Chapter 24

Exploitation of Health on Instagram:
Motivations, Social Support, and Influencers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the exploitative nature of Instagram as a community-based platform. Individual users build, maintain, and participate in communities as a way to connect with experiences and insights that resonate with them. Because users are motivated by different gratifications and are met with social support along the way, brands can use influencers to exploit the community-based practices (i.e., liking, sharing, and curating content) to access a variety of data points from users. Ultimately, users' data is routinely at risk as a byproduct of this subversive use of the platform.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary experience of social media and interactions online can be best understood by examining platform uniqueness. The steady increase of social media platforms available – namely the meteoric rise of Instagram – creates a series of potential pitfalls. Instagram is a mobile, "photo and video sharing application" where users can upload and share their content with followers and/or with a selected group of friends ("What is Instagram?," 2020). Followers can view, comment, "Like," and share content as part of the phone application's primary functionality.

Superstar celebrities such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Ariana Grande, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and Selena Gomez have each accumulated over 165 million followers on Instagram (Statista, 2020). Although celebrities boast the most significant follower counts, a significant portion of Instagram's user base engages with less conventional celebrities often times referred to as microcelebrities or influencers (Abidin, 2018). In fact, many users gauge these influencers as being, "...more accessible, believable,

intimate, credible and influential in the purchase behaviors than traditional celebrities" (Balaban & Mustãtea, 2019, p. 33; see also Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Instagram has evolved past its original use as a photo and video-sharing social networking service into a tool for community and social support. In particular, Instagram has become a platform for individual users and influencers alike to participate in health-oriented community building.

Work by Muralidhara and Paul (2018) investigated the use of Instagram as a platform particularly conducive to sharing and disclosing health-related content online. The authors emphasized the value of Instagram as a platform by citing the wide array of topics that were discussed online including posts pertaining to diet, exercise, mental health, and substance abuse. A platform that was originally designed for sharing pictures of puppies playing on sandy beaches has organically developed into a safe haven for disclosures on significant health-related information.

Given Instagram's utility as a platform for sharing health-related content, there can be unexpected and worrisome complications pertaining toward users' sharing of information online. Zhu, Ton, and Wang (2019) note that users' disclosure of sensitive information may put users in harm's way. Specifically, end-users (e.g., the individual account holders using the platform) are unknowingly exposing themselves to targeted advertisements as a result of their Instagram behaviors and collected data. As noted by Christina Farr of CNBC (2017):

Unlike other industries, the pharmaceutical industry faces strict regulations on how it can promote its drugs on social channels. On Facebook, for instance, a drug company might target a person who has "liked" an advocacy page, or fits a certain demographic profile. But it would not be allowed to target ads to specific people based on a disease that Facebook knows or suspects they have. (para. 6)

Instagram's Terms of Service explicitly states, "[Users] might see ads based on the people you follow and things you like on Instagram, your information and interests on Facebook (if you have a Facebook account), and the websites and apps you visit" ("How does Instagram decide which ads to show me?," 2020). Aside from the algorithms and hashtags that push content searched by users to their application, Instagram is especially conducive to satisfying individual gratifications. Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) suggests that media consumers are psychologically and socially motivated to select media as a means to satisfy individual needs and desires (Rubin, 1994). In the case of Instagram, users' motivation to satisfy gratifications plays directly into the model of community-building. Viewers seeking to satisfy individual needs often participate in online communities without recognizing their data is being jeopardized.

Individual needs are often sought and satisfied within these online communities. In the case of Instagram, the recurring topic of mental health directly intersects with that of social support. Advances in accessible communication technologies have provided users with the ability (or lack thereof) to build, maintain, and terminate relationships online. In many instances, these online relationships may be one-sided (i.e., user observing conversations). Members of online communities may come together to support members despite frequently unidentifiable information (i.e., anonymous or unidentifiable membership). Users can appear as fast as they can disappear within online communities, leaving only an IP address trail behind, which creates a need to examine these online communities.

To summarize, a platform such as Instagram has a number of core user-experience features that are designed to drive behaviors from users (e.g., "Likes"). These particular behaviors are underscored by individuals' needs and desires that are often described as motivations via the uses and gratifications theory.

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