

# COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

## Why Post That? Re-thinking the Problem of Absent Presence within Social Media

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### Abstract

While social media have the potential to promote positive relations online, the increasing use of contemporary apps, such as Instagram, distances many from important face-to-face interactions. In this study, we rethink the problem of 'absent presence' within social media by revealing the language games of Instagram. Drawing on social media literature and Gergen's (2002) concern about the erosion of cultural norms due to the absent presence generated by new media, we engaged in a qualitative study of active Instagram users. Employing a unique 'prompt and response' interview approach, in which we asked participants to explain why they would (or would not) post particular statements, we gain insights into social norms of Instagram as expressed by active social media users. The results of this study show that participants base their posting decisions largely on their perception of a desired self, without much concern for who is posting or why they are posting. Because our findings reveal that posting on Instagram is done without much engagement with others and is often done only if a message corresponds with their own experiences or self-identification, this study extends the concern about absent presence. Specifically, we argue that the complex blurring of monologic and dialogic forms of communication found in contemporary social media apps generates hollow and inconsequential language games that maintain narrow concepts of self and fail to generate interactions necessary to co-create relevant and meaningful social values.

### Keywords

Social media, absent presence, decision-making, Instagram, social norms

## **1 Why Post That? Re-thinking the Problem of Absent Presence within Social Media**

As contemporary communicative environments have become increasingly saturated with social media (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011), reports of polarization and harmful behavior online are on the rise (Caled & Silva 2022; Kilvington 2021). While social media have the potential to promote positive relations online, bring people together, and offer a space for the voiceless, it also distances some from important face-to-face interactions prompting concern about the consequences of how young people act on social media. Some have explored the social media environments in relation to typical users (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022; Iqbal et al., 2019) and what is normally posted online (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014), however the processes of decision-making among social media users is less explored. Thus, studying why people choose to post messages that are outside the established social norms of what is ‘typically posted’ is important for understanding contemporary social media use. Understanding how and why people make decisions on whether to post an idea or statement that challenges conventional social norms can help provide insights into contemporary social media use as well as the ramifications for the development of cultural norms related to particular online communities.

As social media have become an ever-present and indispensable part of our lives (Carrier 2018), communication researchers are increasingly studying the ways we interact online, and how the cultural norms guiding social media interactions are changing. Too often the statements people make online are not appropriate to make in person and while some scholars have explored the destructive qualities of social media communication (see O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), few have studied the rationale for how particular behavioral norms of online communication emerge and become legitimate. With the ubiquity of contemporary social media (see Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden 2011), concern for the consequences of online communication is growing. In the early days of new media and online forms of communication, Gergen (2002) cautioned about the problem of ‘absent presence’ or when someone is physically present, yet absent, because they are immersed in a technologically mediated world. His concern for absent presence was that our cultural value systems would erode because being online lacks the accountability needed to establish social norms maintain cultural values. Gergen was concerned about the increase in ‘absent presence’ as it could result in those physically present losing the ability to hold others accountable to social norms. While Gergen was concerned about the ability to maintain appropriate rules for social behavior in the present, physical world, we take this concern and apply it to social behavior in the mediated world.

In this study, we give new focus to Gergen’s (2002) theory of absent presence by exploring decision-making in new immersive forms of social media. Specifically, we engage in a qualitative study of the online communicative habits of young, active social media users to understand how and why individuals make decisions to post ideas online that might be seen as ‘controversial’ in that they deviate from what is typically posted on a particular social media platform. To ground this study of the decision-making about posting controversial online messages, we begin by reviewing literature exploring the complex contexts of contemporary social media landscapes. We then elaborate on the theory of absent presence (Aagaard 2020, Carrier 2018; Gergen 2002; Pettman 2016) extending the concern as related to contemporary social media apps, and the use of Instagram in particular. We then present the methods for engaging in a unique ‘prompt and response’ interview approach in which asked social media users to make sense of their choices of posting (or not posting) select statements online. After presenting the findings from this study, revealing how the participants explain the reasons why they post messages on Instagram, we conclude with a discussion of how these findings complicate the concerns about online communication, and extend the notion of absent presence and the problems of eroding social norms in contemporary social media environments.

## **2 Social Media and its Consequences**

With social media becoming the predominant communication channel for many young people, concern about the consequences of communicating online is consistent. Social media refer to many things among many people. However, the notion that it is ‘social’ is particularly important for recognizing the potential consequences of its frequent use. While the term ‘social’ originally referred to the “connectedness of human users” (van Dijck, 2015) in contemporary society, the idea of being social has transformed into “an ecosystem of connected media” (p. 1). Thus, when examining communication on social media, the ‘social’ serves as a context for communicative actions and, at the same time, is grounded as the infrastructure and networks for those actions (Sun, 2020). In this way, social media are not a thing or place, but instead must be recognized as a sphere of influence with particular ramifications for those participating. Further, as Pettman (2016) explains, social media are addictive phenomenon which functions by giving us enough micro pleasures to distract us from the burdening awareness of mortality.

The addictive qualities of social media are related to the commercial interests of most social media platforms. The increased interest in social media as an economic channel has motivated studies of how advertising is the primary motivation for promoting social media use (Agerdal-Hjermand, 2014). Sections of marketing handbooks are dedicated to describing the importance of social media implementations in this decade (Mahoney & Tang 2016), and the desire to seek advertising revenues creates apps that encourage more ‘clicks’ and time on screen (Fisher, 2023). As a result, the addictive qualities of social media have an immense distractive function (Prettman, 2016) and are the cause of much criticism. However, it is limiting to only perceive social media as a life-draining activity, distracting us from our impending doom.

Social media have evolved to be more than just addictive. Social media differ from the digital ecosystems emergent in the 1990s (Sun, 2020). The endless possibilities of the wide-open web, as it used to be envisioned, has over time become semi-closed. A decade ago, many perceived it as inevitable that the Web would replace PC application software and reduce operating systems (Anderson, 2010). Andersen (2010) argues that over the past few years, with the aim of saving time, consumers are increasingly choosing applications, or semi-closed platforms, to navigate the internet instead of the browser for display.

As these platforms emerged, social media literature often characterizes the prevalence of online social media in either optimistic (Carrier, 2018) or pessimistic (Pettman 2016) ways. However, our interest in social media is not in terms of being optimistic or pessimistic. Our interest is motivated by a desire to understand how people make decisions regarding interaction in social media and how these mediated forms of interaction relate to face-to-face interactions (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshimi, 2012) or are potentially a replacement (Carrier 2018) of classic interpersonal communication.

In other words, whether contemporary social media use is perceived as constructive or destructive (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson 2011) is not the issue, what is of concern to us are the effects to communicating taking place primarily online. This interest aligns with scholars exploring the norms and choices people make on social media and what influences this ‘new’ communication setting (see Yurder & Akdol 2020; Carr & Hayes 2015). As young adults increasingly describe technological communications as their primary communication channel (Carrier 2018) being preoccupied with the technological mediated world often means a reduction of face-to-face social interactions (Carrier 2018). This study examines decision-making in these online media and reinvigorates concerns about increased ‘mediated’ communication as a problem for the maintenance of cultural value systems.

### **3 Complicating Concerns with Absent Presence**

As everyday life has become increasingly saturated with social media, concerns about the amount of time spent communicating online have grown. Embracing theories of social construction and the notion of communication being constitutive of social reality, Gergen (2002), for instance, discussed the potential cultural and social ramifications of increased social interaction online. Following Wittgenstein’s (1958) conceptualization of ‘language games,’ Gergen (2002) explained how language use establishes communicative expectations for social interaction. Grounded in these ideas, Gergen offered a theory of ‘absent presence’ explaining how communicating with distant others in mediated worlds might lead to the erosion of moral values and loss of identities connected to local experience. Reviewing Gergen’s theory of ‘absent presence’ we reimagine the concern about cultural norms associated with the dramatic increase in the use of contemporary social media applications, such as Instagram.

#### **3.1 Social Construction of the Real and Good**

Those embracing the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy (see Deetz, 2003) recognize the complexities of communication and language use as not only being representative of social reality, but as constituting reality itself. In other words, our social realities and what we come to know as ‘real and good’ are constituted in language use (Gergen, 2015). Wittgenstein (1958) offers a game metaphor for language to understand this concept. Specifically, he explains that language is like a game in the sense that when we know the rules of the game, we know how to act in response to the moves of others playing the game. What ‘makes sense’ in communication only does so if we are playing the same ‘language game.’ For example, as Gergen (2015) explains, “to say ‘good morning’ gains its meaning from a game-like relationship called a greeting” (p. 34). The multitude of language games carry with them implicit rules for how to interact with others. For instance, when someone says ‘hello’ there are only a few appropriate ways to legitimately reply or engage in this game of greeting (Gergen, 2015). As we interact and participate in language, we come to learn the ‘rules of the game’ and thus social norms become grounded in the very language we speak.

Wittgenstein’s (1958) notion of language games helps establish the idea that language use is the way by which relationships are built and preserved, and that through these relationships emerge a shared understanding of how to act and interact with others. What we take to be true, real, and good about the world is therefore dependent on the social relationships of which we are a part (Gergen 2015). In these social relationships, we develop reasonably reliable patterns of coordination in the game-like character of language. What is thus considered ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ is

constituted in the common logical patterns (or rules in the game) established in ongoing communication with others. The game metaphor used to explain the establishment of such 'rules' directs attention to participants learning the appropriate words and actions to use on a given occasion—learning not only what to do and say but what to expect in return (Wittgenstein 1958). This idea of language games offers a way to understand how expectations for reciprocated behavior are created and thus how appropriate ways of communicating with others come to be known.

### **3.2 *The Problem of Absent Presence***

Embracing theories of social construction and the notion of language games, Gergen (2002) became concerned with the rapidly increasing use of communication technologies, particularly with the popularity of the mobile phone. He was especially uneasy with the potential social and cultural ramifications of what he referred to as 'absent presence'. For Gergen, absent presence occurs when "one is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere" (p. 227). Being absorbed in a technologically mediated world removes people from interactions in the present situation. Such absent presence is a concern because conceptualizations of reality, including the establishment of social values and the creation of an identifiable self, require a community of individuals to interact and respond to the interactions of others. Without others who are present in the moment to play the language games of reacting and responding, particular meanings of reality and notions of the self may not be affirmed or reaffirmed. Not having others present in the local context to affirm and offer recognition over time and across situations, there is concern that no one will be holding others responsible for sustaining local understandings of the world and the self. In other words, because what is believed to be real and good is constituted in communication within social relations in a local community (Gergen, 2015), absent presence is a cause for concern, because those present in everyday life are no longer participating in the language games that constitute social norms and moral values.

Gergen (2002) argues that while print media, and other technologies like television and radio have a monologic presence, because interactants do not have an opportunity to respond and engage with the speakers, the rise of new media and its ability to promote interaction with others online, these new forms of communication have become more dialogic. By dialogic, he means that the communication offers an interactive component in which people can interact and co-create meanings together. And along with the opportunity to interact with others online comes the expectation of a response. The dialogic quality of answerability is a key component in the social construction of meaning and when the dialogic quality of communication went online (outside of physical space) concern emerged. As Gergen explains, what emerged with the rise of the Internet, is "a world of relationships, both active and vicarious, within which domains of meaning are being created or sustained" (p. 227). Mobile technologies allowed access to email and other interactive spaces where "alien voices from any local and around the clock may instantaneously insert themselves into one's consciousness" (p. 231). Gergen's concern is that as people interact with these 'alien voices' from afar, they actively participate "in the construction of the world, and this construction can be uniquely tailored to, and expressive of, one's individual circumstances" (p. 231). As such, the constitution of reality is done not in the local community, such as within a family, school, or close-knit group of friend, but with distant others not associated with the local contexts. Thus when interacting with these "voices from afar we are no longer building the realities and moralities of the local together" (p. 232). Gergen explains that this can lead to the rise of more superficial relations and loss of sense of self as grounded in the everyday relations. As Gergen states, the repercussions of absent presence are "the erosion of face-to-face community, a coherent and centered sense of self, moral bearings, depth of relationships, and the uprooting of meaning from material context" (p. 236). In this way, our consciousness is continuously switching between face-to-face and digital communication, which might lead to the illusion that we are never really present in either world. As a result of absent presence, our identities are increasingly more situated, conditional, and optional and "the scaffolding for a recognizable self is eroded" (p. 236). Thus, individuals no longer know who they are, and the constitution of self becomes superficial. We argue that Gergen's concern about absent presence persists yet has become increasingly complex with a multitude of apps and unknown 'alien voices' emerging from our computers and mobile technologies.

### **3.3 *Extending Absence Presence***

The technological advances since Gergen first wrote about absent presence are significant and have reinvigorated concern about absent presence. The most striking development in online technologies is that they have blurred the boundaries of monologic and dialogic communication, with contemporary social media applications becoming much more complex. Technology available on mobile devices today is both monological and dialogical, complicating concern with absent presence as they are purposely designed to keep users absorbed in a technologically mediated world elsewhere. Instagram is an excellent example as it is possible to be constantly entertained by monologic communication as the platform's algorithms offer customized content targeted for the individual user, and thereby removes the need to search for other sources of entertainment. While at the same time Instagram is a dialogical tool, as it integrates direct (private) messaging, comment tracks, and the ability to create groups where you can communicate privately and create smaller communities. This then accentuates the dialogic qualities of the platform and often demands others to respond and reply to the post, establishing norms for social interactions online. The blending and blurring of boundaries between monologic and

dialogic interactions makes Instagram a multi-purpose-tool, enabling individuals to both communicate and be entertained simultaneously. Thus, the increased use of social media contribute to concerns about digital communication becoming a less than ideal substitute to face-to-face communication. Because increased use of of social media reduces the ability for those present in the physical world, to hold others accountable to social norms, social media platforms like Instagram heighten Gergen's concern that the expansion of online media will lead to increased absent presence and thus erode cultural values.

The multiple ways of interacting via Instagram, and other contemporary social media platforms, however, redirects the concern about absent presence because the language game of social media interaction is different. Specifically, these applications provide a space in which one can be present online but absorbed in other types of communication elsewhere on the platform. In face-to-face communication one would have an assumed response when talking to someone present in the room, by playing a particular language game. However, with these more complex social media environments, new language games may be emerging in which expected responses are different from face-to-face language games. Thus, actions with others online may be producing different expectations for responding than those in physical space. The language games played in social media might be creating a new set of social 'rules' and thus communicating online might play by different social rules than those in the world of full presence. In this way, this study explores how social media users decide to interact in social media applications. If social media are where a significant amount of social interactions occur in contemporary society, then focusing on the ways people interact online can provide insights into how social norms are generated in the mediated spaces absent from the 'here and now' of physical interactions. Specifically, our concern in this study is to examine how individuals make sense of their decisions about posting or not posting particular posts in Instagram. The following section explains the methods we used for exploring the language game of Instagram.

## 4 Method

To explore the complex ways social media users make decisions about posting on Instagram, we engaged in a qualitative study integrating a 'prompt and response' method into semi-structured interviews in which the participants were promoted with a 'controversial' post and then asked questions about whether they would repost or comment on the post. Guided by a concern for understanding behavioral norms related to social media use and an interest in gaining an understanding of issues related to absent presence, we critically assessed the interview transcripts to gain insight into participants' logics for making decisions to post on Instagram.

### 4.1 Participants

Six self-proclaimed 'active Instagram users' were invited to participate in this study. Through a snowball sampling method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), the first author initially contacted three individuals known through their posting habits to be active Instagram users via *Facebook*, and upon asking these three if they knew other Instagram users who might also wish to participate, three more participants were invited to an interview. All participants who were invited accepted an invitation to participate in an interview to discuss the ways they use social media.

The participants of this study self-reported an average of 3 to 6 hours a day on social media with about 2 to 4 hours on Instagram each day. And being ages 22 to 26, they were representative of the typical ages of Instagram users, as 61% of all Instagram users are 18 to 34 years old (Statista 2023). While gender was not a specific focus of this study, three of the participants were men and three were women and this mix allowed for the possibility of gender differences to be explored in the analysis. The interviews were conducted by the first author at private locations so that the participants would feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis, and pseudonyms were used in reporting individual responses in this study. Instagram was selected to be the social medium in focus because it is both a monological and dialogical multimedial and thus it is possible to study the ramifications of the complexity of the evolving technology. Further, Instagram is one of the most popular social media applications with 1.3 billion active users.

### 4.2 Qualitative Interviews with Prompts

To gain insights into the ways these particular Instagram users make decisions on what to post and why they post in particular ways, we engaged in qualitative interviews following a unique 'prompt and response' technique. The interviews were conducted in three main parts. The interviews began with discussions about social media and Instagram to learn about the ways the participants used social media as well as how they perceived themselves in relation to their social media use. Following a semi structured-interview format (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) the first author asked informative questions about the participant's backgrounds, the social media they actively used (and for what purpose) as well as their thoughts about social media in society, with a focus on Instagram in particular. The semi-structured nature of the

interviews offered the opportunity to explore the connections between the ways they described themselves and how they generally approach Instagram and other social media.

In the second part of the interview, the participants were asked specifically about their activities on Instagram. For instance, they were asked to explain how they behave on the platform, how often they post on the app, and generally about how and why they use Instagram. Additionally, they were asked about their reactions to other users' posts. The aim of these questions was to gain insights into cultural norms of the online platform, without asking them directly.

The final part of the interview process involved a 'prompt and response' technique in which the participants were asked to respond to specific prompts. This method aligns with a qualitative vignette approach (Harrits & Møller, 2021) and adds to the semi-structured interview process as each participant was provided the same prompts and the reactions to these prompts offered opportunities for further discussions about Instagram. During the interview process, the first author set the scene by asking each participant to read an actual Instagram post, reflect on the tone of the post, and share their initial reaction as if they saw it on Instagram. The participants were then asked whether or not they agreed with the content of the post and if they might post something similar themselves or re-post it if they read it on Instagram. Additionally, the participants were asked if they might post something similar as either as part of a larger social media movement or if they saw others they follow on social media post (or repost) the presented prompt. This process was followed for six different prompts and for each post the interview discussion included why they think people post these types of messages on Instagram.

The prompts were actual Instagram posts selected as being 'controversial' in relation to social norms on the Instagram platform. By 'controversial' we mean that the posts differed from what is commonly seen on the platform and are considered provocative in terms of challenging particular social norms or supporting typically marginalized peoples. The most common and popular posts on Instagram fall within the categories of friends, activities, selfies, and food content (Hu, Manikonda & Kambhampati, 2014). For this study, we chose posts outside the norms of these Instagram categories. The controversial posts chosen as prompts for this study were found on Instagram about abortion rights, suicide, women's safety, LGBTQ+, American society, and racism (see table 1 below). For this study, our interest is in understanding the logic or reasoning as to why an Instagram user might or might not post particular ideas, thus the specific posts for this study were chosen because they were associated with a wide variety of social topics, thereby appealing (or not appealing) to different personal experiences of the participants. By offering a variety of posts our aim was to gain insights into participants' general posting logics even if they did not have deep opinions regarding one or more of the issues embedded within the post.

Topic	Text of the Presented Posts
Abortion Rights	"I will not be told what's best for my uterus, by men who can't even identify the clitoris"
Suicide	"When someone feels bad, wishes they saw the signs & wishes they hadn't done it. But when someone is suffering with their mental health, no one listens, no one believes them, & they get accused of attention seeking. As a society, we need to do more."
Women's safety	"text me when you get home"
LGBTQ+	"Never 'OUT' someone without their permission"
American Society	"Stop blaming rappers for rapping about their life experiences. Blame the government for enabling the conditions they rap about."
Racism	"Racism is small dick energy"

**Table 1: List of Instagram Posts used as Interview Prompts**

The interviews were concluded by asking participants to reflect on the interview experience and comment as to whether they might change their Instagram posting habits after this interview. Our aim was to see if the discussion during the interview provided a reflexive opportunity about Instagram posting. The six interviews, averaging about 30 minutes each, were conducted in Danish because it was the native language of the participants. The interviews were transcribed for analysis and any quotes used to present findings of this study were translated by the first author.

### **4.3 Method of Data Analysis**

An interpretive coding method was used to analyze the 72 pages of transcripts. While data analysis began during the interview process, when the responses to the questions and expressed experiences of the participants were fresh in the first author's memories, preliminary coding began during the transcription process and a focused process of open coding

was conducted when all interviews were transcribed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The transcripts were read several times, and a first round of inductive codes emerged. These codes were reviewed and refined upon reviewing all the interviews revealing interpretations across differing categories such as social media use among the participants, ways the participants described themselves and their posting habits, and emergent logics for why participants might post or not post the presented prompts. While common patterns emerged, attention was also given to unique or differing ways some participants responded, this focus allowed for the exploration of not only what is common across the interviews but what differentiates the participants from each other. The following section reviews the outcome of this interpretative analysis.

## 5 Decision-making on Instagram

The presentation of the findings from our interpretive analysis is presented in three parts. We start by reviewing how the participants characterize their social media use and how their reflections on what is ‘normal’ about social media interactions. We then reveal the outcomes of the interpretive analysis of the reasoning participants gave to explain their (un)willingness to post controversial posts online. Finally, we assess these findings in relation to the problem of absent presence and complicate the critique of the erosion of culture when absorbed in mediated worlds, as we consider how decisions to post (or not post) messages online may actually be contributing to the development of unique online norms and values.

### 5.1 Characterizing Social Media Usage

The participants of this study described social media as occupying a lot of their time. Collectively, participants explained that they spent up to 6 hours a day on social media. However, they generally did not perceive their social media use as distracting or taking them away from their everyday reality. Rather, participants described their use of social media as “relaxing,” “entertaining,” and “enjoyable,” despite admitting that their social media use was quite time consuming. However, upon being asked to reflect on their time spent on social media, half of the participants seemed surprised by the amount of time actually spent on social media, and their use of Instagram in particular. The average participant described spending the equivalent of one day per week online, with Instagram taking up a large portion of this time. It is interesting to note, however, that those who spent the most time on Instagram were also those who were most critical of the platform. For instance, Casper, who spent the least amount of time on Instagram, explained his experiences on Instagram as: “It is positive, I would say.” However, Christian, who spent the most time on Instagram, stated “I think there really is a lot of hate on Instagram.”

Time spent on Instagram did, however, not directly correlate with the posting frequency of the participants. Half of the participants said they posted on Instagram at least once a week, either on a story or in a post. The enjoyment they expressed about participating suggests that these participants’ social media presence is a significant part of their social life. However, not everyone used their screen time posting. The other half of participants explained that they spent the majority of the time scrolling through other posts. In reflecting on how they spent several hours a day on the platform, they seemed to express an awareness of a general sense of enjoyment of the content in which they were exposed.

One of the most interesting characterizations about social media use among the participants is how they seemed to manage and protect their social media identities. In other words, regardless of gender and age differences, all participants when asked to reflect on whether they would post or repost one of the ‘controversial’ postings made the decision based on how posting or reposting would align with (or contradict) their perceived online identity. The following is an overview of the participants’ responses to whether they would (or would not) post or repost the specific prompts. All but one of the participants would post at least one of the presented controversial posts and most of the participants would post several of the potentially ‘controversial’ statements. Gender and age differences did not seem to factor into the decisions, however the perception of the relationship between the prompt and perception of self was illuminating.

Prompt Topic	Christian	Kevin	Sofia	Casper	Sara	Hope
Abortion Rights	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Suicide	Yes	Yes	No	No	Maybe	No
Women’s safety	Yes	Maybe	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
LGBTBQ+	No	No	Maybe	No	Yes	Yes
American Society	No	No	No	No	No	Maybe
Racism	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No

**Table 2: Summary of Posting Decisions**

When describing the reasons for not posting, the participants explained that was not related to whether the post was seen as true, accurate, or if it was something they agreed with or not. Rather, the typical reason for not wanting to post a presented prompt was because it was either not representative of their perceived (or desired) identity or not related to their own experiences. For example, when asked why he answered ‘no’ to whether he wanted to post the prompted message, Casper said: “I would never ever post it myself, but I agree with what it says.” Similarly, Christian responded: “I don't think so. Unless it has happened to me or unless I have experienced it.” Kevin explained that others might feel compelled to post such a message: “if they themselves feel it is something they can relate to like me...but I don't want to post it myself, not necessarily.” This hesitancy to post something that does not correspond with their own experiences or sense of identity, explains how the participants could agree with the statements in the presented post but still not feel compelled to post them. As Kevin explained: “I think I am very very selective about what I post [especially posts] that have to do with debates and those things. Actually. I think I feel like I can have my opinion without others having to know.” Responses like these, show how Instagram users in this study might agree with the sentiments in posts yet would not post or repost them themselves. In this way, agreeing with a post might not necessarily result in wanting to post it. Similarly, someone could have a perceived identity that is not reflected in their posts.

The participants, overall, described a strong desire to feel associated with the content of their posts. Their personal affiliation with the topic has significant importance to the participants. For instance, when asked if they might post the presented statement if others they knew had already posted it, Sara explained: “I want to say no, but there may be a small part of me that would.” If the participants agreed with the general sentiment of the post, they seemed more likely to repost the prompted message; especially if many of their followers had also posted a similar message. For instance, Sofia explained: “I think I would feel more inclined to do that. Yes, I definitely think it affects us, what others share.” Therefore, these findings indicate that the perceived cultural norm is incredibly important for the participants’ decision-making. Specifically, more people seemed inclined or likely to post if others did, based on the context, which includes both who else posts and what has already been posted. In other words, posting is a relational process and is done only if it confirms an already perceived sense of self. Overall, these findings reveal a particular language game being played by these participants regarding posting in Instagram. An interaction rule of Instagram seems to be that posting is done not to present, correct, or debate specific meanings but to align meanings with perceptions of self, or of the self that one wishes to present online.

## **5.2 Posting Habits in Relation to Self-descriptions**

Another significant finding that emerged from the analysis of the interview discussions, was an intriguing connection between self-descriptions and posting habits. Three connections were particularly salient. First, most of the participants who described themselves as not easily changing their minds, as taking strong positions on topics, or being upfront about topics of interest were the ones most inclined to post the prompted messages. For instance, Sara described herself, among other things, as being “stubborn” and “opinionated”, and Hope described her interaction style as being “direct.” Both participants quickly and unproblematically indicated they would post most the prompted messages, and argued against posting only a few of the presented messages. Therefore, the connection between the participants who described themselves as the type of person qualified (and maybe eager) to enter debates were most likely to post the messages that went against the social norms of Instagram.

Second, we found that the participants who described themselves as being generally content and pleased with the world as well as not wanting to ‘rock the boat’ indicated that they would modify their posting habits if they were ever faced with critique. For example, Sara, who seemed ready to make posts and contribute to debates, described herself as “kind” and “nice” and stated that she would change her posting habits “If I got a negative response.” Similarly, Christian, who described himself as generally a “happy” person who posts funny memes multiple times a day, stated: “If at any time I find that something I post is offensive to others. Then I will do it differently.” Those who identify as being a kind and sensitive person explained that any criticism of their posting would motivate them to change their posting habits. This willingness to alter posting habits was not due to correcting a faulty argument or in arguing what is ‘best,’ but because a critique of their post was seen as running counter to their desire to be a happy, kind person. Because social media platforms like Instagram allow users to remove comments and posts, as well as delete negative messages, they enable such individuals to modify and update their posts to escape perceptions that might not resonate with participants' sense of self.

Third, the analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants who described themselves as someone who embodies a concern for other people would be willing to post the presented messages if they thought it could possibly benefit others or contribute usefully to a social debate. For instance, Hope, who describes herself as a “caring person,” explained that she posts to educate others and encourage them to participate in the debate themselves. Further, she explains that her posting habits would be affected: “If I or someone close to me is affected by it.” In a similar way, Kevin, who describes himself as “caring” and “great at doing something for others,” stated that he would post messages if it contributed the formation of others' perception of the message, despite the message not being directly correlated to his own personal problems. Sara, also, explained that “a caring feeling I have inside” guides her towards what to post. When shown one of the posts, she responded by saying “I very, very, very much agree. Yes, I think that's crossing the line. Not



to me, but to that person.” In other words, she would contribute to the conversation if she thinks it will help support others and be good for them. The notion of being someone who cares for others motivates them to post some posts that may not have significant importance for them or resonate with their life experiences. Instead, posts are made if they feel they might be helpful for someone they care about.

Overall, these findings further support how the context of a situation has a significant effect on how one chooses to post messages, because posts suddenly have more significant meanings than just being a reflection of the user. Instagram posts present a sense of self. These findings reveal another interesting feature of the language game being played on Instagram. A rule of engagement seems to follow that Instagram posting is guided by the different ways one identifies as a person and how that post might align (or contradict) with that way of self-identifying.

### **5.3 *Not Noticing Who or What Others Post***

Another significant finding from the analysis of the interview discussions was that participants often do not notice what other people post on Instagram. Most of the participants explained they would not be able to recollect what others post on Instagram. When asked if they notice what others post, the participants’ answers were varied. For instance, Sofia argued: “I won’t be able to tell you what’s on your feed at all” and further explained that what she sees on Instagram is not stored in her memory. Thus, it seems that the messages and interactions on the Instagram platform are designed to be forgettable or unnoticeable. Similarly, when Sara was asked whether she remembers who is posting what ideas, her answer was “Not really. No...” and upon being asked this question, it seemed as if it was the first time she realized that she did not notice what others posted online. In a similar way, Casper’s response to the question about whether he remembers who posts what types of messages was: “I like it if it is someone I know, but I do not really notice it, I think.” His statement explaining that he even likes posts without realizing what he liked which supports the notion that online communication via Instagram is not noticed by its participants.

Based on the responses across the participants, it is clear that they are engaging in online communication without being fully aware of whom and to what they are responding. Interactions in Instagram, liking posts, reposting, and other activities are generally accomplished without much thought. These findings complicate the language game being played by these participants on Instagram. Another rule of engagement is that it is not important or necessary to know who is agreeing, disagreeing, or even posting particular ideas. The game seems to be played among the shadows of others, rather than with direct influence by those playing the game.

### **5.4 *Not Holding Others Accountable***

The final salient finding related to the participants’ reflections about posting on Instagram, is that none held others accountable for their posting habits. When asked if they would be interested in seeing who posted the prompted message or in reflecting on their recent Instagram activities, none of the participants indicated they reach out to others, even if faced with a post that directly contradicted their own opinion. Specifically, participants explained that they would not write to those posting, ask questions about the post, critique the post, comment on the post, or otherwise sanction the behavior. For instance, when asked whether she would say something if a friend posted something she did not agree with, Hope was quick to answer, “No, no.” And Sofia explained this reaction in terms of, “I think I use that mentality a lot, out of sight out of mind.” Casper’s answer to the same question was a bit more expressive: “No. Are you insane? You just sit and think, fuck you are lame.”

Although differing in tone, these participants all described they would not react to others’ posts, unless it was directly related to their own experiences or in relation to their sense of self. In these cases, some were more inclined to react. For instance, Christian stated: “if it was their story, I might still react... But if it was a post, I would not do anything.” Similarly, Kevin said: “I do not think I will respond to it, online on the post. But in private I would.” and Sara explained “It also depends on how close I am with the person. If it is a close friend, I might just turn it off. But if it was someone I did not know, I would un-follow.” But Sara was clear to indicate that she would never write to that person on Instagram. Sara, Christian, and Kevin’s responses do not contradict Sofia, Hope, and Casper’s; however, they seem to take into consideration the context of the post to a greater extent.

The decision to respond to others and hold them accountable for a post they might not agree with is made by considering if the post affected their own lives, their sense of self, or if the one who posted it was a good friend in ‘real life.’ What was particularly striking about these responses is that all participants described, in different ways, how it is not normal to assign responsibility for what is shared on Instagram. It is, however, up for interpretation how likely the participants are to actually carry out the action they describe. We would argue based on other findings in this study the participants are not likely to sanction others despite expressing a disagreement or dislike for a particular Instagram post. We found that most of the participants did not notice what other people post on Instagram, and although they describe what actions they would use if these posts occurred, these actions require much more of the participants than it would require to do nothing. The notion that participants generally will not hold others accountable for posting disagreeable messages further complicates the language game of Instagram. The interaction rule to just ‘let it go’ unless directly

affected sets the stage for an environment in which responses to the posts of others are often limited or absent. The Instagram game seems to be played with only limited accountability for what others are doing or posting.

Overall, the findings of this qualitative investigation of the ways this group of active Instagram users make sense of using Instagram provides insights into the language game of “Instagram.” Specifically, the rules of the game created and recreated when interacting on Instagram include four rules of interaction. First, posting on Instagram is done to align meanings with perceptions of a desired self, rather than to discuss what is real or good in society. The second rule of engagement follows that posting on Instagram is guided by the different ways one identifies as a person and how that post might align (or contradict) with that perceived sense of self. Third, the “game” of Instagram is played indirectly among the shadows of others, rather than in direct interaction with known others. The final rule of engagement on Instagram is to not engage others unless one is directly affected. Combined, interacting with others on Instagram creates an environment in which messages are communicated, however responses to others are often limited or absent. Interacting with others is only loosely guided by whether the participants see posting or not posting a message as contributing to the presentation of their desired identity. By unmasking and knowing these rules, the language game allows for a reimagining of the problem of absent presence.

## **6 Rethinking the Problem of Absent Presence**

The findings of this study provide insights into the language game of Instagram. Following Gergen’s (2002) theory of absent presence, the concern with those physically present yet absorbed in a technologically mediated world, like Instagram, is that one becomes disassociated from the processes of communication with others and thus not participating or being held accountable for the ways meanings are being shaped and reshaped. The concern is that ‘alien voices’ elsewhere are not actively engaged in the creation of social norms. The findings of this study complicate the concern about absent presence. Not only are the alien voices only shadows of others, but interaction is only guided by a desire to be perceived in a particular way. Specifically, because the language game of Instagram is to communicate only to promote a desired self, as guided by how a post might align with that sense of self, without thought as to who has communicated before, and to reply only if a post has something directly to do with you, Instagram communication simply replicates current notions of self and is not a place for the communal construction of the real or the good. These findings complicate the concern with absent presence because the distant others of Instagram are not only not building the realities and moralities but are instead guiding others to recreate and promote a sense of self that is distorted and not maintained in the community only. In other words, Gergen’s (2002) concern about absent presence resulting in superficial relations has emerged. However rather than loss of a sense of self, the findings of this study seem to indicate that a sense of self is being generated through the superficial relations with others online.

In this way, the monologic qualities of Instagram communication provides entertainment and enjoyable media while the dialogic qualities, tailored by content algorithms based on prior consumption (Fisher 2023), generate loose and superficial connections with others. Absent presence is thus occurring among Instagram users who are already absent present. As a consequence, rather than other Instagram users holding others accountable, the most popular idea that emerges (or the idea most supported by the algorithm) becomes maintained and regenerated as others interact in the maintenance of their perceived identity. There is no real desire to challenge, question, or correct particular views and thus hold each other accountable to what is deemed real or good in society. Without care for who is saying what to whom, there is no significant motivation to send supportive statements to others, and thus the primary driving force for why people post ideas is to connect with their own sense of self.

While some hold out hope that social media applications have possibility for a space to be present, to shape social norms, the findings of this study reveal that the language game of Instagram is not embraced as a dialogic space to shape meanings about what might be real and good for society. Rather, the driving force of Instagram seems to be interactions to maintain a particular sense of self. A self that is itself not co-created in local, physical communities among family and friends, but a community created in absent presence. As such, while Gergen’s (2002) theory of absent presence is grounded in the notion that this sense of self emerges from interactions with others in the present local context the findings of this study extend this concern for the loss of meaningful interactions online. Specifically, the findings indicate that while applications like Instagram create a problem of absent presence, the qualities of contemporary social media applications, like Instagram, do not offer a place for interactions that promote accountability to others. Instead, those who are absorbed in a mediated world elsewhere are not even present in that mediated world. The findings of this study cautions active social media users to reconsider who and what is shaping their sense of self.

Overall, the sense of self on Instagram becomes hollow in that the language game played does not contribute to the co-creation of a self that in a local community of others. The lack of interaction and engagement with real and meaningful others, means that individuals are not answerable to others in any substantial way. It is akin to only engage in conversations if one's name is mentioned, and ignoring any conversations that fail to challenge, inspire, or motivate deep interrogation of what is meaningful or good. This inconsequential form of interaction limits possibilities to engage

difference and interact with those one does not know, to challenge one's sense of self, and talk about ideas in a way that can be worked out and agreed upon.

This form of absent presence, an 'online absent presence,' adds an additional dimension to Gergen's initial concern. Specifically, while it is possible to be absent presence in the world of full presence, it is also possible to be absent present when absorbed in a mediated world elsewhere. Consequently, not being fully present in both physical or online communication has consequences for the ways we construct notions of ourselves in relation to what is considered real and good in society.

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