



The rise and fall of BeReal: Values of and motivations for (dis)engagement with authenticity-promoting social media

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Abstract

Social media has long facilitated self-presentation, but the tension between authenticity and performativity remains. BeReal, launched in 2020, promised a more ‘authentic’ experience by requiring users to share unedited, real-time images. This study examines the platform’s perceived value, its initial appeal, and subsequent decline in user engagement. Through a large-scale qualitative survey ($N=333$), we present motivations for (dis)engagement, revealing a trajectory of enthusiasm, scepticism, and eventual disinterest. Participants valued BeReal for fostering social connection and serving as a digital memory archive. However, growing cynicism about authenticity – along with increasing performative behaviours and feature creep – diminished its appeal. Applying Ng’s post-adoption model we map users’ transition from adoption to discontinuance, situating BeReal’s decline within broader trends of social media fatigue. Our findings contribute to debates on ethical social media design, performative authenticity and user disengagement, providing insight into the ephemeral nature of digital platforms.

Keywords

Authenticity, platform disengagement, self-presentation, social media fatigue

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Introduction

The use of social media (SM) remains prolific, with 5.24bn users worldwide (Statista, 2024a). While SM research is extensive, findings on the benefits and drawbacks of its use remain varied and often contradictory (Valkenburg et al., 2022). We know users engage with SM in different ways to facilitate presentation of who they are, but problems such as context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2011) may result in them seeking alternative ways to maintain social connectedness while also feeling in control of their SM content. It is one of these ‘alternative’ ways to engage online that we explore in this study, which to date has not received as much attention as other more mainstream SM spaces. We investigate the platform *BeReal*, which promotes ‘real’ self-presentation for its users and claims to offer a solution to the problem of inauthentic SM (Maddox, 2023). The value of BeReal and its rise (and fall) in popularity is yet to be fully understood, which we address in this study.

Self-presentation, performativity and authenticity on social media

Our sense of self, both offline and online, emerges through social interactions shaped by a desire to manage impressions for various audiences (Manning, 2013). Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach to self-presentation conceptualises identity as a performance through which individuals enact an idealised version of themselves on the ‘front stage’, concealing aspects that conflict with their desired image. This theory has been widely applied to study identity within SM environments, which function as digital stages affording opportunities for users to construct and experiment with versions of self (Kondakciu et al., 2021; Shulman, 2022). Moreover, research examining self-presentation across anonymous and public online spaces highlights how identity is multiple, situated and shaped by the affordances and norms of specific platforms (e.g. Talbot et al., 2020). SM content, including images, videos, biographies, and status updates, provide identity markers and afford users selective control over how they are perceived (e.g. Ranzini and Hoek, 2017). This often facilitates the projection of highly curated, idealised selves rather than a strictly ‘authentic’ self (Hollenbaugh, 2021; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2010). For example, image editing features enable users to appear more physically attractive (Vandenbosch et al., 2022), though this can contribute to poorer self-esteem (Ozimek et al., 2023). Despite these complexities, many users desire to be authentic online but face barriers such as context collapse, positivity bias, and impression management pressures that hinder genuine self-expression (Haimson et al., 2021). Therefore, while authenticity is a valued goal within SM spaces, there is an ongoing negotiation between a need for ‘true’ self-expression and impression management.

The negotiation of authenticity is further influenced by the distinct affordances and social norms of specific SM platforms, whereby engagement with different SM has been associated with varying expressions of self (Costa, 2018). For example, Snapchat has been linked with greater authenticity, whereas Instagram facilitates idealised self-presentation (Choi and Sung, 2018), suggesting specific platforms afford varying levels of legitimacy. Dissatisfaction with unattainable lifestyles and negative comparisons with others on certain platforms (Moore, 2021) has led some SM users to create smaller,

private accounts with a different purpose. ‘Rinstas’ (a portmanteau of ‘real’ and ‘insta’) are dedicated Instagram accounts whereby close friends can access more authentic, meaningful content- sharing their ‘real’ lives (Xiao et al., 2020). Posts include innermost thoughts and feelings that may not be normalised on typical or ‘Finsta’ accounts (Kohler et al., 2018). ‘Finstas’ (‘fake’ and ‘insta’) refer to secondary accounts visible to a wider audience that follow more traditional norms of posting, enacting performative behaviours of ‘front’ and ‘back’ stage (Goffman, 1959). The practise of maintaining multiple accounts with differing purposes and audiences confirms that SM in its current form does not fulfil the authenticity-related needs of its users.

BeReal. New kinds of SM have been promoted which offer a different approach to self-presentation- one such prominent example is *BeReal*. The app was created by French entrepreneurs Alexis Barreyat and Kévin Perreau in 2020, funded by venture capitalists (France 24, 2022). The app has since been acquired by French developer Voodoo in 2024, with its original creators stepping down (Malik, 2024). *BeReal* encourages users to present their authentic self via photographs. It notifies users at different times every day, directing them to post unfiltered photographs of what they are doing at that exact moment (using the front and back camera of a smartphone)- within a two-minute window. If users fail to do so, other users will be notified (*BeReal Help Center*, 2025). Over time, *BeReal* has added new ways to engage users, such as an increased daily post limit from one to three photographs (Richardson, 2023). The kinds of images captured can be mundane and reflect domestic life (see Figure 1).

BeReal’s creator, Barreyat, said the platform aims to take users back to a time when SM was a place for close friends only and they were encouraged to be their authentic self (Letenyi, 2022). Encouraging authenticity is further complicated, however, as ‘performativity shaming’ is enacted when users don’t play by the rules (Duffy and Gerrard, 2022) and others can see delays in posting photographs.

Research framing and focus

As Maddox (2023) surmises, authenticity is here to stay. Despite the claims from *BeReal*’s founder that the platform’s affordances are those of authenticity and choice, its functionality suggests otherwise. Users are still constrained by the norms of SM sharing and receive judgement from others (Gill, 2021). We concur with Marwick (2015) that even ‘authentic’ appearances online are meticulously crafted. With reports that *BeReal*’s popularity is in decline and usage has plummeted 61% (Hutchinson, 2024; Stout, 2023), understanding the value of ‘ethical’ SM and its life cycle is paramount. While we focus on one specific app here, an understanding of its features can inform the infrastructure and culture of future platforms. Some digital platforms will be more relevant than others for identity development due to the content and affordances that characterise them. Yet, they are worthy of individual exploration as they may lead to insights that are more generalisable *across* digital environments (Soh et al., 2024).

Published research in this area is limited. There is a lack of large-scale data about *BeReal* use, often only presented as interview data collected from a handful of users. While this offers depth, it is limited in breadth. There has been some promising work



Figure 1. Example of front and back BeReal photographs (Goggin, 2022).

exploring how users make sense of the platform, ignore notifications to ‘BeReal’, and feel a tension between what they post and what is authentic (Pinch et al., 2024). The work by Pinch et al. provides an excellent overview of the high-level workings of the app and how people experience authenticity. Importantly, they flag some key areas to explore further, namely, resistance, ‘how individuals curate their online presence for their future selves’ (p. 15), and exploration of why users may be turning away from the platform. We approached our work with these unanswered questions in mind, and a desire to understand holistic usage of BeReal from a user’s perspective. To this end, we frame our work within the well-regarded innovation diffusion literature (Rogers, 1962) and decision-making models in this space (Ng, 2020). The diffusion of innovations theory has been applied to many studies of technology adoption (e.g. Acikgoz et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024). One such evolution of Roger’s work is that of (Ng, 2020), which adds *discontinuance* to the adoption model [Figure 2].

Ng’s (2020) model provides a revised six-stage cycle of post-adoption behaviour: (1) pre-evaluation; (2) evaluation; (3) preparation; (4) discontinuance; (5) post-action; and (6) readoption. We describe these stages in the context of SM app use. At *Pre-evaluation*

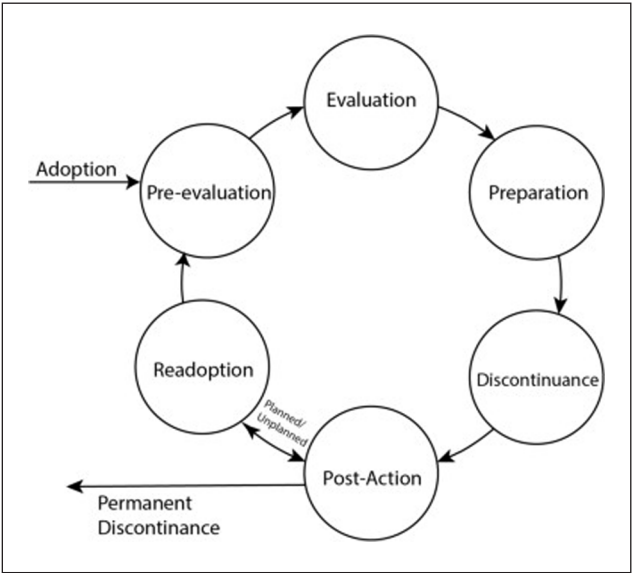


Figure 2. Post-adoption decision-making model (Ng, 2020).

stage, adopters are simply aware of their relationship with the application. They have no intention to discontinue use because they have not yet experienced dissatisfaction. The *Evaluation* stage is when users begin to reflect on benefits and drawbacks of the app, assessing usefulness and possible discontinuation- though no firm decision is made. The *Preparation* stage marks an adjustment period to address some of the dissatisfaction experienced in the prior stage. Users may delete the app, turn off notifications, or even begin to experiment with alternative platforms. *Discontinuance* is explicit withdrawal from the app. This might involve deleting the app, saying goodbye to other users, or choosing to use an alternative platform. *Post-action* involves deeper reflection about discontinuance choices, and results in either confirmation that leaving was appropriate, or users may encounter feelings of regret which can lead to *readoption*.

Our application of this model to BeReal extends (limited) work already conducted in the SM space. Ng’s extended model was applied to the platform *Twitter*. The addition of discontinuance reflects SM users’ choices to seek out and try alternative platforms to cope with disturbance (dissatisfaction) with the existing one. Ng’s work demonstrates the ‘temporal instability’ of innovations, with decisions to permanently or intermittently discontinue use of platforms being determined by satisfaction levels, viable alternates, and peer considerations. We present data from a large-scale national online qualitative survey to address the above unanswered questions and methodological limitations. To the best of our knowledge, ours is the largest dataset pertaining to BeReal, and our work is the first to extend the application of Ng’s discontinuance model to another social media platform. We posit the exploratory research question, ‘What is the value of using ‘BeReal’, and how do these values impact usage of the app?’

Methods

Study design

This was a collaborative project across two UK universities, Northumbria University and Bournemouth University. Data were collected using an online anonymous qualitative survey via Qualtrics. We opted for this approach to enable higher response rates, but also recognise the value in using well-designed qualitative surveys which have the benefit of capturing what is important to participants (Frith, 2000) using a wide-angle lens (Braun et al., 2021). Concerns around self-reporting are ever present with survey data, but we tried to limit this as much as possible via conscious survey design choices (e.g. anonymity and minimal demographic information collection) following guidance of Braun et al. (2021).

Participants

Participants had to be 18+ years old and ‘regular users’ of the SM application BeReal (we did not define what regular meant but we measured frequency of use as seen in Figure 3). As BeReal users tend to be aged 18–24 (Statista, 2024b), we *purposefully* recruited student populations (though anyone who fit the above criteria could participate and we encouraged snowball sampling). We follow Patton’s (2014) assessment of *purposeful sampling* in qualitative research, understanding that power lies in ‘information-rich cases for in-depth study’. What might be a bias issue in statistical sampling ‘becomes intended focus in qualitative sampling, and therefore a strength’ (p. 264). We collected 367 survey responses, but once data was checked for completeness (i.e. consent box ticked and at least one typed comment) this was reduced to 333 responses. We received 34 responses whereby the survey was started but did not include written text. Of the 333 participants, 280 identified as woman (including trans woman), 44 identified as man (including trans man) and 9 identified as non-binary. Ages ranged from 18 to 26 ($M=19.4$, $SD=1.26$). We collected data about frequency of BeReal use (Figure 3) and use of other SM applications (Figure 4). We also received responses from participants who reported to have left the platform, either temporarily or entirely. These responses were retained to add insight into discontinuance motivations.

Procedure

A study advert was shared on SM accounts belonging to both authors, institutional research credit platforms, and via institutional SM e.g. Facebook and Twitter/X. Participants who clicked on the advert link were directed to the Qualtrics survey. The survey presented participants with an information page, consent tick box, demographic questions [age and gender], a measure of social media use, free-text box questions pertaining to BeReal usage, and a debrief page. Participants were told to provide rich but anonymous information with an estimate of 30 minutes to complete the survey. While no psychological discomfort was anticipated, we provided a weblink and phone number for the UK charity *Mind*. The survey was open for approximately 6 months from November 2023–June 2024. The study and its protocol received full ethical approval from Northumbria University Ethics Online System (ref: 5290).

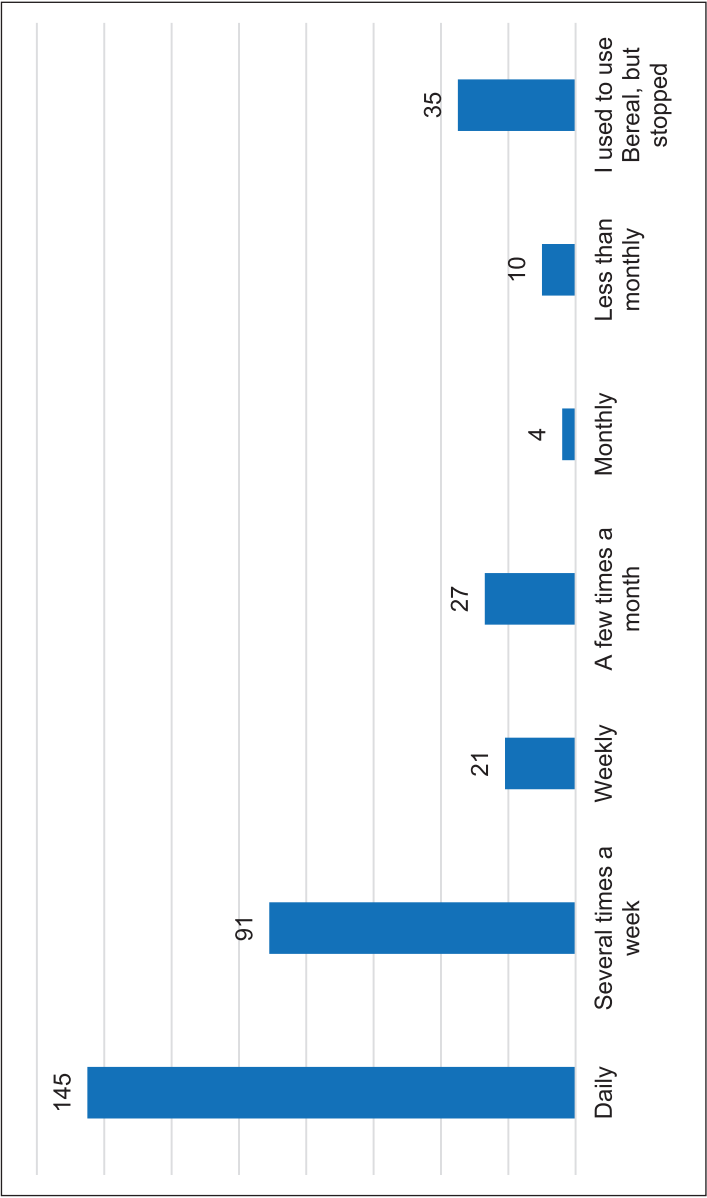


Figure 3. Self-reported use of BeReal.

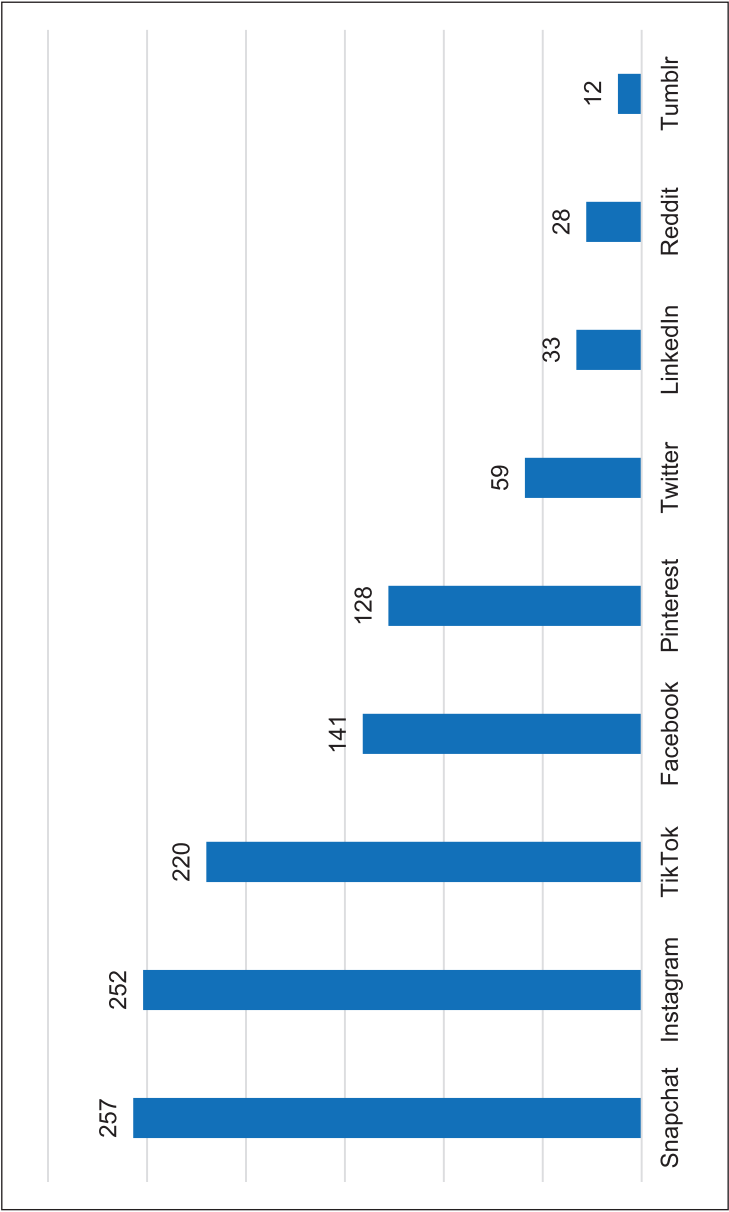


Figure 4. Self-reported use of other SM platforms.

Materials. The survey items (see Supplementary Material) were designed by the authors based on pilot work conducted at their respective institutions, covering topics of posting habits, authenticity, and viewing content. We asked about BeReal use [Y/N] to ensure participants matched the inclusion criteria. Following this, choice radio buttons measured appealing aspects of the BeReal platform [Figure 5], and strategies used on the platform such as posting late. Free text boxes then requested more detail related to these strategies, that is, 'Please describe your reasons for using these strategies on BeReal'.

Analytic approach and reflexivity. Each author managed their own institutional data using QSR NVivo 14. All data was read and considered as part of the analysis. We used the research question to guide data review and met regularly to discuss analysis. The authors co-coded over a period of 6 months. During the final data meeting, we reviewed the sentiment from both data sets and agreed on some key areas to refine. We utilised reflexive thematic analysis principles (Braun and Clarke, 2020, 2024), organising the data around three key insights surrounding the value of the app and its usage, as per the research question. Our analytic approach was inductive, but as we began organising our final themes, we formalised the 'life-cycle' nature of the data and identified a model which helped describe our findings. Ng's (2020) post-adoption model assisted in labelling the data, but sentiment was identified inductively before its application. As with all our work, we *integrated* rather than eliminated subjectivity using a contextualised analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013), recognising our active involvement in the final presentation of this data. Reflecting on the author's experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2024), neither author has a particularly prominent online social presence and are not BeReal users- but their previous work underlines the value of self-presentation and SM value for its users- a driver for this project.

Results

Our data presents a BeReal journey from excitement about possibilities of connection, to waning interest because of the introduction of features similar to other SM apps, to finally deciding to leave the platform. In some instances, readoption was considered. We evidence relevant stages from our participant narrative when describing themes below. Figure 6 displays the organisation of our themes demonstrating a process of use, dissatisfaction, and in some cases permanent discontinuance, with three themes: **(1) Pre-evaluation: social connections and stored memories;** **(2) Evaluation: Cynicism about the utility of BeReal;** and **(3) Preparation and Discontinuance: Leaving BeReal.**

Pre-evaluation: social connections and stored memories

Our first theme aligns with the pre-evaluation stage of Ng's (2020) model, where users remained engaged with a platform without intentions of discontinuing its use, often due to a lack of dissatisfaction or awareness of alternatives. Participants emphasised BeReal's value in fostering **effortless social connection** and **preserving memories for future reminiscence**. BeReal offered opportunities to view real-time images posted by friends not necessarily available on alternative platforms, notably Instagram. BeReal was

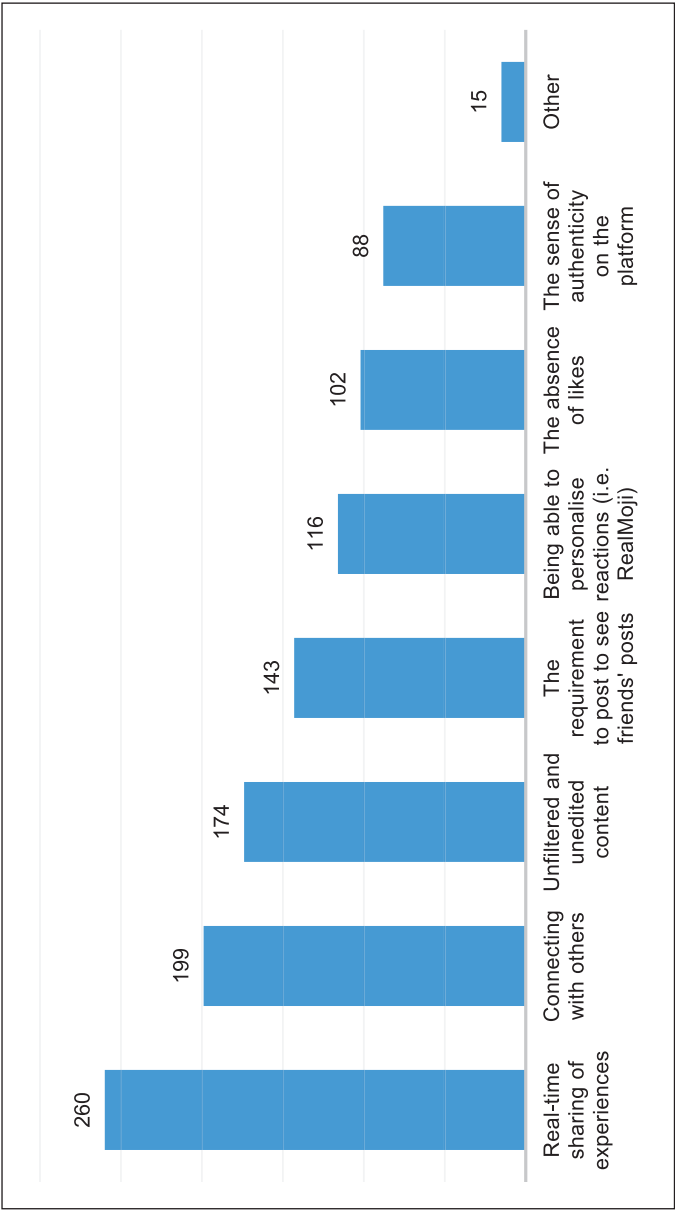


Figure 5. Self-reported responses to Q 'What specific aspects of BeReal appeal to you'.

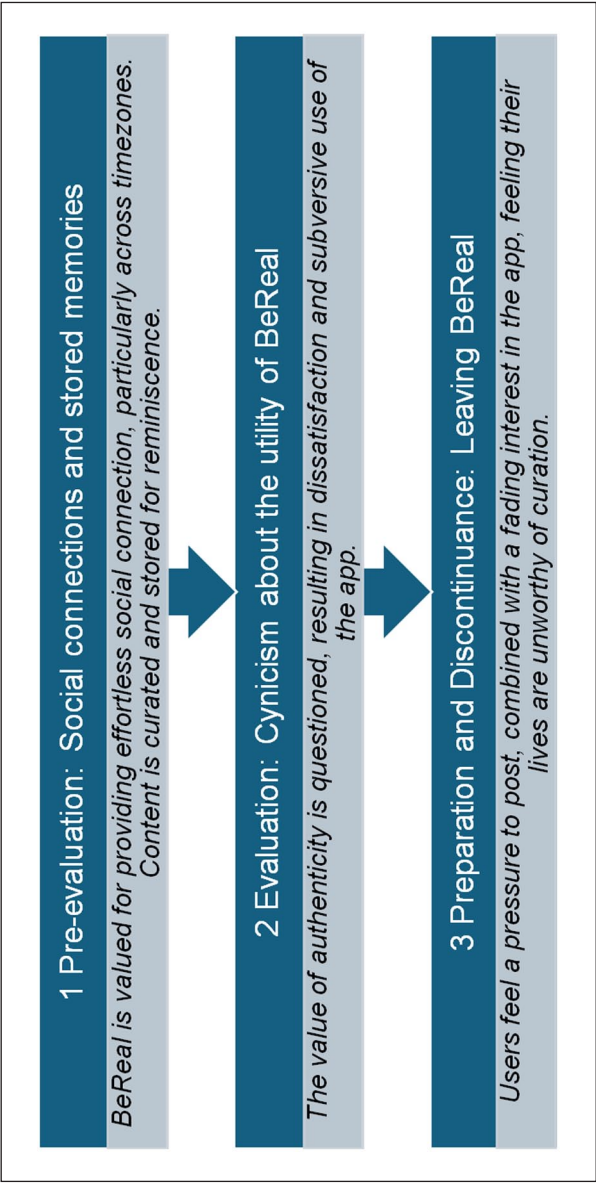


Figure 6. Themes produced during reflexive thematic analysis.

especially useful for staying connected with friends and family in different locations. When moving away to university, for example, BeReal became a tool to keep in touch and experience a daily, real-time *snapshot* of friend's day, even if they were in different parts of the world:

It makes social media a bit more 'true to its purposes' of connecting with friends and seeing what your friends are up to, even if you haven't had the time to catch up and have a conversation with them. I think it's interesting seeing what different people are up to at the exact same moment in time. [P290]

I don't get to see all my friends as often as I'd like, especially since coming to uni, and we're not always free at the same times to catch up via facetime/in person, so BeReal is a way for me to check in with my friends daily and see how they're doing. This makes me feel more connected as I have a few long-distance friends now and since we can't see each other that often it is a way for me to keep updated with their lives. [P214]

Feelings of connection engendered by BeReal were tied to smaller networks of close contacts, unlike platforms such as Instagram where connections extend to broader groups. These close networks encouraged participants to post more frequently with less fear of judgement, leading to a more authentic sense of interaction:

I don't have many people on my BeReal account, and the people I do have are people I'm close with. I don't feel like I need to shelter myself and portray an image for someone who I'm not. This app is somewhere I can show the real events of my life and what is happening. [P260]

On something like Instagram, I don't like posting because almost everyone I know will see it. On BeReal, my closer friends follow me, everyone has the same expectations or lack thereof. [P55]

The close connections and authentic self-expression described here are reminiscent of work by Talbot et al. (2020) in which SM users are constrained by platform norms. Participants may still be expressing a *bounded* self on BeReal, using the norms and rules for performativity in that space (Kerrigan and Hart, 2016).

Participants viewed BeReal as offering low-pressure social interaction compared with traditional methods such as in-person or telephone conversations. Unlike platforms like Instagram (associated with highly curated, idealised self-presentation), BeReal's real-time format encouraged users to share whatever they were doing in the moment regardless of how mundane or imperfect. In turn, exposure to 'routine' experiences on BeReal improved self-esteem as participants saw their activities reflected in others' posts, thus normalising mundanity. This immediacy cultivated an unfiltered style of interaction, effortless social exchange, and genuine connectedness with close contacts. Even without active conversations, passive viewing of others' posts enhanced users' sense of connection:

BeReal is a way to view your friend's day to day lives with the absence of stress that comes with posting on Instagram. [P278]

It helps me keep in contact with my friends without having to put the effort in to start a conversation. [P25]

A distinction between active (posting, uploading pictures, commenting) and passive (observing others' content) SM use has been observed in previous work, indicating that active use is more likely to support well-being (Kaye, 2021; Wang et al., 2018). However, BeReal users must post to view others' content, therefore challenging the passive-active dichotomy (see Valkenburg et al., 2022). However, participants experienced Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) when seeing others socialising or engaging in enjoyable activities. This upwards social comparison was exacerbated by the contrast between their own mundane posts and the more exciting posts shared by friends, leading to feelings of personal inadequacy:

It's nice to see what other people are doing at the same time as you but sometimes it's demoralising if for example they're out doing something and I'm still in bed can make me feel like I need to be doing more with my life. [P64]

It is nice being able to see what people are doing and all the places they go etc. however, it does sometimes make me feel bad that I'm not there with them, or don't go to all the interesting places that others go. [P220]

These experiences of social media FoMO mirror other research demonstrating negative effects on body image, well-being, and self-esteem (McComb et al., 2023). While BeReal may promote more authentic and spontaneous self-presentations, our findings suggest that comparisons still occur on the platform and users may still feel the effects of idealised self-presentation, albeit to a lesser extent. Importantly, intentions to *disengage* from SM can be influenced by feelings of missing out (Sharma, 2015), which may affect users' decisions to remain on BeReal, despite its negative impact on well-being.

Further value of BeReal was attributed to its ability to **preserve memories**, even when posted with a delay. Participants curated content to capture moments for posterity, preserved for a future self. While many participants valued seeing mundane moments on BeReal, they often personally aimed to capture standout events or milestones. If BeReal was a record of their life, participants felt they should capture noteworthy moments:

Sometimes If I've just woken up or know I'm doing something fun with my friends later, I'll wait until later to post it because I like looking back on my past BeReals and remembering the highlights of that day if I was doing something exciting. [P295]

As it is a fun way to look back on certain memories. For example, important events such as weddings etc. . . are fun to look back on, especially things that you forget about. [P233]

I really like the fact that the app saves all of your BeReals, so you can look back into the years and have a memory photo-calendar of sorts. [P82]

These statements highlight how BeReal users consider what is worth capturing, balancing this with a desire for authenticity. The opportunity for 'backwards glances' (Jacobsen

and Beer, 2021) is not unique to BeReal, but there are considerations needed around the storage and retrieval for these kinds of photographic collections (Chen et al., 2023)- we know archival value and revisiting *inappropriate* content issues arise when purposefully reviewing other kinds of social media content (Thomas and Briggs, 2016).

This theme of ‘social connections and stored memories’ highlights how during the pre-evaluation stage (Ng, 2020) users value BeReal for maintaining social connections across distances, often sharing mundane content with a select group of contacts. Quantitative data (Figure 5) supports this narrative, with participants reporting ‘real-time sharing of experiences’ (260) and ‘connecting with others’ (199) when asked, ‘What specific aspects of BeReal appeal to you?’ Participants viewed their engagement as genuine social interaction, despite the passive nature of viewing others’ posts. While many appreciated the platform’s real-time format, some experienced FoMO when comparing their routine experiences to others’ more exciting content. However, they also carefully considered what is worth capturing, using BeReal as a photo diary to chronicle their lives for future reflection.

Evaluation and preparation: cynicism about the utility of BeReal

Here, we see evidence of evaluation from the post-adoption model- participants reflected on the benefits and drawbacks of continuing use, remaining positive and searching for solutions to reduce disturbances related to BeReal usage. They were tech-savvy and capitalised on the platform’s features for their own benefit. Yet, we also note self-awareness and being realistic about what to expect from this kind of social media. Participants accepted it was unlikely that everyone could be authentic *all* of the time:

People will only post what they want others to see of themselves, which won’t always be authentic. But that’s understandable, you just have to take it with a pinch of salt that the things I do to make myself look more exciting, others will as well. (P332)

Most people are aware that others aren’t as genuine as they could be and that people pose and wait for the right moment to post their BeReal. [P57]

We observed a contradiction between participants’ expectations of BeReal’s intended purpose and their own behaviour. While many placed high value on ‘being real’ and expressed a desire for others to follow this expectation, they did not always conform themselves – that is, they saw the value in others being ‘real’, but that shouldn’t necessarily apply to them:

Being authentic on BeReal is very important as that is the purpose of the app. I believe using BeReal in a non authentic way defeats the app’s purpose and individuals may as well post on other social media sites. However, I am a culprit of not being completely authentic at all times. [P285]

Participants also considered that, like content on other SM platforms, there can never truly be a ‘real’ presentation of self. This inauthenticity is normalised among younger users:

I don't think anyone is going to be the authentic version of themselves 100% of the time. I think it's because the audience BeReal appeals to have grown up in the age of social media where people do showcase the 'idea', version of their lives. Therefore I think naturally we do try and showcase the ideal angle or event even if it is subconsciously. [P91]

I believe their [BeReal's] stance is a brilliant idea, I just feel that people from my generation have it ingrained into them this idea that social media isn't 'unedited content'. [P113]

Despite the explicit awareness of the shortcomings of the app and lack of authenticity, participants felt BeReal was as close to authentic as social media *could* get:

I think people will always manage to find loopholes, but BeReal is the closest any app has gotten to it [authenticity] in my opinion. [P132]

Participants revealing that authenticity feels unattainable resonates with Haimson et al.'s (2021) online authenticity paradox, whereby the desire for authenticity conflicts with a reluctance to share negative or sensitive content. Although our data did not feature discussions of marginalised identities or sensitive experiences, participants were hesitant to share anything that may present them in a less positive light. Similarly, Binns (2014) emphasised that community norms limit authenticity as users feel pressures to conform to specific identities. While authenticity can aid transitions like moving to university (Yang and Brown, 2016), our participants' expectation of authenticity from others but not themselves may impact their developing relationships, mirroring research showing that editing and reinventing yourself online can lead to greater loneliness (Thomas et al., 2020).

Participants identified **challenges with the app**, criticised features, and reflected on the value of BeReal for them. We found that despite the social connection it provided and its value as a reminiscence tool, BeReal's popularity was waning for a number of reasons. The feature allowing 're-takes' of a picture was frustrating, and we counted numerous statements to this effect:

I don't like that you can retake a BeReal, it defeats the whole point of BeReal [P197].

Some participants elaborated further on the issue of inauthenticity, suggesting there were other platforms that should be used instead as BeReal was unique for its focus on 'genuine' content. Participants were also critical of other users who were perceived as inauthentic, as they felt it contradicted the platform's core purpose. These kinds of negative sentiments were commonplace, and hinted at the beginnings of dissatisfaction with BeReal:

I think the whole point of BeReal is to include your real time activities, so not being authentic defeats the whole idea of BeReal and then it becomes just like any other social media platform. [P33]

It isn't a life changing issue if people choose to still post ideal versions of themselves, however it does defeat the purpose of the app and they may as well just post on Instagram or another social media platform if they are not being authentic. [P316]

In addition, there was a clear dislike for certain features that BeReal had introduced since its inception, and participants were unhappy with those that mimicked conventions they associated with other existing SM platforms. The most problematic additions included commenting, celebrity posts, 'likes', friends-of-friends features, and recommendations. These changes resulted in a loss of feeling BeReal was a close personal social network and impacted on authentic self-expression:

The friends of friends feature where you can see the BeReals from mutual friends – this just takes away the personal, authentic feature from BeReal for me as I use it with my close friends only. [P214]

I like sharing what I'm doing and seeing what others are doing without the pressure of likes. [P20]

I don't like the feature of being 'recommended' strangers or celebrities. I use BeReal for seeing people I care about, so I don't have any interest in seeing what a random dude in California is doing at this moment. [P131]

One participant suggested a punishment for the practise of posting late, valuing the authenticity the app facilitates:

I don't like that the only 'punishment' for posting late is that it shows you did it late. I think that defeats the point of the app – the photos are supposed to be in the moment, but people wait until they are doing something fun to post. It takes away from the realness. [P4]

As expected, we identified frustrations with the BeReal alert whereby a user must post within a short time frame. Participants explained that this feature creates a conflict between wanting to appear 'real' by posting on time and the desire to express a presentable version of themselves. The timing of notifications did not always align with their desire to capture something memorable, resulting in negative feelings:

I sometimes compare my BeReals to friends who may post more exciting things, which therefore makes me feel really bad when I'm not doing anything interesting. If that's the case I either don't post or wait to post when I'm doing something somewhat fun [P223].

Sometimes it influences me to be authentic but other times it allows me to post less authentically by allowing me to post late and when I'm actually doing stuff instead of when I'm doing nothing when the app notifies me to post. [P196]

A workaround for these issues came in the form of subversion tactics to be able to view friends' posts without sharing themselves (e.g. capturing blank spaces, concealing faces), although this was perceived as annoying for others:

People even just take a picture of nothing so it's just a dark space if they don't want to post but they want to see what others are up to. [P18]

It's also nice that you only get to see what others are up to once you post, but some people do just post the wall or blacked out screen which is a little annoying. [P4]

People use it should change to increase authenticity, for example a lot of people don't show their faces or show blank screens to hide from the camera. [P282]

The issues that participants cite as problematic are a result of function creep or 'featureitis' – incremental additions to the platform that were not part of the original app features. Justification for these kinds of changes include market competition and declining sales (Norman, 2014). In general, unwanted changes to a platform result in social network fatigue, contributing to a reduction in use (Ravindran et al., 2014). Annoyance at the delaying feature of BeReal posts has tentatively been identified in other recent work (Tirocchi, 2024), and frustration when users are forced to post before they can see what their peers are doing has been termed 'social surveillance' (Marwick, 2012). These changes to the app left our participants dissatisfied, enacting the *evaluation* stage of Ng's (2020) post-adoption model.

Preparation and discontinuance: leaving the app

When participants reflected on platform features, we saw evidence of users engaging in *preparation* and in some cases *discontinuance* of BeReal- discussions of adjusting usage patterns and inactivity was common in our data. Participants expressed a declining interest in the app as its novelty seemed to be fading. For those that tried to stick to the 'rules', the pressure to post authentically every day and photograph something *worthy* of sharing led to reduced engagement and in some cases withdrawal from the app. Participants felt they couldn't sustain multiple daily posts while still presenting a socially acceptable version of themselves:

I'm not a fan of the- what I feel is- the push to use it every day. I feel the pressure to post something. I also don't like the feeling of having to make my BeReal interesting. [P69]

I feel like I always have to be doing something, so I feel as if I have to be wearing a nice outfit, and make myself look nice whilst doing something interesting -which is why I use it a lot less now. [P155]

Once individual users began to lose interest, a domino effect of others abandoning the platform occurred. For some participants, BeReal usage became onerous and the daily expectation to post was too time consuming. The need to post on time, authentically, and at multiple times a day became overwhelming:

I just kept missing the notifications and forgetting to do it, and my friends stopped posting so I didn't have motivation. [P135]

I lost interest in the app as I hadn't added anyone new in a while and it become repetitive. I also turned off notifications as they irritated me as they were frequent so I sort of forgot about the app after a while. [P14]

Too much pressure to post everyday. At first it was a new and exciting platform, hadn't seen anything like it before but the novelty has worn off. Not just BeReal, across all social media platforms I'm using them less. [P184]

Part of the decline in popularity centred around reduced social interaction. Once friends stopped posting, the utility of the app was significantly reduced, given its relatively small network size. We observed comments from participants about leaving SM more widely, in line with the idea of a 'digital detox' - though work has suggested this may not have the anticipated benefits for well-being (Ramadhan et al., 2024). Further issues related to discontinuation of the app included judgement from others, and participants comparing their lives with peers. Despite an initial appreciation for documenting mundane moments, some users felt they didn't lead an 'exciting enough life' to curate content, leading to a reduction in usage:

I didn't like comparing myself to others and it was a lot of pressure as a lot of my friends would ask why haven't I posted. [P150]

I have deleted it a few times because I felt my unedited life wasn't exciting enough. [P128]

I stopped using the app as much when it stopped being fun and genuine and more of a competition-I personally preferred the authenticity. [P308]

Interestingly, we noted one participant reported they were considering rejoining the app since discontinuing use, after taking part in our research:

I haven't fully left the platform and still upload on the odd occasion, but it is mostly because I often miss the time to upload or don't feel I look good enough to be posting at that time. However I would like to start using it again and may pursue this since completing the study. [P231]

This theme of 'leaving the app' signals a change in participant satisfaction, with the costs of using the platform outweighing the benefits. SM fatigue is a well-established outcome of online stressors such as envy, shame and communication overload (Zheng and Ling, 2021). A reduction in social connectedness and low self-esteem also play a role in SM discontinuation considerations (Fan et al., 2020). Withdrawal from SM, either by account deactivation (Nguyen, 2023) or deletion (Schaffner et al., 2022) has been explored in other platforms, but not yet in BeReal. Similar to what we see here, Cho (2015) identified 'disturbances' within SM use including 'Feeling bad about one-self' and 'Feeling bad through the comparison with others', resulting in users leaving a platform (p.1540, Cho, 2015). Our participant's comments reflect the *discontinuance* stage of Ng's (2020) post-adoption model, whereby users are inactive, take breaks, or delete their accounts altogether. The participant who suggested readoption after being part of this study would be identified as an 'intermittent discontinuer', but this was limited to an instance of one individual.

Discussion

Our goal was to better understand the value of using the social media app 'BeReal', and how these values impacted on participant usage. We asked, 'What is the value of using 'BeReal', and how do these values impact usage of the app?'. To date, work exploring BeReal has identified tensions around authenticity and posting, but also highlighted the need for better consideration around curation of data, future usage, and discontinuation (Pinch et al., 2024). Our participants valued BeReal for the social connections it afforded, with design features like delays and re-takes allowing them to decide what to present and when. BeReal was viewed as a repository for future reminiscence, with the ability to easily save content long-term, a desirable feature. The immediacy of sharing photographs also assisted friends in staying connected, particularly over distances, with daily reminders encouraging engagement. However, participants were articulate in the features they did *not* value (often the same features they explained were useful), which influenced their intentions to (dis)continue using the app. Re-takes of photographs, user likes, celebrity posts and recommendations were all aspects that deterred engagement. These, coupled with feelings of pressure to post regularly, impacted authentic engagement. Our Gen Z users were cynical and apathetic about what authenticity meant for them, or if it could even exist. Perceptions of authenticity shift over time, and BeReal is evidence we are in one such moment of flux (Maddox, 2023).

We applied Ng's (2020) post-adoption model as a unique way to consider the life cycle of BeReal, anticipating that participants could have been at any stage. Using this model to frame data to understand ways people adopt, use, assess and then disengage from this platform is novel. This approach identified ways that users become dissatisfied with BeReal, and the triggers that push them from evaluation to preparation and eventually discontinuance, with novelty fading when demands to post become overwhelming and social connections break down. It is this discontinuance stage that social media researchers could benefit from exploring in context, as we have uncovered features users dislike that result in disengagement or apathy. We posit that discontinuance is not the end of the process. Discontinuance and post-adoption stages should be thought of as 'disturbance-coping' processes, rather than an uncertainty reduction process, as per Ng's assessment. Users may experience dissatisfaction and enact discontinuance yet ultimately resume adoption of the platform because of social and individual pressures, further exacerbating problematic use. However, the model does not account for experiences of users who abandon an innovation much earlier in the life cycle – adoption 'anomalies' (Bhattacharjee, 2001), which our data is also lacking. This would give insight into early decision-making around the value of platforms.

As researchers we have a responsibility to understand how, when and why SM users engage with platforms, particularly ones that offer a solution to the 'online authenticity paradox' whereby people want to be authentic, but to do so requires sharing experiences that can come at great personal cost (Haimson et al., 2021). The demands that BeReal placed on our participants resulted in feelings of inadequacy, despite marketisation that it normalises the mundanity of life. Consequently, we still see mental health concerns resulting from engagement. We maintain that far from offering users choice and freedom to express themselves authentically, BeReal is designed to constrain by self-presentation

norms (Gill, 2021) and can be detrimental to users' well-being. While BeReal may not have held its appeal for users, data collected from our participants about other platform usage (Figure 4) indicates they had access to a wide range of alternatives to BeReal. The most common SM platforms listed were Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok- all interfaces with 'reel-like' content and the capability for posts to disappear after time, offering an ephemerality to digital content (Klik, 2024). It may be that these alternatives offer enough to satisfy. Some of the dissatisfaction around BeReal use ultimately relates to the intrusive daily push notifications and a sense of always needing to be 'on' that our participants described.

Our findings carry implications for SM design that go beyond safeguarding to promote authentic self-expression and, in turn, support user well-being. This is timely given ongoing debates and legislation (e.g. the UK Online Safety Act, GOV.UK 2025) around online safety and well-being, especially among younger users. Participants valued BeReal's closed sharing network, which enabled more authentic self-expression. Designing for authenticity, therefore, requires attention to audience boundaries; smaller, limited-access networks may better sustain authentic self-expression than platforms with broad visibility. Prior work similarly emphasises audience segmentation and boundary regulation as key to enabling authenticity online. Features offering granular control, such as time-limited visibility and selective sharing, may further empower users to engage in authentic self-presentation. Our findings mirror Brough et al. (2020), who found young people desire SM that reduce pressure to conform or seek validation. Participants in our study similarly expressed discomfort with *quantifiable* markers of authenticity, such as BeReal's re-take counter. Consistent with Kim et al. (2024), we caution against this idolising or quantifying of authenticity, as metrics may foster toxicity in spaces ostensibly designed to promote 'realness'. Instead, platforms should prioritise non-quantifiable modes of expression and interface cues that support, rather than surveil users. More broadly, participants were concerned about BeReal's adoption of features from other platforms, viewing them as undermining its ethos of authenticity and contributing to discontinuance. As users engage with different platforms for distinct social and self-expressive needs (Davidson and Joinson, 2021), we encourage designers to resist SM feature convergence and preserve platform distinctiveness aligned with user expectations. Further research with young people is needed to explore how platforms can support authenticity and well-being without introducing conflicting features.

In terms of limitations, we didn't collect data on how *long* people had used the app for (only how often), which would improve our understanding of the timeline of BeReal use and users' placement on the adoption-discontinuance cycle and would also allow for exploration of adoption 'anomalies' (those who abandon the platform soon after adoption). We also recognise our sample is demographically restricted to women aged 18-16, so different gendered experiences of BeReal have not been captured here. Finally, the inclusion of data from 35 ex-users of BeReal, while insightful, also presents issues of recall bias which may have impacted how participants reported the true value of the platform. We propose further exploration of BeReal usage across age and gender, as this has been shown to modulate SM use more widely (Rodgers and Rousseau, 2022) and would address some of our limitations. Others have suggested the

importance of exploring network size to better understand the link between SM and well-being (e.g. Brown et al., 2021). In future work we plan to undertake a network analysis of BeReal to see how close versus distant friends impact on value, usage and self-presentation across age and gender.

Our work contributes a new, holistic understanding of user (dis)satisfaction and (dis)engagement with ‘authentic’ platform BeReal. This large-scale qualitative dataset provides a valuable overview of social media adoption and discontinuance applying an innovation diffusion model. More work is needed to understand where users migrate when a platform designed for authenticity and support no longer meets their needs. The concept of ‘platform-swinging’ encourages the idea that users adopt various SM to navigate self-presentation and social norms (Tandoc et al., 2019), but the dissatisfaction expressed by our participants around BeReal raises wider concerns about next steps for authentic social media value, design and life cycle.

Author contributions

LT- Conceptualisation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Visualisation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

CT- Conceptualisation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Visualisation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Data availability

Data is available and can be found at https://osf.io/s9hg2/?view_only=f57e6f7a25d54022866a6e313f79b7d8

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Ethical considerations

The study and its protocol received full ethical approval from the Northumbria University Ethics Online System (ref: 5290) on 11 October 2023. Participants gave written consent before completing the survey.

Consent to participate

Participants provided informed consent to participate prior to data collection.

Consent for publication

Participants provided consent to publish anonymised data.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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