Hello Stranger, Welcome to My "Life":
Millennials and their Obsession with Identity-Creation on Instagram

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Background and Significance

My fascination with the world of technology and social media started at a very young age, as having grown up in Silicon Valley. However, it was not until spending a summer in Tokyo, working in the media/entertainment industry, where I saw the true impact of social media, particularly Instagram, on our society. Everywhere I went, I would see teenagers going out of their way to post a photo on Instagram, sometimes even taking a full-day trip. Stores, restaurants, and even magazine articles were centered around the concept of "インスタ映え (*insta-bae*)," which means that the photo is aesthetically pleasing and will thus gain attention (in the form of likes and follows) on Instagram. The 3-hour long lines outside of a small café were not for the taste of the coffee, but was because of the "aesthetics." People were, unfortunately, no longer doing things without feeling the need to take a snapshot of it on their phones first.

Perhaps it may be the simplicity, convenience, and user-friendliness of the app that makes Instagram so appealing to these millennials. The improvements in quality of smartphones allow for anybody and everybody to be able to take high-quality photos in just a few seconds. However, another interesting thing about the relationship between society and Instagram is that it seems as if many users are trying to appeal to strangers, by having their account accessible to the public, compared to Facebook, which has recently been used more as a communication tool. The evolution from Instagram just being a photo-sharing app to connect with close friends, has slowly emerged into becoming a tool where individuals can create a new identity for themselves living a different life than they actually do.

When users on YouTube started "vlogging," or video-blogging, their everyday lives for people to watch, it created a new cultural phenomenon because these were people that were just like us. Viewers were able to relate and connect with these YouTube vloggers in a way that they

would never be able to with celebrities. Following a similar concept, Instagram-famous users may be even more relatable for some because taking and posting photos seems like a much simpler task than shooting and editing videos.

On that note, however, a curious phenomenon that has also emerged these past few years is the concept of "finsta" accounts. The more accounts become accessible to the public eye, it seems as if the number of "finstas," which are Instagram accounts that users post on to connect only with their very close friends, increases. Typically, the photos that are posted on "finstas" are of individuals taking part in underage partying/drinking or are even posts followed by a long rant. Since this is a fairly recent phenomenon, there is not much research, and especially not any studies, done on deciphering the relationship between millennials (who are the main audience of the "finstas") and their views of interacting with strangers on Instagram. Why do they see the need of creating a new account to post their real lives to only their close friends; why can they not post about their true selves on their "main" Instagram account? Or in other words, and what I hope to uncover in my study, why do millennials feel the need of constructing a certain identity particularly on Instagram?

The main purpose of this paper is to understand the latest relationship young adults have with Instagram, as well as how businesses and societies are shifting to accommodate this trend. I hope to look into the different behaviors that users take, as well as their psychological relationship with the site, through conducting different studies that may shed light to why millennials may see the need to create a certain identity on Instagram. Since my focus in academics is on entertainment/media marketing, I hope to also discuss why it is crucial for businesses to understand this trend and how they can adjust to it.

Research Question

Why are millennials obsessed with social media, especially Instagram, and how does it affect their mental stability?

Gaps in Current Literature

Though there are many articles talking about the symptoms of the addiction users have by being heavily invested in social media, I mainly wanted to focus on the social impact of the system, focusing on Instagram, where there seems to be a very strong emphasis on aesthetics or being "artsy." Therefore, I saw myself struggling to find sources and studies on topics that I wanted to cover. The book *It's Complicated* by Danah Boyd, which has been referenced in multiple papers talking about the effects of social media, goes into detail about the history of addiction and the reasons for why teenagers are invested in the act of social media. However, her book is more of an overarching analysis of the phenomenon based off of several stories from different social media users, rather than conducting an actual study in a controlled environment. Another issue with many similarly written articles, including Boyd's, is that the papers' focus is on the social media sites of Facebook, whereas I wanted to focus more on Instagram, which has a heavier emphasis on photography/images rather than the actual connectivity and messaging aspect. Aside from all of that, the biggest issue I ran into while looking for sources was that many of the articles were outdated, such as how some books talk about MySpace and barely referenced recently used social media channels such as Twitter or even Tumblr (though many users have also distanced themselves away from Tumblr).

There was one dissertation written by a student by the name of Peter Bradley, however, that researched specifically on the impact of Instagram and why people take part in posting photos on it. Yet, even then, the focus was more on a general population, rather than specifically targeting a certain crowd, such as the millennials who we see to want to create this second

identity. As I have already mentioned earlier and was also brought up in Bradley's paper, the information and facts we can find about this topic require new and updated data, due to the major improvements in technology especially over the past few years. For example, the statistics used in Bradley's paper are quite outdated because he was referencing statistics on daily usage of the internet from 2010, which comes from a study done by Kaveri Subrahmanyam on teens and social media. Aside from the outdated information that Bradly referenced, his dissertation paper is a very helpful resource because the way he conducted his study and the questions he asked his subjects is very similar to how I want to conduct my research as well. Even though there were some flaws that I saw in his study, as well as minor differences in our areas of focus, I hope to use this study as one of the main tools when putting together my research.

Another interesting dissertation I found was a study on "the influence of social media on teens' self-esteem," conducted by Shannon M. Gallagher at Rowan University. It is a fairly new study, looking into the psychological effects social media has on young adults, which is the main target group I want to research about. The statistics that she uses in her study are also more recent than the ones Bradley uses, which is very helpful for me. Gallagher's focus on mental health provides a glimpse into why teens may feel the need of creating this "other" identity on social media websites such as Instagram.

The results I would obtain from my research will be able to update certain outdated statistics regarding the media that is currently being referenced by many, and will also be able to offer a glimpse into the relationship between millennials and social media through a very specific app that not much sociological research has been conducted on. Furthermore, my research will also be one of the first to explore the topic of "finstas" and its role in the concept of identity-formation for millennials.

Target Participants

The respondents are going to be young adults ages 12-21. Though it may seem like this is a wide age range, especially if I am targeting "young adults," I wanted to include individuals as young as 12 because middle school children these days seem to be actively using social media. Furthermore, though the age of 21 does not seem to be "young adult," I wanted to include individuals as old as 21 because individuals of age 21 are usually still in college, where the personal image is important for many. I have witnessed trends where students drift away from social media after they join the workforce because they become busy and they no longer feel the need to compete to show that they are having the "better life" compared to their friends. I am aware that since my sample will include respondents that are under 18, it may be very difficult to receive approval from IRB and even if I did receive approval, I would need to gain parental consent. I will try my best to reach as many schools as possible in order to increase my chances of gaining responses.

I will want to conduct a qualitative research so that I can listen to different viewpoints and I would gain access to them by selecting random students from school rosters from different middle schools, high schools, and colleges across the state (in this case, the state of Ohio). I will make sure that the individuals selected are from different socioeconomic statuses, ethnicity/race, and even religion so that I get a diverse sample that may shed light on how different backgrounds may shape how young adults view image perception on Instagram. Though I would want to survey students that are users of Instagram already, I think it would also be interesting to survey students that do not use Instagram so that I can get an insight of why they may not use it.

Sampling Plan

My sampling method that I would want to use is the stratified random sampling. I chose stratified random sampling rather than a regular simple random sampling because I want to

conduct a sample that is representative of individuals from different socioeconomic statuses and backgrounds. Therefore, if I had just done SRS for children age 12 in Ohio, for example, I would potentially have a sample group of mostly white children from the middle class. I would use the stratified random sampling to obtain 1,000 samples so that there are approximately 100 respondents for each age category. I will first stratify based on gender so that I will be able to get 50/50 in terms of responses from male and females. This is important because assuming that the majority of Instagram users are female, if I had just done SRS, I would be left with a huge sample of mainly female users. Furthermore, I will also stratify based on socioeconomic status and race so that not all of my respondents are from one race/religion/socioeconomic class. I will also want to include some respondents that do not have an Instagram account, preferably perhaps 5-10 individuals out of each 100 respondents for each age category, so that I will be able to gain insight as to why those individuals may not have an account. Therefore, by the end of my research study, I hope that my sample groups are diverse enough that I can understand whether there is a difference in views on Instagram depending on age, gender, race, religion, and even socioeconomic status.

The Methodological Approaches

Though at first, I was planning on conducting my research through a focus group in which I would gather about 5 individuals from the same age category and similar socioeconomic status, I decided that I would like to conduct interviews instead. One of the main reasons I decided on doing interviews and not focus groups is because there are so many factors that I initially stratified that it is hard to put respondents into groups where they are similar to each other. Another reason why I decided to do interviews instead was because some may feel uncomfortable voicing their opinion in front of even a small group, especially because the topics

covered will be about self-identity issues. Ideally all of this would be done through face-to-face interviews, but telephone interviewing may have to be used at times depending on the situation. The interviewers will visit the schools that their respondents attend and will interview each respondent for approximately 20-30 minutes. Some questions that can be used to facilitate the discussion is attached at the end of this paper, but those questions serve to be mere guidelines to encourage discussion and do not have to be strictly followed depending on the situation and individual. Due to time constraints and the multiple variables that have to be accounted for, there will be multiple individuals conducting interviews; these individuals will also ideally be of similar ethnic/racial/socioeconomic background to the respondents (for example, if we are at the Cleveland Heights High School where a good proportion of the students are African-American, the interviewer would also ideally be African American so that it may ease any racial tensions that may exist). Depending on the funding I will be able to receive for this research, each respondent will either receive or be entered in a drawing for a gift card to a popular dessert chain (such as Mitchell's).

Data Analytical Plan

Because my data is qualitative, I will be analyzing using coding. I will start off by open coding and picking up key terms such as "followers," "image," "popular," and "artsy." I then will axial code, or reanalyze, my results of the open coding to generate important concepts such as "seeking attention/affirmation from peers." Then, I would do selective coding to identify central themes in the interviews such as, in the scenario that I've been using, "desire to feel popular." I will repeat this for all of my data so that I can compare whether different age groups have different views on Instagram, or if there may be a difference even between race or gender.

Reliability/Validity

Reliability and validity-wise, I will be taking measures such as having a different set of researchers look over my coding analysis to ensure that my data is analyzed correctly. However, even with multiple eyes looking at the data, there may still be some misinterpretation when coding the responses that can greatly affect the overall conclusion that may be achieved in the end. This may result due to the lack of knowledge we researchers have and thus may be more difficult for us to understand/relate; we may not even be familiar with some of the terms/slangs that our respondents used to describe a certain phenomenon (ex: the concept of "artsy" may differ from person to person).

My research results are also not perfect, like any other research, because of the potential reliability. Though we hope our respondents will answer our questions as honest as they can, it may be difficult for some to truly open up in the matter of 20 – 30 minutes, especially if they are young and have never really been in a formal setting as such. Therefore, the reliability of responses may differ across age categories, making it difficult to determine whether the responses we had gotten were based on the different variable factors or was just due to one individual. In order to improve the reliability and validity of the research, the questions being asked will be as clear and easy to understand as they could and I will strive to make the interview sessions as conversational/casual, so that the respondents will feel comfortable opening up and elaborating on each thought.

Potential Alternative Method

Since we are mainly targeting individuals that are already on social media, and thus have access to an internet connection, it is also possible to conduct my research through an online survey. For the survey, I would be asking more quantitative questions rather than qualitative questions, and I will also be asking more demographic questions. Because it is very difficult to

encourage survey respondents to elaborate on their thoughts and opinions, even if there is a textbox included for them to type freely, I would have to perhaps enter in options for them to select, rather than the respondent telling me their thoughts. Though I may be able to gain more responses this way and would also be able to compile it into numerical data that is more tangible, there are also many faults with conducting research through an online survey. For one, unless I enforce individuals to fill out the survey, it will most likely only be filled out voluntarily, meaning that I will possibly only receive responses from the extreme ends of the spectrum (individuals that have passionate feelings regarding the topic). Furthermore, for me to enter and offer options for respondents to choose from means that I would have to have an extensive background knowledge regarding their perceptions of identity creation on social media so that I can formulate accurate options. However, by doing this, respondents will only choose the options available, even if it may not closely correlate with their thoughts or even the reality. I feel that since my research is to understand their thoughts and opinions, this would defeat the purpose of my study.

Interview Guide/Questions

Hi. My name is _____ and today I'm just going to ask you a couple questions about your opinions regarding the social media site "Instagram." So, let's get started:

1. First off, are you familiar with "Instagram"? Do you have an account?
2. What comes to mind when you hear or think of the term "Instagram"?

If respondent uses Instagram:

1. How long have you had your account?
2. How many times a day do you check Instagram?
3. How do you feel about your own Instagram account?
4. Are follower numbers important to you? Do you check your friends' follower numbers?
5. Do the number of likes impact you?
6. What kind of photos do you post on your account?
7. Have you ever gone out of your ways just so that you could post it on Instagram? (ex: go to a popular restaurant just so that you can post that item on your account)
8. Have you ever thought of quitting Instagram? Why or why not?
9. Do you have a *finsta*? If yes, why did you decide to create one?
10. How do you feel about Instagram overall?

If the respondent does NOT use Instagram:

1. Is there any particular reason you don't use or have stopped using Instagram?
2. Do you use other social media sites instead to replace Instagram? Why?
3. Do you feel judged or questioned by your peers for not using Instagram?
4. Do you have any specific image of people that are heavy users of Instagram?
5. How do you feel about Instagram overall?

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