'NOT LIKE OTHER SOCIAL NETWORKS'? BEREAL AND THE REMEDIATION OF LIVENESS IN THE PLATFORM ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

'Social media' represent a dynamic technological environment, in which emerging platforms make use of comparisons to existing apps to construct their own reputation. This is the case of BeReal – a platform that allows users to share pictures once a day when triggered by a notification. In this paper, I examine how BeReal deploys antagonistic discourse towards dominant media to promise a more authentic experience. In so doing, I frame the platform as evoking, appropriating, and remediating (Bolter and Grusin 2000) notions of mediated liveness – not only when it comes to a promised 'real-time' connection but also referring to a particular sense of 'being there', sharing experiences, and having 'real' experiences through technological mediation.

Platformization, authenticity, and the refashioning of 'liveness'

In a context of increasing platformization (Poell et al 2019) mainstream apps are often critiqued for favoring a perfectly curated version of people's appearances, identities, and doings rather than a supposedly 'authentic' depiction of life as it is. Arguably, there is nothing particularly revolutionary in claiming to offer authentic experiences. Indeed, emerging technologies often make use of "authenticity" as a strategy to position themselves, disregarding the fact that most established apps have done the same in the past (Salisbury and Pooley 2017). This confirms that authenticity is malleable, fluid, and constantly on the move. It should be noted that the term has multiple and contested definitions (Banet-Weiser 2012, Grazian 2018). Here I am conceiving of the 'authentic' as that which is perceived as genuine, real – even if requiring a lot of mediative work to be concretized (Hochschild 1983, Scannell 2000).

My theoretical starting point is the consideration that liveness, in its different 'constellations' (van Es 2016) is a value-loaded attribute – and, often, these values

reinforce the promise and pursuit of an 'authentic experience' through the reproduction of certain reality claims despite the presence of technological intervention (Scannell 2014). Liveness, I argue, involves an articulation of four experiential dimensions: temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity and embodiment (Lupinacci 2022). This raises the question on how BeReal positions itself in relation to existing platforms, and whether (and in what ways) the historical construct of liveness can be a productive analytical tool for understanding contemporary socio-technical disputes over 'platformized authenticity'.

Methods

To examine how BeReal conceives of the very idea of authenticity and its conditions of possibility, I used a technographic approach. Technography pays attention to how a given technology is framed, promoted, or presented by its creators, and scrutinizes the normative views behind those ideas (Bucher 2018). This includes the inspection of the interpretive repertoires, symbols and metaphors deployed in institutional and promotional materials, the kinds of experiences they invoke, and how they fit broader discursive structures (Berg 2022). This was complemented by the walkthrough method (Light et al 2016), which treats each platform as a particular environment and focuses on how corporate visions are embedded into the interface, the affordances, and the overall operation of each app. Whilst these methods do not allow me to examine how the platform is experienced by users in practice, their combination provides a good insight into how its creators envisioned BeReal to orchestrate users' experiences.

Findings

The analysis focuses on four thematic clusters – temporality, spatiality, intersubjectivity and embodiment –, all of which represent continuities and disruptions in relation to pre-existing social media and historical claims of mediated liveness.

If we approach liveness from the angle of **temporality**, the concept designates either a matter of speed (the 'real-time' access to what is happening), duration (or lack thereof), or contingency (based on situations that are still 'in state of becoming'). In the case of BeReal, there is a clear focus on the 'now', even if this 'present' can be technically made flexible by the users (Highfield 2023). BeReal also exemplifies the potential for imminent risk that is typical of liveness – as the whole premise of the app is that users will be taken by surprise by notifications that pop up at random times. BeReal has an intrinsically 'interruptive' character, in which the perpetual possibility for a notification is a central part of the experience.

If we focus on the **spatiality** of 'the live', then the term is deployed to characterize practices of mediated witnessing, presencing, or experiential 'teleportation'. On BeReal, a particular sense of space is produced through the use of the dual camera setting – in which a selfie and the user's point of view are captured almost simultaneously –, which confers the platform with a very specific way of 'being there' through this photographic marker of presence (Swerzenski and McCauley 2023). BeReal, then, produces a particular way of being in the world which was until then unique to the platform (although it has been since copied by some of its competitors).

'Being there live', however, is rarely only about a perceptual relocation; it is, usually, the experience of being part of an experience with others who are also experiencing it (Hammelburg 2021). When it comes to **intersubjectivity,** then, liveness comprises ideas of togetherness, collectiveness, and participation. In the interactional environment provided by BeReal, the sense of shared experience is mostly produced by the fact that every user is prompted to submit a picture at the same time – although in practice this might not necessarily be the case. Still, the fact that the app only lets you see what others have shared once you have submitted a post yourself through contingent access (Taylor 2023) constrains the experience into a virtual collectivity. BeReal also seems to foreground a new modality of social surveillance (Maddox 2023), in which you are encouraged to share in order to be able to see what others are doing.

Finally, if we foreground **embodiment** in the examination of liveness, then its definition becomes closely aligned with a promised 'direct' access to reality, as if it was not mediated. The 'live' "announces its authenticity against potentially deceptive substitutes" (Peters 1999:218). In this regard, BeReal relies on the mediated use of the body as a marker of authenticity – in particular, the app's rhetoric and interface encourage users to keep their faces always visible, and preferably with a smile on (Annabell 2023). The platform also allows users to create and share personalized emotional reactions through capturing their own version for existing emoji, configuring a self-claimed 'RealMoji'. Moreover, a crucial component of BeReal's mode of engagement is the fact that in order to properly 'BeReal', the user must keep their phone at hand at all times, since they never know when the notification might pop up. Despite its rhetoric of healthy (dis)connection, BeReal actually demands continuous bodily proximity.

Discussion and conclusions

My analysis suggests a recycling of the longstanding idea that immediacy provides a more fulfilling and authentic experience. Whereas many 'alternative' social platforms (Gehl 2015) focus on restoring democratic values as the key distinction from dominant technologies, BeReal focuses on providing a different experience from that of mainstream social media. BeReal relies on a techno-nostalgic appreciation of a social media past (Wieghorst 2021), when rather than 'platforms' we had 'social networks' focused on meeting new and old friends and seeing what they were up to. Particularly, BeReal promises to reconnect users with the long-lost joy of social media, evoking this assumed authentic past through technical constraints. BeReal's normative conception of authentic experience seems grounded in values such as spontaneity, simultaneity, and shared experience – which is a clear refashioning of historical claims of mediated liveness (Scannell 2014).

Yet, I argue that BeReal favors a new modality of platformized social organization envisioning the production of authentic experiences. While algorithmic platforms are premised on the production of orchestrated serendipity (Karppi 2018) – the apparently contradictory experience of expecting surprising affective intensity to emerge from programmed environments –, BeReal seems to foreground coordinated spontaneity, emphasizing the paradoxical experiences of improvisation and synchronization. Moreover, by rejecting the 'continuous connectedness' typical of other apps, BeReal

appropriates the rhetoric of digital disconnection in order to build its own brand identity, reinforcing value-loaded ideas of anti-fakery and, therefore, of what 'being real' actually looks like.

Those findings matter because they demonstrate how claims of immediacy and the direct access to 'reality' are manifested and negotiated in contemporary sociotechnical practices. In this context, BeReal's version for "platformized authenticity" – the co-option of 'the authentic' to advance platforms' growth and commercial goals – is a process marked by a recursive, cyclical negotiation between technical mediation and claims of liveness.

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