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SPECIAL ISSUE:
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Digital Rebranding and Quotidian Self-Reinvention: Wellness Influencer-Healers' Negotiations of Authenticity and Tellability Crises on Instagram

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This paper examines practices of digital rebranding, characterised as the strategic overhaul and staged revitalization of one's digital persona, within wellness influencer cultures on Instagram. Processes of rebranding, which are communicatively afforded by and performatively augmented through platform tools, features and semiotic resources, introduce a narrative disjuncture that requires delicate rhetorical management of self-historicity in relation to neoteric self-presentation practices in order to preserve impressions of authenticity. Drawing on data collected during a longitudinal blended digital ethnographic study, including screen-based participant observations, social media content extraction and oral interviews, I explore the ways in which female wellness influencer-healers discursively (re)negotiate their self-positioning in connection to their current and past digital brands and, relationally, their (imagined) audiences. I suggest that rebranding practices are narratively structured by and, in turn, enact authenticity through discourses of 'personal growth' and 'pedagogical self reflection,' thereby constructing self-presentational shifts as emergent and organic evolutions in one's online presence. The paper further argues that digital rebranding manifests from compounded crises of authenticity and tellability, compelling users to continuously recalibrate their online personas in alignment with evolving platform norms and audience expectations. The analysis therefore foregrounds the paradoxical struggle of maintaining a stable personal brand whilst adapting to the dynamic nature of social media.

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INTRODUCTION

Self-branding — defined as a collection of self-presentational strategies and practices that serve to construe one's identity as a valuable commodity (Marwick, 2013a) — represents a normative mode of participation on Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020). Indeed, the marketization of the self, through an entrepreneurial reframing of one's lifestyle, interests, knowledge and experiences, is not only expected but also an essential aspect of platformed interactions, reflecting the blurred boundaries between economic and affective life in contemporary digital landscapes (Whitmer, 2019, p.4). Much like other social networking sites, such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn and TikTok, Instagram's platform interface is structured around opportunities and obligations to "write the self into being"(boyd, 2008, p.120). From choosing a unique username, uploading a profile photo, writing an (up-to) 150-character bio, and broadcasting snippets and snapshots of one's life events and activities online, Instagram represents a stage not only for performing modes of self-expression and interaction, but also for self-promotion and commodification.

The notion of self-branding highlights the intersections and analytic inseparability of mediated identities and social media's commercial logic. Its underscoring norms and values are entangled in the ontological operation of a digital attention economy, whereby visibility and engagement are the main currency upon which user interactions trade (Hearn, 2010). Drawing on Bourdieu (1977)'s metaphor of the "linguistic marketplace," Page (2012) argues that self-branding relies on the conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital (p.183). In other words, those users who exhibit skillful command over language use and other semiotic resources in ways that capture and sustain the attention of audiences are rewarded with engagement in the form of "likes," "shares," "comments," and "followers," which can be translated into actual monetary value for both users and platform owners. This represents a defining attribute of internet micro-celebrities and social media influencers (SMIs), who capitalise on their "visibility labour" (Abidin, 2016b) and transform self-branding mechanisms into bona-fide careers. Thus, attending to modes of strategic self-conspicuousness, that is, intentional and calculated displays of the self engineered for purposes of attaining attention and influence (Abidin, 2016b, p.91), elucidates the largely opaque forms of algorithmic governance exercised by technology companies

(Beer, 2009) to regulate the boundaries, possibilities and preferences for user behaviour and interactions.

Since its launch in 2010, Instagram has played an important role in rendering self-branding as routinized and recognizable sets of social and technological practices. At the time of writing, the platform boasts two billion monthly active users worldwide and is ranked as the fourth most-popular social networking site globally (Statista, 2024). Over the past decade, Instagram has undergone numerous updates and feature expansions in order to accommodate and solidify its privileged status as a hub for branded personalities and influencer marketing, including the introduction of paid partnership labels that tag branded content, verification badges that signal to audiences that an account is "authentic" and "notable," as well as rolling out short- and long-form video formats alongside existing photographic affordances to align with and transcend offerings of competitors such as Youtube, Snapchat, and TikTok. This, in conjunction with the platformed emphasis on highly aestheticized representations of the everyday and mundane (Zappavigna and Ross, 2021, p.2) offers ordinary social media users enhanced opportunities for and promises of attaining "insta-fame" (Marwick, 2015).

The temporal organisation and archival quality of the Instagram feed incites users to self-fashion as coherent branded packages (Senft, 2013, p.346). Consequently, users engage in strategic forms of self-promotion through continuously streaming intimate aspects of everyday life, thereby fostering a sense of personal authenticity (Marwick, 2013a, p.207). Crucial to this management of an authentic branded persona is a consistent communicative style and image that captures and sustains the attention of a loyal community of followers (Duffy and Hund, 2015, p.6). Yet, amidst the vacillating demands of a highly competitive digital attention economy, shifting interactional norms and capabilities of social media platforms, and broader ideals and imperatives of new individualism, users are surreptitiously coerced into dynamic processes of continual self-reinvention in order to enact difference, originality and, indeed, authenticity in another sense (Taylor, 2022, p.102). These competing demands play out as a struggle to appease norms and preferences for regularised self-production on the one hand, whilst demonstrating uniqueness and distinction from the influencer mass market on the other. For some, this struggle provokes a series of semiotic shifts that constitute a rebranding of the digital self.

In this paper, I examine the multi-semiotic practices and processes of digital rebranding, characterised here as the strategic overhaul and staged revitalization of one's digital persona. I draw on a case study from my ongoing

research examining discursive constructions and negotiations of authenticity in social media wellness cultures (Ali, 2025, in prep), a digital arena that has attracted much controversy in wider cultural discourses due to its proclivity for circulating mis/disinformation and conspiratorial thinking (Baker and Rojek, 2020; Baker, 2022a). This context provides a crucial lens for appraising rebranding at the intersection of contested authenticity. To date, there have been no investigations into rebranding practices of individual social media users from a narrative and discourse analytic standpoint. The paper therefore attempts to remedy this lacuna in scholarly work.

Drawing on a "small stories" approach to social media, I appraise digital rebranding as situated and interactional narrative activities which offer "*a window into the micro-genetic processes of identities as 'in the making' or 'coming into being'*" (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p.379). Rebranding can be read as a narrative disjuncture that separates "*the self before"* the rebrand from "*the self after*." Yet, rebranding also relies on self-continuity and logical progression from past self-iterations in order to organize and justify the emergence of a "*new, evolved and improved me.*" If not handled correctly, this disjuncture has the potential to undermine perceptions of authentic selfhood, resulting in a loss of linguistic and economic capital. I will therefore argue that successful rebranding requires delicate rhetorical management of self-historicity in relation to neoteric self-presentation practices.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SMALL STORIES AND MEDIATIZED AUTHENTICITY

Self-branding and the Mediatization of Authentic Selfhood

Since the inception of social networking sites, meta-discourses about computer-mediated communication in popular culture have framed social media interactions as the antithesis to "genuine" talk characteristic of face-to-face conversation, and as an erosion of "legitimate" connection and communities (Jones, 2014, p.188; Thurlow, 2006, p.681). Further, digital propagations of fake news, deepfakes, hyperreality, and mis/disinformation have fueled widespread cultural anxieties surrounding what is truth and reality online (Cover et al., 2022, p.63), provoking sweeping proclamations that "social media is not real life" (Abidin, 2018, p.6). In turn, key stakeholders in the digital attention economy, including platform owners, advertisers and influencers, are strongly invested in restoring consumer trust in the authenticity of online content and personas. This

is evinced by a preoccupation in promotional dialogue with forms, meanings and practices of "doing authenticity" (Georgakopoulou, 2022, p.268; 2021, p.5).

For social media influencers, this reification of personal authenticity is equated with portraying a "transparent," "honest," and "not fake or manufactured" self and life (Marwick, 2013b, p.4) void of any "gaps or discontinuities in relation to offline life" (Georgakopoulou, 2022, p.269). At the level of linguistic and other semiotic activity, authenticity is associated with an informal and conversational style and amateur aesthetic (Abidin, 2017; Bhatia, 2023), fostering a sense of interactive intimacy between creators and their audiences (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017). Meanwhile, platform features and affordances corroborate this performed authenticity by prioritising immediacy, spontaneity, and mundanity as benchmarks for algorithmically optimised content (Georgakopoulou, 2022), therefore soliciting (seemingly) "unplanned" and "off-the-cuff" self-presentations. These practices represent a *mediatization* of authentic selfhood, that is, they reflexively link processes of "authentic" communication to commoditized processes of self-branding (Agha, 2011, p.163). Far from destabilizing the staged and curated essence of digital communication then, authenticity on social media represents a recognisable "performative ecology and parasocial strategy" (Abidin, 2018, p.3) that is inextricable from the commercial imperatives underpinning digital capitalism

Digital Rebranding and Strategic Self-reinvention

Although the phenomenon of digital rebranding is underexplored in existing scholarship, wider cultural dialogue has engaged with such modes of self-reinvention as a vehicle for "doing authenticity" online. A prominent example is that of former Instagram influencer Essena O'Neill, who made headlines in 2015 when she abruptly deleted more than 2,000 images and rewrote the captions of her remaining 98 posts to reveal the deception involved in their curation (Hunt, 2015). O'Neill subsequently changed her Instagram handle to "Lets Be Game Changers," repositioning the account as a space for sharing "raw" content and denouncing "fake" portrayals on social media (Abidin, 2018, p.6). Another case pertinent to the present research context was the rebrand of fitness influencer Alice Liveing in 2017. Having established an online following of over 700,000 users under the moniker Clean Eating Alice, Liveing announced her rebrand in an Instagram post stating "*as time has passed and I've grown up, I've also felt the need for my brand to grow up too"* (2017) — a phrase echoed in her cover feature on *Women's Health* magazine the following year, where she appeared in black lingerie as a symbolic

departure from her former colour-laden youthful aesthetic beside the headline "Alice Liveing: All Grown Up" (Unwin, 2018). Talk of this rebrand resurged again in 2024 within promotional material for Liveing's new memoir, in which she confesses to the disordered reality that lay behind the scenes of her former online persona (Llewellyn-Smith, 2024).

Both O'Neill and Liveing engaged with their rebrands through discourses of personal growth and pedagogical self-reflection, thereby constructing a seemingly organic transition into more authentic brands of influencer. Yet, these self-presentational shifts came amidst a wave of controversies and backlash surrounding the (lack of) transparency and trustworthiness of social media influencers. This included concerns about deceptive practices such as undisclosed paid-for promotions and false advertising (Hunt, 2017), as well as sharing heavily filtered and doctored images that presented a fabricated reality (Bridge, 2017). Furthermore, the prominent scandal of former wellness influencer Belle Gibson, who was exposed as having faked a terminal cancer diagnosis (Baker and Rojek, 2020), fueled widespread skepticism of influencer industries. Consequently, rebranding efforts, such as those enacted by O'Neill and Liveing, appear to reflect strategic attempts to (re-)establish authenticity in a climate that increasingly scrutinises the legitimacy and credibility of influencers.

Small Stories and Rebranding in Digital Interaction

As I have suggested, rebranding takes place at the level of interaction, often vis-a-vis narratorial modes of self-expression through which users construct and reconstruct an "authentic" digital persona. This position aligns with that of *"small stories,*" a narrative research paradigm that approaches stories and storytelling as woven through the fabric of everyday life and an integral part of routine and ordinary social interaction (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Developed as a counter-move to the restrictive framing of stories as past-tense, linear, single-authored accounts of exceptional or disruptive life events, small stories considers those open-ended, fragmented, non- or multi-linear and co-constructed tellings that have been historically devalued and dismissed in traditional narrative scholarship.

An attendance to atypical and underrepresented forms of storytelling means that small stories research is well positioned to address a wide spectrum of narrative activities taking place in social media environments, such as selfies (Georgakopoulou, 2016b), vlogs (Lene Pers, 2023), status updates (Page, 2010) and hashtags (Giaxoglou, 2018). Such forms of digital storytelling are usually characterised by their transportability, iterativity, and ephemerality, as well as their

propensity for multi-semiotic and multi-authored tellings about the minute-by-minute unfolding of everyday life (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p.269-70). The ontological breadth and flexibility of small stories allows for a recognition of narrativity as an emergent property, thus addresses processes of becoming a story through engagement beyond a single event (Georgakopoulou, 2016a, p.183).

The small-stories heuristic (Georgakopoulou, 2007) explores three separable but interrelated levels of analysis: (1) *ways of telling,* (2) *sites and* (3) *tellers*. *Ways of telling* is concerned with the socio-culturally shaped and more-or-less conventionalised semiotic choices of a story, including the types of events and experiences, how they are managed interactionally as well as their intertextual links with previous and anticipated stories. *Sites* considers the surrounding social spaces and situational context factors of narrative activities, including the role of algorithms and affordances that form an integral part of social media platform logic (Georgakopoulou et al., 2020, p.14). Finally, *tellers* takes stock of the communicators within narrative activities, considering their roles as here-and-now interactional participants, characters in the story world as well as their macro biographic membership to certain social and cultural groups. This heuristic provides a useful apparatus for systematic interrogation of ways in which users announce and perform changes to their self-brands.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this work comes from research examining discursive constructions and negotiations of authenticity by ten female influencer-healers with IBD (Inflammatory Bowel Disease) on Instagram. The term "influencer-healer" characterises a sub-kind of social media influencer whose promotional activities place a focus on marketing their own knowledge, personal experience, and services as alternative and holistic health practitioners or "healers," rather than brand partnerships and paid sponsorships that underscore "traditional" definitions of influencers (cf: Abidin, 2016a). Guiding questions for the research endeavoured to uncover the discursive practices and semiotic repertoires that influencer-healers mobilise in their productions of authenticity, and if/how platform affordances shape and constrain such productions.

To address these questions, I utilised a blended digital ethnographic approach encompassing both online and offline modes of data. Traditionally, digital ethnography has built on pre-digital ethnographic methods in order to produce comprehensive situated accounts of online social phenomena (Varis, 2014, p.56). This involves sustained immersion and engagement with relatively stable and

bounded digital sites and communities to uncover linguistic styles and practices that are particular to computer-mediated communication. A blended approach, however, challenges such theoretical and methodological distinctions between online and offline sites of interaction (see: Bolander and Locher, 2020; Orgad, 2009). Rather than appraising digital spheres as containers of language with distinctive interactional norms and values, it recognises internet use as embedded in everyday life, forging tangible connections between virtual identities and physical realities (Hine, 2000). Blended ethnography then "foregrounds the poly-centric, transmedia aspects of ethnographic research that follows actors and their communicative practices across on and offline spaces" (Androutsopoulous, 2015, p.77). It is flexible and open-ended, and accounts for the historicity of digital discourse as developing from forms and features of language use that pre-date and transcend the internet (Baym, 2005, p.231). In turn, a blended ethnography resists urges to exoticize digital discourse (Georgakopoulou, 2013, p.21), recognising instead that social media are but one point of entry for examining the multi-layered organisation of ordinary social processes (Bakardjieva, 2011, p.59). Blended approaches further hold analytic utility for investigations into discursive constructions of authenticity across digital media. If indeed authenticity online represents showing a "genuine" and "not fake or manufactured" self with "no gaps or discontinuities in relation to offline life" (Georgakopoulou, 2022, p.269),then it is by attending to the offline that we uncover how social media users remediate and resemiotize (Iedema, 2001) the authentic self through digitally afforded means and mechanisms.

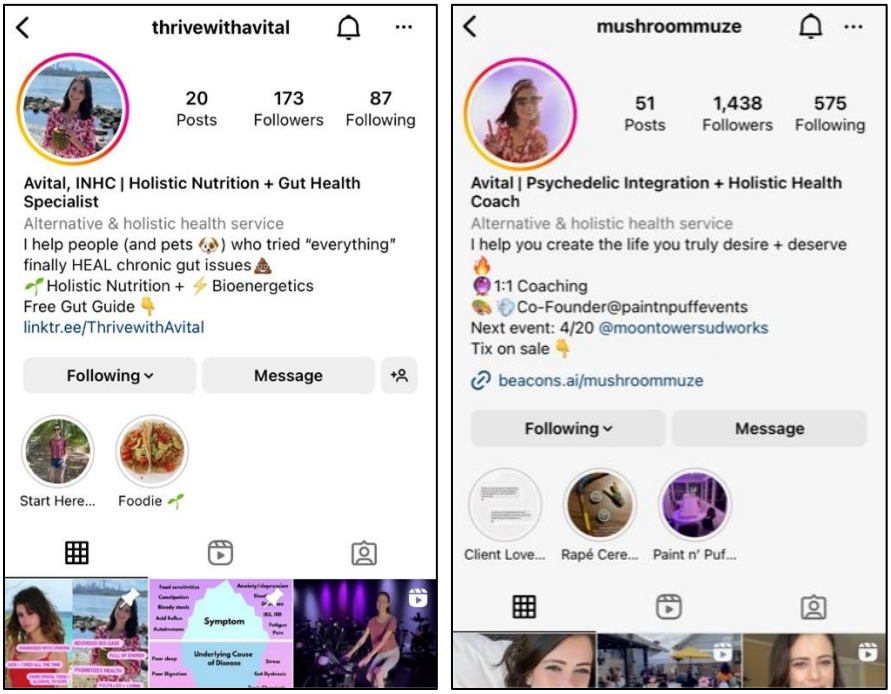
I utilized a tripartite research procedure involving screen-based participant observation, digital data extraction using Instaloader (Graf, 2022) and ethnographic interviews with five of the influencer-healers. This amounted to 20 hours of observation field notes, 4,954 Instagram posts and stories as well as screenshots of the influencer-healers' profiles, and approximately six hours of interview recordings and transcriptions. The alliance or blending of distinctive modes of data follows from a growing body of ethnographic research that seeks to establish a contextualised or holistic picture of online social phenomena, such as Georgakopoulou (2016b) and Page (2014). Data were collected over a period of nine months. Ethical approval was granted by King's College London E&B Research Ethics Panel. All content and observed accounts were publicly available at the time of the research. Informed consent was obtained from the influencer-healers who participated in interviews. Permission was given for the reproduction of any material shown in this paper and anonymity was forgone voluntarily in order to preserve copyright ownership of the material.

DIGITAL REBRANDING: FROM @THRIVEWITHAVITAL TO @MUSHROOMMUZE

My analysis focuses on the rebranding activities of one influencer-healer named Avital, a young woman in her early 30s residing in the Southern United States, whose digital rebrand raised compelling questions surrounding the management of authenticity following such a self-presentational disjuncture. I first encountered Avital on Instagram in July 2022 whilst conducting preliminary perusals of activities within the broader sphere of digital wellness cultures before eventually narrowing my research interest to those users with a focus on holistic healing and IBD management. Avital was among 24 Instagram users initially identified for meeting my inclusion criteria.

At the time of discovery, Avital's profile was a personal-turned-professional account, which she used to archive her healing journey with IBD and promote her services as a health coach. In August 2022 however, shortly after I became aware of her, Avital announced in a post that she had created a new Instagram account where she would be posting from then onwards. This new page, which had the username *@thrivewithavital*, was publicized as a space for topics on gut health, nutrition and lifestyle, with occasional life updates. When I began collecting data in September 2022, Avital agreed to my observation and collection of content shared on this new account. In December 2022, three months into data collection, Avital rebranded again, this time remaining on the account she had set up a few months prior but giving it the new username of *@mushroommuze (See Figure 1)*. In conjunction with this shift, Avital deleted all existing posts on her page. This rebrand initiated a departure from the thematic focus on chronic illness toward content related to "psychedelics and plant medicine."

Figure 1. Screenshots of Avital's profile "before"(September 2022) and "after" the rebrand (January 2023)



At the time, the unexpected shifts in Avital's social media presence were perceived in the research as a methodological complication. Field notes recorded on the day that the rebrand took place recounted frustration surrounding the unpredictability of digital interactions as "live" data for which access could be revoked without notice, attesting to the shifting ground of digital contexts (Baym and Markham, 2009). However, the rebrand also opened up a new line of interrogation that led to the discovery that, to varying degrees and extents, rebranding practices were not so unusual among influencers after all. In fact, of the five individuals interviewed, four disclosed having engaged in some kind of rebranding activity since establishing their social media account. Given reasons included both a narrowing and broadening of thematic focus, putting a name and face to a previously anonymous account, and a deliberate self-distancing from the "toxic" dimensions of wellness (e.g. the promotion of disordered eating and unhealthy relationships with exercise). Avital therefore provided a valuable case study for observing practices and outcomes of digital rebranding in real-time.

During an interview in May 2023, I asked Avital about the shifts I'd seen in her Instagram presence over previous months, to which she responded by disclosing a series of events in her "offline" personal life that she positioned as having catalysed the renewal and revitalization of her online persona. Prefaced by the assertion that "*I've had a lot of evolutions over the past couple of years,*" Avital framed her rebrand not only as a refashioning of her online persona, but as part of a transformation and progression of selfhood beyond the boundedness of social media activity. She recounted her departure from a marketing career in Corporate America after a period of intensified stress and self-neglect during the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, which resulted in time for self-reflection and inner healing that prompted her transition into holistic health coaching, represented in the first activity shift from personal-to-professional account.

When Avital launched her new Instagram account, she was in the process of physically relocating from the Northeastern region back to where she grew up in the Southern US, an event depicted in one of the first posts shared to @thrivewithavital ¯ a selfie in front of an open moving van (*Figure 2)*. As well as sharing this particular event in the moment, the post mediates a narrative turning point in Avital's broader life biography. Avital's off-centre angled self-positioning in relation to the van indexes forthcoming changes in her life-circumstances and, by extension, life-sharing practices. The backward temporal references to experiences prior to moments shared in the here-and-now "*After 3 years living here (another 3 years in Denver before that),"* however, establishes a sense of self-historicity and narrative coherence amidst these forecasted shifts. This is reinforced by expressing future orientations to her enduring affective resonance with her former home in "*I will always be grateful for this place*" and the sequential ordering of upcoming events and experiences in the caption sign-off "*On to the next adventure.*" Thus, owing to the seriality of social media storytelling (Page, 2013), anticipated changes to forthcoming digital content are narrativized through temporal markers of linearity, self-progression and development, forging continuity between past, present and future selves.

Figure 2. Image and caption for a (now deleted) post by @thrivewithavital.

21 likes

Goodbye New York 🤌

After 3 years living here (another 3 years in Denver before that), we have made the decision that it's time to go back home to Texas. ❤️

We moved to NY just a few months before covid and it was really tough for us. We didn't have much of a support system here, being in isolation for half the time and not to mention, it's hella expensive to live here. 🙈

Despite all these challenges, this place gave me the opportunity and time to do the deep healing work. I worked through childhood traumas, transformed from sick and dis-eased state to healing and thriving, and found my purpose in life of helping others do the same.

I will always be grateful for this place as it has allowed me to create the life I truly want, met some beautiful souls along the way, and become a better, healthier, and happier version of me.

On to the next adventure 🎉

This post, along with all other content shared under the username *@thrivewithavit*al, was removed from her page four months later when Avital

rebranded as *@mushroommuze*. Although not mentioned at any point on social media, Avital revealed during our interview that her marriage had broken down shortly after the relocation. This, in her words, catalysed a process of "*finally coming back to myself,"* a realignment with authentic selfhood:

> within that relationship i lost myself (.) i became just this small unexpressed version of myself and i didn't realise how much that was affecting me and how much i have changed from who i truly was until i got back home and a lot of my friends and family was like what happened to you Avital like you used to be this strong confident independent woman (.) and now you're just like this shell of yourself

Avital's interview account reframed what had appeared as an abrupt self-presentational shift and narrative disjuncture into a tale of self-rediscovery and a return to "*who I truly am."* Avital therefore constructs her rebrand as emergent of and a remedy for experiencing a crisis of authenticity. It would be naïve, however, to privilege this account as a necessarily realist presentation of personal experience. Indeed, interviews are a communicative event like any other with their own participation frameworks, communicative norms and performative elements (Briggs, 1986, p.41). It is not my suggestion therefore that, in accordance with Avital's accounts, "online" self-presentational shifts *stem from* and *align with* "offline" selves and realities. Rather, tales of digital rebranding are narratively anchored to "real world" events as a means for authenticating the rebranded self. In the following sections, I demonstrate this in action by discussing the digital practices that encompassed Avital's social media rebrand.

ANALYSING REBRANDING IN PRACTICE

To examine forms and practices of rebranding, I drew on Goffman (1979)'s notion of footing, which attests to the fluidity and malleability of a speaker's stance, alignment, or projected self in talk. Attendance to shifts in interactional footing (henceforth referred to as refooting practices) highlights that interlocutors are not necessarily obliged to be consistent in the voices and positions that they take up, but rather can and often do exhibit changes in footing through careful discursive (re)negotiations of the self (Agha, 2005). In turn, I use footing as a sense-making framework for exploring changes (both conspicuous and subtle)

within users' profile and practices that, over time, amounted to a refashioning of the self. Such changes ranged in scale from broader, profile-wide modifications, such as username and display image, to more under-the-radar shifts, including adjustments in captioning style, variations in content genres (i.e., selfies vs memes), and alterations to the sets of emojis commonly used in posts.

The analysis found that rebranding is structured to appear as a seamlessly executed radical overhaul of one's digital persona. Yet, this process involved an aggregate of simultaneously co-occurrent self-presentational shifts and storytelling practices that signal to audiences a new footing has been taken up. I delimit these practices here as (a) updating profile identifiers; (b) deleting as hype and (c) breaking news of the digital rebrand. These are communicatively afforded by and performatively augmented through platform tools, features, and semiotic resources. Consequently, implementations of new branded identities manifest through and are constrained by preordained parameters of quotidian social media interactions and activities (Davis and Chouinard, 2016). Whilst it may be tempting, therefore, to conceive of personal rebranding as interactionally out of the ordinary and/or an unique expression of users' creative agency, in fact, its negotiations are entrenched in and emergent of technologically regimented processes, thus advancing self-reinvention as normative social practice.

Updating Profile Identifiers

Profile identifiers are user-facing digital representations of identity, such as usernames, display/profile images, bios and other profile data, that differentiate oneself from other users on a platform. User profiles constitute a site for templatised self-presentation, requiring and, in turn, privileging certain details as significant for self-identification and differentiation (see *Figure 1* for examples). On Instagram, constructing a unique username is a requisite for creating an account, whilst prompts from the app encourage users to 'Complete your profile' by adding a name, profile picture and a personal bio of up-to 150 characters. This is positioned as helping discern 'authentic' from 'fake' or 'scam' profiles by linking digital selfhood to a body of verifiable information, such as occupation or location (Instagram, nd). Although profile identifiers tend to be fixed and enduring in comparison to the spontaneity and ephemerality of Instagram posts and stories (Georgakopoulou, 2022, p.276), they are amenable to changes by the user. However, allowances for updates are extremely restricted. For instance, Instagram places a 72 hour time limit on significant profile changes, encouraging users to consider carefully any updates to their self-identifiers. Therefore, updates are not necessarily constructed by

platforms as a routine digital practice, but rather take shape as planned and intentional repositionings of the self.

As described earlier, a key dimension of Avital's rebrand, and serving as a notable contextualising cue (Gumperz, 1988) for the self-presentational shifts and narrative disjuncture witnessed during screen-based observations, was the change in username from *@thrivewithavital* to *@mushroommuze*. This activity served to bracket and differentiate Avital's current and possible future stances, alignments and projected selves from those operant before the new alias came into effect. In Avital's case, the change also marked her shifting affinities to particular 'networked publics,' the imagined collectives emergent from the intersections of people, technology and practice (boyd, 2011, p.39). Her chosen monikers both "before" and "after" the rebrand served as self-presentational indexes that expressed alignment to particular factions of digital wellness culture. *@thrivewithavital* for instance, bore the ego-centred semiotic hallmarks of a profile dedicated to the wellness imperative of health- and self-optimization, positioning Avital as a guide and facilitator for human flourishing and preternatural vitality (O'Neill, 2020; Baker, 2022b). Conversely, *@mushroommuze* borrows from New Age discourses of spiritual exploration and psychedelic sense-making (Letcher, 2007), further employing non-standard orthographic choices as a playful exhibition of liberal and creative self-expression. The change in username therefore enacts a deliberate recalibration of intended audiences and an insertion of the self into a new imagined community or, in wellness terms, a digital 'tribe.'

Whilst the change in username served as a central semiotic shift in the (re)fashioning of a new branded identity, its performative effects were facilitated by corresponding updates to Avital's display/profile photo and bio. In particular, the update to Avital's profile photo –displayed at the top of users' Instagram profiles and alongside each interactional activity, serving as a cornerstone for visual identity construction ¯ enacted a renewal and revitalization of Avital's visual branding. Although both "before" and "after" photos comprise me selfies (Georgakopoulou, 2016b) that hold the "photographed self" as a constant amidst surrounding processes of self-transformation, their adjusted semiotic compositions depict an iconographic maneuver from the "natural" wellness aesthetic to tangibly edited and hyper-ethereal "hippie-style" New Age imagery (shown in Table 1). This delineates visible distinctions between "Avital the Holistic Health Specialist," and "Avital the Psychedelic Integration Coach," and, further, her altered mission statements from *"helping people heal chronic gut issues"* to "*helping you access a higher state of consciousness."*

Rather than isolated self-presentational shifts then, rebranding constitutes collective and coordinated updates to profile self-identifiers. That is, to enact a radical overhaul of one's digital persona requires a cohesive alteration of username, profile photo and bio all at once. To illustrate this, I draw attention to particular occasions where only one or two of Avital's self-identifiers were amended, highlighting that, without this unified reconfiguration, profile updates do not, and perhaps even cannot, represent a fully-fledged rebrand. Table 1, for instance, shows Avital's self-identifiers *before* (left) and *after* (right) the rebrand. However, the central column depicts a profile update approximately two months before becoming *@mushroommuze.*

Table 1. Avital's profile updates between August and December 2022.

27/09/2022	13/10/2022	05/12/2022
		
@thrivewithavital	**@thrivewithavital**	**@mushroommuze**
Avital, INHC | Holistic Nutrition + Gut Health Specialist	Avital ~ Medical Intuitive 🔮	Avital | Psychedelic Integration Coach 🍄
Alternative & Holistic Health Service	Alternative & Holistic Health Service	Alternative & Holistic Health Service
I help people (and pets 🐶) who tried "everything" finally HEAL chronic gut issues 💩 🌱 Holistic Nutrition + ⚡ Bioenergetics Free Gut Guide 👇	Get to the root cause, heal chronic illness and get your body back into balance ⚖️ 🌱Holistic Nutrition 🧬 Bioenergetics 🍄 Plant Medicine DM for consult	I help you access a higher state of consciousness 🎙️ Co-Host: What The Fungus Podcast Grab Your Free Microdosing Guide 👇

Whilst Avital retains the username *@thrivewithavital*, profile elements show clear correspondence to brand stylings that would later become characteristic to *@mushroommuze*. In her profile photo, Avital poses against a purple block-coloured background, her tattoos visible as she is seen reaching for her hair. Contrary to her first profile image as *@thrivewithavital,* which shows Avital in close proximity to nature, indexing the material value of health and wellness, her positioning in the second profile image aligns more closely with spiritual aspects of wellness prioritized as *@mushroommuze*, presenting health- and self-actualization as emanating from within. Her reconceived occupational title, *'Medical Intuitive,'* paired with a crystal ball emoji, further emphasises the spiritual over physical dimensions of health and wellness. Yet, her mission statement retains her original orientation to chronic illness and holistic nutrition. It is noteworthy then that, despite these self-presentational shifts, these updates did not register during real-time observations as constitutive of rebranding. That is, only after becoming @mushroommuze were these shifts recognised as a disruption and disjunction of self-presentation.

The act of rebranding also did not necessarily amount to a static self-brand after the fact. Over the six months following her ”official” retitling as *@mushroommuze*, I recorded a further eight updates to Avital's profile bio. (See Table 2). These performed subtle but continual refootings of the rebranded self, evincing ongoing efforts to take up new roles, positions and identities. In particular, bio updates staged moderate revisions to Avital's occupation and mission statements, as well as the varying entrepreneurial endeavours she embarked on across this period. Whilst some of these projects were short lived and thus rapidly removed from her profile (e.g. "*Co-Host: What The Fungus Podcast*" and "*Founder: Rebellia* 🍄"), other activities were amended in order to share the latest information, announcements and relevant hyperlinks. Thus, routine bio updates serve as a way to maintain the relevance and authenticity of self-identifiers.

The frequency and degrees of change within Avital's bio updates also point to a potential struggle for narrative coherence. In January 2023, there were three updates across a span of ten days, reaching the upper limit of Instagram's profile change restrictions in this timeframe to accommodate light self-identification shifts. These included changing the grammatical realization of her mission statement, removing and reintroducing the self-ascription as a "*Microdose Guide*", and shifting emoji order. Avital also appeared to move to-and-fro in her alignment with holistic health, abandoning this thematic framing in update 2 only to reincorporate the occupational title "*holistic health coach"*

Table 2. Profile bio updates between January and June 2023.

	Date	Name	Bio
1	17/01/2023	Avital 🍄 Plant Medicine, Psychedelics + Spiritual Guidance	Helping you access a higher consciousness 🔮 🍄 Microdose Guide | Integration Coach | Holistic Health Co-Founder Paint n Puff 🎨🍽️🌱 Free Guide 👇
2	19/01/2023	Avital 🍄 Plant Medicine, Psychedelics + Spiritual Guidance	Helping you access a higher consciousness 🔮 Founder: Rebellia 🍄 Co-Founder Paint n Puff 🎨🍽️🌱 Free Microdosing Guide 👇
3	27/01/2023	Avital 🍄 Plant Medicine, Psychedelics + Spiritual Guidance	Access a higher state of consciousness w/ plant medicine 🔮 🍄 Microdose Guide + Trip Sitter @paintnpuffevents 🎨🌱🍽️
4	31/03/2023	Avital | Psychedelic Integration + Holistic Spiritual Coach	🔮 I help you access a higher state of consciousness to create new habits, mindsets and beliefs 🎨 Co-Founder @paintnpuffevents Free Consult 👇
5	19/04/2023	Avital | Psychedelic Integration + Holistic Health Coach	I help you create the life you truly desire + deserve 🔥 🔮 1:1 Coaching 🎨🍽️ Co-Founder @paintnpuffevents Next event: 4/20 Tix on sale 👇
6	18/05/2023	Avital 🔮	On a mission to help millions of people heal themselves w/ plant medicine + community DM for enquiries 💌 🎨🍽️ Paint n' Puff 5/28 Tickets 👇
7	24/05/2023	Avital 🔮	On a mission to help you heal w/ plant medicine + community 🍄 Psychedelic Guide-DM for info 🌱 Plant Medicine Events 🎨🍽️ Paint n Puff 5/28 Tickets 👇
8	31/05/2023	Avital | Plant Medicine Guide 🍄🌱	Harnessing the power of psychedelics to heal the mind, body and soul 🔮 🍄🌿 Microdosing + Integration 🎨🍽️ Co-creator @paintnpuffevents

in update 5. Later updates (6, 7 and 8) see Avital take up a rhetoric of "healing" that has affinity with the semiotic repertoires mobilised as *@thrivewithavital,* thus building in lexical connections to her former self. Furthermore, between updates 1-8, Avital upgrades the action-framing of her mission statements from "*helping you"* to "*on a mission"* and *"harnessing the power,"* embellishing the impact and value of her digital labour. This upgrading magnifies the tellability of her brand story, positioning her content as more compelling and thus engaging to audiences.

Deleting as Hype

The Instagram feed is framed and understood as an archive of activity that memorializes life over time (Annabell, 2022). Yet this self-archive is formed not only through the addition of new material, but also through retrospective removal of content that exhibits identities, stances, and alignments that are no longer relevant for or consistent with current or anticipated future voices and positions taken up through self-branding practices. The affordance of editing and erasing past content represents a key tool for developing and/or "streamlining" one's mediated performance into a sequential tale of logical self-progression (Page, 2015, p.331). For Avital, however, the sudden and sweeping erasure of all past content and activities functioned less as a semiotic resource for negotiating harmonized self-presentation, and more constitutive of a communicative event or performative act in its own right.

In the past decade, the deliberate act of wiping one's social media feed has become an established self-promotional strategy among notable macro-celebrities, including Taylor Swift, Kanye West, Miley Cyrus, and Lady Gaga among others (Richards, 2023). Often performed shortly prior to announcing a new project or professional endeavour, the social media blackout enhances the newsworthiness and reportability of an event by generating a viral string of reactionary coverage and conspiracies surrounding possible causes and future projections for this self-presentational disjuncture. This practice thus represents an intentional provocation of what Vasterman (2005) terms "media hype," that is, a media-generated news wave triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes of news media production (p.515). Reflecting on *deleting as hype* attests to this strategic leveraging of gaps in digital self-conduct in order to maximize the impact of and attention to users' subsequence reappearance.

Much like these celebrity practitioners, the deletion of Avital's existing content functions as a kind of pre-announcement for forthcoming shifts

and changes to her self-brand. Whilst unlikely to elicit the same kind of mass hype as that of macro-celebrities, the act nonetheless introduces a new era of digital self-conduct and sets in motion a revised trajectory for Avital's life-sharing practices and processes. Indeed, the resultant empty Instagram grid represents a critical marker of new beginnings and forecasted stories to come. Further, the act disturbs ideals of "successful" self-branding as necessarily the product of a consistent communicative style and imagery. Contrarily, it points to the ephemerality of the digital personas taken up by social media influencers and the underscoring affordances that enable users to continually make and remake the self anew in line with shifting demands and pressures within a highly competitive digital attention economy.

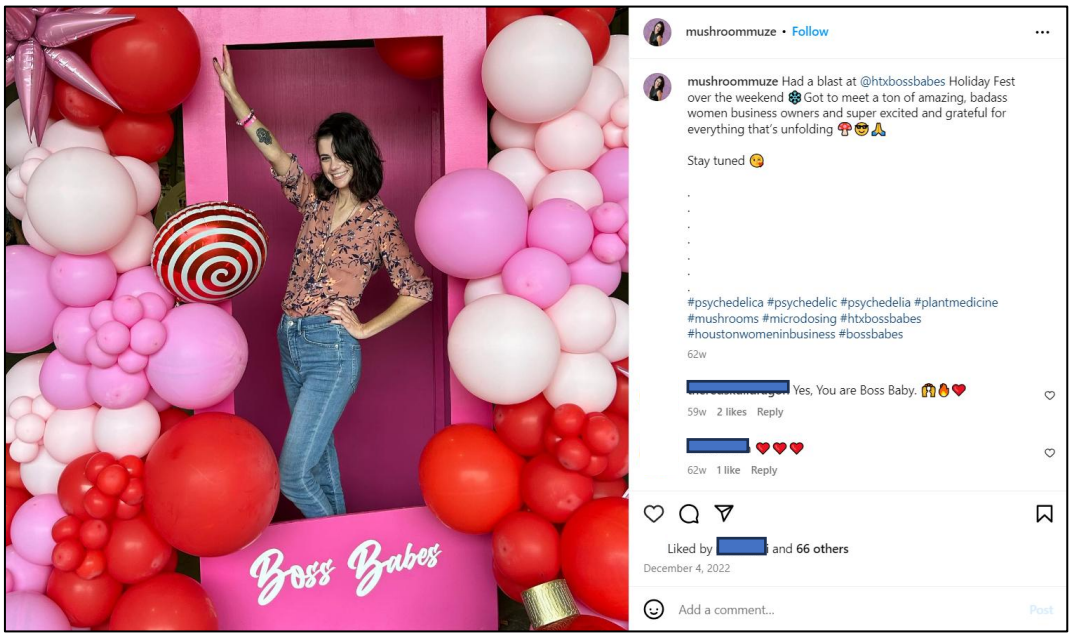
Rebrand Announcements as "Breaking News"

Following the self-identificational shifts outlined above, the first post shared by Avital as the newly rebranded *@mushroommuze* announced and performed this revitalized online persona to audiences (See Figure 3). Much like the differences in profile images discussed earlier, this post presented a perceptible departure from the soft and glowy nature-oriented aesthetic characteristic of *@thrivewithavital.* The post features Avital posing in front of a playful 'girly' pink and red balloon arch backdrop, the term "*Boss Babes"* printed in calligraphy font across the bottom of the prop frame she is shown leaning against. This imagery distils visual tropes of entrepreneurial femininity, an adjoined articulation of post-feminist sensibilities and contemporary self-branding logic through depictions of passionate labour and a glamourous life(style) (Duffy and Hund, 2015). Avital's physical stance and posture transmit and convey a characteristically post-feminist aura of self-confidence and empowered womanhood (Gill and Orgad, 2017) through forms of mediated visibility and self-commodification. Further, the flamboyant imagery evokes parallels to the visual spectacle of gender reveals, marking a dramatic renewal of identity and, in turn, constructing the rebranded self through a recognizable visual metaphor for (re)birth.

The post harbours several key features of a prevalent genre of social media storytelling that Georgakopoulou (2004) refers to as 'breaking news,' encompassing tales about very recent and/or ongoing and evolving events. In the caption of the post, Avital reports her recent attendance of a networking event for women business owners. The playful imagery paired with the affective assertion "*Had a blast at [@*event profile*],"* however, blurs perceived boundaries between labour and leisure, further collapsing distinctions between branded and personal

identity. The depicted event is linked in the caption to current and future experiences by the clause "*super excited and grateful for everything that's unfolding,"* which alludes to ongoing processes of personal and professional self-discovery. The narratorial positioning of this process as "*unfolding"* authenticates the rebranded self as organically emergent and thus the outcome of natural evolution, rather than a product of strategic self-reinvention. The caption sign-off *"Stay tuned"* draws on a terminology of traditional news broadcasts whilst the accompanying kissy face emoji adds a flirtatious sentiment to tease at forthcoming life-updates and future announcements, cultivating sustained interest and attention from audiences.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Avital's first post as @mushroommuze.



Whilst Avital does not explicitly publicize the event of rebranding the digital self in direct terms then, the post serves as a kind of *selfie-(re)introduction,* whereby visual and lexical resources signal to followers that '*this is the new and improved me*'. This idealised self-depiction notably elicits particular kinds of interactional alignment from audiences that Georgakopoulou (2016b) terms ritual appreciation, encompassing positive assessments of the post or poster in highly conventionalised language often coupled with emojis. For instance, praising hands, fire, heart and

heart-eye emojis featured heavily in comments on the post, expressing adoration and celebration of Avital's new branded persona:

> Comments on Avital's breaking news post
>
> *(@user1) Yes, You are Boss Baby.* 👐🔥💝
>
> *(@user2)* 💝💝💝
>
> *(@user3)* 😍😍😍

Forms of ritual appreciation exhibited in the comments are customary for selfies, especially featuring female subjects (ibid, p.304). They express enthusiastic approval of the visual dimensions of the post, reiterating a gendered conflation of traditional beauty and self-branding. The repetition of heart eyes by *@user3*, for example, foregrounds an appreciation for Avital's appearance in the image, whilst the (re)designation of Avital as "*Boss Baby*" alongside a selection of approbatory emojis emphasizes observer's evaluation of Avital's professional identity through an objectifying lens. Thus, Avital's alignment with visual norms of aesthetic femininity within the post prompts a decidedly favourable reception of the rebranded self from audiences.

REBRANDING AS COMPOUNDED CRISES OF AUTHENTICITY AND TELLABILITY

Avital aligned her rebranded persona with notions of 'being authentic' during our interview dialogue. She further positioned her restyled identity as an effort to overcome the struggle for authenticity arising from an unfulfilling marriage and career. Compared to her rebranded identity then, Avital constructed former iterations of the self as "inauthentic", illustrated in the below extract:

> the three years that i was working as a holistic health coach and living in New York (.) i was showing up on social media (1.0) but not in an authentic way (.) it never felt right (.) it never it just (.) felt very forced like i was trying to mimic what other people were doing or what my business coaches said i should do right like you should do this kind of content and this kind of content but (.) it just always felt (.) forced

Here, inauthenticity is equated with imitating seemingly "popular" content and following the guidance of business coaches for what constitutes a "good" or "desirable" post. Avital's suggestion that "*it just always felt forced"* construes a tension between content that is deemed normatively shareable or tellable and content that feels genuine and sincere. Accordingly, authenticity is framed as achieved when pressures to appease imagined audience expectations, which represent a central mechanism of social governance on Instagram (Marwick, 2012), are abandoned or renounced in favour of being "true to oneself." Avital therefore claims to dissociate her "authentic" self from the commercially-oriented goal of visibility. In doing so, she aligns with notions of authenticity as rooted in passion and personal growth, rather than the pursuit of metrical popularity and financial profit.

Paradoxically, when asked why she had decided to wipe her page and start her feed anew rather than transitioning the existing account and retaining its content, Avital noted a desire to evade and erase negative audience responses she had received for holistic health content shared as *@thrivewithavital:*

> i needed a fresh start just as a whole because whenever (1.0) if i tried to post on the previous page (.) i'll be honest like there was even moments when even when i was sharing about healing the gut naturally before i started talking about you know these medicines (.) i ↗still got some backlash and i didn't want that

Instagram perpetuates a "positivity bias" through the metricized measurement of positive affect in the form of "likes" (Waterloo et al., 2018). Scholars have highlighted the social significance of "likes" beyond the mere appreciation of a post, emphasizing their decisive role in rendering the circulatory force and value of certain content on social media (Georgakopoulou et al., 2022; Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013). Users are thereby encouraged to engage in "like-seeking" behaviour that yields favourable evaluations of their branded identities and bolsters their reach and visibility. Avital's unsuccessful attempts to generate well-performing content as *@thrivewithavital,* that instead received "backlash" from audiences, illustrates the evaluative concomitance of "likeable" and "tellable" content. That is, content which is determined as unlikable by audiences is thus regarded as untellable by the teller.

Avital's digital rebrand therefore compounds a struggle for authenticity with what Stage (2019) terms a "tellability crisis," a moment when narrative progression is stalled or threatened. Such a crisis arises when content fails to

resonate with and therefore elicit favourable responses from audiences, forcing users to enact a narrative pivot, involving revised thematic focus and visual aesthetics, to better connect with the evolving interests and expectations of followers. Indeed then, Avital's rebrand demonstrated successful alignment with audience preferences, evinced by a notable increase in followers over the six months after the rebrand from 173 to 1600, a further gain of 415 followers compared to her original account. As such, the strategic reconstruction of the self, orchestrated through authenticating narratives of growth and development, revives the tellability of stories and content to come.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have illustrated that rebranding on Instagram involves a complex interplay of user agency, social norms and expectations, and platform affordances, highlighting the dynamic and ephemeral nature of identity construction in new media environments. I have suggested that rebranding relies on assemblages of co-occurrent and digitally afforded re-footing maneuvers that signal a divergence from former voices and positions taken up by the branded self, in turn creating space and eliciting expectations for the development of new narrative trajectories.

Within the data, three storytelling practices were identified as central to the act of rebranding: (a) parallel updates to unique profile identifiers, including the username, bio and profile picture associated with an account; (b) hyping forthcoming content through the sweeping and sudden erasure of existing posts (and, in turn, past selves); and (c) announcing the rebranded self through mobilizing generic tropes of "breaking news" stories. I have also illustrated — through reflections on my own reception and interpretation of self-presentational shifts during the research as well as appraising followers' responses and interactions — the co-constructed quality of digital rebranding. That is, by recognising and acknowledging a reconfigured online persona, typically through expressing ritual appreciation, audience engagement has an instrumental role in the successful construction of a rebranded persona.

Finally, I have argued that rebranding is manifest of a compounded crises of authenticity, on the one hand, and tellability (Stage, 2019), on the other. The narrative disjuncture introduced by a strategic overhaul and revitalization of one's digital persona, adjoined to an underscoring rhetoric of reclaimed authenticity, as shown in the present case study, facilitates the construction of new

and tellable storylines. In turn, by staging a digital rebrand, Instagram users reassert their visibility and value within the social media linguistic marketplace.

Dynamic processes of digital "rebranding" highlight that dimensions of authenticity have relevance not only for appraising the day-to-day management of digital self-conduct in ways that prioritise spontaneity, immediacy, rawness and sharing-in-the-moment, as Georgakopoulou (2022) has shown. They also underscore the self-historicity and biographical story that users strategically curate over longer stretches of online discourse when (re)fashioning a branded self. As I have demonstrated utilizing "small stories" analytic tools and methods, rebranding enacts a grand self-transformation via clusters of micro-interactional refooting activities (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Thus, rebranding activities represent an example of the synthesis of 'small' and 'big' stories in the digital age.

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