



**University of
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**“Wait, BeReal!” : Performance and ‘being real’ on BeReal – a digital
autoethnography of selfies and self-representation on BeReal**

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Abstract

This study comprises of a digital autoethnography to gain a deeper understanding of my use of selfies and, subsequently, self-representation on BeReal. Goffman's (1959) theory of the presentation of self lays the foundations of this discussion and is corroborated by Ditchfield's (2020) concepts of the rehearsal stage of interaction. This study was carried out within a 14 consecutive day period. This consisted of me logging and documenting my use of BeReal every day, noting down whether I posted on time, my selfie practices and any other thoughts I had when posting.

The use of BeReal enables both the curation of an ideal self and the depiction of my 'real' life. My self-presentation can range from a curated photo that depicts a fun and activity-filled life (an idealised version that requires facework and appearance manipulation) to a mundane photo of my everyday life that does not aim to manipulate perception.

In many cases, there is a consideration of my imagined audience and how they perceive me; however, its influence over my presentation of self varies. This may be due to the core focus of BeReal – to share an authentic photo; thus, manipulating my self-presentation to convey a more exciting persona online would defeat its point. However, one should not ignore my unconscious drive to depict an ideal self; whilst I may not frequently engage with impression management and facework in an active form on BeReal, there is still an unconscious need to look nice due to my imagined audience.

To conclude, my self-presentation on BeReal aims to depict what is happening in my life; it blurs the boundaries of my public and private life by sharing photos of my public life and what is typically my private sphere. At times I may actively engage in impression management to manipulate my perception; however, I also share the mundane and ordinary aspects of my life.

Introduction

Today people have digital options to construct their self-presentation. There are multiple digital platforms that enable one to construct their identity online; however, this report will focus on BeReal. The app BeReal is a social media platform that prompts users to take one unedited photo a day at a random time; it captures a photo from the front and back camera, better known as a 'BeReal' (Hampson, 2022). By logging my digital practices of BeReal, this report aims to create a digital autoethnography to gain a deeper understanding of my use of selfies and, subsequently, self-representation on BeReal.

This report will draw on several scholars; however, Goffman's (1959) theory of the presentation of self lays the foundations of this discussion. To put it simply, Goffman's concept of self-presentation is akin to performance; the self emerges from social interaction where the social actor (knowingly or unknowingly) engages in impression management in order to convey the 'ideal self' (Goffman, 1959; Jacobsen and Smith, 2022). These performances occur within teams in three stages, the front stage or everyday life, where the self is performed, and the back stage or the 'real self', which typically occurs in a more private setting (Goffman, 1959; 1967). Ditchfield (2020) then extends upon his concept of stages and coins the rehearsal stage of interaction. She notes upon pre-post editing on Facebook and draws parallels to Goffman's work, where the pre-post stage is akin to a rehearsal stage where social actors may rehearse or practice their presentation of self. Thus performances occur within three stages, the front stage, the back stage, and the rehearsal stage.

Applying this to digital technologies and BeReal, we can argue that the 'drafting' or posing and retaking of photos is the rehearsal stage where "users draft, prepare and practice their performances before sharing them" (Ditchfield, 2020, p. 930). The development of digital technologies bring forward new affordances, which dana boyd (2014, p. 10) defines as:

"The particular properties or characteristics of an environment ... they make possible—and, in some cases, are used to encourage—certain types of practices..."

Highlighting the affordance of appearance manipulation: editing photos, creating a fake or manipulated persona — i.e. altering one's presentation (Shulman, 2022), we draw parallels to BeReal and assess to what extent does BeReal promote true self-presentation or does one

participate in facework — the act of masking or changing verbal and non-verbal gestures in any given situation (Goffman, 1955)? Do digital technologies such as BeReal enable the re-embodiment of social actors through avatars, photos and videos, as Belk (2013) argues? Or is BeReal promoting the true self? This report will delve further into my self-presentation on BeReal and assess the extent to which I engage with the affordance of appearance manipulation and curate my own persona on BeReal rather than presenting my true self.

Defining selfie

Before proceeding, it may be necessary to define what a selfie is. In short, a selfie is a photographic object and can be a visual identifier of the self (Cruz and Thornham, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015). It can also be a gesture circulated around digital spaces; however, selfies are a way for social actors to represent and share their behaviours (Senft and Baym, 2015). They are a new genre of identity performance (Deeb-Swihart *et al.*, 2017).

As noted before, BeReal is a social media app that notifies users to take one unedited picture a day at a random time, also known as a BeReal. BeReals are arguably an alternative form of selfie where it is a visual identifier of the self; however, it also captures space. Capturing the physical space adds an additional component where representation can transpire (Hess, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015).

Methodology

Digital autoethnography focuses on human experiences in cyberspaces; it is distinguishable from traditional autoethnography as it aims to explore and explain our personal identities and experiences within digital cultures (Atay, 2020; Dunn and Myers, 2020). As such, it considers the influences of digital spaces and the lived experiences and interactions in such spaces; thus, this report aims to explore and understand my digital identity on the app BeReal.

The research took place over a two-week (14 consecutive days) period. This consisted of me logging and documenting my use of BeReal every day, noting down whether I posted on time, my selfie practices and any other thoughts I had when posting. Due to the sporadic nature of

BeReal, I opted to use Google Keep to document my thoughts and actions, as it enabled me to note down key information quickly after the BeReal was taken. Data analysis took the form of thematic analysis; this included creating codes and identifying subsequent patterns or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The subsequent analysis was informed by Goffman's theory of self-presentation, drawing on the concept of the front stage, back stage and rehearsal stage.

A slight disclaimer is needed; this report will contain screenshots of my personal BeReals – all other individuals in the selfies have been covered, so they cannot be identified.

Discussion

The following section will discuss my self-presentation and use of selfies on BeReal. It will be divided into three sections; the first section will discuss the evident rehearsal or appearance manipulation of my BeReals. The following section will then discuss the posting of 'real' or true-to-self BeReals that reveal what Goffman (1959) terms the back stage. The final section will then highlight how BeReal may enable the blurring of boundaries between my front and back stage.

Appearance manipulation

To begin with, we delve into my purposeful appearance manipulation on BeReal. In some cases ($n = 5$), it was evident that the BeReal was staged, drafted, rehearsed or manipulated in some way before it was posted and shared. This rehearsal or pre-post stage, as Ditchfield (2020) defines it, consisted of gathering other individuals together, readjusting personal appearances, retaking the photo or delaying the BeReal to post at a different time. In a sense, partaking in this affordance was an act of vanity or an egotistical boost to my self-esteem, as Buffardi and Campbell (2008) notes. However, it was also an expression of myself, an act of fun, and a way of sharing it (Shah and Tewari, 2016).

To delve further into this affordance, we first discuss the act of gathering individuals together and posing or readjusting personal appearances. We first would alert each other when the

BeReal notification appeared; doing so prompted us to stop, gather, and prepare to take the photo. When reflecting on my practices, I noticed that readjusting my appearance to make myself more presentable was intrinsic.

“We shouted ‘BeReal!’ and grouped together to take the BeReal ... When taking the BeReal, I had the instinctive thought to quickly readjust my hair and smile.”

This was common amongst many of the other individuals present in my BeReals; thus, the drafting and preparing of presentation or pre-post stage, as Ditchfield (2020) terms, was vital to our presentation of self in BeReals.



Figure 1 A stylised group BeReal

Figure 1 is an example of the presentation of self in the front stage being performed and rehearsed. Gathering people together and posing for the photo depicts a more stylised and ‘fun-filled’ perception of my everyday life that appeals to my friends (Stokes and Price, 2017). Subsequently, it creates a stylised photo or staged performance conforming to the non-authentic nature of selfies (Hess, 2015). However, whilst it may not be authentic, it conveys a snapshot of what is currently happening and depicts my life (Shah and Tewari, 2016). Thus, overstating the non-authentic nature of selfies may not be appropriate.

Expanding on this, we discuss the notion of retaking of BeReals and delaying BeReals until a specific time or event. When reflecting on my practices, the aim of this was to curate an ideal perception of myself, ultimately managing my online identity for my imagined audience (Schlenker, 1985; Hollenbaugh, 2020). The notion of the imagined audience – those who may observe my self-presentation – is key to self-presentation online (Schlenker, 1985). My imagined audience is my friends and close connections; therefore, my performance is influenced by my desired perception to them. This led to the retaking of photos or delaying it if there were a more eventful time (see *figure 2*):

“I hated the angle, I looked weird so we retook the photo again”

“I saw the notification, but didn’t take the photo. I knew I was going to do something later in the evening and wanted to share that.”



Figure 2 A staged BeReal at an event

Whilst posing, retaking the photo, or delaying taking the BeReals may be a more subtle form of appearance manipulation, unlike editing photos or creating alternative identities online, it still conforms to the key notions of the affordance: changing or manipulating personas (Shulman, 2022). Nonetheless, my purposeful actions to manipulate my appearance is

evident of Goffman's front stage to convey my ideal self to my imagined audience. Consequently, my digital identity and self-presentation online can be argued to be managed, partaking in facework and affordance manipulation in order to convey my ideal self to my imagined audience.

Being 'real'

On the contrary, there were a number of times ($n = 4$) where one could argue that there was no performance or manipulation of appearance. Common themes amongst these days consisted of 'not caring', quickly taking the BeReal and just taking the BeReal once.



Figure 3 Un-rehearsed BeReals

During these occasions, there was little consideration of how I looked or what I was portraying (see *Figure 3*). Moreover, it is key to note that a majority of these were taken alone and in a more private setting; thus, one may argue that it could be a depiction of my back stage or a more private moment. Interestingly, during these times, there also was no active consideration of my imagined audience or their perception of myself; rather, I saw taking the BeReal as a chore:

"I heard the notification, pulled out my phone, took the picture and put it back down."

This reluctant interest plays a role in how I present myself. The lack of concern or interest, particularly in my imagined audience, in combination with being in a private space, may explain the lack of performance or staging of my BeReals. Subsequently, it reduces the need to partake in facework, thus depicting my 'real' self free from performance (Goffman, 1955). Nonetheless, the action of taking and posting the BeReal still depicts my personal life online. It shares a more private moment, typically not seen, with an online audience; as a result, it presents a more open attitude regarding sharing my personal life rather than a narcissistic tendency (McKinney, Kelly and Duran, 2012; Shah and Tewari, 2016). Arguably contributing towards blurring the public and private dichotomy of my life, where the use of BeReal shares aspects of my private life with a public audience (Walsh and Baker, 2017).

Consequently, when retrospectively analysing my digital identity and self-presentation online, we can argue that BeReal facilitates the openness of what typically is a private space. It enables me to share my 'real' self online as opposed to my ideal self, where it requires little or no facework and appearance manipulation to convey my identity.

A midpoint?

Whilst the front and back stage may be apparent, BeReal arguably blurs the boundaries of both. This blurring of boundaries, or proposed 'midpoint', was seen in five of the recorded days; what was common between all of the BeReals was that the background or environment was not manipulated, and there was only a slight change in facial expression (*see Figure 4*). To distinguish this from the front stage, it is important to emphasise the unedited nature of the environment. No change or staging was made to capture the background; however, minimal changes in my expression can be seen – i.e. smiling. This differs from the front stage, where the ideal environment is curated, for example, by gathering individuals together or by manipulating my appearance.

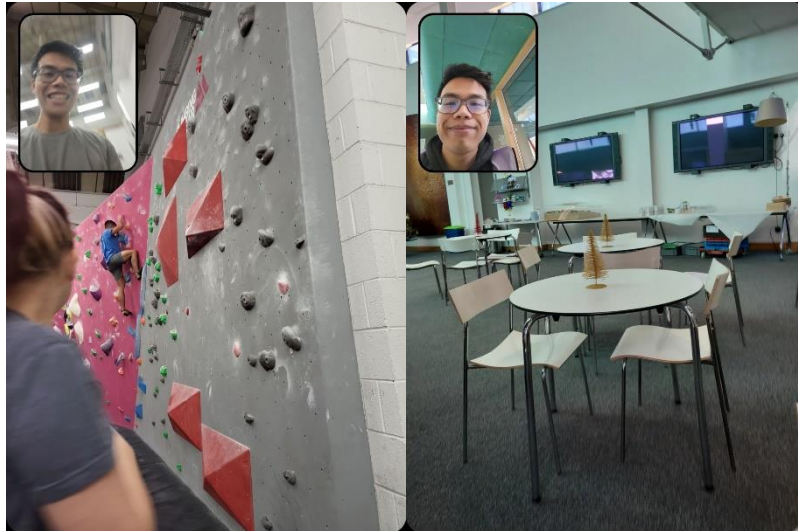


Figure 4 A set of BeReals

For example, in *Figure 4 and Figure 5*, the front-facing camera depicts a selfie of me smiling, a slight change in my expression; however, little is done to create an idealised look. In contrast, the back camera is unedited and captures a moment in time rather than creating a curated or posed photo for the camera.

“I smiled for the BeReal, took the pic and placed it back down ...”



Figure 5 A BeReal in a public space (individuals were not looking at the camera)

Though there are still essences of performance, we can argue that self-presentation online is not as clear-cut as front and back stage; BeReal facilitates the portrayal of both simultaneously. It can enable one to participate in facework and impression management to create the idealised self whilst still being “a means to convey to others about what is happening in one’s life” (Shah and Tewari, 2016, p. 870).

“I smiled, but I didn’t try and take the perfect pic. I didn’t mind if it didn’t really show anything interesting.”

This midpoint places less emphasis on creating the ideal self; however, there is a consideration of the imagined audience. Therefore, one may be able to argue that my online identity and self-presentation on BeReal is a depiction of both an idealised self and my ‘real’ self. It aims to depict what is happening with little or no manipulation, but there is consideration of how my imagined audience perceives me.

Conclusion

In summary, my online identity is complicated. The use of BeReal enables both the curation of an ideal self and the depiction of my ‘real’ life. My self-presentation can range from a curated photo that depicts a fun and activity-filled life (an idealised version that requires facework and appearance manipulation) to a mundane photo of my everyday life that does not aim to manipulate perception.

In many cases, there is a consideration of my imagined audience and how they perceive me; however, its influence over my presentation of self varies. This may be due to the core focus of BeReal – to share an authentic photo; thus, manipulating my self-presentation to convey a more exciting persona online would defeat its point. However, one should not ignore my unconscious drive to depict an ideal self; whilst I may not frequently engage with impression management and facework in an active form on BeReal, there is still an unconscious need to look nice due to my imagined audience.

To conclude, my self-presentation on BeReal aims to depict what is happening in my life; it blurs the boundaries of my public and private life by sharing photos of my public life and what is typically my private sphere. At times I may actively engage in impression management to manipulate my perception; however, I also share the mundane and ordinary aspects of my life.

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This project was awarded a 77 - Class 1 standard

Declaration

I, the author, confirm that the project is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.