

Broadcasting the Backstage: Essena O'Neill's Facework as an Instagram Model

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This rhetorical analysis examines Essena O'Neill's career as an Instagram model in order to illustrate how Goffman's theoretical construct of facework can be used to study social media and other internet texts. The phenomenon of Instagram modeling emerged as a new forum for aspiring models and marketers in the 21st century. As a public figure, Essena O'Neill's decision to quit the industry of Instagram modeling received a generous amount of media attention. Her newly edited Instagram photograph captions provided viewers with a unique look into what O'Neill portrayed as her backstage persona. In this essay, facework is used to examine O'Neill's comments regarding the "realities" behind her front stage region which was depicted through social media. Although traditionally studied in a face-to-face setting, facework can be applied to an online setting given the internet's ability to allow users to broadcast a front online. Online features such as editing software, a lack of time constraint, and the physical barrier of a computer screen can give users the ability and courage to greatly extend the gap between their front stage and backstage regions, blurring the lines between what can be deemed authentic on social media and creating an entirely new level of front stage.

Introduction

A 19-year old's decision to quit social media made headlines in November of 2015. With over half a million followers on Instagram, 200,000 followers on Youtube and Tumblr, and 60,000 followers on Snapchat, some would classify the Australian teen as a social media star (Rodulfo, 2015). After maintaining a career in the social media industry for a number of years, however, Essena O'Neill came to a new realization about her work. Once posting daily photos on Instagram of everything from her fashion choices to her toned body, O'Neill asserted in 2015 that "social media is not real life" (McCluskey, 2015). In conjunction with this statement, O'Neill deleted more than 2,000 photos from her Instagram account and edited the captions on existing photos to portray the "realities" of the industry, including anecdotes about her sponsors and the hours of work that went into each photograph (Rodulfo, 2015). Her newfound opposition to social media captured instant media attention with coverage from *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *The Guardian*, and other popular news publications. McCluskey (2015) of *Time* magazine noted that O'Neill's announcement made global headlines, while Bromwich (2015) of *The New York Times* compared her announcement to statements made by record-breaking pop star, Beyoncé, who "admit[ted] that she did not, in fact, wake up like this."

According to Kristina Rodulfo (2015) of *Elle* magazine, the concept of the "Instagram model" has emerged as a new form of fame in the 21st century. The recent inclusion of social media in marketing tactics goes hand in hand with this new phenomenon. Organizations in the private and public sector in countries all over the world use social media as a platform to reach out to existing and potential customers. An active and successful social media presence has been cited to guarantee a company's "fame and glory" globally (Javer, n.d.). Public figures, celebrities, and models have also begun to take advantage of this new marketing strategy. According to Lou Stoppard of *The Financial Times*, today's modeling world requires more than "lithe limbs and sharp cheekbones...A stellar career requires not only a good face, but also followers — preferably hundreds of thousands across various social media channels" (Stoppard, 2015). Globally recognized models are extremely active on social media and are often recognized by their followers. For example, the current face of Estée Lauder and Calvin Klein Jeans, Kendall Jenner, has 27 million followers on Instagram (Stoppard, 2015).

Social media, however, was not solely created for marketing. It was also created, in part, to communicate and share snippets of one's life with friends and family. However, social media's availability to anyone with a computer or smartphone has increased its popularity and lucrative potential. Social media's popularity and

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availability has also made it the “perfect forum to scout for talent” in the modeling industry, where “wannabe models...can seek stardom from the comfort of home” (Stoppard, 2015). Fashion companies like Marc by Marc Jacobs take advantage of this by casting campaigns on social media in search of models. Aspiring stars can easily submit photographs of themselves by simply posting on their social media account and using the hashtag #CastMeMarc (Stoppard, 2015). Deriving fame by simply participating in campaigns such as these and by creating a notable following on social media is what is commonly referred to as social media modeling or ‘Instagram-modeling’ (Stoppard, 2015).

This new phenomenon of ‘Instagram-modeling’ has not only been known to acquire fame but also funds for aspiring models. Essena O’Neill, the Australian Instagram model who quit the industry, said she was able to make an income from marketing products on her social media accounts to followers, quoting her income to be “\$2,000AUD a post EASY” (Hunt, 2015). O’Neill derived a majority of her fame and income through posting on social media sites, notably Instagram; however, after quitting the industry, she posted videos of herself talking about the dangers of social media on *Vimeo* and on her website. Along with her video blogs and website, O’Neill edited the captions on 96 of her Instagram photos to reveal the “realities” behind the industry of Instagram modeling, including personal anecdotes about her disillusionment towards the industry (Hunt, 2015).

The new era of ‘Instagram modeling’ provides scholars with an opportunity to take a fresh look at the modeling industry and its effect on women. For years, scholars have studied the mass media and its effect on body image for women, however, social media has only recently began to play a large role in the modeling industry (Perloff, 2014). According to Perloff (2014), “there has been relatively little theoretically-driven research on processes and effects of social media on young women’s body image and self perceptions” (p. 363). The new phenomenon of Instagram modeling takes this notion of social media and body image one step further. Essena O’Neill’s decision to leave the world of Instagram modeling and her statements of disapproval towards the industry as a public figure draw attention to the potentially deceptive qualities of social media and the modeling industry. Through this rhetorical analysis, we apply Goffman’s theory of facework to Essena O’Neill’s Instagram modeling career as well as to O’Neill’s statements about the misleading attributes of social media. Goffman (1967) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during particular contact” (p. 5). For the purposes of this article, we define facework as the technique of how one’s face is created, reinforced, maintained, or diminished through interactions with others. Using Essena O’Neill’s career and decision to leave the world of Instagram modeling as a case study, we contend that the launch of the Instagram model into the social media world helps to create a new layer of the front stage while simultaneously giving users the opportunity to broadcast their backstage online. We also note that because of social media’s ability to blur the lines between what is front stage and backstage, the authenticity of what is portrayed as one’s backstage may be questionable.

Shortly after she posted her video blogs speaking about the dangers of social media, O’Neill received an influx of backlash, and has since removed herself from the online world completely, deleting all of her social media accounts, including Instagram, Youtube, Tumblr, and Twitter, as well as a majority of the content on her website. By 2017, she had deleted her website entirely. For this rhetorical analysis, we have selected six images, along with their original and updated captions, that illustrate Essena O’Neill’s use of facework. These six images were selected because they all contained original and updated captions. Many of O’Neill’s posts were deleted entirely before we began this project. While the original web address of O’Neill’s Instagram account from which we obtained these images and captions is no longer available, much of the content lives on through fan accounts as well as magazine and newspaper articles. The Instagram photographs that we studied for this analysis are documented in the appendix of this work. We also use a fan account under the pseudonym of Essena O’Neill on Youtube to reference the video blogs that O’Neill posted following her decision to quit social media and Instagram modeling. The videos are still the same in nature and content, however, they are no longer posted from the original source.

Goffman’s Facework

Erving Goffman discusses his concept of facework in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. In *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman (1967) defines facework as “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (p. 12). He goes on to describe

face as “present[ing] an image” or a “good showing” (pp. 5-6). Other scholars have pragmatically defined face as “the public self-image of individuals” (Suryawanshi & Ronge, 2012, p. 2).

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1967) makes the assertion that “universal human nature is not a very human thing” (p. 45). Instead, he poses that people are “a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without” (Goffman, 1967, p. 45). Goffman (1959) further contends that “we come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons” (p. 20). Suryawanshi and Ronge (2012) describe this act of learning and adapting face as “ceaseless human enterprise to build public opinion and the opinion of self” (p. 2). They suggest that “every individual tries to be projected as a better human being with the help of various individual qualities and abstract entities such as self-esteem, respect, honor, reputation, recognition, approbation, etc.” (Suryawanshi & Ronge, 2012, p. 2). According to Goffman (1967), this is done by face-saving, a process of working to maintain one’s own face or the face of others (p. 6).

Facework has been used by numerous communication and sociology scholars in their studies of various phenomena. Communication scholars Valerie Manusov, Jody Koenig Kellas, and April R. Trees (2004) examined accounts, defined as “public explanations of untoward events” (p. 515), between friends through Goffman’s theory of facework, noting how account sequences were perceived as either attentive or inattentive to the self and others’ negative face (p. 514). In his article in *Poetics*, sociologist Roscoe C. Scarborough (2012) discusses how musicians use four facework strategies – underscoring, substituting, reflecting, and neutralizing – to save or maintain face during performances. Facework has also been used to examine comments from instructors’ written feedback to students (Gardner, Anderson, & Wolvin, 2017), cell phone usage in the presence of friends (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2017), argumentative discourse between smoker and non-smoker friend groups (Durham & Friedman, 2016), and even interactions between fictional characters in musicals (Schrader, 2014).

Though facework has been used to study a variety of communication contexts, few researchers have studied the use of facework in online environments. In their article in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Lim, Vadrevu, Chan, and Basnyat (2012) examined how juvenile delinquents and at-risk youths used facework in their social media interactions on Facebook, noting how they used posts, comments, photographs, and tagging for “posturing, power aggrandizement, and reputation management” (p. 346). Romo, Thompson, and Donovan (2017) also examined how facework is used on social media. Studying how college students engage in privacy management on social media in regards to their alcohol-related posts, Romo et al. (2017) note “how facework is involved in remediating privacy breaches and the co-opting of privacy” (p. 173). We hope that this article will add to the growing body of literature in this area of study.

Essena O’Neill’s Use of Facework as an Instagram Model

Essena O’Neill’s persona as an Instagram model provides a case study for examining how facework is used in the online realm of social media. In *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman (1967) states “every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants” (p. 5). In the case of social media, Instagram models communicate through what Goffman refers to as mediated contact. In contrast to face-to-face contact, mediated contact on social media allows a person to maintain his/her face easier than in a direct confrontation. Because the encounters were online rather than face-to-face, O’Neill was able to prepare her face in a time frame over which she had much control. In one of her re-edited Instagram photograph captions, O’Neill (2015a) noted that “while this image might just look like a girl having fun, this was like two, three hours worth of shooting on a beach.” In multiple video blogs, O’Neill (2015a) pointed out that many of her photographs on Instagram looked “effortless,” although a lot of time and effort went into her photographs. In her *Behind the Image: Effortless* video blog, she noted “[her] life of [what appeared as] effortless beauty was not effortless” (O’Neill, 2015a). In this video, she used one of her modeling photographs to demonstrate that although the photograph made her look very relaxed and natural, “her makeup was quite heavy actually...and the lighting made [her] look quite tan when [she] actually wasn’t... There [were] probably a hundred pictures and this was [her] favorite and they edited it so that it looked effortless” (O’Neill, 2015a). She went on to note that while many of her photographs appear to be candid, they were actually staged, and this staging took a lot of time and effort.

Through her video blogs and re-edited photo captions, O'Neill revealed how easy it was to maintain her face on Instagram as a model. Goffman (1967) defines maintaining or saving face as "when the line [a person] effectively takes presents an image of him that is internally consistent, that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants, and that is confirmed by evidence conveyed through impersonal agencies in the situation" (p. 6). O'Neill maintained face by posting daily photographs of herself that aligned with the Instagram model persona that she wished to maintain. In one of her later blogs following her removal from social media, O'Neill (2015b) described her presence on social media as "a skinny, tan, blonde girl wearing the latest clothes." Her initial facework included wearing popular clothing and makeup, and upholding what she describes as an "edited, beautiful and perfect [life] for the rest of the world" (O'Neill, 2015c). She further described her social media presence as "contrived perfection made to get attention" (O'Neill, n.d.) in one of her re-edited Instagram photo captions (See Image 1). This photograph of her tanning and studying in a bikini that was once captioned "Things are getting pretty wild at my house. Maths B and English in the sun,¹" was then edited to read, "see how relatable my captions were – stomach sucked in, strategic pose, pushed up boobs. I just want younger girls to know this isn't candid life, or cool or inspirational. It's contrived perfection made to get attention" (O'Neill, n.d.).

Coinciding with the act of face saving is front. Goffman (1959) describes front as the equipment with which one projects face, including setting, appearance, and manner. During her time as an Instagram model, O'Neill maintained her face through setting, appearance, and manner. The controlled online environment in which O'Neill projected face represents her primary setting for her facework. Goffman (1959) defines setting as the "furniture, decor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (p. 22). O'Neill also crafted a secondary setting in her photographs by choosing the right location for her photographs. For example, many of her photographs were taken on a beach to portray her relaxing on the beach, although O'Neill was actually participating in extensive photoshoots at the time. This secondary setting is then projected onto the primary setting of the online environment.

Goffman (1959) also notes that "those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it" (p. 22). Goffman (1959) goes on to note that facework is performed in bounded regions, commonly referred to as the front and back regions. He defines front region as "the place where the performance is given" (p. 107) and back region, or backstage, as "a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 112). He notes that front regions embody certain standards, including moral and instrumental requirements (Goffman, 1959, pp. 107-108). The back region, however, is a region where the performer can "drop his front" or "step out of character" (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). O'Neill's comments regarding her career as an Instagram model often align with this concept of facework being conducted in a specific region or setting. She was frequently quoted as saying that the persona she portrayed in an online setting, or front region, was not true to her actual personality, or back region. She notes that, "Online it looked like I had the perfect life... yet I was so completely lonely and miserable inside. I hid it from everyone. I smiled and laughed in pictures and vlogs. No one knew I had what now is described as social anxiety disorder, depression, [and] body dimorphic" (O'Neill, 2016). O'Neill also avoided threats to face through the online setting of social media. For example, on Instagram, one can delete undesirable comments posted on photographs. In this way, O'Neill was able to tailor her front stage image through crafting the setting in her photographs and removing any criticism from her posts.

This online setting also allowed for hours of preparation time regarding O'Neill's appearance. Goffman (1959) defines appearance as "stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social status" (p. 24). In this case, the stimuli of O'Neill's performance was a post on social media where she upheld the physically attractive and happy image that she wished to maintain online. Through O'Neill's online front, she was able to spend time choosing the appropriate clothing and makeup to uphold her appearance. Often, the clothing and makeup that O'Neill chose for her photographs were those that she was getting paid to promote by various companies, which was not always apparent to her followers on social media. Furthermore, the online setting allowed for more time to be spent on photoshoots, which were then followed by choosing the most flattering and candid-looking photograph. In an email newsletter, O'Neill stated that she "would spend eight hours a day photographing, styling, editing,

¹ "Maths B and English" refers to the school subjects for which O'Neill appeared to be studying in her Instagram photo.

filming, [and] scrolling” (O’Neill, 2016). O’Neill also notes that all of her photographs were edited through various editing software, and this editing also contributed to her online appearance or front stage (O’Neill, 2016). In one of her video blogs, she pointed out the overuse of editing software on social media by asking her viewers, “Why even compare your edited self with someone else’s edited self?” (O’Neill, 2015b). Comments like these hint at the disparity between O’Neill’s front stage and backstage.

O’Neill’s manner on social media was also very important to maintain her face. Goffman (1959) defines manner as “those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation” (p. 24). O’Neill’s manner online can be analyzed through her photograph captions. O’Neill’s interaction role with her viewers typically was of an average girl looking “effortless” and sharing her photographs with the world (O’Neill, 2016). However, what seemed like candid photographs were actually paid promotional photographs for different companies (O’Neill, 2016). In the email newsletter that she posted a few months following her removal from social media, O’Neill described the details of her social media fame by noting how she “felt exhausted trying to keep up this bubbly, funny, happy facade” (O’Neill, 2016). Goffman (1959) notes that, “Often it seems that whatever enthusiasm and lively interest we have at our disposal we reserve for those before whom we are putting on a show [the front region] and that the surest sign of backstage solidarity is to feel that it is safe to lapse into an asocial mood of sullen, silent irritability” (p. 132). As expressed by O’Neill’s comments, the manner she portrayed in her online “front region” as a happy and outgoing model was very far from her true feelings, which were only represented backstage.

Another aspect of O’Neill’s social media persona was that her lifestyle focused around healthy eating and fitness. Many of her posts focused on her toned body or the vegan meals that she was eating that day. On Instagram, her healthy lifestyle was presented very positively; however, O’Neill later revealed that she was engaging in very unhealthy eating habits to look thin in photographs. In her email newsletter, O’Neill (2016) talked about how she “became so caught up [in] becoming thinner” and used the idea of becoming “fitter” as her excuse to engage in unhealthy eating practices. She supported this statement with one of her re-edited Instagram photograph captions. O’Neill re-captioned a photograph of herself pictured in a bikini on the beach (See Image 2) as “NOT REAL LIFE - Took over 100 [photographs] in similar poses trying to make my stomach look good. Would have hardly eaten that day” (O’Neill, n.d.). In another edited caption to one of her Instagram photographs (See Image 3), she described herself as “a 15 year old girl that calorie restricts and excessively exercises” (O’Neill, n. d.).

O’Neill talked about the pressure she felt to portray a physically fit and attractive type of face on social media throughout her video blogs, re-edited Instagram photo captions, and email newsletter. She traced her beginnings in social media to age twelve, when “[she] saw [herself] as this huge, solid, too tall, nerdy, awkward majorly unpopular girl. [She] thought to be social media famous would be the best job ever and if all these people ‘liked’ [her, she] would be happy” (O’Neill, 2016). According to Goffman (1959), “a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific task which happen at the time to be performed in its name. The front becomes a ‘collective representation’ and a fact in its own right” (p. 26). For O’Neill, her front was developed through her perceived notions of what society expected of her; she felt pressure to be viewed as outgoing, sexually attractive, and happy. O’Neill’s setting, appearance, and manner each coincided with one of these societal expectations. For example, the setting of her photographs allowed to her give the appearance that her lifestyle was active and fun. Rather than posting photographs of her sitting on a couch at home, O’Neill posted photographs that suggested that she made frequent trips to the beach. Furthermore, her appearance upheld societal expectations to be physically fit and sexually attractive; O’Neill maintained this appearance through unhealthy dieting practices, editing software, makeup, and revealing clothing. Finally, she portrayed her manner as relaxed and happy through her captions and facial expressions in her photos. This collective representation united O’Neill’s front with her perceived expectations of the industry of Instagram modeling.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) notes that performances of face are “socialized, molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (p. 35). Goffman (1959) terms this concept the idealization of face, which he defines as “an idealized view of the situation” (p. 35). He observes that, “when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole” (Goffman, 1959, p. 35). O’Neill talked about the societal beauty standards as the idealization

that she felt pressured to uphold through her re-edited photo captions and video blogs regarding the dangers of social media. In one of her edited Instagram photograph captions (See Image 4), she noted that the “only reason [she] went to the beach [that] morning was to shoot these bikinis because the company paid [her] and also [she] looked good [in comparison] to society’s current standards” (O’Neill, n.d.). O’Neill stated that during her time as a social media star, she also felt increasing pressure to obtain more likes and followers on Instagram (O’Neill, 2015c). Eventually, her reasoning for leaving her career as an Instagram model was because she did not agree with social media’s “basis on views, likes and followers” (O’Neill, 2015c), which relates to Goffman’s concept of idealization of face. O’Neill felt pressured to obtain “views, likes and followers” by aligning herself with societal versions of beauty. In her video blogs, O’Neill talked about how much emphasis people put on the number of likes and views they get on social media posts, asserting that “we’re more than a fucking number” and furthermore, “we’re more than how good we look in that photo” (O’Neill, 2015a).

O’Neill also pointed out the pressure she felt to portray herself as sexually attractive on social media from a very young age. In her *Behind the Image: What to Wear* video blog, she stated, “If you want to be successful on social media, number one, show flesh. I mean, especially if you are female and in the age bracket I was in of health, fitness, inspiration, fashion, beauty. You need to look sexually appealing to get followers, to get attention and that’s everything we see in the mass media, in magazines, in TV” (O’Neill, 2015b). In the same video blog, she noted “Your sex appeal... gets you attention. It gets you a career on social media” (O’Neill, 2015b). This pressure that O’Neill felt to portray herself as attractive and sexually appealing online aligns with Goffman’s concept of idealization. In order to gain followers and likes, or obtain the idealization of the face that O’Neill was aiming to portray, O’Neill aligned herself with the standards that she believed society upheld, including sexual appeal.

Goffman (1959) asserts that when an individual engages in facework, he/she typically conceals something in an attempt to achieve idealization (p. 43). He notes that “if an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forego or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards” (p. 41). Goffman (1959) points out that the individual engaging facework may be concealing a variety of matters, including a profitable form of activity (p. 43). In the case of Instagram modeling, many followers of Instagram models do not realize that the Instagram stars who they are following on social media are actually promoting certain brands and products in exchange for money. As noted previously, O’Neill pointed out that she would make roughly 2,000AUD per Instagram post. In one of her re-edited photo captions (See Image 5), she wrote,

EDIT REAL CAPTION: paid for this photo. If you find yourself looking at ‘Instagram girls’ and wishing your life was [theirs]... Reali[z]e you only see what they want. If they tag a company, 99% of the time it’s paid. Nothing is wrong with supporting brands you love (for example, I proudly promote Eco sheets or a vegan meal in exchange for money as its business for a purpose to me). BUT this ^^ this has no purpose. No purpose in a forced smile, tiny clothes and being paid to look pretty. We are a generation told to consume and consume, with no thought of where it all comes from and where it all goes” (O’Neill, n.d.).

In one of her video blogs, she stated that, “I wasted four years of my life getting paid to wear these clothes” (O’Neill, 2015b). Prior to her statements regarding the dangers of social media and realities of the Instagram modeling industry, O’Neill engaged in facework by concealing the paid aspect of her social media persona.

Goffman (1959) also notes that “errors and mistakes are often corrected before the performance takes place” (p. 43). O’Neill illustrated this type of concealment by discussing her backstage work where she edited photographs. Goffman (1959) notes that in the backstage region, “costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws” (p. 112). As mentioned before, O’Neill carefully crafted the setting and appearance of her photographs and then used multiple editing software applications to perfect her photographs before posting them online. In a photograph that she posted of herself smiling (Image 6), she re-edited the caption to read, “I had acne here, this is a lot of makeup. I was smiling because I thought I looked good” (O’Neill, n.d.). Goffman also notes that performers of facework may conceal certain things by only showing the end product to their audience. In these cases, Goffman (1959) observes that the audience “will be led into judging [the performer] on the basis of something that has been finished, polished, and packaged” (p. 44). This type of concealment is illustrated through O’Neill’s use of editing software and a carefully crafted front to create her face in her Instagram photos. Her promotional activities, errors, mistakes, and preparation time were also concealed from the public.

Furthermore, O'Neill concealed the sacrifice of her personal beliefs throughout her Instagram modeling career. Her message now is clear — that social media is not real and she does not support it. However, during her Instagram modeling career, the public was not aware of her opinions about her career. Goffman (1959) indicates that, "If the activity of an individual is to embody several ideal standards, and if a good showing is to be made, it is likely then that some of these standards will be sustained in public by the private sacrifice of some of the others" (p. 44). Goffman (1959) also observes that "often...the performer will sacrifice those standards whose loss can be concealed and will make this sacrifice in order to maintain standards whose inadequate application cannot be concealed" (p. 44). For O'Neill, her true opinions of the modeling industry on social media had to be concealed in order for her to maintain her career as an Instagram model.

In October of 2015, O'Neill decided to quit her career as an Instagram model and reveal a completely new persona to her audience. Her decision to quit the industry caused her to lose face. Losing face or being in what Goffman (1967) refers to "wrong face," is "when information is brought forth in some way about [a person's] social worth which cannot be integrated, even with effort, into the line that is being sustained for him" (p. 8). O'Neill's loss of face included a completely new front which could not be reconciled with her previous front on social media. The content she posted on Instagram after her decision to quit the industry had a very different setting, appearance and manner than her preceding photographs. Images that once pictured O'Neill tanning on the beach now had the new setting of her bedroom. Instead of posting photographs of her heavily made-up appearance, O'Neill posted photographs of herself sporting a ponytail and wearing no makeup. While her Instagram captions originally portrayed her manner as happy and perky, her newly-posted videos showed her crying and discussing her battles with depression and body dysmorphic disorder. O'Neill argued that this persona was the "true" version of herself, or what Goffman would refer to as her backstage persona.

When loss of face occurs, facework is often performed in an attempt to save face. Here, the term facework is used to describe the process of "counteract[ing] 'incidents'—that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). A variety of facework strategies may be used to combat the loss of face. For example, a person may partake in the avoidance process in which he/she avoids contact in situations where threats to face are likely to occur (Suryawanshi & Ronge, 2012, p. 4). Another type of facework is the corrective process, or corrective interchange, which takes place when threat to face has already occurred (Suryawanshi & Ronge, 2012, p. 5). In addition to the corrective process, one may avoid threat to face by participating in a post-threat type of facework referred to as poise (Suryawanshi & Ronge, 2012, p. 6). Noted by Goffman (1967) as an important type of facework, poise allows a person to control and lessen the impact of the loss of face after a threat by minimizing one's embarrassment (p. 13).

O'Neill's revelation of her backstage to the public threatened her overall face, thus presenting the need for corrective facework. Her actions following her decision to quit Instagram modeling illustrated two of the four stages of the corrective process: challenge, offering, acceptance, and thanks. In the first stage of the corrective process, one must engage in the challenge of calling attention to the misconduct or loss of face (Goffman, 1967). O'Neill called attention to her loss of face by editing the captions of her photographs to show what she claims is her "true," or backstage, persona. Goffman (1967) suggests that in the challenge stage of the corrective process, the person "suggest[s] that the threatened claims are to stand firm and that the threatening event itself will have to be brought back into line" (p. 20). O'Neill's case is unique, however, because she did not attempt to return to the line of her prior Instagram model persona. Instead, she created a new persona for herself via social media, which she argued was a more authentic version of herself.

In the offering stage of the corrective process, the person is given a chance to "correct the offense and reestablish expressive order" (Goffman, 1967, p. 20). As previously mentioned, O'Neill did not attempt to return to her previous front stage persona, however, she did attempt to reestablish some type of order on Instagram by revealing her backstage persona. She did this by creating a website and video blogs with the sole purpose of discussing the dangers of social media. She also attempted to reposition the responsibility in this stage by blaming social media and societal beauty standards, rather than herself. In her first video blog following her decision to quit Instagram modeling, she stated, "I don't agree with social media as it currently is... I think that culture creates validation and insecurity in likes and views. I think it's so detrimental to human health and human ability. When you put work out there, or a part of yourself out there, and a number on a screen dictates that success or that value, it's ridiculous." She also implied that she was not wrong in her career as an Instagram model, but rather that she

was “a product of a much bigger system [or] culture that we’re all in” (O’Neill, 2015b). By broadcasting what she claimed is her backstage personality, O’Neill attempted to rectify the situation by shifting blame to the industry of Instagram modeling and by rebranding herself as a social advocate.

In the next stage of the corrective process, the person who has lost face may receive acceptance for their apology and loss of face. Because Essena O’Neill is a public figure, there is a multitude of mixed feedback on her decision to quit Instagram modeling. In November of 2015, Sally Holmes of *Elle* magazine published an article on what she refers to as “inevitable backlash.” Holmes (2015) documented some of the negative feedback that O’Neill received after speaking out about the deceptive qualities of social media. In response to Holmes’ (2015) article, one reader commented, “I can’t believe this IDIOT has become ‘news.’ This is the downfall of human society people. Don’t give this story any traction and let this dumb bobble head blonde who has nothing to offer the world just disappear into obscurity.” Another reader replied, “So much hostility against someone I highly doubt you know personally. Regardless of her motives, she makes a valid point. I fail to see how ‘her message—that living your life for validation from others via likes on social media is harmful and isolating’ is the downfall of human society” (Holmes, 2015).

Although many of her followers did support her, an overwhelming majority criticized O’Neill for her decision to quit the industry. Eventually, this criticism caused O’Neill to almost completely remove herself from the Internet. As mentioned previously, O’Neill deleted all of her social media accounts including Instagram. She also removed the videos she posted speaking out about the dangers of social media. Her past videos and social media posts now only live on through fan websites. Goffman (1967) notes that acceptance “establish[es] the expressive order and the faces supported by this order” (p. 22). Because O’Neill has not reinstated a presence online, she has not yet completed the stages of acceptance or thanks in the corrective process.

Discussion

When applied to Essena O’Neill’s career as an Instagram model, Goffman’s theoretical construct of facework illustrates how aspiring models can craft their image online, specifically through the new phenomenon of Instagram modeling. Goffman’s concept of front is illustrated through an Instagram model’s use of his/her appearance, setting, and manner on social media. These three aspects of front can be highly manipulated because of the lack of a time constraint in an online setting. This online setting also gives Instagram models the ability to conceal certain aspects of their “back regions” when their front regions are presented online. Goffman’s concept of idealization is also exemplified through O’Neill’s efforts to maintain societal beauty standards, including sexual appeal and physique. Following her decision to quit the industry of Instagram modeling, O’Neill also engaged in corrective facework by attempting to reestablish order for herself through broadcasting what she claims is her backstage persona online and rebranding herself as a social advocate.

It is interesting to note that the online setting of O’Neill’s corrective facework provided the opportunity for her to continue to engage in the corrective process regarding her loss of face online. In a face-to-face setting, the four stages of the corrective process can be completed in a matter of minutes. However, there is no time limit for any type of facework in an online environment. One can engage in facework at different times and have the facework still be effective. For example, O’Neill’s four stages of the corrective process occurred over a period of roughly three months, spanning the months of November 2015 to January 2016. Her corrective facework may still continue, as she may return to the online world and continue to develop a new front for herself.

The asynchronous nature of online facework also allows the performers of facework to manipulate their fronts to a greater degree than in a personal setting. For example, in a face-to-face situation, one is not able to alter his/her physical appearance through editing software. One is also not able to manipulate his/her manner as drastically in a personal setting as he/she is able to online. For example, captions to posts on social media can be edited at any time. This can include altering an existing post, adding a caption prior to posting, and adding a new caption after an initial post has already been captured. One may also simply delete a post online, as Essena O’Neill did to nearly 2,000 of her photographs on Instagram. This ability to drastically manipulate one’s presence online differentiates front from what Goffman had originally envisioned in the 20th century.

Although Goffman’s original theories regarding facework do not directly include concepts of facework in an online setting, his concepts can be used to study social media texts. Because one may alter his/her face online in

different ways, social media can be used as a new layer of one's front stage. However, in the case study examined in this article, it is difficult to know whether or not the backstage persona that O'Neill projected online was truly an authentic one. In studying one's presence on social media as a new layer of the front stage, scholars may focus on social media's lack of a time constraint, the further gap that social media presents between one's front stage and backstage, and the authenticity (or lack thereof) in regards to the backstage persona that is projected online. Future research may also study the effect of photograph editing software on one's ability to manipulate their appearance online. Furthermore, scholars may analyze Goffman's concepts of idealization on social media versus in a personal setting to determine if there is a stronger influence towards idealization in a social media setting due to social media's basis around likes and followers.

Although social media has the ability to extend the gap between one's front stage and backstage and to create an new layer front stage, certain users like Essena O'Neill still choose to broadcast their "backstage" online. After finding dissatisfaction through maintaining a front online, O'Neill broadcasted her "backstage" online by editing the captions of her photographs. Captions that once portrayed a front stage version of O'Neill tanning by the pool were adjusted to detail the actions O'Neill took to maintain her online front— extreme dieting, strategic posing, good lighting, sexual appeal and undisclosed advertising. A little over one year after O'Neill's decision to reveal the inner workings of her Instagram posts, the Federal Trade Commission took a strong stance against undisclosed advertising on social media. An advocacy group called Public Citizen argued that "Instagram has become a Wild West of disguised advertising, targeting young people and especially young women" ("Celebrities Warned over Instagram Ads," 2017, April 20). As a result of their investigation and other similar cases, the Federal Trade Commission began to take action against celebrities and other popular social media personas who have endorsed products online without disclosure. According to the *Business Insider*, the Federal Trade Commission sent letters to 90 celebrities and other social media stars in April 2017 that warned users to "clearly show when an Instagram post was sponsored by a brand" (Rath, 2017). In the following months, popular users of Instagram used #ad and #ambassador to identify their Instagram posts as paid advertisements.

Among the recent backlash against undisclosed advertising on social media, societal trends towards being "real" online have also gained traction. Campaigns like "Aerie Real" by American Eagle and the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty have recently emerged in effort to portray "more realistic images rather than relying on carefully polished portrayals of models who don't reflect the general population of customers" and to "celebrate diverse and healthy body shapes" (Lindeman, 2014; Nielson, 2013) In Dove's "Evolution of Beauty" video, Dove brings attention to the realities of the modeling industry through the portrayal of a model who is transformed through professional hair, makeup, lighting, photographs shot at good angles, and editing software that digitally enhances the image of the model (Nielson, 2013). However, Dove's campaign is still an advertisement, which may lead to questions of its authenticity and purpose. Essena O'Neill manipulated her photographs in a similar fashion to Dove's campaign. New technologies like Snapchat filters and Airbrush, a free smartphone application that allows anyone to do everything from removing blemishes to reshaping the size of physical features with a few simple swipes, allow anyone to easily alter his/her social media front. Technologies like these contribute to social media's position as a new layer of front stage, although social media also allows its users the option to broadcast a backstage online. However, social media's forum of mediated contact blurs the lines between a backstage persona and front stage persona, leaving scholars with much to explore between the traditional and contemporary versions of facework. As consumers, it is difficult to know what can be deemed truly authentic and what may be a manipulation of one's front stage for personal or profitable gain.

After quitting the industry of Instagram modeling, Essena O'Neill encouraged her fans to seek validation through whatever makes them happy on a personal level rather than through likes and followers online. O'Neill also encouraged her fans to stop comparing their peers' perfected "front regions" on social media with their own polished "front regions." This desire for one's "front region" to lie favorably in the eyes of one's peers is an ambition that Goffman identified decades ago. Participation in facework and consequently the need for validation or acceptance by society is an everlasting one. By applying Goffman's theoretical construct of facework to the online realm, we can recognize social media for what it truly is — the front stage in a new medium.

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Appendix

Image 1



 **essenaoneill** FOLLOW

6,087 likes 137w

essenaoneill Things are getting pretty wild at my house. Maths B and English in the sun - edit: see how relatable my captions were [emojis] stomach sucked in, strategic pose, pushed up boobs. I just want younger girls to know this isn't candid life, or cool or inspirational. It's contrived perfection made to get attention.

[View all 475 comments](#)

jazzosings I don't get it @oe215

alimourad3 @mimirani this girls gone crazy

joweve_ Shit regarde la description @alessiamottet

mimirani What? @alimourad3

ninumon @jeonwonshit

christinadolan @sarah1354: follow this account, she's dopeS

[Log in to like or comment.](#) ...

Image 2



 **essenaoneill** FOLLOW

18.3k likes 77w

essenaoneill NOT REAL LIFE - took over 100 in similar poses trying to make my stomach look good. Would have hardly eaten that day. Would have yelled at my little sister to keep taking them until I was somewhat proud of this. Yep so totally #goals

[View all 1,001 comments](#)

theshampion @freemateyeh amazinf

theshampion @mahnoormukarram read the captions on her photos

theshampion @laylool 🍷

aesthetic.mgc this is so powerful💖

amyuntang @nzmila @mjdbreezy have you seen this girl

runa.dn @athena.ellas @mattasemma það sem gerist í alvöru á superficial Instagram accountum.

reeseshuaint 11 uallinn at ma @Reeshuaint

[Add a comment...](#) ...

Image 3



Image 4



Image 5

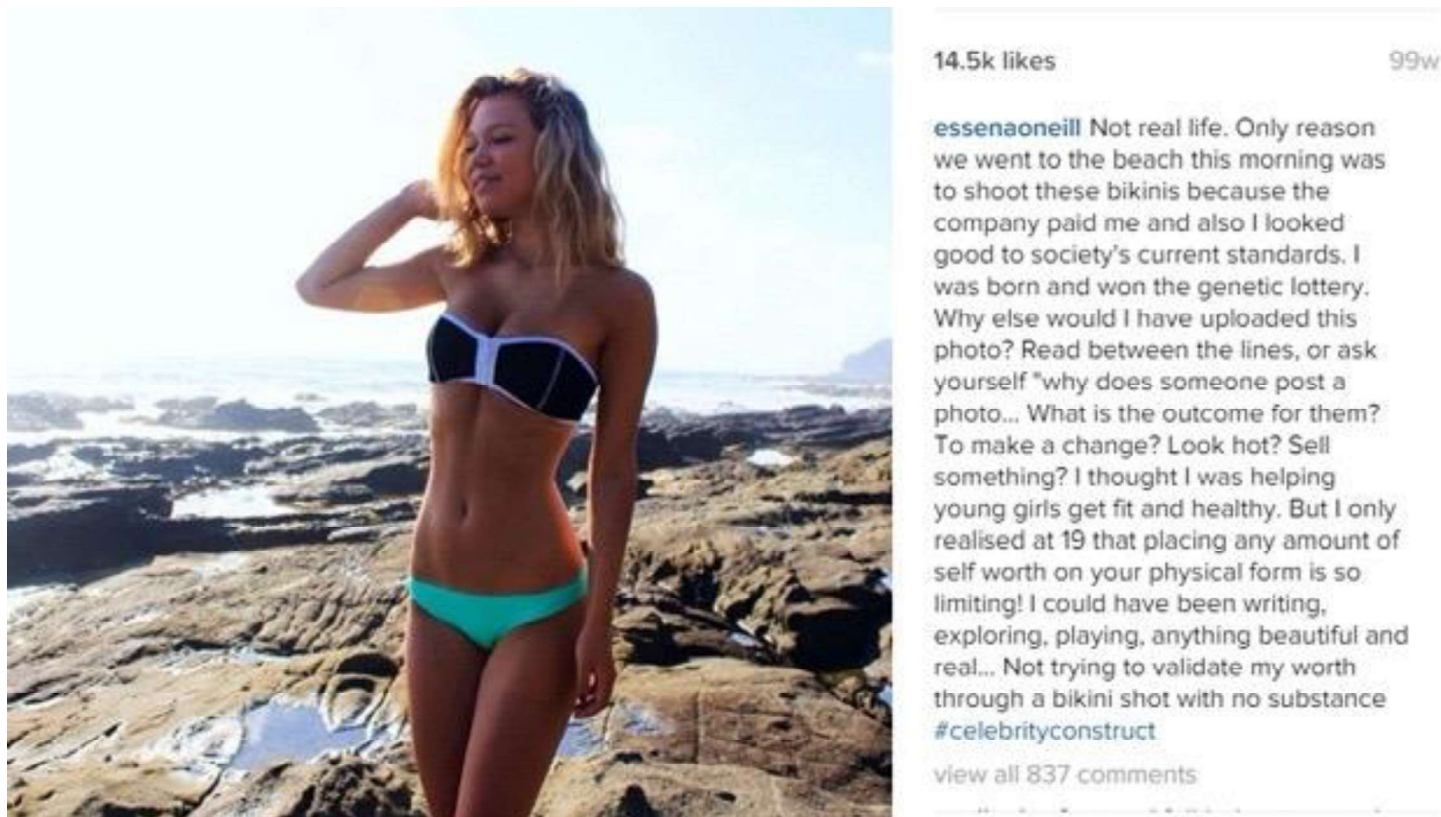


Image 6

