

Too real, or too fake? Female Instagram influencers in 'authenticity bind'

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Female Instagram influencers—whose livelihoods depend on their numbers of followers, views and likes—endure criticism and harassment both for being too real and for seeming too fake, according to a new study from Cornell University.

This leaves women on Instagram caught in what researchers have termed an "authenticity bind"—the nature of social media compels them to share details from their [personal lives](#), but these details make them vulnerable to abuse or charges that they've 'curated' or faked their online personas.

"People are compelled to be authentic and 'real' but in ways that are really narrowly defined," said Brooke Erin Duffy, associate professor of communication and co-author of the study. "If they're too real, if they show too much of their inner thoughts or they express too much, they fear criticism. But if they aren't real enough, if they're highly curated and very performative, or idealized and aspirational, they fear blowback. So, a woman on social media, especially with a large following, essentially can't win."

Research has found harassment on Instagram can be common, particularly among those with large following. And [abuse](#) is more prevalent—and potentially more harmful—for women and people from marginalized communities.

Yet few controls and restrictions exist on Instagram, leaving harassment victims particularly helpless when the success of their businesses depends on [social media](#) prominence, Duffy said.

For the study, Duffy and co-author Emily Hund of the University of Pennsylvania interviewed 25 professional or aspiring female Instagrammers in the areas of fashion, beauty and lifestyle. They found the [women](#) tended to censor themselves in anticipation or criticism.

Women also said they noticed viewers were more engaged with posts confiding personal or [private information](#) about their lives, but they also said they felt reluctant to share anything "that's not elevated and inspirational/aspirational."

Duffy said she hopes the study calls attention to the lack of safeguards for female Instagram influencers, whose challenges are often disdained by a skeptical public.

The study, "Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram's Authenticity Bind," was published in the *International Journal of Communication*.

Provided by Cornell University

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