The Engineering of the Self in online life

Identity Engineering on Instagram

Master Thesis New Media & Digital Culture

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Juul van den Hoogen

6222102

MA New Media & Digital Culture

Universiteit Utrecht

Dr. Michiel de Lange

Dr. Imar de Vries

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Universiteit Utrecht

Abstract

In contemporary digital culture Instagram has become one of the most popular platforms for self-presentation. On this platform, practices of 'optimizing'- up to the point of faking—one's digital identity has become a normative practice. This means that nowadays people deliberately make use of mechanical tools that imitate engagement, for the purpose tweak Instagram's algorithm and subsequently boost impression management. In this study foundational ideas on identity construction and self-presentation as proposed by Goffman have been used to create an analytical lens for studying contemporary practices self-presentation on Instagram. Besides, an attempt was made to revive Goffman's framework and add new perspectives to it. This was done by introducing the concept of identity engineering, which tries to grasp the tension between the idea of user agency on the one hand, and technological deterministic views on the other. Moreover, it aims to look for a middle ground that takes into account the influence of both users and technology on constructing identity. In order to gain insight in practices of identity engineering, the process of buying fake likes and followers, liking robots and comment pods have been studied extensively by conducting a walkthrough. This data gathering method gave extensive insight in the actual process of using these identity engineering practices and the algorithmic consequences on Instagram. Finally, based on this research an attempt was made to revive Goffman's conceptual apparatus, which is more applicable to the contemporary technology-mediated context in which identity is constructed.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays there seems to be a fundamental uncertainty about the 'realness' on social media. Specifically in the case of Instagram, questions on authenticity and realness are pervasively raised (Cotter 10). In this age of social media, people are not only wondering what is real, but also asking what is credible. For example, various Instagrammers wonder how engagement on social media comes about and to what extent this is real: "I saw people with generic photos and boring captions get 800 likes and 300+ comment on every single post, a ratio that doesn't add up" (Cotter 2018: 11). As a foundational theorist on self-presentation, Erving Goffman states that self-presentation is about realness and credulity, and that people are judged on the likelihood of an act to be real (23). This realness on Instagram can certainly be questioned, since recently this targeted advertisement had come to the attention of the researcher:

> Today we introduce something new, active Instagram followers. This service offers followers of which 15 – 30% of the followers perform actual action on your profile by liking, watching videos and stories or reacting on your content. This will be done within 5 up until 10 days after posting your content. These followers are of very high quality, 95 to 99% of the accounts having a profile picture, credible name, biography (etc). They can be ordered from 1000 followers! Try it today![1]

In the context of contemporary digital culture, this example shows that practices of 'optimizing'—up to the point of faking—one's digital identity has become a normative practice; now engagement on Instagram can simply be bought. In the present study, the foundational theories on identity construction and self-presentation as proposed by Goffman will be used as a theoretical lens to study self-presentation on Instagram. Even though this framework was designed in an era without social media, Goffman's framework to study identity and self-presentation increased popularity as a structure to study practices of self-presentation in online life (Hogan 377). Besides, it is considered highly applicable in studying online identity performances (e.g. Bullingham & Vasconcelos 101; Van Dijck, 200; Baker and Walsh 2). Goffman's analytical framework assumes that there are two stages at which people can present themselves, a frontstage and backstage. In this thesis, I will assume that there are multiple stages as well, a backstage where deliberate manipulation practices are targeted at visibility on Instagram, and a frontstage in which an illusion of authenticity and credibility is guaranteed. This will be further explained in the theoretical framework. Essentially, the technological-mediated context in which identity is constructed is central to study, because technology is currently playing an increasingly important role when defining ourselves and our user experiences. Therefore, the concept of identity engineering will be introduced, which will be explained next.

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[1] For email see appendix nr 8.7 page 37

While there is an increasing concern about the power of algorithms and their impact on social realities (Beer 987; Gillespie 1; Kitchin and Dodge 147), limited research has addressed "the knowledge building and interpretive processes surrounding algorithms as a window into the complexities and extent of algorithmic power" (Cotter 2). The concept of identity engineering tries to grasp the tension between the idea of user agency on the one hand, and technological deterministic views on the other. It aims to look for a middle ground that takes the influence of both users and technology on constructing identity. Therefore, with this study I will aim to contribute to the vast and ever growing body of literature on identity management and digital media technology. This will be done by specifically focusing on practices of deliberately tweaking algorithms via various practices of buying fake likes and followers, liking robots and comment pods for the purpose of boosting impression management. These practices will be discussed in more depth in the theoretical framework. Furthermore with this study, an attempt will be made to revive Goffman's perspectives and to re-conceptualize his ideas of frontstage, backstage, cheating and 'the mask' in the context of identity performances in online life.

The aim of introducing identity engineering as a concept is to provide new insights that help define an updated framework through which identity performance in online life can be understood, in this context with a focus on Instagram. As Jefferey Treem and Paul Leonardi argue, even though objects features are common for everyone who encounters them, affordances are not. "affordances are unique to the particular ways in which an actor, or a set of actors, perceives and uses the object" (145). Platform's affordances thus have implications for the technological-mediated experiences on Instagram. That is why the following research question is central to this study: 'How can Instagram users use Instagram's and third party applications platform's technological affordances to tweak the algorithm as a practice of identity engineering for the purpose of boosting impression management?' As mentioned before, the technological-mediated context in which identity engineering takes place is considered relevant, the first sub-question therefore is: 'How do Instagram's and third party application's technological affordances allow for practices of identity engineering?' As will be discussed in the next section, Goffman's notion of cheating and the corresponding notion of the mask have become important in contemporary practices of self-presentation, as these notions provide insight into how credibility is influenced on Instagram. Therefore, the second sub-question is: 'What current practices of identity engineering can be distinguished and how can they be related to contemporary practices of impression management, considering cheating and the mask?' Lastly, as the aim of this research is to provide new insights that will contribute to a new view on identity construction and self-presentation on Instagram, the third sub-question will be: 'How can a theoretical and conceptual update in identity management be conceptualized?'

2. Theoretical framework & academic relevance

In this theoretical framework, first Goffman's foundational ideas will be explained and related to contemporary practices of self-presentation. Subsequently, contemporary studies using Goffman's framework will be examined in order to provide an overview of how self-presentation in online life has been studied so far. Last, the analytical lens will be proposed as a preparation on the analysis.

2.1 Foundational Goffman & contemporary impression management

As the example in the introduction suggested, contemporary practices of impression management on Instagram are changing. To be specific, Instagram users use technological affordances in order to tweak the algorithm and subsequently improve their impression management. The exact workings of this phenomenon will be discussed later in the theoretical framework. In this research, the most important assumption is that the methods for applying identity engineering practices, for instance buying fake likes and followers, are being done 'in secret'. There is a reason that the third party applications advertise with 'authentic' fake followers. It is presupposed that this deliberate manipulation of account engagement in the form of purchased likes and followers with the aim of presenting a more favorable self, can be considered as a form of cheating.

As a consequence, when studying these new practices of impression management, a distinction should be made between the practices of manipulating the self in a secret 'place' and the 'stage' in which the self is presented. Goffman's framework offers possibilities for studying these two different worlds as he proposes a frontstage, a place where one acts in the presence of an audience, and a backstage, which is kept hidden from audiences. It is argued that nowadays it has become a normative practice for Instagram users optimize their self-presentations, up to the point of cheating. Moreover, an attempt is made to revive Goffman's conceptual apparatus in the context of contemporary digital culture by introducing the concept of identity engineering, which will be explained below.

Algorithms are at the basis of structuring online experiences (Beer 987; Bucher 1164; Cheney-Lippold 164; Gillespie 1). According to Bucher, platforms shape the conditions of visibility, and algorithms provide the "disciplinary apparatuses" that define norms of participation (qtd. in Cotter 2). However, in this study it is presupposed that Instagram users have an active role in shaping online experiences by deliberately making use of practices to attain visibility, by "gaming the system" (Cotter 5). This notion refers to the idea that users act on their knowledge about the algorithmic system with the purpose to affect certain outcomes. In this study, these practices of gaming the system are defined as identity engineering. In other words, the deliberate use of platform affordances to tweak the platform's algorithm with the purpose to boost impression management.

In contemporary practices of impression management on Instagram, it is all about visibility. Instagram is a technologically-mediated stage, where algorithms decide the relevance of content and with that the visibility of your performance. Bucher states it results in "the possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough" (1171). In other words, a threat of invisibility forces Instagram users into using normalized ways to optimize their impression management. This can be related to Goffman's ideas on presenting the most favorable self as an important part of the socialization process: "the tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways" (Goffman, 1959:23). As mentioned before, algorithms serve as the disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe desirable forms of participation (qtd in Cotter 13). Therefore, Instagram users nowadays engage in "visibility management" (Flyverbom, 2016: 112), in which users strategically determine how their visibility can be increased by "gaming" the algorithm (Cotter 2). This gaming narrative implies that technological knowledge on how a platform works reveals a blueprint which, when it is followed, guarantees certain outcomes.

However, central to identity construction and strategically crafting impression management is the idea of authenticity and realness. As Cotter argues, the extent of realness cultivates the accessibility, relatability and intimacy of an Instagram account, which are crucial in self-presentation practices (3). This notion can be linked to Goffman's conception of credulity, which is based on the likelihood of an act to be real. In other words, a favorable self is created based on the prevailing norms within a specific group: "thus when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of society (..) to the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of society in which it occurs" (Goffman 23). In fact, this means that people tend to conform to the general rules of conduct, shaped in acts of desirable behavior. In line with these statements, the notion of the power of 'self-illusion' is considered relevant. That is, by creating an illusion of popularity around themselves on Instagram, people deliberately give and give off selected details (Goffman 12). For example as Cresci et al. argue, self-illusion can be created by buying fake followers in order to become the 'idealized' version of the self—rather than an authentic version of the self—and to magnify influence and engagement to the eyes of the world (4).

In summary, when it comes to self-presentation, especially the notions of visibility and credulity are of importance in this research. Cotter argues that authenticity is an essential aspect of self-presentation, since this aspect is at the basis of human relationships (10). However, these 'real' relationships can easily be simulated in algorithmically undetectable ways by using tactics like buying likes and followers, using a liking robot or joining a comment pod. To prevent someone from being labeled as a cheater, these services are disguised as authentic as possible, which appeals to Goffman's notion of credulity. In the next section, Goffman's foundational ideas on front and backstage and his notion of cheating are discussed in more depth and are related to the theoretical lens of this study.

2.2 Goffman's foundational conceptual apparatus

As mentioned previously, Goffman distinguishes two different settings in which performances take place: the frontstage and backstage. While acting on the frontstage, people try to present idealized versions of the self, since this behavior takes places when an actor is observed consciously. The backstage, as Goffman proposes, is "a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (112). In other words, backstage behavior is invisible for audiences. The idea of impression management requires that the backstage is kept hidden from the members of the audience. As Goffman argues, "Here costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws" (70), which means that people continuously try to manage certain impressions for certain audiences. This principle is highly relevant when conceptualizing the notion of identity engineering, since engineering refers to the idea that Instagram users deliberately use the platform's affordances to adjust their identity performances in the backstage, this will be discussed more in-depth in the next section.

2.2.2 Cheating and the Mask

Besides the notions of the front and backstage, Goffman also uses metaphors of cheating supported with the notion of the mask. In Goffman's book, these metaphors are solely used to illustrate the practices of presenting the most favorable self in the presence of others, and not specifically related to frontstage or backstage behavior. Moreover, Goffman used the notion of cheating in order to illustrate the rhetoric of a certain context. As an example he describes the idea of a medical treatment conducted by a normal man, without a doctor's diploma. Just the rhetoric of a doctor's office as context, the idea of available medicine and the conduction of some meaningless tests, may cure someone while they have actually been cheated (Goffman 105). This means that, based on perceptual logic, only the rhetoric of a certain context can make people think that something is true (Goffman 104). As a result, the role this doctor is playing, is no longer questioned, but becomes the truth. In other words, he 'becomes' its profession. Moreover, the metaphor of the mask is described as the way in which people can adopt a certain environmental expectation and the ability of people to act up on that.

> In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed or ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes our second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve characters and become persons. (Goffman 12)

In fact, as mentioned beforehand, this idea of the mask points out that people tend to present forms of behavior that are in line with the prevailing norms within a specific group. Thus, these norms have consequences for how people want to be, and subsequently how they act on that. When relating that to the specific context of this research, this means that people tend to engineer their identities in order to

conform to the ruling norms, that is increasing their visibility by gaining more followers and likes. Impression management therefore depends on engagement rates such as the number of followers, reactions and likes. Precisely these measurements are part of someone's mask, since it is an integral part of our presented personality and helps to shape a certain character.

In this research, it is suggested that cheating and the mask are closely related, namely: cheating precedes the creation of the mask. More concretely and in the context of this research, it means that people use identity engineering practices of buying fake followers, liking robots or joining comment pods in order to fulfill the image they desire, namely: the mask. It is presupposed that these practices take place in the backstage, as a preparation and way to present 'the most favorable self' on the frontstage. Concretely, this means that despite that behavior on the backstage is not visible for audiences, in this backstage people are busy engineering their identities. Therefore, in this research there will be mainly focused on backstage behavior, in order to understand the visible changes in self-presentation on the frontstage. This is discussed in more depth in chapter 3.1.3 However, before the frontstage, backstage and the notions of cheating and the mask can be reconsidered in relation to identity engineering, previous studies that made an attempt to update Goffman's conceptual framework must be examined first.

2.3 Contemporary interpretations of Goffman

In the previous section, the foundational concepts of frontstage and backstage and the notions of cheating and the mask were explained and were related to more contemporary practices of self-presentation. As this thesis aims to provide insights that contribute to an update of Goffman's framework to study contemporary practices identity construction, it is important that previous attempts are incorporated in this study. Obviously, it was not in the scope of this research to describe all contemporary studies that use Goffman's foundational ideas on studying identity. Nevertheless, the current selection of studies all attempted to use Goffman's foundational framework to study identity and self-presentation in the context of social media.

Various researchers have attempted to propose a new notion of identity construction to describe contemporary practices of self-presentation by expanding on Goffman's ideas. For instance, Bullingham and Vasconcelos' study focuses on the idea that self-presentation on social media is subject to technological factors. They propose that social media increased the possibilities for 'editing the self', which entails deliberately enhancing certain qualities while others are suppressed (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 110). Their findings "show that there are reasons why users choose to adopt personas and particular masks" and that the idea of editing the self can be seen as a person using platform characteristics to boost self-performances (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 110). Subsequently, they argue that with the increasing possibilities for 'editing the self' in computer mediated communications (CMC), there are opportunities to contribute to the further development of Goffman's framework. In addition, they point out that Goffman's framework is not only still applicable, but of great usefulness as a framework for understanding identity formation in online worlds as well (110). However, they have not yet sufficiently theorized the foundational concept in a new context, which means that they did not provide an updated notion of the frontstage and backstage and neglected the notion of cheating. In principle, it is not surprising that the notions of cheating and the mask are not included in these more recent studies, since they are only metaphors that were used to give more meaning to frontstage and backstage behavior. However, Bullingham and Vasconcelos point out that different gradations and forms of editing practices can be recognized, but remains a grey area. Therefore there are opportunities for the further development of Goffman's framework in contemporary digital culture (107). This provides opportunities for redefining the mask and the notion of cheating and relates them to practices of identity engineering. As this research was conducted in 2013, it is not surprising that it did not provide a full-fledged conceptual framework in which contemporary practices of identity engineering can be recognized. However, Bullingham and Vasconcelos did point out that the 'editable self' now made its appearance, and the deriving practices of impression management should be theorized.

The most recent work of Baker and Walsh does provide a theorized notion of an identity engineering practice. They introduce the concept of 'rigging', in which "savvy users game the system by helping

each other boost a post's engagement rate through algorithmic manipulations, including rapid-fire commenting and liking" (10). This study clearly explains how the "official accredited values of society" (Goffman, 1959: 35) are now expressed in measurable metrics, such as likes, followers and comments. Moreover, this study is limited to the examination of the content of Instagram posts: the extent to which certain image types of content (food photography, selfies, kissing photo's, etc.) are appreciated, expressed in likes and reactions. The notion of rigging was solely used to describe that the number of likes "signifies status (..) and project the likelihood to be modeled by others" (10). More specifically, this means that while a clear example of identity engineering practices has been elucidated and theorized, this research does not provide an overview and conceptualization of more possible engineering practices that make use of the platform's algorithm to enhance impression management. Besides, the notion of rigging only refers to the suspicion that many people support each other by always liking each other's content. They do not acknowledge that these likes are obtained by mechanic tools using the technical affordances of the platform.

A study that does consider the mutual influence of algorithms, users and platforms in shaping Instagram's user experiences is provided by Cotter (14). In her study called "Playing the Visibility Game", several practices of identity engineering are discussed: the use of bots, fake likes and comment pods. She describes these practices as "simulated influence" which refers to the idea that high degrees of visibility can be mechanically achieved by seeking engagement (e.g. likes), beyond or even without efforts to build authentic relationships (Cotter 12). In other words, this notion refers to the deliberate use of third party applications that provide unauthentic and bought engagement. Cotter refers to these third parties as simulators that offer "social currencies" in the form of likes and comments (12). This is considered similar to cheating and hacking, as these simulations identify possibilities based on the underlying code logic. As Cotter argues, using these tactics resembles cheating in a game world, or as Moeller et al. argue, "tricks that exploit strategic technical possibilities" (qtd. in Cotter, 2018: 12). More concretely, in her analysis practices of simulated influence are discussed, whereby a middle ground is sought between social constructivist and technologically deterministic points of view. This means that the power of algorithms and technological affordances are considered, but at the same time Instagram users deliberately make use of these affordances to tweak algorithmic decisions for the purpose to improve visibility. Cotter's study provides insight into user experiences, based on comments in Influencer Facebook groups. Therefore, the research lingers on a discursive level, in which only general statements can be made about user experiences. Thus, a shortcoming of this research is the actual insight into how, for example, buying fake likes has implications for Instagram's algorithm. Therefore, the present study will carry out a walkthrough, which will be explained in the method section, that focuses on the actual process of using identity engineering practices and the deriving consequences.

The last study that is considered is from João Carlos Magalhães. He states that even though this field of studying technological implications and the use of technological affordances is developing, there is little

insight into the implications of algorithmic tweaking by platform users. He argues that practices of algorithmic tweaking for the sake of better performances are pervasively raised, but rarely theorized (1). In other words, this means that practices of boosting impression management by using the platform's technological affordances are being recognized but have never been extensively theorized. Magalhães mainly focuses on the implications of algorithmic influence and suggests that more attention should be paid to what he calls "the moral harm paradigm" (1). This paradigm describes the biased and invisible consequences of algorithmic power, that violate "universal values in ways that are concretely harmful to the autonomy of individuals and communities" (1). In the analysis section 4.1.1 a concrete example of this harm has been explained.

The studies mentioned above indicated the relevance of reconsidering studying self-presentation on social media, and some studies partly attempted to theorize practices of mechanically boosting impression management. However, these studies have examined practices of boosting impression management separately—the applications were seen as stand-alone practices conducted in different contexts—or only extensively examined the practices on a discursive level. Based on the notion that Instagram users not only interact with friends and followers, but with the platform's technological affordances as well, this research aims to provide more insight into the actual operation of identity engineering practices and algorithmic consequences. Hence, the present study will carry out a walkthrough that will provide more insight into this entire process. This process will be explained further in the method section. In the next session, the affordances dimensions that are at the basis of the walkthrough will be explained in more depth.

2.4 Affordances dimensions & analytical lens

To get insight into how identity engineering practices are afforded by Instagram and third party applications, Treem and Leonardi's analytical framework to study technology affordances was used. They propose four dimensions of technology affordances, namely: editability, persistence, visibility and association, which can specifically be related to the context of studying social media platforms (145). However, this framework was proposed in 2013, therefore it is critically examined and more contemporary considerations are added so that they can be related to identity engineering practices.

Editability refers to the idea that users are able to craft and recraft a communicative act before it is seen by others (Walther 394). In other words, the content of a message can be composed and re-shaped. The dimension of editability in the context of this research refers to the extent in which people are able to edit their number of followers, likes and engagement. Moreover, editability focuses on how this engagement has been established, organically 'real' likes provided by humans or mechanically obtained by, for example, bots. It is presupposed that these practices can be considered as backstage practices and that these are the actual practices that influence the algorithm. This will be explained more extensively in the method section. The domain of persistence refers to the extent in which communications remain accessible (Brengman & Haythornthwaite 221). In other words, it concerns the availability and possible expansion of published content. Persistence in the context of this research can be related to the visibility of certain identity engineering practices; for example the extent to which bought fake followers remain following, the persistence of robotically placed likes, and the extent to which algorithmic changes due to identity engineering remain visible and accessible. This will be explained more extensively in the method section.

The present study will assume that the domain of visibility is part of the frontstage, since the actual consequences of using identity engineering practices become visible here. It is hard to point out if someone uses identity engineering practices to boost impression management, since these practices are made as real as possible and are carried out in the backstage. This will be explained more extensively in the method section. The affordance dimension association refers to the established connection "between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation" (Treem & Leonardi 2016: 162). It is assumed that this dimension can be related to the frontstage, since it provides insight into the association between users, based on like and comment patterns. This will be explained more extensively in the method section.

3. Method

The walkthrough method as proposed by Ben Light, Jean Burgess and Stefanie Duguay was the central method for data gathering in this research. This method required the researcher to engage with the platform's interfaces, in order to make sense of the affordances of the platform. To be specific, this means working through screens, tapping buttons and exploring menus (Light et al., 891). By walking through the apps and tools that provide identity engineering practices on Instagram, the researcher has assumed a user position, while at the same time applying an analytical eye to the process of acquiring the platform and accessing its features (Light et al., 891). In order to be able to study the identity engineering practices of fake followers, like robots and comment pods, it was necessary to look outside the boundaries of Instagram as a platform. The reason for this is although identity engineering practices take place to create an identity on Instagram, the actual practices are provided by third party platforms. For example, it is not possible to buy fake likes via Instagram´s platform itself. With this approach, Helmond and Bucher point out the importance of considering how a platform's infrastructure "extends its affordances beyond its own environment and how they may be integrated in other platforms and services as well as how these activities afford back to the platform" (30). Nonetheless, the third party platforms that do provide these services are highly intertwined with Instagram's application programming interface (API). a technological walkthrough as proposed by was used to study affordances.

In the context of this research, screenshots were made in order to show the affordances of these tools and the deriving consequences on Instagram. Since this method pays attention to platform's materiality, it provides insight into how users perceive certain affordances and constraints and gives insight in the actual manipulation of algorithms and consequences for impression management. Therefore, it is considered a valuable addition to this research. The purpose of using this method is gaining insight into the mediator characteristics. Light et al. argue that the mediator characteristics provide insight into the indications of how an interface configures relations among actors (891). More specifically, the way users are guided through interactions (or not) and how these processes are steered by the platform. Since this research is focused on the technological aspect, only the categories of 'user interface arrangements' and 'functions and features' were examined during the walkthrough. To provide more insight into this, specific attention was paid to the technology affordances that shape these platforms. Below is briefly explained what is specifically analyzed within the affordances dimensions of editability, persistence, visibility and association.

3.1.1 Editability

In order to examine editability practices in the walkthrough, the user interface arrangement is examined, meaning that the entire process has been completed to buy fake likes and followers and installing a liking robot on my account. This will be discussed in more depth in the 'object of study' section. Concretely, the way users are steered by the platform's interface via the placement of certain buttons and menu options will be examined (Light et al.,891). Furthermore, in terms of functions and features, the extent to which users influence the processes initiated by the platforms are examined. More concretely, this provides insight into the extent in which users have the opportunity to steer the tools functionalities. Additionally, it gives insight into how platforms are linked to Instagram and which compulsory fields are required to make use of the identity engineering practices. Besides, this provides the opportunity to make claims about the organic or mechanic basis that underlie these platforms.

3.1.2 Persistence

Persistence is considered a deriving consequence of editability practices in the backstage. In order to gain more insight into this dimension, the walkthrough focuses on the extent to which users content remains visible in their followers time lines after algorithmically manipulating the number of likes of content. This dimension also considers user agency; the examination of the possibility to delete fake likes and followers that are placed by bots, and the possibility to mechanically put fake likes and followers on any given account, without informed consent. This will be explained more extensively in the analysis. The present study will assume that the dimension of persistence can be considered as backstage behavior, because it concerns the technological effects within Instagram that can be related to the algorithm.

3.1.3 Visibility & association

Increasing visibility on Instagram is the goal of using identity engineering practices. However, as this research focuses on the technological process of identity engineering, the actual user behavior on Instagram fall outside the scope of this research. This means that in terms of visibility no user profiles that may have used identity engineering practices will be discussed. In terms of association there will not be searched for user networks that are created mechanically to find evidence for the actual use of identity engineering practices. However, suggestions were made as a result of the analysis, which allowed to give substance to this affordances dimensions which are related to the frontstage. Nonetheless, although the frontstage was not extensively investigated in this study, indications and suggestions for further research were made. Thus, the present study can be seen as a preparatory step, focusing on the technical aspect. Concretely, these dimension give insight into the implications of using identity engineering practices, for example creating a filter bubble, which will be discussed more extensively in section 4.3

3.2 Object of study

The objects of study consisted of a selection of third party applications and platforms that allow optimizing self-presentation. First, the process of buying fake likes and followers was studied by actually buying fake likes and followers on www.instalikeskopen.nl. This particular website provides the opportunity of buying both fake likes and followers. Moreover, the platform offers the possibility to test the platform's feature by offering 50 fake likes for free. Thus, this platform was chosen as an object for this study. Furthermore, to provide more insight into the process of installing a liking robot on an Instagram account, robolike.com was used as the object of study. This provider of fake likes offers a three-day free trial, which allowed for in-depth knowledge of the use of a liking robot on Instagram's algorithm. Moreover, this platform has a clear term of service, privacy policy and cancelation policy that are considered very important because aspects like cancelation are part of the walkthrough as well, this will be discussed more extensively in the analysis.

In case of the comment pods, an exception was made in the form of data collection. As comment pods are self-invented group-chats, a user has to be invited to be able to join. For this reason, it appeared impossible to carry out a walkthrough on the experience of impression management boosting practices via comment pods. Besides, based on ethical considerations, it is hardly possible to conduct research within a comment pod, since there must be informed consent. In the case of a successful participation, it is highly likely that pod members adjust their behavior because they know their acts are being investigated. Moreover, pod users should have the option to opt-out of the research, which would force them to leave a group-chat. These factors combined made it impossible for this research to add findings from participating in a real comment pod. However, in order to provide insight into the actual use and consequences of comment pods for algorithmic impression management boosting, both researches conducted by Cotter (2018) and the NOS were used to theorize these practices. Cotter's study provides insight on a discursive level on how comment pods are used and what rules apply. In addition, the research conducted by NOS provides findings from interviews with influencers who actually (have) participate(d) in comment pods.

For this study, the researcher's own private Instagram account was used for testing the applications mentioned above. This was considered necessary because insight needed to be gained into the real impact of identity engineering practices on Instagram's algorithm and implications of visibility of content. Creating a new account solely for this research would not suffice for both ethical and practical reasons. It was ethically considered impossible to use random people's content for a research account, since there must be an informed consent. In addition, due to time it was impossible to build up an organic follower base for a research account. By using my own account, it is possible to make claims about the

algorithmic consequences of using these practices for my visibility. This would not be possible if a research account was set up with randomly gained organic followers.

Undoubtedly, the choice of using my private account has several implications. First, since this account was used for research purposes, that meant that my account may have been duplicated and transformed into a new fake follower and or liker. This is discussed more in-depth in the analysis. Moreover, there were many requests from fake follower accounts and companies and, obviously, I wanted to prevent my content from being used on other accounts. In order to be able to use the tools I just discussed, it was necessary in some cases to provide both the login name and password. To ensure that these tools can no longer log into my account, it was decided to restore my public profile to a private account after performing the research and changing my password twice to make sure the robots could not access my account anymore.

4. Analysis

In this analysis, three concrete practices of identity engineering, namely buying fake likes and followers, installing a liking robot and comment pods, were examined. Additionally, the way Instagram users use technological affordances to boost impression management was examined per practice. Finally, following this analysis, a proposal was made that aims for updating Goffman's foundational notions of frontstage, backstage and cheating.

The algorithm behind Instagram is designed to establish and maintain the highest extent of user participation and engagement. In light of Instagram's exponential user growth, the move towards an algorithmically sorted timeline can be interpreted as a corporate attempt at improving content relevance, with the result of more engagement and more time spent on the platform. The term 'algorithmic timeline' can be considered a misnomer, since the previous content feed was, technically speaking, based on a reverse-chronological manner by an algorithm. Bucher and Helmond argue that the extent to which algorithms are used to construct content feeds relative to users and their activities on the platform, is new (27). This means that Instagram's digital environment does not solely offer something to its users, on the contrary, user's activities of identity engineering practices increasingly play an important role in establishing those very offerings in the first place. This implies that platforms are infrastructures that can be programmed and extended by user practices. And more interestingly, are allowed by the platform itself. In the context of this research, the programmability of Instagram is facilitated by application programming interfaces (APIs). These APIs enable "interoperability", meaning that they allow third parties to employ platform data and add functionalities (Bucher and Helmond 19). This means that for developers, and subsequently for end users, the action possibilities on Instagram are related to the APIs that are made available by Instagram. These third party tools that use Instagram's API have to meet standards as they are defined in their platforms policy.[2]

As the first sub-question focuses on how Instagram allows for practices of identity engineering, it can be said that Instagram allows third party apps to operate on their platform API. In fact, they encourage companies and programmers to build with their API, to add more services to the platform. Although liking bots and applications for fake followers are part of these third party applications, Instagram clearly indicates that fake engagement applications are not intended and therefore actively blocks and removes these accounts. Nonetheless, they are not active enough to render these tools completely ineffective. Probably because a significant amount of money is earned with it. In the next section, the actual process of using third party apps that provide fake engagement will be elaborated. Starting with www.instalikeskopen.nl, an application that provides fake followers and likes.

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[2] Instagram. Platform Policy. Accessed on 26/03/2019, from: https://www.instagram.com/about/legal/terms/api/

4.1 Fake followers and likes

In order to provide more insight into the process of buying fake followers and likes, this actual process was completed on www.instalikeskopen.nl. Because the analyzed page is in Dutch, a direct translation is shown in this analysis. The homepage shows in capital letters "give your Instagram a boost, get more engagement". Below that, two clickable options are shown, namely: 'more likes' and 'more followers'. When just scrolling down the webpage, a menu is shown (see figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Overview like packages

As can be seen above, buying likes is assumed to be the standard option for boosting engagement, since this option is the first to be displayed. Buying fake followers is one click deeper in the website's architecture. Important here is the opportunity to test this practice with 50 free likes. As part of the walkthrough, the process of placing 50 likes on an Instagram photo was followed. This test offers an understanding of the extent in which users can edit these mechanically produced practices by actually examining the results of 'buying' fake likes via this platform on Instagram.

When clicking on the 'test for free' button, a window pops up saying: "fill in your user name and we will upload your Instagram Grid". After entering an Instagram username, the grid is shown (see attachment 8.2, page 36). Subsequently the 50 likes can be assigned to one picture or divide it over several images. In other words, this tool affords for strategically placing likes on several Instagram pictures. When projecting this to the second sub-question, namely focusing on how identity engineering

can be related to cheating and the mask, it can be assumed that strategically placing and dividing these likes contribute to the notion of credulity and working on a consistent 'mask' at the same time. In other words, by evenly distributing likes, no exponential increase in content engagement becomes visible. That is, users are able to maintain an illusion of authenticity. While scrolling down the visualized grid, the platform immediately shows the estimated growth per Instagram picture. In doing so, the platform influences people to put more likes on photos and to boost the account as a whole instead of boosting single photos.

In terms of editability and user agency, it was considered important to examine to what extent users are able to engineer accounts that are not their own. As a test, accounts of major influencers (300.000+ followers) and some randomly selected private accounts were entered in the interface. It appeared that any existing account with an open profile could be engineered, although private profiles were not available for this practice. Placing fake likes on an account only requires someone's username and it is not necessary to verify ownership of the account. In order to provide evidence, figure 1.2 shows how a picture of a randomly selected influencer could be boosted by 50 likes, from 22241 likes to 22291 likes. In the image is stated: "is everything right? Then continue to start the free test". Placing these likes would have been finalized by clicking on the 'free test' button. Based on ethical considerations the account name has been marked invisible.
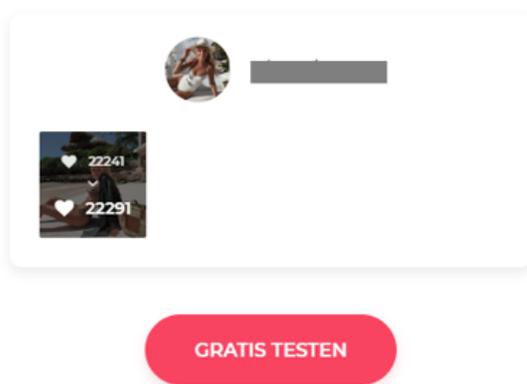

Figure 1.2 Testing fake likes on influencer's account

Moreover, based on ethical considerations, this test was not proceeded. However, it is striking that anyone can deliberately cheat any open access Instagram account. This a clear example of what Magalhães describes as the moral harm paradigm, namely: "the invisible and biased operations of algorithmic power violate universal values in ways that are concretely harmful to the autonomy of individuals and communities" (1). Indeed, this tool violates individual's autonomy, as anyone can decide to cheat one's account with the purpose of misleading the algorithm. When projecting this observation to sub-question two—focusing on how identity engineering practices can be related to cheating and the

mask—it can be said that the option to engineer someone else's account is a form of cheating. Especially since this engineering practice can be carried out without informed consent. This notion has severe consequences for user agency, since with this practice the agency can be taken completely out of someone's hands. This creates a dependency risk, whereby people must constantly watch out that other people can engineer their accounts.

In summary, the identity engineering practices of fake likes and followers allow people to deliberately manipulate other user's accounts without informed consent. In fact, there is a possibility to irreducibly apply these practices on any given account, since there is no need to leave an email address. Moreover, the platform does not need login credentials as only a username is sufficient. For this experiment, the free test version was used. Since it is required to leave an email address and payment details when a large numbers of fake followers or likes are wished to be bought. This makes it easier to trace 'offenders', however, it remains possible to place fake followers and likes on a public account without informed consent of the account's owner.

4.1.1 Proceeding the process

As this test was canceled, the entire process of placing fake likes had not yet been completed. In order to provide insight into how third party applications and Instagram are intertwined, the process wat proceeded by using the researcher's private account. This gave insight into the accuracy and ability of this application of centrally sending likes to a given account. Moreover, it provided the possibility to examine 'who' these fake likers are and how fake accounts look like. Most importantly, it allowed for drawing conclusions about the persistence of mechanically developed and targeted placement of likes. After completing the steps as mentioned above, it was decided to send the likes to a randomly selected picture, that were placed within 6 minutes. The accounts that liked the content seemed surprisingly real: authentic names (not a random combination of letters and numbers), profile picture and description and at least 9 pictures.[3] When using this tool, users automatically agree with the terms of service in which it is stated that user accounts may be duplicated and used in different contexts. More specifically this means these accounts are used to create new fake accounts which are used to like other people's content. In relation to user agency, this has is implications in relation to persistence; it means that the user's content is no longer owned by themselves and may be used in various other contexts. Unfortunately, it is yet unknown what exactly happens with this content and to what extent it is traceable.

Furthermore, there is another consideration in terms of persistence, namely the extent in which the mechanically obtained likes remain visible on the account. Instagram states, they actively remove and

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[3] In the Appendix a fake profile can be found (image 8.4 page 33)

ban fake accounts, therefore there is a chance the purchased likes and followers will disappear soon.[4] However, instalikeskopen.nl offers a guarantee: likes and followers are automatically supplemented in the first month after purchase. After that period, it is less likely that the fake accounts that were used to boost your impressions will be detected by Instagram and marked as fake account, and can be considered permanent.[5] This particularly has implications for impression management in the frontstage, because the persistence of obtained likes and followers are visible for one's audience or followers. It can be said that the continuous loss of followers and likes does not fit with an authentic profile. In other words, as long as an illusion of authenticity must be guaranteed, it is important to achieve a consistent page engagement, which means credibility is maintained. If this is not the case, the impression management will deteriorate.

Thus, to provide an answer to sub-question two: 'what current practices of identity engineering can be distinguished and how can they be related to contemporary practices of impression management, considering cheating and the mask?' It can be said that buying fake followers and likes via instalikeskopen.nl is a fully mechanical process. This identity engineering practice is considered 'hardcore', meaning that the amount and distribution can only be determined at the preliminary stage. Besides, the entire process is mechanically based and the used followers are randomly created, and therefore fake. During the actual placement process, no influence can be exerted on the placement of these fake likes and followers. More significantly, it is even possible to perform these practices on accounts that are not under the buyer's own control. Considering sub-question three, which focuses on the reconceptualization of studying identity construction, it is proposed that this practice takes place in the backstage. Meaning that the behavior in the backstage changes from an inactive attitude to an active one, where good thought is given to forms of self-presentation in the frontstage. It can be seen as a kind of preparation, or general rehearsal. Based on these findings, the reconceptualization of frontstage contains the assumption that people are continuously working on a self-reflexive process in which credibility and an illusion of authenticity are at the basis of the purpose to increase or at least maintain a certain visibility.

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[4] Instagram Press. Reducing Inauthentic Activity on Instagram. Published on 19 November 2018. Accessed from: https://instagram-press.com/blog/2018/11/19/reducing-inauthentic-activity-on-instagram/ on 08-04-2019.
[5] Instalikeskopen.nl. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ). Accessed from: https://www.instalikeskopen.nl/ on 27-03-2019

4.2 Liking Robot

Robotlike.com offers mechanically generated likes for Instagram. For $7,99 per month, a liking robot generates 30-80 photos per hour, with the goal to increase engagement.[6] It is presupposed that visibility and audience reach increase by liking other's content. It does not specifically matter whether you have a business, public or private account. In short, this applications works as follows: The like robot is able to operate in name of the user's account, since the application requires to share both the user name and password. Subsequently, the bot scans content that contains certain hashtags and likes the content with the user's account. Remarkably, the website emphasizes that these likes are not 'fake'; of course, the likes are generated by a bot that makes the method of liking unhuman, but the intention is 'human', since the bot only likes predetermined content via self-selected hashtags. [7]

When entering www.robolike.com, the fist clickable option is their free trial. After clicking that button, a screen opens where the buyer is asked for their username, password, country and a checkbox to see whether they are a robot. Subsequently, RoboLike asks for the city of residence and email address. As this was a test case, the process was successfully continued without entering an email address for the reason of privacy and spam after this research. Then a dashboard appeared that showed that the liking process had already begun, based on pre-selected hashtags. In this case #ootd, #foodporn, #vsco, #lmao, #travel and #bestoftheday. None of these hashtags were ever used in the captions of the researcher's Instagram content, however the bot determined that these hashtags fit the content. Within 5 minutes, ten mechanically-generated likes were conducted. As these likes were placed automatically, it was examined if there were ways to influence this process. The bot does not provide options to steer the amount of likes for a certain, chosen, hashtag. Although it is possible to add more hashtags which ensures that the total number of likes is distributed over more hashtags. This allows you to indicate yourself what you are more interested in. As shown in figure 1.3, the platform shows the liked content by providing a link. After clicking on this link, the buyer is redirected to Instagram and the liked photo is shown. After ten minutes, content from Spain, Russia and Brazil was liked (figure 8.5 page 34). In terms of persistence, this means that these likes continue to exist, unless they are removed organically myself (by 'once again' clicking on the like button). This provides evidence that the tool is actually intertwined with Instagram. During the process, it was hard to find the opportunity to make the robot stop, therefore after enough data was gathered, the process was stopped by changing Instagram's password. In that way, the robot no longer had full access to the account.

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[6] RoboLike. Simple and Safe Instagram Liker. Accessed from https://www.robolike.com/.

[7] (e.g.) Medium.com. How To Automate an Effective Instagram Bot that Isn't Spammy. Published 07-03-2018.

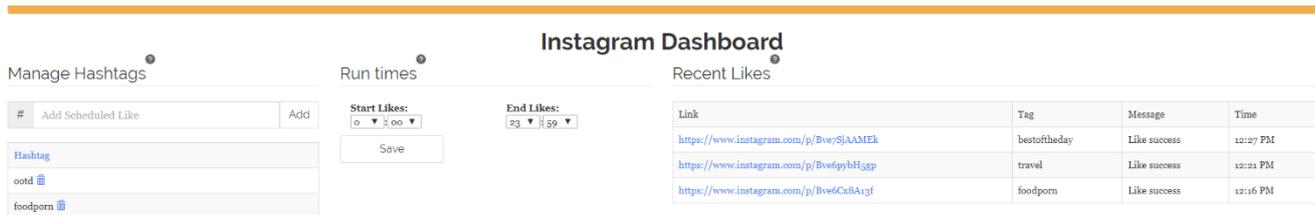Accessed fom: https://medium.com/the-mission/how-to-automate-an-effective-instagram-bot-that-isnt-spammy-b2146a2c0b19

Figure 1.3 RoboLike dashboard [8]

Thus, in relation to sub-question one, RoboLike allows people to engineer their identity by automatically generating likes, by means of an account 'takeover'. In terms of editability, the tool offers the possibility to steer the bot by inserting extra hashtags.

There are some consequences when using this tool. First, in terms of user agency, when using this tool the terms of service were agreed upon, in which was stated that the profile's content may be "transferred, unencrypted and involve transmissions over various networks."[9] Thus, it can be assumed that the researcher's account now has been duplicated for the sake of creating a new fake follower which will be used as a like profile. Therefore, the persistence of the account as an automatic liker remains unclear. Besides, once the liking process has started, the bot completely takes over the account. Although it is possible to stay logged-in during the process and like content yourself, this is discouraged to prevent interference with the bot. This means that Instagram's algorithm can detect mechanical manipulation once the 'like budget' is exceeded. Therefore, RoboLike continuously scans what Instagram flags as unnatural activity and tries to stay below that limit. As soon as people continue to actively like themselves, this limit can be exceeded which results in a penalty from Instagram that drastically reduces your visibility. When projecting this finding to the notion of cheating, it means that authenticity is replicated with the purpose to appear a real as possible, while the algorithm is surely manipulated.

Thus, to provide an answer to sub-question two, focusing on how Instagram users interact with platform's and third party's affordances to boost performances, it can be said that the use of liking robots is a medium version of identity engineering. On the one hand, the tool takes care of your entire account activity, but on the other hand it does offer options to control which hashtags are liked. With this process, it does indeed take work off your hands to achieve lasting engagement. Considering sub-question three, which focuses on the reconceptualization of studying identity construction, it is proposed that the practice of using RoboLike takes place on the backstage, since it is carried out in secret. This has consequences for Goffman's notion of the backstage, in which it is presumed that no active attitude is taken to work on impression management. In fact, I propose that in the absence of an audience, people work hard to present a desired image on the frontstage. A more extensive updated is provided in the conclusion.

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[8] Full version of Robolike dashboard is provided in appendix page 36, figure 7.6 .
[9] Robolike. Terms of Service. Accessed on 26-03-2019, from: https://www.robolike.com/terms-of-service

4.3 Comment pods

Besides bots, Instagram users came up with their own self-invented tactics to boost engagement via comment pods: private group messages where users "assemble to share newly published posts so other in the pod can like and comment on them" (Cotter 2018:13). The rise of this identity engineering practice has emerged since Instagram's changed its algorithm. In fact, after this algorithmic update, a visibility decrease of approximately 50% appeared.[10]

As Sara Melotti explains in a blog post, a comment pod provides impression management boosting practices that "look legit to algorithms".[11] Pods depend upon reciprocity: before sharing, people have to engage with others' content first (Cotter 13). As Melotti adds, this practice is "to accelerate the rate of engagement and growth of an account by going viral."[12] In general, pods begin with friend groups and soon network connections are added. One gains access to the pod when access requirements are met, that is liking and commenting on the three most recent pictures of all the members in the pod. In addition, when someone may join it is mandatory to follow the pod's rules. For instance, every group member must like and react to all content published in the group and use at least four words and one emoticon to maintain the illusion of authenticity. Cotter refers to this idea as "simulating connectivity", the effort and devotion to appear real in order to increase visibility. Here we literally see the attempt to make an engineering act look as real as possible. This corresponds to the actual description of Goffman's notion of credulity, namely: the likelihood of an act to be real.

Members of a comment pod are expected to engage with other member's content within 24 hours after posting.[13] If members do not comply with these rules, they get a penalty mark with the consequence of being publicly shamed in the groups chat. The same applies if engagement is not considered rich enough.

As an attempt to answer sub-question two, focusing on how Instagram users interact with the platform's and third party's affordances to boost performances, it can be said that the use of comment pods is a 'light' version of identity engineering. This practice is organically based, which means there is no active role of a platform that mediates the practices of liking and engaging with the content. In fact, the actual likes and reactions are intentionally given by actual people. Since this practice is based on users organically boosting each other's performances, it can be assumed that the users cannot exert much influence on who liked what, but must trust each other's intentions and the rules that apply within the comment pod. The dimension of editability is therefore 'outsourced', which can be considered as a form

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[10] NOS Stories. Geheime INSTAGROEPEN | De Waarheid Over: Hoe FAKE is INSTAGRAM? Published on 22-09-2018, accessed from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucEbjCHIYO0&list=PL_sYQfTgBr J9RIyKz7AU5ff9aeskE9zcZ&index=2

[11] Sara Melotti. Instagram Created a Monster – A no bullshit guide to what's really going on. Published on 23-04-2017, accessed 08-04-2019. From: http://behindthequest.com/instagram-created-a-monster/

[12] Melotti, Instagram Created a Monster. 23-04-2017

[13] Ibidem

of distributed agency. This means that once joining a comment pod, other people are agents that determine your visibility.

In terms of persistence, it can be stated that the 'earned' engagement in the form of likes and reactions remain visible, as long as the user complies with the pod's rules. Once again, this means that user agency is distributed. In relation to the research question, this means that in order to be assured of good impression management, or visibility, standards must be constantly met in these pods. That is, in terms of affordances, the deliberate and massive liking of content placed in these groups. If this does not happen, likes are removed, and with it the persistence of engagement, and eventually a banishment from the group.

Although there was no active participation in a comment pod for this research, something can still be said about the consequences of using comment pods in relation to algorithmic implications. Since all these users continue to like and engage with each other for a long time, it can be assumed that as a reaction the algorithm decides to connect these people more closely with each other, by making their content more visible in each other's timelines. This factor can clearly be linked to the affordances' domain of association, since this provides insight into the connection between individuals, content and actors. While these users manipulate the algorithm, it is highly likely that over time members in a specific comment pod are associated with each other and create a highly intertwined network. Considering the updated notion of the frontstage, which can be related to sub-question three, this assumption means that the use of comment pods determines the audience to who the engineered self is presented. As the algorithm is fed with continuous likes between certain groups of people, the algorithm will assume that these people are important to each other, creating an 'audience bubble'.

5. Conclusion

Research has shown that algorithms affect our social realities (Beer 987; Bucher 1164; Gillespie 1; Cheney-Lippold 164; Cotter 2). However, much of the discussion and research on this topic still neglects the role of individuals' knowledge and skills of algorithmic manipulation, and the ways in which users consciously interact with Instagram's algorithm to moderate its capacity to determine visibility. In this research, this conscious interaction with Instagram's algorithm has been studied, which led to the following research question: 'How can Instagram users use both Instagram's and third party application's technological affordances to tweak the algorithm as a practice of identity engineering for the purpose to boost impression management?'

By conducting a technological walkthrough, an attempt was made to provide more insight into identity engineering practices. This method allowed to thoroughly examine the actual process and interaction with Instagram's algorithm and concretely showed the outcomes and implications of using them. Within this research, three practices of identity engineering were examined: buying fake likes and followers, the use of a liking robot and comment pods. The limitations of using the walkthrough as a method will be discussed more extensively in the discussion.

In this research, it was assumed that identity management and self-presentation in digital media are not just a game between frontstage and backstage behavior, but a game with platform affordances as well. This refers to the continuous process of self-reflection, whereby the creation of an illusion of authenticity is mechanically simulated. All of this with the aim of increasing visibility and ensuring credibility on Instagram. One of the goals of this research was to renew the foundational views on front and backstage as proposed by Goffman and to revive these notions in the context of contemporary digital culture. Goffman's foundational ideas on frontstage behavior in everyday life are described as a role play, in which the role someone plays is gradually disappearing into the background; the role that one assumes becomes part of reality in that specific context. This means, for example, that someone becomes their profession, and the associated behavior is no longer a role but characterizes that person. As a result, a role becomes 'the truth', and its credibility is not constantly questioned. This is fundamentally different in the case of Instagram. In fact, it is presumed that in case of Instagram people are constantly engaged in a hyper-reflexive process in which the credibility and authenticity of a person's self-presentation is questioned. Therefore, when considering Goffman's ideas on the frontstage in the context of contemporary practices of self-presentation on social media, a reconsideration is recommended.

Instagram users create an illusion of authenticity, by making the mechanical manipulations of the algorithm look as real as possible. Subsequently the visibility for the public is increased and the illusion can be continued in the presence of the public. When relating this to impression management, it can be said that people are constantly legitimizing their self-presentations in order to maintain visibility. Based on these assumptions, I would therefore propose a new definition of the frontstage as a place where not

only the public is taken into account, but where people continuously interact with platform affordances to increase their visibility. Besides, in this frontstage people a continuous process takes place in which authenticity and credibility are questioned, in order to maintain an illusion of authenticity.

In addition, the findings from this study have implications for considering the backstage as it was originally proposed by Goffman as a place where people don't have to present themselves in front of an audience, and therefore do not pay much attention to their appearance. Based on my findings, I would like to suggest that the backstage is no longer a place where people are not concerned with their self-presentation. In fact, it can be seen as a place where people deliberately and strategically think about how they can increase their visibility. In order to continue speaking in terms of metaphors, I propose that on the backstage, Instagram users prepare a 'general rehearsal.' During this 'rehearsal stage', users actively work on a mask that is achieved through cheating on engagement rates, which will be explained next. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the mask refers to the role people strive to live up to or the version of themselves they would like to be. This notion remains unchanged, but it is assumed that this idealized image precedes the deliberate use of cheating methods, in the form of buying fake and followers, liking robots and comment pods. Cheating, as described by Goffman, focuses on misleading people and appeals to their credulity. However, in the context of this research, cheating refers to the deliberate use of identity engineering practices to mislead people's perceptions of someone's self-presentation, with the goal to boost impression management in the frontstage. This means that the notion of cheating has been given an important place within identity construction and self-presentation on Instagram. My suggestion is that this concept should be taken into account when studying contemporary practices of self-presentation on social media. However, the forms of cheating will be subject to technological developments, as well as Instagram's policies and changes to the API. Even though three cheating practices were discussed in this study, there will probably be more methods to manipulate the algorithm to boost performance in the future, which will be discussed in the discussion.

In conclusion, by introducing the concept of identity engineering, an attempt is made to reconsider Goffman's foundational ideas on identity construction and self-presentation. With this update, I aim to pay more attention to both the platform's technological affordances and user agency when studying identity construction and self-presentation on Instagram. Consequently, identity engineering operates in new force field, in which online worlds are not considered to be just a stage, but a participatory exhibit: a place where people interact with each other and with technological affordances of the platform. Herein, it is not seldom the questions what end users afford or do to technology, but the question is what users do with technology, in order to achieve their own goals.

6. Discussion

This thesis has aimed to provide a deeper understanding of studying identity in contemporary digital culture, by introducing the concept of identity engineering. With the updated notions of front- and backstage and the incorporation of cheating and the mask in a so-called 'rehearsal stage', opportunities are provided to consider the technological-mediated context in which the construction of identity in online life takes place. The main source of data gathering in this research was based on the walkthrough method as proposed by Light et al., 2016. By conducting a walkthrough this study has aimed to provide a deep understanding of the technological process of using identity engineering practices, taking into account platform's affordances and the interactions with Instagram's algorithm. Nonetheless, this study does not provide insight into the actual motivations of users to adopt these identity engineering practices. Besides, in this study an estimation is made of the gradation of fakeness the engineering practices, however, this gives no meaning to the willingness of users to actually use these applications. As previous research has collected data from forums and this research focuses on the technological aspect, it would be highly interesting to interview actual users of identity engineering practices, to get more insight in these motivations.

Moreover, future works might delve deeper into the understanding of frontstage behavior, because this research mainly focused on the technological aspect of engineering. Actual networking strategies and and improvements in visibility were not included in this study. Besides, it is acknowledged that this research does not provide a complete picture of all possible manipulation methods that could be defined as identity engineering. For this reason, findings from this research cannot be generalized to other platforms. Moreover, it is expected that Instagram users will always come up with new ways of algorithmic tweaking, which could further expand the concept of identity engineering.

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8. Appendix

8.1 instalikeskopen.nl – step one

STAP 1/3

Foto's ophalen

♥ 50 LIKES | € 0,-

GRATIS

♥ **50 LIKES** | **€ 0,-**

Vul hieronder jouw gebruikersnaam in en wij halen jouw foto's op.

Gebruikersnaam

FOTO'S OPHALEN

8.2 Placing fake likes on owned account

STAP 2/3

Foto's selecteren

♥ 50 LIKES | € 0,-

GRATIS

Selecteer jouw foto of verdeel de **50 likes** door meerdere foto's te selecteren.

juulvandenhoogen

< TERUG   **CONTROLEREN**

8.3 Placing fake likes on random account
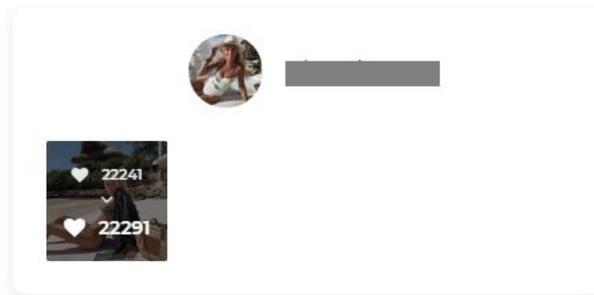
8.4 Example of fake follower that liked my content

8.5 Evidence of robot liked in my name
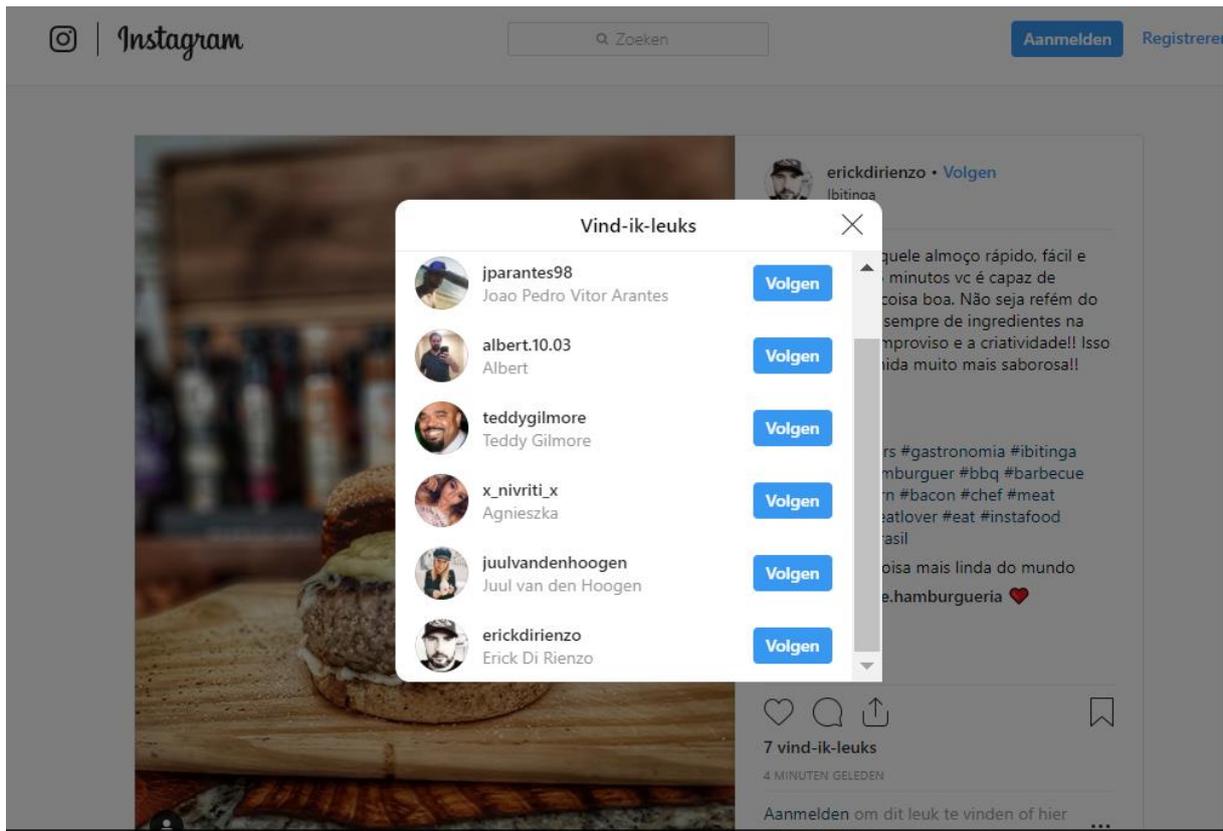
8.6 Full image interface like robot dashboard

8.7 Source anecdote

Link:
https://d38rqs2egh08o4.cloudfront.net/campaigns/browser_preview/decc9d0611dfe18ef8f56eed0e05d808