves, a term in pop culture referred to as ‘catfishing.’ Mia, a fourth-year CU Boulder student, has had her

own experiences with dating apps and their connection to Instagram and social media platforms. Having experienced a first date where the person's appearance did not match his photos, she has had a first-hand encounter with what was clearly an intentionally deceptive misrepresentation. She defined catfishing as “when someone misrepresents themselves (online) to lure someone into a relationship under false pretenses.”

Catfishing in the media is often presented through extreme cases of identity theft or fraud, however, for savvy young social media users, overtly fraudulent or criminal encounters are very uncommon. However, young people use "catfishing" to describe the experience of mismatch between online representation and in-person presentation. They emphasize the negative experience of confronting this gap in person by describing minor misrepresentations with the hyperbolic term catfishing. Mia described a situation where she had to confront the gap between virtual representations and reality with someone that she had met on a dating app:

It usually helps if I can see someone's Instagram linked to their dating profile. One example, I met this guy for coffee and he had this horrible mustache that was not in any of his photos. But for most people, they have been close to their profiles.

Another student, Cassandra, shared her experience with Instagram deception where rather than being ‘catfished’ by being forced to confront the gap between the online representation and physical presence of a person she first met online, instead was surprised when she found the Instagram account of someone she already knew in person:

A kid that I know that I met and he's a little weird and awkward and a jerk, and he has this Instagram that doesn't even look like it's his, he would post a photo of him, like, in Spain, and then the next day I'd see him on campus. He posts all these things that he's not really doing, and [after] meeting him and hanging out with him in person that are not what you would expect from him. [...] I think it makes me think differently of people. I already thought he was a little bit of a douchebag and then seeing that he did that—[it] makes you see people differently.

While Cassandra did not necessarily feel betrayed or even really misled by this person, she did not describe having been romantically interested in him to begin with. However, regardless of romantic intention, young social media users are aware of this disconnect and the potential that someone may not turn out to be how they had hoped. Melanie spoke about this underlying, almost subconscious consideration in her practices of online dating and analyzing social media posts:

[A] guy that I met on a dating app, his dating app pictures were linked to his Instagram, but it only showed like six photos, but then when you went to it his whole account was private. But then I found him on Facebook and he posted this picture with this super giant beard and these tiny pictures and I worried that he would could actually turn out to be super unattractive.

For many of my interview subjects, this constant worry, or rather acute situational awareness, emerged in tandem with their habitual usage of social media accounts and dating apps. While the situation may never be as dramatic as the word ‘catfish,’ with its associations with crime and serious danger, what seems noteworthy here is a potential shift in consciousness. What does it mean for college students seeking to build relationships on a platform that seems to require constant social awareness and the ongoing assessment of posts for signs that a person of interest is potentially deceptive, unattractive, dishonest, or even dangerous?

Melanie's reference to the person on the dating app having suspicious ‘tiny pictures’ must be understood within the cultural context of social media. While photo size may seem irrelevant, especially given that social media content is often viewed on small screens anyway, to Melanie, this was a possible indication of suspicious activity. As she realized that the man did not have many photos clearly showing his physical appearance, her initial interest gave rise to cautious consideration. In this instance, we can understand that to Melanie, the tiny (low resolution)

pictures are indicative of potential dishonesty, and her reaction to the photos can be seen as a form of normative moral assessment (Jones et al., 2011). Similarly, Sophia, an applied math student at CU Boulder, shared her thoughts on viewing someone else's Instagram profile and making judgement calls on that basis, without having met the person:

With dating apps, if I was considering going on a date with them, I would look at their Instagram first to get some information about them. I would like to see more about how they look, maybe see who their friends are, do I know any of their friends. It's not that I would try to find their interests and then bring them up on the date, but more to confirm that I did want to go out with them. The main thing would be to see if they looked different on social media than I thought they looked, that would be a turn off for sure. Anything that I find questionable or offensive, maybe Trump support, that would make me less interested. In an interesting sense, almost trying too hard on Instagram is also a turn off.

Sophia was able to articulate that any signs of what she perceived as misrepresentation, in her words, "if they looked different on social media than I thought they looked," were enough to prevent her from wanting to go out with someone. Given that almost all of the young people I spoke with assumed that there would be some gap between a person's self-representation on social media and in-person presence, this raises the question of why misrepresentation would be considered unattractive. Is this seen as a mark of insecurity? Deceptive tendencies? Furthermore, for Sophia, what she took as markers of non-shared political or moral values, for example, support of Donald Trump, would disqualify someone as a potential romantic interest. In this way, young people may effectively create a kind of dating "filter bubble," by considering only people who appear to share their core moral and political beliefs to be dateable.

Another CU student, Riley, explained her thoughts and processing techniques when viewing a girl's Instagram that she was potentially interested in dating:

If I met someone and I wanted to go on a date with them and I looked at their Instagram and say they had like, no posts, or one weird post from years ago, that would weird me out. And I would be hesitant, like why, that's unusual in today's world.

Riley expressed what seemed to be a common feeling among many college students—that a lack of presence on social media might in itself seem suspicious. Although on the one hand, as previously mentioned, young people may experience less of a sense of “mystery” or potentially less intense excitement about any new person, due to the constant influx of images and information supplied by social media, many Instagram users seemed to feel as if they could not fully trust someone who did not use social media or shared only minimal information. Without at least some degree of mediated access to someone's personal life, Instagram and dating app users felt uncomfortable. Interestingly, they saw their lack of knowledge and control in relation to people with minimal or non-existent social media content as problematic despite the almost axiomatic premise that all social media images are specially curated according to how that user wants to be seen by others to view.

If interview subjects expressed concerns and doubts about their mediated romantic lives, they also shared optimistic stories of social media enabling incredible connections and long-lasting relationships. For example, Jane gave the example of her cousin's romantic success to illustrate the popular narrative of how virtual worlds bridge physical and geographical gaps and allow love to grow in places that would have been highly unlikely before social media and dating apps:

My cousin, we've been super close like all our lives, he just got engaged to his boyfriend, Clyde, and that's been super exciting, because [my cousin] only came out like, two years ago [...] and they're living together in my home state but Clyde's parents and sister, they all live here, he grew up in Boulder, so it's super weird, but they met on Tinder! Some of the most amazing relationships that I know came out of social media, and some of the most terrible, but yeah.

*So Now You're Dating...*

The need to carefully navigate social media does not end once a person establishes a

romantic relationship with someone else. There are many details that go into presenting a relationship online, specifically the question of how much or how little you choose to share with your audience of followers. Alissa, a CU Boulder senior, described her decision to post a photo with her new boyfriend on Instagram and the symbolic social weight she felt that this carried, especially given that her ex-boyfriend followed her on Instagram:

My second boyfriend didn't even have an Instagram until recently, and I only have two posts with him. It was a bad break up and with my new boyfriend, I was really hesitant to post for multiple reasons, but then my ex got an Instagram and it had been 8 months and I hadn't done anything with my current boyfriend on social media, and so I posted and I felt the need to show my ex that I'm in a better place now, and also that I do want people to see that I'm happy and in a good place.

Alissa's story addresses several factors that young people consider when negotiating the use of Instagram in relationship with dating. Even if a user is not seeking romantic connections through the app, it often plays an important role in relationships. Alissa's "second boyfriend," or in this situation, her ex-boyfriend, did not have an Instagram while they were dating, which appeared to have limited the number of posts that she made about him. When her ex-boyfriend did make an Instagram and follow her, she carefully considered variables like relationship length with her "new" current boyfriend, the symbolic value of letting all of her followers—especially her ex—know that she had a new boyfriend and that the relationship was important enough to share on social media. However, the person who makes a post does not fully control the symbolic value and significance of these posts, as their meaning is co-constructed through the responses and reactions of followers.

The public and performative nature of social media has become an important consideration for young people's conceptions of appropriate partner dynamics in a relationship. One person's involvement—or lack thereof—with their partner on social media

can cause conflict within the relationship. Participation in social media has become almost obligatory for American college students, similar to what Crawford described as "an increasing expectation that [loved ones] should be using [social media]. If they are not paying attention, are they still a maximally effective student, worker, partner or parent?" (Crawford, 2009: 532). This expectation of "ambient intimacy," where one is always at least partially aware of and participating in the life of their partner even when geographically separated, can be experienced in both positive and negative ways (Crawford, 2009). For example, Grayson, a senior at CU Boulder who was very involved in his fraternity, has had two relatively serious relationships while in college. He described the expectations around social media as placing pressure on relationships, including his own:

In relationships there's this interesting thing where there's just like new obligations, for like both halves of the couple to be posting pictures of each other. And like, I think there are fights that come from that and that's so interesting. In my last relationship I actually, like I never posted a picture with her and she never talks about it, but I think that it upset her. And it wasn't like on purpose or anything, like I don't—it's not something I think about, I guess.

Posts on Instagram are semi-public, accessible to at least all of the users' followers (and potentially a much larger audience, depending on a user's privacy settings), and relationship posts may impact more than just the two in the relationship. How are couples' photos perceived by other users, and what are the cultural norms and expectations about when and how often one should post? While it is common for couples to post about each other on social media, the frequency with which they post can be perceived and judged by their followers and others in a variety of ways. One CU Boulder student explained that when she saw a couple create numerous posts about each other, she interpreted this as a sign of inauthenticity, and potentially a sign of weakness in the relationship:

When people post a lot specific to relationships, I think it's an indication that things aren't actually going very well. I don't think for the most part I judge peoples accounts but when I notice people's stuff on my feed.

While users have different feelings regarding the appropriate frequency of posts with their partner, or about how often a couple should post pictures of each other, there was a widely shared understanding that there was a new social pressure to post photos with the person you're dating. However, this affects different groups in different ways, and in the LGBT+ community, for example, the Instagram user may be faced with a difficult challenge between making things public and involving people in their personal lives that they would not necessarily want to involve. In these cases, the user must weigh the potential costs and benefits of sharing a personal post. Riley discussed this issue:

I've posted pictures of [my girlfriend] in a really platonic way, and I have a cute picture of my girlfriend and I, [but I haven't posted it] because a lot of my family doesn't know that I'm gay. It's saved in my drafts, and I want to post it. It's not that I'm ashamed but I don't know if them knowing will benefit either of us, and that's not a good thing, but it's just the way that our world is. Because I'm nervous of what the reaction would be, on one hand I think, "I'm gonna post what I like," fuck the system! But on the other hand, you're not free of what other people I think, and like if I go home for Thanksgiving [I have to confront this issue with family members]. It's like a Catch 22 [...].

For some, it may seem like an easily solvable problem: Keep the private parts of your life to yourself, and only let your followers know information that you would want the world to know. However, as Riley pointed out, questions of public and private are further complicated when your sexuality is non-normative or historically marginalized. For Riley, a post of her girlfriend is not only a public statement about their relationship, but is also a public statement that they are gay, which may not benefit her or her girlfriend. Riley did not like this, but as she explained, "it's just the way the world works." In spite of this, Riley explained that she might still be inclined to post on social media in spite of potential conflict, but that if she did not post, it



was not a question of deceit or shame:

If you're in a happy relationship, people like to see it, and it's something that represents you as being happy [...] I still strongly feel that it's not everyone else's business to know my intimate and romantic life, but [...] it will not affect you who I'm sleeping with, especially as far as strangers are concerned. I have other more important qualities that actually do affect me, and how others see me. I would never lie about [being gay] but I also would never bring it up randomly.

In this culture of constant sharing and constant access, those who do not publicly post about important life events, like a new relationship, may be judged negatively for not "fully participating." In this way, not only members of the LGBT+ community but all social media users confront the question of what *is* everyone else's business? What do *I* feel comfortable sharing and want other people to know about my life? This issue regarding representation of the LGBT+ community online can be foreshadowed by Turkle's statement in her 1996 research, long before the creation of Instagram, and the birth year of many of my interviewees: "Perhaps people are being even more surely excluded from participation, privilege, and responsibility in the information society than have been from dominant groups in the past" (Turkle, 1996, 244).

### *Posting Post-Heartbreak*

Dating and breaking up usually means that the two people involved now want to avoid each other, and on large college campuses like those in the Denver-Boulder metro area, it is relatively easy to do. However, when someone is connected with peers on social media, exposure to fellow students including their ex is less controllable. Instagram users are now met with the challenge of being active participants in the cultural norms and expectations of social media, while also trying to avoid particular people. Furthermore, the constant connectivity of the digital

age makes creates "new anxieties of disconnection, a kind of panic," about what might happen if one were offline (Turkle, 2017: 16). Grayson talked about the lengths that he went go to in order to avoid seeing his ex-girlfriend's posts (although quitting social media was never seriously considered):

I had a break up over winter break, and we were [hooking up] and trying to work it out like all of last semester and then she cut it off officially in June. So, I like, after the break-up I unfollowed her on absolutely everything. Now it's like, [...] I don't really worry about it so much anymore, because we talked a little bit, but now even when her friends post, I don't want to look at their stories because she might be in there. But, I feel like I have to, you know? So that's where [...] most of the stress it's brought me comes from that. From stories and posts, just like, not wanting to see it, to see the wrong thing.

This student's statement begins to illuminate the ways in which social media users have to navigate how to seek out interaction, but how to avoid it as well. Regardless of the intention behind a post or Instagram story, it may affect former romantic partners even long after break-ups. However, as Grayson mentioned, unfollowing one person in a greater social network is only a partially effective strategy.

While in the past, students may have worried about bumping into exes on their college campus or at a sporting event, now students also deal with the very real possibility of online encounters with exes. Grayson's comment, "but I feel like I have to, you know?" offers insight into the pressure to participate in social media, as well as the unspoken rules of online interaction which imply that it would be bad for him to not add his ex-girlfriend or her friends on social media. Layla, an anthropology major at CU Boulder, also discussed the meaning and power balance involved in following someone after a relationship or hookup:

There is this struggle of whether or not to unfollow a guy you hooked up with and whether it will mean more if you keep following him or if you unfollow him.

A considerable part of social media posts and responses, in the forms of likes, comments,

or messages, is in relation to the meaning attributed to these responses. By examining Layla's question of which response “means more”—regarding whether or not to keep a previous intimate partner within one’s social network via social media—we can ask what following or unfollowing an ex *really means*. Would it benefit Layla more, and create more of a lasting impact on her ex, if she were to remove him from her online accounts and unfollow him? What would this mean for their contact, would it signify that it was cut off permanently and entirely? Would Layla, or any other Instagram user, do this in hopes of demonstrating that they no longer have feelings or attraction for the other person, and is this how they feel or merely how they hope that they are perceived?

In the past, in the time of grocery store encounters and “mysterious” romance, a one-night sexual encounter (often referred to as a “one-night stand”) meant that sexually active young people had to negotiate the possibility of future encounters with this person. Now, just as ex-partners have to navigate potential online visibility and contact with one another, casual or one-time sexual partners are faced with a similar challenge. The cultural codes of conduct online, however, differ according to how people perceive the seriousness of a relationship or significance of a one-night stand. My interview subjects considered questions like: Does it show weakness to unfollow a friend after a casual sexual encounter or brief relationship? Or might it send the message (to them or to your other followers) that you were more attached to them than they were to you? Or, if you continue to follow them, does it imply that you still have feelings for them and care about their lives? These questions are complex, and present young people with the challenge of negotiating their identity in relation to possible, current, and former sexual and romantic partners at the same time, while on a public stage.

## Chapter 4: Meaning and Intention in Digital Communication: Likes, DMs and Texts

### *Introduction*

Erving Goffman's research on human interaction and normative social behavior, including his theories of "face work" and "interaction ritual" have contributed to the social scientific understanding of discursive practices. (Goffman, 1976; Goffman, 1967). Goffman's work inspired social scientists to explore "social referencing," or how infants learn normative social interaction based on observations of those around them (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2009). Linguistic anthropologists working in this tradition are concerned with understanding how people learn and decode verbal interactions, given that how we communicate and the language that we use has morphological and phonological details that communicate feelings, attitudes and preferences (Ochs and Schieffelin, 2009). However, a great deal of communication is now done screen-to-screen rather than face-to-face. In this chapter, I explore how people learn the norms and styles of appropriate speech and behavior in the virtual sphere, where many key components of face to face interaction, like body language, tone, and physical touch, are absent.

Anthropologists have explored how people interact in mediated environments in the absence of ordinary linguistic and social cues. Sherry Turkle's work on game hacking in virtual reality video games, for example, examined how players negotiated sexual encounters, including situations in which one player was able to force another avatar to have sex with his or her own avatar, or perform other virtual violent sexual acts (Turkle, 1996). Turkle's work suggests that consent is extremely relevant when it comes to sexual activity in gaming environments. In this

chapter, I explore how consent is taken into account by young people using social media, and analyze what happens when users contact one another in ways that can be seen as unwelcome, sexually aggressive, or even threatening.

Most, if not all, social media platforms have a way for two people to contact and speak or write to each other privately within the app. This has created an environment where regardless of whether you have been asked for or given other people your phone number or email address, they still have a way of contacting you directly, within the guidelines and limitations of the apps themselves. This messaging system is referred to as a ‘DM’ (direct messaging) on Instagram, and is woven into the way the college students in the Denver-Boulder metro area that I interviewed contacted, and even met one another. ‘DMing,’ occurs when one Instagram user messages another via the app, and while there are various privacy and communication settings, DMs can usually be sent to and from individuals that do not follow each other on Instagram. This means that although there is no expectation that the recipient is obligated to respond, someone with an Instagram can be contacted by nearly any other Instagram user, for better or for worse. DMing has become a place where young people negotiate the complex social, moral, and sometimes legal questions that arise from constant accessibility.

Instagram and other social media sites also allow users to react to posts with ‘likes’ and written ‘comments’ as reactions to posts, which are then available for public viewing, leaving no ambiguity as to who liked which photo or who commented on another person’s post. Goffman’s research suggests that there is a *line* in interactions, defined as, “a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself,” (Goffman, 1967: 5). Likes on Instagram can thus be understood as a non-verbal evaluation, as can the withholding of likes. However, it is unclear

whether or not these virtual marks of approval or disinterest have a face-to-face equivalent, and whether or not they can be directly translated into something like an in-person compliment or threat.

Recently, I was eating dinner with my roommate, and in between bites of over-cooked pasta, she remarked that she had received a message on Instagram, a DM from a man she had never met. We both joked about the fact that Instagram had blurred the image in the DM and warned her that it could contain potentially offensive content. It was no mystery to either of us what this content could be. We both crossed our fingers that this was not (yet another) an unwarranted photo of male genitalia. While we laughed, in hindsight, I see this story as rather disturbing, particularly how normal it had become for us to mentally prepare for unwanted graphic (and pornographic) images. If the constant connectivity is part of the appeal of social media, it is also what enables its darker side. How much contact is too much contact? What kind of contact is appropriate? And how does DMing relate to other forms of communication? Is one mode, for instance texting, perceived as more intimate than DMing? Or less so? Melanie, a sociology student at CU Boulder, Melanie, saw clear distinctions between these forms of interaction, and explained how the seriousness of a relationship affected the mode of communication:

I'd say I experience flirting on Instagram through DMing, like this one guy I'm talking to right now, I started messaging him the other night and he said that he missed me and wished I was with him, and this was over DM. [...] I think that like commenting or liking a picture is way less intimate. Then DMing and texting is the most intimate. But DMing allows for intimate conversation without needing the person's phone number.

*Whether or not to "Slide into their DMs"*

Erving Goffman defines the concept of *face* as, "the positive social value a person

effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967: 5). Thus, in face-to-face interactions, one participant reads the situation and assesses his own conversational contributions accordingly. This concept of face, and saving face so as to protect one’s own appearance to the other interaction participant(s), is relevant for understanding Instagram DMing. This can be seen in Layla’s comments about virtual communication methods:

There’s definitely a difference between social media messaging and texting, texting is way more personal. [...] Texting is more personal and vulnerable, a higher degree [of] connection. You have a direct connection to someone if you have their phone.

For Layla, it is evident that it is permissible to message someone on Instagram even if you would not feel comfortable texting them, whether that discomfort stemmed from not knowing the other person well enough, not being attracted to them, or wanting to intentionally create a barrier so the relationship would not become more intimate. Kate Crawford argues that in communication via social media, “norms vary with the type of user,” (Crawford, 2009: 529). I began to wonder if social media users might view virtual communication in a systematic or loosely normatively structured way, and whether or not they saw a difference in value when it came to texting or DMing via the Instagram app. Melanie described what she saw as the different levels of intimacy associated with texting versus receiving a direct message:

This guy was DMing, but I knew he had my number so I thought, ‘Oh this isn’t that intimate of a relationship,’ because we were just DMing, but then he texted me on my birthday and it seemed more serious. Texting shows, “Hey, I was thinking about you” instead of, “Oh, I was just on Instagram and saw you in a photo.”

Thus the decision to communicate something via DM could contribute to the recipient attaching less emotional weight and intimacy to the content of the message. However, when explicitly asked, “Have you ever been inclined to message someone on social media (DM them) due to a

photo that they posted?” a majority of my interviewees answered no. They attributed their inclination to message someone as based on a preexisting need or desire (for example, asking for homework assignments), rather than based on a new post or having seen a picture of that person. Why, then, do students perceive DM as less intimate than a text when they are recipients, even as they describe themselves as *sending* both types of messages the same intention? And, are these opinions idiosyncratic or shared more widely among Instagram users? Sophia described her attitudes towards DMing, having been on both the sending and the receiving end:

It’s usually a compliment, I’d say the sneakiest and best way is to ‘reply to a story’ I’ve had the most success with guys messaging me and usually it’s reply to story, either you look good or if it’s a place, that’s really pretty, where is that.

In this example, the word “sneaky” can be used in a similar way as coy, or subtle, such that one’s message would not be understood as a dramatic or aggressive act of coming on to another person via social media, but rather a subtle, though flirtatious remark. One could compare this to a witty comment made in class or while out with a larger group of people because the nature of Instagram stories is live and momentary, making them more participatory acts, rather than standard posts, which suggest more typical roles of subject and onlooker. Stories, in this way, foster a sense of an interactive live moment in the person’s life, rather than a post that is a moment, or series of moments, frozen in time on a profile. Many of my interview subjects agreed with Sophia, and felt that replying to an Instagram story was the most approachable way to DM someone on Instagram and was more likely to receive a desired response.



In some cases, an Instagram post could lead to texting, as was the case in one of Sophia's encounters with someone that she had already been seeing who saw her on Instagram and decided to reach out:



Sophia had already hooked up with the person that sent her the text message, which suggests that their already established intimate relationship may have been what led him to contact and compliment Sophia via text message rather than DMing her. If so, this would be another example supporting the notion expressed by a majority of the interviewees that texting symbolizes a deeper level of intimacy and connection, while DMing is for bridging the gap between being merely acquaintances and having a more personal, intimate relationship.

However, despite these normative expectations, Instagram users are often confronted with DMs that fail to comply with what the recipient sees as the proper etiquette regarding contact online. Many DMs lack greetings or introductory phases, which students interpret as an (misplaced) assumption that a relationship is already established on the grounds that they're connected via social media. Chase described his discomfort with this style of DMs:

I've DMed mutual friends or like sources, but I always introduce myself, but people don't introduce themselves. Nobody says hi this is who I am. There should be boundaries with DMing, in the digital world anybody can do anything, because I can make a fake page and harass people.

Chase brought up the potential dangers of the digital world, and spoke negatively about what he saw as the lack of boundaries when it comes to contact and communication online. These gray areas and unclear boundaries can create an environment where limits are pushed and consent is, both consciously and unknowingly, disregarded.

### *Conflict and Consent*

One issue that social media users face is deciding whether or not they feel comfortable enough to establish one-on-one contact, or whether it is permissible to contact another person solely on the basis that they follow one another on social media. Rather than having asked for someone's phone number or email, which are seen as unambiguous direct modes of contact, in this situation, prior contact consists of, at most, having asked to view another user's posted content, a step which is not necessary if an Instagram profile is public. Thus, begins the social dance of careful (or sometimes blatantly unwelcome) interaction. How does a college student know how to go about DMing, and what do people consider appropriate ways to do so? Riley described what she felt to be appropriate when DMing a girl that she might be interested in or flirting with:

I probably have messaged people first, both people that I have met in person and not. The normal way is introduce yourself or compliments, more about activities rather than physical appearance, and you know which compliments are objectifying and which are not. I would say 'you're super cute' over 'you're so fucking sexy.'

In this way, Riley feels that online interactions have many similarities to in-person contact, given that there are social rules that should be followed by participants. She said she would only flirt online with language that was similar what she would use in person, which would exclude hyper-sexual remarks that Riley views as objectifying. However, in the absence of the social cues of non-verbal communication and body language, online interactions are clearly distinct from what would be possible in an in-person conversation.

Furthermore, online interactions do not have the immediate response or reaction expected in face-to-face conversation. If someone conversationally steps outside of the norm, or says something argumentative, controversial, or offensive, there is no immediate visual or verbal response from the other conversation participant. Thus, online interactions facilitate a wide range of communication, enabling a level of vague and indirect contact, such as liking and commenting on posts, as well as hyper-personal, intimate and potentially invasive direct messages.

How, then, does one gauge what is appropriate to say to someone and what is off-limits, given that Instagram users have not been raised with examples of appropriate communication in this platform? For instance, babies learn language and interaction from their parents, and spend their childhood and adolescence practicing culturally appropriate ways to communicate with one another (and receiving conversational cues and feedback alerting them to missteps). By contrast, Instagram users have to decode the appropriate way to understand and react one another through posts that are accessible to numerous potentially unknown people, and determine what mode of communication, from a comment on a photo to a private message might be appropriate in a given context. At the same, Instagram users also interpret the particular way that the person with whom they are interacting has represented themselves through their profile and photos. Sophia

described how her perception of messages entirely depended on her feelings about the person that sent it:

I would say maybe a creepy or off-putting DM would be a really extreme compliment from someone that I'm not interested in. Getting a compliment from someone I think is attractive could lead to something.

Whether or not the encounter is romantic, one must consider what variables are being taken into account when messaging another person, and are these the most effective ways to go about assessing a virtual situation? For instance, one might find it appropriate to view someone else's posts to know what a normal or approachable topic of conversation was, thus being guided by what that user had chosen to share with their followers. While this approach might sound reasonable, even resourceful, there may be a disconnect between what one posts, and what someone feels comfortable discussing, especially with a stranger or acquaintance. Melanie uses her social media accounts as a platform for political activism and is very involved in movements for racial equality and social justice. However, Melanie described how when someone from her past sent her a DM aggressively confronting her political views, she felt he had overstepped boundaries without her consent:

This guy from high school I went on a few dates with and he thought that because I post really political things he thought he could DM really political things (for the other side) specifically things about Trump and telling me how wrong I was and finally he sent me another message and I felt that this was not consensual in a way, I didn't ask for this conversation and he got really pissed off and then he attacked me ("you're so fucking ugly, you're stupid") and how all of my activist work was pointless and I just replied 'Fuck off' and then he said, 'You're blocked' and it really upset me that he felt like he could talk to me like that.

While complimentary DMs can often lead to flirtatious conversations, potentially even a date or in-person encounter, they are not always welcomed. Carmen, an attractive 20-year-old and very prolific Instagram user, told me about how she was often contacted by men via direct

messaging, and how she took factors like previous encounters and mutual friends into account when deciding if and how to respond:

90% of the guys that DM me on Instagram are strangers [...] sometimes we have mutual friends, sometimes we don't, and if we don't have mutual friends there is less of a chance that I'd talk to them, even if I think they're really really cute, just because they're basically like complete strangers. I don't feel as bad replying to someone I don't know, especially when I don't have to face them [in person].

Carmen's explanation of how she deals with messages from strangers suggests that her online interactions are structured by obligation, but only in a very weak sense. Without the strong obligation to respond she described feeling when conversing in person, on Instagram Carmen was much less inclined to respond to someone that she had never met. Moreover, if she continued to receive messages from a stranger that she found excessive or inappropriate, she would sometimes block the person, preventing him from seeing her profile or sending her direct messages. Blocking a user may carry symbolic social and emotional weight as well, as can be seen in Kuwaiti CU Boulder student, Chance's description of what it meant to block another social media user:

You know a person wants to weed you out of their life if they block you on social media. It shows that you're not welcome in my personal sphere in real life or digital life. I think we did that before the digital age, like with phones we could block numbers, or with mail we could return to sending which was a big slap in the face.

In spite of the potential for offense that comes with blocking another user, many interviewees reported blocking users, specifically as a result of unwanted or sexually aggressive messages. This issue of contact and consent was brought up in a number of interviews, and many female users in particular described unsolicited DMs, romantic or otherwise, as unwelcome or invasive. Mia's view of DMs was typical among the female, college-aged Instagram users I interviewed:

The other thing is that people who do this [send direct messages] wouldn't go up to you in person. [There is] an assumption about the accessibility of women which, is amplified surrounding these warped ideas surrounding what is considered okay online, like contacting someone, [and] how and what you say. There were multiple guys from Tinder who followed me then on Instagram, and Facebook. That is not okay, it is a breach of privacy.

For Mia questions of privacy and consent came up even in the absence of direct messaging or personal contact. While she found it appropriate for men to contact her within a digital context clearly aimed at meeting new people, like a dating app, she did not see exchanges on dating apps as constituting permission for men to enter her social network by, for example, following her on Instagram. It is clear that distinctions between modes of communication including dating apps, DMs, and texting, can be quite ambiguous, and there is no obvious answer to the question of what constitutes appropriate contact. For some Instagram users, like Carmen, it was not bothersome or invasive to be followed by someone that she did not know, although she might not reply to their messages. Mia, on the other hand, was entirely uncomfortable with the idea of a stranger being a part of her social network, and would not allow a stranger to follow her account, let alone contact her via direct messaging.

Aside from the question of messages from strangers, Instagram and social media also allow unwanted contact from people who are not completely unknown to the user, or who may even be part of their peer group. Social media offers an avenue for obsessive feelings to be expressed, including after the recipients of these messages made it clear that the attention was undesired. Alissa described how Instagram direct messaging facilitated unwanted contact, in this case, from someone who she had already blocked on Facebook as a result her discomfort with his messages and behavior:

Freshman year of HS it was in gym class and there was this kid, [and we] never spoke in person. Online I got a request from this guy and I didn't recognize the profile pic but we had mutual friends and it said he went to my school. But then I saw him post a few hours ago that 'his crush had accepted his friend request' and it turned out to be me, but he only initiated conversation online. Senior year he got all bent out of shape because I had a boyfriend and then he started posting things about my boyfriend cheating on me, etcetera, all online. My friend tried to report the behavior, but I ended up having to block him, but then he followed me on Instagram later and DMed me.

The problem of unwanted and nonconsensual contact from people with a vague or distant personal connection to the user was a problem frequently encountered by young women receiving unwanted messages from men, but the phenomenon is not only gendered in this particular way. For example, Chase had also experienced receiving unwanted images via Instagram direct messaging, in this case from a female classmate:

I've had weirdos slide into my DMs, and I've never met any of them in real life. The only time I met someone in real life was my math partner, she sent me nude pictures via Facebook, and I deleted them. The next day she apologized and I told her I deleted them, but then I couldn't wait for the class to end so I could block her and not deal with her in my life. She's not a slut in my mind, it was an honest mistake, but just a hard mistake. It repelled me not because she's not attractive but because it was her naked body and I didn't ask her for them, but it was very awkward.

While Alissa and Chase's experiences were unique to them, many interview subjects spoke to related themes of mediated interactions where consent was breached and norms for polite or appropriate conduct were ignored. Some users take additional steps to avoid unwanted messages. For example, Annabelle, a senior at CU Boulder, described avoiding contact with social media users whom she did not know in real life:

I don't think I've ever DMed anyone that I don't know in person, but I don't think I've ever like seen someone somewhere and then found their social media and sent them a message because that to me seems very invasive, to me it's like then that person knows I've taken the time to find their social media and especially if it's not a public account, you have to request to follow them, it's just a lot of steps for someone you don't actually know.

Yet, even in situations where interview subjects saw DMing as inappropriate, a “like” or a “comment” might be socially permissible, resonant with Goffman's description of the "small choice of lines" that constitute appropriate and face-maintaining action (Goffman, 1967: 7). Instead of a personal and explicit message, an Instagram user can use the more neutral "like" to express interest in or support for a friend, romantic partner, or supermodel that they've never met.

In this chapter I have argued that “likes” and “DMs” are distinct modes of communication, where each mode is considered appropriate only for certain uses. However, the lack of clear boundaries regarding interaction and communication makes for a confusing and potentially dangerous cyber-territory. Consent is often not communicated, and it is either implied, or disregarded, given the opportunity that Instagram users have to disregard the informal or at least virtual nature of social media as an excuse to undermine social norms regarding appropriate contact. Communication often relies on how one user has perceived the other, based on their bio, posts and captions. While at times this is an effective method for understanding how to approach said Instagram user, posts are not always indicative of desired contact; i.e. if a girl posts semi-revealing photos, this does not necessarily indicate that she would like sexual DMs or text messages as a response to this post. Clearly there is still work to be done in understanding the nuances of cyber-communication, and the potential implications of communicative misfires.



## Final Thoughts and Further Research

Anthropologists and ethnographers have long been interested in digital studies and understanding the emerging social circumstances and communities that are results of technological advances. Existing research has taken a linguistic approach at understanding the discourse of teenagers via Facebook Instant Messaging (Crawford, 2009; Jones et al., 2011). Scholars have also analyzed the ways in which bodies and identities are treated as commodities and how social media and the internet contribute to this transactional system (Constable, 2009; Zelizer, 2009). Additionally, anthropologists have looked at video games and virtual reality platforms in order to further understand mediated representations of the self as they are played out in these virtual realms, and the relationship that users hold with their identities across real and virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Nardi, 2015).

In my thesis, I have synthesized the work of cognitive psychologists, sociologists, and economic, linguistic and digital anthropologists in order to further my understanding of how and why college students in the Denver-Boulder metro area use the social media platform of Instagram. I have not only argued that broadly, the unique Instagram platform has real-world implications for its college-aged users, but that there is no dichotomy, as mentioned by other scholars, between the 'real' self and the virtual self. Rather, attitudes towards realness are more of a defense mechanism against the inherent vulnerability involved when using such a performative and public social media platform. Finally, I have argued that the vague and ambiguous nature of contact via Instagram may make the user feel as if they maintain constant control over the situation and themselves, when really it makes the user more uncertain and anxious when it comes to face-to-face contact and intimacy.

While I was able to analyze Instagram use by college students in the Denver-Boulder metro area in a unique and effective way, there are still many questions to consider further. Twenty participants offered me a lot of insight, some of which I was not able to address in this thesis, like the concept of FOMO (fear of missing out) which was discussed by many of my interviewees, however a larger sample-size would be ideal. In the future, I would like to look at greater populations, for example college students around the country or even internationally or broaden my research so that I could draw stronger comparisons between various social media platforms. Finally, there is more work to be done regarding the construction of value and taking a closer and more critical look at how value is expressed, and to whom value is attributed. Contemporary college students are paradigm examples of involvement in the social platform of Instagram, and there is extensive research to be done regarding their self-presentation and self-worth in this increasingly digital world.

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