From "Time to BeReal" to "Let Me Post My BeFake:" A Case of Operationalizing Authenticity Through Design

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The effects of social media platform usage on users' well-being have been a topic of significant discussion. Some evidence suggests that users sharing about themselves in ways that are perceived by themselves and others as "authentic" may benefit their well-being. BeReal is a social media platform that aims to encourage more authentic online behavior by constraining users' ability to selectively share content via a daily prompt to post whatever they are doing at that time. This rigid operationalization of authenticity, however, may be at odds with the rich and nuanced notions of authenticity observed in practice. Through an analysis of interviews with 25 BeReal users, we find that participants experienced two facets of authenticity that often did not align with BeReal's operationalization. Moreover, we find that participants' desire for authenticity was often in tension with their competing desires for privacy and autonomy, and their desire to reflect back on significant moments. We discuss how these tensions illustrate the challenges of designing for authenticity and add nuance to our understanding of authenticity on social media platforms.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Authenticity, social media, self-presentation, BeReal, design

1 Introduction

The impact of social media platforms on societal and individual well-being has been a topic of significant public debate. Some evidence suggests that these technologies yield substantial benefits, particularly for marginalized populations, by creating spaces for social support, empowerment, and self-expression [19, 32, 38]. Additional work shows potential benefits to well-being from social media use perceived as "authentic" [28, 43, 58]. At the same time, however, a 2023 advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General on social media's threats to young people's mental health drew significant attention [66, 67]. This report is rooted in a growing body of literature suggesting negative effects of social platform use on well-being, particularly when scrolling through and comparing oneself to seemingly endless streams of highly curated and often unrealistic content [29, 40, 65].

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The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory posed two calls to action: 1) for corporations to "make design and development decisions that prioritize safety and health," and 2) for researchers to "prioritize social media and youth mental health research that can support the establishment of standards and evaluation of best practices" [67]. This is consistent with calls in the HCI community to work toward solutions for pressing social problems like mental health and well-being [12, 20, 52, 61].

Prior work provides insight into how being authentic online can improve psychological outcomes [28, 39, 43, 58]. However, it may be difficult to reliably recognize or encourage authenticity, an abstract concept that has been approached from many disciplinary and cultural perspectives. In Western society, authenticity is often perceived as a positive quality that people strive toward [1, 56]. According to Banet-Weiser [1], early theorizations tied authenticity to alignment between one's inner self and externalizations or representations of that inner self. Relatedly, Goffman's [27] classic self-presentation framework suggests that people strategically manage the authenticity of their identities by selectively manipulating the impressions they convey to others through their appearance and behavior.

When considering how to reap the potential benefits of authentic online behavior, a core challenge is understanding what it means to behave authentically and how we might design to encourage this behavior. Barta and Andalibi [2], Haimson et al. [31], Haimson and Hoffman [30], and Duguay [22] demonstrate how the distinct sociotechnical attributes, context, and norms of various social media platforms shape and constrain users' understanding of what it means to be authentic and how to express authenticity on each platform. According to Nissenbaum [47, 48], one defining element of social contexts and their norms is the set of shared values in any given context. These values reflect people's shared goals and priorities, and allow for assessment of what constitutes appropriate behavior and why. As such, considering these elements may help us better understand how to design for authenticity on social platforms.

One particularly interesting platform for considering authenticity, which is our paper's focus, is BeReal. This photo-sharing app touts itself as a social media platform aiming to "create an authentic world" [7]. Launched in 2020, BeReal promotes liveness at any given time as a form of authenticity [63]. Unlike other platforms that allow users to carefully select and curate shareable moments to show their audiences, BeReal encourages users to post spontaneously by arbitrarily selecting a time each day when all users are nominally expected to use the app to share what they are doing at that moment [37, 45, 62]. Reddy and Kumar [57] and Kim et al. [37] investigate how BeReal ostensibly encourages authenticity through these features.

The work we have described so far points to relationships among context, design, and authenticity. It also points to a need to better understand authenticity as people perceive and experience it in their everyday lives. To address this, we focus on BeReal users. The app's attempt to operationalize authenticity through its design makes it an ideal site to consider how authenticity is conceptualized and practiced. We analyze interviews with US-based BeReal users to understand how they experience authenticity, drawing inspiration from Nissenbaum's [47] and Friedman's [23, 24] concepts of values to investigate authenticity as a value.

2 Background

2.1 Conceptualizing Authenticity

Researchers have conceptualized authenticity as both a fixed construct that can be consistently operationalized and measured across contexts and, as we detail later, a contextually situated property, for which the detailed definition may vary substantially across social situations. Adopting the first approach, early computer-mediated communication research noted that social technologies, in which people are represented separately from their physical bodies and behavior, can allow for

self-presentation that is substantially more selective than when people interact in the physical world [5, 33, 70]. In other words, social technologies may enable people to embellish or enhance the online impressions they convey in ways that some might perceive as inauthentic. As such, authenticity relative to one's physical-world self has often been framed as an attribute of online self-presentation that is seen as related to accountability for one's online behavior [2, 35].

Authenticity in online self-presentation is often seen in a positive light. Platforms, in describing themselves to existing and prospective users, have long touted authenticity as a desirable attribute. In a longitudinal study from 2002-2016 of social media companies' marketing materials, Salisbury and Pooley [60] found that almost all platforms in their sample invoked users' sense of authenticity in their appeals, using words like "real life" and "genuine." The authors [60] noted that platforms refer to authenticity with what they described as "numbing regularity" because, as Haimson and Hoffmann [30] argued in their analysis of Facebook's "real name" policy, many users prioritize presenting themselves in an ostensibly authentic way and seek to meet others who do the same.

Social media users who perceive their own online engagement as authentic may also derive benefits [2]. In a review of research on social media self-disclosure and well-being, Luo and Hancock [43] suggest that psychological authenticity, which they defined as people feeling more able to express their "true self," can potentially benefit people's well-being. They cite Reinecke and Trepte [58], who refer to authenticity as the ability to express one's true self freely and find that being authentic online increases positive affect, reduces negative affect, and improves life satisfaction, which are all commonly used indicators of well-being. Grieve and Watkinson [28], who define authenticity in the same way, also find that online self-disclosure that is perceived as consistent with one's true self can positively impact well-being, whereas inconsistencies can leave people feeling less socially connected and more stressed.

While we have so far treated authenticity as reflecting alignment with one's physical-world self, there is good reason to believe that what is perceived as authentic may be perceived quite differently in different contexts, both online and in the physical world. In her contextual integrity framework for understanding privacy, Nissenbaum [47, 48] notes that people's expectations for privacy in any given context are rooted in contextual norms, such that the same behavior may be perceived to violate privacy in one context but be perfectly acceptable in another. Evidence suggests that online authenticity can be approached in a similar way. As we detail below, Barta and Andalibi [2] argue that what is perceived as authentic on social media varies with the social and technical attributes of each online environment. Indeed, perceptions of authenticity may vary more between online contexts than physical world contexts because people must navigate the complexities of presenting different aspects of their identities across multiple platforms, each with unique features [18], social norms, and expectations [2, 68].

In this light, Haimson and Hoffmann [30] and Uski and Lampinen [68] have defined authenticity as socially constructed and shaped by the norms of what it means to be perceived by others as authentic in a given environment. In a study comparing Facebook to online music service Last.fm, Uski and Lampinen [68] point out that users of both platforms felt that "being real" was important, but the practice of doing so differed because participants felt the platforms had different norms around self-presentation. For example, they found that "being real" on Facebook involves avoiding oversharing and not seeking attention through frequent profile updates. This was in contrast to Last.fm where "being real" ironically required users to alter their musical preferences or enhance their profile to demonstrate their versatile musical tastes that were not always captured by the app.

Similarly, Barta and Andalibi's [2] study of the short-form video app TikTok suggests that attributes of the platform—such as anonymity and video modality—shape and reinforce users' perceptions of authenticity. Specifically, their participants felt TikTok's topic-based content distribution, unlike the friend- or follower-based model of other platforms, made them feel more

anonymous, which encouraged disinhibition and authenticity when sharing sensitive details. Participants also felt that video posts allowed for more visual communication of their emotional states and experiences, which was perceived as more authentic in the sense of making oneself vulnerable [2]. Building and drawing on this prior work, we similarly conceptualize authenticity as contextual, normative, and socially constructed.

2.2 Designing for Authenticity Online: Introducing BeReal

From the literature we have described so far, it becomes clear that one design challenge faced by platforms is encouraging their users to behave in ostensibly authentic ways. In considering how platforms meet this challenge, we draw on Davis' [16] mechanisms and conditions framework for affordances. Affordances more generally refer to the perceived and possible actions that people believe they can take when using a platform [11, 16, 49]. Davis' framework builds on this definition by asking not only whether a technology affords a particular action to a particular user, but also investigating: 1) how this occurs, namely through what Davis [16] refers to as "mechanisms," which include requesting, demanding, encouraging, discouraging, refusing, and allowing particular behaviors; and 2) under what conditions and for whom these afforded behaviors are possible, as these may differ for people with different skills, cultural background, abilities, identities, etc.

Affordances are not inherent to technologies but are socially situated, emerging through interactions between users, artifacts, and context [16]. Applying Davis' framework, we understand affordances as shaped by three key conditions: perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy [16]. Notably, cultural and institutional legitimacy refers to how an individual's position within broader social structures—and the accompanying norms, values, laws, and institutional rules—influences their ability to recognize, interpret, and engage with technology. These conditions of technology use reflect power structures and influence how technologies are encountered and used in everyday life [16].

One way that platforms design to encourage authenticity is by encouraging or demanding that people align their platform identity with their physical-world identity. The underlying idea is that, as we noted above, this identity alignment facilitates holding people accountable for their online behavior [15]. With this in mind, Facebook has historically aimed to enforce accountability via a policy and design that demanded its users identify with their "real" names (i.e., names they are known by in the physical world), sometimes requiring users to submit evidence like ID cards and records supporting the authenticity of their chosen identity. In analyzing this policy, Haimson and Hoffmann [30] reveal that this demand for real names was not effective for all users or under all conditions. Some thought they were being forced to use an identity that they felt was inauthentic in order to comply with this policy [30, 42]. Others had difficulty reinstating their accounts when they were flagged by other users for having non-normative names, which potentially marginalized certain populations, such as some Native Americans whose names included words that led other users to flag these names as "fake" [30].

Dating apps also present a need for accountability and trust between users, as misalignment between one's online and physical-world appearance could lead to disappointment and perhaps increased risk of meeting somebody with nefarious intentions [26, 34, 53]. Gibbs [26], for example, found in an early study that dating site users sought to reduce uncertainty about matches before meeting them, such as by Googling or otherwise finding information to help authenticate the information in their profiles. As Duguay [22] notes, the dating app Tinder initially addressed this safety issue by, using Davis' [16] term, demanding that: 1) people use their Facebook login to set up their Tinder profile, and 2) their Tinder profile picture was visible on Facebook. This built on Facebook's efforts to enforce authenticity via real names and the fact that people typically knew their Facebook friends in the physical world. While users might be able to get away with sharing

deceptive photos on a dating profile intended to be viewed by strangers, requiring a photo seen by friends on Facebook helped warrant [50] that the photo was more likely to be authentic.

Another platform that has attempted to encourage authenticity through its design is the photo-sharing app BeReal, which is our paper's focus. BeReal's design ostensibly encourages spontaneous, in-the-moment sharing that its designers feel will be perceived as more authentic than the highly curated and composed photos that some feel are both inauthentic and all too common on popular platforms [37, 55]. In a recent study, Reddy and Kumar [57] draw on Davis' framework to identify several ways in which BeReal's design encourages authentic sharing with one's audience. The app's defining feature is a daily notification prompt sent to all app users in the same time zone that says, "Time to BeReal," as shown in Figure 1. Upon receiving the notification, users have two minutes to share a photo (called a "BeReal"). Users are encouraged to post via enforced reciprocity: one cannot see others' BeReals from that day before sharing one's own. While it is possible to post late, this is discouraged by labeling these posts as "X minutes/hours late." The underlying idea is that the spontaneity of the notification and the potential stigma resulting from a visibly late post will result in fewer planned or curated photos and thus appear more authentic [45, 55].
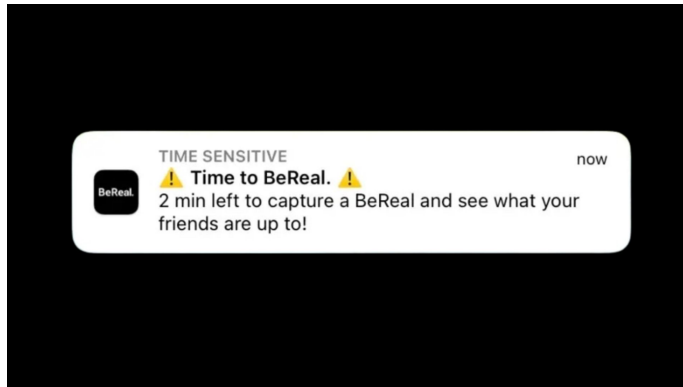

Fig. 1. BeReal's daily two-minute "Time to BeReal" prompt.

Authenticity is further encouraged in that a BeReal includes two images captured simultaneously from both the front and back cameras on users' smartphones. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, a small version of the front camera image is superimposed picture-in-picture style on top of the back camera image. These photos cannot be filtered, edited, or otherwise modified. It is possible to retake a BeReal; however, the number of retakes will be displayed when other users see the image. The intent here is to encourage unfiltered and unrehearsed posts, which BeReal's designers believe are more authentic. Underlying this, using Davis' language [16], is that employing both cameras and limiting editing requests more visibility into users' lives, as Reddy and Kumar find in their analysis [57]. This visibility, in turn, will reveal more of the user's physical-world context at that moment and reduce their ability to curate photos in a way that might be ostensibly less authentic.

Once a BeReal is shared, it is visible to users' contacts only until the following day's "Time to BeReal" notification. Reddy and Kumar [57] suggest that this ephemerality encourages authenticity by limiting the future visibility and thus concerns about potential future misinterpretation or misappropriation of these images, similar to other ephemeral sharing apps like Snapchat [4]. Users themselves, however, can view all their past BeReals via a feature called "Memories" that allows them to click any date on a calendar to view their posts from that date and share them on other platforms.
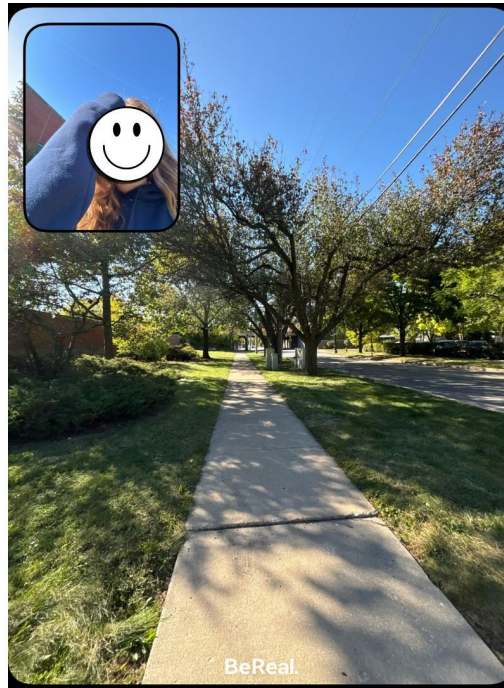
Fig. 2. A sample BeReal post depicting an image taken from the phone's front-facing camera superimposed onto an image taken simultaneously from the back-facing camera. Emoji was added to ensure anonymity.

Prior studies of BeReal have raised important ideas about its effectiveness in fostering authenticity. Maddox [45] discusses the platform within a broader panoptic culture, suggesting that its design may reproduce surveillance-like dynamics rather than support genuine expression. Reddy and Kumar [57] highlight how BeReal's affordances are intended to cultivate authenticity through various affordance mechanisms, but inconsistently do so. Pinch et al. [55] argue that the app's design can conflict with users' desires to present an idealized self. Across these studies, users are shown to resist BeReal's constraints—ignoring its affordances in favor of regaining control over timing, context, and content to better align with their self-presentation goals. However, less attention has been paid to the conditions under which users engage with or reject these affordance mechanisms. In all of this, there may be a need for designers to balance design that encourages authentic behavior and the contextual complexities of authenticity in practice. We thus wanted to address this gap by understanding how users' experiences of authenticity are shaped not only by design but also by their contextual conditions. We asked:

RQ1: How do users interpret authenticity in practice?

2.3 Tensions Around Authenticity in Practice

So far, we have seen how authenticity varies across online contexts, with different social norms, affordances, and constraints affecting people's behaviors. We turn here to the complexity of behaving in what are likely to be perceived as authentic ways, particularly as one moves between varied online and offline contexts. In her influential contextual integrity framework for privacy, Nissenbaum emphasizes that values are central to defining a context as they drive norms that govern what is appropriate to share, with whom, and under what circumstances [47]. This framing complements

Friedman's foundational work on Value Sensitive Design (VSD), which similarly foregrounds values as integral to the design and evaluation of sociotechnical systems [23, 24]. We know from this work that values do not exist in isolation and are often in tension with one another. For example, privacy is often discussed as at odds with security [24, 47]. The notion of values in Friedman's work also illustrates how technologies operate within complex social ecologies, where competing values held by different stakeholders shape how a system is used, perceived, and experienced. While some may engage with technology in ways that reflect their own values and normative expectations—producing certain behaviors—others may approach the same system through a different value lens, leading to divergent practices [23, 24]. These tensions reveal how conflicting value systems embedded in social contexts can result in mismatched norms and different perceptions of behavior.

In an interview study of social media users, Haimson et al. [31] identified what they refer to as the "authenticity paradox." Their participants felt that being perceived as authentic on social media often requires sharing not only the emotionally positive content that is common on social media because it is likely to lead to good impressions, but also some negative experiences to capture the reality that their lives have negative moments as well. Sharing these negative experiences, though, can be difficult and may carry the risk of negative impressions [31]. As the authors point out, the paradox lies in a tension between two norms common to social media: valuing authentic self-presentation while also presenting in a manner that is likely to yield positive impressions from others. The tendency toward positive content has been referred to as a positivity bias. Waterloo et al. [71], for example, found in a survey study that compared several popular platforms that positively framed content was perceived by users as more appropriate than more negative content on all platforms. Lin et al. [41] and Waterloo et al. [71] attribute this positivity bias to emotional norms whereby users weigh the appropriateness of sharing particular thoughts and feelings.

Many people choose not to share negative or vulnerable content. However, this raises a key question: to what extent is positively biased self-presentation judged as authentic? Social media users must navigate the fine line between being perceived as authentic and not overstepping platform norms. In a study of Instagram users, Duffy and Hund [21] illustrate the balancing act female content creators endure when navigating authenticity on social media. They must project authenticity while also managing perceptions of being either too real or not real enough, which reflects broader societal pressures on women and marginalized groups to be both visible and vulnerable [21].

Moreover, presenting in an authentic way can, as suggested above, be influenced by platform design. For example, Bayer et al. [4] found that Snapchat users perceive the platform as a lighter-weight channel for sharing ephemeral, spur-of-the-moment experiences with a relatively small audience of close ties. This small audience combined with content ephemerality may reduce concerns about negative perceptions, resulting in less attention paid to ensuring they share mostly positive content [4]. Similarly, Xu et al. [73] found that ephemerality reduces self-consciousness among Snapchat users, encouraging them to share funny and self-mocking content they might not post elsewhere online.

Even on a single platform, different affordances can result in differing perceptions of norms and authenticity. Kreling et al. [39] define authenticity as subjectively feeling in alignment with oneself in the moment, which occurs through and is experienced in relation to one's own self-presentation on social media. They found that posting ephemeral Instagram Stories made people feel more authentic compared to more permanent and often more curated Instagram posts, and also found that users' ability to control their privacy positively influenced perceived authenticity. The authors discuss that designing for spontaneity may play an important role in improving well-being [39].

While authenticity can be treated as a design goal, extant work suggests it may be deeply entangled with other values that shape how people practice it. Drawing from Friedman's [23, 24] and Nissenbaum's [47] work on values, we know that values are not only embedded in technology but also emerge through users' situated practices. Our aim is to understand which values are in play when users evaluate the authenticity of their own behavior across contexts. BeReal's arbitrary timer and real-time sharing affordances provide a unique lens into exploring this, as they likely surface moments when users must negotiate authenticity in ways that reveal deeper value conflicts and priorities. There is a need to examine how authenticity is practiced in relation to competing contextual norms and values, which is especially important as authenticity can have positive psychological outcomes [28, 39, 43, 58].

RQ2: How does authenticity come into tension with other values?

3 Methods

3.1 Data Collection

We analyzed semi-structured interview data with 25 BeReal users, which were collected as part of a larger effort to understand self-presentation on social media. In this earlier paper, members of our research group examined how authenticity is understood, performed, and evaluated as it conflicts with people's goals to present an idealized self [55]. We extend this work by examining how other tensions, beyond self-presentation, influence the practice of authenticity. We focused our study on BeReal as a deliberately bounded case study due to its unique design goal of promoting authenticity and its distinct set of affordances and constraints. Unlike other social media platforms, BeReal operationalizes authenticity in a particularly rigid way, which makes it an especially rich site for examining how authenticity is both designed for and negotiated in practice. Studying BeReal in isolation allowed us to deeply explore the tensions between design and user behavior within a platform that foregrounds authenticity as a central value.

Participants were 18-24 years old (M=20; SD=1.31), which reflects BeReal's largest user demographic [64]. In terms of participant demographics, 20 self-identified as "female" and 5 self-identified as "male." Furthermore, ten identified as "White," ten as "Asian," four as "Other," and one as "Black or African American." Participants were recruited from multiple university campuses in a large metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States by distributing flyers across campus, reaching out to faculty and university administrators to promote the study among students, and asking interview participants to share the study information with others. To be eligible to participate, participants had to have posted on BeReal within the prior seven days. Participants were compensated with a 25 USD Amazon gift card.

The interviews, conducted over Zoom (n=21) and in-person (n=4) between April and July 2023, lasted 30 to 90 minutes (M=53, SD=14.49). Participants were asked questions about how they conceptualize authenticity, how they engage on BeReal, and what content they post. Prior to the interviews, the researchers obtained informed consent from the participants for their involvement in the study and for audio recording. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were professionally transcribed. The researchers removed identifiable information from the transcripts and assigned pseudonyms to participants to protect their privacy.

3.2 Data Analysis

Our data analysis process was informed by Braun and Clarke's guidance on reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which is conceptualized as a six-step process in which steps can be blended together and become increasingly recursive [8–10]. In the first step, two of the authors familiarized themselves with the data by reading through the transcripts, memoing initial thoughts, and meeting

to discuss initial observations. The next step involved coding, where the two authors independently coded the data using the Dedoose software to create initial codes related to the research questions. These early codes pertained to higher-level categories: user behaviors (e.g., posting late, shifting the scene), content of posts (e.g., posting highlights, avoiding posting emotional moments), participants' conceptualizations of authenticity (e.g., being open, not editing the post), and values (e.g., following social norms, being socially connected). The coding process was iterative as the authors met multiple times to refine and collapse the initial codes, adjust the categories, re-code as needed, and resolve misalignment. This iteration resulted in a set of codes that both researchers agreed upon, allowing for more consistent engagement and systematic coding. Upon completion of coding, codes were grouped into themes. For example, the codes "showing different sides," "showing bad/unideal sides," "being honest," "being open," and "being vulnerable" were combined into the theme of "representative self-presentation."

In understanding participants' interpretations of authenticity, the analysis process was more inductive as it was grounded in the content of the data. In understanding other values, however, the analysis combined inductive and deductive approaches as it was initially grounded in the data, but existing ideas and literature around what values are and how they exist in tension helped to deepen our analytic interpretation. We did not come into the coding process with a predetermined list and definitions of values, but we did come in with a pre-existing notion of values as sensitizing constructs. Drawing from Friedman [24] and Nissenbaum [47], we used definitions of values consistent with work by both Friedman and Nissenbaum, who focus on factors that are of shared importance to users, but have since expanded the idea of values to encompass anything that people find important in their lives. This operational definition of values and related ideas helped refine our interpretive lens and define the values we observed in the data.

While identifying privacy and autonomy was more deductive, as these values are well-established in the literature, identifying reminiscence required a more inductive approach. For example, some of our initial codes were "posting highlights" and "documenting memories," which were initially coded under the categories of "user behaviors" and "content of posts." These codes were eventually integrated into "reminiscence," which required a more inductive approach as reminiscence had not been explicitly discussed as a value in the literature and thus required more interpretation.

4 Findings

In our analysis process, we frequently observed participants referring to everyday BeReal usage with the word "BeFake" in place of "BeReal." As Eden said:

> ...my friends and I, when it first came out, would be like, "That was so real. You posted, that was so BeReal." And then now people will be like, "Let me post my BeFake."

This tongue-in-cheek expression helped us understand how participants conceptualized the sociotechnical intersection of BeReal's design and their own evolving sense of authentic behavior. Specifically, we identified two themes in our data that we used to structure our results.

First, we found that participants' sense of authenticity reflected frequent tension between two competing conceptualizations: 1) their perception of authenticity as operationalized in the design of BeReal; and 2) their sense of what it means to behave as one's true or ostensibly authentic self. Second, we found that these tensions around authenticity were often foregrounded by the conflict between authenticity and other contextually salient values such as privacy, autonomy, and reminiscence, which emerged in our analyses. In the face of these tensions, participants often acted strategically in ways that enabled more control over their self-presentation, even when this did not conform to BeReal's operationalization of authenticity.

4.1 Interpreting Authenticity: Two Facets of Authenticity

In this section, we address **RQ1: How do users interpret authenticity in practice?** Through our analysis, we found two facets of authenticity: impromptu posting and representative self-presentation.

4.1.1 Authenticity as Practicing Impromptu Posting. As mentioned previously, BeReal's design ostensibly encourages authentic sharing through its unique design features, which prescribe a conceptualization of authenticity that favors unplanned and uncurated posts. Many participants, in describing their own interpretations of authenticity, acknowledged BeReal's approach and understood what, as Charlotte said, "BeReal wants you to be [doing]" through its design. We refer to this facet of authenticity as *practicing impromptu posting*, which resembles Reddy and Kumar's [57] notion of "extemporaneous interaction." As we describe below, however, the conceptualization we pose in this paper illustrates additional nuance as participants described posting late and curating their posts.

On the one hand, participants clearly understood how BeReal's design was intended to encourage them to share in an authentic way, particularly when compared to other platforms. This was evidenced by participants who spoke about impromptu posting with quantifiers like "more authentic" as well as participants who compared perceived authenticity on BeReal to other social media. For example, Daphne said:

> …[BeReal's] initial thing was to get away from Instagram and being fake on Instagram and editing all your pictures and retaking them a million times. So I think it was just for being more unfiltered. Because you're not going to edit that photo. It's just going to be you, if that's what you're posting. So it does, I mean even for myself, it allows me to be more just natural.

Participants further saw how BeReal's operationalization of authenticity seemed to be designed in deliberate contrast to these other platforms. First, there was a temporal aspect of authenticity that stemmed from the app's arbitrarily timed prompt described above. Rodrigo said, "You have to show what you're doing at the moment, or else it's not authentic," while Anya noted that she believed these temporal aspects of BeReal's design were intended to discourage editing by limiting the available time for doing so and reducing the pressure to edit your photos. According to Anya,

> …social media has a reputation of being fake and promoting inauthenticity, and people often literally editing themselves so that they don't even look themselves anymore to appease their audience or whoever's looking at their posts. And I think BeReal is an attempt to mitigate that pressure. And they wanted a platform where you don't have to feel the pressure to edit your photos or look your best or post at a certain time so you get enough likes or whatever.

The second aspect of authenticity participants described related to BeReal's encouragement of uncurated posts that had not been filtered. As Jacob summarized, "you post at a specific time and there is no social media filter."

Even as participants understood how this design encouraged authenticity, they also admitted to some nuance in their interpretations. Many felt it was still possible to embrace this view if one did not behave exactly as the design prescribed. For example, Leah suggested that one could be seen as authentic even when posting outside the two-minute window. This was especially true in cases where people did not immediately see the "Time to BeReal" notification on their phones. For Leah, "that authenticity factor comes from sharing what you're doing in real-time…taking a BeReal at that moment, then you stick to that moment," as long as that moment was when one saw the notification, regardless of whether it was within the two-minute timer or not.

For some participants, however, there were limits to this interpretive flexibility. Anya felt that posting late can only be considered authentic if the post is within a reasonable time horizon:

> I think just being authentic in the sense of, yes, it's okay to be late because you're obviously doing stuff, but not to the point where it's a whole different day.

Some participants also revealed some inconsistency between their embrace of BeReal's operationalization of authenticity and their perceptions of their own behavior. Daphne, for example, said that she does believe impromptu posting encourages authenticity by allowing her to "be more just natural," but she also felt that this was in tension with her sense that authenticity is also about being true to herself. She said:

> I feel like holding off on Be Reals doesn't like...I know some people are really sticklers about it and I know one of my friends says, unless it's five minutes after you shouldn't be posting. But for me, I am being my authentic self all day. So if I post it later on in the day, I'm still being authentic because I'm being true to me because I wanted to wait. That's just who I am. So just my authentic self is who I am just all the time.

In these examples, we see that some participants did embrace and believe the ideas that appeared to underlie BeReal's design, particularly when compared to other social media platforms. However, in practice, they also felt that more interpretive flexibility and nuance were warranted than BeReal's design appeared to allow. We return to this flexibility later in the results.

4.1.2 Authenticity as Practicing Representative Self-Presentation. Another theme that emerged in our analysis was that many participants experienced authenticity as presenting their experiences in an honest and open way, even when this risked the possibility of conveying a negative impression. We refer to this as *representative self-presentation*, which complements Reddy and Kumar's notion of "comprehensive self-presentation" [57]. While comprehensive self-presentation emphasizes portraying a fuller range of experiences, representative self-presentation involves sharing content that feels aligned with one's internal state or values. Though distinct, these approaches are interrelated as users may aim to post something that feels true in the moment and work toward presenting a more complete picture of themselves across multiple posts.

One important aspect of representative self-presentation was being true to one's real experiences in sharing online. Charlotte, for example, described authenticity for her as "not faking anything, and not pretending to be something or do something that you normally wouldn't do just to show to your friends." Charlotte added that authenticity means "not hiding how you feel." This notion of openness and avoiding the perception of hiding aspects of oneself was resonant with several participants. For some, this meant actively striving to reveal different facets of themselves. Mia, for example, said:

> I think authenticity for me comes from being honest and open with yourself. For example, I've started therapy this past fall and one thing that I recognized was that I've had trouble being open to friends...so I think when I try to be authentic on the app, it's more for me to get more comfortable with opening up. Maybe being more vulnerable with people that I care about.

This vulnerability highlights the importance of sharing things that may seem negative, which several participants acknowledged to be both difficult and important in practice. Eva, for example, said part of being authentic is "not caring about what other people are going to think." She said:

> ...I think with stuff like BeReal, it hides a lot of that authentic part of you from maybe what you don't want people to see, or you're trying to stage it to make everything look good. But I think just being authentic comes from not caring about what other people are going to think. Maybe you're taking a BeReal at a weird time where you

don't think you look your best. Being authentic maybe would be just doing it anyways, or when you're in an emotional state, just doing it anyways, type of thing.

But as we saw with impromptu posting, participants expressed nuances involved in this interpretation of authenticity. A few participants, like Leah, believed that showing different sides could be "bad." Leah believes that authenticity does not require full transparency, acknowledging that there are detriments to showing "every side of yourself," but rather involves honesty and vulnerability in how one presents oneself.

It's not like you have to show each and every side of yourself to someone because that'd be bad. But I think it's just about the heart or intention behind it. You're not trying to deliberately change the narrative, or craft a curated persona, or anything. But just really showing yourself without airs or pretending to be someone you're not.

Leah's example foreshadows our next results section, which uncovers some challenges of embodying representative self-presentation.

4.2 Values in Tension

In the previous section, we discussed participants' two facets of authenticity. In this section, we address **RQ2: How does authenticity come into tension with other values?** In practice, we found that as participants navigated their everyday lives, they found these dueling conceptualizations of authenticity as impromptu posting and representative self-presentation difficult to abide by when using BeReal. Nearly every participant described instances where, instead of posting in the moment or presenting themselves in an honest and vulnerable way, they would instead delay their BeReal posts or try to curate them to show a more positive side. Many said they observed others doing the same.

We argue below that these behaviors, often referred to as "being fake" and being "BeFake," stem from value tensions as participants navigated conflicting priorities as they crossed between contexts in their everyday lives. BeReal's design appeared to catalyze these tensions by unilaterally and homogenously superimposing its own operationalization of authenticity onto the rich and varied complexities of participants' lives.

4.2.1 Privacy. One value that frequently arose in our analysis is *privacy*, which we operationally define in light of Nissenbaum's [47, 48] influential contextual integrity framework. As we describe above, Nissenbaum's [47, 48] framework suggests that everyday activities occur within contexts, each of which has its own normative privacy expectations that determine what types of information can appropriately be shared and how. As they navigated the many contexts of their everyday lives, participants felt that BeReal's operationalization of authenticity sometimes demanded behavior that was inconsistent with contextual expectations for privacy. Consequently, many participants curated their posts, even when this conflicted with their understanding of authenticity in the BeReal context.

In multiple cases, participants' colleges or workplaces had rules or norms that proscribed certain types of sharing. Audrey's workplace, for example, had rules against employees revealing any client data, leading her to be more mindful because "you can't just take a picture of whatever you're working on at that moment." Rodrigo, who interned at a hospital, expressed concern over preserving other people's privacy: "I would cover my screen up if there were patient names and stuff...and would wait until I got back in the main hallway or back to the office before I did anything."

Some participants began to realize this as they used BeReal over time and as they navigated different contexts. For Avery, privacy became a more salient value after accidentally revealing confidential information:

> I was in charge of putting together a scholarship actually for one of the clubs I'm in. The BeReal [two-minute timer] went off while I was in the library just working on homework, but I had the tab open with the scholarship winners' application, and you could see the name in the title of the tab. I remember one of my friends actually came out to me a couple days later once the scholarship recipient had been announced, and she was like, "Yeah, I already saw, because you accidentally put it in your BeReal." And so, ever since then, I do think about it just because I had that experience.

Many participants addressed this by assessing their surroundings before they took their BeReals and finding ways to avoid sharing certain details. For example, Juliet would switch to a browser tab she was "fine with others reading." Similarly, Kate said:

> I guess I've never felt pressured to expose more than I wanted to because if I'm worried about privacy, I'll just leave the room or I'll switch something up and then stuff like that. Yeah.

There were also cases where sharing one's activities in the moment on BeReal might be in tension with the normative expectations of a very narrowly construed context, such as a particular social relationship. In these cases, participants were concerned that practicing impromptu posting would reveal their location or activities, potentially prompting conflicts in certain relationships. Kate added:

> Sometimes I'll post on BeReal but I haven't sent a text [responding to a friend], I'll be like, "Oh," or if I'm ignoring an obligation, I'll be like, "Uh." I had some friendships squabbles and I was like, "Should I post that I'm hanging out with this person because this person is upset with that person," type thing.

Participants also felt tension between their desire to be authentic in the sense of presenting their true self, or practicing representative self-presentation, and their normative understanding of what is acceptable to share among their friends and/or on social media platforms more generally. Mateo felt that it was possible to be "too real," while Mia suggested that there are "some things people do not need to know."

Charlotte, who shared a similar mentality, said:

> ...some things are a little too private [to post on BeReal]. With tabs on my computer, I don't necessarily want people to see what I've opened up. Or if my room is messy, I'd go to a different room...sometimes, even when I'm at home or at a friend's place, there's also that issue of privacy because I'm posting their room, or apartment, or whatever.

This concern also impacted participants' behaviors around posting negative emotional content. When asked if they would share this type of content, multiple participants expressed that it was inappropriate in the context, as Leah said:

> I just personally am someone who prefers to keep that [emotional] stuff to myself, and I wouldn't want to...even though this audience is relatively smaller, it's not like I know all of them extremely well or anything. So, it's just something I'd prefer not to share.

We found that participants' sense of privacy was incredibly dynamic as they used BeReal for longer and found themselves in situations where they had to navigate different contexts. Furthermore, the onus of privacy was placed on participants to self-manage.

4.2.2 Autonomy. A second value that frequently arose in our analysis was participants' sense of *autonomy*, which we define in light of Friedman's [23] and Friedman and Nissenbaum's [25] characterization as users' ability to choose online behaviors that are consistent with their goals,

interests, and priorities. There was a clear, emergent tension between, on the one hand, participants' eagerness to be ostensibly authentic by impromptu posting at the daily "Time to BeReal" notification and, on the other, their desire to maintain control over when, what, and how they posted. For many participants, this tension became more salient over time, as the app became part of their routine and as they observed how others were using it.

While BeReal's design clearly encourages what we called authenticity as impromptu posting above, many participants described rejecting BeReal's daily prompt and timer, using language like "that's how I use it" or "if I wanted to," with Jacob referring to the timer as "an opt-in type thing." Leah mentioned a desire for temporal control, pushing back on how BeReal imposes on her ability to select when she could share. She said, "there's so much autonomy still of what you want to post," perceiving BeReal's design as still allowing people to determine when they want to post despite the two-minute timer, comparing BeReal to Instagram Stories.

> [BeReal's] original intent was that you have to finish it within these two minutes. And I guess it's also about your definition of fake and real. It's not even that it's not real because I am choosing to commit to taking it in that one specific moment that I choose...I guess it introduces a new element, like Instagram Stories. I can choose when I want to post.

Other participants described some situations when they would not comply with BeReal's timer. As in Leah's example, they sometimes wanted more control over what they shared, either to share positive moments or avoid sharing negative ones. Brianna added:

> I mean, obviously some moments I've chosen to skip doing BeReal, maybe I just wasn't in the mood, maybe I didn't want to put a selfie online that day...I don't know if BeReal would say that's inauthentic, but it's just in the way that I use the app and interpret the app.

A second reason participants mentioned was that BeReal's notification would frequently arrive when they were in a context where posting a BeReal would be normatively inappropriate. Participants like Eva felt it was important to prioritize physical-world social interactions as she saw BeReal's imperative to post authentically in the moment as a potential threat to the perceived authenticity of her interactions with friends. Eva explained that she saw posting a BeReal when she was with friends as "taking away actually being real in the moment, and...taking away valuable time with your friends." For this reason, Eva felt posting on BeReal was "more of a hassle than something enjoyable," and often posted late, even deleting the app at one point.

As Avery further explained, if BeReal's notification arrived when she was not "in the right environment," she would:

> ...just ignore it and either miss the BeReal or take it later. . . or if I'm with a group of people and I feel weird about taking out my phone. . .I was in a group project meeting with a bunch of people I didn't know that well, and I was like, "Oh, this would be weird right now."

A third reason participants mentioned for not complying with BeReal's prompt was that BeReal's attempt to enforce timely posting via design by visibly marking late or retaken posts in potentially stigmatizing ways did not appear to participants to be effective among their friends. After seeing their friends post late without apparent consequence in terms of perceived inauthenticity, participants rationalized their own late posting by referencing their friends' behavior. Hayley, for example, said:

> ...I was definitely more committed to posting it at the exact time in the beginning, but then now, I'm more like, "Ehh, whatever." You know what I mean? Because before, it

would still be, "Oh, Katie posted late," and I'd be like, "Okay, that's embarrassing." But then, I realized that everyone posts late, so it's not embarrassing. So I just posted late.

Participants euphemistically referred to these late posts, as Brianna said, "doing a fake BeReal" and "being fake." These tacit acknowledgments not only illustrate they were not fully complying with BeReal's authenticity demands but also that these assertions of autonomy did not seem to threaten others' perceptions of their authenticity. The norms of BeReal, in other words, appeared to reflect a realization that BeReal's demands were sometimes counter-normative with regard to a larger sense of balance between autonomy and authenticity across the contexts people were navigating. As Anya said, "I'm not going to drop everything just to do it."

4.2.3 Reminiscence. Another clear theme that emerged in our results was participants' desire to review and reflect back on their past BeReals. Recall from above that BeReal posts are archived in a private calendar labeled "Memories" that can be reviewed at any time despite being ephemeral to users' BeReal contacts. HCI researchers have referred to this as *reminiscence*, and we, drawing on work by Cosley et al. [14], define this as the nostalgic recalling of one's experiences. Reminiscence has been shown to have positive psychological effects and can support identity building and maintenance [14, 51, 59]. While reminiscence has not been directly articulated as a value in the sense that privacy and autonomy have been, it was clearly important to participants and in tension with their and BeReal's operationalization of authenticity. Therefore, we treated it as a value in our analysis, and we describe this tension here.

Participants articulated a clear tension between their desire to be authentic via impromptu posting and representative self-presentation, and their desire to share moments worthy of revisiting later. In describing this latter desire, participants used words like "worth remembering," "documenting," and "capturing," which illustrate that their BeReals were often more than ephemeral and arbitrary snapshots. By allowing users to archive posts, the Memories feature heightened this tension as participants accumulated more posts and started to build a growing archive of these memories they could revisit and reflect on. They did so often, and multiple participants said it evoked positive emotions like nostalgia and happiness. Sienna looked back on her Memories, "if not every day, every other day" while Mia tended to open the Memories feature when she was bored, saying "it's kind of nice to have a reminder to capture what I'm doing every day" and be able to look back on her posts to reminisce.

The Memories feature clearly resonated with participants. Natalie explicitly said, "I use [BeReal] more for being able to look back on what I do rather than as a social media app" while Bryn similarly mentioned that "now I'm more interested in the memories part of it all…I think that's my favorite feature of the app."

But this reminiscence often, in turn, increased their desire to share moments worthy of future nostalgic reminiscence, even if these were at odds with their facets of authenticity as described above. As Hayley said, she and her friends began to use BeReal for its role in "documenting a fun part of their lives." Despite that Hayley believed it was important to document more unpleasant sides of the self, she, in practice, sought to document moments that were boring or funny.

> …sometimes [BeReals] can be boring, and it's just the meme of your day. Or sometimes it can be the high range of your day, or sometimes, I would never say it would encapsulate the low range…something that I like to do is whenever I make a big oopsie, if I literally drop a whole ice cream on the ground, I will take that.

When asked if there were instances she would not post on BeReal, Sienna attributed her desire to not post these moments to reminiscence:

> If it's a bad day, I probably wouldn't want to look back on that bad day. Then, obviously, I wouldn't just be like, "Oh, my gosh, here's me crying."

When the "Time to BeReal" notification arrived, many participants sought to capture a better or more interesting moment. For Gemma, she sought to capture a mix of "highlights" of her day and more everyday moments.

> I think it's a little bit of highlight of the day, but I think it's also a little bit of what I'm just doing at a random point in time regularly, because I think there have been moments where I knew I was going to do something fun, and I would like to BeReal that, but the BeReal went off and I'm just studying, I'll take the BeReal while I'm studying. You know what I mean? I won't save it if what I'm doing is already my criteria of okay. I think it's a document of highlights, but also just what I'm just typically doing regularly.

For Gemma, posting negative content would, in ways, tarnish her curated collection of BeReal memories. She expressed that posting a photo of her crying would "mess up my line of lovely events that I have in my memories."

In contrast to BeReal's operationalization of authenticity as impromptu posting, participants like Leah used BeReal as a diary of things she wanted to remember.

> ...it serves a diary purpose for me. So I'm just like, "I'll save it for when I'm doing something more remotely interesting that I might want to look back on in the future."

Juliet, who early in her interview said that "being authentic is recognizing that there are really great days, there are some bad ones too" observed that "BeReal, at the beginning, was very authentic in the sense of, for the most part, people really would post in the moment and show exactly what they were doing." But her own experience and observations of her friends on BeReal suggest that people increasingly prioritized reminiscence over the facets of authenticity previously discussed.

One particularly interesting aspect of this tension between reminiscence and authenticity is that, unlike the tensions with privacy and autonomy that appeared to stem from the superimposition of BeReal's norms and demands on various physical-world contexts, this tension seems to stem primarily from BeReal's own design. By including a feature that encourages reminiscence, designers appear to have reduced the likelihood that users will behave authentically in their prescribed manner. They also appear to have done so in a way that seems likely to intensify over time. As participants reminisce, they are likely to share more highlight moments than authentic moments that make them want to reminisce even more. These highlights are also visible to users' BeReal contacts, and these highlights—and not in-the-moment or vulnerable posts—become the normative expectation on BeReal.

Multiple participants directly pitted the embodiment of authenticity as a value on BeReal against their desire to "commemorate the best moments," acknowledging that their behaviors go against the operationalization of authenticity the app encourages. As Sienna said:

> I feel the point, at least when it was first established... is you want to just show what you're doing in that moment that the BeReals go off—no matter how you look, no matter what you're doing, no matter if you're cognizant of who you're posting it to. It's just here is me, here is what I am doing at this specific time. I feel that is, at least for BeReal, that's supposed to be the authenticity. But, I feel as time has progressed, people are gravitating farther from that and just trying to...similarly to how I view it... "Oh, I want to commemorate the best moments of each day." Which is why it sometimes pushes people to just post later, if you're not doing really anything that's important that day.

5   Discussion

We began with the question of how to design social platforms that encourage authenticity, with the goal of potentially improving users' experiences with social media and certain well-being outcomes [28, 43, 58]. To provide a foundation for reflecting on our results, we draw on the concept of a "design space" [44, 72, 74], a metaphorical Euclidean space defined by key design dimensions. This allows us to consider and compare the relative positions of different platforms within that space with regard to how they might support authenticity. We can then leverage Davis' [16] mechanisms and conditions framework to consider how different positions in the authenticity design space affect people's behavior and perceptions of authenticity.

Based on our analysis, we identified four core dimensions of the authenticity design space: temporal selection, persistence, content modification, and content selection. Table 1 provides definitions of the dimensions, which we will draw upon in this discussion. BeReal, as we will discuss further, is low in *temporal selection* (control over when content is shared and captured) and low in *content selection* (control over what content is shared). This combination results in a limited set of possible behaviors, which may encourage impromptu posting, but also reduces users' choices about how to present themselves authentically.

Dimension	Definition	Low Examples	High Examples
Temporal Selection	The degree of control over when content is captured and/or when it is shared with others	BeReal: The prompt limits do not allow users as much freedom to choose when they post	Instagram: Allows users total freedom to choose when they post
Persistence	How long content remains visible (to self and to wider audience) after it is posted	BeReal: Posts disappear to others after 24 hours Snapchat: Posts are only visible to others for a maximum of 10 seconds	BeReal: Posts are archived through the Memories feature for the posting user only
Content Modification	The ability to alter or edit a post before or after sharing	BeReal: Does not allow editing photos before posting	Instagram: Allows users to manipulate their posts through filters and other editing tools
Content Selection	The ability to choose what content to share, such as selecting a photo from the camera roll, getting the best shot	BeReal: Does not allow users to upload photos from the camera roll	Instagram: Allows users to upload photos from the camera roll

Table 1. Dimensions of the authenticity design space, with examples of low and high implementations.

Reddy and Kumar [57] argue that BeReal's mechanisms—requesting more visibility into users' lives and discouraging late or modified posts—are intended to encourage authenticity, but are not always effective in doing so. Our findings reveal that one potential reason for this is a misalignment between BeReal's position in the authenticity design space and how our participants practice authenticity in their everyday lives. Through mechanisms that constrain users' behavior, BeReal's design proscribes a narrow operationalization of authenticity that reflects how BeReal's designers hope authenticity will be practiced. However, our participants chose to ignore many of these mechanisms.

As we described in our results, participants conceptualized authenticity in ways that often felt misaligned with BeReal's design. Many participants opted to curate their posts and also post later, despite knowing this was at odds with the app's design and some of their peers' expectations. Our

findings illustrate how BeReal's design is primarily mechanism-driven, often overlooking what Davis [16] calls the conditions of affordances that also govern people's practices. We focus here on Davis' idea of cultural and institutional legitimacy, which we defined in the Background section above.

Here, we present three tensions that illustrate the disconnect between BeReal's position in the authenticity design space and participants' practices of authenticity. We contribute to deepening understandings of the relationship between the design space and the sociotechnical conditions in which users engage, while offering suggestions for navigating these tensions in design.

5.1 Tension 1: Facets of Authenticity

Our findings revealed two facets of authenticity at work in participants' experiences on BeReal, which at times were in tension with each other and difficult to navigate. On one hand, many perceived one facet of authenticity as what we call *impromptu posting*—sharing photos in the moment and in an unfiltered way. This is analogous to Reddy and Kumar's [57] notion of "extemporaneous interaction." On the other hand, we also saw that participants conceptualized authenticity as presenting themselves in ways that felt honest, vulnerable, and unconcerned with others' perceptions. We refer to this second facet as *representative self-presentation*. This builds on Reddy and Kumar's notion of "comprehensive self-presentation" [57], by adding alignment with and feeling true to oneself.

Our findings suggest that the frequent tension participants felt between these two facets of authenticity stemmed from a conflict between BeReal's mechanisms and what Davis [16] calls the contextual conditions in which participants experienced them, specifically cultural legitimacy. Thinking about this in terms of our authenticity design space, BeReal's arbitrarily timed prompt and requirement of live photos with the front and back cameras rather than photos uploaded from a camera roll, are related to the dimensions of *temporal selection* (the ability to control when content is captured and shared) and *content selection* (the ability to choose what content is shared). These limitations on users' ability to choose what they share are designed to evoke behaviors consistent with impromptu posting, but they threatened participants' sense of *autonomy*, even though they wanted to be authentic. For example, Mia believed it was important to open up and be vulnerable, but felt that posting at certain moments arbitrarily selected by BeReal might reveal inappropriate and overly personal content.

Moreover, BeReal's low position on the content selection dimension, evident by the inability to upload photos from the user's camera roll, in addition to its low position on the *content modification* dimension (the ability to modify or edit posts), evident by the lack of filters and other editing features, are meant to encourage representative self-presentation via raw and less-filtered expression. However, our participants circumvented these constraints, such as by waiting to post later or shifting the scene around them. This allowed them to share what and when they wanted to, which was inconsistent with BeReal's expectations. Autonomy also offers another way to think about Haimson et al.'s [31] authenticity paradox, where social media users value authenticity but also need autonomy to selectively self-present and choose what is beneficial to them and their identity needs.

While we identify temporal selection, content selection, and content modification as relevant design space dimensions here, others may be important in other social media contexts. Designing for authenticity may require more thoughtful alignment between affordances and the diverse ways users navigate and express authenticity in everyday life. We suggest that designers consider the conditions that shape users' behaviors, including their desire for autonomy over self-presentation and ability to select what is appropriate to share as authentic. As we gleaned from the case of BeReal, simply constraining users across these dimensions may not be the most effective approach.

Designing for authenticity may mean designing for greater flexibility by allowing more choice over when, where, and how they post. This is very common on popular platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which suggests it may be important to users. Full flexibility, however, may be ineffective, as experience with mainstream platforms suggests that greater freedom can lead to greater curation. The design challenge is to give users choices and scaffold or reinforce certain facets of authenticity. For example, a platform like BeReal could send multiple prompts a day and request that users choose one, providing more freedom to decide when content is captured and shared, while still aligning with the facets of authenticity reflected in behavior. On platforms like Instagram, where some constraints may be desirable to encourage authenticity, adding more scaffolding could be beneficial. For instance, limiting temporal selection for Stories and only allowing users to share pictures taken in the moment could help enforce authenticity.

5.2 Tension 2: Privacy in Multiple Contexts

The second tension our results highlight is between the *privacy* norms and values of BeReal as an online context and the privacy norms and values of the everyday contexts participants were in when they received the daily "Time to BeReal" prompt. This tension across multiple contexts stems from BeReal's low position on the temporal selection dimension. In effect, however, this design decision binds the arbitrary prompt time to the place (and context) the user happens to occupy at that moment. Users are expected to capture and share a photo from wherever they happen to be at that time. For example, if the prompt arrives while the user is at work, they are encouraged to post within that professional context, regardless of whether or not it is appropriate under those conditions.

This tension underscores how the disconnect between BeReal's position in the design space and user behavior may be amplified in what have been called hybrid spaces [17], where people are simultaneously present in both an online space and a physical-world context. While BeReal's low position on the temporal selection dimension is intended to cultivate a certain type of authentic expression, people's behavior in any given moment is shaped by their current contextual conditions [16]. Designing for hybrid spaces requires recognizing that users operate across social and cultural contexts, each with its own norms, expectations, and values [16]. In these spaces, practicing authenticity is not simply about being spontaneous. Rather, it involves context-aware self-presentation as users attempt to balance authenticity with other concerns like privacy. This meant participants were often confronted with difficult choices.

BeReal superimposes its own contextual norms and expectations about privacy on the many physical-world contexts people navigate as they go about their everyday lives. When participants were trying to practice authenticity, this led to situations where they did not want to be authentic in the ways BeReal's design was encouraging. Participants, at times, had to choose between abiding by the app's requests for impromptu posting or behaving appropriately in their physical-world location. Our participants ultimately prioritized the latter and found alternative strategies for sharing on BeReal. For example, some participants curated their posts by waiting to post later or by selectively changing aspects of their setting, such as Charlotte, who discussed going into a different room or closing tabs on her laptop.

Some participants prioritized the norms, expectations, and values of their physical-world contexts to avoid threatening social relationships. Recall Kate, who was concerned that posting in the moment might reveal social details that could lead to later conflicts with friends. Maddox [45] discusses this consequence of BeReal's position in the design space, which ultimately leads to what feels like panopticism and social surveillance, where users may monitor each other's behavior and feel as though they are also being monitored by others. This privacy concern also shows how BeReal's arbitrary timing can itself be a sort of activity indicator that reveals what Cobb [13] refers to as

"presence information." By binding the arbitrary prompt time to user location, BeReal allows others to discern where you are and what you are doing at that moment, ultimately threatening users' ability to manage their privacy in a manner they feel is appropriate across relationships.

We observed a similar phenomenon with regard to sensitive or negative emotional content. Despite BeReal's request that users share a glimpse into their lives [57], many participants clearly felt uncomfortable with the idea of sharing emotionally negative or vulnerable moments on BeReal, or otherwise practicing representative self-presentation, even when these were behaviors they nominally considered important to authenticity. Our findings support the notion that how people actually practice authenticity is impacted by the collision of contextual platform norms and contextual physical-world norms. Prior work on sharing on social media [6] suggests that sharing vulnerable content outside of a private conversation may be perceived as inappropriate. Pinch et al. [54], in a study of sensitive social platform disclosures by LGBTQ+ adolescents, found that participants had clear perceptions of what was appropriate and relevant on different platforms. For example, participants felt it was appropriate to share information about their sexual health on a dating app but not on mainstream social platforms. Our study supports these findings, illustrating how it may not be appropriate or desirable to disclose more sensitive information to wider social media audiences.

This tension in some ways resembles and extends the context collapse problem, where social media platforms collapse users' rich and varied audiences from many contexts of their lives into one flattened online context in which content intended for one audience can easily be seen by unintended others [46]. On BeReal, however, we have shown how the app imposes its own vision, ostensibly with norms and values, about "authentic" posting onto many physical-world contexts, each with its own norms and values around information sharing and other behaviors [47]. We term this *context imposition*—a dynamic in which a platform-defined context is projected onto users' diverse physical-world situations. What results is a hybrid space that constrains their ability to navigate privacy, authenticity, and other behaviors on their own terms.

A more specific kind of flexibility could be beneficial to lessen the tensions caused by the bind between the arbitrary prompt time and location, while preserving the spontaneous and raw sharing BeReal cultivates. One approach is to soften constraints by allowing users to respond to the timer by informing the app they cannot post at an inappropriate time, but allowing the app to prompt them again later in the day. Another approach might be to alter BeReal's position on the content manipulation dimension by allowing users to blur out backgrounds that may reveal private information. These approaches provide users with more flexibility, without fully compromising the authenticity benefits of low temporal selection and the potential detriments of high content modification. In other contexts where this bind does not exist, privacy may be less of an issue, and spontaneity may play a lesser role in perceived authenticity. For example, sharing one's location on a TikTok post may not pose a serious privacy threat, as the platform allows for high temporal selection, but may not signal authenticity as strongly. Instead, authenticity may be cultivated through what content is selected rather than when and where [3].

5.3 Tension 3: Conflicting Design Features

The third tension we identified is between conflicting aspects of BeReal's design. On the one hand, many of BeReal's features—as we have discussed—are intended to encourage ephemeral, in-the-moment sharing of raw and unfiltered moments to their audiences. On the other hand, many of our participants reported using BeReal's Memories feature, which allows users to privately archive their own posts for future viewing and ultimately *reminisce*. It was clear that participants were fond of the Memories feature, such as Sienna observing herself and others beginning to value

the opportunity to reminisce about memories more than the opportunity to share random moments that coincide with the prompt.

As Sienna's experience suggests, the Memories feature renders content persistent only to the user themselves, but not to others. Reddy and Kumar refer to this as an "ephemerality for them, persistence for me" approach [57]. In our analysis, we saw how this affected how participants engaged with BeReal over time. Rather than treating BeReal as a space for spontaneous and raw sharing, our participants began using it as a personal photo album or diary. Participants selectively posted moments that, for example, Gemma referred to as "highlights" of her day, rather than ordinary or representative experiences that align with the facets of authenticity discussed above.

By increasing its position on the dimension of *persistence* (how long content remains visible) only to the self, BeReal, using Davis' terms [16], allowed reminiscing behavior through the Memories feature. Even though the persistence of content was low (or ephemeral) to others, participants became more likely to carefully select moments they might wish to reflect on in the future, as they knew their posts would be preserved in a personal archive. As Pinch et al. [55] describe, users adopted a "self-as-audience" mindset, selecting content not for others but for their future selves.

This tension between BeReal's features, oriented toward authenticity, and the Memories feature (illustrating high persistence to the self) underscores the need to align design intentions with user behaviors. If cultivating authenticity through impromptu posting is the platform's core goal, we urge caution around features that might be at odds with that goal, such as Memories that inadvertently allow users to use the app as a digital diary or photo album instead of being authentic via impromptu posting. While persistence and authenticity are not inherently at odds—content can be both lasting and authentic—we see how persistence can lead to trade-offs with impromptu authenticity. Similar tensions may also exist on other platforms with reminiscing features like Facebook Memories or Instagram Highlights. Highlights is an especially interesting feature as it allows ephemeral stories to be made permanently persistent to others.

It is also worthwhile to consider how we might support the benefits of authenticity and reminiscence simultaneously. Research on reminiscence suggests that it can increase identity development [14], while the act of remembering can increase well-being [36, 69]. According to Cosley et al. [14], social media is a tool to support people's everyday reminiscing as it helps with identity creation and relationship maintenance, which is valuable throughout the lifespan. But as we noted earlier, authenticity has also been linked to psychological benefits [28, 43, 58]. BeReal could allow users to choose whether their daily post is saved to Memories instead of automatically saving all posts. This could also be paired with a limit on the number of posts users can archive, making the act of saving a post more intentional. Offering greater flexibility in the persistence dimension can ease the tension between these competing design features while encouraging both authenticity and reminiscence.

Furthermore, this tension within the dimension of persistence—between persistence to self and ephemerality to others—highlights the complex relationship between how content is experienced by the creator and the audience. As our participants demonstrated, content can indeed be meaningful for the poster by capturing a memory or acting as a source of reflection, even though it eventually disappears for others. On the other hand, content is also important to be perceived as authentic to their audiences, as fleeting content may create a sense of authenticity due to its ephemerality [4]. This dynamic complicates the practice of authenticity because participants must balance what content makes them feel good and authentic with what content makes others perceive them as authentic.

5.4 Limitations

Although we believe our findings provide valuable insight into the complexities of operationalizing and practicing authenticity on social media, there are several reasons to interpret our results with caution. Our sample consisted of mostly females between the ages of 18—24, and most participants identified as "White" (40%) and "Asian" (40%). There is reason to believe that others with different backgrounds may perceive and experience differently. Although participants came off as outspoken and willing to talk about their "BeFake" behaviors, we also cannot fully dismiss the possible effect of social desirability bias, whereby participants respond or report in a manner that they felt would be viewed favorably.

This study focused solely on BeReal as a case study of authenticity in design. While this allowed for a deep investigation of how users negotiate authenticity within a platform that explicitly foregrounds it, a limitation of this approach is that it captures only one platform's operationalization of authenticity. Future work should examine how value tensions around authenticity surface across a broader range of social media contexts that users are likely navigating within. Additionally, our data collection relied on individual, retrospective interviews, which may not capture the full nuance of in-the-moment practices or decision-making. Future work could apply longitudinal or in-situ methods like diary studies or experience sampling.

6 Conclusion

In considering the effects of social media on well-being, authenticity has emerged as both a useful and complex factor. While there may be benefits to online behavior perceived as authentic, these perceptions vary widely across platforms and contexts. Our results highlight how design to encourage authentic behavior can force authenticity into tension with other values users may prioritize, such as privacy, autonomy, and the desire to reminisce on memorable moments. We further show how sharing what is likely to be perceived as authentic content is not merely a matter of sharing at arbitrarily selected moments without filters but also of ensuring that one is being normatively appropriate in overlapping physical world and online contexts, such as BeReal. By exploring these tensions that our participants experienced, we show the importance of considering authenticity in multiple overlapping contexts.

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