

Constructing **Liveness** on Social Media  
to establish 'Authenticity'

**BeReal.**

A case study

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## **Abstract**

*This thesis builds both on television and new media studies to examine the French social media app BeReal as a case study to investigate how 'liveness' is used and operates to establish a feeling of 'authenticity' for users. With reference to earlier television-based approaches to 'liveness,' as well as more recent studies on social media, I situate the app in its socio-political context of a highly commercialized social media environment. Subsequently, I examine how BeReal constructs 'liveness' in a manner that serves to create uniqueness next to other platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, by generating 'authentic' online encounters between users. To do so, media scholar Karin Van Es' approach of understanding 'liveness' as a constellation that is constructed through the interplay of the domains of institution, technology, and users will serve as a framework for my understanding of the concept in relation to BeReal. Based on this three-folded dynamic of 'liveness,' this thesis argues that the mainstreaming of curating profiles, editing images, and monetization practices on social media increasingly put the credibility of shared content into question, hence also causing a shift in the composition of 'liveness' with the relevance of establishing 'authenticity' through 'live' content distinctively enhancing. Thus, in contrast to Van Es and other prior studies, which identify 'authenticity' as a secondary component within the construction of 'liveness' in social media, this thesis claims that BeReal's use of 'liveness' is decisively entangled with notions of facilitating more transparency and intimacy between users, hence positioning the construction of 'authenticity' as one of the main purposes of 'liveness.' Since this altered focus of 'liveness' demands a re-evaluation of the concept, I introduce 'authentic liveness' as a contemporarily fitting term for this phenomenon.*

*To prove this argument, the analysis is structured according to Van Es' methodological approach of examining the app's metatext, space of participation, and user responses to identify how BeReal constructs 'authentic liveness.' The first analytical chapter thus examines how the metatext, embodied by the app's official website, the Apple App Store, Google Play Store, as well as the founder's LinkedIn profile, externally frame 'liveness' in relation to the app. The second and main analytical section deconstructs the app's participatory space by focusing on how the techno-cultural forces on the user interface, as well as legal and economic forces, navigate user activity on the platform by merging characteristics of 'authenticity' with 'liveness.' Lastly, the third analytical chapter investigates user responses collected on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store to examine how users understand 'liveness' in the app.*

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4-6</b>
<b>2. Theoretical-Methodological Framework</b>	<b>7-16</b>
2.1 <i>Television's 'Liveness' and the Concept's Origins</i>	7-9
2.2 <i>'Liveness' as a Construction within the Social Media Era</i>	9-10
2.3 <i>'Liveness' and 'Authenticity'</i>	11-16
2.5 <i>Analysis Method: The Domains of 'Liveness'</i>	17-19
2.6 <i>Corpus and Gathering Methods</i>	20-22
<b>3. Analysis</b>	<b>23-47</b>
3.1 <i>The Metatext – Framing of the App's 'Liveness'</i>	23-29
3.2 <i>The Space of Participation</i>	30-42
3.2.1 <i>Techno-Cultural Forces on the User Interface</i>	30-41
3.2.1.1 <i>Functional Affordances</i>	30-37
3.2.1.2 <i>Cognitive and Sensory Affordances</i>	37-41
3.2.2 <i>Economic and Legal Forces</i>	41-42
3.3 <i>User Responses – Understandings of 'Liveness'</i>	43-47
<b>4. Conclusion</b>	<b>48-50</b>
<b>5. Bibliography</b>	<b>51-53</b>
5.1 <i>List of Illustrations</i>	51
5.2 <i>Sources</i>	51-53
<b>6. Appendix</b>	<b>54-60</b>

## 1. Introduction

A decade ago, *Instagram* published its mission statement claiming that the platform aims “to capture and share the world’s moments,” while *Facebook* stated in 2017 that they strive “to offer individuals the capacity to share and make the world more open and connected.”<sup>1</sup> In spite of the fact that these statements underline the seemingly initial social focus of *Instagram* and *Facebook*, the overall increasing monetization of social media caused such platforms to develop into market sites.<sup>2</sup> As such, new media professor José van Dijck describes social media as “for-profit enterprises” with commercialization being embedded in their logic and in 2013 identified that the overwhelming majority of the then-hundred biggest social media platforms were “run by corporations who think of the Internet as a marketplace first and a public forum second.”<sup>3</sup> Today’s digital age does not draw a better picture, with ad-cluttered feeds, influencer marketing, and the standardization of ‘polished’ content through filters and tremendous editing practices being the norm on platforms such as *Instagram*, *Facebook*, or *TikTok*. However, it has been observed by media scholars such as Allan S. Taylor and Josie Reade how new generations, despite being used to such online environments, are increasingly demanding more ‘authenticity’ online, yearning for the times when social media and its simplicity did not allow for data-sorting, management or the calculated curation and editing of content.<sup>4</sup>

Launched in France in 2020 and winner of the 2022 Apple App Store Award, *BeReal* seems to momentarily fill this demand, stating that it positions attributes of ‘authenticity,’ transparency, and “extreme ownership” as its core principles to distance itself from commercialization.<sup>5</sup> To establish its ‘authentic’ uniqueness in opposition to other platforms, I argue that the app utilizes one particular media strategy: ‘Liveness.’ Once a day, the app simultaneously notifies all users that a two-minute timeframe has opened in which they can

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<sup>1</sup> Ekaterina Kachalova, “The Rise of Ad-free BeReal and Mastodon shows People are Sick of the Old Social Media,” *AdGuard*, December 1, 2022, <https://adguard.com/en/blog/bereal-mastodon-twitter-substitute.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘social media’ is used according to Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein’s definition. As such, the term ‘social media’ refers to a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the exchange of user-generated content.

<sup>3</sup> José Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> Allan S. Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Josie Reade, “Keeping it Raw on the ‘Gram: Authenticity, Relatability and Digital Intimacy in Fitness Cultures on Instagram”, *New Media & Society* 23, no. 3 (2020): 535-553.

<sup>5</sup> Alexis Barreyat and Kevin Perreau, “BeReal,” Apple App Store, Ver. 0.25.1 (2020), <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/berealuncontrollablephotos/id1459645446?pt=117262097&ct=Landing&mt=8>. “Jobs,” *BeReal*, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://bere.al/en>.

With “extreme ownership” *BeReal* refers to their privacy policy of stating that they will not disclose any information or personal data provided by users to third parties. As such, they neglect to perform any monetization practices of selling data for advertisement purposes.

post a *BeReal*.<sup>6</sup> By doing so, users are asked to share a spontaneous, non-edited 'live' impression of what they are doing at that moment by taking a photo through the mandatory double perspective of the front and back cameras. Due to posts being characterized by the immediacy of sharing and the inability of curation, I claim that the app allows users to enter a social sphere that is all about unique 'authentic' 'live' encounters.<sup>7</sup>

The conceptualization of 'liveness' has been significant for television networks since the first *Golden Age of Television*, in which 'live' programming was used to secure the position of networks and allowed television to be categorized as a 'live medium' that aesthetically differs from film.<sup>8</sup> Ever since, different definitions and understandings of 'liveness' have positioned the concept as a core topic of discussion between media scholars, especially in television studies.<sup>9</sup> Yet, its expansion to social media is especially significant for this thesis. Notably, media scholar Karin Van Es combines elements of previous television-based approaches and identifies 'liveness' as being "a construction informed by technologies, institutions, and users" and claims that online platforms apply similar techniques of television's 'liveness' by establishing a temporal and spatial connection between users.<sup>10</sup> While her research provides a basic framework for the examination of 'liveness' on social media, the rapid further development of the current online environment, however, asks for a re-evaluation of the concept.

To do so, I build on media scholars such as Philip Auslander, Michele White, and Ludmilla Lupinacci, who have hinted at the construction of 'authenticity' as one characteristic of 'liveness' within broadcast and social media. Extending these approaches and reflecting on the historical conceptualization of 'liveness,' I – in contrast to previous research – primarily focus on the connection of 'liveness' and 'authenticity' to claim that the case of *BeReal* exhibits that the construction of 'authenticity' must be approached as the concept's main attribute within the examined constellation of 'liveness.' Positioning *BeReal* in its context of a highly commercialized social media landscape, I hence reflect on how the mainstreaming of curation and monetization practices, in return, causes an increased demand for 'authenticity,' which

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<sup>6</sup> The daily posts of users are like the app's name called a *BeReal*.

<sup>7</sup> By stating that the app is unique in terms of its established 'authenticity,' I refer to the fact that *BeReal* distinguishes from other platforms, such as *Instagram* and *TikTok*, through its limitation of editing and curation practices of content. Thus, I consider its emphasis on 'authenticity' through these restrictions as unique. Due to this clear differentiation, other platforms, such as *TikTok* are even starting to copy *BeReal*'s idea with introducing *TikTok Now* as a similar app that responds to the increasing demand for 'authenticity.'

<sup>8</sup> Karin Van Es, *The Future of Live* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 3.

The first Golden Age of Television spanned from the late 1940s to the 1960s and portrayed the peak of live broadcasting as well as introduced 'liveness' as a main characteristic of television.

<sup>9</sup> The different approaches will be explained in detail in the theoretical framework.

<sup>10</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 5.

eventually enhances the relevance of establishing ‘authenticity’ in the constellation of ‘liveness.’ Therefore, I will revise the concept and introduce a new conceptualization of ‘liveness’ called ‘authentic liveness,’ identified both as a countermovement to other social media’s increasingly curated environments and as a new business strategy to secure media power by filling the demand for more ‘authentic’ encounters online.

To examine this contemporary phenomenon, I will interpret *BeReal* as a yet unexplored case of how ‘authentic liveness’ is constructed on social media platforms. To do so, I follow Van Es’ methodological approach of analyzing the app’s *metatext*, *space of participation*, and *user responses* to determine how these three domains collectively generate ‘authentic liveness’ as an interplay of institution, users, and technology.<sup>11</sup> The research question that will guide this analysis is as follows: In what way does the social media app *BeReal* strategically construct ‘authentic liveness’?

In doing so, I will not only investigate the app in detail as a recent case within the dynamic of social media and ‘authenticity’ but, more importantly, highlight that the concept of ‘liveness’ is continuously relevant for the study of social media and highly transformative in relation to its socio-political context and case.

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<sup>11</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 27.

## 2. Theoretical-Methodological Framework

### 2.1 Television's 'Liveness' and the Concept's Origins

Before analyzing *BeReal* and its contemporary form of 'liveness,' it is necessary to position the concept in its historical context of television broadcasting. Overall, the academic discussion entails three major approaches to the meaning and establishment of 'liveness,' these being the rhetoric one, focused on 'liveness' as being a tool for power execution; the ontological one, claiming the technology itself to be its cause; as well as the phenomenological approach, suggesting that the 'live' is a social experience.<sup>12</sup>

Beginning with rhetorical approaches to 'liveness,' media scholar Elana Levine has observed how the use of 'live' transmissions establishes "hierarchies of value" between broadcast programs that eventually facilitate "distinction (...) of cultural worth."<sup>13</sup> As such, she emphasizes how the 'live' may be used to stress the relevance of content and attract audiences by use of the 'live' label. In this sense, influential media scholar Nick Couldry has identified the application of 'liveness' as a media ritual to sustain 'media power' by creating the impression that media matter since they are part of society's current "reality."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he connects 'liveness' to being entangled with the conceptualization of the "myth of the mediated center," which describes the idea that "there is such a thing as the center of society, and that media represent privileged access to that center."<sup>15</sup> While he hence hints at the calculated establishment of relevance through 'live' transmissions, television scholar Jane Feuer similarly underlines the ideological dimension of the concept. Namely, she claims that it presents a form of power execution by "cutting back and forth between events, and the use of slow motion" since "flow and unity" give "a sense of immediacy and wholeness."<sup>16</sup> Therefrom, Feuer also highlights 'liveness' as being a force for navigating user attention and a tool for securing media dominance. While the rhetorical approach highlights the concept as being a construction, it underscores the role of the technology itself within the establishment of 'liveness,' which, in contrast, the ontological reading of 'liveness' focuses on.

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<sup>12</sup> Karin Van Es, "Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 8 (2017): 1249.

The terminology of the 'live' is in this thesis utilized as a synonym for 'liveness,' as also done by Karin Van Es.

<sup>13</sup> Elana Levine, "Distinguishing Television: The Changing Meanings of Television Liveness," *Media, Culture & Society* 30, no. 3 (2008): 395.

<sup>14</sup> Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2003), 48.

<sup>15</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983), 16.

As a representative of the ontological approach, scholar of broadcast and electronic communication arts Herbert Zettl proposes that television's technological base is what establishes the 'live.'<sup>17</sup> While he argues that the "beaming lines"<sup>18</sup> of television make the medium 'alive,' media scholar Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow agree that the simple electronic nature of television is what labels it as 'live' with the image offering "a permanently *alive* view on the world."<sup>19</sup> With a focus on the medium's functions, media professor Philip Auslander in 2008 moreover claimed that 'liveness' occurs when the used technology may "respond to us in real-time."<sup>20</sup> While this approach highlights the importance of the technological dimension within the construction of 'liveness,' media scholar Paddy Scannell accuses this reading of 'liveness' to lack in understanding 'liveness' as being the "effect of the *human application* and use of technologies whose ontological characteristic is immediate connectivity."<sup>21</sup> Thus, several scholars criticize this solely technology-focused approach, with Auslander declaring his earlier claim as incorrect, stating that 'liveness' is no longer an "ontologically defined condition but an (...) effect of mediatization (...) produced through our engagement with the object and our willingness to accept its claim (of being 'live')."<sup>22</sup>

As such, Auslander's revised statement adopts a more phenomenology-based reading of 'liveness' by positioning users and their experience at the heart of its creation. As this approach centers around human encounters and social exchange, Scannell identifies television production as establishing a form of "communicative entitlement," meaning that 'live' transmissions allow audiences to simultaneously participate in an event unfolding in real-time and thus position users as being 'entitled' to talk about it.<sup>23</sup> While he hence claims this 'live' capacity of television to establish "possibilities of participation, effects of being-there,"<sup>24</sup> Jérôme Bourdon, in the same vein, argues that humans feel a natural need "to connect oneself with others, to the world's events," which 'live' transmissions are precisely satisfying by establishing a social unit of shared knowledge.<sup>25</sup> In a similar manner, also Van Es claims that "live media all draw on real-time and sociality to establish their value."<sup>26</sup> In essence, all these scholars agree on the importance of sociality for the establishment of 'liveness,' as well as that

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert Zettl, "The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics," *Journal of the University Film Association* 30, no.2 (1978): 3.

<sup>18</sup> Zettl, "The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics," 3.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, "Television: A World in Action," *Screen* 18, no. 2 (1977): 23, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Paddy Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of Live: An Enquiry into the Human Situation* (London: Polity Press, 2014), 99.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012): 3, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Paddy Scannell, "Authenticity and Experience," *Discourse Studies* 3, no. 4 (2001): 409.

<sup>24</sup> Scannell, "Authenticity and Experience," 409.

<sup>25</sup> Jérôme Bourdon, "Live Television is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise," *Media, Culture and Society* 22, no.5 (2000): 193.

<sup>26</sup> Van Es, "Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live," 1249.



'live' media facilitate a sense of urgency, that something needs to be attended (...) because it is important to us as members of a society."<sup>27</sup> However, while these sources provide relevant insights into the reading of 'liveness' as a human experience, as well as highlight the importance of social encounters for the creation of 'liveness,' Van Es claims that this approach downplays the relevance of the ideological dimension of media and thus introduces her own conceptualization of 'liveness.'<sup>28</sup>

## 2.2 'Liveness' as a Construction within the Social Media Era

In her book *The Future of Live*, Van Es states that while all three perspectives would reflect on "certain domains of liveness (e.g., technology, users, institutions), none can aptly capture the complexity of live media on its own,"<sup>29</sup> which portrays the basis for my analysis. Consequently, she argues that 'liveness' should instead be considered as a "construction shaped by institutions, technologies, and users,"<sup>30</sup> hence as a three-folded dynamic that builds on earlier television-based approaches and combines these as interrelated actors. Thereby, Van Es highlights the complexity and variety of different forms of 'liveness,' which cannot be classified solely within one domain but are situated within the interplay between them. In this sense, she moreover states that the importance of each domain varies by constellation, arguing that "to capture its diversity, the live needs to be considered as a product of the complex interaction among" these domains while "unique interaction among these three groupings constructs different constellations of live media."<sup>31</sup> Building on this, she applies her approach to the new media ecosystem and identifies that 'liveness' is still a prominent strategy within the social media era, asserting that:

Social media have increasingly commercialized, and today, they compete with broadcast media for consumer attention. And in the process, they need to demonstrate their value. The resurgence of the live, I would argue, can be understood as a product of this competitive media landscape, where old and new media institutions compete to dominate the market.<sup>32</sup>

With this reference, she particularly notices how *Web. 2.0*, described by Tim O'Reilly as the "collection of web technologies that facilitate simple publishing, content sharing, and

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<sup>27</sup> Van Es, "Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live," 1249.

<sup>28</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Van Es, "Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live," 1251.

The term "Social Media Era" refers to the period after 2000/2001 in which we have seen an enormous increase in user-generated content and online sharing.

collaboration,” majorly contributes to new constellations of ‘liveness.’<sup>33</sup> Namely, she argues that the *Web 2.0* portrays a main segment within the emergence of *participatory culture*, with user-generated content for the first time positioning users as ‘producers’ of ‘liveness’ instead of solely being the receiver of ‘live’ content, as seen in broadcasting practices.<sup>34</sup> Building on O’Reilly and his claim of such platforms to entail “a natural architecture of participation,”<sup>35</sup> which means that there is a built-in ethic of cooperation within these systems, Van Es thus highlights the importance of user activity within online-based constellations of ‘liveness’ and how users perceive the ‘live’ proposed by the technology.<sup>36</sup>

To do so, she examines several new media cases, such as *Facebook*, and gives critical insights on how relations between users, technology, and institutions are formed within the construction of ‘liveness.’<sup>37</sup> Thereby, she also refers to data management as having always been a core feature of *Web 2.0*, claiming that “in ‘sharing,’ ‘commenting,’ and ‘liking’ on Facebook (...) users create data that the platform can monetize.”<sup>38</sup> While she hence identifies monetization as a central characteristic of such platforms, her work does not focus on investigating the emerging dynamic between commercialization and ‘liveness’ on social media in the sense of how commercialization alters the accuracy of content. That is to say that she does point out that ‘liveness’ on social media is utilized “to demonstrate their value” by offering “access to the lives of our friends”<sup>39</sup> but lacks in analyzing how ‘liveness’ may be used within the context of highly commercialized, edited, and curated online content to, in contrast, generate uniqueness and authenticity. As this may be due to her research being published in 2017, with editing and influencer marketing not yet characterizing online encounters to the same extent as today, it is still highly necessary to examine ‘liveness’ from a contemporary perspective and how it establishes a feeling of ‘authenticity’ within the socio-political context of business-focused social media environments. As such, I will adopt a slightly altered perspective and complement Van Es’ research by examining the connection between ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity’ as a relevant angle for contemporary media research.

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<sup>33</sup> Tim O’Reilly, “What is Web 2.0? Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software,” in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 38.

<sup>34</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Tim O’Reilly, “What is Web 2.0? Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software”, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 23.

<sup>39</sup> Van Es, “Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live,” 1252.

## 2.3 'Liveness' and 'Authenticity'

### 'Authenticity'

Before diving into a discussion of works that focus on the connection between 'liveness' and 'authenticity,' it is relevant to explore the debate on 'authenticity' in connection to social media, as well as define how I utilize the terminology. Namely, the term 'authenticity' must be approached as a philosophically rich term that has been differently approached and applied to several disciplines over the years. Media scholar Allan S. Taylor argues that:

The somewhat existential quest for the authentic is not a new concept: the idea that one should live according to one's internal values, or to ensure that the internal self matches the external presentation, has been debated by some of the most well-known Western philosophers of the modern era.<sup>40</sup>

While Taylor hence introduces 'authenticity' as a widely debated historical concept, individuals in contemporary culture often equate the term with the quality of being true, real, or "as having fidelity or congruence between an inner core and outer appearances."<sup>41</sup> Conflating 'authenticity' with 'the real' is, nonetheless, from an academic and cultural view, highly paradoxical since existential questions of what constitutes reality lead back to philosophers such as René Descartes or Jean Baudrillard, who – according to Taylor – argued that "society is "so far removed from what could be considered reality that it could never return to the real, whatever it was in the first instance."<sup>42</sup> While the use of the term 'reality' must hence always be positioned in a specific context or based on a particular argumentation, it is equally problematic to find a universal definition for 'authenticity.' From a performative cultural point of view on social media, Taylor thus raises the critical question: "In particular reference to social media—a predominantly *digital* space that contains nothing but copies and facsimiles of people, feelings and texts— how can anything be authentic?"<sup>43</sup> While he thus challenges the standardized way of equating the terminology of 'authenticity' with 'reality' in colloquial language, several other scholars also aim to understand what an 'authentic experience' may be within today's digitalized world.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 3.

In this sense, sociology scholar Jenny L. Davis defines social media authenticity as the 'spontaneity of action, interaction, demeanor, and selfhood.'<sup>45</sup> As she hints at the relevance of the spontaneous nature of online engagements, media scholar Alice E. Marwick investigates the role of 'authenticity' within fashion blogging, concluding that "authenticity is "conceptualized as a somewhat ineffable quality that overlaps with ideals of truthfulness, and consistency."<sup>46</sup> Thus, she highlights that the spatiotemporal component of the consistency of posting seemingly 'trustful' content plays a crucial role in the perception of online 'authenticity.'<sup>47</sup> In the same line of thought, anthropologist of internet cultures Crystal Abidin agrees with Davis, claiming a seemingly effortless and spontaneous nature of posts, called 'calibrated amateurism,' to be a marker of 'authenticity.'<sup>48</sup> While Abidin argues that a "raw aesthetic of an amateur"<sup>49</sup> would add a notion of 'authenticity' to shared content, media scholars Phoebe Mares, Sandra Banjac, and Folker Hanusch link this 'rawness' to the characteristic of transparency. In detail, they state that:

Transparency is yet another concept that is closely interlinked with authenticity (...) it is deliberately used to connect with others online and to increase perceived relatability by providing personal, sometimes uncomfortable information.<sup>50</sup>

Hereafter, sharing personal, sometimes uncomfortable details seems to be at the heart of transparency and simultaneously refers to a further marker: Intimacy. Namely, new media scholar Josie Reade identifies intimate and confessional insights and expressions of imperfection, negativity, and rawness as fostering online 'authenticity.'<sup>51</sup> As such, these 'honest' encounters would facilitate 'digital intimacies,' which "are socially and economically productive in that they facilitate a shared sense of belonging and connectedness."<sup>52</sup> While all these markers (spontaneity, consistency, truthfulness, rawness, transparency, and intimacy) allow for a broader frame of characteristics of online 'authenticity,' most scholars classify online 'authenticity' as a performative construction.

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<sup>45</sup>Jenny L. Davis, "Curation: A Theoretical Treatment," *Information, Communication, and Society* 20, no. 5 (2017): 776.

<sup>46</sup>Alice Marwick, "They're Really Profound Women, They're 'Entrepreneurs': Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging," *7<sup>th</sup> International AIII Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* 7 (2011): 7.

<sup>47</sup> Marwick, "They're Really Profound Women, They're 'Entrepreneurs': Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging," 7.

<sup>48</sup> Crystal Abidin, "#familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labor," *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 2 (2017): 7.

<sup>49</sup>Abidin, "#familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labor," 7.

<sup>50</sup> Mares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers' and Audiences' Perceptions on Instagram," 3.

<sup>51</sup>Reade, "Keeping it Raw on the 'Gram: Authenticity, Relatability and Digital Intimacy in Fitness Cultures on Instagram," 535.

<sup>52</sup>Reade, "Keeping it Raw on the 'Gram: Authenticity, Relatability and Digital Intimacy in Fitness Cultures on Instagram," 550.

Most prominently, Taylor argues social media ‘authenticity’ to be highly performative and established through the co-creation of users and their audiences.<sup>53</sup> In this sense, he argues that ‘authenticity’ should be understood as “a tool employed to achieve a certain aim that has a performative effect for both the creator and the audience receiving the content.”<sup>54</sup> In this regard, Marwick claims this aim to be the establishment of uniqueness by stating that “in online environments saturated with celebrity culture and marketing rhetoric, authenticity has a significant presence,” with ‘authenticity’ becoming a way for “individuals to differentiate themselves, not only from each other but from other forms of media.”<sup>55</sup> As she creates a direct connection between ‘authenticity’ and the establishment of uniqueness, scholars such as Sarah Banet Weiser and Andrew Potter indicate that ‘authenticity’ often points to a pre- or non-commercialized space.<sup>56</sup> As such, they claim how an impression of ‘the authentic’ may serve to situate oneself “in contradiction to crass excesses of commercial capitalism,” hinting at the strategic placement of ‘authenticity.’<sup>57</sup>

Building on Banet-Weiser, Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch claim that “with the increasing commercialization, authenticity has become the core narrative to overcome the perception of a mere-profit-orientation across all fields of cultural production.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, they identify ‘authenticity’ as a strategy to present genuineness and agree with Marwick, who also asserts that ‘authenticity’ is an ineffable value and a process that would demand consistent labor for achievement.<sup>59</sup> In this regard, digital media scholar Aaron Hess argues for online ‘authentic’ self-portrayals to entail an allocated notion, meaning that they result from a “discursive achievement,”<sup>60</sup> which will also be seen in *BeReal*. In approval, also information technology scholars Suvi Uski and Airi Lampinen argue that ‘authentic’ representations are positioned in the context of having to be framed as such by external forces, claiming that “in stark contrast

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<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Marwick, “They ‘re Really Profound Women, They’re ‘Entrepreneurs’: Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging,” 2.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 13.

Andrew Potter, *The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves* (Canada: McClelland & Stewart, 2011), 34.

<sup>57</sup> Marwick, “They ‘re Really Profound Women, They’re ‘Entrepreneurs’: Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging,” 2.

<sup>58</sup> Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, “The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers’ and Audiences’ Perceptions on Instagram,” 2.

<sup>59</sup> Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, “The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers’ and Audiences’ Perceptions on Instagram,” 1.

Marwick, “They ‘re Really Profound Women, They’re ‘Entrepreneurs’: Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging,” 7.

<sup>60</sup> Aaron Hess, “Selfies: The Selfie Assemblage,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1629.

to the way authenticity is popularly understood as something straightforwardly true and unintentional, our study makes apparent how authenticity is ascribed.”<sup>61</sup>

Collectively, these scholars neglect any assumptions of identifying a ‘real’ self behind online representations. Instead, ‘authenticity’ would be part of a “performative ecology” rather than a quality, as described by Abidin who detects the concept’s calculated use.<sup>62</sup> Building on these discussions, I approach ‘authenticity’ in social media as a construction and as highly performative, meaning that the concept must be understood as describing a fabricated impression for users that is based on specific markers of spontaneity, consistency, truthfulness, rawness, transparency, and intimacy, as identified in the academic debate.

### **‘Authentic Liveness’**

While there is a growing body of literature about ‘authenticity’ in relation to social media, there are rather few sources that discuss the construction of ‘authenticity’ as the major purpose for creating ‘liveness.’ However, several scholars have hinted at this conceptual connection or discussed it as a secondary element.

To start with, Philip Auslander has investigated to what extent ‘liveness’ plays into the construction of “rock authenticity.”<sup>63</sup> As such, he argues that the idea of an ‘authentic’ rock musician is culturally determined by conventionally shared markers, such as that ‘rockers’ have to perform ‘live’ to be labeled an ‘authentic’ rocker.<sup>64</sup> Hinting at the performative connection between ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity,’ media scholar Gunn Enli claims that audiences expect especially ‘live’ media, such as the news, to provide authentic and trustworthy information.<sup>65</sup> As such, she observes how the consensus that “the media are normatively supposed to provide the people with trustworthy, balanced, and neutral information about the world” creates a direct connection between ‘liveness’ and ideas of ‘authenticity.’<sup>66</sup> While she refers to audiences’ expectations of being confronted with trustworthy ‘live’ content, media scholar Michele White, in the same vein, identifies that “television and internet producers invoke liveness to suggest that their content is

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<sup>61</sup> Suvi Uski and Airi Lampinen, “Social Norms and Self-Presentation on Social Network Sites: Profile Work in Action,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 3 (2016): 461.

<sup>62</sup> Abidin, “#familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labor,” 91.

<sup>63</sup> Philip Auslander, “Seeing is Believing: Live Performance and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock Culture,” *Literature and Psychology* 44, no. 4 (1998): 123-154.

<sup>64</sup> Auslander, “Seeing is Believing: Live Performance and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock Culture,” 136.

<sup>65</sup> Gunn Enli, *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> Enli, *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality*, 3.

unmediated.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, she claims that the construction of ‘liveness’ makes users overlook the mediated nature of these platforms, which in turn facilitates ‘authenticity.’<sup>68</sup> While both scholars refer to the co-constitutional dynamic of ‘authenticity’ through ‘liveness,’ Van Es concludes that within ‘live’ media, and especially news broadcasting, “the live is used to frame the program as authentic and real” by facilitating “genuine experiences that viewers feel they are witness of.”<sup>69</sup>

As these scholars examine how ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity’ are interrelated through the audiences’ notion to believe ‘live’ media to be ‘authentic,’ also media scholar Ludmilla Lupinacci in her recently published PhD briefly touches upon the correlation of ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity,’ approaching this interplay from the perspective of trust.<sup>70</sup> She emphasizes how “the core of liveness” and its struggle for ‘the authentic’ “is in practice threatened by social media’s perceived partiality, deceit, and manipulation.”<sup>71</sup> As such, she highlights how the use of technological affordances to curate and edit social media content, as well as the practice of monetization, endangers the construction of ‘authenticity’ and ‘liveness.’ From this viewpoint, she enumerates several elements that may, however, establish this correspondence, stating that:

The practical association between the mediated ‘live’ and the ‘authentic,’ therefore, can be anchored in attributes such as transparency (the direct experience), seamlessness (the perfectly consistent experience, with no perceptible problems), truthfulness (the experience that is faithful to what it claims to be), and improvisation (the unplanned, and therefore unpredictable and open-ended experience).<sup>72</sup>

Therefrom, one can observe how Lupinacci, despite not examining this correlation in detail in her work, indicates elements of transparency, truthfulness, seamlessness, and improvisation to define the association between the terms ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity.’ Thus, her observations directly connect to how scholars Davis, Marwick, or Abidin define the construction of ‘authenticity’ in contemporary culture through indicators of spontaneity, consistency, transparency, or intimacy. Hence, this overlap demonstrates how deeply

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<sup>67</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Michele White, “Television and Internet Differences by Design: Rendering Liveness, Presence, and Lived Space,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 12, no.3 (2006): 341.

<sup>69</sup> Van Es, “Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live,” 1249.

Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ludmilla Lupinacci, “Live, Here and Now: Experiences of Immediate Connection through Habitual Social Media” (PhD, diss., The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2022).

<sup>71</sup> Lupinacci, “Live, Here and Now: Experiences of Immediate Connection through Habitual Social Media,” 192.

<sup>72</sup> Lupinacci, “Live, Here and Now: Experiences of Immediate Connection through Habitual Social Media,” 191.

interrelated the two conceptualizations are, with the 'live' and its claim of truthfulness intrinsically working with a claim for 'authenticity.'

Correspondingly, Van Es discusses different markers of 'liveness' and mentions 'authenticity' and participation as being two of them.<sup>73</sup> In this sense, she argues that "all these ideas are associated with the live and can be foregrounded depending on the particular constellation that is relevant in each case."<sup>74</sup> Basing my argument on the idea that different cases and periods construct specific constellations of 'liveness,' I – in contrast to the mentioned scholars who approach 'authenticity' as one of several aspects of 'liveness' or only briefly touch upon it – claim that the construction of 'authenticity' must be approached as the main purpose of 'liveness' in the case of *BeReal*. As such, I introduce 'authentic liveness' as a re-evaluation of the concept to highlight the interrelated nature of the 'live' and 'authenticity.' The conceptualization of 'authentic liveness' is thus defined as working both against the strategic curation of self-presentations through more 'authentic' social encounters built on transparency, intimacy, and spontaneity, as well as identified as the latest social media business strategy to highlight uniqueness next to other individuals and platforms.

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<sup>73</sup> Van Es, "Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live," 1249.

<sup>74</sup> Van Es, "Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live," 1249.



## 2.4 Analysis Method: The Domains of ‘Liveness’

To examine how social media construct specific forms of ‘liveness,’ Van Es suggests an interrelated method of analysis consisting of examining three different domains of constructing ‘liveness’: The platform’s *metatext*, *space of participation*, and *user responses*.<sup>75</sup> These domains would then allow reflecting on the “formative influence of institutions, technologies, and users on the live.”<sup>76</sup>

The first step includes the examination of what literary theorist Gérard Genette in 1991 introduced as “paratext,” namely features that accompany a text to make its meaning clear to its readers.<sup>77</sup> Since then, media and culture professor Jonathan Grey has revised this conceptualization for film and television analysis, claiming the “paratext” to be a form of media extension that creates meaning and establishes “relations to upcoming film and television shows.”<sup>78</sup> He claims that:

Paratexts tell us what to expect, and in doing so, they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us “into” the text, and they will provide the all-important early frameworks through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption.<sup>79</sup>

Building on this, Van Es, in her study of social media ‘liveness,’ advocates for examining discursive sites around the platform, such as its website, promotional material, and interviews with representatives “that can be analyzed to disclose how the makers/owners of the platform conceive of its liveness.”<sup>80</sup> These paratexts are collectively described as the platform’s *metatext* and are mainly texts published by the creators, makers, or owners of the platform. As such, this first analytical level serves to identify what these texts externally communicate about the meaning of the platform’s ‘liveness.’

In a second and main step, Van Es suggests examining the domain of the *space of participation*, investigating the participatory practices that specific media platforms offer their users and the “politics through which this space solidifies.”<sup>81</sup> The *space of participation* is formed by *techno-cultural, economic, and legal forces* that collectively shape the platform’s user practices.<sup>82</sup> Firstly, examining *techno-cultural forces* allows grasping how the user

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<sup>75</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Gérard Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 1 (Winter): 262.

<sup>78</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 28.

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>80</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 29.

<sup>81</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 29.

<sup>82</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 29.

interface shapes participation practices by investigating how the “affordances of the platform’s material assemblage (...) and software” elements of algorithms and protocols structure the platform.<sup>83</sup> Here, Van Es applies a data-driven approach and argues for focusing on software elements of algorithms and protocols, thereby solely investigating the *affordances* in a general sense. I am – in contrast – much more interested in investigating the surface level of the user interface instead of diving into the internal data-management practices. Thereby, I aim to understand how users are navigated via the interface and how specific *affordances* structure user participation to collectively establish an experience of ‘authentic liveness.’ This focus on *affordances* hence allows me to gain detailed insights into how the app addresses users, investigating the focal point of collusion between users, technology, and institution.

In doing so, I will supplement Van Es’ method through a detailed dissection of *affordances* that make a “normative claim” about the actions of an ideal user, according to media scholar Mel Stanfill’s *discursive interface analysis*.<sup>84</sup> In detail, Stanfill focuses on “the structuring ideals that position particular behavior as ‘correct’ or ‘normal’,” investigating the platform’s composition that produces norms about the “simplest” form of user responses, thus the “path of least resistance.”<sup>85</sup> While the actual user behavior may differ, this approach allows investigating how platforms aim to navigate users in accordance with the platform’s vision through three different forms of *affordances*.<sup>86</sup>

First, *functional affordances*, determine users’ options of action and limitations on the platform and “produce norms, as allowing this and not that implies that Users ought to do this and not that.”<sup>87</sup> Secondly, *cognitive affordances* focus on how descriptions or site taglines guide users in terms of what an interface allows them to do through an analysis of word choices. Lastly, *sensory affordances* refer to the aesthetic elements and design of visibility, legibility, and audibility that navigate users regarding relevance and attention.<sup>88</sup> While these *affordances* allow examining how a platform establishes ‘liveness,’ *economic and legal forces*

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<sup>83</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 30.

<sup>84</sup> Mel Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 7 (2015): 1059-1074.

<sup>85</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1060.

<sup>86</sup> It is important to state that Stanfill’s approach hence analyses how a platform aims to structure user behavior detached from the actual user practices. The analysis of *affordances* limits itself to how an interface constructs assumptions about an ideal user which needs to be distinguished from how a site may actually be used, meaning that it does not consider misconduct or deviant user behavior of ‘ignoring’ how a platform invites users to behave.

<sup>87</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1060.

The establishment of norms through the *functional affordances* is highly relevant for Stanfill’s approach. Namely, *functional affordances* are the basis for creating an interface structure that invites users to follow the path of participation that the platform aims for.

<sup>88</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1063-1064.

also contribute to this construction. Here, *economic forces* focus on the present business model and usage costs that users are confronted with and hence shape participation on a platform. *Legal forces* explore “the explicit rules concerning property, privacy, and acceptable behavior,” embedded in the present business structure and formulated in the *terms of use*. As such, these two forces allow the identification of how a platform’s economic-legal structure is interlinked with the intended user activity on its interface.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, Van Es suggests that “user responses (...) play a role in the construction of liveness” and may serve as a supplementary object of investigation, hence representing the third and smallest analytical step.<sup>90</sup> This final domain examines *user responses* as “instances of reflection” on how the present form of user agency “contributes to the meaning of ‘live,’ or (...) exposes how users understand the liveness proposed by the metatext.”<sup>91</sup> Essential to this is that these reflections do not serve to understand how users experience the media platform in general but to show how users understand the meaning of ‘liveness’ on the platform.

In accordance with these three analytical steps introduced by Van Es, I will examine how *BeReal* constructs ‘authentic liveness’ and how the entangled elements of institution, technology, and users form this contemporary constellation of ‘liveness.’ As such, the analysis will be guided by the following sub-questions:

- 1) In what way does the *metatext* frame ‘liveness’ in *BeReal*?
- 2) How is the *space of participation* structured to create ‘authenticity’ in relation to ‘liveness’?
- 3) In what way do users reflect on the construction of the ‘live’ in *BeReal*?

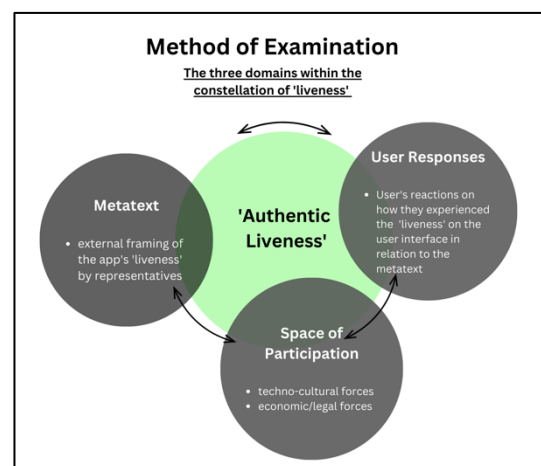


Figure 1: Visualization of Method

<sup>89</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 32-33.

<sup>90</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 33.

<sup>91</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 34.

## 2.5 Corpus and Gathering Methods

In this analysis, I first focus on *the app's metatext* and examine how *BeReal's* representatives frame the app and its 'authentic liveness.' Due to a lack of interviews by the founder and CEO Alexis Barreyat and his co-founder Kevin Perreau, as well as the shortage of extensive promotional material being part of the company's 'authentic' vision and 'anti-commercial' self-labeling, I have here chosen to focus on the following paratexts that *BeReal* published as a company or that Barreyat published himself: 1) the official website as the main source of information given by the company; 2) the official *Apple App Store* and *Google Play Store* Page as a guaranteed point of collusion for users; 3) Content posted by CEO Barreyat on his *LinkedIn* profile as the primary source for examining the creator's vision, next to his *Twitter* account.<sup>92</sup> I examine the collected texts through the lens of how they frame 'liveness' and look for intersecting structures of meaning-making to decode the company's vision. By doing so, I identify the repetitive patterns of the makers aiming for users to understand *BeReal's* 'authentic liveness' as being constructed through establishing transparency and intimacy between users.<sup>93</sup>

Next, the investigation of the *space of participation* represents the focal point of my analysis due to this analytical section concentrating on the platform itself. As such, I examine the present *techno-cultural forces* relevant to the construction of 'authentic liveness.'<sup>94</sup> I have decided to limit my analysis to the "my friends" user interface and the connected elements due to this being the primary point of reference for most users and the mode of sharing for which *BeReal* is popular. Hence, I will limit my analysis to this interface mode and will not consider the additional "discovery" or "memory" interface since these are not majorly contributing to the 'authentic liveness' that constitutes *BeReal's* uniqueness.<sup>95</sup> The analysis of *functional affordances* will hence mainly focus on the process of taking the *BeReal* as a unique precondition for participation on the platform, as well as investigate the comment and reaction functions that the app facilitates. To perform this examination, I position myself as a

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<sup>92</sup> I have decided to limit my analysis to *LinkedIn* instead of *Twitter* because the inclusion of *Twitter* would not add any new elements to the analysis of paratexts and would be too extensive for the scope of this thesis.

<sup>93</sup> These paratexts are all accessed through the safari browser of my personal laptop and collected via screenshots. A reflection on my gathering method can be found in the last paragraph of the method section.

<sup>94</sup> It must be noted that I will only consider aspects that are relevant for my argument and hence will neglect certain *affordances* that the *BeReal* interface offers. This does not mean that these elements are of no importance for the app or would counter my argument but rather that these are not primarily essential for the construction of 'authentic liveness.'

<sup>95</sup> This limitation results from the focus of this thesis on the construction of 'authentic liveness' that is especially present in the "my friends" interface mode with the app facilitating 'authentic encounters' between "friends." I am aware that the "discovery" mode may also imply a form of 'live' connection between users but would like to limit my analysis to the prior mode to allow for a detailed and all-embracing examination of it. A further reflection on this limitation can be found in the conclusion.

user, beginning with the analytical step of opening the app on my phone, which directly confronts users with the demand to post a *BeReal*. After investigating this precondition through the lens of how it establishes community-based intimacy, I observe the interface in detail to find out how the *functional affordances* create a feeling of ‘authenticity’ for users by guiding them through the interface.

In a second step, I examine *cognitive* and *sensory affordances* as two intertwined elements relevant to the constellation of ‘authentic liveness’ by analyzing how I, as a user, respond to these elements. The focus will be on *affordances* that contribute to the intersection of ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity,’ hence elements of word phrasings, page placements, description details, and design choices in push messages and on *BeReal’s* interface itself. Additionally, I will investigate the app’s *economic* and *legal forces* of claiming not to sell data to third parties but to offer a subscription-free, non-in-app purchase or advertisement-ruled system in relation to how this business model contributes to the construction of ‘authentic liveness.’ This examination will be done by examining *BeReal’s privacy policy* and *terms of use* published on *BeReal’s* website in relation to how the named resolutions contribute to an overall experience of ‘authenticity.’

Lastly, I briefly examine *user responses* to investigate how users comprehend the ‘liveness’ proposed by the *metatext* and *space of participation* to gain a deeper understanding of how users understand the connection between ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity’ in *BeReal*. These responses are collected in the form of direct reactions posted on the *Apple App Store* and *Google Play Store* sites since these posts provide an extensive corpus of user opinions and represent the official way of providing customer responses about apps. Due to many recent feedback posts being relatively short and lack in helpful information, I have decided to focus on posts of the year 2022 and 2023 that are marked as the ‘most helpful’ feedback by other users, meaning that other users rated these specific feedback posts as being the most useful.<sup>96</sup> Since there are, in total, 17 ‘most helpful’ posts to be found on the *Apple App Store* Site, I equally examine the 17 ‘most helpful’ user responses published on the *Google Play Store* in this timeframe to ensure an even impression of user opinions. After inspecting these 34 posts in relation to their meaningfulness in how users understand *BeReal’s* ‘liveness,’ I have decided to limit my analysis to 13 final posts that are expressive about users’ perception of the app’s

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<sup>96</sup> This means that these posts were repetitively marked as ‘really helpful’ by other users. As such, these posts are more visible than other feedback posts on the website and may have more weight in their relevance due to many users agreeing or taking the specific feedback into account. Moreover, these posts are more extensive than other short ratings, hence allowing to gain more detailed insights into the implied meaning of ‘liveness’ what makes them a good source of analysis.

'liveness.' The other 21 *user responses* instead focus on technical issues, personal suggestions, or general thoughts about the app detached from its 'liveness,' hence not serving the aim of this analysis. To detect how users understand *BeReal's* 'authentic liveness,' I compare the remaining 13 *user responses* and identify repetitive patterns of describing the 'live.'<sup>97</sup> By doing so, I identify the recurring motives of users praising the temporal and spontaneous nature of posting, the equal participation of all users, as well as the negative critique about common misbehavior of ignoring the inter-coordinated timeframe of posting.

For all analytical steps, I made use of my personal phone and laptop as gathering devices to collect the necessary data embodied by screenshots, meaning that I accessed *BeReal* through my personal account and searched the web via my *Safari* browser.<sup>98</sup> Thus, I am aware that the collected data and my analysis may be influenced by my previously established personal user data and the creation of user-specific search behavior within my browser. However, due to the overall research conditions in terms of dimensional and temporal limitations, the utilized gathering method must be viewed as sufficient for this master thesis. Especially in the sense of analyzing *BeReal's* user interface, the app offers the same *functional and cognitive-sensory affordances* to all users and merely differs in the specific content of posts determined by having 'different friends.' That is to say that I am not interested in individual user behavior on this platform but rather in how the platform is generally 'prescribed' to navigate an *ideal user*. As such, I – in line with Stanfill – argue that how the interface is "built reflects assumptions about what site visitors will do, which becomes a normative claim about what Users should do."<sup>99</sup> Thus, I will investigate *BeReal's* interface detached from individual content and possible deviant behavior, which justifies the chosen mode of data extraction through my personal devices. Namely, this analysis sets its focus on how the interface itself navigates *ideal user* participation and, collectively, with the *metatext* and *user responses*, constructs 'authentic liveness.'

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<sup>97</sup> All analyzed *user responses* can be found in the appendix. Here, I used different colors to mark similarities in user's understanding of 'liveness.' Grey for responses that are unusable due to referring to technical issues and personal suggestions for improvement and green for general positive feedback on the app that is however not primarily focusing on its 'liveness.' Next to that, the colors of blue, pink, and yellow mark the three relevant tendencies of how 'authentic liveness' is understood: 1) as being established through the spontaneous temporal connection of user; 2) through positioning users as being equal producers of 'liveness;' 3) Users critique deviant behavior of posting late as disturbing 'liveness' what in return displays the relevance of 'live' posting for creating 'authenticity.'

<sup>98</sup> The collected data in form of screenshots can be found in the list of illustrations and in the appendix.

<sup>99</sup> Stanfill, "The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design," 1062.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 . The Metatext – Framing of the App’s ‘Liveness’

After having reflected on the concepts, theories, and methods relevant to this thesis, I pursue by examining the app to grasp in what way *BeReal* strategically constructs ‘authentic liveness.’ As such, my first focus is set on the platform’s *metatext* and how these discursive sites and texts frame ‘liveness’ in *BeReal*. Overall, the analysis will show that the paratexts together repetitively point to two different but entangled attributes of ‘authenticity’ that stand at the app’s core and are established through utilizing the strategy of ‘liveness’: The vision of creating transparency and intimacy between users.

#### Transparency

Firstly, the official *BeReal* website gives evidence of how the company envisions the app and its meaning of ‘liveness’ in connection to transparency, which in the words of Maeres, Banjac, and Hanusch is “used to connect with others online and to increase perceived relatability.”<sup>100</sup> As seen on the website, *BeReal* uses one main slogan, which repeatedly comes up on multiple discursive sites, such as on the *Apple App Store* or *Google Play Store* page: “BeReal. Your Friends for Real.” Here, the double use of “real” is highly eye-catching, which seems almost repetitive in the context of such a short slogan.<sup>101</sup> As such, this iteration already externally influences users’ expectations and understanding of the app, creating a framework for highlighting that this app is unique since it depicts mediatized depictions of your friends that are “real,” equalizing the word with notions of accuracy and relatability, hence transparency.

Moreover, the humorous tone of the wordplay implies a form of irony, referring to the fact that this app “for Real” allows accurate content of your friends in contrast to other existing platforms. That is to say that this expression works with notions of ‘ironic surprise’ about the platform “for Real” being based on transparent media content. Thus, this slogan, as a basis, already makes a clear connection between transparency and *BeReal*, externally framing the app as allowing for ‘authentic’ and transparent encounters through the linguistic choice of including the phrase ‘real’ in the app’s name.

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<sup>100</sup>“Home,” *BeReal*, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://bere.al/en>.

Maeres, Banjac, and Hanusch, “The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers’ and Audiences’ Perceptions on Instagram,” 3.

<sup>101</sup> “Home,” *BeReal*.

Thus, the slogan strategically ‘ascribes’ ‘authenticity’ to the app, just like Uski and Lampinen define ‘authentic’ representations as having to be framed as such by external forces.<sup>102</sup> In this regard, the description of the app positioned on the website’s homepage transmits a similar message:

Every day at a different time, everyone is notified simultaneously to capture and share a Photo in 2 Minutes. A new and unique way to discover who your friends really are in their daily life.<sup>103</sup>

Here, especially wordings like “every day at a different time,” “simultaneously,” and “in 2 minutes” hint at this app to create a temporal and local ‘live’ connection between users that allows them to join a spontaneous online social sphere.<sup>104</sup> As such, this ‘liveness’ through its unpredictability would facilitate a “new and unique way to discover who your friends really are,”<sup>105</sup> implying that these encounters permit more refreshing and more ‘real’ impressions of your friends that are based on transparency about their daily activities. In doing so, these intentionally chosen phrasings collectively establish what Couldry describes as the “myth of us,” the tendency of platforms to be understood as ‘places of the social.’<sup>106</sup> More specifically, the myth claims that online social gatherings are positioned as a “natural form of collectivity” and as a neutral way of social exchange.<sup>107</sup> In this sense, the presented description situates the app in the same manner of allowing users to engage ‘live’ with others and to discover what users are doing from a transparent and accurate point of view. ‘Liveness’ is hence discussed as the technological element that allows users to participate in this social sphere, with *BeReal* presenting the new ‘place of the social.’

Meanwhile, the *Apple App Store* and the similarly structured *Google Play Store* mirror these ‘messages’ to users, giving detailed information about the app’s functions.<sup>108</sup> While several statements align with the mentioned ones from the website, the *App Stores’* descriptions moreover remark several “warnings” about the app that, in an again ironic tone, underline that the app is based on veracity and transparency that many users may not be used to.<sup>109</sup> A few of these “warnings” remark:

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<sup>102</sup>Uski, Lampinen, “Social Norms and Self-Presentation on Social Network Sites: Profile Work in Action,” 461.

<sup>103</sup>“Home,” *BeReal*.

<sup>104</sup>“Home,” *BeReal*.

<sup>105</sup>“Home,” *BeReal*.

<sup>106</sup>Nick Couldry, “The Myth of ‘Us’: Digital Networks, Political Change and the Production of Collectivity,” *Information Community & Society* 18, no. 6 (2014): 619.

<sup>107</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 20.

<sup>108</sup>Apple Inc, “Apple App Store,” *Apple*, Version 3.0 (1006.6.7), <https://www.apple.com/app-store/>, accessed on March 28, 2023.

Google, “Google Play Store,” *Google Play*, Version 4.0, <https://play.google.com/store/games?device=phone&gl=DE>, accessed on March 28, 2023.

<sup>109</sup> Apple Inc, “Apple App Store.”



BeReal is life, Real life, and this life is without filters; BeReal is your chance to show your friends who you really are, for once; BeReal won't make you famous. If you want to become an influencer you can stay on TikTok and Instagram; BeReal won't let you cheat, you can try and if you manage to do so, come work with us.<sup>110</sup>

As all these statements demonstrate, these “warnings” frame the app as being highly distinctive from other social networks, such as *Instagram* and *TikTok*, due to showing “real life,” detached from monetizing and curating your profile and content.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, the use of phrases like “won't let you cheat” or “show who you really are” create a clear vision of the platform's ‘live’ content as being fully transparent, with users not even having the chance to stage or curate their content and as phrased here “cheat” about their representation.<sup>112</sup>

Correspondingly to this implied message, creator Alexis Barreyat clearly expresses his concerns about the widespread monetization of social media and his counter-vision through *BeReal* in his 2020 shared *LinkedIn* post just before launching the app:

Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no followers, No ads, No filters, just what my Friends are doing, in the most authentic way possible. Give it a try, I'd love to hear your thoughts!<sup>113</sup>

As seen, Barreyat states that *BeReal* “is the first Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App”<sup>114</sup> and hence directly connects the ‘liveness’ created by *BeReal* to a notion of allowing for accuracy and transparency since users can not choose the time of posting. In detail, he highlights that the moment of posting is “uncontrollable,” thus un-staged, unprepared, and seemingly allowing for non-curated content being shared.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, he states that the utilized ‘liveness’ on *BeReal* serves as the “most authentic way possible,” again emphasizing that this app is highly distinctive to other social media in the sense of allowing for more transparency through “No ads, No filter,” just seeing “what my friends are doing.”<sup>116</sup> In this sense, his word

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<sup>110</sup> Apple Inc, “Apple App Store.”

<sup>111</sup> Apple Inc, “Apple App Store.”

<sup>112</sup> Apple Inc, “Apple App Store.”

It must be stated that it is indeed possible to cheat, which is, however, not the focus of my analysis since an *ideal user* would post according to the request. Nevertheless, I reflect on this possibility in the analysis section of the *user responses*.

<sup>113</sup> Alexis Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower,” *LinkedIn*, 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexisbarreyat/recent-activity/shares/>.

<sup>114</sup> Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower.”

<sup>115</sup> Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower.”

<sup>116</sup> Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower.”

choice is highly intentional and strategically chosen, again serving to guide users' perception of the app as being accurate in its content-sharing practices.

In relation to online self-presentations, scholars Uski and Lampinen identify such forms of guiding users' reading of one's content as *Profile Work*, described as the idea that users strategically "make many choices to manage how they are perceived" and how they aim others to understand their identity.<sup>117</sup> In this regard, they declare "*presentation of authenticity* as the main goal of profile work."<sup>118</sup> Similarly to how they identify social media users to assign 'authenticity' to themselves, Barreyat works with the technique of *profile work* to frame his app as "the most authentic" app on the market, establishing authenticity as the angle through which users should perceive *BeReal*.<sup>119</sup> While he stresses the implied patterns of accuracy and transparency through the app's strategy of 'live' posting, one can identify how his statement and also several other paratexts simultaneously refer to *BeReal* as creating a unique form of intimacy through establishing transparent 'live' encounters between users.

## Intimacy

Namely, the pattern of repetitively stressing the created intimacy and closeness between users is especially present in the website's vision statement, which elaborates on the beliefs and aims of *BeReal*.<sup>120</sup>

### **What do we believe in?**

#### **building a social network that brings people closer together.**

- We are building the first social network where people spontaneously share their real life
- Every day at a different time, everyone in the community is notified simultaneously to capture and share a photo in 2 minutes
- No filters. No followers. Just friends, sharing with each other
- On *BeReal*, you discover your friends' real lives and get closer to them

Figure 2: *BeReal's* Vision Statement

As seen in this excerpt, the idea of uniting users in more intimate manners stands at the heart of the company's mission of "building a social network that brings people closer together."<sup>121</sup> This would be established by being the "first social network where people spontaneously share their real life."<sup>122</sup> There are "No filters. No followers. Just friends, sharing with each

<sup>117</sup> Uski, Lampinen, "Social Norms and Self-Presentation on Social Network Sites: Profile Work in Action," 450.

<sup>118</sup> Uski, Lampinen, "Social Norms and Self-Presentation on Social Network Sites: Profile Work in Action," 461.

<sup>119</sup> Barreyat, "Stoked to finally launch *BeReal*, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower."

<sup>120</sup> "Jobs," *BeReal*.

<sup>121</sup> "Jobs," *BeReal*.

<sup>122</sup> "Jobs," *BeReal*.

other,” an app that allows users to ‘get close’ to others by introducing a new and unique social sphere.<sup>123</sup> Hence, one can identify how the idea of intimacy between users is highly relevant and established through full transparency and the restriction to not use filters or choose the time of posting. However, while the app may currently be unique due to its simplicity next to other platforms, its labeling of introducing a transparent and intimate communal circle is a long-established social media technique, as identified by Van Dijck. She states that:

The rhetoric of (...) openness was supposedly rooted in and certainly inspired by the rhetoric of community-based online sociality, which flourished during the first six years of the new millennium. Most of these online groups, though, preferred to conduct their activities in a noncommercial, public space where they could communicate free of government or market constraints. When corporations took over online platforms, they were eager to co-opt the rhetoric.<sup>124</sup>

As Van Dijck demonstrates, the “rhetoric of community-based online sociality,” and the establishment of noncommercial spaces to create intimate spheres is not a new phenomenon.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, due to *BeReal* being launched in 2020 with monetization practices being the norm on popular platforms, such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, or *TikTok*, its simplicity of again reinventing a non-commercial space is indeed unique, making its claim of establishing intimacy even stronger. As such, the company highlights this uniqueness and positions ‘liveness,’ created through spontaneous notifications and simultaneous posting of users, as well as the inability to edit, as the key element for this establishment of more intimacy. *BeReal*’s vision statement hence situates ‘liveness’ as the essential point of differentiation from other platforms by highlighting the construction of an intimate social sphere.

Furthermore, it is eye-catching that both the website and the app stores’ pages use colloquial language for descriptions and the vision statement with an easily understandable word choice, abbreviations, direct address of readers, and humorous side facts.<sup>126</sup> Examples of this from the app stores’ “warnings” are: “BeReal doesn’t care if you have millions of followers or if you’re verified” or “BeReal is pronounced ‘BiRil’, not bereale, Bèreol.”<sup>127</sup> As such, it can be argued that this language style establishes a further level of intimacy by confronting users with an author who seemingly does not hide between staged formal

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<sup>123</sup>“Jobs,” *BeReal*.

<sup>124</sup>Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 15.

<sup>125</sup> Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 15.

<sup>126</sup>Apple Inc, “Apple App Store.”

Google, “Google Play Store.”

<sup>127</sup>Apple Inc, “Apple App Store.”

language and the aim of appearing like a ‘professional’ app inventor. Instead, users are addressed in a friend-like, intimate, and seemingly ‘honest’ way, transferring the creators’ vision of establishing intimacy, transparency, and thus ‘authenticity’ through ‘liveness’ into the app’s paratexts. In this line of thought, especially the ironic tone of terms like ‘warnings’ or “show your friends who you really are, for once,” indirectly critiques how most contemporary social media use is standardized through curation, editing, and ‘cheating.’<sup>128</sup>

Similarly, also Barreyat makes use of the same casual style of language within his *LinkedIn* post to create an honest and intimate framework for users.<sup>129</sup> He states that “after being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own.”<sup>130</sup> By giving such detailed insights into his thoughts and even addressing users in a friend-like manner by remarking, “I’d love to hear your thoughts,” he facilitates an intimate and close relationship with users, seemingly caring about their opinions.<sup>131</sup> Hence, this technique reflects what scholar Reade describes as ‘digital intimacy,’ which facilitates “a shared sense of belonging and connectedness.”<sup>132</sup> While Reade also highlights the economic advantage of this strategy, one can observe how Barreyat makes use of the same notion and positions the app as being highly attractive for users through its intimate social encounters: The colloquial and ‘honest’ phrasing stresses the unique intimacy and closeness between users rendered possible through the app and its ‘liveness.’

Collectively, the *metatext* generates a framework for users to understand *BeReal*’s ‘liveness’ as the key element for the establishment of ‘authenticity.’ In relation to this, Van Es states that it is especially relevant to investigate the repetition across these paratexts, “as this points to a consistency in ideas about what is ‘live’ about a particular platform.”<sup>133</sup> In this sense, decoding the *metatext* has identified that the two characteristics of ‘authenticity,’ transparency, and intimacy serve as repetitive motives within the app’s paratexts. These motives are constantly connected to *BeReal* and externally position *BeReal*’s ‘liveness’ as the essential factor for facilitating ‘authentic’ encounters between users, in the words of Uski and Lampinen “ascribing” ‘authenticity’ to the app by highlighting its ‘liveness.’<sup>134</sup> This is reached

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<sup>128</sup> Apple Inc, “Apple App Store.”

<sup>129</sup> Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower.”

<sup>130</sup> Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower.”

<sup>131</sup> Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower.”

<sup>132</sup> Reade, “Keeping it Raw on the ‘Gram: Authenticity, Relatability and Digital Intimacy in Fitness Cultures on Instagram,” 550.

<sup>133</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 61.

<sup>134</sup> Uski, Lampinen, “Social Norms and Self-Presentation on Social Network Sites: Profile Work in Action,” 461.

through word choices of ‘close,’ ‘real,’ or ‘authentic,’ the contrasting of the app with other social media to highlight its uniqueness of spontaneous posting and the use of colloquial language and irony to create genuineness and closeness.

As such, the *metatext* implicitly invites users to reflect on the values of ‘authenticity’ being lost in today’s social media sphere and promises to offer users a way out of this by regularly using the app and its technique of ‘authentic liveness.’ Hence, this offer connects to what Van Es describes as the process of institutionalization, defined as “becoming part of a relatively stable cluster of rules, resources, and social relations.”<sup>135</sup> Namely, providing this app to users to download on the *Apple App Store* and *Google Play Store* and externally framing its meaning is a step towards this described institutionalization, meaning the process of introducing ‘authentic liveness’ in a standardized form for regular usage.<sup>136</sup> What Van Es defines as “becoming part of a relatively stable cluster”<sup>137</sup> thus solely increases the implied message of the analyzed *paratext*: The app questions the lack of ‘authenticity’ in today’s social media, demanding for more transparent and intimate online encounters between users with *BeReal* and its institutionalized offer of ‘liveness’ being framed as the key for overcoming this shortage.<sup>138</sup>

While the investigation of *BeReal’s metatext* displayed how the app’s vision of ‘liveness’ is externally framed by the company, the examination of its user interface will exhibit how the technology navigates users on the interface to construct ‘authentic liveness.’

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<sup>135</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 61.

<sup>136</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 61.

<sup>137</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 61.

<sup>138</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 61.

## 3.2 The Space of Participation

### 3.2.1 Techno-Cultural Forces on the User Interface

After having defined the external framing process of *BeReal* by its creators, this section examines the relevant internal structures and design of the app's "my friends" interface to detect how 'authentic liveness' is established on the level of technology.<sup>139</sup> In this sense, Van Es argues that affordances arise from "the object's material properties and its design," hence shaping participation on platforms.<sup>140</sup> Equally, Stanfill defines affordances as allowing to map specific "functionalities, menu options, and page layouts" to identify the structures at work within them that establish common sense about what users do and should do.<sup>141</sup> *Functional affordances* are the first subject of examination.

#### 3.2.1.1 Functional Affordances

##### Posting as a Precondition

To begin, users automatically find themselves on the *BeReal* "my friends" interface page when opening the app.<sup>142</sup> Users can see what their friends have posted and scroll through the posted *BeReals*. However, when not having posted a *BeReal* yet since the newest request, the app blurs all already posted *BeReal*'s of friends, prohibiting users to see other posts before having contributed to the posting process.

This first limitation of functionalities based on the enabling factor of posting serves as one of the major techniques of navigation: Without users sharing content themselves, they are excluded from the online interaction and social sphere that is created on the platform, making the app unserviceable for them. Here, one can identify the first level of user guidance that is created by the *functional* affordances. The app is structured to create a form of closeness and inclusive community feeling between users through this technological precondition. Thus, the app, as proposed by the *metatext*, works with what Van Dijck has identified as the "rhetoric of community-based online sociality," highlighting the importance of previous phenomenological approaches to the 'live.'<sup>143</sup> Namely, she identifies how companies like "to present themselves as pioneers of a joint public-private endeavor,"

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<sup>139</sup> Barreyat, and Perreau, "BeReal."

<sup>140</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 31.

<sup>141</sup> Stanfill, "The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design," 1059.

<sup>142</sup> Barreyat, and Perreau, "BeReal."

<sup>143</sup> Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 15.

providing exclusive access to a social sphere.<sup>144</sup> While she thus hints at platforms targeting users through the construction of an online social community that is only accessible through the use of the provided service, *BeReal* works with a similar strategy and establishes a private social sphere that only embraces users that are willing to share their daily life with others. Hence, the functional requirement of each user having to post a *BeReal* not only establishes “community-based online sociality”<sup>145</sup> but also shapes a form of privacy based on “digital intimacy,” as phrased by Reade.<sup>146</sup>

To create this ‘digital intimacy,’ *BeReal* goes a step further than other platforms and positions O’Reilly’s conceptualization of the “natural architecture of participation” and the “build-in ethic of cooperation” at the heart of its construction, even exaggerating the notion of cooperation in its simplicity.<sup>147</sup> Namely, while also social media sites like *Instagram* and *TikTok* construct an online sphere with user-generated content being at the core of their ethic, *BeReal* positions each user to have the exact same abilities of usage: They must contribute to the social exchange as a ‘natural act’ of co-creation with each user only being limited to post one *BeReal* a day. As such, *BeReal* counters the commercialized, curated environment of many contemporary platforms that create an unequal distribution of user content that distorts the idea of equal co-creation. In this sense, marketing and media scholars Alice Audrezet, Gwarlann de Kervilier, and Julie Guidry Moulard state:

Social media has led online user-generated content to become a prevalent consumer practice. (...) Over time, some contributors gain extended competencies in creating sophisticated content in the form of stories, videos, and visuals. Given the internet’s scalability and speed of diffusion, these contributors may rapidly attract a mass audience and attain fame through the accumulation of cultural capital.<sup>148</sup>

Thus, they identify the rapid increase of unequal user participation with some contributors reaching mass audiences, while others stay quiet and do not extensively shape the social sphere. *BeReal* instead bases its technological functionalities on going back to the roots and understanding co-creation from its

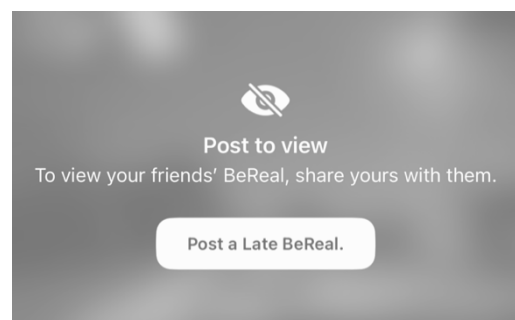


Figure 3: The blurred interface

<sup>144</sup>Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 15.

<sup>145</sup>Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 15.

<sup>146</sup>Reade, “Keeping it Raw on the ‘Gram: Authenticity, Relatability and Digital Intimacy in Fitness Cultures on Instagram,” 550.

<sup>147</sup>O’Reilly, “What is Web 2.0? Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software,” 38.

<sup>148</sup>Alice Audrezet, Gwarlann De Kervilier, and Julie Guidry Moulard, “Authenticity under Threat: When Social Media Influencers need to go Beyond Self-Presentation,” *Journal of Business Research* 117 (2020): 557.

simple original meaning: Users equally co-create the social space. Hence, the app establishes a unique, community-based ‘digital intimacy’ between users that distinguishes it from other current social media by positioning equal participation as its core. While this created community feeling generates intimacy and connectivity as a first instance of allowing for a space for more ‘authenticity,’ several *functional affordances* in relation to the creation of the *BeReal* transmit this intimate and ‘authentic’ feeling onto the construction of ‘live’ interactions between users.

### **Taking the *BeReal* itself**

Diving into the functional aspects of creating a *BeReal*, users are confronted with several operational conditions and limitations that highly differ from other platforms: The unpredictable request for posting and the regulation of only posting once, the two-minute time frame for its creation, the double camera-perspective, as well as the inability for editing or using filters. To examine how these functional elements contribute to the creation of ‘authentic liveness,’ it is necessary to decode their relation to the ‘live.’

Firstly, users are confronted with the functional demand of a once-a-day send request to post their *BeReal*, which implies ideas of spontaneity and unpredictability since this request is positioned in an unknown timeframe that varies each day and is sent to users located in the same time zone isochronally.<sup>149</sup> To be specific, this call for posting is portrayed by a push notification stating, “Time to BeReal.” Users then officially have a two-minute timeframe for creating their *BeReal*, and in the intentions of the app, they should aim for posting their *BeReal* within this frame. Otherwise, their post will be marked as ‘late.’<sup>150</sup> Moreover, the post will be visible for other users until the next day’s request, hence displayed for roughly one day depending on the timing of the following push message. As described, users are thus confronted with an ‘uncontrollable’ nature of posting that prevents practices of proper preparation or staging, causing the post to entail a notion of unprofessionalism. In this sense, Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch argue that general criteria for ‘authentic’ images shared online are “an apparent effortless spontaneity and amateurism.”<sup>151</sup> Similarly, Abidin argues that the spontaneity of posting is “a practice that embraces the “raw aesthetic of an amateur (...) to be perceived authentic and “anti-professional,” calling such techniques “calibrated

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<sup>149</sup>*BeReal* makes use of four time zones: America, Europe, West Asia, and East Asia with each time zone having a different and adapted moment of sending out the notifications. If a user has friends from other parts of the world, the posting moment may differ.

<sup>150</sup>In line with examining how the app guides the *ideal user*, users should aim for posting directly after receiving the request.

<sup>151</sup>Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers' and Audiences' Perceptions on Instagram," 3.



amateurism.”<sup>152</sup> While both statements claim that the spontaneous and amateurish nature of posts is essential for creating a feeling of ‘authenticity,’ one can identify how *BeReal* uses these characteristics as the basis for structuring its *functional affordances*: The uncontrollability of the time of posting is ultimately interlinked with the construction of ‘authentic’ content through only allowing the production of spontaneous and ‘unprofessional’ posts.

However, to establish this increased amateurish and ‘authentic’ impression of posts, ‘liveness’ is essential. By collectively requesting all users to post a *BeReal* around the same time, the app constructs a ‘live’ connection between users that is highly entangled with notions of spontaneity. With reference to television, Van Es argues that “by focusing on the same content simultaneously, (...) parties can construct a shared frame of reference” that ultimately establishes a feeling of the ‘live.’<sup>153</sup> When applying her observation to social media, one can argue that *BeReal* facilitates this “shared frame of reference” by unforeseeably demanding users to simultaneously post a *BeReal* so that they have access to the same content. Thus, it becomes evident how the ontological approach to ‘liveness’ with a focus on the technology is deeply interlinked with a social dimension of connectivity: The technology with the “medium’s capacity to provide simultaneity between the time of production and that of transmission and viewing”<sup>154</sup> of content is the main force allowing users to connect ‘live’ with each other in a social experience. As such, it becomes clear how *BeReal* constructs ‘authentic liveness’ through the interplay of technology and users.

In this regard, also the daily updating of posts and limited timeframe for accessing posts of others contribute to the construction of ‘liveness’ as this causes what Heath and Skirrow define as “a permanently *alive* view on the world.”<sup>155</sup> Each day, users spontaneously share ‘live’ insights about their activities, with the content’s production, distribution, and reception being connected in parallel within the time span of one day. Hence, this ‘live’ updating increases the temporal nature of posts, highlighting their transience and ‘liveness,’ which ultimately contributes to the overall construction of ‘authentic liveness.’

Moreover, the app’s *functional affordance* of only allowing to take photos within the app and thereby automatically take a picture of the front- and back camera is essential for this construction. Namely, the app’s *BeReal* is constructed through an entangled double

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<sup>152</sup>Crystal Abidin, „#familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labour,” *Social Media+ Society* (UK: Sage Pup, 2017), 12.

<sup>153</sup>Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 40.

<sup>154</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 7.

<sup>155</sup>Heath, Skirrow, “Television: A World in Action,” 54.

perspective obliging users to take a selfie as well as a photo of their surroundings. Thus, users are confronted with having to share more of the situation they find themselves in, as – in contrast – seen on other platforms that only allow for one perspective to be posted in a single recording. Hence, solely this functional element implies a form of more transparency and accuracy about the ‘live’ situation users are situated in, preventing to intentionally leave out aspects of ones surrounding.<sup>156</sup>

In this regard, especially the demand for using one’s front camera to create a selfie is significant. Taylor argues that it is “difficult to discuss self-representation (and authenticity) without including reference to selfie culture, which contains within it a tension between what may be understood to be authentic and the staged nature of the image.”<sup>157</sup> In a similar manner, Hess also discusses this conflict, arguing that “selfies are staged performances, yet they also invite users to state that they indeed were at that vacation spot, ran into that celebrity, or lost that weight,”<sup>158</sup> thus referring to selfies being temporal in their nature. While



Figure 4: A BeReal

Hess identifies factors of temporality and veracity being present in the selfie construction, Taylor goes a step further and argues that selfies entail a “simultaneous networked and ephemeral nature of the image, meant for instantaneous consumption by its audience.”<sup>159</sup> As such, he argues that selfies entail a certain ‘liveness,’ “that is meant to be considered as immediately as it is posted,”<sup>160</sup> thus connecting selfies to impressions of the ‘live’ due to their temporality.

Equally, *BeReal* makes use of this entailed notion of ‘liveness’ through the demanded selfie perspective, asking other users to consider the creator of the *BeReal* ‘live’ at this moment of time, in that specific spatial and temporal context. In line with Hess’ argument, *BeReal* can be understood as facilitating a notion of veracity and accuracy due to demonstrating the ‘live’ presence of someone in a specific context, creating ‘authentic

<sup>156</sup> On *Instagram* one can observe a similar trend towards more transparency and accuracy of posts, with users posting two pictures within a split screen post. Like the *BeReal*, the photos should be more ‘authentic’ and represent the contrast between the curated *Instagram* post, and the accurate situation of the photo.

<sup>157</sup>Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 57.

<sup>158</sup>Hess, “Selfies: The Selfie Assemblage,” 1632.

<sup>159</sup>Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 61.

<sup>160</sup>Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 58.

liveness' through a temporal proof of presence. Users are drawn into the mediated framework, facilitating 'instantaneous consumption' and a 'live' impression of individuals' depictions. As such, the selfie post of the *BeReal* does not have a sense of permanence but as phrased by Taylor, "is fast and kinesthetic, contributing to a fuller picture of the narrative,"<sup>161</sup> meaning that it allows for a 'live' depiction of the presented being in a particular moment.

On top of that, there is one further functional limitation of *affordances* during the post- and especially selfie creation that is relevant for the construction of 'authentic liveness': The lack of filter or editing options. Namely, users are not offered to edit their posts, nor can they add filters, choose a specific frame, or retouch their content in any way. The only agency users possess in manipulating their content is to retake the *BeReal* during the two-minute time frame, which, however, will be visible for other users to see.

In this sense, Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch claim that "transparency is yet another concept that is closely interlinked with authenticity and is also strategically employed (...) to increase perceived relatability."<sup>162</sup> Moreover, they identify the overuse of editing options and filters as "rendering the image inauthentic,"<sup>163</sup> while Reade identifies that portraying physical imperfections instead of heteronormative beauty standards is admired as authentic."<sup>164</sup> Correspondingly, *BeReal* utilizes the prohibition of editing options to facilitate a feeling of genuine encounters between users, demanding them to share raw, personal footage of their daily lives without 'hiding' behind edited and curated posts. Moreover, even when deciding to retake the *BeReal*, the number of retakes will be transparently shared, aligning with "sharing uncomfortable information," as described by Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch.<sup>165</sup>

In total, the stated *functional affordances* of the process of taking the *BeReal* and its positioning as a precondition for the app's use hence combine ideas of intimacy, spontaneity, and transparency with the app's 'live' sphere to create 'authentic liveness.'

## Reaction Functions

Next to the posting process, the interface itself offers *functional affordances* that connect 'liveness' to 'authenticity' that I would like to touch upon. Firstly, users can react to other posts

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<sup>161</sup> Taylor, *Authenticity As Performativity on Social Media*, 61.

<sup>162</sup> Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers' and Audiences' Perceptions on Instagram," 3.

<sup>163</sup> Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers' and Audiences' Perceptions on Instagram," 3.

<sup>164</sup> Reade, "Keeping it Raw on the 'Gram: Authenticity, Relatability and Digital Intimacy in Fitness Cultures on Instagram," 537.

<sup>165</sup> Maares, Banjac, and Hanusch, "The Labour of Visual Authenticity on Social Media: Exploring Producers' and Audiences' Perceptions on Instagram," 3.

with comments and *RealMojis*, which are small selfies of oneself that express a specific mood or facial mimic. These can be pre-shots or also a 'live' selfie of the moment of users reacting to a post. While the comment function may primarily be a technique for connectivity and interchange, as also seen on other platforms, the 'live' *RealMojis* are, however, a unique technique of adding a further element of 'authentic liveness' to the app. Equally to the actual *BeReal*, users can take an 'unedited' selfie that is posted at the exact time of users' reaction to a post. As such, one can identify the same strategy of instantaneous sharing and consumption as also examined in the *BeReal* itself. Namely, this interchange of communicating through unedited photos almost establishes a framework of 'face-to-face' communication by reacting to a selfie with a selfie. In this sense, media and film scholar Andrew Tolson examined platforms such as *YouTube*, arguing that "where extensive use is made of the facility to post text comments on vlogs, it has been suggested that such activities reproduce the feel of 'face-to-face communication.'"<sup>166</sup> Based on such activities, he states that such user-generated online content and its 'freshness' and 'spontaneity' offer a new form of 'authenticity' in mediated communication."<sup>167</sup> *BeReal* – I argue – goes even further than this and recreates 'unfiltered' face-to-face communication by allowing users to respond 'live' to the selfies of others with a selfie. By doing so, the app imitates the idea of 'real' face-to-face conversations as precisely as a mediated photo-sharing app could, thus increasing the impression of a genuine and accurate social interchange between users.

In connection to this, it must be stated that the *functional affordances* of constant notifications and push messages informing users about the uploading of a friend's *BeReal*, comments or *RealMoji*-reactions are essential for creating 'liveness' and the immediacy of such increased 'authentic' encounters. These allow users to have 'live' updates of interactions on the app, creating the basis for a temporal connection between users. As such, these updates are necessary to facilitate 'authentic liveness' by portraying the technological real-time 'courier' of content. While also these push notifications are hence important for the constellation of 'authentic liveness,' the platform's *cognitive* and *sensory affordances* represent further influential components within the present construction.

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<sup>166</sup> Andrew Tolson, "A New Authenticity? Communicative Practices on YouTube," *Critical Discourse Studies* 4, no.4 (2010): 277.

<sup>167</sup> Tolson, "A New Authenticity? Communicative Practices on YouTube," 277.

### 3.2.1.2 Cognitive and Sensory Affordances

Stanfill argues that *cognitive affordances* “facilitate processing information and are therefore closely tied to the social act of meaning-making.”<sup>168</sup> Examples of “naming, labeling, and/or site taglines and self-descriptions” on interfaces hence always emphasize a specific connotation.<sup>169</sup> As such, specific word choices highly matter “as these statements define what the User does by selecting that feature or option.”<sup>170</sup> *Sensory affordances*, in addition, allow for an aesthetic analysis of interfaces, referring to the use of color, fonts, legibility, or page placements that entail an implicit meaning.<sup>171</sup>

*BeReal’s* “my friends” interface and its push messages, work with these two types of *affordances* to create ‘authentic liveness.’ First, one can identify one central phrasing and design choice at the hand of the logo and name of the app itself: *BeReal*. Users are confronted with a simple combination of two words: be and real. There is no hyperbolic or excessive branding included in the app’s name nor a humorous neologism of two unrelated phrasings. The name is as simple as its message may be: Be real, be transparent, and take no effort to pretend to be any different.

While this *cognitive affordance* hence creates a claim of accuracy, the sensory design choice of black and white colors, as well as the clean and modern font choice of ‘Genera Grotesk Heavy,’ strengthen this established impression. Similar to the distribution of black and white films before the introduction of color negatives in the 1940s, these colors facilitate a notion of going back to the origin, before the introduction of shrill, bright colors, filters, and editing within media. In this sense, marketing scholar Hyojin Lee et al. argue that “color has become mainstream in all forms of media in the twenty-first century, making it rare to observe any content presented in black-and-white (BW) format.”<sup>172</sup> While they hence highlight the uniqueness of black and white color use in an environment that is packed with ‘attention seeking’ colors, one can identify how *BeReal* works with this implied connotation and instead demonstrates its uniqueness and vision of ‘authentic’ online encounters at the hand of the chosen color: A basic black and white logo that almost appears organic by distancing itself from overstimulation and a ‘too colorful’ design. Equally, the app’s interface is constructed

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<sup>168</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1063.

<sup>169</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1063.

<sup>170</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1063.

<sup>171</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1064.

<sup>172</sup> Hyojin Lee et al., “Monochrome Forests and Colorful Trees: The Effect of Black-and-White Versus Color Imagery on Construal Level.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 41, no. 4 (2014): 1015.

around this absence of other colors, with black and white portraying the main color scheme within the interface.

When opening the “my friends” interface, one can moreover observe how the logo “BeReal” is placed at the mid-top of the interface, hence immediately visible for all users that open the app.<sup>173</sup> In this regard, Stanfill argues that “page placement is also important: appearing at the top or left makes something more visible (...) than being lower or on the right.”<sup>174</sup> They furthermore state that “what is ‘below the fold’ – what cannot be seen when an interface loads without scrolling – is easily overlooked; reversing this statement, features ‘above the fold’ acquire more visibility and weight by that placement.”<sup>175</sup> Transferring their observations to apps, *BeReal* intentionally places its logo and vision of users being ‘real’ in the sense of being transparent at the top of the interface, functioning as a constant reminder for users when entering the platform.

Similarly, the interface description of “my friends” is placed directly beneath the logo, solely in a smaller font size. Consequently, this description is also positioned “above the fold,” underlining the relevance of posting since it allows social interaction with your ‘friends.’<sup>176</sup> In terms of *cognitive affordances*, the word choice of the possessive pronoun ‘my’ and the noun ‘friends’ are furthermore significant. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a ‘friend’ as “a person whom you know well and whom you like a lot, but who is usually not a member of your family.”<sup>177</sup> While this word thus implies a personal attachment to the addressed subjects, the pronoun ‘my’ creates a direct connection between an object to the self and a feeling of belonging. However, the word ‘friend’ has been subject to an extensive row of decontextualizing within social media, with several platforms, such as *Facebook*, entitling all contacts of users as ‘friends.’<sup>178</sup> Even though the phrase may have thus experienced a degrading in its initial strength of meaning, I still argue that its initial notion of creating closeness to others is embedded in its connotation. Therefore, the terms ‘my’ and ‘friends’ – in contrast to the exemplary word choice of ‘my contacts’ – create a personal and intimate relationship between users on the app’s interface. As such, this description creates an intrinsic social space of connectivity where users can show their ‘authentic’ selves, just as they would with close friends.

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<sup>173</sup>Barreyat, and Perreau, “BeReal.”

<sup>174</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1064.

<sup>175</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1064.

<sup>176</sup> Stanfill, “The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms through Web Design,” 1064.

<sup>177</sup> “Friend,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed on March 28, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/friend>.

<sup>178</sup> Mark Zuckerberg, “Facebook,” *Apple App Store*, Version 407.1, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/facebook/id284882215>.

While the mentioned *cognitive* and *sensory affordances* stress the unedited, intimate, and thus ‘authentic’ nature of the interface, other elements display the interconnectedness of ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity’ within the app. Here, as already hinted at in *the functional affordances’* examination, the push messages are particularly relevant. Users receive the following message once a day:

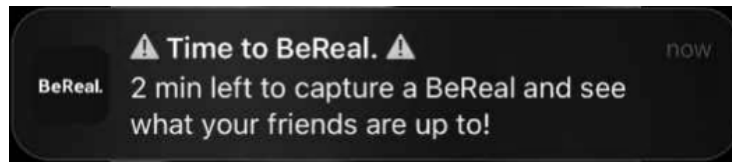


Figure 5: BeReal's Push Notifications

In terms of *cognitive affordances*, users are thereby confronted with several linguistic phrasings that establish a sense of urgency and the necessity for immediate posting: “Now,” “Time to BeReal,” and “2 min left.”<sup>179</sup> All these phrasings imply a call for a direct and prompt action of users, almost pressuring users to ‘leave everything behind’ and post their *BeReal* in the two-minute time frame that is ‘seemingly’ given. While the actual functional possibilities for taking the *BeReal* may differ when users do not perform as the *ideal user*, one can recognize how these stylistic devices aim to provoke correct user activity by establishing a framework of ‘liveness.’ In this sense, Bourdon argues, from a phenomenological standpoint, that humans possess a “need to connect oneself with others, to the world’s events.”<sup>180</sup> Building on this, Van Es claims that live media make use of such requisitions and “all draw on configurations of real-time and sociality to establish their value.”<sup>181</sup> Following, she argues that “what all live media share is that that they establish that something needs to be attended to now rather than later because it is important for us as members of society.”<sup>182</sup> In accordance with these statements, *BeReal* creates this urgency for participating on the platform by cognitively demanding users to enter a created social sphere that is situated in real-time and can only be joined when reacting isochronally.

In this sense, also the *sensory affordances* of displaying yellow attention signs within the push messages, as well as the use of exclamation marks, underline this urgency for posting and demonstrate the social relevance of participation to users. ‘Liveness’ is thus again positioned as the key element for creating social ‘authenticity’ and connectivity on the app.

On top of that, also the description tags of posted *BeReals* are essential factors for the

<sup>179</sup>Barreyat, and Perreau, “BeReal.”

<sup>180</sup>Bourdon, “Live Television is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise,” 193.

<sup>181</sup>Van Es, “Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live,” 1249.

<sup>182</sup>Van Es, “Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live,” 1249.

construction of 'liveness' on the platform.<sup>183</sup> Namely, users can see the exact time of posting when others shared their *BeReal* within the two minutes timespan, hence creating a shared timeframe of 'liveness' for these posts. Posts that were shared "too late" are also marked as such. Positioning this information right next to the name of the user above the actual photo moreover serves for high visibility, demonstrating its weight for creating 'liveness.' To be specific, when a *BeReal* was requested, for example, at 8:18 pm in the evening, all *BeReals* that were posted in the following two minutes until 8:20 pm are accompanied by a description of the exact time, including minutes and seconds of posting. When allowed, even the location of the recording is published. Thereby, users can scroll through the content and observe what others were doing at the exact same time and possibly also where they were staying, hence including a notion of transparency. As such, the app, through its *cognitive and sensory affordance* of highly visible time and location descriptions, increases the created feeling of an intimate temporal and spatial connection between users, which Althusser, as quoted by Auslander, describes as "always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence."<sup>184</sup> *BeReal* makes use of this "temporal co-presence"<sup>185</sup> and positions 'liveness' as being essential for connecting people, with such descriptions reinforcing users' "conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live" due to the visual proof of the 'live' circumstances of posting.<sup>186</sup>

Overall, the analysis of present *affordances* on the user interface has shown how *functional, sensory, and cognitive elements* navigate an *ideal user* and collectively construct a space for 'live' interactions that are highly intertwined with ideas of 'authentic' encounters between users. In detail, *BeReal's* interface is structured to construct intimate, transparent, and accurate social experiences for users, facilitated by the created 'liveness.' Thus, I would like to build on media scholar Daniel Chamberlain and argue that *BeReal's* user interface must be understood as a media-scripted space of 'authenticity' that, through its *functional, sensory, and cognitive affordances*, establishes a sphere of 'authentic liveness' between users.<sup>187</sup> Chamberlain argues that media interfaces are interactive scripted spaces that are "designed to entice and enthrall visitors, flooding their mental and corporeal faculties with carefully

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<sup>183</sup>Barreyat, and Perreau, "BeReal."

<sup>184</sup>Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective,"102.

<sup>185</sup>Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective,"102.

<sup>186</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 19.

<sup>187</sup> Daniel Chamberlain, "Scripted Spaces: Television Interfaces and the Non-Places of Asynchronous Entertainment," in *Television as Digital Media*, ed. James Bennett, Niki Strange and Lynn Spiegel (New York: Duke University Press, 2011), 230-254.



sensory inputs.”<sup>188</sup> Thereby, such interfaces would be pre-scripted, giving users a powerful sense of agency within its environment, while possible user activity is indeed pre-scripted and hidden under the emphasis of the user’s experience.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, *BeReal*’s interface is pre-scripted in the sense of deploying clear regulation of functional aspects, as well as *cognitive* and *sensory affordances* that aim to establish an increased ‘authentic’ experience for users. To do so, the interface, as the constellational element of technology, positions ‘liveness’ as its central technique of connecting users and constructs a maximized impression of ‘authenticity’ by navigating users in ‘transparent’ and ‘intimate’ manners through the interface.

### 3.2.2 Economic and Legal Forces

After having examined the user interface and its overall ‘scripted nature’ of ‘authentic liveness,’ Van Es argues that the *economic and legal forces* “construct the possible range and forms of participation on a platform.”<sup>190</sup> These concern “the imperative of its business model and the costs that users incur through platform use,” as well as the explicit rules concerning privacy and behavior on a platform.<sup>191</sup>

In general, online platforms have allowed for the emergence of new business models on the market. Instead of attracting high viewing ratings and wide reachability to advertisers, as seen in broadcast television practices, most online platforms generate value by monetizing user-generated data and introducing paid features or advertisements.<sup>192</sup> While platforms such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* are well known for selling collected data, with Facebook giving “a staggering 79% of a user’s personal data (...) to third parties every time they open the app to browse,” *BeReal* claims to work antagonistically, priding itself on its simplicity and detachment from monetization.<sup>193</sup>

In detail, *BeReal* possesses three major economic-legal differences compared to other platforms, mirroring its vision of promising to create ‘authentic’ and transparent connections between users. Namely, the company states not to sell users’ data; they do not allow any form of commercialization, such as advertisements; and they do not demand any form of user costs, such as subscriptions or paid features.

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<sup>188</sup> Chamberlain, “Scripted Spaces: Television Interfaces and the Non-Places of Asynchronous Entertainment,” 240.

<sup>189</sup> Chamberlain, “Scripted Spaces: Television Interfaces and the Non-Places of Asynchronous Entertainment,” 240.

<sup>190</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 32.

<sup>191</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 32.

<sup>192</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 32.

<sup>193</sup> Chris Stokel-Walker, “Instagram is Sharing 79% of Your Personal Data with Third Parties,” *Cybernews*, February 9, 2022, <https://cybernews.com/privacy/instagram-is-sharing-79-of-your-personal-data-with-third-parties/>.

However, as with any other platform, *BeReal* collects user data for its internal services, with two types of data being stored: Firstly, data that users provide to the platform, meaning their profile data, including phone number, full name, and age; and secondly, data that the platform collects when making use of their service, namely data related to user's activities, thus, content-, geolocation-, phonebook-, and device- data.<sup>194</sup> Nevertheless, according to *BeReal's privacy policy*, "your information and Personal Data is used exclusively by *BeReal's* internal services and will not be transferred or sold to third parties without your prior express consent."<sup>195</sup> As such, they reject any allegations of selling personal data and also state that any external sharing would require the "consent of the user."<sup>196</sup> Moreover, the *terms of use* prohibit the usage of the app to "publish or facilitate the transmission of advertising, commercial solicitation, spam, 'chain letters,' 'pyramid schemes' or to collect information (...) about other users without their permission."<sup>197</sup> As indicated, one can identify how the app apparently works against factors of monetization seen on other platforms, such as *Instagram* and *TikTok*.<sup>198</sup> By, in contrast, establishing a business model that is based on free accessibility and the seeming omission of selling data for advertisement purposes, *BeReal* strengthens its internal vision: The app gives users a sense of intimacy, and privacy and hence creates the feeling of a 'safe space' for enjoying 'authentic' interactions with friends.

While several experts suspect that *BeReal* will, however, in the future introduce paid features due to lacking revenue at this time, one can, from today's perspective, argue that the *economic* and *legal forces* are important elements in the overall construction of 'authenticity' in the app.<sup>199</sup> Namely, these forces ensure that the principles of intimacy, connectivity, and accuracy embedded in the *techno-cultural forces* of the created 'liveness' are mirrored in *BeReal's privacy policy* and *terms of use*. While the focus of this thesis is set on how *BeReal* constructs 'authentic liveness,' it is important to note that the *economic* and *legal forces* which are in itself detached from ideas of 'liveness,' shape the user interface and contribute to an overall feeling of 'authenticity' on the latter, thus enhancing the construction of 'authentic liveness.'

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<sup>194</sup> "Privacy Policy." *BeReal*, last modified August 2, 2021, <https://bere.al/en/privacy>.

<sup>195</sup> "Privacy Policy." *BeReal*, last modified August 2, 2021, <https://bere.al/en/privacy>.

<sup>196</sup> "Privacy Policy." *BeReal*, last modified August 2, 2021, <https://bere.al/en/privacy>.

<sup>197</sup> "Terms of Use," *BeReal*, last modified August 2, 2021, <https://bere.al/en/terms>.

<sup>198</sup>It must be said that also *Instagram* and *Facebook* started as non-commercial platforms and introduced commercialization practices after having gained popularity. *BeReal* however from the current perspective seems to not follow this path through strict privacy and terms of use regulations.

<sup>199</sup>Viktor Hendelmann, "The BeReal Business Model-How Does BeReal Make Money?," *Productmint*, July 17, 2022, <https://productmint.com/bereal-business-model-how-does-bereal-make-money/>.

### 3.3 User Responses – Understandings of ‘Liveness’

After having examined *BeReal’s* *metatext* and *space of participation*, I proceed by briefly investigating *user responses* as the final realm for understanding how the app constructs ‘authentic liveness.’ As such, this third domain examines *user responses* as “instances of reflection” on how users “understand the liveness proposed by the metatext” and interface.<sup>200</sup> To do so, I compare the 17 ‘most helpful’ user responses published both on the *Apple App Store* and *Google Play Store* site to detect similarities in how users understand the ‘live.’ By doing so, I consider 13 out of these 34 responses as useful to extract meaning about how users understand *BeReal’s* ‘liveness.’<sup>201</sup> With this selection at hand, I identify the repetitive motives of users praising the spontaneous and temporally adjusted timeframe of posting; the equal distribution of user participation; as well as users in return critiquing the possible deviant behavior of posting ‘late.’ Collectively, these patterns make evident that users understand *BeReal’s* ‘authentic liveness’ as being established through the vibrant dynamic between user agency and the technological restrictions of the scope and time of posting.

#### Temporal Guidance of Posting

To begin, 46,1% of the considered responses, meaning six out of these thirteen user reactions, point to the importance of the unpredictable and temporally synchronized sharing of user content for the construction of ‘authentic’ interactions.<sup>202</sup> In this sense, one user claims: “I enjoy the app, like most people have said, the spontaneity is a really unique way to avoid glorified posts and unrealistic updates.”<sup>203</sup> Similarly, another user states:

I love how whenever you get a BeReal, it's at a completely random time in the day. It could be now, it could be in an hour, nobody knows! Having this randomness gives the app it's humanity, with every photo you see, you know that it just happened!<sup>204</sup>

As seen, both users point to the spontaneity and ‘randomness’ of posting as preventing ‘inaccurate updates,’ thus positioning the unpredictability of posting as the core practice for establishing ‘authentic’ renditions of life. In this sense, further users agree, stating that “the

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<sup>200</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 33.

<sup>201</sup> In the appendix all 34 user responses are listed, as well as highlighted according to their focus.

<sup>202</sup> These user responses can be found in the appendix, marked in blue.

<sup>203</sup> Emi.Marie224, “I enjoy the app, like most people have said, the spontaneity is a really unique way to avoid glorified posts and unrealistic updates,” *Apple App Store- Ratings and Reviews*, May 12, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

<sup>204</sup> Syssinad, “I love how whenever you get a BeReal, it's at a completely random time in the day. It could be now, it could be in an hour, nobody knows! Having this randomness gives the app it's humanity,” *Google Play Store- Ratings and Reviews*, February 29, 2023, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.bereal.ft&hl=en&gl=US>.

fact that this app (tries to) force users to post what they're doing in the moment also does a great job at eliminating the fake realities of socials"<sup>205</sup> or claiming that "a rush goes through me every time I get the notification that it's BeReal time — you never know when it's coming and you're never prepared for it."<sup>206</sup> Likewise, another individual argues:

This app is great because it rebels against the guise of perfect lifestyle and aesthetics. You get a notification at any random point during the day, and you're encouraged to post within two minutes of receiving the notification. It gives a more realistic perspective of what your friend and acquaintances are actually doing on a daily basis and it feels so much more real. (...)<sup>207</sup>

As these responses show, users understand the spontaneous nature of posting as facilitating an unpredictable sphere of 'liveness,' which is described as the essential element for more realistic and 'authentic' updates between users. Hence, these users position the technical condition of the app demanding users to post simultaneously as the essence of *BeReal's* 'authentic liveness' since it would counter the curation and staging of online content through spontaneous and non-prepared posts.

### Equal Participation of Users

Moreover, next to this emphasis on the temporal guidance, four user responses (30,7%) highlight *BeReal's* 'authentic liveness' to come into being through positioning users as equal contributors of 'live' content. In this regard, several users claim that the limiting of the daily number of posts to only one is essential for this 'live' and realistic feeling of shared content.<sup>208</sup>

In this regard, one user claims:

I actually do like this one. It's not always dinging with notifications or wasting hours of your day. It's just there. You can take a photo of wherever you are and then without spending more than 10 minutes scrolling, you can see what all your friends and family are up to at some point in their day (...).<sup>209</sup>

As this user highlights, the limited number of visible posts simultaneously prevents an excess of shared content and 'endless' scrolling as seen on other platforms. Agreeing with this

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<sup>205</sup> Annoyed Moderate, "The fact that this app (tries to) force users to post what they're doing in the moment also does a great job at eliminating the fake realities of socials," Apple App Store- Ratings and Reviews, May 27, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

<sup>206</sup> Rgxmez, "A rush goes through me every time I get the notification that it's BeReal time — you never know when it's coming and you're never prepared for it," Apple App Store- Ratings and Reviews, July 20, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

<sup>207</sup> Black Star, "This app is great because it rebels against the guise of perfect lifestyle and aesthetics. You get a notification at any random point during the day, and you're encouraged to post within two minutes," Apple App Store- Ratings and Reviews, May 3, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

<sup>208</sup> User Response referring to this aspect are marked in pink in the appendix.

<sup>209</sup> Star Explosion, "I actually do like this one. It's not always dinging with notifications or wasting hours of your day. It's just there. You can take a photo of wherever you are and then without spending more than," Apple App Store- Ratings and Reviews, November 12, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

contrast to other platforms through the equal distribution of shared content, also other users claim that “it’s impossible to scroll forever like I did on Instagram,”<sup>210</sup> or “you can look at your friend’s current post and maybe comment or react to them. After that there’s really no reason to stay on the app and end up killing your whole day.”<sup>211</sup> As such, these users understand the limitation of only posting once a day as increasing the intimate and ‘authentic’ experience of shared content through not being ‘distracted’ by the abundance of content. This is to say that by positioning all users as equally participating in the distribution of content through only one daily post, users claim that this post gains more weight in its significance and enhances the established feeling of a ‘live’ sphere by posting it isochronally. As such, the examined *user responses* understand ‘authentic liveness’ as emerging from the interdependence of users’ content sharing and the pre-structuring of the mode of sharing, hence emphasizing the entanglement of the domains of users and technology in the constellation of ‘liveness.’

In this sense, Van Es has identified how social media has caused a general shift in the participation practices of online users. She states that “users of social media, because they produce the content that essentially drives these platforms, have both a user relation and a producer relation to liveness.”<sup>212</sup> While she acknowledges that platforms, however, do design and pre-structure the manner of sharing, she notices that users are indeed responsible for determining what content will be shared and must thus be approached as simultaneously receiving and producing online ‘liveness’ through constant social interaction with others.<sup>213</sup> *BeReal* makes use of this two-folded dynamic of positioning users as producers while still guiding their activity through the technological restrictions of limiting both the temporal and dimensional manner of sharing. Precisely this interaction of producing ‘live’ content through the temporal adjustment of content distribution, as well as the guiding restriction of one daily post, seems to be fundamental for users to understand the established ‘liveness’ as creating more ‘authentic’ renditions of life.

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<sup>210</sup>Annoyed Moderate, “The fact that this app (tries to) force users to post what they’re doing in the moment also does a great job at eliminating the fake realities of socials,” Apple App Store-Ratings and Reviews, May 27, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

<sup>211</sup>LEGION1TE, “You can look at your friends current post and maybe comment or react to them. After that there’s really no reason to stay on the app and end up killing your whole day,” Apple App Store-Ratings and Reviews, August 1, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

<sup>212</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 144.

<sup>213</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 144.

## Critiquing User's Misconduct

However, with positioning users as producers of 'liveness' comes the risk of users to not operate in the intended manner when the technological structuring leaves room for 'misbehavior,' which Lupinacci identifies as a "threat to the authentic experience (...) by the platforms' technical emphasis on the individual."<sup>214</sup> This can also be observed in *BeReal* at hand of three users (23,07%) articulating their concerns about other user behavior.<sup>215</sup> In this regard, Van Es claims that when users "become critical of the understanding of liveness put forward, they respond (...) by publicly articulating their dissatisfaction."<sup>216</sup> Putting Van Es' words into practice, several users critique the possibility of taking a 'late' *BeReal*, hence, not to meet the two-minute time frame but instead post distinctively later, as phrased in the following user response:

A lot of people will purposefully not take their BeReal until they're doing something interesting. At that point, they're using the app like a simplified Instagram story which defeats the whole purpose of BeReal.<sup>217</sup>

As seen, this user criticizes the ability to ignore the immediate demand of posting and to consciously postpone one's post to a particular time of the day that appears to be 'more suitable' for sharing. Likewise, another user claims:

I think it's just too easy to choose the time of the day you actually post and that completely defeats the point of it. Some people just post like 12 hours late and clearly they're choosing the moment to post.<sup>218</sup>

While my analysis does not consider 'misbehavior' and instead focuses on how the interface navigates an *ideal user* according to Stanfill, it is, however, relevant to mention this widely spread user criticism about this possibility of circumventing the app's user navigation since it displays how users understand the present form of 'liveness.' That is to say that users appraise this functional possibility of postponement as prohibiting the construction of the intended 'live' sphere that, according to Barreyat, would be "the first Uncontrollable Photo Sharing

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<sup>214</sup>Lupinacci, "Live, Here and Now: Experiences of Immediate Connection through Habitual Social Media," 193.

<sup>215</sup> *User responses* critiquing the app for allowing this deviant behavior are marked in yellow in the appendix.

<sup>216</sup> Van Es, *The Future of Live*, 33.

<sup>217</sup> Bethany, "A lot of people will purposefully not take their BeReal until they're doing something interesting. At that point, they're using the app like a simplified Instagram story which defeats the whole purpose," Apple App Store-Ratings and Reviews, December 8, 2022, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/bereal-your-friends-for-real/id1459645446?see-all=reviews>.

<sup>218</sup> Jose Otavio Carlomagno Filho, "I think it's just too easy to choose the time of the day you actually post and that completely defeats the point of it. Some people just post like 12 hours late and clearly they're choosing the moment to post," Google Play Store-Ratings and Reviews, March 15, 2023, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.bereal.ft&hl=en&gl=US>.

App.”<sup>219</sup> Omitting this spontaneous and uncontrollable characteristic of posting, according to the users, disturbs ‘authentic liveness’ by again entailing content that possesses a higher degree of staging and curation practices. In other words, this criticism displays that the spontaneous, unpredictable, and unprepared manner of posting stands at the heart of how users understand ‘authentic liveness’ in *BeReal*. Users define the present ‘liveness’ characterized by transparency and ‘authenticity’ as emerging through the interplay of user-generated content being spread according to the technical restriction of unpredictable and temporally synchronized sharing practices. As such, it solidifies that users understand *BeReal*’s ‘liveness’ as generating increased ‘authentic’ encounters as claimed by the *metatext* and constructed by the interface, even when being critical about the execution of specific functional affordances.

Collectively, the investigated *user responses* make visible that users share a similar understanding of *BeReal*’s ‘liveness’ despite focusing on different aspects of the app. Namely, the present ‘liveness’ would come to being through the dynamic of users being navigated through the technology. By doing so, users contribute to the overall construction of ‘authentic liveness’ by reinforcing that the app applies a unique approach to create ‘authenticity’ through the technological restriction of the scope and time of posting. Through this guidance, users identify that the app allows for spontaneous ‘live’ content that ultimately constructs ‘authentic liveness’ by prohibiting users from staging or curating their posts. As such, the *user responses* solely reflect what the analysis of the *metatext* and *space of participation* already uncovered: *BeReal* is thoroughly structured to create an online experience of ‘authentic’ ‘live’ encounters, established through the interplay of the domains of institution, technology, and users.

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<sup>219</sup> Barreyat, “Stoked to finally launch BeReal, the First Uncontrollable Photo Sharing App. After being tired and annoyed with all the bullshit on social media, I decided to launch my own. No like, no follower.”

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis of *BeReal's metatext*, *space of participation*, and *user responses* has shown how all three levels of institution, technology, and users are interwoven and collectively construct 'authentic liveness.'

Firstly, the investigation of the *metatext* has displayed how the company externally frames the app's 'liveness' as creating 'authentic' encounters between users, mirrored through content on the official website, the descriptions on the *Apple App Store*, and *Google Play Store Page*, as well as CEO Alexis Barreyat's *LinkedIn* post. Here, the detailed analysis of word choices in the vision statement, the slogan, the 'warnings,' and in further descriptions, has revealed how the representatives 'ascribe' 'authenticity' to the app and its 'liveness.' This is done by repetitively highlighting how the app distinguishes from other social media through its transparent and intimate manner of connecting users. As such, I have shown how the *metatext* "provides an early framework" that shapes the app's reading, as argued by Gray.<sup>220</sup> Namely, users are encouraged to perceive the app's 'liveness' as the key element for the establishment of 'authenticity' and are animated to regularly utilize the app and its 'authentic liveness' to overcome the described lack of accuracy seen on other platforms. Thus, the process of the app's institutionalization is positioned as necessary for users to experience social media 'authenticity.'

In direct connection to the *metatext*, the examination of the *space of participation* has shown how the app, on the level of technology, guides users on the interface, employing specific *functional, cognitive, and sensory affordances* to establish an increased feeling of 'authenticity' for users. Here, I have identified how the precondition of posting, the limitations, and guidelines of content sharing, the reaction functions, as well as the design and linguistic choice of elements on the interface collectively create a space for "live" interactions that are intertwined with ideas of "authentic" encounters between users. While the *techno-cultural forces* displayed how the app fuses the conceptualization of the 'live' with attributes of 'authenticity' by creating a pre-scripted space of 'authentic liveness' according to Chamberlain, also the examination of the *economic and legal forces* has proven important. Here, I have shown how *BeReal's* business model additionally reinforces the constructed feeling of 'authentic liveness' through the present *privacy policy* and *terms of use*.

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<sup>220</sup> Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 26.



On top of that, the last analytical step of reflecting on the *user responses* and users' understanding of 'liveness' has especially demonstrated how the domains of technology and users are co-related within the present constellation of 'liveness.' To be specific, the analysis of *user responses* collected via the Apple *App Store* and *Google Play Store* has exhibited that users understand *BeReal's* 'liveness' as emerging out of positioning users as producers of 'live' content but still guiding their activity through the technological pre-structuring of sharing on the level of quantity and timing. Hence, despite some users being critical about functional details, users understand *BeReal's* 'liveness' as proposed by the *metatext* and *space of participation*: *BeReal's* 'liveness' is unmistakably entangled with the creation of 'authenticity.'

As these analytical results demonstrate, Van Es' method and the addition of Stanfill's *discursive interface analysis*, have proven to be highly useful for the investigation of 'liveness.' Merging both methods provided me with the necessary tools to show how the 'live' and 'authenticity' are increasingly intertwined within social media applications, with the case of *BeReal* demonstrating that the construction of 'authenticity' even stands at the heart of the app's 'liveness.' By doing so, my analysis has given relevant insights into this new understanding of 'liveness,' contributing to the overall academic discussion by highlighting, at hand of *BeReal*, how the relevance of 'authenticity' within the construction of 'liveness' is distinctively growing due to the current social media landscape being marked by monetization and calculated curation practices. Thereby, I have adopted a new perspective with a primary focus on this co-relation by introducing the new conceptualization of 'authentic liveness' as an innovative terminology that emphasizes this identified phenomenon as an expansion of Van Es' approach to 'liveness.'

To do so, the conceptual focus of linking the terminology of 'authenticity' with 'liveness' has proven highly productive as well as a portrayed the necessary point of reference to investigate my case study since the multilayered and strategically imprecise conception of 'authenticity' allowed me to identify several different levels of how *BeReal* constructs its unique 'liveness.' Namely, the different levels of intimacy, transparency, consistency, and spontaneity. As such, the applied focus on 'authenticity' in relation to 'liveness' as an umbrella term for these specific components not only strengthened the highly performative and constructed nature of both conceptualizations but moreover portrayed the only possible conceptual interplay that fully captured the complexity of how *BeReal* constructs its specific constellation of 'liveness.'

Still, this analysis is subject to several limitations, such as its lack of an all-embracing investigation of the interface, its primary focus on the *ideal user* that partly neglects possible deviant user behavior, as well the shortage of an entirely neutral manner of collecting data through the lack of external research gathering devices. While the restricted gathering method is due to the dimensional and temporal limitations of this thesis and could be improved in further research, the investigation of the interface with a focus on the *ideal user*, however, allowed for a detailed understanding of how the app aims to guide users in accordance with the app's vision. As such, this limited focus proved beneficial to identify how specific *affordances* are structured within the examination of how *BeReal* constructs 'authentic liveness' on its interface. Nevertheless, further research detached from these restraints may provide expanded insights into the relation of 'authenticity' and 'liveness' in the case of *BeReal* – but also on other platforms – to explore 'authentic liveness' as a broader phenomenon and thereby exhibit the ever-changing nature of 'liveness' based on its constellational use and context.<sup>221</sup>

**word count: 15692**

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<sup>221</sup> As stated earlier, the case of *TikTok Now* could be an interesting study for further investigation to strengthen the conceptualization of 'authentic liveness' as introduced in this thesis.

## 5. Bibliography

### 5.1 List of Illustrations

**Figure 1** Visualization of Method (Visualization by Alexa Siepen, created on 13-04-23)

**Figure 2** BeReal's Vision Statement (Screenshot by Alexa Siepen, taken on 14-04-23, [https://boards.eu.greenhouse.io/bereal?gh\\_src=4c21b372teu.](https://boards.eu.greenhouse.io/bereal?gh_src=4c21b372teu.))

**Figure 3** The blurred interface (Screenshot by Alexa Siepen, taken on 14-04-23, <https://bere.al/en.>)

**Figure 4** A BeReal (Screenshot by Alexa Siepen, taken on 14-04-23, <https://bere.al/en.>)

**Figure 5** BeReal's push notifications (Screenshot by Alexa Siepen, taken on 14-04-23, <https://bere.al/en.>)

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