

“It's your Finsta at the end of the day, *'kind of'*”: Understanding Emerging Adults'

Self-Presentation on Finsta

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### **Abstract**

This study assesses emerging adults' understanding of how their Finsta (i.e., Fake Instagram) self-presentation evolves over time, starting from when they create an account to their present use. Interviews were conducted with 17 female undergraduate students who had at least one Finsta and one Rinsta (i.e., Real Instagram). Expanding on prior research that has found Finsta more accepting of negative self-presentation than Rinsta, I find that users are aware of how their audience would perceive them when they post complaints as emerging adults. As they become older, users either post more lighthearted content or share negativity that may be relatable to the audience to reflect their maturity. Further, users find engaging on Finsta difficult when their high school followers cannot understand the college content presented, they experience context collapse with high school and college groups, or they do not have or want to add college friends on Finsta. I also explore how the "Making Rinsta Casual Again" trend and the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced users' self-presentation and behaviors on Finsta.

## Introduction

Finsta, also known as the “fake Instagram,” is created by many people as a secondary Instagram account to express a more authentic (Taber & Whittaker, 2020) and expressive (Kang & Wei, 2020) self apart from their “real Instagram” Rinsta. It is a safe place to present “unseriousness, humour, and imperfection” (Xiao et al., 2020, p. 8).

Self-presentation can change based on social contexts, social norms, or the audience. Ellison et al. (2006) found how people seeking to start dating relationships in online dating environments worked to balance between accuracy and desirability in self-presentation. Zhao et al. (2008) discovered how students presented their hope-for-possible selves on Facebook, which is an identified social network site, as compared to a true-self in an anonymous online context. Haimson et al. (2016) found how people going through gender transitions may try to manage their self-presentation by editing data involving their prior identity on Facebook. Previous research on exploring self-presentation on Finsta was also explored through different lenses, such as through intimate reconfiguration (Xiao et al., 2020), user motivations and self-presentation behavior measurements (Kang & Wei, 2020), and personality theory (Table & Whittaker, 2020). Expanding research on malleable self-presentation and Finsta, for this study, I extend their work by seeking to understand whether self-presentation on Finsta changes through emerging adults’ occupation on Finsta, such as from peoples’ high school to throughout college years, and also during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, with these research questions: How do users describe how their self-presentation of Finsta has changed over time? How do users explain the reasons for a change of self-presentation?

To address these research questions, I analyze semi-structured interviews conducted with U.S. female undergraduate students aged 18-22 years (N=17). My findings uncover how participants describe their change: from posting overwhelming negativity to either posting more lighthearted content or sharing negativity that may be relatable to the audience. Users also find engaging on Finsta difficult when their high school followers cannot understand the college content presented, context collapse occurs facing the high school and college group, or users do not have college friends to add on Finsta. Last, I find how the “Making Rinsta Casual Again” trend and the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced users’ self-presentation and behaviors on Finsta. For example, the trend, popularized on TikTok through the hashtag #casualposting (Crossley, 2020), encourages participants to post on Rinsta the unfiltered side of themselves usually saved for Finsta. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants noted how Finsta not only became a “substitute for physical interaction,” but also an opportunity to reflect on the previous self on Finsta. This study contributes to the social media literature on self-presentation by exploring how self-presentation on Finsta changes from when participants created the Finsta to their current use and describing why these changes may occur during emerging adults’ transition to and through college.

## **Related Work**

### **Social Network Sites**

A social network site consists of three elements: A profile for self-representation, the "friends" list that showcases one's network, and the access to view friends’ connections (Ellison & boyd, 2013). First, the profile contains information provided by the user and the user’s friends, and the activities of the user. Second, the "friends" list allows diverse forms of links, including reciprocal

or uni-directional connections, as well as asymmetrical disclosure in content-sharing. Third, almost all information on social network sites is traversable, whether it is using "hashtags" to see relevant content or clicking into links on streams. The three elements, together with the fourth element, "the message", are the common foundation of social media (Bayer et al., 2020). The message offers more privacy compared to the previous three elements and involves communication between two or more users (Bayer et al., 2020).

### **Emerging Adults on Social Network Sites**

Working in the field of developmental psychology, Arnett (2000) coined the term "Emerging Adults" for people aged 18-25. Emerging adults go through identity explorations (Arnett, 2000) and have distinct perspectives on whether they have reached adulthood (Arnett, 1998). Manago et al. (2008) conducted focus groups with undergraduate students to discover how emerging adults used MySpace to explore and present different selves. From their work, peer interactions helped students observe ideal selves of others and incorporate those images in their self-presentation. Based on Yang and Brown's (2016) research on freshmen's self-presentation on Facebook, compared to when freshmen started college, their self-presentation became broader, deeper, and less positive at the end of the first semester, while the authenticity and intentionality of their self-presentation did not differ. Stephenson-Abetz and Holman (2012) discovered how emerging adults who were freshmen or sophomore students faced three challenges with old (those who students met before college) and new (those who students met in college) relationships on Facebook: "preservation and (re)invention" (connecting with old and new people), "uniqueness and conformity" (expressing unique interests yet meeting peoples' expectations ) and "openness and closedness" (revealing information to different audiences) (p.

181). From these prior research, peers may influence emerging adults' self-presentation on social media platforms.

### **Defining Finsta**

Instagram first made the feature for users to switch between accounts in 2016 (Monckton, 2016). When users create multiple accounts on Instagram, the primary account is named “Rinsta” for “real Instagram,” and the secondary account is coined “Finsta” for “fake Instagram.”

According to Abrashi (2018), a Finsta is a private account non-identical to Rinsta, and the audience is a smaller network of the users' close friends of usually less than a hundred people. Besides close friends, the audience could also include aspiring connections and a looser connection of followers (Xiao et al., 2020). Content on Finstas can include: showing negative emotions, posts of reflection, and humor (Xiao et al., 2020). Dewar et al. (2019) described Finsta as a space where people perform “humor, authenticity, and self-deprecation” (p. 4). Kazemi (2017) compared Finstas to celebrity scandals, as young adults 19-27 are using Finstas to showcase drugs, sex, partying, and mental breakdowns as an escape from Rinstas. Despite how young users present their carelessness and vulnerabilities on Finsta, it is still similar to Rinsta in that it is a performance to the audience (Kazemi, 2017). This resonates with Dewar et al.'s (2019) work where they described how humor and authenticity were the norms of performance on Finsta.

Devito et al. (2017) developed the affordance-based framework which structured self-presentation on social media platforms into three categories: self, other actors, and the audience. The first two categories were applied by Taber and Whittaker (2020) to compare Rinsta and Finsta. For the self, Taber and Whittaker (2020) explained how on Finsta, users are

able to show an “authentic self” (p. 5) compared to the “curated self” (p. 5) on Rinsta because Finsta users can present a negative personality or display controversial behaviors without having to maintain a positive self. They note that expressing negativity through venting or going against social norms of self-expression are two ways that demonstrate the social context of Finsta: An emotional outlet where users feel comfortable complaining and posting illicit behaviors. For the audience category, having a close and intimate audience gives users more control on Finsta than Rinsta: through trust and closeness with the audience, Finsta users are able to manage who their private feelings are available to and engage with a relatively homogenous network than Rinsta (Taber & Whittaker, 2020). Compared to generic interactions on Rinsta, Finsta interactions between the user and their followers can be more “meaningful and genuine” (Xiao et al., 2020, p. 8).

In addition, based on Big Five Inventory (BFI) survey data from students at a large US West Coast University, Taber and Whittaker (2020) found that Finstas are "more extraverted, less conscientious, less agreeable than Rinstas" (p. 1). In Kang and Wei's (2020) research, their findings showed how “users presented their actual-self, deceptive-self, ideal-self, and impressive self to a greater degree on the Rinsta than on the Finsta” (Kang & Wei, 2020, p. 67). They explained how users may feel pressured to appear funny on their Finsta account, and do not like how “too close to reality” Finsta appears to be. In other words, compared to Rinsta, Kang and Wei (2020) note that Finsta users try to maintain a funny persona on Finsta, thus hindering the potential to present other selves.

### **Self-presentation on Finsta**

Hogan (2010) conceptualized the exhibitual approach by discussing how social media sites can be places “where people submit reproducible artifacts” (p. 381). In other words, the data produced by submitters can be viewed synchronously or asynchronously by the audience.

Expanding on Hogan's (2010) research, Zhao et al. (2013) categorized people's self-presentation on Facebook into three regions: the performance region, the exhibition region, and the personal region. The performance region is served for the presenting the self. The exhibition region includes performances of the users over a period of time, such as previous posts. The personal region explains how the user's data can be saved to self-reflect or reminisce for the individual. These three regions explain how people manage their past content online, and how the tension between balancing the first two public regions and the personal region remains a challenge for people (Zhao et al., 2013). For some users, Finsta serves as an archive, or a space to look back at their past experiences and see what kind of person they were (Dewar et al., 2018). In this study, I hope to understand how these tensions on Finsta may impact emerging adults' transition from high school to college, and how they describe their experience posting content to their high school and college audiences.

People tend to ‘imagine’ who the audience might be when presenting themselves (Litt, 2012). There are two kinds of imagined audience (Litt & Hargittai, 2016): the abstract imagined audience, where users do not consider their audience when sharing content, but just share content because of the impulse to do so, and the target imagined audience, where users have a particular group of audience in mind to read their post. In the target audience group, a majority of people tended to think about the audience from personal ties (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). For Instagram,



people might be posting for themselves or also thinking of their target audience as close friends, significant others, former romantic partners, or their general followers (Kelly et al., 2020).

Context collapse occurs when users face different imagined audiences, such as family, friends, and colleagues (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Even though there are multiple audiences, some users target one certain group of the imagined audience when they tweet as a way to overcome context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Though the social media post is targeted to a certain intended audience, people would take into consideration that the most ‘problematic’ audience would have access to it, and post content that can be also acceptable to that ‘problematic’ audience, also known as the lowest common denominator (Hogan, 2010). Though having a Finsta might be one of the solutions to context collapse on Rinsta (Dewar et al., 2019; Taber & Whittaker, 2020), users might still experience context collapse on Finstas. I am curious whether context collapse occurs on Finsta, and how users would manage their self-presentation.

### **Motivations of using Finsta**

According to Sheldon and Bryan (2016), the four main reasons for using Instagram are "Surveillance/Knowledge about others, Documentation, Coolness, and Creativity" (p. 89). Based on Sheldon and Bryan's (2016) survey data from undergraduate students, Surveillance/Knowledge about others is the top reason people use Instagram: people would use the platform to see what their friends are up to by liking or commenting on other people's posts. The second top motivation they discovered is "Documentation": documentation has a positive correlation with having an active social interaction. Since Instagram is photo-based characteristic, people also tend to use Instagram as a digital photo album to share memories with friends (Sheldon & Bryan, 2016). Lee et al. (2015) also identified five motivations for using

Instagram, from the highest to lowest: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking. They discovered archiving (recording or updating photos) and peeking (browsing lives of people) both served as the main motives for the attitude and intention of Instagram use.

Users use Finsta because of its “lack of impression management” (Kang & Wei, 2020, p. 66): participants could show their raw life without worrying about looks or engagement on the account. Audience management and emotional or aesthetic self-expression are also Finsta motives (Taber & Whittaker, 2020). Duffy and Chan (2019) also pointed out from their interviews with emerging adults that Finsta accounts were a result of “imagined surveillance” on Rinsta: users imagined potential scrutiny from social institutions on Rinsta that might hinder future opportunities. Therefore, Finsta serves as a pseudonymous space for a more daily-life self (e.g., funny, sarcastic, vulgar self) that is only presented for a selective group of people who may not have scrutiny on users (Duffy & Chen, 2019).

When Kang and Wei (2020) applied the user motivations scale from Lee et al. (2015) to compare motivations between Rinsta and Finsta, they found from survey data on undergraduate students that "self-expression, social interaction, escapism, archiving, and peeking higher on the Rinsta than the Finsta" (p. 67). That is, while archiving and self-expressions were rated the two top motivations for using Finsta, the five user motivations on Finsta were lower compared to Rinsta.

### **Norms on Finsta**

The norms of each platform define what content users post or what interaction they can achieve (Zhao et al., 2016). Waterloo et al. (2018) examined norms of emotions presented on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. They found out that Instagram is the platform rated by

participants as the least appropriate for negative emotions, while Instagram is the second highest rated for expressing positive emotions. McLaughlin and Vitak (2011) facilitated Facebook focus groups with undergraduate students to understand Facebook norms on friending, photo sharing, and status updates also influence user behavior. For instance, their study found how users consider it impolite to reject a friend request, they are considerate of their friends' impression management when tagging them in photos, and they do not update their status frequently. These two examples demonstrate how norms play a role in user behaviors and online expressions on social network sites.

While users follow social and self-presentation norms on Rinsta and offline, on Finsta, users are able to go against them by presenting sensitive information and negative perspectives (Taber & Whittaker, 2020). Users assume that people who follow them on their Finsta would not disclose the content to others (Mcgregor & Li, 2019). Despite Finsta users being able to violate norms that would normally be unpreferred on Rinsta or online (Taber & Whittaker, 2020), Finsta may have its own social norms for users to follow, such as an expectation to be "open, funny or even imperfect" (Xiao et al., 2020, p. 10) or sharing content on drugs and alcohol (Xiao et al., 2020). For this study, I hope to explore other norms that may exist on Finsta.

Overall, prior research has explored self-presentation on various social network sites such as Myspace, Facebook, and Instagram. Research on self-presentation on Finsta is rather new in the social media field, and this study will provide insight into how emerging adults' transition to college may be reflected onto self-presentation on Finsta, and how social contexts and norms may influence self-presentation. I am also curious how people describe their experience

presenting content to their high school and college audiences, and whether context collapse occurs on Finsta.

## Methods

### Gathering Data

#### *Participants*

According to the Social Media Use in the 2021 survey conducted by the PEW Research Center, 76% of the Americans aged 18-24 were likely to use Instagram. As undergraduate students typically fall within this age range, I recruited undergraduate students at a large Midwest university through department email listservs and newsletters from the College of Engineering, School of Education, School of Public Policy, and the School of Art & Design.

Students had to complete a screener survey included in the email or announcement. For students who had indicated they had at least one Rinsta and one Finsta in the survey, I emailed them directly for a 45-60 minute interview. The final sample included was 17 participants. Prior research has suggested that a majority of their Finsta participants were female (Dewar et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2020; Kang & Wei, 2020); in my study, all of the 17 participants identified themselves as female, between the ages of 18 and 22. As online self-presentation differs in gender (Herring & Kapidic, 2015), I explore how female users utilize Finsta with a focus on self-presentation. Detailed information about the participant's age, gender, school year, ethnicity, and the number of followers on Finsta and Rinsta are shown in Table 1.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>School Year</b>	<b>Ethnic Background</b>	<b># of Finsta followers</b>	<b># of Rinsta followers</b>
<b>P1</b>	Female	20	Junior	Caucasian	~20	470~490

<b>P2</b>	Female	19	Sophomore	Asian	90	4000
<b>P3</b>	Female	18	First-year	Caucasian	77	747
<b>P4</b>	Female	18	First-year	Asian	17	1098
<b>P5</b>	Female	19	First-year	African American	23	570
<b>P6</b>	Female	21	Senior	Caucasian	60	640
<b>P7</b>	Female	22	Senior	Caucasian	57	1363
<b>P8</b>	Female	21	Senior	Caucasian	102	1160
<b>P9</b>	Female	21	Senior	Asian	60	630
<b>P10</b>	Female	18	First-year	Asian	109	691
<b>P11</b>	Female	19	First-year	Caucasian	65	1386
<b>P12</b>	Female	21	Senior	Caucasian	83	462
<b>P13</b>	Female	20	Sophomore	Caucasian	87	701
<b>P14</b>	Female	20	Junior	African American	12	232
<b>P15</b>	Female	18	First-year	Caucasian	215	754
<b>P16</b>	Female	22	Senior	Hispanic / Latino	23	2796
<b>P17</b>	Female	19	Sophomore	Caucasian	60	940

Table 1. Participant information.

### ***Procedure***

This study was considered exempt from oversight from my university's Institutional Review Board. I conducted semi-structured interviews with individual participants via Zoom with the exception of one participant via Google Hangout. The interviews were conducted between

December 2020 to February 2021. Participants signed a consent form to be audio recorded prior to participating in the interview. After completing the interview, participants were sent a \$12 Amazon gift card.

Since previous Finsta research (Kang & Wei, 2020; Taber & Whittaker, 2020; Xiao et al., 2020) gained valuable insights through participants comparing Rinsta and Finsta behaviors in light of self-presentation, I also designed questions on how Finsta self-presentation strategies were different or similar to Rinsta. In the semi-structured interviews, I asked questions including: What were the reasons you signed up for your Finsta? Have these reasons changed throughout your use on Finsta? What do you hope to get out of your Finsta right now? Thinking about one year ago versus today, how (if at all) has COVID changed your use of Finsta? The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

### **Analyzing Data**

Interview files were transcribed using Otter.ai, checked for accuracy, and slightly edited for an easier read. Data analysis was conducted in a ‘cycling act’, where coding was not only limited to one cycle, but multiple cycles of recoding “further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 8). Importing data to Dedoose, I applied code to each interview inductively along with codes from the literature review. As new codes were added in the later interviews, I went back to recode earlier interview files one more time. Next, I clustered the codes on a codebook which eventually led to the main themes (Glesne, 2011): change of self-presentation on Finsta, intermingling between high school and college followers, the “Making Rinsta Causal Again” trend, and the COVID-19 influence on

Finsta. Based on these themes, a meta-matrix was then developed in order to visualize examples across participants (Miles et al., 2020). As I constructed the matrix, I revisited the interview files, the codebook, and literature to understand more about the findings.

## Findings

### Defining Finsta

During the interviews, I asked participants to define Finsta by adding or changing the definition provided to them: *"We defined a Finsta account as (1) one that has a small social network (2) the secret account you use on Instagram"* (Kang & Wei, 2020). Most participants agreed to this definition, while some described how it was not secret to the people who followed their Finsta, with P6 (senior) explaining:

And when I made mine, I have friends from the West Coast, who called it a Sinsta, because that's what they define as a secret Instagram. And I always defined a Finsta as like a fake Instagram, instead of secret, because it's not secret to the people that know me, or that I have been close with before.

Participants had diverse interpretations of how they presented on Finsta, as how P15 (first-year) described, *"I think it's just a different side of Instagram, other than, like, trying to look good, and present yourself and get a lot of likes. And so I think the like, description of what a spam or Finsta account is, is like, pretty broad."* For some participants, Finsta showed a funny side of them. For other participants, Finsta held a casual or less perfect image than Rinsta. There

were also participants who described themselves as messy or expressive on Finsta. P9 (senior) shared how she thought Finsta presented a more ‘human side’ of her, explaining:

I think my Finsta like shows more of the, like chaos that's going on in like my life either. [With] things that are happening or just like my own mental health [because Finsta's where I go and rant or stuff like that.] So it's like, it definitely shows just [more] realistic, like human side of whatever's going on in my life.

### **Changes of Self-Presentation on Finsta**

Participants described changes of self-presentation behaviors on Finsta in light of participants’ posting behaviors and interactions. These changes were influenced by the audience, “Making Rinsta Casual Again”, the COVID-19 pandemic, the maturity of participants, and using other communication tools as alternatives to Finsta. I put the changes under three categories: (1) Signing up for Finsta, (2) Intermingling between high school and college followers, and (3) What do we do with Finsta now?

#### ***Signing up for Finsta***

Confirming previous research (Xiao et al., 2020) on why participants signed up for Finsta, I also found that participants signed up for Finsta because they had friends who were using a Finsta, or it was a trend to have one at that time. I determined this as the period when most participants first joined Finsta between high school years or first year of college.

#### ***Presenting drinking, partying and drama to fit in with their social circle***



Some participants posted about drinking, partying, or gossiping behaviors to demonstrate to their peers that they were fitting in their social circle. For P7 (senior), drinking was reflected in her profile picture to show she was cool before she changed it later:

My profile photo for the last four years that I had -- It was me drinking svedka [ . . . ], it was the alcohol one because that was kind of like symbolized I think what Finsta was like, where you talked about alcohol and stuff, like, especially when I first made it when I was first going to college. It was like, I don't know, I guess it was probably like bragging about like, "Oh, I drink. I'm cool."

P10 (first-year) shared how Finsta was used for drama in high school, such as 'shading', which meant being disrespectful towards someone (Urban Dictionary, 2003): "*Like, it was like another thing when I was in high school, so bad of me but I would like shade people and stuff. [I would kind of] make the post directed towards them. Even though like I wouldn't like say their name.*" In the case for P15 (first-year), Finsta served as a platform to find out where the next party would be:

I kind of wanted to, like know, like, the drama and stuff, just like news people had going on. Because, again, like people posted kind of more private things on those accounts. And so I would like follow all the like, accounts of people, I knew that and um in high school, I would try to, like, get like, beyond the end, and like, find parties and like figure out what was going on on the weekend. And so, I followed, like, the people from like, that kind of scene who I know, they went out a lot.

P16 (senior) further added how presenting her life on Finsta as “dramatic” and “interesting” became a competition among peers in her first year of college, comparing herself to other Finsta users whose social life appeared to be more exciting:

I guess again, with the whole, like, comparing yourself thing like, like, I feel like, especially with the content, like people always had something like their lives are so interesting. Like, if you looked at their Finstas, like they always had something going on every single day. That was like exciting, and like, really dramatic. And so there was like, I felt like a pressure to post to make people think like, oh, like, "My life is interesting." Like, I have things that I want to share with the world that are like, super dramatic going on in my life. And so I feel like yeah, the pressure to post was more of like, the pressure to like, make my life seem like, like a movie almost.

While posting drinking, partying, or drama seemed the norm to present on Finsta as a high schooler or first-year college student, some participants also expressed how they would not post these content on Finsta, with P11 (first-year) explaining: *“I wouldn't post on my Finsta of me using illicit substances. Me and scandalous pictures that I wouldn't want an employer to see.”*

Adding on to previous findings that indicate how users felt like they were expected to be funny (Kang & Wei, 2020) and imperfect or open (Xiao et al., 2020) on Finsta, in this study, some participants presented drinking, gossiping, or dramatic behaviors on Finsta because they perceived this to be the self-presentation norm on Finsta. This may suggest that participants were influenced by how other users were managing self-presentation on Finsta and felt inclined to also present themselves in the same manner.

*Framing failures, stress and mental health in a funny or humorous manner.*

In addition to the “cool” and “partying” self, showing humor or the funny side of themselves to cover up failures or stress was another self-presentational strategy described by participants. P10 (first-year) explained: “*I think when I made a Finsta, everyone was like, ‘A Finsta is like a fun Insta.’ [. . .] I didn't really get like ‘fun’ because it's like, pretty serious.*” P4 (first-year) also explained how she would try to talk about failing in class through humor, noting: “*I felt like I didn't really do well, on my math test. I wanted to see if like, ‘Oh, maybe like other people were feeling the same way,’ or just like, kind of make humor out of that situation.*” In P7 (senior)’s case, she talked about how being humorous about mental health was common among her friend group in the beginning of using Finsta, and in particular, her friend:

And like hers (friend) was like lighthearted, like comedy jokes. So we all kind of like copied that. And obviously like, like, it's like [friend] is a very depressed person. So like it's like lighthearted, but like, actually really depressing, but like, you know, like, hide the pain away, [. . .] so we do post things about like being depressed, being sad like whatever, like not getting into something we wanted, like we post that stuff but like in a lighthearted manner.

Even for a few older participants, lightweight stress still seemed to be somewhat associated with more humor on Finsta. For example, P9 (senior) described using a funny meme to convey her stress with being in college during COVID-19, saying:

I don't know if you've seen that like meme with like, Kim Kardashian in the pool. And she's like, “Oh my gosh, like, I'm gonna cry. I lost my diamond earring or whatever.” But it was like instead of like, “Oh my god, I'm gonna cry - My college experience,” and then Kendall's responding. And she's like, “Kim, there's people dying.” So I was like, just like stuff about COVID. And then also

just like, random things about like, being very confused on what I'm supposed to do with my future and stuff like that.

Previous research (Xiao et al., 2020) has touched on how users would use humor to relieve negative emotions. In this study, some participants also present failures, stress or mental health issues in a humorous presence. This may suggest that for some participants, they may be reluctant to discuss those topics directly on Finsta. It may also imply how Finsta serves as an outlet to talk about negative emotions in a superficial or protective manner.

*A space for venting and complaining to a group of people*

Although Finsta provided the space to complain or vent to the group of followers, there were different views on how much complaining and venting could be shown. P17 (sophomore) described, “*At the very beginning, it was kind of me using it to just complain about certain things.*” P11 (first-year) explained how she shared ‘stupid things’ because other Finstas was also doing so: “*I would only want people who were also sharing similar stupid things, to also be able to see it.*” For P5 (first-year), Finsta was a place where she could share “*deep down personal*” content anytime, explaining:

Like it can be like, either personal conflict, or if I'm feeling like really down for the day, or from just feeling like, if I'm just feeling like really, really bad, you know, self-destructive or whatever. And then I'm just like, Oh, I can make this post. [. . .] And then it could be like, either not like intimate content, but just like, the like self like internal conflict, self-conflict, and it's like, “Oh my gosh, I don't know what to do.” Or if I just want to rant like “Oh my gosh, yada, yada, yada”.

P7 (senior) described how complaining on Finsta mitigated forcing individual friends to take on the responsibility of handling of the participant's emotions, and left the decision to the Finsta followers:

But when you post on a platform where there's like 30 people following you, like your friends who have the capacity to comfort you or respond [or] whatever can, and those who don't, will not. So then it's like, good, like, it's like a choose your own adventure.

In the case for P3 (first-year), even though she complained, she tried to post a “similar amount” of negativity and positivity on her Finsta. However, she also noted the frequency of posting vulnerabilities were different among Finstas:

[Other Finstas also post] a similar amount of like, emotional things. Like, I'm not posting every day, like, “Oh, this is what made me mad today.” But like, a couple times a month, or when it's like, a really bad day or something, I'll post about it. And I think there are people who do post that same amount as in like, a couple times a month. They're also people who post like, weekly, or like almost everyday things that are getting them down. And I feel like that can become negative if you're always posting about negative things. So I like to have a balance.

In contrast to sharing on Finsta, P15 (first-year) considered whether her thoughts should be shared with one individual friend instead so that she wouldn't annoy her Finsta network, explaining:

And I'm just like, "I think other people should, like, could hear this." I'm like, okay, that like qualifies, as a post, or, but I also like to stop and think sometimes I'm like, "Could I just text my best friend?" And then like, that would be enough to get it off my chest? Or should I make a

whole post about it? And so oftentimes, that dissuades me from posting, but it's, um, I don't know, it's not too long of a process.

While some participants would overwhelm their Finsta with “*petty qualms*” (P8, senior) others were mindful of how this behavior would be perceived to the audience as the shared negativity.

### ***Intermingling between high school and college followers***

Most participants started using Finstas as high schoolers and continued to use the account as college students. This transition was reflected in how participants would present themselves to the high school and college audience, and how few followers from college were on participants' Finsta.

### ***Keeping in contact with high school or existing followers***

Finsta was used to maintain high school or existing relationships despite most participants not being physically together with their followers. Compared to Rinstas, some participants expressed how Finsta created a more intimate social network to keep in touch with followers, just as P17 (sophomore) shared, “*It feels more intimate than seeing like posts that they might post on their Rinsta for everybody. Still feels nice to know that like you're part of their small social network.*” Not being able to meet with high school friends physically, Finsta created a pathway for some participants to sense their friends' presence in their lives, as P5 (first-year) described:

So like, even though I don't see my friends and like, like a year or like, a month straight I know, like, I still feel their presence kind of like they still comment on my posts. They still, like, make their own posts that I comment on to.

P13 (sophomore) also echoed this perspective, noting how she was able to keep up to date with her followers:

At that point (first semester of first-year), it was just kind of a way for me to like, talk to people that I didn't really see and like postings and keep them like up to date on like the [. . .] things in my life. So I was like, like the audience for that would have been like people who I don't see all the time.

However, P13 (sophomore) also explained how the college content she shared later became difficult for her high school followers to understand her college life, explaining:

I feel like, it wouldn't really get a reaction because people would just be like, "I don't really I don't really know what she's talking about." I kind of think, like an example would be like, I don't know, like posting about like a class. Or like specific [college] friends here? Like it wouldn't really make any sense because I don't think those people like they want to know them (college friends), they wouldn't really know what I was talking about.

Since most Finstas were created during high school, Finsta helped most participants interact with high school friends and bring a sense of belonging to a friend group. However, for few participants, it became hard to present their college self to high school friends not only because the audience could not relate and react to the posts, but also because the participants' self-presentation would be new and different to the participants' previous self.

*Managing the college audience*

As the audience for Finsta was mostly participants' close network of friends, some participants were not able to add new followers since they had not become close friends with people from college. P13 (sophomore) described: *"I think that [I was going through] a weird time in college where like, I wasn't super close with anyone enough where I like trusted anyone to follow the account. So I wasn't really adding any new followers. So at that point, like the number [of followers] just kind of stay the same."* Those participants became reluctant to use Finsta when they had few college followers they could interact with and share similar experiences. P11 (first-year) pointed out the lack of interaction on Finsta, saying:

Uh, I don't know if I was expecting a reaction or anything. But I was hoping, oh, maybe some of my hall mates would like, say "lol" or something like that. But yeah, [. . .] in college, I haven't really shared my Finsta with anyone besides, like, my very close friends are like my roommates this semester. It's not even like, there's a college audience of my peers that would even see it.

On the contrary, going into college, some participants tried to build on relationships with college friends through Finsta. For P10 (first-year) who had college followers, it was a space to maintain the college relationships she had, saying:

[And I feel like on Finsta], I have a couple of people that I met in college like online and stuff. [. . .] I hope that (Finsta) like helps us like, become better friends or just let us know each other better. So I think that's like what I hope out of my, like main Finsta is like, just like, keep the connection between me and people. Like there like, at least like existed. And hopefully like how people like get to know me better than I get to know people better as well.



Finsta may be symbolized as a badge for a close friendship, as the followers have access to all the unfiltered selves presented on the account, including illicit behaviors and venting. For some participants, it was harder to become a close friend on Finsta than offline.

*Overwhelming intimacy and complaints from other Finstas*

Some participants expressed discomfort at behavior they felt represented people sharing too much of their lives or constantly complaining on Finsta. P17 (sophomore) explained, “*And sometimes I was like, I don't really know these people as well as I used to. It feels almost weird to know how intimate the things that are going on in their life are.*” P12 (senior) suggested these people could create another Finsta to alleviate the tension of the audience feeling “a lot”:

Like, for some reason, even though Finstas should be a place for like venting, and like sharing everything, you just don't want to spill all of it. Because sometimes it can feel like a lot. But I did propose this idea. [. . .] If you had a Finsta. And you let a bunch of other people's Finstas follow it that you didn't know at all, like they were from like Utah, or something. None of you knew each other personally. So you could all just spill everything on your personal life. And it would have like, no consequences or repercussions. Because they don't know you -- they just get to like, see what you post and maybe give you advice if you're going through something kind of rough.

Most participants were getting annoyed of consuming complaints on Finsta as an audience. Some participants also expressed how they felt about the negativity on Finsta, with P7 (senior) noting how this headspace stopped her from using Finsta:

I find it (Finsta) a little bit annoying now, because it's kind of everybody else just like ranting about how terrible quarantining is or how terrible like life is. And to me, that's just not the

headspace or the area that I want to be surrounding myself. And so I kind of stay away from it (Finsta) a little bit more now.

With the Finsta feed being too intimate and negative with complaints and venting, a few participants ultimately decided to remove some followers, for example, with P15 (first-year) saying:

Um, yeah, I don't, I like unfollowed a lot of people because I was like, I actually not to, like sound mean, but I must, I was like, "I don't care about you," like talking about these problems that happen over and over again, just like, petty drama.

Although Finsta provided a space for negativity (Xiao et al., 2020) and personal secrets (Kang & Wei, 2020), at this point participants expressed the weirdness of being an audience to such broad exposure of one's life. This may be because at the beginning of creating a Finsta, participants were following and accepting a wider circle of friends beyond their close friends circle. As participants were not as close with some people on their Finsta, this increased the feeling of being overwhelmed with people oversharing their lives.

### *Context collapse*

As college followers joined participants' Finsta, participants faced two audiences on Finsta: high school old friends, and college new friends. This resulted in context collapse, just as P12 (senior) explained:

It was definitely different when I had college people start following me because like, they like when I would post in high school, it was all about stuff that was going on in high school. And all

people started to follow me I'm like, Oh, I have this like new audience. What do I have to say? It was weird intermingling the two like groups of like high school vs. College people. I have I'm experiencing all this new stuff in college freshman year. Let me share it with you. But people from my high school who weren't with me in college. They weren't like directly there to see what was going on. Like, weird like intermingling the two.

There was context collapse even for college followers from various groups, as P9 (senior) explained how she would share memes that she knew would be funny to all of her audiences, describing:

So I only let like a handful of people follow me and like all the people who do follow me I feel like I know pretty well. [. . .] So it's like, one friend I have from frisbee, another friend I have from housing, another friend I have from work. So it's like, um, they really don't overlap. [. . .] so I like have a general sense of like, what they find funny. And so like, I really, I'm not really like, when I'm posting these memes. I'm not thinking like, Oh, this is the most efficient way to like send this to all of them without sending it to all of them. But it's just like, a general like, I find this funny, like I relate to it now like I'm sure other people like when this comes up on their timeline, they'll also find it entertaining.

As for P1 (senior), even if Finsta had a small network, she explained how she decided to post a inside joke in a group chat to avoid context collapse on Finsta:

Um, yeah, like, if it's an inside joke of something with my high school friends, and I would just send it directly and like the group chat that we have. I think that's just a more like, convenient way and kind of an easier way to connect them to post something like have similar content on Finsta. And it's only meant for a specific, like a group of people.

Though previous research has indicated how Finsta mitigated context collapse on Rinsta (Dewar et al., 2019; Taber & Whittaker, 2020), despite Finsta being a smaller network for close friends, different forms (e.g., high school and college, various college groups) of context collapse exist on Finsta.

### ***What do we do with Finsta now?***

#### *What remained the same on Finsta*

#### *Maintaining the Finsta social circle*

Compared to Rinsta, the audience on Finsta consists of a close circle of friends who participants would like to maintain a relationship with, such as P13 (sophomore) explaining, *“I think that that's a way of kind of preserving deeper relationships, because like, the stuff on that account is a lot more personal.”* Even for P11 (first-year) who did not use Finsta as often as before, she viewed Finsta as a validation for a closer relationships, noting:

But being on someone's Finsta still feels like you're in their, like, little ultimate fan club, their ultimate little circle. And so you don't just want to like let anyone you know, in your little circle, you know, even if I don't post anything, there's a lot of validation that comes with like being on someone's Finsta.

By interacting or updating on Finsta, participants have the sense of their social media friends circle, with P12 (senior) comparing this circle somewhat different to her real-life friends circle:

Just because, like, it feels nice to have like, this, like real life friends circle. And then it's like social media friends circle. Like it's just kind of fun to like, say things on social media or like on

Finsta specifically, but I wouldn't talk about in real life. Like, just kind of like it doesn't feel worth it to bring it up. But like, the, I'll just be like, "Hey, this funny thing happened." Or "The annoying thing happened, you know?"

P2 (senior) mentioned using Finsta to connect with particular friends who are more active on Finsta than Rinsta or other social media:

Yeah, so like my guy friends that like posts on their Finsta more often, like, don't post on their main account, like ever. Like, I'll never see them in my feed. So I guess like on in my Finsta it's like easier to connect because like, they're like posting there, you know, whereas like, I would see like a post on there in like, main Instagram, like once a year. It's like, it's just easier, I think that way, but um, I guess people that are active on both that doesn't really matter.

Finsta continues to be used to maintain close relationships because of the criteria of participants accepting a smaller network of close friends and sharing personal thoughts.

### *Sharing good updates that are personal*

Although Rinsta presented a polished and perfect side of them, some participants expressed how they would actually not post good news that was personal to them explicitly on Rinsta: they would post about getting into relationships and getting into college on Finsta instead. P6 (senior) explained about this:

I mean, I'll use when I posted about my ex [as an example] when I kind of came out and I was like, "Oh, I'm in a relationship." I wanted to let not my, not just my inner circle, but kind of like that one ring outside of the inner circle. That's not like your big circle with all the acquaintances

that you know, from like high school and stuff like that. But let that middle circle kind of know that, “Oh, this is like a big part of my life.” And because I wasn't quite ready to tell that biggest circle, what was happening. I think it's just to kind of share a little bit more about my life. When I don't want to post it on Facebook or when I don't want to like really, really publicly post about it.

In the case for P7 (senior), she considered this behavior on Finsta "authentic" because what could not be posted on Rinsta could be posted on Finsta, noting:

When I got into [university], like I posted on my Finsta, I wasn't gonna post that on my real Instagram because it's like, you know, everyone's trying to get into colleges, some people probably didn't get into [university] and like, you don't want to like make people feel bad. So it's (Finsta) just like a place you can be more authentic like post things that you wouldn't want to post on your regular.

Participants also pointed out this was because their audience on Finsta understood more about them, with P11 (first-year) explaining that her audience knew she was in a relationship with another person and would not mistake her “one month anniversary” post with her roommate as a new relationship:

I think I chose it because I didn't want people (on Rinsta) to think that we were dating if I were to post a one-month anniversary to my roommate, but I figured that the people on my Finsta that would get that it was a joke.

In the case for P9 (senior), Finsta was also the first place to post about unfortunate news, for instance, her mother passing away: “*I posted a black screen on my Finsta, ‘I have no words’*”

*as the caption, and then on my Rinsta I posted pictures of her and I with like a long little like In Memoriam.”* When I asked her why she posted a black screen on Finsta first, she explained:

Um, because on my Finsta it like first happened. And I just I didn't know what to say. And I didn't really want to be like saying exactly how it happened to my Finsta. And I didn't really have the words to articulate my emotions. So it was either that or having absolutely no caption at all. And then I want to say like half a day later, I posted the in memoriam of my mother [on Rinsta and Facebook] and I was able to kind of gather my thoughts a little bit and be able to kind of that post, like, let the world like let all friends and family like know what happened.

The reason why most participants chose to present good news on Finsta may be mainly because of the audience. These personal information are shared with the Finsta audience, not the Rinsta audience, since the people on Finsta understand more about participants' lives and the context of what participants present online.

#### *Growing up & Changing the vibe of Finsta*

##### *Replacing drama and overwhelmingly negativity with a lighthearted Finsta*

Most participants disliked the initial drama on Finsta and tried to move on from gossiping and complaining to more easygoing content on Finsta. This can be understood through some participants comparing their high school and current self-presentation, for example, with P17 (sophomore) explaining:

I feel like in high school definitely used to be dramatic, sometimes, like people would post things that were like, scandalous about someone's drama. But it's definitely stopped being like that. So I think the interactions are a lot more easygoing. (Interviewer: Why do you think it has stopped?) I

think people realize once we got into college that like it, you don't have to project everything that you're doing and all of your problems to this small following. It's just kind of like you deal with it in other ways. I think it was a very like, like, it's still sometimes feels like a very, like high school thing to do to be posting on your Finsta.

P10 (first-year) further emphasized on changing the way she presented herself from constantly ranting to fun and lighthearted, describing:

Like my Finsta back then, like, I used to rant a lot more on it, and like the vibe of it was kind of just like me ranting and stuff. And like, I don't really enjoy it that much, because I was thinking about it. Like, even though it's like my account, like I was thinking about it, like if I was someone else, and like, like, if I see someone like ranting, 24/7 on their Finsta, I kind of get like, annoyed because I'm like, "Bro, like, like, this is just for fun." Like, I guess [can] they stop complaining all the time. And so I think that's why I changed, like my concern now to be more [. . .] fun and light hearted because like, I don't really like the previous vibe that I had going, if that makes sense.

P8 (senior) resembled P17 and P10, describing instead of putting shallow thoughts on Finsta as she did when she was younger, she wanted her Finsta to be more "authentic" now, stating:

I would probably complain about my roommate, I'd probably complain about, like not being able to party on a Friday or something like that. I probably, you know, it would just be like a bunch of shallow like, "Oh, I ended up getting the number of this one random frat guy" or something like that. And, you know, I want people to be able to, like, kind of understand me a bit more. And I mean, if they're friends with me, they do understand me and like, they really enjoy my life and stuff. Like they've told me that like, it's more authentic than like some other Finsta might be.



There might be a connection between changing their own Finsta into a lighthearted space and how participants felt when other people were complaining and venting on their Finstas. Thinking about how participants themselves felt when they were overwhelmed with negativity, participants navigated their Finsta into more funny and thoughtful posts. For some participants, they realized ranting on Finsta was not a healthy method to deal with stress: the interactions on Finsta have become more easygoing as they approached other methods to resolve problems.

### *Being mature and relatable*

Participants have expressed how their maturity has been reflected on Finsta. P16 (senior) shared how the biggest difference between her Finsta in the beginning and now is that "*what I write about is that I feel like I'm just like way more mature and like I know how to like, handle my emotions and like events better.*" P8 (senior) explained how she would like her Finsta to better articulate her thoughts now, explaining "*I want it to be like, a real like stream of consciousness that if someone reads they'll be able to understand me better.*" In this phase participants made sure they were "relatable" to the audience, with P15 (first-year) explaining. "*And, like, whatever I'm posting about, I think is, it at least like relates to someone else that follows me.*" P6 (senior) mentioned how she felt overloaded in the past semester, and shared it because taking online classes was a relatable experience to followers, saying:

I actually expected people to relate to that. Because, like I said, everyone was going through it.

And a lot of people it was their first time having like, properly all online classes, and I took spring and summer term classes. So I'd been online, literally since March. And I don't know, I guess I just thought it would be relatable enough, and not a talking point.

In the case for P11 (first-year), she could see herself posting about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted her, but not sharing personal struggles that she thought people would not care about:

The times, the times that I have been negative on my Finsta are usually things that everyone can relate to. Like, I didn't post about like COVID but I could picture myself being like, "Oh man, COVID sucks, blah, blah, blah", because people could relate to it. But when it comes to personal struggles, I wouldn't because I don't think people like really care [and] need to see that.

Relativity may have become a criterion for posting negativity on Finsta: participants' complaints being relatable to the audience better rationalized why it might be acceptable to rant on Finsta as they thrived to become mature.

#### *Not using Finsta as frequent as before*

Many of the participants described how their frequency of use on Finsta has changed since creating one. The reasons have to do with the reduced active interactions on Finsta, and Rinsta taking over the functionality of Finsta being a casual self.

#### *Less popular and using other social media platforms*

P2 (sophomore) shared how Finsta was a trend in high school, and as Finsta became less trendy now, people became inactive at the same time, explaining, "*I think it was just trending a few years ago and I think like when everyone got one and a lot of my friends' accounts are inactive. Now it's like they just like don't use it. So that's probably why I'm just like growing out of it.*"

One reason why Finsta has become less popular may be because of other social media platforms taking over Finsta. For instance, P11 (first-year) mentioned, "*I think a lot fewer people post*

*because there's TikTok, which is just like, I think as a new social media has been born and like, blown up insanely. I think there's less demand to have multiple Instagrams when you can just have an Instagram (Rinsta) and a TikTok.*” For P6 (senior), she created another Instagram account other than her Rinsta and Finsta, therefore explaining,

Probably because I'm posting on my Disney account (another Instagram account) so often, that I'm like, [. . .] I'm planning for this, or I'm already talking about things on this account. And I don't feel like doing it again (on Finsta). Or I don't really feel like just putting it out there to put it out there. Like there have been multiple times where I'm like, “Why don't I just delete this account?” Like it's like, I'm barely active on it. It's, I don't know what the big use for it is. But I still kind of keep it around because it's not really doing any harm.

For P7 (senior), as an emerging adult, she overgrew talking about her life with a group of people on Finsta; explaining that she now talked to individuals as a result of maturity. For instance, P7 described *“But like now I would just call [friend] and talk to her individually which was, I think that's like a maturity thing. Like as you get older, you're like less reliant on the group, you can like talk to individuals easier.”* For participants, they were aware of the attention they could put on social media platforms. If there were alternative platforms that were predominantly used by their friends, they would start using those platforms. Since some participants and their friends were active on TikTok, Snapchat, or even other Instagram accounts, participants noted the decrease of interaction on Finsta as the reason for less use.

*Making Rinsta casual again, but not personal.*

For some participants, one of the reasons why they used Finsta less frequently was because of the “Making Rinsta Casual Again” trend. As Finsta was a space where most participants could present a rather casual and unpolished self, as “Making Rinsta Casual Again” started, some participants posted what they would normally post on Finsta, just as how P11 (first-year) described:

I actually feel like there seems to be kind of like a “Make Instagram Casual Again,” type of trend that's been going on, which I think has helped move people from posting those types of things like more casual photos on their Finsta posting on their Rinsta. I think it's just like any sort of trend. It's more trendy to be more transparent with your followers now than it was back when Finsta kind of originated at least that's what it seems like.

When I asked how participants noticed this trend, P13 (sophomore) noted how in high school everyone including herself was trying hard to manufacture Rinsta photos, which felt exhausting and insincere, but going into college, she was able to meet new people and see how they handled social media differently, explaining:

I think coming to [college] and I would like [see really cool accounts] and like meet new people and like they didn't really seem to care. And I was like, “I don't really care either. I don't want to put in the effort in [Rinsta]. And like trying so hard.” So I think that was a pretty big shift in like coming to college and like just meeting new people and seeing how other people like handled social media.

Another reason why Rinsta became casual was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with P7 (senior) hinting how being able to present everyday-life instead of traveling photos helped mitigate feeling unproductive or strapped to her phone. This was because instead of taking a

good picture for Rinsta, now she does not have to do that; she can post whenever she would like to:

Especially during COVID people are like posting less, and I'd be posting more like, like everyday things versus like, just going to Bahamas and things like that. So I think that's good. And yeah, like I said, like, I've deleted my Instagram at times, because I do think it's unhelpful, like unproductive to be, like, strapped to your phone. And like, every time you like, if I go to a national park, like I have to take a good picture. I can't just be in the moment. [But I don't know when I deleted it], I felt isolated because like that's like a main form of communication with people.

Although participants mentioned the “Making Rinsta casual again” trend, some participants still expressed how Finsta remains important for their self-presentation. First, being casual on Rinsta does not necessarily mean being personal. Since Rinsta followers are from a wider social network, personal information is not shared on Rinsta. For example, P8 (senior) shared:

My Rinsta, it's still up. And I think it was supposed [to be] like more aesthetic pictures, I've become a lot more casual on it. Because I don't think that we need to strive to be something that we're not. I allow a lot of people to follow my Rinsta because it's not deeply personal. It's universal information that people should know. Um, and, yeah, like, some of my former students follow it, I am very guarded on there to make sure that what I post will not come back to haunt me. [. . .] When it comes to Rinsta, followers are still considered to be top tier and I do have a lot of followers on my Rinsta, but Finsta's where you get to be authentic.

Second, for P10 (first-year), it did not make much sense to switch everything from Finsta to Rinsta; changing the frequency of posting and the presentation on Rinsta to Finsta was not likely:

Um not really I think my main account, [there's a thing going on TikTok about] "Making your Instagram more casual," I guess and like not really caring what is posted on that. [. . .] But I'm not really sure if I'm going to. I don't really know, like what I would change about [what] I feel like is there (Rinsta). But then I would just use my Finsta more.

While "Making Rinsta Casual Again" did encourage participants to present a casual, random, or transparent self on Rinsta, and overlapped with the "unfiltered" and "messy" self-presentation on Finsta, Finsta still remained as a space for some participants to present a personal self. In other words, participants still used Finsta to present their personal feelings, as mentioned by P12 (senior), "*Even when people are posting like those casual like photo dumps on Rinsta, they're not like adding like a personal caption.*"

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic Influence on Finsta**

The COVID-19 pandemic influences were more impactful on participants who continued to Finsta than those who had become inactive. I asked participants whether COVID-19 influenced their self-presentation and posting behavior on Finsta. Some participants mentioned how they were able to reflect during the pandemic, which led to them thinking about how they presented themselves on Finsta; whether they liked the image or if they wanted to change. P8 (senior) mentioned how she changed her self-presentation due to COVID-19, explaining how she started to post more maturely and less haphazardly on Finsta:

Oh, my posting behavior. I feel like it's changed completely. I feel like I've really gotten to know who I am because COVID which is wild to think about. That the person that you are interviewing today it's completely different from the person I was before COVID. But I think that I am posting more maturely and less haphazardly. (Interviewer: Can you tell me what led to this change; posting more maturely and less haphazardly?) I would say yeah, because of the lockdown and being forced to reflect on myself and become more comfortable with myself during that time. (Interviewer: How has the maturity influenced your posting?) [. . .] I only post things that [. . .] I say I'm going to feel the same way about it a week from now.

P10 (first-year) shared how she thought about the “*law of attraction*” which she described as “*what you put out is what you receive*” during quarantine, and hoped to distance herself from the friend drama she presented during high school into a more positive presentation:

And I think towards, like, during quarantine and stuff. I started like, learning a lot about like, manifesting and like the law of attraction stuff. [. . .] I used to like gossip and stuff all the time. And I hate like saying it now. But I think it was important for me to reflect on it. [. . .] Like, I think it's kind of good in a way because then I could look back and be like, “Oh, so like, this is like the kind of person I was.” And like how like, I want to [change from being] that person.

Rather than posting events on Finsta, most participants focused more on expressing thoughts on Finsta, with P5 (first-year) describing:

It's been less about just like events, and more just like chaotic things, or just like maybe some personal conflicts about whatever's happening in my life. That's different because I'm inside and because I am a first year at [university], that and it's a year that no one ever expected.

Further, some participants described how Finsta served as a substitute for a regular conversation, with P14 (junior) saying, *“It's like a substitute. It's like a COVID version of a regular conversation. Where like [before COVID], I might [meet someone], when I'm out somewhere, I see people at my old job when I worked there. We interact on my Finsta instead.”*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Finsta was more often used to update close friends. For example, P9 (senior) shared how she started to use Finsta more again:

Yeah, um, I think that I didn't really use Finsta then too, as much a year ago, partially because I was so busy that I didn't really have time to like, keep up with a Finsta. [. . .] But with COVID now I can't see people as much. And also there's like, both a lot more free time, and also like, a lot more stress. [. . .] But I'm also not seeing my friends. So they wouldn't know that. So like, I'm using Finsta as like a way to update them and also to just like, rant about my own feelings.

For participants who had acquaintances on Finsta, they started to interact with them by giving acknowledgement, with P12 (senior) explaining,

I acknowledged their (acquaintances) posts more, just because it's like, all we had time to do in the beginning of COVID was go on social media. Those were the only people you could really interact with. So like, like, you became like, closer, online, which kind of sounds stupid but like, it's true.

For few participants, there were changes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic on how they felt about Finsta, or social media in general. For example, P13 (sophomore) described the ups and downs of using social media:



I think like when COVID first like started really affecting life here, I think that I like definitely started using my Finsta more just because I was like, didn't really have anywhere else to go. [. . .] I think everyone was pretty desperate to like engage and connect on some level. [. . .] But then I think that there was definitely like, a level of burnout. Like when like summer kind of came in. [. . .] , obviously I got pretty tired of social media. And I was like, “this is like giving me a headache.” [. . .] So like now I just kind of like go on every once in a while, check in maybe post but like, it's not like a huge, super, like dependent part of my life. And like, it's not really how I connect with the most people now.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity for some participants to reflect on their past presentations on Finsta and seek to present a mature or positive self on Finsta. For other participants, they relied on Finsta as an interaction platform with their friends in the replacement of face-to-face interaction. As compared to pre-COVID-19, those participants became more interested in what their followers were sharing.

### **Moving Forward with Finsta**

*“It’s your Finsta at the end of the day, ‘kind of’,”* shared P10 (first-year) at the end of their interview. This quote resonates with how most participants had shared some degree of presentational concerns somewhat salient even on a Finsta. Nevertheless, for most participants, they either hope to keep Finsta as an open space to express themselves freely or maintain relationships with their close friends. Finsta serves as an avenue to let out thoughts, as described by P5 (first-year): *“If I want to talk about my day, if I want to send like a story prompt, or I can send literally anything I want”* or how P9 (senior) shared, *“ I think it's just kind of like a place for me to just like, dump things.”* In the case for P13 (sophomore), Finsta is to be more engaged with

interactions than showing off, explaining, *“I think it is still like a way for me to engage more than it is for me to like, show anything off. And like that's, I think, like a pretty big difference between like, like my real Instagram.”* There are also a few participants who did not see themselves using Finsta in the future, for instance, P1 (senior) who explained, *“I was considering even just like fully deactivating my Finsta, like in the future, just because I've kind of lost interest in it.”* Just as how Finsta is broadly defined by participants, how they will continue to be used and presented may also vary across different school years and transitions in life.

### **Discussion**

This study explores emerging adults' understanding of how their self-presentation changed on Finsta (i.e., Fake Instagram) as they matured. My findings confirm previous research that self-presentation is not static (Ellison et al., 2006; Zhao et al., 2008) on social network sites and how participants decide what to present may be impacted largely by them being emerging adults (Arnett, 2000), social norms on Finsta (Xiao et al., 2020) and the audience (Xiao et al., 2020; Taber & Whittaker, 2020) of Finsta. First, participants described different considerations when presenting negativity on Finsta. Their self-presentation behaviors started from presenting negativity without reservation, to being relatable when posting complaints. They also kept their experience of being exposed to such negativity as an audience in mind when posting. Second, some participants in this study questioned Finsta's utility when context collapse occurred between high school and college groups, or when they became distant with the old audience (high school or childhood friends) and did not have new followers (college friends). Third,

participants explained how self-growth, the “Making Rinsta Casual Again” trend, and the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their self-presentation behaviors.

Prior research found that Finsta provided a space for negative self-presentation that was not preferred on Rinsta (Taber & Whittaker, 2020; Xiao et al., 2020). Building on their research, in this study, I find that some participants described changes in presenting negativity self-presentation. This may be related to participants being emerging adults, and exploring their identity (Arnett, 2000) through self-presentation online. In the beginning, some participants posted complaints and gossip without much reservation. Through growth, some participants were mindful of being relatable when they ranted on Finsta, as excessively complaining became behaviors they no longer wanted to become associated with on Finsta. This may be because participants were beginning to figure out what to keep to themselves and what to share on Finsta. Further, instead of painting the image of fitting in college by presenting a 'party girl' image, they may have found their own circle.

In addition, I confirm Xiao et al.'s (2020) speculation that the audience of Finsta users may feel exhausted by the "negative emotions and weighty topics" (p. 10) presented, expanding on how participants in this study described how they felt “annoyed” seeing other people present overwhelming negativity on Finsta and explained how it appeared “weird” to have access to people's lives on a larger and more intimate scale. While one participant suggested making another Finsta with followers whom one does not know in real life to avoid repercussions, it is also worth considering being an audience to other Finstas may have led participants to shift their Finsta towards a more lighthearted context. As these self-presentation behaviors occurred in different stages, self-presentation may be influenced by the Finsta norms conveyed by

participants' peer networks. Despite these changes, there may still be a need for participants to let out emotions or thoughts that might be viewed by the audience as negative or redundant; an implication for design could be for Finsta users to have the option to post those content viewable to "Only Me" as on Facebook timeline on the Finsta grid.

The "Making Rinsta Casual Again" trend highlighted in this study encouraged participants to be casual or less perfect on the real Instagram, which overlapped with the self-presentation participants showed on Finsta. While this trend decreased the desire to present their casual self repetitively on Finsta, some participants still expressed how the trend did not symbolize being personal on Rinsta. This confirms Kang and Wei's (2020) work that users utilize Finsta to have better self-expression on Finsta because they are able to share personal secrets. In this study, participants did not share a more personal self in this trend because they were either uncomfortable sharing to the larger audience on Rinsta, or they would just continue posting on Finsta.

Building on existing research (Dewar et al., 2019; Taber & Whittaker, 2020; Xiao et al., 2020), the authors each discussed how having a Finsta could resolve context collapse on Rinsta. I expand on discovering how there may still be context collapse on Finsta with high school and college audiences. While participants hoped to keep in touch with high school or existing followers by updating on Finsta, it was hard for them to present their college self when the followers did not have full context of what was happening in their college life. Further, it may have been challenging for participants to add new followers on Finsta, as there were few college followers on some participants' Finstas. This may be because for some participants, Finsta was a very "high school thing" to have as a college student, since Finsta initially represented drama,

drinking, and venting behaviors in light of self-presentation. It is worth considering that it may be because some participants preferred not to show that “high school” side of themselves that exists on Finsta to the new college audience.

In this study, I also explore the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-presentation and social interactions on Finsta. Expanding on previous findings that Finsta was an existing space for deep engagements (Xiao et al., 2020) and an authentic self (Taber & Whittaker, 2020), during the pandemic, posting and interacting with other Finstas became a substitute for face-to-face interaction as some participants could not meet their friends in person. Participants also noted they had more time to reflect on their past self: building on to Zhao et al. (2013)’s work on the exhibition regions, particularly the personal region where users looked at their posts to see their past self, I find that some participants looked at previous posts on Finsta to reflect their self, and choose to omit negativity (e.g., drama, ranting, and drinking) on Finsta and start presenting a more positive and funny self.

Like all scholarship, this study has some important limitations. Through interview data collected from undergraduate students in one large Midwest university, I gather insight on how self-presentation changed over the period during their occupation on Finsta. However, the work may not generalize to other age groups, cultural contexts or time periods. Further research could compare self-presentation on Finsta between the U.S. and other countries, as cultural differences can influence self-presentation and Finsta behaviors. Considering that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unclear how these practices would differ in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Emerging adults' self-presentation on Finsta is malleable and influenced by their maturity, social norms, audience, and social contexts. From this study, participants observe other Finstas and apply different self-presentational strategies to express negativity and personal updates. They experience interacting with old and new audiences and decide what to present based on the social goals they would like to achieve. Social contexts such as the "Making Rinsta Casual Again" trend and the COVID-19 pandemic also impact participants' self-presentation behaviors and utility on Finsta. Finsta continues to be a unique space for experimenting with different self-presentations and building relationships for emerging adults.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Script and Questions

#### Introduction

Hi, my name is Michelle Tao, and I am a master student at the University of Michigan School of Information. Thank you for participating in this research study. The research study I'm conducting is under the guidance of Professor Nicole Ellison to understand about the use of Instagram, with the focus on Finsta. This interview will take about 45-60 minutes.

Before we start, I would like to remind you that you have signed the consent to be audio recorded. I will be audio recording this interview. If there's anything you really don't want on the record, even if it's anonymized, please let me know. If you do not want to continue, you can leave at any time during this recording session. You can also deny consent at any time. Do you have any questions?

#### Interview Questions

##### Warm-up questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. What social media platforms do you use now?

##### Use and Reasons of Multiple Accounts

Let's start with some general questions about managing multiple accounts.

3. [Primary and Finsta] You mentioned in the questionnaire that you have more than one Instagram account. Can you tell me about these accounts?
  - What were the reasons you signed up for your Finsta? *Probe:* Think about the time you set up your Finsta account. Can you tell me about that (context, timing, etc.)?
  - Have these reasons changed throughout your use on Finsta? Tell me about it.
4. What are the benefits of managing multiple accounts on Instagram? What are the challenges?

##### Defining Finsta

In the questionnaire you completed (screening questionnaire), we defined a primary account as (1) one that has a large social network (2) the main account you use on Instagram.

5. Thinking about your primary account, are there any points you would add on or change to what your primary account is?

In the questionnaire we defined a Finsta account as (1) one that has a small social network (2) the secret account you use on Instagram.

6. Thinking about your Finsta account, are there any points you would add on or change to what your Finsta account is?
7. [Primary and Finsta] What do you think are the most important differences between your two accounts?

**[Interviewer rephrases primary account as "Rinsta" (Real Instagram), and Finsta account as "Finsta" (Fake Instagram) ]**

### Self-presentation & Identity

Now, let's talk about how you present yourself on Finsta.

8. How do you think your Finsta describes who you are? OR If someone saw your Finsta, what kind of impression would they get? Why do you think so?
  - Do you think this is an accurate representation of you? Why or why not?
9. What is in your bio on Finsta? How did you decide what to say about yourself in your profile bio?
  - *Probe:* What is the name you have on your bio? What is your account name? Are they identical to your real name?
  - Are you identifiable on your profile photo? Why did you decide to do so?
  - Who do you think reads your bio? Who do you think of as the audience when you created your profile?
10. [Finsta and Rinsta] (In one or two sentences) Is there a difference between your image on Finsta and Rinsta (if at all)? Why?
11. [Finsta and Rinsta] Can people find your Finsta account on your Rinsta?
  - *If so:* Why do you choose to reveal your Finsta on Rinsta?
  - *If not:* Why do you choose not to reveal your Finsta on Rinsta?

### Consuming & Posting Behavior

Next, share some experiences about what you do on Finsta.

12. How much time a week do you typically spend on Finsta?
13. You mentioned that you post content and also read other people's posts on Finsta. Which do you do more? Why?
  - Are there if at all unspoken rules about reading other people's posts?
  - How do you feel when you read other people's posts?
14. As for posting, how often do you post, on average?
  - What motivates you to post on Finsta?
  - Describe how you use your Finsta to share content. Do you use stories, highlights, posts, or something else? How do you decide where to post what content?
  - Can you describe a time (if at all) you posted something and then later deleted the post? Tell me about it.
15. What kinds of content (topics) do you post on Finsta stories, grid, etc?
  - Who is in your posts (yourself, friends, family, or other)? Why?
  - Do you think there are unspoken rules (if at all) about posting on Finsta? Like what?
16. You mentioned that there is a difference between how (often) and what you post previously and now. Tell me about it.
17. [Finsta and Rinsta] When you are posting something, how do you usually decide where to post it?
  - What are some similarities or differences between what you share on Finsta and Rinsta? Why?
18. [Finsta and Rinsta] Do you ever post about the same event (but with different content) on both accounts? If so, how do the posts typically differ? Why?
  - If yes (audience): What if anything was the response from the people who saw both?
    - i. Why do you allow the same people to read both accounts?
    - ii. Do you think they read your posts or not?
  - If you don't post the same event: Why?
  - If not (audience): If there wasn't a time this happened, how do you think the same followers on both accounts would react?

### Audience

Take a moment to look at the people who follow you on Finsta.

19. [Finsta and Rinsta] How many followers do you have on Finsta and Rinsta?
  - Why do you think there is this difference?

20. [Finsta and Rinsta] If you could put your followers into different groups, what groups would you name them?
- If *close friends*: Are there any close friends that don't follow your finsta? Why?
  - Do any family members follow you? Why or why not?
21. Do you interact with followers on your Finsta?
- *Probe*: Tell me about your recent interactions with followers on Finsta.
  - Do these interactions influence your relationships if at all with the followers? How? How do you feel about the interactions?
  - Do you think your interactions with your followers have changed over time? Why?
    - i. Pre-covid vs covid?
  - [Finsta and Rinsta] Do you interact with the followers on Rinsta?
    - i. If so: What is the difference or similarity? Why?
    - ii. If not: Why do you choose to interact on Finsta?
22. Of the follower categories you described, who do you think reads your posts? How do you know? Is there a reason why?
- Who do you have in mind as a reader (audience) when you create your posts? Why?
23. How do you decide to accept or deny a follow request? What are the criteria you use to decide?
- *Prompt*: Can you think of a time when you decided to deny a follow request? Tell me about it.
  - Can you describe a time (if at all) you accepted a follower and later deleted the follower? Tell me about it.

### Privacy questions

24. Do you use the close friends function on Rinsta? Why or why not?
- If yes: What's the difference between using that and Finsta?
25. Do you have any privacy concerns on Finsta? If so, how would you describe them?
- Do you think your followers will reveal information you post on Finsta to other people?
    - i. *Probe*: Was there a time if at all when someone who was not your follower on Finsta knew about events you shared on your Finsta?
    - ii. How did you know? How did you feel?
26. Can you open your Finsta account, and go into Setting > Privacy? Have you changed your default privacy settings on Finsta? If so, can you tell me why you did this? Why?

### Goal for Finsta



27. What do you hope to get out of your Finsta? [right now]
- How is this the same or different from when you signed up for it?
  - How is this the same or different pre-covid?
  - How is this the same or different when you were in high school?

### Pre and Post Covid

28. Because of Covid, people are more constrained today. Thinking about one year ago versus today, how (if at all) has Covid changed your use of Finsta?
- Has your posting behavior remained the same or changed? Why?
  - Has your interaction with followers remained the same or changed? Why?
  - How has these interactions impacted your relationship with your followers online / in real life (if at all)?

### Comparing your Finsta to other Finstas

29. You mentioned that you follow other Finstas. Do you see any similarities or differences with yours regarding the topics we discussed so far? Describe them.

### Wrap-up questions

30. Is there anything else interesting or important about your Finsta that we haven't touched on?

### Demographics

Before we end, I would like to ask you a few demographic questions.

31. From 1 as a private person to 10 as a public person, how would you rate yourself in social media? Why?
32. What is your gender?
33. What is your ethnic background?
34. What is your year in school?
35. What is your age?

### **Conclusion**

These are all the questions we have for you. If there is anything I missed out during our interview session, please feel free to contact me by email at [mhtao@umich.edu](mailto:mhtao@umich.edu). I may contact you if I have any follow up questions. Thank you for your time and participation. Do you have any questions for me?