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Like Me: Generation Z, Instagram, and Self-Branding Practices

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I. History and Context

Can the performance of selfhood ever truly be authentic? The genre of autobiography is inherently more illusory than real because it relies on dominant modes of self-construction. Figuring out how to present or define your identity has always been a complex process, but when the digital age asks us to participate in self-defining practices on and offline, it appears to have become even more complicated. According to a 2010 study conducted by AVG Technologies, 92 percent of American children have an online presence before the age of two (AVG Technologies, 2010). Another 2015 poll performed by the U.K.-based safety site, Parent Zone, found that parents post nearly 1,000 images of their children online before their fifth birthday (Nominet, 2015). As the Internet becomes an increasingly visual medium, more and more individuals are using images rather than written self-descriptions to express their identities. Members of Generation Z, those born in the new millennium, are growing up in a highly image-saturated society in which the documentation of their life experiences has become almost paramount to one's personal and professional success.

A 2016 Pew Research study found that 54% of all internet users and 81% of users ages 18-29 reported posting original photos or videos online (Greenwood et. al, 2016). Photo-sharing platforms like Snapchat and Instagram have become increasingly popular especially among young people. Instagram, which exceeded 800 million users this year, is used by 76% of teens ages 13-17 (AP-NORC at the University of Chicago, 2016). Unlike Facebook which has a fairly rigid profile structure, the image-based

platform offers users a more open-ended forum to present themselves. Users are encouraged to participate in both the sharing and ranking of photos. Practices which are not dissimilar from those used to build and evaluate brand value. Thousands of “How to Build Your Personal Brand” literature has been written in the attempt to aid individuals in standing out and potentially profiting from their social media presence. Likes and the promise of visibility for “just being yourself” represent a certain kind of personal and quantifiable achievement.

While Instagram promotes the illusion of being an open cultural script, a place to express your most authentic self, it's evaluative and commodifiable nature reinforces strict cultural norms. Data points such as “Likes” and “Followers”, which validate the user's online self, determine what is worthy to be photographed, shared, and endorsed. The self becomes a commodity that is available for public consumption and valuation. To earn social capital or “Likes” on this platform, one must largely abide by perceived cultural standards, perpetuating practices of self-management, self-control, and conformity. The newest generation, raised and immersed in this hyper-consumer culture, has learned to define the self within a neoliberal and capitalist framework in which self-branding and ascribing to hegemonic principles appears imperative to one's personal success.

Consumer societies emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century amidst the rise of mass production and urbanization. Urbanization caused fundamental changes in the experience of community and family, which previously had been foundational in how individuals derived identity. Amongst the growing and diverse urban population,

individuals anxiously searched for new ways to understand the self. With an enormous array of products suddenly available, purchasing decisions became a way to distinguish identity (Cartwright and Sturken, 2001). This concept is what media scholar, Stuart Ewen, defines as the *commodity self*, the idea that our selves are mediated and constructed in part through our consumption and use of commodities (Cartwright and Sturken, 2001). Advancements in branding practices, such as printing and design techniques, further fostered the cultural value of commodities. In the increasingly competitive commercial landscape, brands sought to form long-lasting relationships with consumers by attaching social or cultural meaning to their products as a means to personally resonate with an individual consumer. Brands were marketed as a lifestyle choice; a collection of morals, feelings, and values that a consumer could identify with.

Branding remains incredibly significant in the 21st century. We interact with brands extensively on a daily basis, from the logos we wear, the cars we drive, and even the food we eat. In fact, media scholar, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that as branding has become a more normative practice, the relationship between culture and economic logic has become “increasingly entangled” (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The branding practices employed by consumer brands have trickled down and are being used on the individual level (Marwick, 2015). People have begun to use the logic, strategies, and language of brands as a way of expressing their very identities.

Co-authors of “Be Your Own Brand,” McNally and Speak, define personal brand as “a perception or emotion, maintained by somebody other than you, that describes the total experience of having a relationship with you” (McNally et al., 2003). Personal

branding has become especially popular on Instagram, where individuals are encouraged to both consume and produce unique biographical narratives through images. Just as brands rely on imagery and symbols to communicate an identity to be viewed for purchase so does the Instagram user. Photographs are especially good for impression management because they connote photographic truth while also possessing an aura of fantasy (Marwick, 2015). Traditional advertisements use photographs for this very reason; they suggest authenticity while remaining aspirational. Successful ads promote a story that one can believe in and desire to be a part of. While the truth is not fully divulged, just enough indexical information is provided to engage the viewer. Instagram captions also provide the viewer with additional context. Similar to ad copy, captions guide the viewer on how to read the meaning of the image or, even sometimes, give the image new meaning.

On Instagram, authenticity is often thought to be achieved through appearing transparent with viewers; giving others access to one's inner self and offering a glimpse into one's everyday life (Ibrahim, 2015). The banal everyday is photographed and aestheticized with the expectation that others will consume these lived experiences and validate them (Ibrahim, 2015). Simultaneously stating, "this is who I am," and asking "do you like me?"

Instagram "Likes" represent social capital in the attention economy, the marketing perspective which assigns value to something's capacity to attract views (Fairchild, 2007). Those who are successful at gaining attention often are those who emulate celebrity culture, reproducing conventional status hierarchies of luxury,

celebrity, and popularity (Marwick, 2015). Instagram's platform is unique because it is occupied by brands, celebrities, and regular people alike. This environment has made it possible for people to gain access to mass audiences that have historically been limited to broadcast media. Additionally, individuals have access to tools, like hashtags, which make it easier for their posts to be "discovered." While fame is undoubtedly easier to obtain, the platform falls victim to similar trappings of traditional fame. Marwick points out in her piece, *Instafame*, that the Instafamous tend to be "conventionally good-looking" or "work in "cool" industries" (Marwick, 2015). These individuals tend to post images emphasizing their wealth, such as photos of lavish vacations, glamorous self-portraits, and designer goods. By receiving extensive likes, this kind of iconography is further culturally validated as worthy of attention and admiration.

Self-branding practices have become mechanisms of self-advancement in our contemporary culture. Foucault speaks of the "technology of the self": sets of practices, or methods, that "permit individuals to affect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, and conduct, and the way of being, so as to transform themselves to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality." In today's modern brand culture, these "operations" involve the self-branding practices used to explain the self within a neoliberal capitalist society. The self becomes an entity that can be molded, socially trained, and managed in order to obtain success within its cultural context (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

The pressure to participate in these capitalist activities is especially significant for women. Postfeminist theorists, like Angela McRobbie, argue that as women have gained purchasing power, consumerism has become an expected part of the feminine identity (McRobbie, 2009). Sarah Banet-Weiser describes the Postfeminist woman as an “individual entrepreneur,” whose “individual success and personal consumption habits are the expected behaviors of the ideal feminine subject” (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This has contradictory implications for women. While women are more economically able than they have been historically, their freedom is limited by the pressure to present themselves as adequately feminine and objectified. As Rosalind Gill elaborates, “The body is presented simultaneously as the women’s source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness” (Gill, 2007). Expected to be ambitious and productive, the postfeminist woman feels a sense of duty to define herself within the neoliberal framework provided. Women are encouraged to build their personal narratives around their feminized consumer habits. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that for the Postfeminist woman, self-branding may not only seem “logical” but actually “necessary” (Banet-Weiser, 2012). With an overwhelming pressure to define oneself online, women may feel especially obligated to contribute to the practice. Instagram’s evaluative nature intensifies women’s monitored behavior. With visible quantifiable data, women are evaluated on their ability to successfully abide by the cultural norms constructed for them.

II. Production and Reflection

Through my senior thesis project, I set out to investigate how these expectations affect American adolescent girls and the shaping of their identities. My interest in this topic stemmed from conversations I have had with my thirteen-year-old sister. As a millennial, I am aware that I check my phone far too often and care too deeply about my own social media presence, but my sister seemed to have an even deeper connection to her social media profile. Listening to her and her friends talk about what so-and-so posted and how so-and-so had such a “good Instagram feed,” there appeared to be very little delineation between reality and life online. One’s Instagram profile seemed to be an important defining characteristic of a person as a whole. Traveling home for a weekend, I interviewed and filmed six thirteen-year-old girls, including my younger sister. I prepared extensive interview questions, touching on topics such as self-portrayal online, motivations behind social media use, photo inspiration, likes and followers, and etiquette and language on Instagram. The girls were eager to share their thoughts and answered questions for nearly an hour. Nearing the end of our interview, there was a knock at my family’s door- a group of boys from the neighborhood. The girls were gone within minutes, chasing the boys around the block. This made filming for the rest of the evening difficult, but reminded me of being thirteen years old myself; a distractible age and a time for self-discovery and exploration.

When the girls returned home later that evening, I filmed them texting, posting photos they had taken that evening, and showing me their go-to selfie poses. While I felt that I had made the best out of the limited time I had to film, when I returned to campus, I was disappointed with my footage. The content was great. The girls had provided honest and very illuminating insight, however, most of my footage consisted of talking head shots. The most straight-forward solution was to incorporate the Instagram platform itself, including demonstrations of the girls' actual social media activity. However, I decided not to include these images, except for several videos and photos the girls shared with me directly, because the girls are minors. Instead, I resolved to take a more abstract, expressionistic approach to presenting the media. I did this by combining the interview audio I had recorded, my B-roll footage, text, and mixed footage of screens and iconography unique to the Instagram platform.

The girls I interviewed admitted to constantly worrying about how others perceive them online; nervously anticipating the number of likes, comments, and potential backlash they may receive on a photo. Instagram plays an integral part of their daily lives. Regarding her own social media usage, one girl stated, "I'm just used to like going on my phone and straight to Instagram after school, in the morning, at night- usually whenever I'm on my phone, I just kind of have a schedule and *Instagram is always there.*" To illustrate the ever-present nature of Instagram in the girls' lives, I utilized visual overlays and Instagram iconography in my video piece. On top of footage from my interviews, I layered images from famous Instagram accounts as well as instructional content revolving around achieving Instagram success. This content

includes Pinterest boards promoting Instagram inspiration, poses, and caption ideas, as well as instructional Youtube tutorials, such as how to achieve the perfect “Instagram Makeup Look.” The multiple screen overlays are meant to portray the overwhelming and looming presence of the social media platform in the girls’ lives and the constant pressure that is felt to contribute and conform to its rigid standards.

While organizing a cohesive narrative, I grouped the raw footage into categories that seemed important to the story the girls had told me. Categories such as portraying the online self, what makes a photo Instagrammable, rules and expectations online, beauty standards, the gendered differences between girls and boys on Instagram, and imitating celebrity culture. Then I transcribed all the interview material. On paper, I was able to recognize many patterns in the girls’ language that I had previously missed. Many of the girls’ preoccupation with social media unsurprisingly revolved around judgment from others. I counted over twenty instances in which the girls mentioned caring about what others thought about their social media presence. “I want people to think...,” “People are going to be like...,” “I don’t want people saying like...,” and so on. The girls discussed certain rules they felt obligated to subscribe to in order to be liked on social media. “You can’t be too slutty, but you can’t be too unrevealing,” “If you’re wearing too much makeup people will be like, “why is she wearing so much makeup?” But if you’re not wearing enough or you’re not wearing any people will judge you then too and you’re like, “what do I do?”” Many of the rules the girls described were related to beauty and effort. They mentioned that it was important to them to look pretty on their Instagrams, but they didn’t want others to accuse them of

trying too hard. One girl said, "I want to portray myself as obviously pretty, like everyone doesn't want to look bad on Instagram, but I don't want to seem obsessed with Instagram." Your photos can't appear overly edited, you can't have too many photos of yourself, but you also have to have enough or no one will "know who you are," and "people are going to be like, "why isn't she expressing herself?" The beauty myth is a tale as old as time, but in today's image-centric and evaluative digital age, the pressure to adhere to unrealistic social and beauty standards is only heightened for women. As the girls spoke, it became apparent to me that these perceived rules play a large role in their day-to-day lives and decisions.

I wanted to emphasize the language the girls used to describe these concerns. I was inspired by a video that my thesis advisor, Professor Tran, shared with me called, "Music For Sleeping Children-Sabrina." The public artwork, produced by Charlie White, is part of a larger series for Boom Bip's "Music For Sleeping Children." The series transforms interviews with teen girls into narrative dance tracks, each track "capturing a different aspect of adolescent identity." In White's piece a teenage girl's voice can be heard describing the high expectations she places on herself and the fear she has that one mistake will ruin her whole life plan. Her words, in sync with the beat, flash in bold text against a simple pink background. Each word is delivered with emphasis and intention, amplifying her message. I used this text-based delivery as inspiration for my own piece. Unlike White's piece, which exclusively uses text and audio to deliver its narrative, my piece uses text only to emphasize the instances in which the girls mention their fear of judgment. The text emphasizes the similar

language and shared concerns the girls vocalize, "I want people to think...", "People are going to be like...", "I don't want people saying like..."

In addition to the overwhelming pressure to appear effortlessly beautiful on social media, the girls want to have unique profiles. "We don't want to be the people who follow other pictures. We want to be the people other people want to follow." The girls discuss the importance of having their "own style on Instagram," having "good captions," and a "Instagram good feed." Many of the girls expressed a desire to produce original and creative or "artsy" content. They don't want others to accuse them of "stealing" or "copying" photos or captions. However, at the same time, many of the girls admit that oftentimes they find inspiration from celebrities' photos and even search for caption ideas on the Internet.

Like Marwick highlights in her piece, *Instafame*, the emulation of celebrity culture and luxury is extremely popular and well-received on social media. The girls confess that on Instagram they "want to look rich," and if "you're not spoiled, you want to look spoiled." For a group of thirteen-year-old girls in Westport Connecticut this means posting pictures in nice clothes similar to outfits worn by "people they are inspired by on Instagram," taking pictures in the city, glamorous selfies, and a stream of vacation photos. One girl describes a pose that she tells me was very popular among her peers this summer. She kneels and sits on her calves, her feet are beneath her bottom. I recognize this pose as one made popular by the Kardashians, one that emphasizes the backside. She continues, "The Kardashians have a big impact, like they go on vacation all the time, they post pictures in the water, and people are like, "Oh! I

want to post something like Kim! So, everyone tries to get a cute vacation picture.”

The girls go on to tell me a story about how a local teenager planted a palm tree on the beach and now it has become a popular place to take photos. Next to the tropical, non-native plant, people have the opportunity to appear as if they are on an endless tropical vacation.

One girl in the group tells me that her “goal in life is to become a famous Instagrammer.” She goes on to show me several Pinterest boards she has put together, curating inspiration for her own Instagram. The boards are filled with pictures of bikini-clad Instagram models on tropical vacations, pictures of perfect heterosexual couples, and glamorous sun-kissed selfies. She tells me that her goal stems from her love “to take pictures” and her desire to “be able to go to new places.” She wants to show other people, “you can do this too. If you want to take pictures in cool places- just follow my lead.” She is very serious about her endeavor, having researched brands that could sponsor her, products she can pose with, and how she can make a lucrative career out of her own personal profile.

The girls I interviewed appear to be masters of social media. They know what pictures will get them the most likes, how to successfully gain followers, and are aware of all the things they should and should not do in order to be liked on Instagram. However, they aren’t sure why or who makes the rules they follow. When asked about a rule regarding not posting more than once a day, one girl reflects, “I don’t even know why it’s a rule. It actually seems so stupid. They’d be like “well, why did she do that?” They’ll just say “why”, but they don’t know “why” they’re just saying that because

other people say it. Why do we care though? Why do we have to judge her for that? She's just posting." Instagram's evaluative nature inherently invites public scrutiny. And for adolescent girls, who already face great pressure to abide by societal norms, social media, especially Instagram, heightens self-monitoring behavior and reinforces pressure to conform to hegemonic power structures. Additionally, success on the platform offers a promise of personal achievement, the possibility of fame, and even lucrative opportunities to profit off one's public image.

This being true, it is not surprising that many members of Generation Z appear to be fully immersed in and affected by Instagram's culture. Initially, I was intrigued by the obsessive relationship I observed. My sister's pre-planned and highly curated Instagram profile seemed extreme to me. I found it all slightly unnerving: the integral role the online platform played in her life, the way it manifested itself in her language, and the lack of delineation she seemed to perceive between reality and the virtual. However, I remember being a thirteen year old girl; vulnerable to pressure, self-conscious, and wanting above all else to be *liked*. Wanting others to think I was "so pretty," and guys to think I was "hot," "but not slutty." One girl says, "Everyone wants to be loved and have people respect them." And isn't that that the truth?

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