Committed Commenting and the Virtual Visage: Contextualizing Sorority Social Media Encounters

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the ways in which collegiate sorority women deploy sorority-specific aesthetic cues to construct socially acceptable and recognizable presentations of themselves online. I suggest that sorority members initiate and invite social media interaction as a means of parlaying their own media posts into discursive sites, thereby participating in a complex and considerably stratified economy of display and recognition. Sorority members also exert social capital through public demonstrations of social network linkages—demonstrations which can only be performed successfully if one maintains legitimacy and good standing within the media economy. I probe the implications of theorizing social media posting (particularly to the digital media platform Instagram) as a communal art creation practice that strengthens group social linkages and reifies communally observed aesthetic guidelines. I also address the stylistic and discursive regimens that shape expectations of media presentation, contrasting these practices with the comparatively candid and informal presentation styles exemplified in Fake Instagram ("finsta") posting behaviors.

Anna, a 21 year-old collegiate sorority member, described the role of Instagram in mediating her first forays into sorority social life as such:

The whole point of joining a sorority is really to make friends, that's really why everyone joins. But it's kind of awkward, it's like, ok, now we're supposed to be friends because we're in the same sorority. So you definitely try to comment on their photos probably, and interact with them.

Throughout the fall of 2020 I met regularly with Sarah, Anna, and Maria, members of the Alpha Beta sorority, to discuss their Instagram posting habits and experiences. In addition to several structured and unstructured interviews, informal conversations, and a focus group session, I conducted three "Instagram walkthroughs," during which each participant described the creative processes which led to their most recent Instagram posts. I also conducted activities in which participants sorted sample Instagram comments onto egocentric diagrams to better understand how relationship types and strengths become embodied in commenting behaviors.

These women, who have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities, are aged 20-21, and are in the same Alpha Beta (name also changed) pledge class, meaning they were initiated into the sorority simultaneously and completed the requisite initiation procedures together. They are all frequent users of Instagram, having collectively posted thirteen photos to their primary Instagram accounts throughout the research period. Their positions within Alpha Beta are relatively senior: Sarah and Maria are third-year university students and hold positions on the sorority's executive committee. Although in the same pledge class as Sarah and Maria, Anna is a fourth-year student and thus afforded a similar degree of seniority by virtue of her age classification (Anna transferred to the university as a second-year student and was consequently initiated a year later than usual). This is to say— the social media experiences and practices described in this paper are particular to collegiate sorority members. Although some of the principles which appear to underlie the posting behaviors hereafter described are likely generalizable, the posting criteria, aesthetic preferences, language use, and hierarchical nature of the social media encounters described in this article are particular to members of the Alpha Beta sorority.

Scholarship pertaining to digital environments, and particularly to social media practices and behaviors, have leveraged a variety of digital ethnographic methodologies and theoretical approaches to better understand media sharing behaviors and digital communications. Ross (2019) posits that Instagram users center a particular form of value within their social media practice—the like—and resultantly focus their content production on the accumulation of likes, such that posts successfully fulfill their function when they succeed in generating a satisfactory quantity of likes. This position accounts for both hierarchical and aesthetic considerations in content creation; posts that generate large quantities of likes could be understood to reflect a poster's prevalent social positionality and/or a communal acknowledgement of a poster's success in complying with the style guidelines of a particular community.

However, since 2019, Instagram has updated its interface such that the number of likes a post receives is only visible to the poster. My research participants affirmed that, while the receipt of large numbers of likes was once a dominant consideration in Instagram media sharing practices, the accumulation of great quantities of likes has become a lesser priority given that this metric is no longer visible to other users. Users may still reflect on the number of likes their posts receive and come to conclusions regarding a post's success based on their private knowledge of its accumulation of likes. However, without the pressure applied by

this metric's public visibility, the generation of likes seems to have declined as a focus of content creation.

Given that the criteria for awarding likes have remained largely the same despite the invisibility of like-totals, it is doubtful that the production of Instagram posts has fundamentally changed because of the obsolescence of likes as a public-facing metric; posts are still created to observe certain aesthetic standards, still function as expressions of self-presentation, and still serve as platforms for affirmative discourses. Nonetheless, that periodic updates to social media interfaces might dramatically change research conditions seems to prescribe a digital ethnographic approach that is similarly adaptive. Caliandro (2017, 552) acknowledges that "ethnography is a flexible method that on the one hand can be effectively adapted to online environments, but on the other hand continuously needs to be reshaped according to the features and mutations of online environments." While virtual communities have long been studied ethnographically, social media platforms require a unique methodological approach given their diffuse nature and susceptibility to sudden transformation. Furthermore, functional and conditional changes experienced by other platforms within the media ecology, such as Snapchat, Twitter, and TikTok, may likewise impact the ideologies relevant to a particular social media platform and thus require flexibility in addressing users' notions of what each platform is "for" (Gershon 2014, 284). Caliandro (2018) suggests that ethnography of digital environments should thus account for both the ways in which a particular social media interface organizes communications, and the strategies, perceptions, and understandings held and employed by social media users. Such a framework provides for a reflexive and conversant approach to understanding the configurations of—and relationships between—users and social media platforms.

For example, Sarah observed that "the Instagram Story like, that wasn't around in high school, so I think that really changed [Instagram] because it was like, food and more casual posts." The advent of this form of posting on a platform with existing norms of acceptable usage changed how users understood the platform's purpose, illustrating the tendency of media ideologies to adapt to new circumstances as material constraints and affordances change. Within these shifting virtual confines, users develop innovative strategies for posting successfully to, as Ross (2019, 5) describes, "produce content to be liked."

Likewise, Marwick (2017) grapples with the strategies Instagram users employ to generate successful content within the platform's confines and limitations. Marwick (2015, 138) interprets "microcelebrity" as "a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status." Microcelebrity, as described by Marwick, seems to capture a social media praxis oriented towards generating laudative interactions—likes and comments—in much the same way that Ross identifies likes as an implicit directive of content creation. Marwick (2015, 138) situates microcelebrity within an "attention economy," positing that a post's efficacy can be understood to consist in its unique capacity to attract attention. This analysis draws an explicit connection between the qualities of a particular Instagram post and its success in the marketplace. Ross's understanding of the "like" as a primary objective in posting behaviors succeeds in identifying a dominant (or, perhaps, once dominant) metric of success, while Marwick provides for an understanding of how community specific strategies are developed to generate the engagement Ross identifies.

Gift giving and gift economies have been documented extensively and, indeed, are one of the most heralded foci in anthropology. Following Bronislaw Malinowski, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Marcel Mauss, in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), Pierre Bourdieu's work on the Kabyle society, symbolic capital and gift exchange in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and David Cheal's efforts in *The Gift Economy* (1988), I will attempt to demonstrate how social media commenting practices among sorority members proceed as gift exchanges,

layered with meaning and expectation and connected intimately to the social capital invested in intra-sorority relationships and hierarchies. Particularly, I will focus on the ways in which deferred Instagram commenting practices, conceptualized as gift exchanges, serve to expand the temporality of intra-sorority social linkages through contractual reciprocity and debt creation. As Hjorth et al. observe, "the symbolic role of gift giving—as a practice of reciprocity, obligation and negotiating power relations—has long been attached to mobile media cultures" (Hjorth et al. 2020, 79). Embedded within a particular moral economy, Instagram commenting exchanges are used to sustain and protect important relationships and to cohere peer coalitions within the sorority. This system is shaped by the orientations and expectations of sorority members who, in dispensing Instagram comments, consider the "objective probabilities of profit" flowing from the likelihood that their gift will be reciprocated by its recipient (Bourdieu 1997, 232).

In this article, I will demonstrate that sorority members form coalitions of mutual respondents in social media environments that distribute responsibility for content engagement and ensure that coalition members' posts meet a threshold of interaction. I will likewise use sociogramatic data, as well as a discourse analysis of Instagram comments, to address how sorority social linkages are expressed in virtual settings.

Instagram Aesthetics and Presentations of the Self

"I don't have one filter I stick to, so my pictures don't go together, like, the way the Alpha Beta Instagram posts do, but I've never really felt the need to have one that looks like [the Alpha Beta Instagram account] …" explained Maria when asked whether the official Alpha Beta Instagram account, run by an executive member of the sorority, serves as a social media style guide for members. She continued:

> … and I don't know many people in Alpha Beta who have an entire "blue theme" for Instagram. But the way people portray themselves might be mimicked. So not at all, like, the artistic

editing aspects or whatever, but like the way you look in your photos, so like your pose, definitely, can mimic the kinds of poses they show on the Alpha Beta Instagram.

It would seem that the Alpha Beta official Instagram feed is a highly curated stream of images—more so than the personal Instagram feeds of Alpha Beta members. The official Alpha Beta account's posts are selected from posted Instagram photos or images submitted by sorority members, and, according to Maria:

> To get on the Alpha Beta Instagram, you either have to post a picture that they like, which has, like, blue in it, or you can submit one. So a lot of these people are taking these pictures with the goal of it to be on the Alpha Beta Instagram. So it's very—I don't want to say artificial—but you really need to try to get that look.

The official Alpha Beta Instagram feed is almost uniformly blue—an effect achieved both by filtering posted images with blue tints and by strategically employing blue clothing, props, and backgrounds in the photos.

As Maria points out, this aesthetic isn't necessarily adopted by members of the sorority—neither Maria, Sarah, or Anna use unifying color themes in their personal Instagram posts. However, their posts that depict sorority life and sorority events, such as parties and initiations, almost always feature blue colors prominently. The participants' posts that are associated with sorority activities are almost immediately recognizable from their broader oeuvre of posted material given the distinctive and identifying blue accents. Because their feeds are not uniformly blue themed, the juxtaposition of blue and non-blue material on the participants' accounts creates an auspice of two worlds—that of grandparents, family vacations, and friends from home, and that of Alpha Beta sorority life and the aesthetics therein. When users deploy particular themes and aesthetics to stylize their sorority-related content, they effectively differentiate sorority activities from the rest of the sharable quotidian, emphasizing the stylistic rigor and formality necessary to convey

the nature of sorority experiences. Alpha Beta's blue theme, and its instantiation in the Instagram posts made by Alpha Beta members, directs attention to the refinement, commitment, and attention to detail required by sorority life. Such attention-grabbing strategies are crucial in the social media attention economy (van Dijck and Poell 2013, 7).

The deliberation and attention to detail incorporated in the sorority content creation practice seems to reflect Goffman's (1956) analysis of self-presentation. Sorority social media materials are intricately cultivated and rely on a distinct stylistic grammar and presentation style to convey membership. Goffman asserts that the act of self-presentation is a performance: "it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited" (Goffman 1956, 244-5). The leveraging of recognizable and accepted aesthetic elements to convey sorority affiliation—and moreover to convey that one has bought-in, and so embodied the relevant ideologies of presentation—illustrates the extent to which media presentation styles constitute a performative mode of self-presentation (Miller 1995, 8). The extent of a sorority member's success in deploying relevant stylistic cues—that is, whether their post is "credited or discredited"—may be reflected in their post's acquisition of likes and comments, the currency animating the attention economy.

The value invested in sorority-wide commitments to acknowledged modes of presentation is a crucial component of the aesthetic strategy and is the context in which the deployment of such presentations should be understood. Goffman (1956) observes that individuals frequently recruit peer coalitions with whom to perform, relying on shared understandings of socially acceptable discourse methods and presentation styles to avoid behaviors that are inconsistent with certain standards of performance. It may be tempting to frame the sorority en masse as one such coalition, however Alpha Beta members frequently associate in far smaller groups and rarely, if ever, express a deep familiarity with all group members. Rather, members tend to congregate in smaller, more intimate groups, and the performative nature of these small-scale coalitions is captured both by their iterative content engagement strategies and the tacit yet highly regulated expectations regarding media practices.

Egocentric sociogram data gathered during participant interviews reflects that sorority members repeatedly interact with posts made by small peer coalitions: 62% of comments made by sorority affiliated peers on the participants' five most recent Instagram posts were produced by peers who had commented on multiple posts within that time span. Furthermore, the participants had recently commented on posts made by 51% of the sorority affiliated peers who had commented on their posts. This trend reflects the existence of virtual coalitions of interlocutors who repetitively engage with one another's material (See Figure 1).

Goffman's analysis of coalitional performance suggests that small peer groups of sorority members engage in practices of systematically repetitive interaction to demonstrate commitments to performance standards and successful instantiations of appropriate social discourse. Consistent within these coalitional bonds are expectations of reciprocity germane to media interaction: coalitional assemblages that promote reciprocated interaction enable members to parlay their future media posts into sites for further discourse and thereby benefit from the social capital invested in these forms of dialogue.

Given Alpha Beta Member	Total	Percentage
Are Younger	10	34%
Interacted Previously	15	51%
Multiple Interactions	18	62%

Figure 1: Egocentric sociogram data regarding Alpha Beta peers who commented on the participants' five most recent posts.

Likewise, this expectation of exchange can be understood as a system of gift giving that lends itself to servicing and demanding media interactions (Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001, 312). This exchange system organizes coalitional linkages among Alpha Beta members such that the act of commenting grants the commenter the power to demand reciprocation of their gift, allowing relationships to be maintained longitudinally and ensuring their continued mutual beneficence. Thayne (2012) poses that reciprocity in content engagement prefigures "potential future interaction," suggesting that Instagram commenting behaviors assist in sustaining virtual relationships. In this sense, the debts created through deferred commenting exchanges have the effect of expanding and extending the temporality of social linkages. As Taylor and Harper indicate, "teenagers' phone-mediated activities can be understood in terms of the obligations of exchange: to give, accept and reciprocate" (Taylor and Harper 2002, 439). These exchanges are "characterized by a strong set of social obligations to give, to accept gifts, and above all to reciprocate gifts," illustrating how reciprocity norms within coalitions structure gift exchanges and give rise to extended temporality (Elder-Vass 2015, 37). Animating deferred commenting exchanges is a particular moral economy, wherein the debts produced through commenting practices are backed by normative behavioral expectations shared by the sorority at large.

Group oriented posting behaviors are further displayed in the tendency of sorority members to engage in communal content creation processes in preparation for media posting. In reflecting on her own Instagram practice, Anna commented that:

> I think often you will narrow it down to a few [pictures] yourself, and you'll send your top two or three pictures to your friends, and then they'll tell you which one they like best. Sometimes there's also, like, collaborative editing. [Her friend] pays for an editing app, like she has a really nice editing app, so a lot of times I'll be like 'oh, can you edit it for me with your app?'

Anna's description of group participation in content production indicates that media posting behaviors are not only highly deliberate but also essentially collaborative in nature. Members value the perspectives of their peers and rely on their aesthetic judgments to gauge the credibility of certain media within the context of Alpha Beta stylistic norms. These collaborative practices function to strengthen social linkages among coalition members by embedding media posting within a framework of group reciprocity and service exchange—the tasks of critiquing a peer's photos, assisting with their editing, or helping to formulate a witty photo-caption can be understood as services rendered to maintain valuable relationships (Dutton, 1977). Additionally, collaborative posting practices formalize certain aesthetic systems that delineate group membership and identity—that is, communal content creation activities legitimize and empower Alpha Beta stylistic norms.

The normative styles that inform posting behaviors and content creation largely define users' Instagram presentations and experiences. These prevailing aesthetics exemplify how users enact a nuanced regime of ornamentation in order to purify and make credible one's presentation of self. Ross (2019) argues that this highly formalized environment is juxtaposed by users' interactions on Fake Instagram. 'Finsta' (Fake-Instagram) accounts are secondary Instagram accounts that serve as a comparatively more spontaneous and organic outlet for self-expression than 'real Instagram.' Finstas are unique in that they are typically far more private than their 'real Instagram' counterparts—Instagram users typically only allow their closest peers to follow their Finstas.

Finsta content is ostensibly less formal. Anna noted that "finstas are, like, unfiltered, both literally because you don't have to look good and don't usually edit the posts, and also metaphorically because you can, like, be yourself if that makes sense. Like, post stuff you wouldn't post on your main [Instagram account] that's like, kind of more you." Ross (2019, 14) characterizes Finstas as a "respite from the social expectations of Instagram, class and gendered pressure to impress with beautiful portraits and envious locations." Finsta accounts do indeed facilitate a distinct mode of

content creation and posting behavior, however I do not necessarily view them as a foil to the highly formalized and regimented ideologies of 'real Instagram' as does Ross. Finsta content creation is still subject to aesthetic normativities—posts typically eschew the presentation styles of 'real Instagram' and embrace an alternative visual language akin to popularly self-deprecating internet memes.

It is seemingly expected that one not look presentable in Finsta posts, and that one make efforts to sabotage the meticulously constructed self-presentation crafted on the users' main account. There is certainly a polarity between the deliberate presentations of one's primary Instagram account and the ostensibly less rigorous presentations of the Finsta account, however one does not appear to be more reflective of the "true self" than the other. Rather, both are artifices, presentations of the self that complement one another. Although each are seemingly antithetical, the apparent self-sabotage affected by the Finsta may be considered a calculated means of bolstering one's most intimate social network. Finsta posts are often read by users as "unfiltered," "organic," "spontaneous," "candid" and indicative of the "real" self—an apparently stark departure from the media practices and ideologies endemic to other Instagram environments. Finstas, in this sense, may be understood as a curated album of scandalous and socially unacceptable material that can be entrusted to a close peer with the effect of signifying—and possibly enhancing—the strength of the social linkage. The act of presenting an unacceptable version of oneself to a peer is a performance of deep trust; we are attentive to around whom we let our guards down and to whom we let drop our masks—those who we allow in to this unpresentable presentation of selfhood must be knowledgeable enough of our person that the particular deliberateness familiar to primary Instagram media creation is unnecessary. The Finsta is in this sense a token of appreciation and an acknowledgement of intimacy. But this does not preclude a formal, unifying aesthetic grammar endemic to Finsta posts, nor does it guarantee that the material posted on Finsta accounts is necessarily as vulnerable and organic as it is understood as being.

Throughout the research process I was not granted—nor did I ask for—access to the participants' Finsta accounts. In fact, only Sarah and Maria had their own Finstas, and neither posted on their Finstas regularly. My interviewees discussed their past experiences producing Finsta content and their understandings of the particular media ideologies pertaining to "fake Instagram," however we did not conduct walkthroughs of the interviewee's Finstas. For this reason, I will refrain from further discussing the aesthetic particularities and expectations of Finstas for lack of available data. Nonetheless, it is evident that certain formalities dictate acceptable posting behaviors on Finstas, such that Finsta material may be read as vulnerable and candid by other users while still allowing posters to maintain control over self-presentation techniques.

Discourse Analysis in the Comments Section

Posting free-standing images to one's Instagram profile is a single component of an array of possible actions an Instagram user can take. Users can also choose to like or comment on posts made by other users; the participants liked and commented on others' posts regularly and frequently interacted with the comments made on their own posts as well. In my interviews and sociogram activities I primarily focused on commenting behaviors among sorority Instagram users, analyzing both quantitative patterns in commenting and general styles of discourse endemic to sorority members' comment sections. My discourse analysis led me to taxonomize Instagram comments by coding for implicit semantic meanings and referents. While I identified three prominent categories of discourse that seem to be predicated by the nature of the interlocutors' relationships with one another, I acknowledge that many other categorization possibilities are likely just as viable. The discourse taxonomy I will present is a relatively simple framework for understanding how commenting behaviors arise from certain typologies of social linkages; it seems likely that a more nuanced analysis of Instagram discourse could be gleaned by leveraging a more substantial data set.

The discourse analysis focused on the comments made by other sorority members on the participants' five most recent Instagram posts—the same sample used to generate sociogram data. I identified three primary modes of commenting that were ubiquitous throughout each post's comment section by coding for references to the post itself, references to the poster and/or persons portrayed in the post, and simple supportive remarks and/or symbols. I denoted "references to post" as those comments which specifically appeal to the non-personal, primarily aesthetic contents of the post, "personal references" as those that referred to the poster or persons portrayed in the post, and "vague applause" as supportive comments that do not substantively engage the post material.

Following Frege's (1948) observations regarding the relations between signs, senses, and referents, I examined how commenters engaged with posted material by appealing to a variety of referents, in so doing revealing the nature of their relationship with the poster and with the posted material itself. Figure 2 provides a selection of material posted to the participants' Instagram photos, categorized by each comment's referent (in the cases of references to post and personal references) and by the extent of their engagement with the post (with regard to vague applause).

References to the post and personal references each demonstrate a comparatively higher level of engagement with the posted material than vague applause. References to the post refer to certain of the post's aesthetic qualities or acknowledge the posted material as a self-contained object. Uses of the word "this" frequently indicated that a commenter was referring to the post itself and intended to articulate some response to its presentation.

These comments may be an affirmation of the acceptability of the presentation style employed by the poster or an acknowledgment of the credibility displayed by the presentation. Maria reflected that "I feel like [comments on her posts] give me a sense of validation in a way, to know that at least a few people are like, yeah this looks good, or yeah this is a good picture or whatever." Maria's statement suggests that comments operate to affirm the credibility of particular presentations and acknowledge the poster's successful deployment of group-relevant aesthetics. Similarly, references to the post may also be understood as one of a variety of mechanisms by which aesthetic criteria are formalized by Alpha Beta members.

Commenters may also refer to the post if they were involved in its creation. Maria noted that "a lot of times you're like, with them when they post it, or like, she talked to you about it—"oh, should I post this picture"—so then you kind of want to, like, hype them up because you told them yes they should." Anna affirmed that involvement in the posting process often obligates peers to comment affirmatively about the quality of a given post: "like, you encouraged them to post it, so you also on Instagram want to be like, yes, this is a good post for sure." The obligation of peer consultants to affirm the quality of the posts they've helped see to fruition reflects how the collaborative practice of content production is succeeded by a similarly collaborative affirmative discourse. Comments to the post, in this sense, can be understood as strengthening collaborative relationships among Alpha Beta members while likewise formalizing the aesthetic standards that shape how members produce content.

Personal references enable commenters to publicize their social networks, thereby

References to Post	Personal References	Vague Applause
This is so cute	My people 🤩🤩	hot
Love this so much	i love my peeps	💕💕
Love this picture	love you to freaking much 🥰	pretty
That vintage view ✨	My cool mom	cutie

Figure 2: Taxonomy of Instagram comments made by Alpha Beta members on the participants' five most recent posts.

leveraging the social capital consistent within certain high-value social linkages During an activity focusing on the relationships between comment types and perceived levels of friendship between commenters and posters, Maria humorously reflected that, "there's no reason to say 'I love my peeps' other than to show people who you know." The value in "showing who you know" was expressed regularly throughout the research process: participants frequently alluded to the complexity and nuance of social networks within Alpha Beta. According to Maria, "there's a lot of connections in Alpha Beta altogether, and it's kind of hard … to like know really who knows who. That would be hard, to like, gauge completely without [Instagram]." According to Maria, cultivating public displays of one's social network in comment sections allows members to record proof of—and thus reap benefits from—having "participat[ed] in the craziness" of intra-sorority sociality. The payout may not be immediate, however the capacity to demonstrate a robust intra-sorority social network can, in the long run, "open doors."

Because so much social capital—understood as the "more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119)—becomes embedded in the tangled and disorderly fabric of intra-sorority social linkages, efforts to publicize and accentuate one's relationships through the use of public facing comments serves both to reinforce such relationships in the face of ever-shifting internal politics and to make them effectively canonical—that is, to embed close and important relationships within a corpus of common knowledge accessible to and recognizable by the rest of the sorority. This is a process through which relationships can become institutionalized, such that they exist beyond the linkages between private individuals and come to be known and accepted at large among sorority members. So, while "showing who you know" can be understood as a practice of leveraging social capital, wherein a valuable relationship is publicly demonstrated in order to make use of any prestige or power to be had as a result, it also can and should be understood as a means of institutionalizing such relationships. This is a

necessarily iterative process which protects against the entropic invisibility—the natural difficulty of ever knowing who knows who within the confusing field of intra-sorority relationships—constantly threatening to undermine one's capacity to make use of the social capital at one's disposal. Such is partially why commenting practices reiterate constantly—one needs always to carefully tend both one's relationships and the public representations of one's relationships to stave off invisibility in the attention economy, a marketplace—only accessible to visible actors—where social capital can be put to use.

By producing a comment that expresses one's familiarity with the poster, commenters publicly locate themselves within a complicated matrix of intra-sorority relationships. This type of comment likely reflects a relatively strong social tie between the commenter and poster—comments that emphasize "closeness of relationship" are seen as inappropriate when the commenter is perceived as being too hyperbolic about the strength of their relationship. When asked whether a comment reading "my favorite people" would be acceptable if the commenter were a distant acquaintance, Maria responded: "that would be weird because we're not that close and it would seem like she's trying to make it seem like we are."

Personal references and, to a slightly lesser degree, references to the post, are seemingly indicative of intimate social ties between commenters and posters. Vague applause in large part enables peers with weaker ties to the poster to nonetheless maintain their familiarity through low-effort affirmative comments. These comments, which frequently consist of a single emoji or word, laud the poster's appearance or vaguely express affection without designating or implying a close relationship to the poster. Weak ties, those that are peripheral to an individual's core network, are susceptible to untrustworthiness (Völker and Flap 2001, 401). Vague applause may be a means of maintaining relationships with those on one's social periphery by occasionally re-establishing familiarity through simple, supportive remarks (Haythornthwaite 2002, 391). The value of these comparatively weak relationships is well documented—although they provide less

support than strong ties, weak ties constitute crucial sources of information given that these peers frequently liaise between members of multiple groups (McPherson et al. 2006, 355). It is therefore advantageous to maintain weak ties and reciprocated social media encounters may be one way of doing so.

This economy of interaction illustrates how Alpha Beta Instagram users embody their social networks—and their social positionality—in their online encounters. The shape one's Instagram comment takes largely reflects the nature of the interlocutors' relationship. Instagram comments are an exercise of relations and relatedness; likewise, the act of commenting is an act of embodiment.

Hierarchy and Media Surveillance

Upon initiation into Alpha Beta, new members are required to enter their social media usernames into a spreadsheet accessible by all active members of the sorority, following which they usually experience a deluge of new Instagram followers. "I remember when I joined," Anna recalled, "all the older girls—not all of them, a lot of them—just followed me. I was like 'I don't know who this is but she's in Alpha Beta so okay.'" This exercise is partially a means of disseminating new members' social media information so that existing members can follow new members, but the activity also enables existing members to monitor the social media activities of new members who may be less trusted to observe the sorority's social media guidelines. Maria noted that "they ask you to put your Instagram, Snapchat, you have to put it into a Google Doc so that they can all follow you and monitor what you're saying and posting." This spreadsheet also equips the sorority's social media chair to follow the new members' accounts using an unofficial Alpha Beta Instagram account: "They have an Instagram separate from the Alpha Beta Instagram … and it doesn't have any posts, and it just follows active members, so I think, like, the social media chair can easily just scroll through and see what everyone's posting, like on a regular basis, so I guess there's kind of an element of fear."

There are Alpha Beta guidelines that shape what users can and cannot post on their social media profiles. Images depicting underage alcohol consumption, drug use, or violations of the university's COVID-19 protocols are prohibited. Likewise, depictions of certain illicit social events that have been formally banned by the university, but which the sorority continues to host in secret, violate the sorority's social media policy. The sorority has co-opted a particular emoji to convey when a user posts an illicit image—the emoji is an acronymized four letter word (the first words of which are "That Ain't" and the latter of which are the sorority's initials) and revealing it would likely compromise the identity of the research group. However, the formulation of the particular emoji's meaning within Alpha Beta discourse can be analogously conveyed with the greek letter Tau (τ). When an Alpha Beta member's post violates the sorority's posting guidelines, a senior member may simply comment "τ" in the offending post's comment section. τ in this context serves as an acronym for "That Ain't Us," and although innocuous to non-Alpha Beta Instagram users who may see the symbol in a comment section, the receipt of a τ on one's post is considered "super, like really, really embarrassing."

When a poster receives a τ they are required to remove their post, illustrating how senior members leverage their seniority to monitor social media behaviors and take action against content that belies the sorority's standards of discourse and presentation. Older members, therefore, have a hand in how younger members construct their self-presentations on Instagram—they delineate what content is suitable and litigiously address media that violates these boundaries of expression. The surveillance program enacted by senior members suggests a form of panopticism, and the "fear" of being monitored is apparently successful in affecting self-regulation among new members. "Getting tau-ed" is relatively uncommon, largely because the threat of being "tau-ed" is so severe that members post diligently to avoid this punishment.

Social media platforms are frequently conceptualized as public spaces that are constructed and contested by users (Poell and van Dijk 2015, 2). Institutional efforts to surveil and desocialize public spaces are one means by which discipline may be internalized by users of

public space (Foucault 1975, 198). The surveillance strategy employed by Alpha Beta's senior membership exemplifies how monitored social media environments affect an internalization of media discipline in new sorority members.

Foucault's theorization of surveillance as permanent visibility illustrates the ways in which social media users navigate inclinations towards media prominence and the concomitant susceptibility to surveillance (Livingstone 2008, 12). Maria's previously referenced remark that Instagram comments made by other users on her posts "give me a sense of validation in a way, to know that at least a few people are like, yeah this looks good, or yeah this is a good picture or whatever," reflects Bucher's (2012) articulation of the "threat of invisibility," a reversal of Foucault's analysis of surveillance that suggests that possibilities of virtual obsolescence configure media orientations towards attention-seeking strategies. While Foucault describes panoptic surveillance methods as systems of perpetual visibility, Bucher (2012) suggests that social media users regularly work to sustain visibility in their online activities. The "attention economy" articulated by Marwick (2017) similarly incentivises strategies that support media visibility while exposing users to regimes of virtual surveillance. This tradeoff likely informs users' media switching behaviors—by toggling between primary Instagram accounts and "finstas," users can dictate the visibility or obscurity of their content (Ross 2019, 4).

Senior Alpha Beta members enjoy an overall more comfortable situation within the sorority and are consequently better able to engage in social media activities with a broad range of interlocutors. "For me personally," commented Sarah, "going into freshman year, the confidence you had in high school is not there really. I would not have been confident enough to post on these older girls' pictures. It's intimidating, and it's like, in high school you knew everyone. Now you don't know these girls, and I was like, oh, they're going to think I'm a weirdo … I felt like the girls I knew and their friend groups, that were older, were commenting on my stuff more than I was commenting on their stuff at first, because I was like, awkward." Sarah's experience is not

unique; the other participants affirmed that following initiation, older members commented on newer members' posts more regularly than newer members commented on older members' posts.

The tendency of older members to comment extensively on newer members' posts reflects their comparatively more comfortable situation within the Alpha Beta hierarchy and might suggest that the initial surge of comments made by senior members is a largely pedagogical activity. Maria mentioned that "on my bid day photo, I was looking through the comments, I have a lot of older girls that I barely talked to, so I think there definitely is like that kind of welcoming stage where everyone kind of commented on any Alpha Beta bid day pictures." She described these initial interactions with older members as being informative about how to proceed socially: "they kind of showed me, like, the kinds of things you can say and the right tone and stuff. Like, I felt like I could kind of go from there in terms of reaching out to my PC [pledge class] and starting to get to know them." These initial interactions might be understood as a means of demonstrating acceptable discourse styles and a method for equipping new members to safely interact with their peers. This introductory deluge of comments from senior Alpha Beta members may constitute a passing on of a corpus of a unique sociolinguistic repertoire, a rite of passage whereby members are made familiar with the modes of discourse they will be required to employ throughout their membership.

Conclusion

Its material affordances and adaptable interface make Instagram a powerful means of projecting self-presentation and community membership. Ross (2019, 19) argues that "the various factors that go into the image-making and -sharing process can be traced back to the desire to have one's posts liked by others." This paper primarily explores the role of Instagram commenting as a crucial mediator of content creation and posting behavior, as well as the broader function of Instagram commenting in facilitating socialization among sorority members. Partially owing to the recent obsolescence of visible Instagram "like" metrics,

"like" accumulation has seemingly declined as a directive of media activity.

Commenting behaviors provide for analysis not only of content creation practices but also of how particularized virtual discourse methods shape and maintain group membership. Whereas "likes" may be a means of gauging posting success and a principle for fine-tuning image production, Instagram comments reflect the situation of social media encounters within broader contexts of social relatedness, coalitional expectations, and intra-sorority dominance hierarchies. The discursive potentialities invited by commenting platforms underlays the sociality of social media. Baudrillard (1985, 577) dictates that truly "social" media most fundamentally serve as "reciprocal spaces of speech and response," exemplifying the centrality of comment discourse as a powerful and pervasive media practice.

Alpha Beta affiliated Instagram users employ the platform to communicate their membership by mobilizing distinct, sorority-specific aesthetics. Style guidelines are formalized through intra-sorority power dynamics and iterative commenting processes that congratulate successful uses of group acknowledged aesthetics. Virtual and face-to-face collaborative practices also enabled sorority Instagram users to establish stylistic modes of content production that complement existing organizations of group relations (Yates et al. 1997, 3).

The implementation of acceptable content creation and discourse practices enables users to project their sorority identities and establish expectations of membership (Nisa 2018, 92). By interacting with media posted by sorority members and sorority affiliated accounts (particularly, the official Alpha Beta Instagram account), users learn to operationalize certain stylistic and discursive aesthetics in order to inform their own participation in and embodiment of sorority life.

Instagram comment forums and image feeds are largely palimpsestic in nature, owing to the capacity of new media content to overwrite existing material and the tendency of users to delete posted material entirely. Moreover, media posting behaviors are frequently hauntological, given frequent reappropriations of vintage and retro styles in reimagined and recontextualised environments. Ambiguities surrounding linearity and aesthetic recapitulations suggest a need for further scholarship concerning the situation of sorority media aesthetics within broader histories of image making and production. Moreover, attending to the ways in which sorority members contest existing aesthetic regiments could clarify the tensions between agency and conformity in online activities (Code 2013, 41; Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, 7). Many of my interview conversations explored how sorority members adopt existing media ideologies to instantiate their membership and group-commitment, however participants frequently alluded to instances in which they departed from these norms, such as in portrayals of non-sorority activities. These cases reflect that, just as members toggle between primary and "fake" Instagram accounts, so do they toggle between presentation styles within single accounts. This code-switching behavior suggests that agency and coercion in media posting are context-dependent and contingent on the nature of the material being portrayed.

Furthermore, participants commented that restrictions on in-person gatherings implemented by the university in response to the COVID-19 pandemic expanded how social media was used as a tool for initiating new Alpha Beta members. Research regarding the changing role of social media as a result of the pandemic, and the extent to which these changes become formalized beyond the pandemic, could provide insight concerning the adaptability of media environments to changing conditions.

Adaptability is a primary component of media usage and is precisely what enables users to direct their content creation practices towards particular audiences. Posting with the sorority in mind necessitates attention to group power dynamics and stylistic cues, however these formalities may be circumscribed by leveraging alternative channels, such as "finstas." Group-acknowledged aesthetic normativities shape how and what users post, and in so doing systematize a practice of communal content creation that affects perceptions and presentations of the self.

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