

The Social Space, Language, and Art of Inferences on Instagram: A Netnographic Study

Gabrielle Duval

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School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

In this thesis, we explore the ways individuals interact with one another on Instagram through a netnographic study. In observing the profiles and content of 15 participants from around the world, we were able to observe how the participants and the audience members used captions, emojis, and hashtags to interact with one another on Instagram. Utilizing the works of Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Pierre Bourdieu's *Forms of Capital* (1986), we were able to observe Instagram through Goffman's perspective about the performance and how the interactions are forms of capital. From these observations, we were able to form four (4) concluding hypotheses: 1) Individuals conduct performances on Instagram and aim to give a good presentation of self to an audience; 2) Instagram has a very distinct language whereby individuals communicate meaning through emojis and hashtags; 3) Any observer on the Instagram platform is constantly making inferences about others; lastly, 4) Instagram is its own distinct social space with its own characteristics and subcultures.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

As individuals interact with one another in different social spaces, we behave just like actors who interact in a theatrical performance. This includes exits and entrances, appearances, a stage, and a performance always showing the best of ourselves and never the worst. This simple analogy is known in Sociology as the dramaturgical perspective. This perspective was developed and outlined in 1959 by Erving Goffman in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). In this work, he defines this dramaturgical perspective as the study of how we present ourselves in our everyday lives through the use of stage language (Rohall, Milkie & Lucas, 2014:127). In recent years, researchers have begun to discuss the involvement of Goffman's work within the context of social media platforms on the topics of the presentation of self, the performance, or simply the understanding of interactions between individuals on social media platforms. Furthermore, studies in recent years have also begun to assess how capital is reflected within these interactions, primarily focusing on cultural, symbolic, and social capital. These forms of capital, along with social capital and the presentation of self, will be further conceptualized in chapter 3.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok have become an integral part of individuals' lives and can now be described as a social space. The social space of social media is defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015). These platforms allow for individuals to push co-presence beyond the physical parameters initially defined in Goffman's work to allow for international communication.

To put this in perspective, according to data collected in January 2021, there were 4.66 billion active internet users (Statista, 2022) and of these users, 4.2 billion individuals were active on social media platforms (Statista, 2022). Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok fall within the top 10 social media platforms with 2,910 million users, 1,478 million users and 1,000 million users respectively (Statista, 2022). These statistics demonstrate how social media has been integrated in people's daily lives worldwide, to the point where it could be considered a new social sphere. In the field of Sociology, media studies and communications, researchers are beginning to assess how social media can be considered a new social space in society—one that stems beyond the initial physical barriers. Researchers Abeelee, De Wolf & Ling (2018) propose that social media is reshaping society from a structural standpoint through communicative technologies such as social media platforms. They posit that this technology is an extension of the self that allows for the “capacity of perpetual contact [and] fostering social connectedness with social relationships” which provides the ability for an extension of the self where individuals can “personalize [their] content, services, place, and time” (5). This notion of personalized content with boundless space and time is further described by Suh (2020), who assessed a popular fashion influencer on Instagram. Through her research, it was found that the still images on Instagram provided a “non-boundary” platform, and thus described Instagram as “transcended, open social, realistic virtual, and an aesthetic space in everyday life” (Suh, 2020). They further propose that social media is an open space that has no physical limits whereby individuals can communicate with one another without any physical boundaries. These initial studies began the discussion of social media as a new social sphere. Though

lacking in research on this topic, Suh (2020) discusses the idea that Instagram forms a new type of social space by assessing a popular fashion influencer on Instagram. The term “influencer” is described as: 1) having the “ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.) or 2) as someone who has the capability of influencing others (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). According to current research, there are five (5) categories of influencers: nano (between 1,000 and 10,000 followers), micro (between 10,000 and 100,000 followers), macro (between 100,000 and 1 million followers) and mega (A and B-list actors, singers, etc.) (Ismail, 2018; Wiley, 2021.) Typically, influencers (regardless of the number of followers) have the goal to amass a significant following on Instagram. This goal is achieved through the use of various tools on the platform such as posting still images, short video clips also known as reels, or stories, live videos that only appear for a limited time. The functioning of the platform and the type of influencer is key for our study as to understand how Instagram works and how it is utilized amongst nano influencers.

For the purpose of this research, our focus will remain on nano-influencers to assess how they use Instagram. With previous research already conducted on impression management on Facebook (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Michikyan, Dennis & Subrahmanyam, 2015; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Ranzini & Hoek, 2017), we will focus on the second most used platform Instagram, which currently holds 1,478 million users worldwide (Statista, 2022). This platform is also amongst the top 5 most used by Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) with 83% of social media users using Instagram preceded by

Snapchat, Tik Tok and YouTube (Statista, 2022). Within these four platforms, Instagram is one of the least studied platforms which forms a gap in the literature on social media within Sociology. The goal of this study is to bridge some of the gaps surrounding the use and purpose of Instagram at a surface level through a Goffmanian and Bourdieuan lens.

1.1. Research Questions and General Approach

The research question of this study is rather a simple yet large question. Firstly, how Instagram is utilized by nano-influencers and secondly, how Goffman's Presentation of Self (1969) and Bourdieu's Forms of Capital (1986) apply to these interactions. To answer these questions, we will first conduct a comprehensive literature review to understand the current state of research in Sociology regarding Instagram as a platform. We will then conduct qualitative netnographic research (i.e., observational method on the social media platform—Net for internet and nographic for ethnographic) and descriptive analysis of the hashtags, comments, emojis, and captions posted, following similar methods as previous studies on this topic and on social media. Lastly, we will present our findings and conclusions.

1.2. Importance and Significance

The goal of studying Sociology is to study human social interactions (Rohall, Milkie & Lucas, 2014), which now also take place on social media platforms. This goal held true regardless of current societal circumstances. However the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shift within society worldwide by restricting interactions to online platforms due to public health guidelines. One of the ways societies have shifted has to do with the notion of digital literacy, how we use and interact with digital platforms.

When we wish to study social media platforms like Instagram, we must first understand how they are used by the users (i.e., digital literacy) and while there are some studies on this topic, there is a lack previous academic literature studying Instagram specifically. Furthermore, in recent years, researchers have begun to wonder how Bourdieu's work on the forms of capital (more specifically cultural and symbolic capital) are expressed on social media platforms (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Julien 2015; Di Stefano, 2016), though the involvement of social capital has yet to be discussed on Instagram. Thus, as our research question pertains to digital literacy on Instagram, we will begin examining our research questions through the lens of Goffman and Bourdieu's work.

Many of the older platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have been subjected to various studies in many different fields. However we can note a gap in the literature when we discuss newer social media platforms such as Instagram and Tik Tok. It is therefore important to gain further knowledge and conduct research on these platforms—especially as these platforms are becoming important components in people's lives. This thesis will contribute to a larger discussion focusing on a platform that has been less studied within the current literature. It will allow us to gain a better understanding of the platform and the ways of interacting within it through the lens brought forth by Goffman and Bourdieu.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, we will conduct a comprehensive literature review of the relevant topics associated to this thesis. We will first begin by outlining the research problem and follow with a discussion on how social media could represent a new social space. We will then discuss the language of social media platforms with a focus on hashtags and emojis. Furthermore, we will discuss the involvement of audience feedback through literature discussing the comments section on social media. Lastly, we will present how different methods of communication lead to an increase in capital for the users on the platforms.

2.1. Research Problem

Within recent years, there has been an increase in studies on the use of social media platforms on various topics: some regarding the presentation of self and others regarding the effects of cultural capital within the platform. Alaimo & Kallinikos (2016) propose that there are sociotechnical entities that shape how users interact on social media. Within these sociotechnical entities, they refer to three specific elements: 1) encoding, which refers to the association to standardized activities such as tagging, liking a picture, or sharing and following; 2) aggregation, which is the information collected on the platforms; and lastly, 3) computation, which is the way in which social media platforms utilize the information collected during the aggregation to profile people into categories (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2016). Though their case study focused on online shopping, they found that our digital footprints (i.e., what we like, share, follow) is a form of conversation which leads to mediating online interactions (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2016). These different elements are also applicable when we observe Instagram as a platform.

Instagram over the years has developed various ways individuals can interact with one another through an open social platform by sharing pictures, sharing reels (i.e., more permanent videos that are shared on the main content), sharing short stories (i.e., small impromptu videos that only last 24 hours), messaging, shopping, and following various individuals or pages based on your preferences (Instagram, n.d.). With this in mind and the relevance of studying social media platforms like Instagram, the goal of this thesis is to observe the interactions between individuals on Instagram and how we can understand this platform through Bourdieu and Goffman's work. In this section of the thesis, we will focus on providing a comprehensive literature review touching on the different elements pertinent to our study, such as the notion that Instagram could possibly be a new form of social space in society, the different methods of communication on social media platforms (i.e., involvement of hashtags, the importance of likes, the study of emojis) and some additional factors regarding the presentation of self and how individuals present themselves on social media platforms.

2.2. Social Media: A New Social Space

In recent developments in the research on social media, researchers have begun to assess and question whether social media platforms form a new social space where individuals interact with one another. Though the research is still underdeveloped and limited, some researchers have started to observe this concept in various capacities, such as through the use of context collapse and the removal of physical barriers for communication and interactions within a new social space (Loh & Walsh, 2021). These two elements will be further discussed in the upcoming section of the thesis. In addition

to these two concepts, we will also explore the notion of communities on social media (Boy & Uitermark, 2020) and how it all relates into social media as a new social space.

2.2.1. Social media Boundaries and Context

In recent studies, researchers have begun to study the notion of “context collapse” which is described by Loh & Walsh (2021) as: “how people, information, and norms from different settings all converge into one context” (1). This term can further be broken down into two notions: “context collusion” or “context collision.” Context collusion refers to an occurrence “when individuals intentionally collapse, blur, and flatten context” whereas context collision refers to an occurrence in which “different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other” (Loh & Walsh: 2021:1—2). When we consider the usage of context collapse on Instagram, we are focusing on context collusion whereby the platform itself provides an environment with very little physical boundaries and limitations. As Loh & Walsh (2021) present, with context collapse we lose the importance of face value that comes with face-to-face interactions such as positive social values and approved social attributes. The interaction becomes an “exhibition of self” based on verbal and non-verbal actions online (2). As such, they found in their case study that individuals were likely to manage their image very carefully and use different methods to alter their presentation of self through the use of privacy settings, censoring what they post and separating their personal and work lives as much as possible to maintain a positive self-presentation (Loh & Walsh: 2021:11). The reasoning behind the use of these tactics remains unknown based on current literature. However, we can hypothesize that individuals use

these methods as a way of maintaining a sort of conformity to the norms within the digital space for a positive self-presentation.

As we can see within any social media platforms, physical boundaries that we would usually have with in-person interactions are now blurred due to constant accessibility, constant communication, and constant feedback. Abeele, De Wolf & Ling (2018) highlight this concept of lack of physical barriers by stating that social media is reshaping the social space from a structural standpoint. They propose that communication technologies (such as social media platforms) are an extension of the self that allows for the “capacity of perpetual contact [and] fostering social connectedness with social relationships” (Abeele, De Wolf & Ling, 2018). This allows for an extension of the self where individuals can “personalize [their] content, services, place, and time” (Abeele, De Wolf & Ling, 2018:5). This study found that individuals will present parts of themselves to an overall audience as ways to communicate on social media platforms. As they further highlight, participants are able to modify the time and place of their interactions on the platforms, or of the posts so that it creates a place with little boundaries. This boundaryless situation within the digital space is further described by Suh (2020) who assessed a popular fashion influencer on Instagram. Through their research, they found that the still images on Instagram provided a “non-boundary,” and further highlighted that the platform itself is “transcended, open social, realistic virtual, and an aesthetic space in everyday life,” whereby individuals can interact with one another without any limitations—more specifically physical limitations. Furthermore, the social media space is considered an open platform that is available and accessible to anyone. While settings can make a profile “private” or “public,” upon request individuals

can still find each other within the platform making it an open space for discussion and interactions. This study begins to highlight the level of accessibility on Instagram and how the interactions take place on the platform (Suh, 2020). It is also one of the few studies on the subject of social media being its own social space.

2.2.2. Social Media Communities

Within every society, there are various communities that communicate and interact with one another. Researchers argue that social media is no different in this regard, as new studies are demonstrating diverse communities and subgroups within social media platforms. Boy & Uitermark (2020) conducted a study on the inner workings of Instagram in comparison to physical urban spaces in Amsterdam to assess whether there is in fact fragmentation on the platform similar to the physical setting. Within their results, they found that Instagram users would form clusters or groups based on similar tastes and activities. In addition, these individuals were more likely to also use similar hashtags in a sort of heterogeneity within the clusters (Boy & Uitermark, 2020). Though there are various clusters present, they further highlight that though the participants may be within different clusters, they are not necessarily separate from one another, but rather Instagram allows for the creation of ties across different groups that otherwise would not be available in a physical setting (Boy & Uitermark, 2020). These findings are important, they do not explore beyond the involvement of hashtags, which is only one small component of the language on Instagram.

Based on these studies, we can see that means of interaction on social media have not been fully explored/understood. The content primarily refers to the external factors that lead to social media being its own social space. While these are interesting

and provide a dynamic to consider, there are few studies that have simply studied how individuals interact with one another more broadly on the platforms. While unfortunately there are limited knowledge and information on the topic, this thesis will aim to provide more information in examining how Instagram could form a new social space for individuals to interact with one another. Prior to delving into our own study, it is important to consider what other information we can gather more of the current literature surrounding the communication methods of social media platforms such as hashtags, emojis and “likes”. In addition, as Abeele, De Wolf & Ling (2018) present, there is the involvement of the audience members on social media. This will be further explored within this chapter. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the notion of ties between different groups of individuals with similar tastes, which refers to a homogeneity of responses or rather relates to cultural capital and knowledge of the platform and group (Boy & Uitermark, 2020). The involvement of capital will also be assessed in the current literature in section 2.5.

2.3. Communication of Social media

In recent years, one of the areas of concern and interest for researchers in media and communication studies are the different methods individuals interact with one another on platforms like Instagram. Anderson & Corbett (2013) describe how individuals more recently have used computer-mediated communication, which gives the opportunity “to provide alternative contexts for social interactions, to facilitate access to existing discourse communities and the creation of new ones” (99). Though the focus of our study is not on sociolinguistic specificities of the meaning behind the language used on Instagram, there is nonetheless a level of importance to see what language is

used on Instagram, because as Anderson & Corbett (2013) note, language allows for individuals to interact with one another and further understanding of communities on social media platforms.

A study conducted by Pasfield-Neofiton (2013) explores further the involvement of computer-mediated communication through a lens of individuals who are digital natives. The term *digital native* is described as “a person who is very familiar with digital technology and computers because they have grown up with them” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Pasfield-Neofiton, 2013). In her work, she describes the cultural differences between different language speakers, whereby in western cultures there was a common use of text art that differed to Japanese text art as seen below (Pasfield-Neofiton, 2013:153):

| | <u>Western</u> | <u>Japanese</u> |
|-------------------|----------------|---|
| Love | <3 | (.´ 3 `.)♡chu!(●´ 3 `)ノ”♡→←♡(✿´ ▽ `✿-) /♡♡♡ |
| Positive feelings | :-) :) =(| ☆ ^ o ^ ☆(*^o^*)(^Ⅲ^ ^♪)ゞ(^▽^)/(@·ω·@)/ |
| Negative feelings | :-(:(=(| (≥u≤) (>_<);(>~<)T_T;(;O;) ; _ ; -_-; |

While her findings date back to 2013, prior to the creation of emojis through Apple and Android that many know now, these findings demonstrate a cultural difference in the types of emojis used between the two cultures presenting two different types of in-groups (Pasfield-Neofiton, 2013:153). Furthermore, her study found that individuals were also likely to emphasize their emoticons by adding more than one in a sequence such as <3 <3 (Pasfield-Neofiton, 2013:155). These different elements presented by Pasfield-Neofiton (2013) also are some of the factors that we will consider within our

study. Though some elements are similar, we will be investigating a yet unanswered question: are emojis the language of Instagram?

Unlike Anderson & Corbett (2013) and Pasfield-Neofiton (2013), Russmann & Svensson (2017) chose to further explore the literature available on regarding the use of visual communication on social media platforms. Within this article, they describe the use of visual communication where they refer to pictures, hashtags, and emoticons. Furthermore, they present how these visual communicative tools are often considered as complementary to written text but can also be used as a standalone where they have their own meaning or if in a sequence can provide various meanings (Russmann & Svensson, 2017:1—2). Though their study is primarily a literature review where they are most concerned with the communicative meanings behind pictures, they do note the importance to study further the use of hashtags and emoticons as part of the communicative language used on social media platforms like Instagram (Russmann & Svensson, 2017).

2.3.1. The Art of Hashtags

In the field of media studies and social media, the majority of the literature surrounding language and its use on the platform is about hashtags. Much of the literature studies the meaning, use, and effects of hashtags on different platforms like Twitter. In this section of the literature review, we will first outline the literature that presents how hashtags are used on social media and how they function as an integral part on social media platforms.

Current literature presents the different ways hashtags are typically used on social media platforms. Potnis & Tahamtan (2020) state that hashtags have the ability to

share and retain information on social media platforms, where they play the role of gatekeepers of information. In their work, they explain that each hashtag is recorded within the platform and used for current and future searchers. It is through these searches that individuals will gain information within the online communities (Potnis & Tahamtan, 2020). They further explain how hashtags are used in the following ways: 1) creating a community; 2) sharing and broadcasting information; 3) discovering and searching for new information; 4) collection of information; 5) organizing information into categories; and 5) protecting information through the use of hashtag filters (Potnis & Tahamtan, 2020:1237). Based on their findings, they note that the primary use of Instagram is to provide information and create communities within the platform for people who share commonalities (Potnis & Tahamtan, 2020). These findings are also supported by a further study conducted in 2017 that focused on how hashtags are used to retrieve information on the internet (Buarki & Alkhateeb, 2017; Zappavigna, 2018; Geboers, Van De Wiele, 2020). This study was conducted on Instagram, and it was found that hashtags were often used as descriptors to the content and provided a way for individuals to connect with others of similar interest (Buarki & Alkhateeb, 2017).

Aside from the hashtags being informative, Wikström (2014) describes additional methods as to how hashtags are used. Based on his findings, individuals will also use hashtags as a way of being witty (or he describes as playing games with hashtags) or to engage in commentary (Wikström, 2014). Each of the studies indicates similar results with mild variations in the methodology. Another series of studies about hashtags discusses the notion of how they are used as a method of engagement for discussions or in the case of #foodfestivals provides an overview of events taking place (Celuch,













2021). The study measuring the effects of #foodfestival found that the number of hashtags that individuals use in their captions does not necessarily influence user engagement on the topic, though they state that the longer the hashtag and the caption, the less that individuals will engage with the content (Celuch, 2021). They present that the strategic use of hashtags provides an interesting perspective that suggests hashtags are a “persuasive factor in influencing user engagement” when analyzing festival experiences (Celuch, 2021). Just as hashtags provide information regarding a subject, it can also promote advocacy for current situations as present Choo et al. (2022), who describes the involvement of the hashtag #TaiwanCanHelp. Though this hashtag became a political way to increase capital for Taiwan, this study found that the hashtag itself did gain recognition worldwide and received positive responses globally (Choo et al., 2022) demonstrating the efficacy of hashtags like an engagement tool. A similarly study was conducted following the shooting at the office of Charlie Hebdo in 2015 in France (Giglietto & Lee, 2017). This study, on the other hand, examined the counterargument hashtag #JeNeSuisPasCharlie. This hashtag was considered an opposition to the initial hashtag #JeSuisCharlie which supported the magazine’s right to free speech in their articles (Giglietto & Lee, 2017). Their findings demonstrated that this counter hashtag was a method of challenging mainstream beliefs in terms of the capabilities surrounding freedom of speech, and to support the victims of the families while not undermining the consequences of the shooting (Giglietto & Lee, 2017). This study demonstrates how hashtags can direct a discussion and debate between different ideologies and different communities.

Though the literature on hashtags is vast, the majority of the studies reviewed indicate similar if not identical results. Hashtags are used for various reasons: as a way of searching information, as a way of categorizing and as a way of engaging with other individuals on the platform. Though for our study, we will not delve deeply into the involvement of hashtags, we can note that this is an important method for interacting with one another on Instagram. It is through this literature that we can understand the use and effects of hashtags in digital social spaces. We must therefore acknowledge the importance of hashtags on Instagram as being an integral part of communication within the platform.

2.3.2. The Language of Emojis

As we noticed in previous literature above, there are different methods of communication throughout the different platforms. As we saw hashtags are one of the key areas of study for current communicative literature on social media, but in recent years, there has also been the integration of emojis or emoticons (both are used interchangeably) within the platforms. Unlike hashtags, studies on the usage and effects of emojis seem to vary. In this section of the chapter, we will present the literature on emojis as a communicative device on social media platforms.

In 2019, researchers Bai et al. did a systematic review of emojis since its creation 20 years ago. With their in-depth findings, they discussed how different genders used different emojis in different circumstances (Bai et al., 2019). Additionally, they present how emojis are used differently depending on the culture of the individuals using the platform (Bai et al., 2019). Along with these differences, they further highlight how there are some emojis are ambiguous in meaning as presented below:

| Emoji | Name | Official definition | Misunderstanding |
|---|---------------------------|--|--|
|  | Face with tears of joy | Something is funny or pleasing | Loudly crying face |
|  | Folded hands | Please or thank you or praying hands | A high five |
|  | Sleepy face | Tired or sleeping in anime or manga | Crying face |
|  | Women with Bunny Ears | An iteration of the Playboy Bunny known in Japan as a Bunny Girl | Friendship, Fun, or "Let's party" |
|  | Face with Steam From Nose | Irritation, anger, and contempt | Pride face |
|  | Hushed face | Being hushed by concern or correction | Astonished face |
|  | Dizzy | Being dizzy | Fantastic ideas |
|  | Confounded face | Confused | Frustrated and sad face |
|  | Sad but relieved face | Concern or Anxiety | Crying Face |
|  | Woman gesturing ok | "OK" sign | Put your hands together as a loving heart |
|  | Ogre | Depicts an oni, a kind of hideous ogre in Japanese folklore | Supernatural or figurative beasts and demons |
|  | Grimacing face | Nervousness, embarrassment, or awkwardness | Mischievous grimace |

Based on the table, we can see how there some emojis have different meanings in which they believe has to do with cultural differences (Bai et al., 2019). Park et al. (2013) noted as well the differences in cultural usage of emojis whereby they describe how individuals are likely to use them in a positive context regardless of the culture. Furthermore, they present that geography does present a difference in emoticon style, though language is what determines primarily the usage of emoticons (Park et al., 2013). That being said, while they all have different meanings, emojis are used to express an emotion or to strengthen a message (Derks, Bos & Grumbkow, 2008) and in most cases, users are more likely to use emojis with people they know rather than strangers (Derks, Bos & Grumbkow, 2008). Additionally, Derks, Bos & Grumbkow (2008) found that emojis were often used in a positive context just as Park et al. (2013) present as well. With this we can see how context matters and the physical capability of language do matter.

As we discuss the notion of the meanings of emojis, we can observe the use of emojis as a method of symbolic interactionism. Lu & Wu (2022) present how emojis are a set of icons and symbols that individuals use as a method of communication and that while they are not technically a “real type” of language, they are still used as a method of replacing words with specific meanings. Whenever we discuss symbolic interactions, there is a certain consensus amongst the participants about the meanings (other than the few cases above). There were many studies that have tried to explain what all the emojis meant through complex methods of analysis such as a semantic analysis, sentiment analysis, etc., but the specificity of the method of analysis is in and of itself a limitation. We present this as a limitation because it fails to acknowledge how individuals infer the meanings of different emojis. By this we posit that current literature doesn’t acknowledge the level of inference involved for us to understand the meaning of the sequences of emojis. This is something we will further explore in our study through the use of a netnographic study and a wider scoped method of analysis.

2.4. Audience Feedback

One of the key interactions on Instagram is between the user and the audience through the use of comments. These comments are a form of audience perception and feedback for any and all content posted on the platform. In recent years, researchers have observed how there is the implicit influence of an “imaginary audience” which invertedly can play a role on the presentation of self on the platform. As Stsiampkouskaya et al. (2021) found in their case study that individuals will often take and adopt the perspective of the audience when choosing a picture to post and will consider the feedback they would receive (15). This case study also found the use of

certain captions were more likely to lead to positive feedback from the audience. Furthermore, the users were more likely to build their profiles based on the feedback (both positive and negative) as a method of reproducing positive comments or to avoid negative comments (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021:15). It is through audience feedback that we begin to assess the involvement of comments on social media and the presentation of self within the platform. As Stsiampkouskaya et al. (2021) proposed, users will try to modify their content as to avoid any negative interactions or negative comments. The avoidance of this feedback was also studied by Yun Shin et al. (2020) who states that companies will often try to curb the negativity in the comments section through control. By this, they suggest that companies will often delete any negative comments to curb any negative perceptions others may have (Yun Shin et al., 2020). Though they found that deleting the negative comments could prove more detrimental, the participants were more likely to be OK with the manipulation and control of the comments if it were for a justified cause (Yun Shin et al., 2020). This ability for the users to control and to delete any comments applies to everyone on the platform—not just companies. That being said, just like companies, it is in the best interest of the individual to control what others think of them for the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959).

While it is in the best interest of individuals to control the perceptions others may have, Matook, Dennis & Wang (2022) suggest that this may not always be a feasible option on a large stage such as social media platforms. They describe a notion called a social media firestorm (SMF), which they note are commonly a series of negative comments that are “hurled at a target for [a] perceived wrongdoing” (Matook, Dennis & Wang, 2022). In their study, they assessed the purpose, tones, and motivations of user

comments. In their findings, they found that the comments were usually one of two things: supportive or condemning which were usually influenced by a “herd” mentality (Matook, Dennis & Wang, 2022). Matook, Dennis & Wang (2022) believe that individuals comment in a similar fashion (positive or negative) to what others commented as to avoid any backlash hence the argument of comments following a “herd” or group mentality. This proves particularly interesting for our study as a main component assessed is the interactions between the user and the audience, primarily the comments. While this study focused on Twitter, it is curious to assess the involvement of comments on Instagram. Furthermore, as we discussed the literature on emojis, it is also important to discuss the current literature on emojis within comments. A study conducted on the Chinese platform Weibo assessed and presented the use of emojis within the comments (He, 2022). In their findings, they found a similar influence of herd mentality where the commenter’s position (positive or negative; supportive or discontent) was usually similar across all the comments. Furthermore, they present that the emojis and text were often a reflection of similar ideologies and beliefs throughout the comments section (He, 2022).

Based on these studies and the literature presented, we can ascertain there are certain commonalities amongst all the literature: 1) users usually want to give the best presentation of self and to do so, might modify their own personal content in accordance; 2) the ability to control the visibility of the comments is not necessarily ill-perceived with just cause; lastly, 3) the individuals commenting in the comments section are likely to follow a herd mentality and make similar comments as others. It is through

this literature that we understand some of the factors that influence the interactions between the user and the audience.

2.5. The Capital Interactions

As we saw in section 2.3.1, hashtags have various uses such as providing the ability to be found (Omena, Rabello & Mintz, 2020) and to provide more information on the picture or reel presented (Geboers, Van De Wiele, 2020; Zappavigna, 2018). That being said, Fiers (2020) presents the notion that hashtags are a form of self-presentation on the platform but also a method of social capital. To elaborate, Fiers (2020) conducted a study on 787 hashtags and found that individuals used one of the common hashtags from 2021 “Instagood” as a way for users to give meaning and symbol of their pictures—primarily the symbol of capital and thus promoting their social status. While they found that the users often tried to conceal status-seeking hashtags such as #Likeforlike or #Followforfollow, they nonetheless found that users would often use a specific set of hashtags (like the top 10 hashtags of 2021) as a method to gain more status (Fiers, 2020). Though our study focuses less on the use of hashtags, we can nonetheless acknowledge how hashtags can contribute to the role of capital on social media platforms. Furthermore, Kang & Liu (2019) conducted a study which found that individuals who have a similar status were also more likely to support others on the platform with these same traits. By this, they clarify that individuals were more likely to make associations between themselves and what they describe as the intended target due to these similarities (Kang & Liu, 2019). Thus, individuals support one another with similar traits which increases both participants’ capital and status on the platform.

Though the research is limited, we can begin to see how the actions taken on the platform such as using hashtags to increase visibility are used to increase capital. Furthermore, the literature presents how individuals are likely to support like-minded individuals as a way of increasing both individuals' capital. This notion of capital will be further discussed and describe in chapter 3, where the work of Bourdieu (1986) and the notion of cultural capital and social capital is discussed. With the limited research on the topic, there is the clear need to fill gaps in the literature, such as how cultural capital and social capital form part of Instagram.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

For the purpose of this thesis, we will incorporate, discuss, and analyze the data gathered through Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self* (1959) and Pierre Bourdieu's *Forms of Capital* (1986) to answer our research questions. This will allow us to understand how Instagram is utilized by individuals and the perceived outcome they gain through the use of emojis, captions, comments, and hashtags. In this chapter, we will define and discuss the following: 1) Goffman's (1959) presentation of self and dramaturgical approach within the context of interactions; 2) the theory of cultural and social capital outlined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). This theory and perspective will be used to guide our research questions and our analysis.

3.1. Presentation of Self and Dramaturgical Perspective

The first theoretical foundation examined in this thesis is Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, which stems from his work on the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). This perspective is based on Shakespeare's statement that we as individuals interact in society in the same way as actors perform in a play for an audience. Goffman uses the metaphors of stage language (ex.: front stage, performance, performer) to understand and explain daily interactions in society. In this section of the theoretical foundation, we will discuss the dramaturgical perspective and its application to the social media platform Instagram.

Goffman uses a specific terminology when discussing the presentation of self which highlights the use of stage language such as the performance, front stage, the performer and the audience. As such, it is key to define the important terms that are pertinent for this thesis and form the basis of this perspective. The first key word used in

Goffman's presentation of self is the notion of the performance which he defines as "all the activities of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants ... [whereby] those who contribute to [the performance] as the audience, observers or co-participants" (Goffman, 1959:15—16). This describes how individuals will interact with one another with the goal of influencing each other in some way. This phenomenon is apparent when examining the role of an influencer. In most cases, influencers will have a specific niche (i.e., yoga, fashion, etc.) with a certain audience they wish to convey a message to (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Thus, we could argue that an influencer takes part in the performance in each of their activities on social media.

In his work, Goffman (1959) further argues that within the performance, individuals will put up a front when interacting with individuals in their day-to-day lives. Goffman (1959) describes the front (also known as the "front stage") whereby he defines the term as:

"the part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman, 1959:22).

In other words, Goffman (1959) presents how the appearance and manner of the performer can influence the performance. The appearance of the performer provides information to the audience of the performer's social status and the manner warns the audience of the role the performer will take (Goffman, 1959:24). To simplify, the front is

defined by how the individual looks and behaves within a given interaction in their day to day. The individual's appearance gives indication to their social class and the way of behaving allows for others within the interaction to know what to expect from the performer. An example of this would be someone who classifies themselves as a yoga influencer will put up a front (i.e., post pictures, reels, etc.) that they are skilled at yoga or do yoga-related activities on their platform. In addition, the influencer will most likely wear yoga clothing and use yoga equipment in their pictures to portray their expertise in yoga while also indicating their intentions through their written comments. Thus, we can see with this example that the front is relevant and observable on Instagram as well.

In the *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman presents these terms within the context of face-to-face interactions but as we can note from the example given, the terms and language he uses can nonetheless apply on Instagram. On Instagram, individuals will post pictures, reels (short videos), lives (video streaming taking place in real time) and use captions, comments, or direct messages to communicate with their followers. If we understand the platform of Instagram through a Goffmanian lens, we can say that Instagram is the stage where the performance takes place. The individual posting content is the performer and the performance itself are the pictures, reels, lives, and captions used. Subsequently, the audience would be the followers who can like or comment on their content. In addition, we could argue that the individuals who are classified as influencers conduct a performance that meets the best practices of social media. Following these socialized ways during face-to-face interactions and on social media lead to the attainment of a social status within the given environment. In the case of Instagram, it would be to gain popularity on the

platform. Thus, we can see how social status also plays a role within the development and maintenance of a performance. Furthermore, Goffman (1959) posits that the final goal of the performance is to maintain a societal standard that does not deny a falsified or honest performance but that demonstrates a certain image to the audience (Goffman, 1959:75). Through this, Goffman (1959) posits that individuals will use different methods (also known as impression management tactics) to achieve the wanted presentation. The image presented further highlights how “social status, [the] position, [and the] social place is not a material thing to be possessed and then displayed; [but rather] it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellishment [within a performance]” (Goffman, 1959:75). Goffman (1959) further argues this statement by describing how in America, some members of the upper-class Hindu circle felt they needed to downplay their financial wealth in order to “foster standards regarding birth, culture, or moral earnestness” (75). Furthermore, Goffman (1959) presents the concept of idealization. Goffman defines this process of the performance as a “socialized” process which is “moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society which is presented” (Goffman, 1959:35). In other words, we as individuals aim for our performances to conform to the norms and values of society or within the context of social media, behaving in a way that is conforming to the platform. This process of idealization posits that one has a goal, and the goal is to achieve social mobility. As Goffman notes, individuals who have higher aspirations to attain these higher strata and to attain these aspirations, they must maintain a proper presentation of self. He notes that this process is used to maintain and preserves one’s image, but also that making sacrifices for the performance is a key driver in the argument for upward social mobility

(Goffman, 1959:36). Goffman further notes that the status symbol in America associated with social class consists of items that are expressed using “material wealth” such as clothes, cars, and homes amongst many others. (Goffman, 1959). This notion of presentation of self, front stage, idealization, and status are all pertinent when we assess overall interactions on Instagram. Thus, Goffman’s theory (1959) allows for us to understand some of the processes involved in the presentation of self and it is used within day-to-day interactions.

3.1.1. Contemporary Applications

Many of the current discussions and applications of Goffman’s presentation of self focus on the performance, and how impression management ties into daily performances on social media. When assessing the literature, it is clear many studies have focused on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and online dating sites. Additionally, there are various corporate studies on the presentation of self within large companies and their interactions with clients. Within these studies, some researchers tried to gain a better understanding of the ways people present themselves on social media, and it was found that some of the main goals for social media users were to maintain acceptability and promote credibility (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Through a discourse analysis, Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014) identified that corporate companies will most likely hold conventional politeness, moral discourses, and use diversions to maintain a positive presentation of self—one that is acceptable to societal norms and conventions on social media. On a smaller scale, there are also various studies examining how individuals will use the presentation of self and impression management methods on different social media platforms. Merunkova & Slerka (2019)

identified the implication of Goffman's work on Facebook with regard to the different forms of identity presented by the various Facebook users. Within their study, they found the following identities: the public diary, the influencer, the entertainer, job, education, and lastly, hobbies. They found that all these different identities use different methods of impression management for social interactions, postings, and how they engage on social media (Merunkova & Slerka, 2019). An additional study conducted on Facebook found the secondary elements, such as personality traits and secondary goals, also aid in the conceptualization of online impression management (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Furthermore, they found that the tactics used on social media through the process of self-reporting by participants (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). The key personality traits identified were affinity seeking behaviour, Machiavellianism, and self-monitoring tendencies with a focus related to self and interaction-oriented goals with online impression management (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011:11). In other words, the need to be accepted and included (affinity-seeking), the manipulative tendencies of an individual and the willingness to fabricate impressions of themselves (Machiavellianism). In addition, the monitoring (or regulating, controlling, and observations) that one does with regard to their own actions within social interactions and the selves they display in interpersonal relationships (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011:4—5). As such, these personality traits can also be associated with the element presented by Ranzini & Hoek (2017), who found that users feel they are under constant observations by an "imaginary audience," which leads to the constant use of impression management tactics on Facebook. Within their studies, they concluded that this imaginary audience, along with privacy concerns, were the most important factors to the

presentation of self. Contrary to Rosenberg & Egbert (2011), self-monitoring showed no significance in this study (Ranzini & Hoek, 2017). In addition, similarly to Goffman's work and previous literature, Ranzini & Hoek (2017) found that gender plays no effect in the way individuals present themselves.

Another application of Goffman's work within impression management highlights the involvement of identity. Michikyan, Dennis & Subrahmanyam (2014) focus on this element in their research to assess whether individuals will present a real, ideal, or false self on Facebook. This study did a cross-analysis with the participants regarding their state of identity and found that individuals who had a coherent sense of self were also more likely to report that they present their real self on Facebook. Those with a less coherent sense of self and low self-esteem were more likely to present an ideal or false sense of self as to conform to what they believe is expected of them through social norms (Michikyan, Dennis & Subrahmanyam, 2015). The various elements presented in this literature highlight some key themes found in our research such as social interactions, self-monitoring, and identity.

Though the previous studies only focused on Facebook, other researchers chose to focus on impression management on other social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter. Starting with LinkedIn, Paliszkievics & Madra-Sawicka (2016) highlights the various tactics used by different users to present a positive self-presentation for job applications, such as building a complete platform with only relevant information such as experiences and skills highlighted, always including a professional picture, building a credible network, joining different groups and only providing high-quality and research-based information (208). Similarly to Ranzini & Hoek (2017), Marwick and Boyd (2010)

highlight the implication of the imaginary audience on Twitter with regard to impression management. Within their studies, they conclude that the main tactics used on Twitter are strategically targeting for different audiences, concealing or censoring subjects, and maintaining authenticity in their presentation (128). Further contemporary applications of Goffman's work demonstrate how self-presentation is reflected on other platforms worldwide.

3.1.1. Critiques of Goffman

In recent years, various academics have applied Goffman's presentation of self within the context of social media. While his theory is widely used within a similar context of this thesis, Goffman's perspective is not free of criticism. Amongst the many critiques, the most notable heavily criticize the theory as no more than a mere analysis rather than a formal theory, as Goffman only focuses on a "small part of the social without integrating a broader picture" (Picone, 2015:2). Picone (2015) further presents how Goffman's original work was only to observe the face-to-face interactions, (3) thus the application to social media might become complex, though it is still an exploratory route. Conversely, it has been argued that there is not "only face-to-face interactions [that] can create a mutual monitoring between the interactants, but synchronous continuous media such as phone calls and video links can also do the same" (Trung Kien, 2015:58; Rettie, 2009:425). As such, Trung Kien (2015) and Rettie (2009) also present how social media platforms can allow for the different elements of the presentation of self to be applied in a digital space within society. Within this research, Jenkins (2010) outlines how we can draw parallels with Goffman's original work to more contemporary comparisons with social media platforms in which he states the

presentation of self is more important than ever to understand within a social media context to understand the self (260). That being said, Billingham & Vasconcelos (2013) also describe how Goffman's theories and methods are now outdated and would require a remodeling to incorporate the new research and technology involved in the presentation of self (102).

These contradictions are only the beginning of the critiques surrounding the application of Goffman's work. Amongst some of the major critiques, Furseth & Repstad (2021) outline some clear reasons why Goffman has been the subject of criticism stating: "[he] has been criticized for being sloppy in his use of methods: little source criticism, little transparency, and empirical material of uncertain quality. Concerning research ethics, there are some things that stand out [as being unethical and would not pass current regulations. In which lacks] a certain cumulative quality" (Furseth & Repstad, 2021:24—25).

This critique surrounding Goffman's use of a "sloppy methodology" is not a new critique, as Psathas (1996) describes Goffman's conceptualizations as: "always [being] based on empirical exemplars, gathered from Lord knows what sources, here, there, and everywhere. But they were not systematically organized into conceptual framework that achieved a coherence and overall systematicity" (384). He furthers these words by describing Goffman as a "con man himself [in which] he uses all his wit and subtlety to convince us that he is not trying to be comprehensive, not taking a particular theoretical position, not adopting unquestioningly several theoretical assumptions, not trying to be consistent" (Psathas, 1996:384) or as Plotz (2019) describes him as a "straightforward describer of social occurrences" (442). It is further argued that Goffman wanted to

protect himself from “disconfirming” theory which lacked explanatory power (Manning, 2016:148) following a more anecdotal approach which lacks credibility (Raffel, 2013:166). These critiques continue by describing Goffman’s work as a “cynical picture of people as if they were like manipulative actors or participants in other forms of play” (Furseth & Repstad, 2021:25; Raffel, 2019).

Based on the current literature discourses about Goffman’s work, some academics supported his statements whereas others felt there was a lack of empirical evidence to support them. In this instance, while we agree with the critiques presented, we also believe that this perspective (critiques aside) presents interesting basis to understand interactions on Instagram. Thus, providing an interesting basis along with Bourdieu to discuss the platform as a whole.

3.2. Bourdieu’s Forms of Capital

Goffman presents how daily face-to-face interactions lead to the attainment of social status through the performance and the front. Though we believe this is accurate when conducting face-to-face interactions, we believe there is more involved when trying to attain a social status on social media platforms. Hence why it would be important to also acknowledge the presence and involvement of the theory on social capital. In this section of the theoretical foundation, we will discuss Bourdieu’s (1986) theory on the forms of capital, specifically focusing on cultural and social capital, and how this theory applies within the context of Instagram.

Over the last 50 years, sociologists such as Robert Putnam, James Coleman, and Pierre Bourdieu have developed their own perspectives on the definition of social capital and its components. In their works, Putnam emphasized the involvement of

politics (La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998) whereas Coleman focused on the economic involvement of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Though they both present interesting perspectives about social capital theory, for the purpose of this thesis we are most interested in Bourdieu's theory on the forms of cultural capital focusing on the involvement of social capital on social media. While Putnam and Coleman bring important elements to the theory, for the application to Instagram Bourdieu's perspective with the focus on social class and social status is most important as it is best suited to discuss the interactions social media platforms.

In his work on *The Forms of Social Capital* (1986), Bourdieu presents and defines key concepts regarding cultural, symbolic, and social capital and their involvement with social class and social status in society. Firstly, he defines *cultural capital* in threefold: the embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state, which are "the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, the form of cultural goods (i.e., pictures, books, etc.), and the educational qualifications associated to cultural capital" (17). Though all three states could prove interesting on social media studies, the key elements to consider for this embodied state and the objectified state. Within the embodied state, Bourdieu (1986) defines this further as the process of "embodiment, incorporation, which insofar as it implies a labour of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor" (18), which in turn leads to habitus which are ways of doing that cannot be transmitted instantly (i.e., wealth, status title) (18). He further argues that habitus and social capital are both acquired over a long period of time through social interactions passed down by each generation. Furthermore, he posits that acquiring this knowledge is often

performed unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1986:18). Thus, he presents that cultural capital leads to the security of class-divided societies, due to the fact that not all classes have the capacity (economically or culturally) to support future generations (Bourdieu, 1986:19). This conception of embodiment presented by Bourdieu demonstrates an interesting phenomenon associated to in-groups and out-groups, whereby individuals will either have the knowledge to advance or lack the knowledge and remain in the unknown. This is an important notion for us to consider when observing patterns and ways of doing on Instagram. Furthermore, we must also consider the involvement of the objectified state, especially with our study on Instagram. Bourdieu (1986) defines the objectified state as the collection of material objects that can be transmitted (19) and as such supports the embodied state through cultural capital gain. As Bourdieu (1986) concludes, cultural capital is the:

“appropriating of the product of accumulated labour in the objectified state which is held by a given agent, depends for its real efficacy on the form of the distribution of the means of appropriating the accumulated and objectively available resources; and the relationship of appropriation between an agent and the resources objectively available, and hence the profits they produce, is mediated by the relationship of (objective and/or subjective) competition between himself and the other possessors of capital competing for the same goods, in which scarcity—and through it social value—is generated.” (19)

Furthermore, the majority of the literature surrounding social media studies through Bourdieu’s theory focuses on cultural capitalism. That being said, for the purpose of this

study, we will focus on the involvement of social capital. Bourdieu (1986) defines *social capital* as:

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (21).

In other words, Bourdieu postulates that social capital is acquired through different interactions and connections between people in society. In addition, he presents that once these connections are attained, the individuals are often given a “credential” or a common name or title (Bourdieu, 1986:21). This is an important concept when studying individuals through social media, especially those trying to gain the title of “Influencer.” This is because those individuals will use different methods, such as using hashtags, likes, or the follow option (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) to make connections with people on the platform to attain the “credential” of being an influencer. Hence, we can begin to see how Bourdieu’s work is applicable within the context of Instagram and the notion of social status from within the platform.

It is of note that on social media platforms like Instagram, individuals form a network (or followers) where they might not directly know the individuals who follow them. Bourdieu (1986) acknowledges this disconnect as he states that the “relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchanges which help[s] to maintain them” (21). This further highlights the presence of symbolic

interactionism, as individuals will give meaning to exchanges based on the information that they know (Rohall, Milkie & Lucas, 2014). It is through these exchanges that we can begin to see Bourdieu and Goffman through the larger lens of symbolic interactionism and thus understand how the presentation of self and capital can form symbolic exchanges to understand the day-to-day interactions on social media platforms.

Following the notion that social capital and cultural capital are formed from the basis of interactions (or interactionism), Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that social capital is not inherently separate from economic gain (21). Rather, he postulates that the “[economic gain] which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes them possible” (Bourdieu, 1986:22). This notion of sociability is highlighted in Bourdieu’s work (1986) where he states that

“the reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed. This work, which implies expenditure of time and energy and so, directly, or indirectly, of economic capital, is not profitable or even conceivable unless one invests in it a specific competence (knowledge of genealogical relationships and of real connections and skill at using them, etc.) and an acquired disposition to acquire and maintain this competence, which are themselves integral parts of this capital.” (22–23)

And so, when we observe individuals on Instagram, there is continuous interactions between the performer and their followers through posting content, using specific captions, and by exchanging likes and comments. Thus, Instagram is a platform that

allows for constant sociability. Furthermore, when Bourdieu describes the notion of investing, we can see this with the performer individualizing or having a niche for their platform where they will focus on fashion, the outdoors, or athletics where they share with their followers their expertise or knowledge. It is through these interactions and investments that one gains social capital, which thus leads to an improved social status on a platform like Instagram.

3.2.1. Contemporary Applications

Within recent years, various researchers have used Bourdieu's theory on capital (cultural, symbolic, and social) to theorize the interactions on digital spaces like social media platforms. Di Stefano (2016) presents similar findings that "few scholars have employed Bourdieu's relational process to investigate and describe social practice taking place in social media environment" (148). Keeping this information in mind, this chapter of the thesis will present the limited contemporary applications of Bourdieu's work to social media platforms.

In his review of the current research available, Di Stefano (2016) presents how some researchers have chosen to observe the involvement of cultural capital on social media. He begins by describing the work of Couldry (2004), who posits that Facebook could be a cultural subfield, as each field on the platform has a "distinctive pattern of prestige and status and its own values" (169) which present forms of cultural capital on social media platforms. In a similar nature, Calderón Gómez (2021) presents an empirical study examining the three forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) within the digital space. In their study, they focused primarily on how the different forms of capital cause divide between different groups (Calderón Gómez, 2021). Taking into

consideration 30 in-depth interviews, they found that the economic capital caused the more inequality for digital capital due to lack of material access, whereas cultural capital was seen as a gain through a form of socialization on the platform (Calderón Gómez, 2021). They conclude that digital capital (i.e., social capital) is gained through social practices and social support (Calderón Gómez, 2021). Their study presents how there are different elements of capital presented within the interactions on online platforms. Furthermore, in an additional study focused on Bourdieu's (1986) theory on social capital, researchers focused on internet memes (images that are seen as typecasts that are known and recognized by all users) (Julien, 2015). Though his case study focused on internet memes, Julien (2015) presents an interesting find regarding the theory of social capital. He found that amongst all the theories on social capital, Bourdieu's theory proved the most promising to discuss interactions on social media platforms, as individuals will interact through shared knowledge on the platform, such as in the case of internet memes (Julien, 2015). In another perspective, Tan (2019) presents the application of Bourdieu (1986) to study personal image management (or also known as impression management) on social media. While this study touches on similar elements as ours, Tan (2019) focused primarily on how individuals present themselves through a Bourdieu-lens, as he presents symbolic capital as what is most important when maintaining a presentation of self. Tan (2019) focused on the individual whereas we will focus on the interactions on the platform, observing them from a macro standpoint rather than a micro standpoint. Though the studies are limited, we can begin to see how Bourdieu's theory on the forms of capital can provide for interesting discussions and further insights into the interactions on social media platforms. Thus, one of the

limitations of this research is the lack of contemporary applications, but this provides us with the opportunity to further the knowledge and insights into the forms of capital in social media.

3.2.2. Discussion on Bourdieu's Theory

Pierre Bourdieu is a well-known and respected theorist within the field of education and social sciences, with his notable works focusing on social class and capital. Though Bourdieu himself did not study the application of his theories in a digital space, other researchers have considered this possibility as we saw above. In this sub-chapter, we will conduct a comprehensive discussion on the various thoughts regarding his work—both the praise and critiques.

Ignatow & Robinson (2017) conducted a comprehensive literature review where they posit that Bourdieu's work can provide interesting insights into the field of digital sociology. They present that his theory allows for a level of interconnectedness not often seen which allows for it to "flourish" in this new digital age (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017). By this, they present the interconnected features are an "inseparability from the practice of empirical research, [an] ontological stance combining realism and social constructionism, and his familiarity with concepts developed in other disciplines and participation in interdisciplinary collaborative projects" (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017:950). All of which, they argue positions the theory to be applicable in various settings such as social media studies. Hesmondhalgh (2006) presents a similar argument that this theory on cultural capital is considered "superior" to some of the other options available. That being said, while most theorists argue the pertinence of the theory, there are still some academics that criticize Bourdieu's approach. Gilleard (2020) conducts a thorough

review of Bourdieu's forms of capital (1986) in which he notes the biggest criticism surrounds the different ways one could interpret the work itself. He clarifies that many of the criticisms surrounding Bourdieu's work has to do with the "terminological ambivalence and the ambiguous status of his 'capitals' as either 'social facts' or 'economic metaphors'" (Gilleard, 2020:5). As such, Gilleard (2020) suggests that this ambiguity causes different meanings and divisive interpretations in later applications. This criticism of ambiguity is further presented by Yang (2014) who states that within the ambiguity, we can realize a change within the framework where one can modify their understanding of the theory. Furthermore, Yang (2014) presents that the biggest weakness in the framework is the "inability to anticipate change". As such, many academics argued that Bourdieu's work is one of structural determinism. Yang (2014) suggests to look beyond this criticism and to find the "hidden essence" or meaning of the text. Like Yang (2014) and Gilleard (2020), we also argue that the ambiguity of the text is a limitation whereby it can be interpreted in various contexts. Though these are all valid critiques, one could argue that the ambiguity can also be a strength. While it makes for a more complex theory, the ambiguity allows for us to understand the theory in various contexts that may not have been present back when it was written, such as applying it through social media.

Based on the literature provided above, we can begin the discussion on how Bourdieu (1986) and Goffman (1959) discuss various forms of interactionism in peoples' daily lives. Though Goffman (1959) and Bourdieu (1986) present different perspectives, they do have one common point: the involvement of social class and social status. Both present, through different frameworks, how interactions lead to a form of social status or

social class. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1986) presents the notion that the interactions are done unconsciously, whereas Goffman (1959) presents that they are done with a purpose. Though they have their different thoughts and perspectives, we can nonetheless argue that these two foundations combined allow for us to gain a new perspective to understand Instagram. Thus, it is using these foundations that we will analyze and discuss what is presented on Instagram, and how it serves as a functionality for this thesis.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

This study explores the ways in which individuals interact with one another on the social media platform Instagram. These interactions take place between (in Goffman's terms) the performer and the audience through photos, captions, and comments which include the language of the platform: emotions/emojis, descriptive or informative text, and hashtags. This chapter will outline the chosen research approach for the study, the population sample used, and the method for data collection and analysis used to answer the research question of this study. In addition, this chapter will present the ethical considerations when conducting research on social media platforms as well as the methodological limitations. Lastly, we will engage in a discussion on reflexivity of the research process.

4.1. "Netnographic" Research Approach

The chosen research approach for this study is a netnographic analysis which is known as an established approach for studying social media platforms (Flick, 2014). Kozinets, Dolbec & Earley (2010) explain that the term "netnography" derives from the combination of two words "internet" and "ethnography", as this approach has similarities to ethnography, but also differs in many ways as well. In this section we will present, define, and explain the netnographic approach. In addition, we will present the advantages and disadvantages of this approach while also highlighting how this approach is the most appropriate for the purpose of this study.

The netnographic approach has been described in a similar manner as ethnography, as an observational method that provides the researcher with the ability to observe a social context and to describe what they are seeing within the environment

(Himpele, 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin, 2002). Additionally, this approach is described as a “flexible approach that allows for scholars to explore and explain rich, diverse, cultural worlds” (Gobrium & Holstein, 2014) and has been used in social media studies in recent years (Himpele, 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin, 2002).

Furthermore, Flick (2014) describes this approach as “naturalistic”, as it gives the ability for researchers to observe natural patterns of behaviour within a local context (2). While this description of netnography is quite similar to that of ethnography though there is one key difference. The key difference is that netnography is further defined within the context of “computer-mediated communications” than traditional face-to-face methods presented by an ethnographic approach (Kozinets Dolbec & Earley, 2010). More generally, it also differs due to the type of data collection procedures (i.e., the data needs to be focused on what is available on the platform), decisions about the field sites (i.e., choosing the best site with the most traffic/interactions and content relevant to the research question), and the decisions surrounding the type of data gathered (i.e., tweets, captions, emoticons) to answer the research questions (Kozinets, 2010).

Flick (2014) presents four (4) characteristics specific to the netnographic approach on social media. The four (4) characteristics are the following: 1) “increase field site accessibility; 2) increased communicative variety; 3) communication connectedness across multiple forms/fields; and 4) auto-archiving” (Flick, 2014:3). While these characteristics could prove to be a disadvantage for some, for this study they are rather considered advantages for various reasons. First, the increased field site accessibility was an advantage due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that reduced the ability to observe face-to-face interactions. In addition, the increased accessibility

allowed for us to gain data from a wide range of participants internationally.

Furthermore, the increase in communicative variety and connectedness across different platforms allows for us to gain insights for our research questions and lastly, the auto-archiving gave us the opportunity to gain more data points for analysis. Thus, taking into consideration these different elements of netnographic research, we can argue that this is the best approach to answer our research questions and to analyze content on Instagram.

4.2. Sample and Selection Process

For this research, the selection process utilized various categorizations from within the Instagram platform. Firstly, we needed to find a way of reducing the sample size without excluding anyone on the factor of race, gender, or social class. To achieve this, we chose to only include users who posed for a picture and used the #happy in their caption between January 1, 2022, and September 15, 2022. Additionally, for ethical purposes, the individuals were required to be above the age of 18 years. The use of #happy was randomly selected between the top 10 most used hashtags of 2021. When we searched the top 10 hashtags of 2021, we found the following: 1) #love, 2) #instagood, 3) #fashion, 4) #photooftheday, 5) #beautiful, 6) #art, 7) #photography, 8) #happy, 9) #picoftheday, and 10) #cute (Newberry, 2021). As we can note, #happy was the 8th option with appearing in approximately 878.8 million pictures. While we acknowledge that choosing the hashtag of “happy” could have caused a sample bias in the results, the hashtag itself was only used to search for individuals to narrow the participant sample. Furthermore, based on our assessment of the pictures and hashtags used, the hashtag “happy” itself was rarely used aside from the one picture

found when recruiting. This also provided us with a sample that had one commonality where they posted a picture of themselves with “hashtag” happy at least once. Using this hashtag also gave us a diverse range of individuals worldwide without limiting the sample to a specific group of individuals. In addition, the other possible hashtags were too general or too limited in scope for a proper sample of the population. Based on these factors, we thus argue that using this hashtag is nonetheless acceptable for the purpose of the study as a way to reduce the sample size without causing a sampling bias.

For this research, we initially wanted to obtain between five or six participants to analyze their pictures and to do a short interview. This number was based on previous literature which highlighted for qualitative research, the ideal range for participants can vary between 5 participants to 50 participants, though this depends on the type of research being conducted and the intricacies of the research or time restraints (Dworkin, 2012). This methodology and sample size were modified following a revision of the research question where we chose to focus on a content analysis only and to forgo the interviews. With the modified research question and method for analysis, we were able to increase the participant sample size to 15 participants.

The process to gain consent from 15 participants required many steps—many of which are a necessity when conducting research on social media platforms. First, it was important as a researcher to personalize my own Instagram page by making it publicly available and adding some personal pictures to verify my identity. In addition, it required that I create and build both my university researcher profile and a LinkedIn account. Following the creation of both these accounts and the personalization of my Instagram,

more participants agreed to partake in the research noting the credibility of the study and myself as the researcher. In all instances, the participants gave written consent either through a consent form or by direct message on Instagram and in a few instances, participants requested a favour in return such as a letter stating their participation, for me to like their pictures or follow them back, or for me to partake in their own research for their graduate studies. For the most part, the participants who opted to partake in the research had indicated that they had completed or were in the process of completing their own degrees (either bachelor or master's). In addition, it was found that while formal messages are required when using direct messages on social media platforms like Instagram, participants were more likely to respond to informal messages with the details of the study and my contact information. Following these steps and direct messaging over 400 participants, 15 participants agreed and consented to take part in the study. The table 1 below presents the demographic information of the participants and the information collected from their profiles.

Table 1. Participant Demographic

| PARTICIPANT ID | Followers | Posts | Location |
|-----------------------|------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1 | 2722 | 8 | Morocco |
| 2 | 7094 | 28 | Mexico |
| 3 | 1933 | 27 | India |
| 4 | 2515 | 40 | Turkey |
| 5 | 5940 | 24 | Dubai |
| 6 | 1348 | 28 | India |
| 7 | 3717 | 20 | Iran |
| 8 | 7666 | 61 | USA |
| 9 | 4318 | 27 | Poland |
| 10 | 1243 | 71 | USA |
| 11 | 1120 | 27 | Netherlands |
| 12 | 5174 | 24 | Greece |
| 13 | 2104 | 29 | France |
| 14 | 1148 | 23 | Croatia |
| 15 | 3274 | 39 | Argentina |
| TOTAL | | 476 | |

The demographic information that was retained was only the location, number of posts (pictures and reels), and number of followers of the participants. Other factors such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, or sex was not retained as it is not pertinent for this study though could prove interesting for future case studies. Furthermore, the username of the participants was anonymized for privacy and ethical considerations.

4.3. Data Collection and Analysis Strategy

In this section, we will present the data collection method and the method for analysis. The data collection came from the singular source being the Instagram platform, though there are various elements within the platform that were coded. The strategy for data collection involved the manual collection and coding of the content

posted on the participants' platform between the dates of January 1, 2022, to September 15, 2022. This included pictures and reels (short video clips), and the following content was coded: the captions and emojis posted by the participants and the emojis and comments made by the audience within the posts in reference to the picture or reel.

The method for analysis focuses on ethnographic principles surrounding observational methods and thematic coding to see patterns within the data. This study utilized similar methods of analysis as previous studies conducted on Twitter, Weibo, and Tumblr. Studies on this platform utilized a netnographic research method to gather information and to describe the tendencies seen on social media platforms of written comments and emojis, and the elements utilized by the performer such as captions and emojis (Ge-Stadnyk, 2021; Brett & Maslen, 2021). The method of analysis used is based on a speech-act analysis and a functional analysis but was modified to present a more descriptive and broad approach associated with a netnographic study. The analysis method and coding scheme are presented below:

Descriptive Analysis

As a netnographic study is to observe and describe the environment, we felt it was fitting to use a descriptive approach to describe what we were observing on Instagram. The method of analysis comprises two taxonomies. The first taxonomy is based on the speech-act analysis (Ge-Stadnyk, 2021) which focuses more on a sociolinguistic perspective. Based on the research presented by Herring et al. (2005) and Ge-Stadnyk, we developed the taxonomy that was best suited to analyze the content of Instagram. The taxonomy and coding scheme presented in table 2 provides

us a method to describe the types of captions used and the types of emojis used by the performer and the audience.

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis Taxonomy

| CATEGORIES | DEFINITIONS |
|-------------------------------|--|
| INFORM | Providing “factual” information that is verifiable in principle. |
| DESCRIBE | Describing the content that is presented. |
| QUOTE | Utilizing a quote from someone famous or an inspirational quote. |
| UNKNOWN MEANING | The caption is not relevant to the picture, the meaning of the caption is unclear as an outsider, or the caption is unable to be translated. |
| WITTY | A caption is characterized as “witty”: quick and inventive verbal humour. |
| STATEMENT | The participant is making a statement in their caption |
| REACTION | Show a positive, negative, or neutral response. |
| NO CAPTION | The picture or reel does not contain any caption. |
| EMPHASIS | Multiple (more than 2) of the same emojis were put to give emphasis to the meaning of the comment or caption. |
| ADDITIONAL INFORMATION | The emoji provides additional information that is not known directly from the caption, picture, or reel. |
| STANCE | Any emoji that is expressing an emotion. |
| CONCEPT | An emoji that is conveying a concept such as using a camera emoji to give credit to the photographer. |
| SUBSTITUTION | An emoji is substituting for a written comment or caption. |

This method of analysis used a thematic coding scheme to describe what we are seeing on Instagram. This method and coding scheme is a modified version that was adopted by Ge-Stadnyk (2021) on his study of emojis. This study used a very specific taxonomy to study emojis on different platforms whereas we are taking a more observational approach, as a descriptive analysis is more pertinent. Through this coding

scheme, we are able to observe the type of emojis used, along with the how they were used.

Utilizing a netnographic research method, we are able to observe the different patterns on Instagram focusing on the captions, the hashtags, and the types of emojis used. This method of analysis is key to assess the overall interactions on Instagram and to understand how all the elements available within the application lead to symbolic interactions amongst individuals. Thus, for the purpose of this study, using this method of analysis is key to understand the notion of the performance on Instagram. Furthermore, with these observations, we were able to gain a better understanding of the type of language used by the performers on Instagram by assessing the performance itself (picture, caption, hashtags, emojis, audience feedback within the performance) or from a Bourdieu perspective, studying the forms of cultural and social capital presented by individuals on Instagram. In addition, the descriptive analysis allowed for us to understand what the forms of social capital bring to the performance.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

There are no clear guidelines or consensus on what the appropriate measures are when conducting research on social media platforms. That being said, researchers throughout the years have tried to develop some guidelines and best practices as presented by Ravn, Barnwell & Barbosa Neves (2020). In their study on the blurred lines between public and private boundaries on Instagram, they found that while individuals will post their content and make their platforms public, these platforms are not necessarily public domain as they could go to a private account at any given time (Ravn, Barnwell & Barbosa Neves, 2020:44). In addition to this, they present a blurred

line where in most institutions, if the participant has their profile public, the consent of the participant is not required for the study (Ravn, Barnwell & Barbosa Neves, 2020). That being said, as Tiidenber (2018) presents: “Just because something is technically accessible and collectable, doesn’t mean it should be accessed and collected”. As such, following on this notion and following basic ethical guidelines, Ravn, Barnwell & Barbosa Neves (2020) propose that for research on social media platforms, researchers should still engage with the principles surrounding consent, privacy, and ownership (44). Thus, following a similar practice, we chose for this study to anonymize the usernames while also asking for written consent from participants for us to analyze the content they have posted. This ensures a certain degree of anonymity to avoid participant tracing while also following the ethical considerations of consent, privacy, and ownership. Furthermore, for any screenshots shared in this thesis, all the usernames will be removed and for any pictures shared, participants were asked additional consent for use of the specific picture on a case-by-case basis. In the case where a picture was used, all identification factors (username, names) were removed. This follows the ethical considerations brought forward by Ravn, Barnwell & Barbosa Neves (2020) and follows similar methods for anonymizing as Brett & Maslen (2021).

4.5. Methodological Limitations

This study presented with few methodological limitations, however, those present were primarily regarding the intentions behind the comments, emojis, and captions that were incomprehensible without prior knowledge of the participant or the commentator. As such, there was one category in both the speech act and the functional analysis that were marked as unknown. In this category certain emojis like this: 🗨️ that without

additional knowledge of the participant or the commentator, the meaning was unclear. As an outsider, the only way to assess the intentions or meaning behind such emoticons is to ask the individuals directly through interviews. This would also have given us insights into the intentions or the backstage of the performance. That being said, for the purpose of this study, we will focus primarily on the front stage of the performance—what is presented and understood from the presentation. Thus, in assessing the front stage of the performance, interviews are not necessary.

Furthermore, one final limitation found when conducting studies on social media platforms is the ability of the performer or the commentators to delete, alter, or hide content. It was noted on a few occasions while collecting data that some participants had chosen to hide how many individuals liked their pictures or they had deleted posts (i.e., pictures or reels) on their page. To mitigate this risk of altered data by viewing it directly on the platform, screenshots were taken from all the posts between January 1, 2022, and September 15, 2022. These same screenshots were used for the entire analysis. In addition, participants have the ability to delete any comments made under their posts. Though we are unable to confirm whether participants have deleted any comments prior to the collection of data, we must acknowledge the limitation and possible implications for the findings of this study.

4.6. Reflexivity

Following any form of research, it is important to conduct a reflection of the overall process and any modifications that were done over the course of the study. There are quite a few elements that required modifications and adaptation in order to achieve the final results of the study such as the modification of the research question.

We noticed that initially the research question was too narrow in scope and so we modified it to be able to collect more data and information. In addition, we were required to expand the number of participants in order to acquire more data and more accurate results. Furthermore, we initially had wanted to utilize a specific method of analysis (functional analysis and speech-act analysis), though following the collection of the data, we noticed this methodology proved to be too narrow in scope when conducting a netnographic study. We thus expanded our methodology to consider more of an observational approach. In addition, we noticed that in our request for participants, we often had to “return the favour” whereby individuals requested we follow them back or liked their pictures. Though this process required many modifications to fit the needs of a social media study, we nonetheless were able to achieve our goals for the study. Lastly, as someone who actively uses social media, it is important to consider our own perspectives and thoughts on the platform, even more so as we consider the notion of inferences. By this, we are referring to the fact that we were socialized within these platforms and so many of the emojis, hashtags, and types of comments were recognized as normal, and we often understood what an emoji meant based on previous knowledge of the platform. That being said, when we were observing the interactions on the platform, we tried to forgo our previous knowledge and see the comments, emojis, and captions at face value within the context of the picture and other comments. It is through this perspective that we were able to gain some interesting insights and also mitigate personal biases.

CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

In this chapter, we will present our observations followed by an analytical assessment of the findings. Each section within the chapter will first start by outlining results from the study, which will then be followed by a discussion how we can understand these results through a Goffman-Bourdieu lens. The data presented in table 4 below presents the number of posts (reels and pictures), the number of hashtags and the number of comments for each participant from January 1, 2022, to September 15, 2022. It is with this information that we will conduct a netnographic study focusing on observational methods based on the themes highlighted in the methodology.

Table 4. Data Collected

| PARTICIPANT ID | POSTS | HASHTAGS | COMMENTS |
|-------------------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | 8 | 78 | 220 |
| 2 | 28 | 90 | 150 |
| 3 | 27 | 208 | 424 |
| 4 | 40 | 775 | 235 |
| 5 | 24 | 376 | 163 |
| 6 | 28 | 351 | 777 |
| 7 | 20 | 224 | 669 |
| 8 | 61 | 2133 | 843 |
| 9 | 27 | 517 | 715 |
| 10 | 71 | 207 | 245 |
| 11 | 27 | 134 | 100 |
| 12 | 24 | 259 | 216 |
| 13 | 29 | 240 | 556 |
| 14 | 23 | 177 | 135 |
| 15 | 39 | 437 | 309 |
| TOTAL | 476 | 6206 | 5757 |
| AVERAGE PER POST | | 13.04 | 12.1 |

As we can see from the table, the observations were gathered from 15 participants. There are a total of 476 posts (pictures or reels and their caption) that were observed and 5757 comments that were also analyzed. We will first present the findings that inform us about the performer, Instagram as a space, and discuss some of the interactions that take place on the platform. Secondly, we will present the language used on Instagram, and lastly we will discuss the notion of inferences while also considering in-groups versus out-groups and social class. Each of these elements presents some interesting findings—some that are confirming what we already know whereas others are presenting a new perspective on how we can understand Instagram as a new social space.

5.1. The Performer, the Space, and their Interactions

In his work, Goffman (1959) presents the interesting perspective on how we are all actors performing on a stage for an audience in our daily interactions. While Goffman highlighted the notion of the performance based on face-to-face interaction, it is nonetheless of interest to observe how we as individuals interact in a separate and “new” social space. As the first social media platform was created in 1997 (Facebook), researchers are continuously developing on the insights and knowledge of the workings and dynamics of this “new” form of social space—especially as each social media platform can be considered its own social media space with its own ways of doing.

Instagram has a range of options from main content to biographical content, to highlights or shared memories. Within the main content, individuals can post pictures and reels (short videos) onto their pages, and in most cases (as we saw above) there is a caption associated with the picture or reel and hashtags. These individuals will often

as well have a theme to their pages, such as the content is focused on modelling pictures, day-to-day activities, travel, or fishing. All of these components available within the platform allow for the individual to put on a performance and a front—one that they wish to share publicly or as publicly as they allow. By this we mean that individuals have the option to make their profile public and available to everyone using the platform to see their posts or they can “privatize” their content so only those they allow to follow them can see their profile. That being said, someone can have thousands of followers yet have a private page or privatize their page at certain times then make it public again. This notion of private versus public can be modified by the individual owning the page, which demonstrates a level of control that the performer has over the performance. Additionally, the performer has the control and ability to delete unwanted comments or to hide the number of likes. This notion of the putting a performance, a front, by controlling audience feedback and perception are key when we understand how the notion of the presentation of self is portrayed on Instagram. As Goffman would describe, each individual using the platform is a mere actor in the performance—either as someone part of the audience or as the performer. Based on our findings, the performance on Instagram primarily takes the form through the posts of pictures and reels, their captions, the use of emojis and hashtags.

5.1.1. Results

When we conducted our netnographic search, we primarily observed the performance of the actors (i.e., participants) in two ways: 1) what types of captions did they use? And 2) what type of emojis were used in the captions? Based on our observations, we can note that out of 476 pictures and amongst the 15 participants,

there were a total of 473 (99.36%) captions where only 3 posts had no captions. Of these captions, we observed some that were informative, descriptive, witty¹, that presented a statement, or that we were unsure of the meaning as it couldn't be translated. In some instances, participants only used an emoji as the caption. These observations can be seen below in table 6. It is important to note that some of the captions fit within more than one coding theme, such as being both informative and witty or descriptive and informative. In those instances, they were coded twice. The types of captions used are presented in table 5 below.

Table 5. Types of Captions


| TYPE OF CAPTION | NUMBER OF TIMES | PERCENTAGE |
|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| INFORM | 71 | 14.61 |
| DESCRIBE | 87 | 17.90 |
| QUOTE | 78 | 16.05 |
| UNKNOWN MEANING | 7 | 1.44 |
| WITTY | 173 | 35.60 |
| STATEMENT | 31 | 6.38 |
| SUBSTITUTION | 39 | 8.02 |

As we can see in table 5, the caption type that most used was a witty caption and was used by participants in 173 (35.60%) of the 476 posts, which is almost double the next closest type of caption used. This suggests that individuals are more likely to post short, witty comments as a way of presenting oneself in a certain manner—one that is likeable

¹ Witty in this sense of defined as “full of clever humor or wit” or something that is “amusingly or ingeniously clever in concept or execution” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

and possibly smart or funny. Based on these results, we can also notice that a descriptive caption (one where individuals write where they are or what they are doing) was used in 87 captions (17.90%) whereas quote was used in 78 captions (16.05%). In most types of captions, we observe that the performers will present small pieces of information of their daily lives or about themselves that they wish to share. Each picture being part of a larger front relating to the ideal image or perception that performers wish to give to their audience. Small pieces of information about the poster can be inferred through the captions such as a participant defining themselves as a working woman, for example. Other participants mentioned their religious beliefs, some presenting key milestones (i.e., graduating), presenting their favourite items, or even presenting a past trip they have been on or are currently on. Below are some examples of the types of captions used by participants on Instagram:

Witty: **Participant 13** Working Woman

Descriptive: **Participant 3** I'm smiling cos god is always teaching
me to be strong 

Quote: **Participant 15** 'Change is the law of life. And those who look only
to the past or present are certain to miss the future.' John F.
Kennedy

Informative: **Participant 8** Happy Valentine's Day, everyone!
 ♥ Check out my new @toroeeeyewear
 sunglasses! I'm legit obsessed. That's all!
 Have a great day! 😊

Statement: **Participant 9** Miss you Roma 😭🇮🇹❤️

5.1.2. Discussion

As we can see within these examples, the captions are short yet give insights into the participants—some more subtle than others. In each post, caption and emoji are used, and participants give insights into their daily lives through precise actions. These actions could be interpreted as impression management techniques—more specifically the different personality traits involved. As we previously noted in chapter 2, Rosenberg & Egbert (2011) present how individuals on social media platforms will present different personality traits such as affinity-seeking, Machiavellianism, and self-monitoring. Though we cannot confirm these specific traits in the participants, we postulate that participants will use specific captions to achieve certain goals associated with the personality traits presented by Rosenberg & Egbert (2011).

As we can see within each caption, the participants provide information about themselves. The types of captions used could be related to personality traits, or demonstrate a front where the audience witnessing the performance can make inferences about the performance. As Goffman (1959) presented, the audience will make **inferences** about a performance based on what they already know about the

person or situation. We would argue that through these captions, participants will share their performance and from there, participants will form conclusions and react based on what they already know or can observe from the performance. As we know, social media platforms like Instagram are large, with many individuals on the platform. This creates a new dynamic where individuals from around the world can follow someone else without prior knowledge of who this person is in real life. Only inferences can be made based on the information given, and the majority of the information participants divulge is through the captions. An example of this can be seen here:

What a special and unique experience... 🎓 I really want to say a huge thank you to all the people at the for helping me to achieve my goals.

Photo Credit:

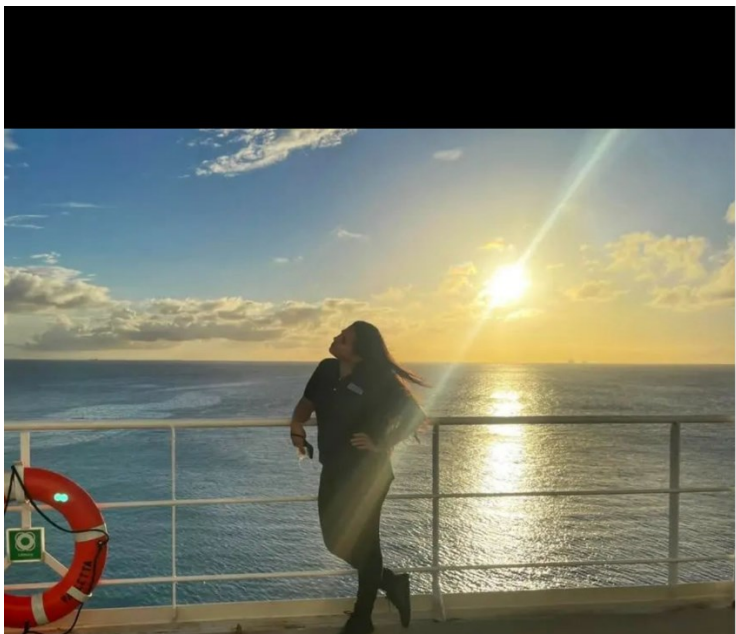


#manchester #mastersdegree #digitalmarketing #mcrmetgrad
#university #skyisthelimit

As we see in the example above, through the captions, emojis, and the hashtags, we can infer that the participant graduated a master's degree in digital marketing at Manchester University. As an observer with limited knowledge about the participant, we were able to make these inferences based on the caption and hashtags used. While we cannot confirm the inferences made by the audience; we could hypothesize that the audience on Instagram will rely on inferences to form their perception of the performer.

As participants have the ability to control what they put on the platform and have the ability to delete anything unwanted within their page, this allows for participants to give a modified version of the events—one defined and controlled by the performer. This notion of control on the performance and the types of captions posted demonstrates a **level of curation** that goes beyond the typical in-person barriers. By this, we mean that individuals will share a selected version of themselves. This version of themselves is what we could argue is the “ideal” version they wish to share with their audience as seen in the two examples below.

Example 1:



"I may be stupid, to believe in honour, friendship and loyalty without price, but these are virtues to be cherished for without them we are no more than beasts roaming the land"

#photo #photography #photographer #photooftheday #sun #sunset #friendshipquotes #friends #loyalty #amazara #honour #travel #travelphotography #experience #explore #enjoy #freedom #free #honesty #transparency #love

Edited · 35w



ce Reply

View replies (2)



Reply

View replies (1)



Example 2:



Who's ready to get back out on this ice this weekend? Because I AM 🤖

The last few weekends have been pretty cold. For those who don't know, I have a condition where I am very sensitive to the cold. It's hard for me to go out ice fishing alone because at times I need help with tip ups and even zippering my own jacket due to my hands losing all strength. I've been wearing my _____ excursion bib, gloves, fuzzy neck snield, and sweatshirts and they have been helping so much!

Although the cold may hurt, ice fishing has probably become my favorite form of fishing. Don't get me wrong, being on my kayak on warm summer days is my happy place, but there's nothing like running to a tip-up when the flag goes off, or jigging up fish on my _____ ice rod. Being the first one out on the ice to watch the sunrise, then staying out all day to witness the sunset over the ice is an amazing feeling. Even though it get hard with being so ridiculously cold, I'm proud of myself for powering through it so I can enjoy what I love. Never going to let my condition stop me. 🙌

#icefishing #bassfishing #fishing #ice #monsterbass #fxrprofitfish #hookedonfxr #bass #largemouthbass #largemouth #newhampshire #fishnh #pond #pondfishing #auger #fishma #fishmassachusetts #massachusetts #fishnewhampshire

Edited · 35w

Nice 🤖

35w 1 like Reply

— View replies (1)

👍👍👍

35w 1 like Reply

— View replies (1)

Awesome catch!!

Congratulations. 🙌👍👍👍

35w 1 like Reply

— View replies (1)

Tight lines looks

cold 🤖 it's definitely time to come to Florida

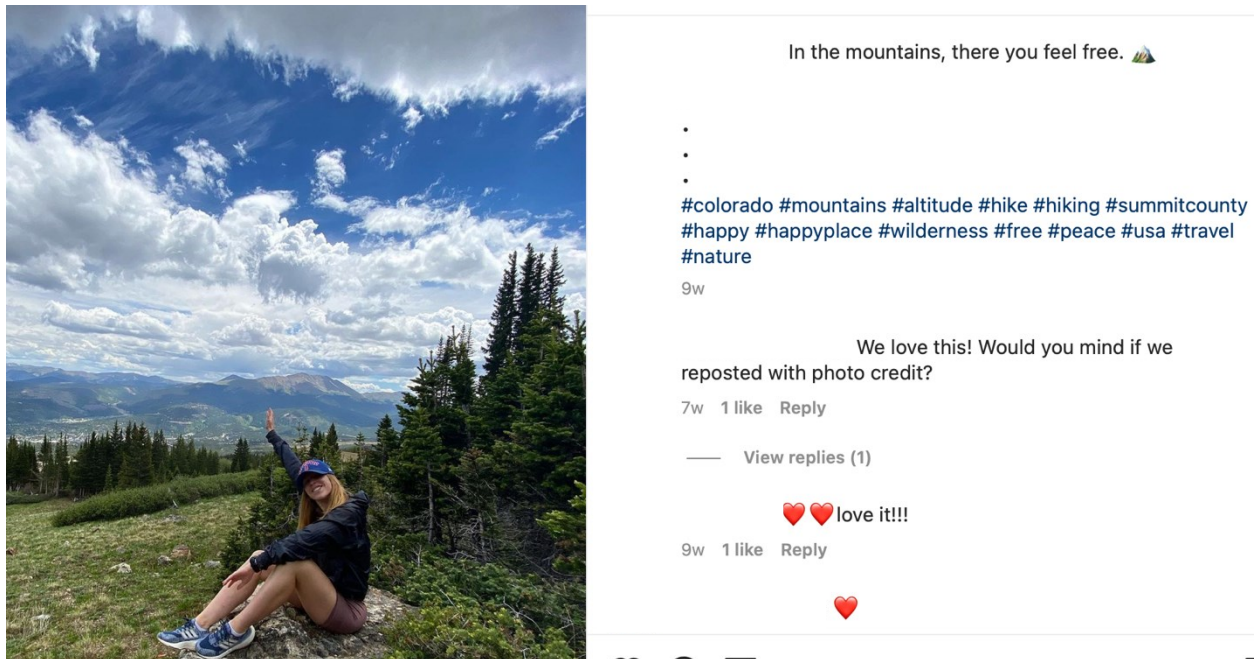
35w 1 like Reply

Goffman himself describes how individuals will put different fronts in different situations as a way of presenting the best presentation of self—one suited to the time and place of the interaction. Unlike in person, social media platforms like Instagram are one very large stage (i.e., space) rather than many smaller stages. Additionally, unlike in person, Instagram provides the opportunity for individuals around the world to interact with one another through curated content. Similar to Goffman's process of idealization, we could argue that the curated content on Instagram follows the principle of "appropriate conduct" found on the platform. We had observed that while the participants are from different countries worldwide, they followed similar patterns in the types of content curated. Based on these observations, we could hypothesize that the level of curation

found on the platform could represent what Goffman considered “**idealization**”.

Furthermore, with all 15 participants demonstrating similar patterns (as seen below), we could argue that this method of curation **is part of the culture** on Instagram as a way of presenting oneself in this social space.

Example 3:



Example 4:



🇮🇳 freedom ride

.....

•

•

.....

•

••

•••

••••

#cycling #indipndencedayindia #aug15 #freedomride
 #75thindependenceday #kerala #malappuram #chavakkad
 #btwin #happness #sportsman #bhfyp #juventus #realmadrid
 #barca #football

5w

_ Who is this star 🤔🤔

5w 2 likes Reply See original

❤️

5w 2 likes Reply

🔥

5w 1 like Reply

😂

5w 1 like Reply

Example 5:



Sunday in Lille 🌤️

•

•

•

•

#model #modeling #lille #lillegirls #frenchgirl #coffee
 #shooting #pictureoftheday #모델 #외국인 #외국인모델

Edited · 31w

Trop jolie

27w 1 like Reply See translation

#classy ✨

30w 1 like Reply ...

Cette photo 🍷

31w 1 like Reply See translation

•••

•••

•••



5.2. The Language of Instagram

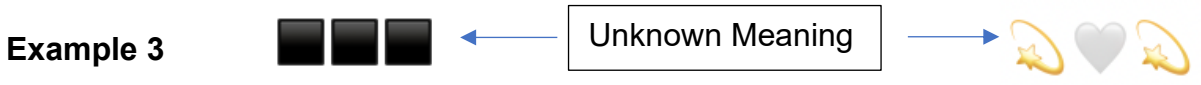
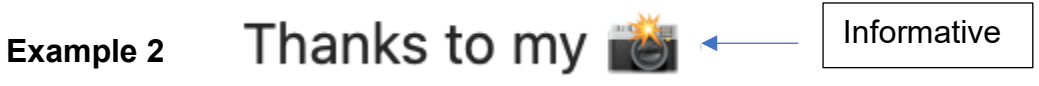
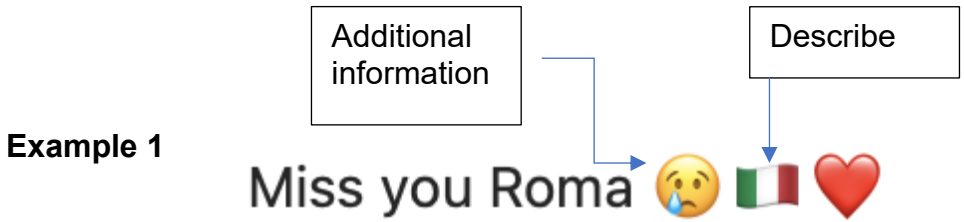
The process of curation presents the notion that we will assemble details, settings, and props that are appropriate to the performance. As we began to see above, there are certain ways that individuals will behave on Instagram, and one of those common ways is through the language used on the platform. As we noted above, the performers will often use witty or descriptive language when interacting with their audience. Other than actual written language, we were surprised with the results demonstrating the number of emojis used by both the performer and the audience. In this section of the analysis, we will outline our observations regarding the language and use of emojis on Instagram. We will also present how these observations could be associated with symbolic exchanges within the interactions on the platform.

5.2.1. Results

As we have seen in the examples above, in most captions, there were emojis present. Based on our results, we found that within 473 captions, we observed that participants had used emojis 692 times. The types of emojis varied but they primarily fit within the categories of informative, descriptive, as giving additional information, or the meaning was unknown without further knowledge of the situation or participant. The results are presented in table 6 below. Furthermore, we also present some examples of each type of emoji (i.e., informative, descriptive, additional information, unknown) that participants had used and how they were coded.

Table 6. Emojis used in the Captions

| EMOJI | NUMBER OF TIMES | PERCENTAGE |
|------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| INFORM | 47 | 6.79 |
| DESCRIBE | 312 | 45.09 |
| ADDITIONAL INFORMATION | 48 | 6.94 |
| UNKNOWN MEANING | 285 | 41.18 |



As we can see within the results, participants were more likely to use emojis that were descriptive and added a visual description that matched to the theme of the picture (45.09%) or that had an unknown meaning (41.18%) from the perspective of an “outsider”. What is interesting with these results is that we observe there is a sense of

universal understanding of what the emojis mean in most cases. Though some can be a bit ambiguous at times where the meaning varies, the general meaning remains the same. The emojis themselves provide a visual description or itself could form a witty caption that symbolizes the picture. An example of this is while, the following: 🇮🇹❤️🇮🇹

Though we cannot confirm the meaning related to the picture, we can note that it means stars and hearts—presenting a general positive meaning. Furthermore, when the participant used this caption in their post, they were dressed in white so we could infer that the white heart symbolizes their white clothes. That being said, not all emojis have ambiguous meaning. This is seen in example 1 above. The participant said they miss Rome and added a sad face with a flag of Italy. The meaning is quite clear in that instance from an outsider perspective. Furthermore, we can see that the use of these emojis each have their own significant meaning within the context, leading to a form of **symbolic interaction** on the platform. We therefore wonder if emojis are used as a universal method of symbolic interaction on Instagram? Based on the observations overall, we begin to hypothesize that emojis form a component of the language of Instagram, as interactions are numerically dominated with the use of emojis. This further presents the possibility that within the social space of Instagram, it could be seen as a norm to respond using emojis as a way of symbolic interaction and shared meaning between the performer and the audience.

As previous research indicates, hashtags and emojis are part of the larger discussion on the meaning and importance of the interaction on social media platforms (Page, 2012; Ge-Stadnyk, 2021). As noted in table 4 above, in 476 pictures between 15 participants, there were 5757 comments posted by the audience where we further argue

this notion of the use of emojis as part of the language of Instagram. Within the 476 posts, there were 3017 (52.41%) comments that had no text and were only comprised of emojis or a substitution for text, whereas 2740 (47.59%) comments contained at least some text with or without emojis. Further observations showed that between all examined comments, there were a total of 8625 emojis (or also known as reactions) observed. This emoji to comment ratio demonstrates how emojis are used by the audience to convey meaning. As previously mentioned, we observed that participants used different types of emojis to convey a meaning through symbolic interactions. Alternatively, we could argue that the audience themselves is conducting their own performance that is in line with their own personal goals. Thus, these symbolic interactions can also be observed in the comments presented by the audience through the types of emojis used, which provides a different perspective than that of the performer. What we can hypothesize is an extension that goes beyond the simple exchanges between the performer and audience—one that is rather a constant exchange of symbolic interactions, and a maintenance of their own performance. We will explore this further by describing the observations seen on Instagram in Table 7. In this instance, it is important to note that the emoji descriptors given in the table were provided by Apple and not necessarily the meaning given within Instagram itself. By this, we mean that certain emojis (ex. 🙄) were placed in the category of unknown meaning as what was given on the platform did not signify the same meaning attributed by Apple. This emoji 🙄 was often used by participants and was originally named “bead” by Apple programmers. However, when used by participants (both the performer and the audience) on the platform, it means the evil eye. In this instance, while our

observations are based on what is defined by those creating these emojis, we can note that some emojis and their meanings go beyond simple design and are rather symbolic interpretations that are used within the platform, given meaning by those using it. We will further explore this notion of embedded communication in section 5.2.2. Below, there are examples of the different ways emojis are used on the platform.

Example 1: **Audience 1** Good dog 🐶
14w 1 like Reply

Example 2: **Audience 2** We like your post very
much can we put your post on our page dm
me 📧
12w Reply

Example 3: **Audience 3** Let's shoot sometime! 😊📸

Example 4: **Audience 4** 🪝🐟🎣👊

Table 7. Emojis used by the audience

| EMOJI | NUMBER OF TIMES | PERCENTAGE |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| HEART (❤️) | 2342 | 27.15 |
| FIRE (🔥) | 1534 | 17.79 |
| SMILING FACE WITH HEART EYES (😍) | 1739 | 20.16 |
| UNKNOWN MEANING (🗳️) | 1340 | 15.54 |
| HANDS RAISED IN CELEBRATION (🙌) | 321 | 3.71 |
| CLAPPING HANDS (👏) | 470 | 5.45 |
| SMILING FACE (😊 😊) | 92 | 1.07 |
| SMILING FACE WITH HEARTS (😘) | 143 | 1.66 |
| THUMBS UP (👍) | 67 | 0.78 |
| FACE BLOWING A KISS (😘) | 129 | 1.50 |
| POINTING (👉 👈) | 90 | 1.04 |
| OK HAND SIGN (👌) | 52 | 0.60 |
| DESCRIPTIVE EMOJI (🐶 🐠) | 306 | 3.55 |

Note: the descriptor given to the emoji is how Apple describes them.

Based on these results presented in table 7, we can observe that the audience used 8625 emojis in total in their 5757 comments. We observed that the most used emoji was the heart symbol. This symbol was used a total of 2342 times which totals to approximately 27.15% of the total emojis count. The second most used emoji was the smiling face with heart eyes which was used 1739 times for a total of 20.16%; followed by fire emoji which was used 1534 times for a total of 17.79%. It is an interesting observation that over 50% of the emojis used by the audience within the comments of the posts of these 15 participants focused primarily on support or praise—essentially demonstrating a positive reaction with only 3 types of emojis out of 13. If we observe this notion of support or praise on a larger scale, we would observe all the emojis that fall within this category. This includes the hands raised in celebration, clapping hands, smiling face, thumbs up and face blowing a kiss which was observed a total of 6837 (79.27%) emojis. Furthermore, if we observe simply the emojis that could represent “love” focusing on the following emojis: heart, smiling face with heart eyes, smiling face with hearts and the face blowing a kiss; we observed a total of 4353 (50.46%) of love reactions.

Furthermore, we noted that emojis were also used repetitively within a comment to emphasize the message. We posit that this emphasizes the meaning they are trying to present, as in the example below where three commentators wrote multiple hearts to indicate more appreciation than a single heart.

comments can be a way for the audience themselves to maintain their own self-presentation as they are equally a performer in the performance. There were, on the other hand, emojis that are considered more “neutral” such as the pointing emoji, the OK hand sign, or the descriptive emojis. In total these emojis count for only 448 (5.19%) of the emojis observed in total. Furthermore, when we observed the types of emojis that were associated with written comments, we were able to divide them into two themes: emojis that conveyed a stance and those that conveyed a concept. Of these two themes, we observed that 2261 (82.52%) of the emojis conveyed a stance such as an emotion of an attitude (i.e., love, praise, happiness) whereas 479 emojis (17.48%) that conveyed a concept such as pointing to a link or using a mailbox emoji to convey that they sent a message in their direct message inbox. Based on these findings, we observed that in general, the written comments and emojis often conveyed a stance that is usually positive in meaning. The majority of comments (whether it be written or emojis) generally provided a performance demonstrating support and praise. Furthermore, we noticed that concepts were less often used, but when they were, it was to make a request to the performer, such as a request for collaboration or to share their pictures.

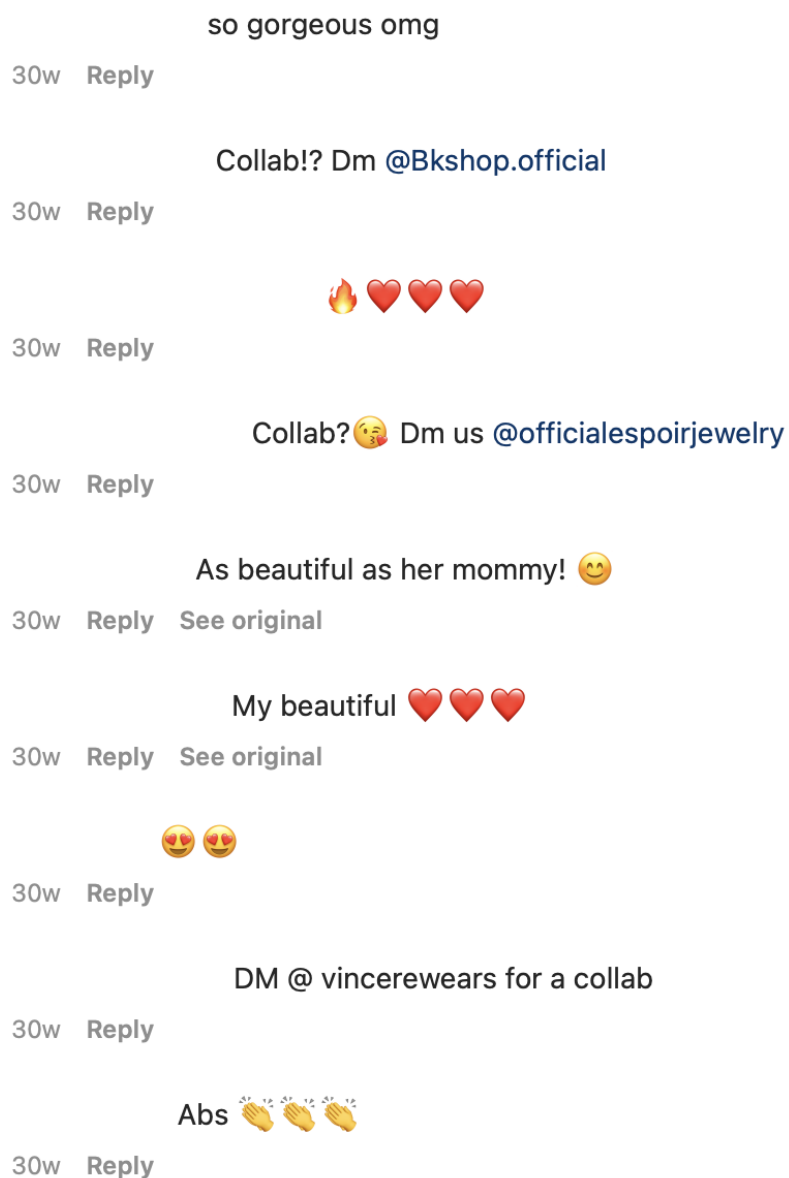
5.2.2. Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that individuals will interact with one another through symbolic interactions. As we noted above, the emojis are given descriptors by the Apple and in most cases, they are used in the same way given. However, in other instances (such as the evil eye), the emojis are given a completely different meaning for those using it on Instagram. Furthermore, the modification to the meaning given by the users

demonstrates a sort of consensus within the platform, such as the bead emoji meaning the evil eye. This observation is further supported by the diversity in the participants for this study. As most participants are from different countries from around the world, with different languages, values, and beliefs, we observed similar findings amongst all the participants. On the other hand, we noticed that the majority of the unknown applications of the emojis from our perspective came from the three participants in India and in Iran. The difference noted can be for various reasons, though we hypothesize that the differences stem from a cultural dialect within Instagram itself. These communities may have appropriated the meaning of the emoji to their own culture on the platform. This can also depend on a different meaning attributed by the Apple programmers compared to those who use the emoji. This can further be supported with the differences in the types of individuals present on the platform, where various groups are formed based on different subcultures. As previously mentioned, individuals can personalize their pages to tailor the content to a specific theme, and these themes are different subcultures within the platform. If we have the possibility of different subcultures within the platform, there is also the possibility of different dialects. Just like in a physical in-person setting, we can further present how Instagram takes the form of its own social space with its own cultures, subcultures, and means of communication.

Whenever we observe tendencies on any social media platforms, we must acknowledge the ways in which symbolic interactions take place. We previously highlighted how the performer interacts with the audience through their captions whereas here, we hypothesize that the audience interacts with the performer through the audience feedback. This leads to what we would consider trading in positivity as a

form of social capital on Instagram. By this we mean that individuals will communicate and exchange through positive emojis or requests for collaborations such as the example below.



As Bourdieu (1989) stipulates, individuals will interact with one another as a means of exchanges to maintain their status. One of the ways individuals on Instagram maintain their status is through the type of language used. If the language is conforming

to the platform, we can hypothesize that individuals will maintain their status or raise their status through language. And so, while we observe this pattern of trading in positivity, we can see that the performer will write captions that follow a consensus, whereas the audience will communicate back through positivity as well. This is not only a form of symbolic capital as Bourdieu would note, but also a way of maintaining individuals' status and the performance through means of social capital—the social capital being the continuous exchanges themselves.

An additional component of the language on Instagram that contributes to the increase of social capital is the use of hashtags. As we observed in our findings, participants had used 6206 hashtags in total which averages to approximately 13 hashtags per post, though in some cases we did observe that participants used little to no hashtags. As previous research indicates (Page, 2012), hashtags provide a way for participants to be found within the platform (as we did to find our participants with the #happy). Furthermore, we could argue that hashtags form a part of the language used on Instagram, as in most cases participants did use hashtags to further describe the captions and the post itself. Thus, while we often consider hashtags as only being a search method, we can look beyond this typical description to highlight how it forms a component of the Instagram language along with emojis. Below is an example of the hashtags used by participants.

• Be The Energy You Want To Receive •  

#athens #greece #blackoutfit #style #fashion #insta
#instagram #photooftheday #nikon #kifisia #me #instagram
#instaphoto #instapic #instamood #vsco #vscocam #attitude
#blacksuitsme #zara #lightroom #photoshop #hawkersco
#igers #instafashion #instadaily

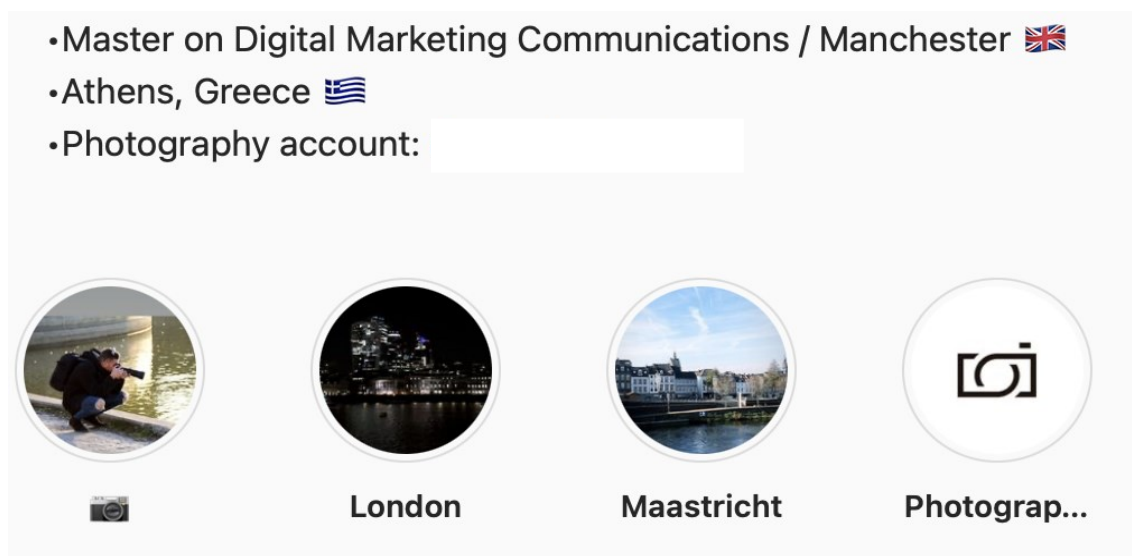
We can further observe that individuals who use more hashtags do not necessarily have more followers, although hashtags should provide easier accessibility to find their profile. This, however, depends on the type of hashtags they use to increase their visibility. Based on our observations, many of the individuals who have a higher number of followers were more likely to use the most common hashtags of 2021. These hashtags include #photooftheday (used in over 1 billion posts) or #picoftheday (used in over 698 million posts) in combination with more specific hashtags tailored to their page or picture content. That being said, even hashtags that were more tailored to specific content were nonetheless some of the more popular options that people searched. Furthermore, we observed that some individuals used fewer hashtags, which we could hypothesize is the reason for fewer followers. While we cannot confirm the association between the followers and the number of hashtags, we can begin to wonder through these associations whether individuals who use more hashtags really do gain more visibility. With our findings, **we can hypothesize that hashtags form one of the components of Instagram's language**, and while we were unable to study hashtags

fully, we wonder if the individuals who use the “appropriate” hashtags will gain more social capital over time and gain more social status.

In conclusion, when we observe the patterns found in the captions and comments, we can begin to hypothesize that the language of Instagram focuses on witty captions, emojis, and hashtags. We were also able to observe that the participants and audience seemed to communicate in symbolic interactions with shared meaning between each other, which seemed to be generally positive in nature either focusing on praise or appreciation. Furthermore, we are able to observe what seemed like different **subcultures within Instagram through the types of emojis used and the different hashtags. This supports the hypothesis that Instagram is in and of itself its own social space—with its own culture and its own symbolic interactions.** We can lastly conclude that while we were unable to understand what some of the captions, emojis, or hashtags meant, these form nonetheless an important subculture within the platform itself. We can thus begin to see Instagram as its own social space with its own technicalities, where individuals will form part of their performance around language and subsequently gain social capital in doing so.

5.3. We live by Inferences: In-Groups Versus Out-Groups

As Goffman (1959) presents, we live every day by making inferences on the situations we experience. We make decisions on the basis of how much we know about a situation and our previous experiences. Based on the observations about the interactions between the participants and their audience on Instagram, when we first look at someone’s profile page, we can see the following:



As we can see in this example, the demographic information, or what Instagram calls the biography, provides the user with 150 characters to describe themselves. In most cases, the users (or the performer) will share information like their employment, where they are from, or sometimes just a witty statement about themselves. With this example above, we observe the different ways in which the participant presents themselves on Instagram. In these observations, we can infer that they have a master's in digital marketing from Manchester University, that they live in Athens, Greece and that they either have a photography business or they do photography as a hobby. As an outsider, one could make these assumptions, but after speaking with the participant, we know that it is a hobby. These assumptions that we are making are in and of itself inferences. We can further see within the highlights (the bubbles below the biography) that this participant has a general picture or reels section, one specifically for London and another from Maastricht. What we can infer from this is that the participant went to London in the United Kingdom and that they seem to travel. While this is one specific

example of how we make inferences on Instagram, all of the participants provide insights into who they are within their biographies, their highlights, and their posts, where people observing their content can make inferences. As we can see with the example above, the information at times can be very direct whereas other times requires more of a leap based on knowledge from the audience member. In some circumstances, we might not be able to make any inferences which makes the meaning completely unknown to someone observing. It is thus through inferences that we make inference leaps regarding the information presented to us, which all depends on how much we know the person or the situation. An example of this can be seen below where from an “outsider” perspective, we are unable to make sense of what these comments mean nor the symbolism of the interactions. This makes us a part of the **out-group** where we lack the necessary knowledge to understand the interaction, whereas those taking part in the interaction forms part of the **in-group** who have the necessary knowledge to understand and comment on the exchange.

On the volume
4w 1 like Reply See original

— View replies (1)



4w 1 like Reply

— View replies (2)



4w 1 like Reply

— View replies (1)

Drumstick of mine ❤️🔥

4w 1 like Reply See original

Though in some situations, we are missing the necessary knowledge to understand the interaction such as seen in the examples above, in other cases as the observer, we can infer the meaning of other more general comments such as someone commenting:

“beautiful ❤️” next to a picture. While we cannot confirm the exact meaning behind the picture, we can infer that this is a positive praise given to the performer. As seen in the example above, one participant commented on a picture: On the volume . When we observe this interaction from an “outsider”, it is less general as commenting someone is beautiful with a heart and requires some sort of personal knowledge of the situation or person. Furthermore, in other circumstances the exact meaning might be unclear, but the general meaning is known, such as the use of the fire emoji. As we noticed above, the fire emoji was used quite often in the comments, but this emoji (unlike the hearts emoji) can have different meanings for each person, as it could mean any of the following: you are fire, you are on fire, or it’s lit. The fire is one emoji that has some ambiguity and that varies depending on your knowledge of the person commenting. We therefore wonder if between the participant and the audience member whether they can confirm the concrete meaning based on how much they know the individual. This is something we are unable to confirm in this study, though it could provide interesting insights into inferences. Similarly, in the caption examples, there are often emojis that have unknown meanings as well. We can see this as we were unable to understand the meaning or context for 1340 emojis or 15.54% of the emojis used in the comments. This could be for various reasons, but as previously mentioned above, it could be due to a cultural difference in how the platforms are used by individuals in different regions

worldwide. That being said, while these emojis have unknown meanings for us as external observers, they most likely have meaning to the performer and the audience member that posted it. As Goffman (1959) would argue, being a part of an in-group with previous knowledge allows for the audience to better understand the intentions of the performance. Additionally, from Bourdieu's (1986) perspective, he would argue that having insider knowledge and being a part of the in-group creates a sense of cultural capital only known between those who understand the meaning of the interaction. It is through this understanding of the performance and shared cultural capital that individuals to make inferences about the situation. As Bourdieu (1986) would further argue, it is through this shared cultural capital and understanding of the inferences that individuals will gain more status. This leads to the question as to why we use Instagram if we are communicating to specific in-groups? Though we are unable to confirm the exact reason, if we take note of what Goffman (1959) presents, the performer will often conduct a performance that is generally understood by a large audience. It is through these generalized performances that the performer is able to connect with the audience, and so even those with limited knowledge will still understand enough to share or take part in the interaction. When we observe the patterns on Instagram primarily enacted by the performer and the audience, the interactions are usually general and vague. This allows for the majority of individuals witnessing the performance to understand (for the most part) the interaction. **Thus, we can hypothesize that the performance itself is general enough to reach a wide audience even if the information given targets individuals with in-group knowledge.**

On a social media platform like Instagram where there is the possibility to interact with people globally, we begin to see how a platform like this one can take the shape of a “new” social space. It is through the various interactions, their meanings, and the ability to communicate with one another through a distinct common method such as emojis and hashtags. In observing these interactions that we could argue that Instagram has formed a social space.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provided us with different insights into how Instagram is used by 15 participants worldwide. We observed how each emoji used by the participants and their commenters provide insight into the interactions that take place on Instagram between the performer and the audience. We were also able to observe how Instagram seems to have taken the form of its own social space in society, with its own language and methods of communication. As we began the research focusing on the understanding of Instagram, we observed different ways that the performer and the audience members interact with one another. From these observations, we were able to form four (4) concluding hypotheses: 1) Individuals conduct performances on Instagram and aim to give a good presentation of self to an audience; 2) Instagram has a very distinct language whereby individuals communicate meaning through emojis and hashtags; 3) Any observer on the Instagram platform is constantly making inferences about others; 4) Instagram is its own distinct social space with its own characteristics and subcultures. We were finally able to observe how the different forms of capital are represented within the interactions on the platform. Thus, in this final chapter of the thesis, we will present some of the limitations found within this study and present areas for future research.

6.1. Study Limitations

While this study provided us with various observations, the study also has its limitations. With any netnographic study, we are able to gain many interesting insights, though without interviews we are unable to confirm the actual meaning behind the interactions. By this we mean, if we wish to understand the meaning behind some of the

emojis that were marked as “unknown”, we would be required to speak with the participants and the audience directly to ask clearly what each emoji means to them. Furthermore, we were unable to confirm the exact meaning of some of the more ambiguous emojis such as the exact meaning of the fire emoji. The lack of confirmation highlights how all the observations on the platform are taken at face value, or in Goffman’s terms, we are observing only the front of the performance with no additional knowledge about the performer or the audience members. Thus, if we wished to understand the backstage such as the intentions, the meanings, to gain further knowledge about what certain comments or captions mean, we would be required to conduct interviews. In addition, one key limitation within the platform is the inability to confirm any participant modification to the data. While one way to mitigate this risk was to take screenshots of the content, if there were any issues with the screenshot, we could not guarantee that the initial content was still there. Furthermore, a limitation with social media is the ability for the user to delete any content or comments. This creates a mild limitation as if the participants delete any content, it could give the perception of a bias within the data and skew results. Taking into consideration the limitations of the study, we implemented different protocols to mitigate major issues (especially regarding skewed data) and will consider interviews for future studies.

6.2. Areas for Future Research

While our study provided various insights into Instagram through the emojis, captions, and other interactions, we can note that there were a few elements that could potentially be explored further, such as the use and understanding of hashtags. Additionally, it would be interesting to gain more knowledge into whether certain

personality traits (such as affinity-seeking tendencies, Machiavellianism, and self-monitoring) play a role the presentation of self and attainment of social capital. In addition, it would be interesting to further assess the notion of identity, if individuals maintain a sense of their “real” self on the platform or whether they present a false sense of self, one idealized to fit the “mould” of the social space. Furthermore, an additional element to consider would be to study how gender, race, culture, and age create different dynamics on Instagram with the types of emojis and captions used by the participants and the audience. Lastly, it would be interesting to further delve into how Instagram as a social media platform seems to have formed a new social space in the lives of individuals within a digital universe.

Appendix

Appendix A: University of Ottawa Ethics Approval

05/04/2022

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

| | |
|---|--|
| Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number | S-03-22-7827 |
| Titre du projet / Project Title | Impression Management: A Nano-Influencer Case Study |
| Type de projet / Project Type | Thèse de maîtrise / Master's thesis |
| Statut du projet / Project Status | Approuvé / Approved |
| Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy) | 05/04/2022 |
| Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy) | 04/04/2023 |

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

| Chercheur / Researcher | Affiliation | Role |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Gabrielle DUVAL | Département de sociologie et d'anthropologie / Department of Sociology and Anthropology | Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator |
| Willow SCOBIE | Département de sociologie et d'anthropologie / Department of Sociology and Anthropology | Superviseur / Supervisor |

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

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