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Journal

Qualitative Psychology, 10(1)

ISSN

2326-3601

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Publication Date

2023-06-05

DOI

10.1037/qup0000232

Peer reviewed

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Narratives of the Self in Polymedia Contexts: Authenticity and Branding in Generation Z

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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DOI: 10.1037/qup0000232

Abstract

In the digital age of polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2012), a multitude of social media platforms provide youth with an endless menu of options, cultural expressions, imagery, metaphors, models, and narratives to tell the world (and themselves) who they are as they develop an autobiographical self (McAdams, 2013). To understand autobiographical self development in the context of self-presentations on multiple platforms, we analyzed the structure and content of undergraduate college students' ($N=29$; 17=Female, 12=Male $M_{AGE}=20$) storytelling as they guided researchers on a tour of their three most frequently used social media platforms. Whole-person narrative analysis of audiovisual recordings of the social media tours revealed a variety of ways that young people construct themselves as real and recognizable in the context of master narratives surrounding authenticity and branding on social media (Davis, 2014; Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011). We present our insights into the process of constructing the autobiographical self as an authentic brand on social media through excerpts of stories youth tell about themselves and their experiences primarily on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

Keywords: narrative identity development, online self-presentation, social media, authenticity, Generation Z.

Narratives of the Self in Polymedia Contexts: Authenticity and Branding in Generation Z

Social media environments are dynamic and as they change over time, so do possibilities and expectations for self-presentation (Davis, 2011; Manago, 2014). In contrast to the early 2000's when the majority of young people in the U.S. primarily used Facebook (Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe et al., 2006), in 2018 most 18 to 29-year-olds used at least four of the following platforms: Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Pinterest, and LinkedIn (Pew Research, 2018). These “polymedia” (Madianou & Miller, 2012) environments afford new opportunities to present various versions of the self to distinct audiences—a trend crystalized in a January 2020 viral meme, #DollyPartonChallenge, in which participants presented a collage of distinctly curated selves on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Tinder. Because previous research has tended to examine self-presentation in the context of one particular site such as Twitter (Marwick & boyd, 2011) or Facebook (Michikyan et al., 2015; Yang & Brown, 2016), we know little about how young people present themselves across platforms and how they are integrating these experiences in their self-development.

To examine self-development in the context of polymedia, the current study combines storytelling as a fundamental process of identity development (Hammack, 2011) with a social media tour (Salimkhan et al., 2010). U.S. college students guided researchers through their most frequently used social media profiles at the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019, and reflected on their digital self-expressions over the past five years. Stops along the audiovisual tour elicited small stories behind participants' public posts, which were analyzed to understand autobiographical selves within the context of digitally-lived experiences. We paid particular attention to the ways in which youth oriented to narratives of authenticity and branding across different platforms, building on prior work showing discourses surrounding these issues frame

individuals' decision-making about online self-presentations (Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011).

The Social Media Context

With the proliferation of social media applications in recent years, young people are “platform swinging,” seamlessly moving between platforms to exploit a variety of opportunities to manage impressions and relationships (Tandoc et al., 2018). Rather than viewing each of these platforms as separate environments, Madianou and Miller (2012) argue that they constitute “polymedia” contexts, which are characterized by increasing diversity and integration of affordances for communication. Building on Hutchby’s (2001) definition of affordances as “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action” (p. 444), Madianou and Miller highlight the customizability of social environments in the current social media environment, such that constraints of any one medium can be circumvented by the opportunities of another. Generation Z adolescents and young adults are switching easily between platforms and communication channels to meet different kinds of relational goals, to connect with different audiences, and express different aspects of themselves.

The mediums youth choose to convey their messages are multifaceted and constantly evolving. Visual based platforms such as Instagram afford opportunities to present oneself through iconic representations, photos, and memes while newer social media applications like Snapchat and TikTok offer visual self-expression combined with nonlinear storytelling through photo and video-based “stories” that usually disappear after a short period of time. These stories are shot as day-in-the-life moments that can be enhanced with emojis, gifs, songs, written overlays, filters and lenses. The affordance of ephemerality marks these channels as safer havens for more experimental or personal communication, although content can be saved to a device,

captured clandestinely by members of an audience (Waddell, 2016), or live on in highly personalized algorithmic feeds of short-form video content (e.g., TikTok). In line with polymedia integration, the “story” application has been adopted by Facebook and Instagram, while TikTok’s “swipe-up” method for scrolling through short-form, algorithmically-curated videos has seen replication attempts by Snapchat and Instagram Reels.

Importantly, social media platforms afford personal communication that persists in public (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Communication in networked publics on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter tends to involve authoring relatively permanent iterations of the self that are available to all members of an abstract, imagined audience (Pitcan et al., 2018). On these platforms, contexts between typically distinct social groups are often collapsed (Vitak, 2012) and a lowest common denominator approach to self-presentation becomes more relevant such that content about the self might be curated to be valued by the majority (Hogan, 2010). Quantified social metrics such as number of likes, shares, and comments confer value in networked publics and the relative permanence of these indices allows people to accumulate and showcase clout or popularity. Adolescents have also contrived more intimate uses of public facing platforms like Instagram by creating ‘finsta’ (fake Instagram) accounts for exclusive self-presentations available only to their closest friends (Dewar et al., 2019; Kang & Wei, 2019).

Unique features of social media communication have created novel behaviors in adolescents’ peer relations (Nesi, et al., 2018). For example, quantified social metrics amplify and alter the delivery of peer approbation, creating new kinds of relationship and impression management behaviors such as strategically posting at times of the day when the largest proportion of one’s audience is likely to be online, or removing posts that fail to earn high numbers of likes and comments (Dhir et al., 2016; Nesi et al., 2018). In short, the “imagined

audience” (Elkind, 1967) that has long characterized the way the peer group is experienced in adolescent self-development takes on new forms and intensity through social media (boyd, 2014; Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017). Adolescents growing up with various audiences for their self-expression in multimedia environments may be acquiring new kinds of literacies for compelling storytelling to achieve connection and social validation, which may also be applied to the ways they are integrating their diverse self-presentations into their self-development.

Autobiographical Self-Development

Narrative perspectives on the self and identity are anchored in social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, where stories constitute selves in social interactions (McAdams, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1991). To link sociological and psychological perspectives on the self, McAdams’ (2013) Actor-Agent-Author framework conceptualizes selves as social actors in early childhood learning social roles and performance, then becoming motivated agents in mid-to-late childhood exploring and committing to values, goals, beliefs, and desires. By late adolescence and young adulthood, the autobiographical self begins to construct a meaningful life story, incorporating the reconstructed past and the imagined, hoped-for future. It is through the integration of self as actor-agent-author that youth begin to develop a clear subjective understanding of their personal life story, albeit one that will be frequently edited, revised to integrate past, present, and future and continually influenced by a dynamic world of symbols and meanings.

Stories are the vehicle for selves to engage with cultural worlds, to comprehend larger ideas and concepts, and to build coherency in life (McAdam, 2006). To understand how personal stories are influenced by cultural processes, researchers have turned to the framework of master narratives (Bamberg, 2004; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Thorne & McLean, 2003; Weststrate & McLean, 2010). The framework posits that there are certain ways that members of a cultural

group are ‘supposed to’ tell their stories—for example, through the redemptive arc in the U.S. (McAdams, 2006)—and that there is a continuous negotiation between individuals and their culture(s) in the telling of their stories (Mclean & Syed, 2015). As youth begin to construct their personal narratives, they engage with master narratives—either internalizing master narratives about how to live a good life or constructing alternative narratives when their lives do not fit into the requisite societal structures and they consider master narratives problematic.

Previous research on master narrative engagement through the internet and social media has examined the narrative forms of non-heterosexual youth (Kuper & Mustanski, 2014). Researchers analyzed the ways 18-20 year-olds talked about the low and high points of their internet use and sexual identity development using preexisting taxonomies of narrative forms found in adults such as *redemption* (high and low story points ending in positive outcomes) and *contamination* (gains counteracted by subsequent negative events) (Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Lieblich et al., 1998; McAdams, 2006). Kuper and Mustanski (2014) found that non-heterosexual youth who were more engaged in online internet culture tended to use narratives of struggle and success (“a triumphant model of resilience in a heterosexist world” Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 49) rather than emancipation narratives (rejecting the inevitability of struggle and embracing the fluidity of gender and sexual labels) in making meaning of their experiences as sexual minorities. Their study showed that master narratives for gender and sexuality found in previous LGBTQ+ populations (Cohler & Hammack, 2007) were transferred into, rather than transformed by, social media.

Cultural continuity notwithstanding, adolescents are also agents of cultural change in their adaptations to new communication affordances (Manago et al., 2020). The transition to adulthood is characterized by change, complexity, fluidity (Arnett, 2000; Luyckx et al., 2011),

and life stories that are being told in response to contemporary circumstances. Longstanding ways of authoring the self may not necessarily fit with novel behaviors in peer relations and impression management that are occurring with social media. Instead, we anticipated that autobiographical self-development in Generation Z would likely reflect engagement with a master narrative of authentic branding.

The Self as an Authentic Brand

The self can be understood as developing over time and also as a product of social interaction, a ‘collaborative manufacture’ between an individual and an audience (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Goffman’s (1959) theory of self-presentation has been widely adopted as a starting point for understanding the self through online performance (boyd, 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Papacharissi, 2012; Tufekci, 2008). Goffman’s (1959) theory is rooted in the dramaturgical performances of the self, where individuals adopt front stage behaviors (“facework”) to display a ‘good’ image to others, which may at times be in conflict with desires to be sincere.

In the early days of the internet, it was thought that affordances for anonymity, multiplicity, and fluidity of identity expression would create online ‘identity playgrounds’ (Plant, 1997; Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995; Waskul & Douglass, 1997) such that authenticity would become less relevant compared to the face-to-face interactions described in Goffman’s theory (Davis, 2014). However, recent research shows that online self-presentations tend not to be so fluid or separable from offline contexts (boyd, 2014; Davis, 2010; Hardey, 2002). Moreover, the social media stage is more public and permanent compared to face-to-face interactions and therefore might be better conceptualized as ‘exhibition spaces’ for identity commitments in the timelines of posted content (Chua & Chang, 2016; Hogan, 2010). With exhibition spaces, there is

greater potential for performances to be reflected on and edited, spread, scrutinized, and revisited in the future. The constant availability of known and potentially unknown audiences through social media creates persistent consciousness of others' evaluations such that authenticity may become even *more* of a concern in identity development (Davis, 2012; Gatson, 2011; Robinson, 2007; Tufekci, 2008).

Meanings of authenticity are culturally constructed (Cheng, 2004) and on social media, authenticity is becoming paradoxically linked with notions of the self as a brand (Khedher, 2013; Marwick, 2013). Previous qualitative research suggests that authenticity is often “performed” online, involving frameworks and strategies from contemporary promotional culture and practices of microcelebrity to build an audience for a particular form of self-expression (Davis, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2013). In commercial contexts, brands allow people to separate the authentic from the inauthentic, distinguishing mediocrity from quality in the products they buy; similarly, authenticity and branding may be interwoven into a master narrative about how to be a good, high-quality person online (Marwick, 2013). For example, Marwick and boyd (2011) asked adult Twitter users about how they communicate with their “imagined audiences” and many responses involved strategies for building a loyal following by revealing personal information:

As an individual (not org or corp) it's worth it 2 me 2 lose followers 2 maintain the wholeness/integrity of who/what/how I tweet (p.119)

Authenticity Rule 1: Include personal w/ promotional. “Bags under my eyes from staying up ‘til 4 accepting friend requests.” (p. 126)

As Generation Z navigate self-promotion and desires to be sincere on various platforms, they may be integrating a master narrative for authentic branding into their autobiographical self-development and perpetuating it in social media culture. Autobiographical storytelling is a higher order psychological process by which people agentively make meaning of tensions and contradictions in their lives, construct their worldviews (Bhatia, 2017; Bruner, 1990), and establish purpose and continuity in the growing complexities of the self across contexts (McAdams, 2001, 2006). Yet, agency in constructing a life story is also constrained by master narratives such that youth must position themselves relative to ideal ways of being a person; for Generation Z, this likely involves conveying the self as an authentic brand across various social media platforms.

Current Study

To better understand autobiographical self-development in Generation Z, we asked a small ($n = 29$) but somewhat diverse sample of West Coast U.S. college students to guide researchers on a tour of their self-presentations on their top three social media platforms over the past five years using their own smartphones connected to a recording device. The social media tour (Manago, 2013; Manago et al., 2020; Salimkhan et al., 2010) has been likened to “go-along” ethnographic observations (Campos-Holland et al., 2016) but in the context of social media, stories of the self are connected to digitally-lived experiences. Audiovisual recordings of the tours, actual online behaviors alongside participants’ interpretations for the interviewer, were analyzed to understand how late adolescents/young adults are negotiating authentic branding through their various online self-presentations and how they are internalizing, rejecting, or reformulating this master narrative through the stories they tell the interviewer about who they are across social media platforms.

Methods

Overview

Social media tour interviews were conducted in the tradition of narrative inquiry (Josselson, 2011). This tradition of inquiry is grounded in the idea that meaning is socially and discursively constructed, that the idea of ‘truth’ is multifaceted; challenging positivist assumptions that there is only one objective, knowable reality (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Narrative interviews are a collaborative process that takes place between a participant and interviewer as partners in an interaction. Participants are not merely constructing themselves for an audience, but for a *researcher* in light of digital artefacts that come up in the digital tour. Interviews in a research setting elicit participants’ accounts, stories, and narratives as they construct themselves to be – reasonable, rational, and sane, engaging in repair work when these presentations are threatened (Goffman, 1983).

Social media tours facilitate narrative constructions of selves grounded in young people’s self-presentations in their online lives. Thus, data from the tours are more experience-near (Yoshikawa et al., 2008) compared to traditional narrative interviews as they provide a window into the personal narratives embedded in the multimedia content young people use in their everyday peer relationships. In sum, social media tour data are self-constructions synthesized across different online and face-to-face social contexts and represent both content and process of youth self-development in context.

Participants and Procedure

A sample of 29 college students, 17 identified as female, and 12 identified as male (none of which identified as nonbinary), participated in interviews using their personal smartphone

device ($M_{AGE} = 20$, range = 18 - 24). Two participants were dropped from the study because of technological error in recording. Participants self-identified as: Hispanic/Latine/o/a ($n=6$), Southeast Asian/Indian ($n=2$), Middle-Eastern ($n=3$), White ($n=11$), Asian-American/Pacific Islander ($n=4$), African American ($n=1$), Chinese ($n=1$), and Central American/African-American/Filipino ($n=1$). From these respondents, the narratives of Samantha [pseudonym] (19-year-old mixed-race female), Justin [pseudonym] (19-year-old white male), Mahika [pseudonym] (20-year-old South Asian/Indian female), Lana [pseudonym] (19-year-old white female), and Valentina [pseudonym] (22-year-old Latina female) were selected as case studies for this article. These cases were selected as highly illustrative of the key insights that emerged from the narrative thematic analysis of tours.

Participants were recruited through a large west-coast university human subjects pool, after signing up for a study labeled ‘a social media interview.’ The only requirement for participation was having at least one social media account that had been active for at least five years. The advertisement indicated that students would receive three research credit hours as incentive for their participation in the interview. Android users were asked to download the DU recorder application from the Google play store, for audio-visual recording of their social media profile walkthroughs, and iPhone users were asked to bring their native iPhone charging cable, for use with the interviewer’s laboratory iMac computer. After participants arrived for the study, they were informed that they would be participating in an interview that required an audio-visual screen recording of their social media profile(s), recording only their voice, and the screen of the smartphone.

After giving informed consent, participants were instructed to open their phones to access their frequently used social media to check device compatibility with the screen-

recording application, DU recorder, if they were using an android-based smartphone device. If participants were using an iPhone, no app was downloaded, and interviewers used QuickTime Player on an Apple iMac computer to screen-record participants' iPhones. Participants gave interviewers tours of their social media profiles in a private room, next to an Apple iMac computer, and provided explanations and commentary. Interviewers followed a semi-structured narrative interview protocol focused on participants' public or semi-public status updates and posts and refrained from responding to participants in any way that appeared judgmental—approving or disapproving. The interviewers were a white cisgender male graduate student and two undergraduate research assistants, one a mixed-race cisgender woman, the other a Korean cisgender male.

Interviews lasted between 90 to 180 minutes, and all social media profile walkthroughs were audio-visually recorded on participants' smartphones. At the end of each interview, participants' screen recordings and audio files of interviews were uploaded to a secure server, and deleted from participants' smartphones and laboratory recording devices. All names were replaced with pseudonyms and any identifying information was changed.

Design

We constructed an interview protocol that probed young adults' experiences with their most frequently used social media sites. Interview questions started with basic demographics and most frequently used social media, followed by current social media activity, and then a retrospective walkthrough of posts from the last five years of their lives on their most frequently used sites. Interviewers asked participants to only show their one-to-many posts, which we defined as information shared publicly for an audience, even if some youth limited or segmented this audience via privacy controls. We did not record any form of group chat where third party

individuals would have expected restricted access in conversation.

The first section of the narrative interview asked participants to name the top three social media platforms they currently use, when they started using them, and how they used these sites to connect with other people. Next, they were asked about their current social media use with questions such as “Can you show me some posts that exemplify how you express yourself on this site?” and “Are there aspects of yourself that you do not express on this site?” Questions were followed by prompts to encourage participants to elaborate on issues related to intentionality, privacy, and audience (e.g., “Were you thinking about a particular audience when you posted this?”, “How did people react when you posted this?”). The last section of the interview asked participants to navigate back in time on their social media timelines (e.g., “I’d like you to go back five years or so, to when you first started using social media. Can you tell me about why you started using [Site 1]?”). Questions in this portion of the interview asked participants about how they previously presented themselves on the platform and to reflect on one post that got a lot of attention and one post that did not get a lot of attention. Interviewers also asked participants to show examples of personal content that they posted publicly, and asked follow up questions regarding intentionality, audience, and privacy. The interview ended with a broad discussion of social media use, asking about how the participant’s social media use and communities had changed over time.

Reflexive Analysis

Given the first author’s background as a 28-year-old white, cisgender, heterosexual male graduate student who has used social networking sites extensively since the age of 12, he thought critically about the effects of his identities and generational experience as a millennial on the interview process and data analysis. Currently, he uses Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat on a

daily basis, while using Twitter and Tumblr infrequently. He kept a diary of memos throughout the course of this study to document his reactions to participants' narratives, which helped him to recognize the impact of his identities and social position with participants on both the interview process and narrative analysis. Through these memos, the first author discovered how his identities as a German-Jewish man, with a fairly individualistic family background prevented him from fully understanding cultural differences in participants' narratives where participants described higher degrees of deference and respect for familial control over social media account activity. His identity as a white man limited his ability to relate to some women's experiences in the interviews, particularly when women of color discussed their valuing of familism, phenomena such as Brown Twitter, and their experiences of issues like rape culture on social media; however, he believes that this also prompted women he interviewed to explain their experiences in greater detail to him.

The second author is second generation Italian American cisgender woman who grew up without access to the internet until adulthood and currently uses Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter but posts on social media very sparingly. The current study is influenced by her previous research on communication technologies as cultural tools for identity development in the transition to adulthood (Manago et al., 2020). She is largely an outsider to internet youth culture, and therefore relied on co-authors' and participants' interpretations and insights into social media behavior, particularly on newer platforms. Her motivation for this research was to shed light on perspectives of social media and the self among youth in Generation Z.

As an older member of Generation Z, the third author, a 21-year-old mixed-race, cisgender female undergraduate, began frequently using Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter during high school. She saw many similarities between the developmental milestones and content posted by

the majority of participants and her own social media use. Her gender identity as a woman impacted her views and attitudes toward understanding some of the men's experiences in the interviews regarding hesitancy or openness to posting on social media about their emotions and struggles with mental health. She actively worked to use open-ended questioning to gain greater insight and prompted male-identified participants to clarify their thoughts behind posting vulnerable or personal content about mental health. During the interview process, the third author also learned how her agnostic beliefs interfered with her ability to fully understand some participants' religious identities and the importance of non-American cultural and religious events such as Jewish Birthright or the Hindu celebration Raksha Bandhan. This lack of knowledge regarding diverse cultural and religious milestones motivated her to approach interview responses with curiosity and sensitivity.

Analytic Strategy

Data were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008; Bates et al., 2020), which emphasizes the importance of lived experience and meaning-making in social contexts using an inductive, interpretive approach to coding (Lieblich et al., 1998; Tappan, 1997; Toolis & Hammack, 2015), retaining a bottom-up, person-centered focus, and identifying similar prominent themes across life stories. In a modern interpretation of narrative tradition that takes a holistic approach to the study of human lives (Hammack, 2006, 2010; Josselson, 2009), we conducted an in-depth analysis of each life story in our dataset using the computer program Datavyu (Datavyu, 2014) to engage with each tour of participants' social media. Datavyu is an open-source video analysis software that allows researchers to code and annotate video files directly, via text columns that are displayed alongside a video player. Importantly, Datavyu

enables a researcher to map comments and textual analysis directly to specific time points in the video file of an interview.

We chose not to generate full written transcriptions of each interview; instead, opting to conduct a bottom-up analysis of each life story by annotating and viewing transcripts directly via Datavyu to discover what meaning participants made of their digital experiences. In addition, each interviewer kept a diary of personal memos, which were written after each interview. These memos served as material for reflection upon interviewers' reactions to participants' stories and allowed interviewers to reflect on their positionality and salient aspects of interviews. After creating memos for each interview, the interviewers generated narrative summaries for each participant and attempted to understand the structure, salient moments, and ways in which youth negotiated or engaged with the authentic brand master narrative on social media. Narrative summaries were usually about one and a half to two pages in length and reflected the outline, structure, and main quotes from participants' interviews, serving as a rudimentary template for refinement and further analysis.

After memoing and creating narrative summaries of emerging adults' stories, we developed a 'multi-pass method' for collaborative analysis and interpretation of the digital tour interviews. On first viewing of the interview file, four columns were created in Datavyu for a participant's file. The first column described the notes for the outline and flow of the interview, and subsequent columns denoted increasing depths of analyses for each successive re-watching of the interview. The first column contained primarily keywords of concepts or ideas that participants mentioned during interviews, and columns two, three, and four were used to expand upon these ideas and themes within the context of the whole of participants' stories and the social media they decided to share with us.

The first and third authors conducted multiple readings of these columns, coupled with re-watching and listening to interviews, which aided in identifying connections and patterns across participants and deriving themes (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). The research team created four passes in Datavyu for all participants in our sample. Members of the research team did not read each other's column notes and memos before weekly discussion meetings. Instead, they discussed personal memos and column notes at length during these weekly meetings. In alignment with Braun and Clarke (2019), analyses were led by the first author, with the second and third author providing support and guidance by looking at a smaller subset of interview video files and participating in weekly discussion groups over seven weeks to discuss common patterns and discrepancies present across memos, narrative summaries, and Datavyu files. Through this process, narrative themes were increasingly refined and collapsed into higher-level conceptual insights, with narrative thematic analysis allowing us to go beyond the listing of themes and maintain the whole person in our findings.

Results

Overview of Findings

Even though we did not directly ask about authenticity and branding in our interview protocol, participants' stories about their public lives online very often referenced these notions. Generation Z young adults in our study characterized their growth throughout adolescence to the present as a process of learning to be more real, more themselves on social media over time. Many also talked about distinct personas they embodied across platforms, sometimes explicitly using the term "brand" to summarize the hallmarks of their self-presentation on a particular platform, especially more public-facing platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. However, their responses to cultural narratives about living a good life on social media by being an authentic

brand also varied widely. In this section, we elaborate on three different themes encapsulating how college students in our sample approached authentic branding in their self-storytelling. We present our three narrative themes through excerpts from the stories of Samantha, Justin, Lana, Mahika, and Valentina (pseudonyms). For the benefit of the reader, it is important to note that some of these stories and associated figures in the appendix are very personal, and deal with emotionally intense issues.

Narrative Theme 1: Laughing at my Sad Posts – Building an Authentic Brand through Tragicomic Storytelling

One way that youth in our sample constructed themselves in relation to an authentic brand narrative was by exhibiting all their chaotic teen angst through dramatic irony and rebelling against expectations of a mainstream social media culture they viewed as shallow and sanitized. They saw themselves on social media as offering a unique spotlight on the absurdity and tragedy of human life, connecting with their audiences on a more complex emotional level by turning their despair into entertainment. To counter social media artifice and build authenticity and value with online audiences, they interwove comedy and tragedy in their self-expressions through heavy use of self-deprecation.

One of these participants was Samantha, a Black and Salvadorian 19-year old girl. Samantha uses Instagram and Facebook but is most involved in Twitter, where she shows the interviewer a post depicting herself as 'fukn stupid' [See Figure 1]. She says,

I want people to know that I'm kinda like a mess. It's like expected I guess, if I start crying. Yeah, like I tweet things that I think are funny, because I like people laughing at my tweets I guess. I feel like this is a really accurate portrayal of myself I guess, I like that people can see my thoughts I guess. I feel like I like to make myself seem more

stupid than I am, in just like interactions, and there's not any way for me to say that in real life. Like I like pretending to be stupid but I'm actually kinda smart... I want everyone to see everything and just like be really raw about it. It's kinda like what I do, it's like my brand, you know, by portraying myself as stupid, in a weird way, like I kinda just expect or want people to think I'm dumb because I think it's funny. It's like a weird internal battle, because I want people to realize that I work hard because I work hard academically, and know more than I make myself seem, just for like the humor's sake of it all. Sometimes I'm just exhausted with portraying myself like that I guess.

In this excerpt, Samantha is describing how she finds humor in self-deprecation, both online and offline; however, what's different on Twitter is that she is able to break the fourth wall between herself and an imagined audience, expressing her inner world of self-doubt and fears as tweet-by-tweet amusement for her followers. In this way, Samantha constructs herself as "hyper-real" on Twitter, compared to offline contexts where an audience cannot see her thoughts. She uses words like *raw* to align herself with authenticity, defining realness in her brand of self-presentation as unprocessed and unfiltered (even though it is curated), which is distinctive from her watered-down self-presentation on Facebook or face-to-face interactions lacking subtext.

Samantha embraces the authentic brand master narrative by being *messy*. Through tragic and ironic posts dealing with mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, and psychological insecurities, she distinguishes herself from polished performances online, and garners attention and validating commentary that help her connect emotionally with her large following on Twitter, which numbers in the thousands and includes international audiences. Her Twitter biography states that she cries a lot, and the tweets she selects to discuss with the interviewer

include a photo of a trophy she begged her mother to buy for her as 'crybaby of the year' [see Figure 2] and another where she identifies as a sad bowl of cereal [Figure 3].

Whereas some participants in our study used social media to confront family about societal injustices through online campaigns like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, Samantha used social media to confront family pressures to be the perfect happy daughter. During the tour, she showed how she frequently describes heavy drug and alcohol use, depression and suicidality on Twitter, knowing her mother will not take it seriously or believe it, assuming it is all a part of Samantha's brand of online humor. Yet, by exposing her parents to her drug and alcohol use and jokes about mental health, she reinforces her position as the imperfect daughter and constructs value out of her life as chaotic and tragic.

In the following excerpt, Samantha interprets a tweet about her relationship with her therapist [see Figure 4], which suggest she is processing her journey with mental health through Twitter, and learning to embrace the sad and dark parts of life, perhaps in opposition to adults in her life who prefer not to do so:

... I used to go to my therapist's office last year, and I had a class there, and I was like, oh my god my old therapist is here, I should pop by, I miss her, and then I tweeted this, like, I miss our friendship. [reads tweet] And I feel like I never really talked about my therapist on twitter, because I feel like it's stigmatized or whatever, but I thought this was the most funny thing now... I feel like when I went to my old therapist, my existence was a lot different, I guess. Like there were things that I was trying to figure out that were like different I guess, and I think I was just remembering everything that was different, I guess. I kinda just thought it was funny. Whenever people like my tweets like this, I feel like less lonely...It's really weird, because, twitter is like my thoughts. And when some

people like my thoughts I'm like, thank you, I don't feel alone... I like to be more upfront about my mental health because I feel like it helps other people.

The likes Samantha receives on this tweet contrast with her therapist's inability to understand her tragicomic perspective, which serves to shore up Samantha's brand as misunderstood but real to those who recognize her. Through tragicomic storytelling, Samantha transforms her alienation into social support while challenging the stigma of mental health issues.

Towards the end of her digital tour, Samantha voices doubts about her brand, worrying about being actually perceived as 'fukn stupid,' which she addresses by clarifying to the interviewer that she's a straight-A student who is graduating a year early. She never wants to appear as touched-up, too smart, or perfect, but she's also afraid of her audience taking her too seriously. As Samantha reflects on her social media experiences during the tour, she also distances herself from her tragicomic brand, describing Twitter as an emotional crutch nowadays and being exhausted with portraying herself as messy and sad all the time. Samantha's autobiographical self is just beginning but it has been powerfully marked by the tragicomic brand she constructed on Twitter.

Narrative Theme 2: Authentic Branding though Satire and Irony to Expose and Embrace Performativity

Another approach to authentic branding was the use of satirical humor and irony to critique and embrace vanity and self-commodification on social media. Justin, a gay, white, 19-year-old, cisgender male exemplifies this strategy. Justin is out to his friend groups and family, whom he describes as playing an active and very accepting role in his life. He uses platforms like Tinder, Grindr, and Instagram to post sexy selfies that he describes as 'thirst traps' to solicit reactions in hopes they will lead to hook-ups [Figure 5]. Justin curates and tests out these thirst

traps on his Snapchat, where his audience is more intimate, restricted to close friends from college. His audiences on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are much broader, including family, longtime friends from adolescence, celebrities, brands, and popular influencers. He posted on Instagram most frequently in middle and high school but now uses the platform to passively consume others' content (i.e., family, friends, famous people), and his current profile is 'heavily curated,' as he describes it. Twitter is for capturing his funny thoughts and self-critical humor, and he follows major drag stars, queer icons, and prominent gay and Brown Twitter influencers.

In one stop on Justin's tour, he shows the interviewer his Instagram posts from senior prom, discussing how he became socialized over the course of adolescence to value social validation through likes and comments [See Figures 6 & 7].

...As much as I pretend that I don't, I usually post stuff for the clout, and the humor, like Justin, you're funny, and I'm like, give me your validation please... In the past, I would just know something is cool, and be like, oh, this is gonna get so many likes. But I didn't care, even if it didn't, because I knew it was cool. But now, I need it to do really well and get lots of likes. Because social media has really transformed me, which is really gross and sick... I wanted people to tell me that I looked good, sort of the name of the game for my Instagram. When I also post pictures of myself, like I just did it for the captions and for people to tell me that I look good. Social media has made me very vain. If no one commented on, or liked a selfie, I would rip that out root and stem! Definitely. If it flopped, I would take that out root and stem! I would be like, oh, they're liking it, but this is a sympathy like.

In Justin's description of how he has come to see the authentic value of social media posting in terms of immediate quantified metrics, he constructs his current view as morally inferior to a

more pure, perhaps naïve, understanding he had as early teen. He attacks his current worldview, describing the effect of social media on him as “gross and sick” but irony is a mechanism for approving of the things a satirist is attacking (Zekavat, 2017) and Justin uses it to occupy multiple positions, to critique and embrace the authentic brand master narrative and dependence on external validation for self-worth.

As the tour continues, Justin’s story further elaborates on his development via social media, which he equates with learning how to play the social media self-curation game correctly (e.g., “time plays a really huge role in how many likes you get on Instagram, and I’ll act accordingly.”). There are different rules to the game on different platforms, which create different ways of being authentic:

When I started using Twitter for the real world, I was still in the Instagram mentality. The dichotomy of my social media is Instagram and Twitter, and my brain works differently on both of the apps. I’ve become a lot more developed on my Twitter, where I don’t care about posting things [*about his personal life*] as much anymore ... I know the name of the game and it’s not that. It’s about becoming as funny as you possibly can. Hopefully one day I come up with a really good tweet and become famous. Like any of these people who just become famous for no reason. I’m just waiting, I’m just waiting on it to one day find a really good one.

For Justin, being authentic means taking ownership over, admitting to, and being upfront about the desire to be socially validated so that you put your best foot forward to elevate yourself and your audience. Those who display their flaws online are not being authentic; rather, they are not savvy to the social media game and thus become a burden to their audience:

I just don’t really like it when people post on Instagram, like, I’m sad and stuff. And I’m

like, why are you posting that, and what are you gaining from that? And it makes me feel bad or weird, because I'm like, do I not care? And the answer is that, sort of I don't. Like anybody can feel sad, right? But I don't think it's for other people to put it on other people that they feel sad. It's not my job to tell you that you're pretty and deserve love. That's something that you have to do for yourself. Which is really hard. Social media I think, to me, like really twists that. You know, like people come [...] like posting selfies of you to get likes and validation, and at a certain point, you have to do it for yourself, and not for other people, and I think social media is a big inhibitor of that. At the same time, like I can't tell you why I need these people to like my photos. It's really insane, but I'll keep on doing it.

Justin sees contradictions in the authentic brand master narrative, and in himself as he internalizes it. Yet, through satirical self-storytelling on social media and during the interview tour, he constructs himself as an authentic brand by genuinely trying to perform what will be most valued in a given context.

Satire and irony also functioned as a way for youth in our study to develop an authentic brand involving sexual self-commodification. For example, Lana, a straight, white, 19-year-old cisgender female uses Twitter to achieve authenticity and feelings of validation for her sex positivity. During a stop on Lana's tour of her Finsta and Twitter profiles, she shows the interviewer some posts that capture her Twitter humor and reads a tweet about masturbation in a sarcastic tone of voice [Figures 8 – 10]:

I thought what I did here was funny. I spelled masturbate wrong. I have gotten into so many arguments with people who say that women can't say jack off. It doesn't work unless you're male. And I was like okay, that's what I say though. I was laying in bed last

night thinking about jacking off, and I was like, I'll make this post. My tweets are stuff that is just going on in my life that I'm responding to through humor. Because Twitter is super sexual for me. It's super honest, and everyone is so sex-obsessed. People think it's funny to be super horny on Twitter, and I use it for that a lot. In person as well, I talk a lot about sex and it's part of my humor too. So I feel like people know I'm being funny on Twitter, but it's also like they know this is real to who I am, my identity. Recently, I've started following people on Twitter that I'm hooking up with. I'll call people out that I'm fucking, and they'll call me out. It's crazy. It's so personal, it's so fucked up, and it's very unhealthy. What I say is true, but it's ironic. I think it's kinda like my sense of humor, the way I am and talk to people on social media, I use sarcasm and irony a lot. It's more like how I text and stuff, and you can't do this kinda stuff on Instagram, where it's more about the pictures and visuals. I also call myself out a lot using irony, and I like saying things about myself before other people can. For me it's almost an insecurity thing. I like to put it out there, so it's something I don't have to feel insecure about.

Misspellings and raunchy self-expression illustrate Lana's authentic brand of spontaneity and uninhibited sexuality that distinguishes her from older generations' ideals of buttoned-down sex positivity. Although researchers have tended to focus on young women's self-sexualization through visual mediums such as Instagram (e.g., van Oosten et al., 2017), Lana exemplifies how young people present themselves through sexualized discourses to generate attention, interaction, and validation from online audiences. Similar to the way Justin used irony to satirize his quest for fame and external validation on social media, Lana constructs her behavior online as "unhealthy" but savvy in the social media game. By critiquing Twitter's culture of extreme sexual innuendo as "sex-obsessed" while aligning with it, she takes ownership of her moral failings and

the power out of others' critiques of her authentic brand. Through her satirical self-storytelling, she constructs agency and independence even as she is conforming to audience expectations to perform a sexualized self on Twitter. Whereas Justin is using irony to embrace his authentic vanity and desires for likes on Instagram and fame on Twitter, Lana is using irony to embrace her authentic desire to perform within the hyper-sexualized discourse of Twitter.

Narrative Theme 3: Narrative Realism to Integrate Social-Cultural Consciousness into the Authentic Brand

Some youth in our sample had a more serious tone in their social media tours and embraced the authentic brand by integrating their whole selves (e.g., family relationships, cultural practices, intergenerational politics) into their self-presentations. In this theme, youth identified with culturally oppressed groups and tended to tell their stories through narrative realism such that they held themselves and their audiences accountable to current cultural and political conversations on social media. Moreover, they constructed their authentic brands through earnest self-expression, in contrast to the irony of many of their peers.

For example, Mahika is a 20-year-old female-identified Southeast Asian/Indian college student who uses Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Mahika's primary audiences on Facebook and Instagram are her family and close friends. Her Twitter audience includes her Punjabi community, which includes people from her hometown, university, and international contacts she forged online, alongside the celebrities and activists that she follows. She regularly prunes her followers on Instagram and Twitter instead of creating new accounts with segmented audiences through the use of 'Finstas'. Mahika was one of the few interviewees in our study who had never created a Finsta. Instead, she emphasized how consistent she strives to be in her self-presentation

across her polymedia landscape - a practice which she believes results in a high degree of verisimilitude between who she is offline and on social media.

Mahika's digital tour allowed us to observe how conflict and accountability contribute to her understanding of authenticity, which is tied to her identification with a kind of social brand many participants in our study referred to as "Brown Twitter:"

I am Punjabi background, and people call political twitter, brown twitter. Those of us who are all from the same ethnic background, we talk about the same issues in our ethnic communities online. I'm very involved in the brown community here on campus. I wouldn't want to label myself as very popular, but I am very social, with social media as well as in person. I would say that I'm able to stand by my opinions. It doesn't just want to make me go with the flow and go with what the majority is saying, but you know, if any people have anything against what I have to say, then free speech, I guess. It's my account, so if there was any negativity, then potentially I would just brush it off, or ask for criticism to make it better.

Mahika's authentic brand has developed through "metavoicing" in Brown Twitter, which Majchrzak and colleagues (2013) define as, "engaging in the ongoing online knowledge conversation by reacting online to others' presence, profiles, content and activities" (p. 6). By participating in public conversations about political issues, Mahika constructs herself as standing up for what she truly believes and values, rather than hiding from conflict. Her commentary also shows how she intertwines ideals for freedom of expression with ideals for community obligation, constructing herself as accountable to the accuracy of her online self-presentations and as building awareness and societal change through community relationships.

In her metavoicing, Mahika makes Brown Twitter conversations visible for her Facebook and Instagram audiences, who might not otherwise have access to them. During a stop on her digital tour, Mahika shows the interviewer her retweet of a friend's viral video depicting the rape of a young woman at a U.S. music festival [see Figure 11]. Her corresponding commentary of this tweet transitions into a discussion of her posts on Facebook about Yazidi tribal women being sold as sex slaves to the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) [see Figures 12 – 14].

My high school friend retweeted this video of someone getting raped at an outdoor music festival. When it comes to matters of rape culture, or anything of that sort, I want to say that I'm a big supporter for women on that. Even though all I did was simply repost it. Like to my followers, I just want to let them know that, you know, this is real life, and it's happening. Because a lot of people, you know, when it comes to social media are like 'it's up to date', but regarding Facebook, you get to know more about the issues that are happening like now. Then my mother saw that I reposted this video of the Yazidi sex slaves, and called me up and was like, 'why'd you do it?', and even though we're not the same ethnic background, you know, as these women, I think it was easy for me to somewhat relate to them. Like my mom does not post about this stuff, but when she sees me posting about it, and me being more outspoken about it, she's kinda like, 'oh my god, why are you talking about it? That's not something that we talk about!' But it's cool for me, like people in the younger generation that's coming along to be like, yo, you need to look at this, it's gruesome, but it's happening.

Similar to Samantha, Mahika uses social media to construct a sense of authenticity by posting distressing content that challenges her family's worldviews. However, rather than drawing attention to her personal tragedies and shrouding them in comedy to distance herself from her

family, Mahika creates an authentic brand by shocking her family with tragedies that are happening in the world, telling the story of who she is through narrative realism on social media to integrate her family into her worldview.

In many ways, Mahika is a cultural broker, disseminating the Brown Twitter social brand to her family and friends on Facebook and Instagram. She considers social media platforms more reliable than traditional media outlets and Facebook the most important source of news on current events, primarily since much of her extended family and Punjabi communities use Facebook and WhatsApp, whereas only younger generations of her family and community use apps like Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. This is quite different from how many other youths in our sample characterized Facebook as an outdated space for baby-boomers and misinformation and suggests that Mahika places more value on the potential for social media to strengthen intergenerational ties compared to some others in her generation.

While young adults like Mahika elaborated on past confrontations with family to construct their authentic brand, Valentina, who identifies as a 22-year-old Latina, was in the midst of newfound social media fame and appreciation of the cultural-familial content in her authentic brand. During the tour, Valentina stopped at a recent viral tweet she created with footage from her 25-year-old cousin's Quinceañera [Figure 15] which rapidly skyrocketed to Twitter fame in online Latine communities. She described how she was recently trying to reconnect more with her family (especially her parents), which happened to coincide with her Twitter fame, where virality further reinforced her cultural identity and closeness with family.:

I tweeted this before school one day, then I put my phone away during class. I didn't know it was relatable, and then it just blew up. My cousins never had a Quince, which is something traditional to us. Since they never had one, my aunt decided to throw them a

party, [...] and then everybody on Twitter saw it and it blew up. I got a lotta likes on it, and I think it even got posted on those [WeareMitu] Instagram pages and we were all really confused, but at the same time, we were like, wow, look at us, we're so famous! I did not expect it to blow up like that, my phone literally stopped because it couldn't handle the notifications, and my Twitter stopped working [...] I follow a lot of people on Twitter and Instagram that are a part of my culture, and a lot of them have many followers, so when they retweeted it, it got to more people and just kept going and going. I noticed that a lot of people who quoted this tweet, also related to having a Quince later in life or needing to experience these significant cultural moments, and other people were like, I want to have a Quince now. I always wondered, people whose tweets go viral like this, how do you process all of that? I spent some days just reading all of the reactions, and I was afraid that someone was going to react poorly to my culture, but that didn't happen [...] I think this post reflects literally, this is my family, this is how close we are. It shows literally like how we are as people and as a culture.

As the number of likes and views for Valentina's Quinceañera tweet continue to go up in real-time, she uses the interview to process her reconciliation with family [Figure 16], her Twitter fame, and the realities of online hate directed toward minoritized cultural groups in the U.S. Valentina describes the significance of her family's decision to hold a Quinceañera for her cousins a decade after the traditional age of 15 as honoring, while modifying, the rules of tradition. By tweeting her cousin's eventual Quinceañera recognition, she aligns her authentic brand with this metaphor of modified tradition – themes that resonate with audiences of Latine and Brown Twitter communities. Further, Valentina is graduating as an older, first-generation college student, and positions this discussion of the modification of cultural tradition alongside

her own adolescent maturation process, which she characterizes as nonlinear, sometimes delayed, and turbulent. Valentina interprets the Quince tweet as speaking to her delayed coming-of-age, symbolizing movement away from teenage rebellion towards family centrality and supportiveness (e.g., embracing the current closeness she is experiencing with her mother and father for finishing college). Through her self-presentations on social media, Valentina constructs family togetherness by honoring her immediate and extended family directly in her posts about milestones like the Quince and her discussions about graduating as a first-generation college student [Figure 17], expresses her feelings that family will always be there for you even if there is conflict, and imbues her authentic brand with family values and Latine culture.

Mahika's and Valentina's stories showcase how some youth in the U.S. engage with the authentic brand master narrative by integrating family and culture into their online self-presentations, often transforming tradition to make it authentic to contemporary times. These youth defined authenticity in terms of personal and social accountability to cultural oppression, sometimes by confronting family and sometimes by celebrating family. In their social media presentations across platforms and in their autobiographical self-development, they tell dramatic and realistic stories of conflict, social accountability, and reconciliation with family and community.

Discussion

The results of this study concern the meaning making that is occurring among Generation Z young adults regarding their identity and self-presentation through social media. More specifically, our narrative thematic analysis of college students' autobiographical storytelling during a tour of their most frequently used social media platforms revealed how they are aligning with an authentic brand master narrative in their constructions of self. During the tours,

participants spontaneously invoked notions of branding when interpreting their online self-presentations for the interviewer and told stories with elements from tragicomedy to construct authentic brands from dark emotions, satire to critique and embrace their self-branding, and narrative realism to integrate family, culture, and politics into their authentic brands. In contrast to previous research on authenticity and branding with older participants (Marwick & boyd, 2011), we found few stories of tension related to maintaining authenticity in “collapsed contexts” on social media. In the polymedia environments of our participants, identities-as-brands often transcended a particular platform or audience, although some compartmentalized, like Justin who described his "brain working differently" in how he expresses himself on Twitter versus Instagram. Participants such as Mahika and Lana bridged and integrated their identities-as-brands across social media audiences while others, like Samantha, expressed their identities-as-brands most sincerely on one particular platform where they found like-minded audiences.

With previously corporate notions of marketing and branding becoming ubiquitous and intertwined with values and frameworks of a neoliberal self (i.e., “You are the CEO of your own corporation” (Peters, 1997, p. 83), popularization of content creator and portfolio-based careers (Khedher, 2013; Marwick, 2013), a number of psychologists have argued that self-branding is playing a crucial role in the process of identity construction in the West (Belk, 1988; Oyserman, 2009; Reed II et al., 2012; van Dijck, 2013; for review, see Gorbатов et al., 2018). As social media continue to proliferate, corporations are iterating on ways to capitalize on human identities, a trend that hit a turning point in the 2016 U.S. election when for the first time, advertisements were targeted not just to people's sociodemographic data but also their psychometric profiles (e.g., Cambridge Analytica, *see* Isaak & Hanna, 2018). As they seek to profit from personal self-expression on social media, platforms are integrating in-app features for

e-commerce (e.g., Personal Shops/Storefronts/Marketplaces) on sites like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, alongside quantified social metrics into their applications that facilitate content creator careers and everyday self-expression in the form of a product for online attention and engagement. Whereas online consumers and vendors previously had to navigate outside the boundaries of social media for traditional ecommerce (e.g., Amazon, Ebay, etc.), the increasing integration of the personal storefront affordances into social media allows youth to think of themselves and their identities-as-brand as the product in a store that they manage.

The metaphor of branding seems to work on multiple levels in young people's autobiographical self-development with polymedia. On one level, the content and style of self-expression are constrained and enabled by affordances that are both functional (e.g. character counts, multimedia tools) and relational (e.g. values, norms, expectations of an audience) (see Hutchby, 2001). Meanings around this first layer of branding often become clear when participants in our study compared themselves across platforms. For example, Justin conceptualized authentic branding in terms of "understanding the assignment"—social media parlance for sincerely striving for and succeeding at embodying what is valued in a particular role or context, which differed significantly across Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat because of different communication modalities and audiences. Samantha described Instagram as constraining the nuance of her self-expression through affordances for mass visual appeal, where what she posts has to be more contrived, compared to her experience of off-the-cuff expression on Twitter. Because polymedia environments expand choices for circumventing the constraining nature of any one platform or communication modality, the experience of authentic self-curation may be enhanced.

A second, more profound way in which the branding metaphor shapes identity development is through autobiographical storytelling in relation to a master narrative that casts the construction of one's online brand as a process of self-discovery and achievement of authenticity. Participants in our study aligned with an authentic brand master narrative by borrowing from longstanding genres of storytelling to generate audience participation and co-construction online. This was most illustrated in the tours of Samantha, Mahika, and Valentina who found a deep sense of meaning and purpose in their online brands. From the start of her interview, Mahika shares her values for confrontational discourse and social justice, clearly establishing her specific brand of social justice activism through her relationship to Brown Twitter and then, moving through the tour, describing how she extended that form of self-expression to Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to integrate her family into her developing identity. She fully embraced her culturally and politically conscious identity-as-brand through a narrative realist approach to the master narrative, constructing herself as real and valued by shedding light on the harsh realities of injustice happening in the world in the face of political and cultural forces aiming to suppress them. Narrative realism imbued both her online posts and the style with which she engaged the interviewer on the tour.

Although Samantha resisted branding at a more surface level by critiquing polished visual self-curation on Instagram, at a deeper level she aligned herself with the authentic brand master narrative. She constructed authenticity and value on Twitter by curating tragicomic self-deprecation, which became her signature style of entertainment to large online audiences who celebrated and connected with her failures to live up to the expectations of a perfect daughter, and a perfect online brand. Her trademark self-deprecation on Twitter had become so deeply ingrained in how others saw her and how she saw herself that the brand almost seemed

inescapable when she lamented tragically during the tour that she is tired of being messy all the time.

This is not to say that participants in our study never experienced tensions and resistance to the authentic brand master narrative. When Justin idealized a purer version of himself just entering the world of social media, referring to his maturation through social media as "gross and sick," he is alluding to contradictions between being a high quality identity-as-brand and the need for audience validation. This tension may be perceived because contemporary definitions of authenticity in the U.S. are self-focused and premised on the value of independence and individual desires over the needs of others or social etiquette (Lewis, 2018). Satire is Justin's response to that tension, a way for him to perform self-awareness and reclaim agency and authenticity while still relying on others to confer value on his identity-as-brand. Justin's satirical storytelling may also be influenced by corporate strategies for appearing more personable, humanlike, and authentic using irony (see Hower, 2018). Corporate brands often connect with youth by trying to sound like them using Generation Z irony (e.g., sardonic humor, specific emojis), adopting a more casual tone (lowercase type) by tweeting out deadpan jokes and on-point memes, and becoming retweetable (Guimond, 2020) [see Figure 18].

Overall, the narrative genres we found seemed to be particularly useful for young people to convey the complexity of their identity-as-brands in an instantly recognizable emotional tone. Phenomena such as 'doomscrolling' (Ibrahim et al., 2020; Markham, 2020), the 24-hour news cycle, and information overload make us loathe to read lengthy stories and as social media affordances continue to emphasize micro-narrative modes of storytelling (e.g., story feature, Snaps, TikTok, Instagram Reels), the current cultural emphasis is on emotionally compelling stories that reflect only the most recent past. Storytelling is more restricted by different platform-

specific affordances that encourage brevity in written text and short-form videos (e.g., character counts, video time-limits, algorithmic recommendations). This may make it more challenging to tell redemptive stories of struggle and success found in previous research (Kuper & Mustanski, 2014) because those take too long, require too much additional context from one's life history. Further, social media's attention economy persists and continuously morphs so that participation means staying attuned to only the most current, trending ideas and cultural conversations and reacting to them, while adapting one's self-presentation (and storytelling) accordingly. Tragicomedy, satire, and narrative realism seem to be particularly effective for robustly transmitting affective qualities of identities-as-brands, less fixed in trying to mine meaning from the past, and more adaptable for uncertain futures.

Limitations & Future Directions

It is important to note that the cases outlined in our results do not necessarily represent the perspectives of authenticity and branding among U.S. college students in general. However, our purpose is not reduction or generalizability, but rather to interpret and expand upon the ways young adults tell stories about who they are in polymedia contexts. While we attempted to sample for diversity of race, gender, and sexual orientation, we recognize that our sample is biased toward liberal West coast college students who were open to sharing their approach to self-presentation on social media. We were also limited by our institutional research board to focus only on public posts in our digital tour interviews with young adults. Therefore, our tours captured more of youth's retrospective activities across Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and less on platforms like Snapchat and WhatsApp. During our period of data collection, platforms such as TikTok, Twitch, and Discord were just gaining popularity with younger members of Generation Z – our data speak to the oldest members of Generation Z and do not shed light on

the use of newer social platforms, many of which exploded in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, our study utilized a non-traditional life-story interview format. While we considered using McAdam's (1993) life-story interview structure, we constructed our own retrospective narrative interview (See Appendix A) to approximate a go-along tour from ethnography (Campos-Holland et al., 2016). A life-line approach, which involves the creation of a visual plot of the life-story narrative coupled with a life-story interview (Giele & Elder, 1998; Hammack, 2006, 2010; Lieblich et al., 1998), allows youth to tell the story of their lives using the line as a guide and reference point. Without a visual life-line to define the form of their life stories, we are limited in our ability to interpret the narrative form of autobiographical self-development in the tradition of previous work (Giele & Elder, 1998; Hammack, 2006; Gergen & Gergen, 1987a; 1987b). Future approaches blending a life-line methodology with digital tour interviews could show how young adults interpret the trajectories of their lives through social media that led them to certain approaches to identity branding.

Conclusions

This study contributes an important perspective on the depth with which a branding metaphor shapes young people's autobiographical storytelling and self-development with social media. Tragicomedy, satire, and narrative realism were compelling strategies for young people in our study to find fidelity between internal and external self-representations and construct themselves as authentic brands. Digital tours allowed us to capture multi-modal narrative meaning making and how young people are authoring life stories across spoken words and digital bits for real and imagined audiences as they reckon with the transition to adulthood in social environments with quantified social metrics conveying the value and truth of human

identities. These digital tours are specifically reflective of young adults in a Western culture, where authenticity has historically been about presenting a uniform self, nonchanging across context and now also deeply linked with being a successful creator in a capitalist economy. Our study suggests that Generation Z are aligning their identities with an authentic brand master narrative, embracing commodification of self-expression and developing purpose and meaning in constructing a marketable self.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Instrument

We are only going to ask you to show us public posts. The data we are interested in collecting are masspersonal exchanges-- personal information shared publicly for an audience-- posts, tweets, and photos with unrestricted access. We will not record private messages, nor small group chats where 3rd party individuals would have been expecting restricted access. So, if we accidentally record media content with any kind of restricted access (i.e. use of privacy settings to restrict who could see a status update) we will delete before uploading to our server. We do not want you to show us any kind of media content that represents restricted access.

I. Getting to know the media landscape

[Turn on backup lab audio recorder now.]

In this section of the interview I'm going to be asking you about the social media you are using. What are the top three social media sites you use? We are going to go into your experiences on each of these sites in more detail but first can you tell me when you first started using each of them? Do you have any other sites that you have regularly used for the last 5 years?

1. *Let's start with the site you have used the longest [SITE 1--Repeat for each site]*
 - a. *Why do you use [SITE 1]?*
 - b. *How often do you use [SITE 1]?*
 - c. *Who are the people you connect with on [SITE 1]?*
 - i. *Do you connect with these people offline?*
 - d. *“Were there any specific periods of inactivity that you remember, or any times you deleted content from an entire period of your life on [SITE 1]?”*
2. *Are there any other social media that you use frequently?*
 - a. *Why do you use [SITE 1]?*
 - b. *How often do you use [SITE 1]?*
 - c. *Who are the people you connect with on [SITE 1]?*
 - i. *Do you connect with these people offline?*

II. Current Social Media Use

1. *In this section of the interview I'd like to know more about your experiences on each of the social media sites you use most. Let's start with [SITE 1]. Go ahead and open up that app on your phone [Set up the DU recorder].*
2. *What aspects of yourself do you show on this site? Can you show me some posts that exemplify how you express yourself on this site? (aim for 2 examples and repeat following questions for each)*

- a. *Is this post public, or did you use privacy controls-- who had access to this post?*
 - b. *Did you create this post, or was it retweeted/reblogged/reposted?*
 - c. *Can you give me a bit of background on this post and tell me about your motivations for posting this and what happened when you posted it?*
 - d. *Were you thinking about a particular audience when you posted?*
 - e. *How did people react? Can you show me some examples?*
 - f. *How did you feel about their reactions now?*
 - g. *How is this similar or different from how you express yourself at school or at home?*
 - h. *How do you think post reflects the person you are now?*
3. Repeat Question # 2 for [SITE 2] and [SITE 3]
 4. *Are there aspects of yourself that you do not express on this site?*

III. Retrospective Narrative

1. *I'd like you to go back five years or so to when you first started using social media. You said that [SITE 1] was the first site you began using?*
 - a. *How old were you when you first started using [SITE 1]?*
 - b. *Can you tell me about why you started using [SITE 1]?*
 - c. *What was your community like on this site when you first started using it?*
 - d. *Can you take me to that account if it still exists?*
2. *Now I would like you to show me some posts that reflect how you were expressing yourself on [SITE 1] at that time. I'd like you to show me one post that got a lot of attention and one post that did not get a lot of attention (aim for 1 example and repeat following questions for 5 years, 4 years, 3 years, 2 years, 1 year)*
 - a. *Is this post public, or did you use privacy controls-- who had access to this post?*
 - b. *Did you create this post, or was it retweeted/reblogged/reposted?*
 - c. *Can you give me a bit of background on this post and tell me about your motivations for posting this and what happened when you posted it?*
 - d. *Were you thinking about a particular audience when you posted?*
 - e. *How did people react? Can you show me some examples?*
 - f. *How did you feel about their reactions then?*
 - g. *How was this similar or different from how you expressed yourself at school or at home at that time?*
 - h. *How do you think post reflects the person you were then?*
 - i. *How does it feel looking back on this now?*
3. Repeat Question # 2 for [SITE 2] and [SITE 3]

4. *Can you show me an example of something really personal you posted?*
 - a. *Is this post public, or did you use privacy controls-- who had access to this post?*
 - b. *Did you create this post, or was it retweeted/reblogged/reposted?*
 - c. *Can you give me a bit of background on this post and tell me about your motivations for posting this and what happened when you posted it?*
 - d. *Were you thinking about a particular audience when you posted it?*
 - i. *Was there anyone who saw this post who was not part of the intended audience? (context collapse)*
 - e. *How did people react? Can you show me some examples?*
 - f. *How did you feel about their reactions then?*
 - g. *How is this similar or different from how you expressed yourself at school or at home?*
 - h. *How do you think post reflects the person you were then?*
 - i. *How does it feel looking back on this now?*

IV. Overall Reflections and Closing

1. *Now we are going to wrap up the interview with a few final questions. First, how has the experience of this interview been for you? How does it feel to go back to the past and look at your media use?*
2. *How do you think you have changed over the past few years?*
 - a. *How has your social media use changed over time?*
 - b. *How have your online communities changed over time?*
 - c. *How have your offline communities changed over time?*
3. *Finally, is there anything else you would like to share about your social media experiences?*



Figure 1. One of the first tweets that Samantha discusses as she starts to show us her Twitter profile.



Figure 2. Samantha shows us a tweet at the beginning of her digital tour, in which she received a trophy from her mother for Christmas, with her name, labeled as crybaby of the year, starting a discussion of the ways in which she uses social media to blend sadness and humor.

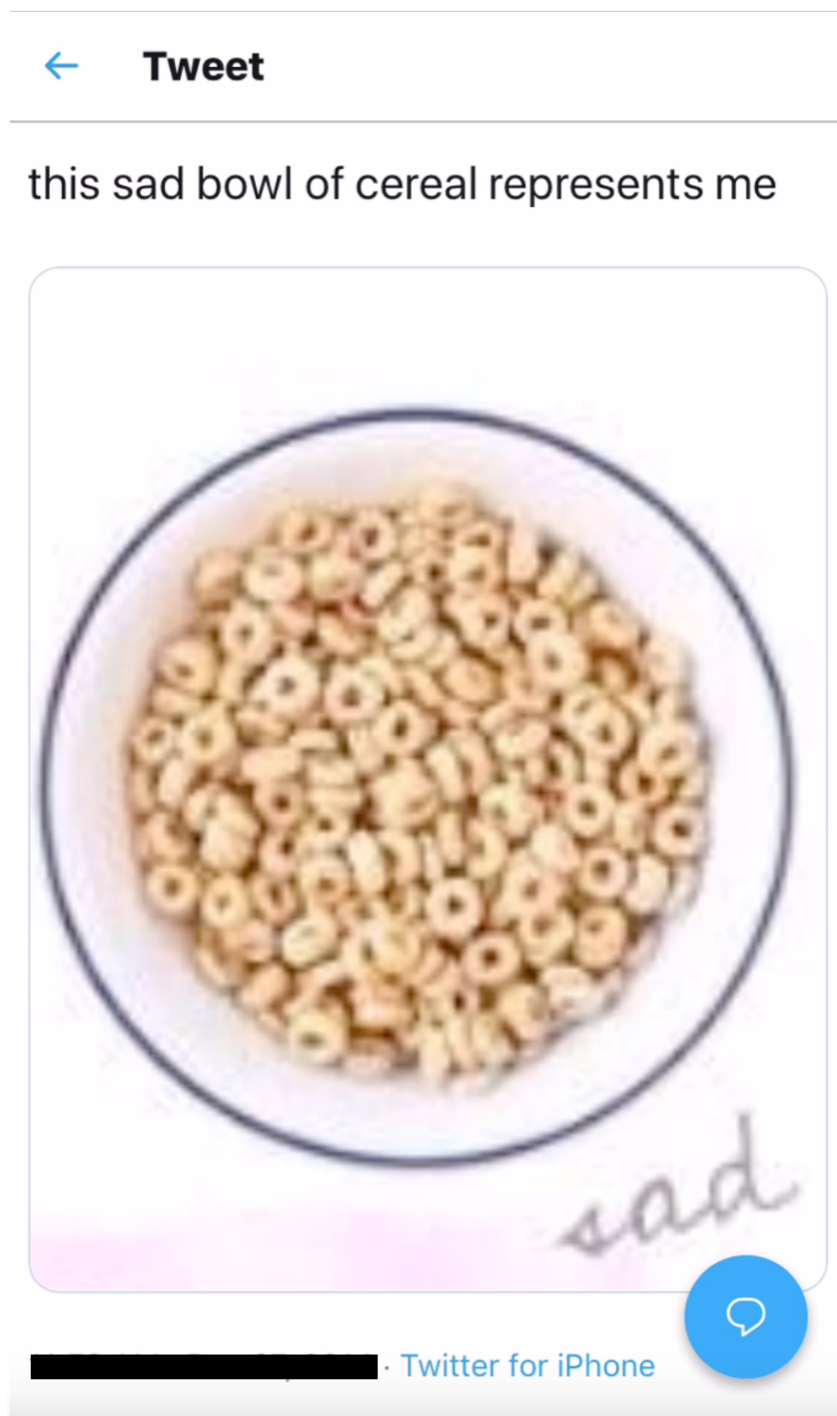


Figure 3. Samantha relates herself to a sad bowl of cereal in the context of a continuous discussion of the ways in which she blends sadness and humor throughout her social media.



Figure 4. Samantha discusses a tweet where she reminisces about her relationship with a therapist, and reflects on ways in which comedy can be used to process mental health struggles.



Figure 5. Justin shows us a selfie that he describes as a thirst-trap, designed to elicit sexual commentary from potential partners on Instagram.

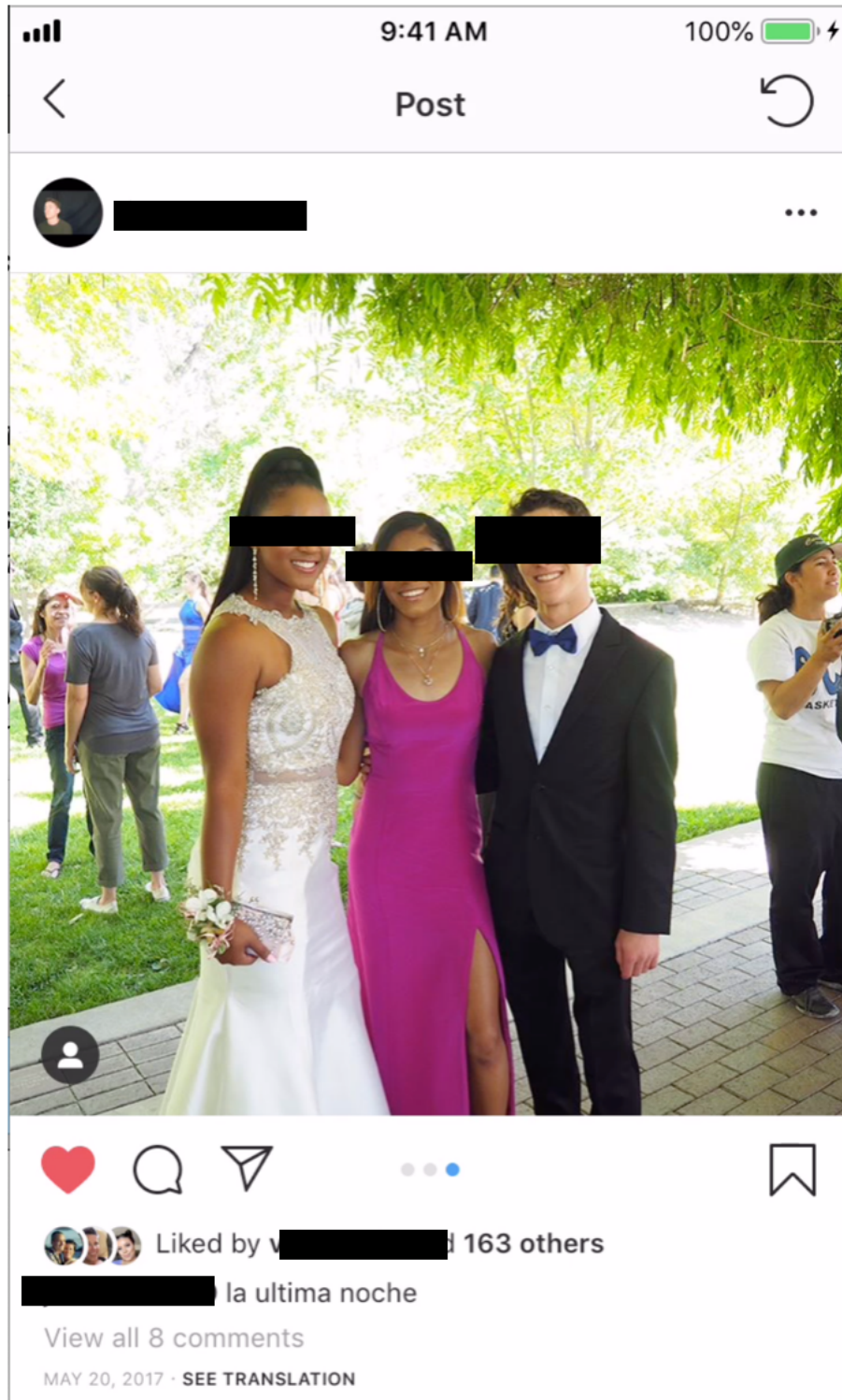


Figure 6. Justin shows us an Instagram post from his high school senior prom, which he captions as ‘la ultima noche’, meaning the last night in Spanish.

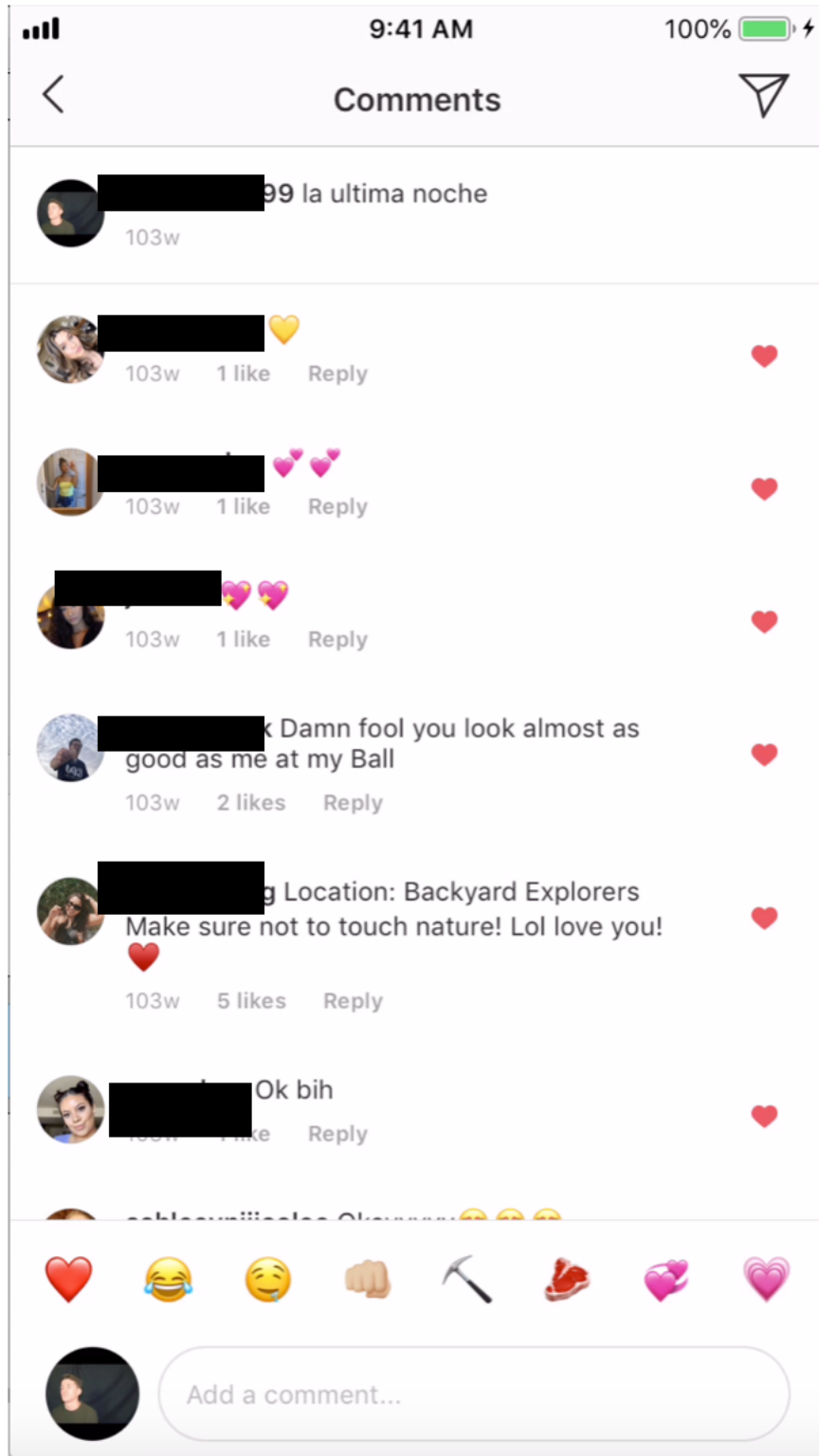


Figure 7. Justin shows us the comments on an Instagram post from his high school senior prom, while describing the comments, and the effect that they had on him.



Figure 8. Lana shows us a tweet where she questions why women can't say jack off, and deliberately misspells masturbate to emphasize the irony in her tweet via text.



Figure 9. Lana shows us a series of Tweets that capture how she talks about her sexuality on Twitter.



Figure 10. Lana shows us a series of Tweets that capture how she talks about her sexuality on Twitter.



Figure 11. Mahika shows us a post she retweeted of a young woman being raped at a music festival. This post generates a longer discussion about feminism and rape culture on social media.



Figure 12. Mahika shows us a Facebook video where Yazidi women burn their burqas after being liberated from sex slavery they were forced into by ISIS.

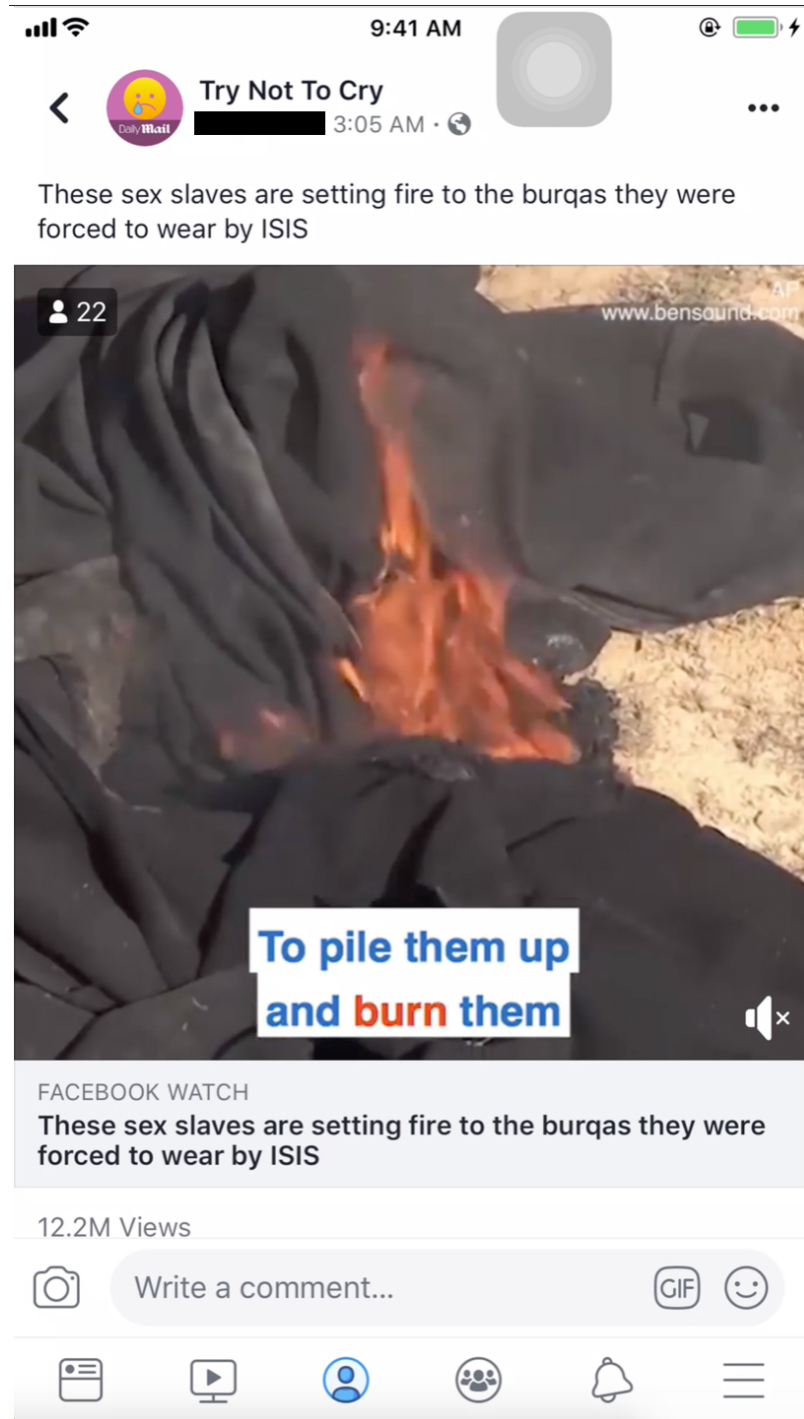


Figure 13. Mahika shows us a Facebook video where Yazidi women burn their burqas after being liberated from sex slavery they were forced into by ISIS.

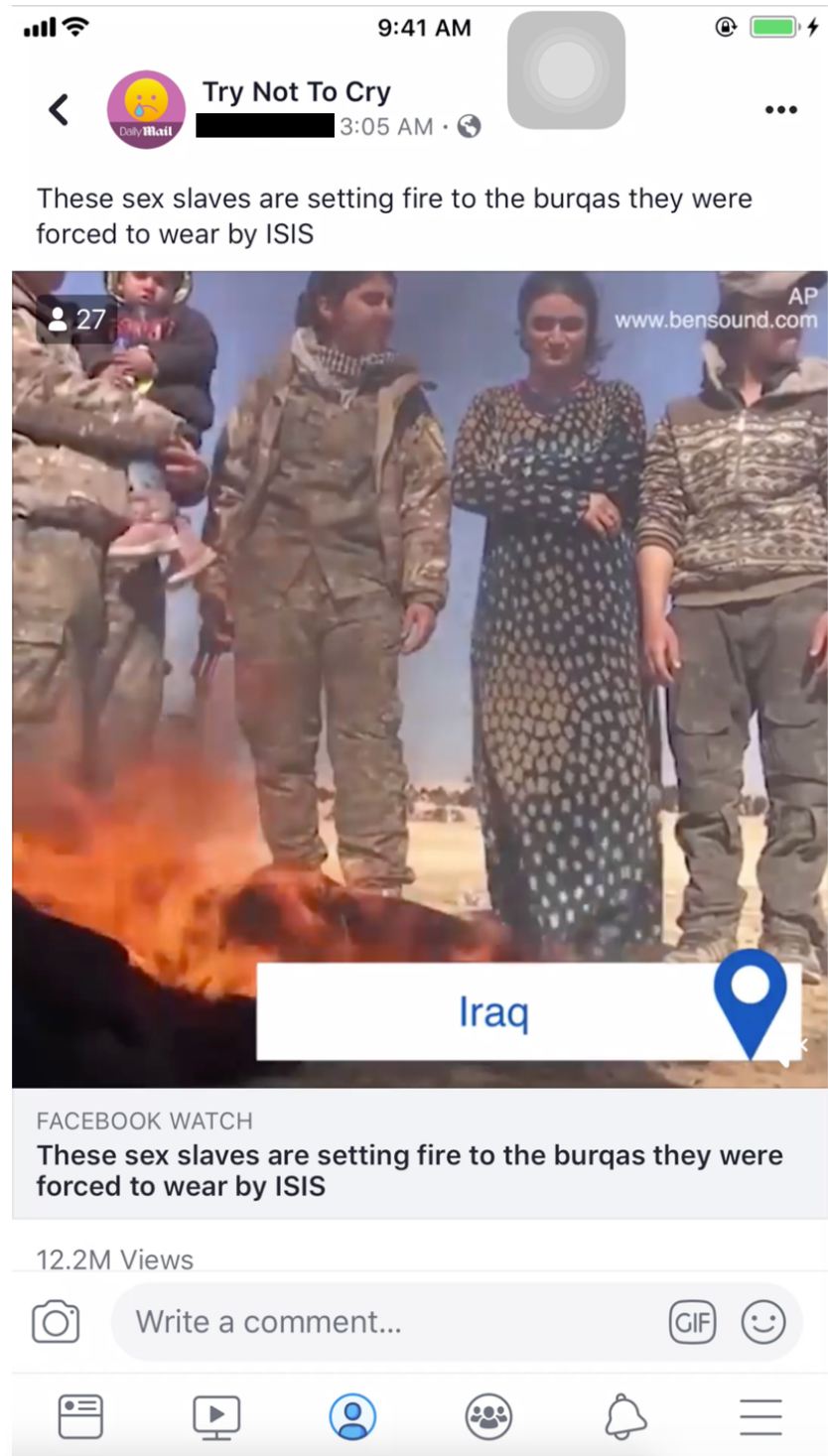


Figure 14. Mahika shows us a Facebook video where Yazidi women burn their burqas after being liberated from sex slavery they were forced into by ISIS.



Figure 15. Valentina shows us her viral tweet about her Aunt holding a joint (and retroactive) Quinceanera for her two older cousins who are now 25 years old, which rapidly skyrocketed to Twitter fame.

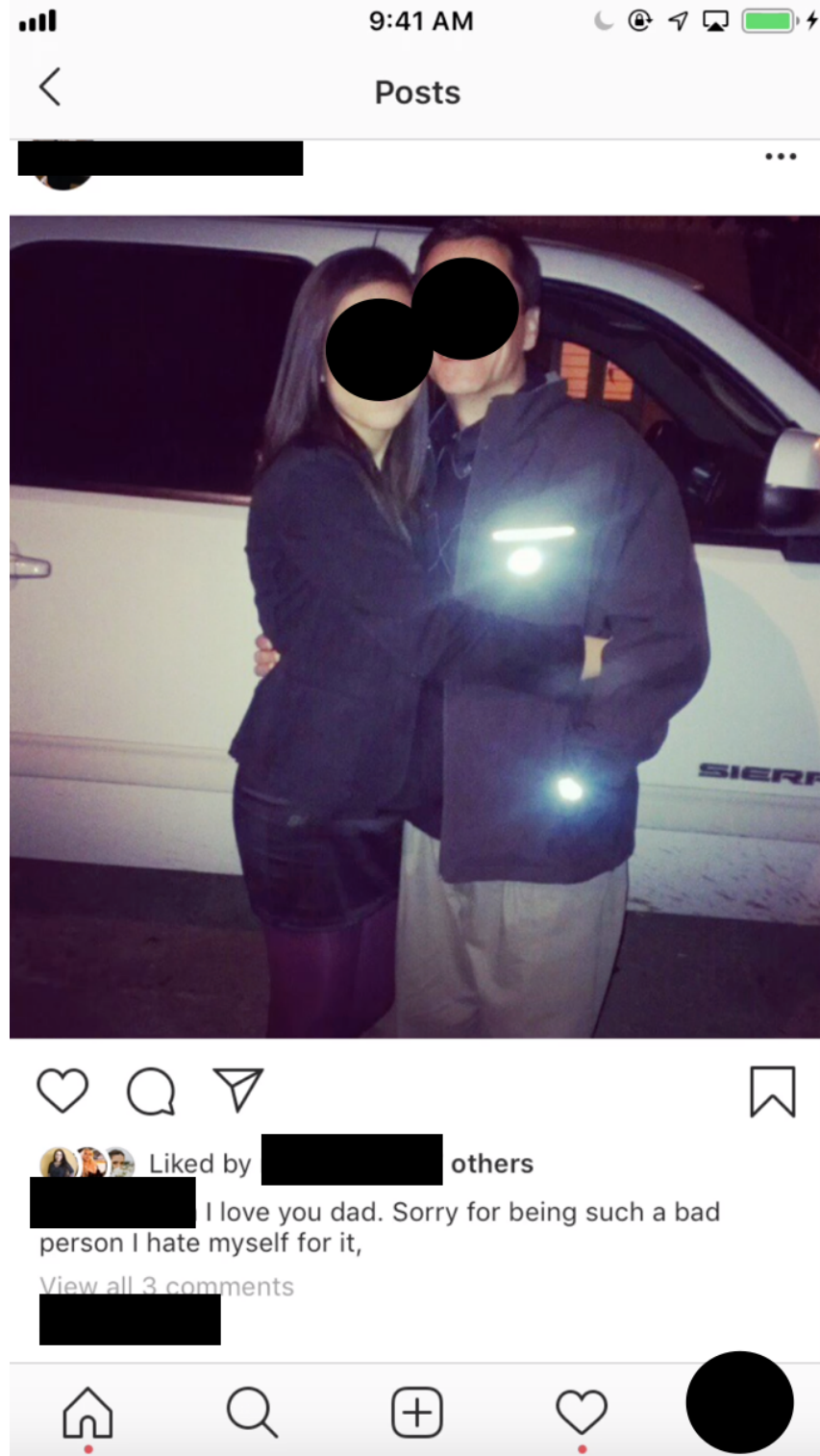


Figure 16. Valentina shows us an Instagram post about reconciling her relationship with her father.



Figure 17. Valentina shows us an Instagram post about her graduation ceremony from college, where she discusses delays, turbulence, and perseverance in her first-generation experience of finishing university – centering the role of family and close friends in her success.



Figure 18. Selected screenshots from fast-food Twitter, where corporations invoke ironic deadpan humor, lowercase type, emojis, and word abbreviations – remixing Generation Z memes with their food products to drive up brand engagement.