

EXTENDED PAPER

Capturing a crisis: Exploring individuals' Instagram use during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic

Abbildungen einer Krise: Eine explorative Untersuchung von Instagramnutzung während der Anfänge der COVID-19 Pandemie

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Abstract: In the first half of the year 2020, images of the COVID-19 pandemic dominated frontpages and primetime news: empty streets, overcrowded hospitals and panic-buying reflected the chaos and great uncertainty of this global health crisis. Since the advent of the Web 2.0, however, it has been not only traditional news media that shape the imagery of such historical events, but also people's social media accounts which show what individuals are experiencing at a specific time and deem shareworthy. To identify prevalent COVID-19 imagery on Instagram, this digital ethnography assesses the posting behavior of 47 internet users in Switzerland and the United States during the early stages of the pandemic. This study combines findings from a qualitative content analysis of 2,698 posts and interviews with 19 creators to address the following research questions: (1) What content related to the pandemic did Instagram users share with their followers? And, (2) why did these individuals log on to Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic? Overall, we found six COVID-19-related themes in the Feed and Story posts, which predominantly reflected changes to participants' personal lives, including visual changes to everyday scenery. Furthermore, the individuals in our sample captured the COVID-19-related themes from an overwhelmingly positive angle. Answering our second question, we found that logging onto Instagram helped our participants feel part of "something bigger" during a time of social isolation. We discuss these findings in the context of the platform's affordances and conventions and contribute to the thus far limited literature on the uses and gratifications of Instagram and individuals' use of an image-based social networking site during a traumatic event.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, affordances, qualitative method, social media use, uses and gratifications, digital ethnography.

Zusammenfassung: Während der ersten Hälfte des Jahres 2020 haben Bilder der COVID-19 Pandemie die Titelseiten und Primetimes der Nachrichten dominiert: Leere Strassen, überfüllte Spitäler und Panikkäufe haben das Chaos und die grosse Unsicherheit dieser globalen Gesundheitskrise widerspiegelt. Jedoch produzieren seit Beginn des partizipativen Netzes nicht mehr ausschliesslich traditionelle Medienhäuser die Bilder solcher historischen Ereignisse, sondern ebenso private Bürger*innen, welche Bilder auf ihren Profilen in sozialen Medien teilen und somit einen Einblick in ihr persönliches Erleben dieser Zeit gewähren. Um die vorherrschenden COVID-19 Themen auf Instagram zu untersuchen, analysiert diese Instagram- Ethnographie das Instagram-Verhalten von 47 Nutzer*innen in der

Schweiz und den USA während den ersten Wochen der Pandemie. In einer Instagram Ethnographie kombinieren wir Erkenntnisse einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse von 2.698 Instagram Posts mit 19 Interviews mit den Nutzer*innen um die folgenden Forschungsfragen zu adressieren: (1) Welche Inhalte zur Pandemie teilen die Nutzer*innen mit ihrem Publikum? Und, (2) weshalb haben sich die Teilnehmenden während der COVID-19 Pandemie auf Instagram eingeloggt? Wir haben sechs COVID-19 Themen gefunden, welche in den Feed- und Story-Posts der Nutzer*innen erschienen und welche hauptsächlich Veränderungen in den Privatleben der Teilnehmenden reflektierten, oft auch visuelle Veränderungen von alltäglichen Situationen. Diese Themen wurden überwiegend positiv dargestellt und haben den Instagram Nutzer*innen dabei geholfen, sich – während dieser Zeit der sozialen Isolation – als Teil von «etwas Grösserem» zu fühlen. Wir diskutieren diese Erkenntnisse im Kontext der Plattformlogiken und leisten somit einen Beitrag zur bisher limitierten Literatur über „Uses and Gratifications“ der Instagramnutzung und im Speziellen dem Nutzen von Bild-basierten sozialen Netzwerken während traumatischer Ereignisse.

Schlagwörter: COVID-19-Pandemie, Affordanzen, qualitative Methoden, Nutzung von sozialen Medien, Nutzen- und Belohnungsansatz, digitale Ethnographie.

1. Introduction

“Dear Diary, today I ...” Personal diaries offer a unique window into individuals’ personal lives: what people were doing, thinking about, and feeling at specific points in time. Such entries are as diverse as their creators. Personal experiences captured in diaries differ regarding not only their content, but also their manner of creation (e.g., regularity, attention to detail, tonality). While such entries are highly individual at first glance, personal moments captured in diaries also reflect creators’ cultural and societal environments. As a result, a diary from an individual living in the 18th century will refer to other social norms, values, and viewpoints than a diary from the 21st century. In other words, in addition to gaining insights into individuals’ lived realities, studying diaries can serve as a method for researchers to uncover larger narratives within and across personal diaries, which allows us to reconstruct the specific social contexts in which they were created (Humphreys, 2018).

However, not only the content – what individuals capture about their personal experiences – but also the format – how people record their personal experiences – has evolved over time. Since the beginning of the Web 2.0, the everyday has been embedded in a highly connected and fast-changing environment, affecting individuals’ personal experiences as well as their opportunities to record those moments. Today, social media posts have largely replaced the notebook as the medium for personal diary entries. Consistent with the conventions of leading online platforms, these social media posts often aim to catch other users’ attention with visual elements rather than long text entries (e.g., Leaver et al., 2020). Globally, over 1 billion people use the image-based social networking site Instagram for image-sharing (Enberg, 2020). They use the platform not only to post everyday moments in the form of a personal archive, but also to share pictures with others, just like paper-and-pen diaries were historically used to archive experiences as well as share them with a select audience (Humphreys, 2018, p. 2). Be-

cause of Instagram's large user base, which increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Enberg, 2020), we study posts on this platform in order to see what aspects of their changed daily lives individuals shared during the onset of this global health crisis. This should help us to reconstruct aspects of two larger phenomena through personal narratives and answer our research questions concerning what content individuals shared from their personal experiences of the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland and the United States. Additionally, it allows us to answer our second research question which asks why these individuals logged on to Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To gain an insight into people's personal experiences, one popular approach – commonly employed by museums, magazines, and TV programs – is to call for individual photo-contributions to exhibits or stories (e.g., “#CovidStoriesNYC,” 2020; Dickson, 2020; Schneider & Prost, 2020). Personal photographs are thus collected by organizations to portray a collection of individual, personal perspectives on a global pandemic. However, in our digitized world, we can directly access these experiences through people's personal social media where they record content from their daily lives for themselves and share it with their followers. While all social media content is curated, it is still less so than a selection of images sent to museums for official, public exhibition. This type of access allows us to focus on content that was produced in a natural setting. It also allows us to view photos in their context, including their captions, date of publication, and other posts shared by the same individual. We therefore include content which reflects social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson's concept of *social photography*: “the quick selfie reaction, the instantly posted snapshot of nice sunlight on your block, the photo of a burger sent to a friend,” which is different from photography created with the main purpose to be presented in museums or exhibitions as “documentation or art” (2019, p. 8). We are interested in just these types of understudied visuals: the ones that individuals found share-worthy in the moment of capturing their personal experiences of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of focusing on a selection of the best amateur photographs, this method allows us to paint a more holistic picture of a specific sample of individuals' experiences of the beginning stages of COVID-19 through their Instagram behavior.

Furthermore, by looking at individuals' Instagram posts during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic and talking to several creators, we can make conclusions about the platform's function according to these users' platform expectations and behaviors. Specific platforms have unique affordances – the range of possible activities (Norman, 2017, more on the specific Instagram affordances in Subchapter 2.2). Equally important, however, are cultural conventions which strongly impact how people use specific platforms. This includes users' perceptions of the ideal platform use, such as the type of content that “belongs” on the platform (Norman, 1999). These conventions are co-created and upheld by users which is why studying their behavior and their beliefs about platform use can uncover underlying conventions. The present study, therefore, allows conclusions about Instagram's conventions – during a pandemic – according to our sample.

2. Literature review

2.1 Uses and gratifications in social media use

Since the onset of mass media, scholars have been interested in reasons leading to media use (Rubin, 2009). What is our motivation for watching a documentary on the *BBC*, reading a news article on *The New York Times*, or scrolling through Instagram posts on our colleague's feed? And, do our needs and expected outcome vary when using different media formats? Findings shedding light on these questions contribute to the research on media *uses and gratifications* (Katz, 1959). For decades, this theory has been extensively applied in traditional media formats (Ruggiero, 2000), explaining people's motivations to use media and their gratifications from its use (Stafford et al., 2004). With continually rising numbers of daily social media use across the globe (see Auxier & Erson, 2021; Latzer et al., 2020), the uses and gratifications theory finds increased attention from scholars interested in internet users' motivations for logging on to social media platforms and the gratifications they gain from using them (Quinn, 2016).

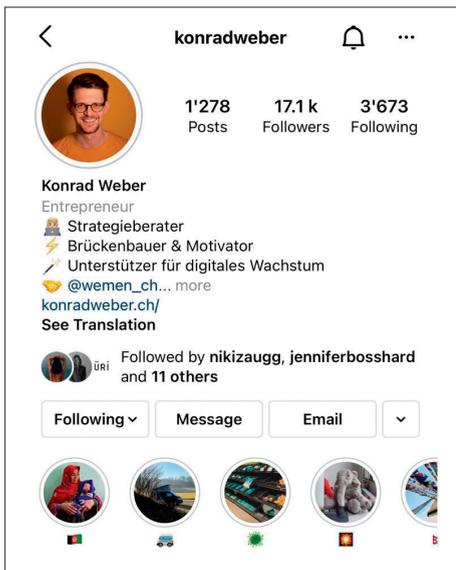
In an increasingly rich and diverse social media environment, individuals must make choices concerning which platform they use for which purposes. Madianou and Miller (2012) have coined the term "polymedia" to describe the communicative environment in which individuals have to choose among an "environment of affordances" (p. 170), as not all media are interchangeable in their uses. This environment has only become more complex with time. Previous research identified underlying forces for social media use, including internet users' need to (1) connect with other people for different purposes (Hillyer, 2021; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015), (2) perform self-representation (Blackwood, 2019; Caldeira et al., 2018; Ibrahim, 2015; Owens, 2017; Risam, 2018), (3) use social media as an information source (Chung et al., 2015; M. Lewis et al., 2017; Mastley, 2017; Moore, 2016), (4) archive moments and memories (Mylonas, 2017; Rollason-Cass & Reed, 2015), and (5) use social media as a means for recreation and passing time (Gomes, 2015; Noguti & Waller, 2020).

However, not only the motivation, but also the types of use can vary. Types of social media use differ by (1) a varying degree of engagement with the platform, ranging from scrolling through the content passively to creating content actively (e.g., Dolan et al., 2016), and (2) the tonality of the shared content, tending to be either rather critical or positive (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Previous research found a broad range of aspects that impact the type of use, ranging from social media users' character traits, such as a strong desire for status seeking (Thompson et al., 2020), to peer-to-peer surveillance (Helsper & Whitty, 2010) and privacy concerns (Quinn, 2016), as well as the topic itself, which might be difficult, polarizing or touchy (Cooper, 2021; Schroeder et al., 2013). The following section presents more specific research findings on internet users' motivations for selecting Instagram from a growing list of social networking services. Locating our research within this tradition will help us evaluate why individuals used Instagram (in different manners) during the beginning of the pandemic.

2.2 Motivations for Instagram use

One of the main motivations for using Instagram is to archive experiences by sharing images (Lee et al., 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). In this use, Instagram is often considered an online diary, reflecting traditional diary use as individuals fix future memories in – or close to – the moment of experience. However, archiving on Instagram changed when the platform introduced a new feature in 2016 called “Stories” where users can now upload images and videos which disappear after 24 hours and which are used more to share in the moment, “carefree” topics (see Bayer et al., 2016). This means that not every post on Instagram is published with the intention of durability, reflecting the concept of the social photograph (see Jurgenson, 2019). Instead, there is a differentiation between posts that are ephemeral and others that – while having the option of being deleted – are created for the long-term. This dichotomy, however, has been complicated by the introduction of a new affordance, the “Story Highlights” on users’ profiles, overcoming the ephemeral nature of the posts by creating a permanent button on the profile through which selected Story posts can be viewed (see Figure 1 for an example of Story Highlights). Highlights can also be created retroactively: An image can be posted to the Story, disappear after 24 hours but then, weeks later, the user can still privately access the Story and add it to a Story Highlight, thereby making the memory-marker more permanent. However, regardless of using Instagram for permanent memories or fleeting stories, just like physical diaries in the eighteenth century, Instagram is not necessarily used for recording one’s “innermost thoughts” but mostly for creating a version of memories that is meant to be *shared* (see, Culley, 1989; Humphreys et al., 2013).

Figure 1. An example of a Story Highlight about COVID-19



Notes. An example of a Story Highlight about COVID-19 can be seen on Konrad Weber’s profile in the third “bubble” from the left. Here, he collected his Story posts from the beginning stages of COVID-19.

Instagram is not the only platform allowing for ephemeral content. Snapchat is infamous for messages that disappear after reading and, while the platform has evolved since its launch in 2011, its messages are still not archived by default, and are much more geared toward direct communication. Bayer and colleagues indeed claim that “the meaningfulness of Snapchat communication stems in part from the sharing of insignificant slices of personal life” (Bayer et al., 2016, p. 971), not from a need for archiving. In this sense, Instagram presents a special case since it combines the two modalities. However, again, Instagram is not alone in providing these affordances. In 2017, Facebook (owned by the same parent company as Instagram: Meta) also launched a Story-feature. Facebook therefore also combines ephemeral posts more akin to traditional communication tools and permanent posts for archiving experiences. Our focus on Instagram is owed to our interest in the visual documentation (ephemeral and permanent) of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering that Instagram is the prime social networking site for sharing visual content, we chose this platform. It is therefore important to keep in mind that our findings are not generalizable to social networking sites in general, exactly because different platforms have different affordances and conventions: behavior is highly context-specific and individuals act differently, depending on the social media stage they choose (see Erving Goffman’s “highly bounded regions” in which individuals perform (1959)). Throughout this paper, we mention when our findings differ between Feed and Story posts and elaborate on potential reasons.

While the modalities for narrating personal experiences have evolved, the content which individuals tend to share on social networking sites is strikingly similar to the content recorded in eighteenth and nineteenth century diaries: People write about everyday topics such as foods eaten, activities pursued and media consumed (Humphreys, 2018, p. 37). These experiences, while being mundane, are also framed in a positive manner, reflecting users’ motivation for self-expression. Additionally, the sharing of these events is used to perform identities, “an important aspect of media accounting” (Humphreys, 2018, p. 51), meaning that posts do not simply stand for themselves but are used to create and negotiate the poster’s identity. Positive self-representation has in fact repeatedly been found to be among the strongest motivators for sharing on Instagram (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016): Individuals share on Instagram to record aspects of their lives which they want others to view as representative of who they are, such as being part of an active social group (Hu et al., 2014). In this sense, social media present stages on which individuals give performances of idealized versions of themselves (see Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010).

Representing oneself in a positive light requires an audience. Again, this is a function which is not new to social media but has been true for eighteenth and nineteenth century diaries as well. Before modern diaries were equipped with locks, they were shown to visiting family members or sent home from vacation for loved ones to read (Humphreys, 2018, p. 2). The importance of sharing special moments on Instagram appears to have gained such priority that situations can even be described as “instagrammable.” Leaver and colleagues describe the colloquialism of

‘doing it for the gram’ as “the creation of situations for their instagrammability rather than the experience and the inspirational or aspirational aesthetics of visual content performed for an audience” (2020, p. 65). This assumes that social media behavior is at least in part motivated by a desire to create resonance, which is also reflected in research showing that, while connecting with others is not the main reason for Instagram use (Serafinelli, 2017), individuals still appreciate its connecting functions, are aware of their potential audiences, and post accordingly (Hu et al., 2014; Leaver et al., 2020). Connecting with others through Instagram can thus be done without explicit interpersonal communication but rather by sharing moments from one’s own and reacting to others’ personal lives.

Lastly, in addition to these motivations for active use, Instagram is also used passively, mostly for entertainment purposes (e.g., Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Looking at what other people post – which Lee and colleagues found to be the most frequent type of Instagram use – can help people “pursue relaxation, avoid the troubles they encounter in reality, and peek at others’ photographs” (Lee et al., 2015, p. 555). Lee and colleagues’ survey on motivations for Instagram use found that among participants’ primary motives for Instagram use was to escape from their own lives (2015). Going a step further than pure entertainment, Sheldon and Bryant found that, “surveillance/knowledge about others” was the main motivation for Instagram use, therefore implying a level of social control as exercised through social media (2016). This could be a motivation for passive social media use which might be dominant during the beginning stages of a pandemic when social control was at an all-time high because of the many new measures which were mostly easily observable (e.g., Zürcher & Loser, 2021).

2.3 Motivations for social media use in traumatic times

Studies of social media use in traumatic times are rare and mostly focus on incidents which are more short-term in their acute stages than the COVID-19 pandemic. Events include terrorist attacks (Eriksson, 2016; Garcia & Rimé, 2019), tragic accidents (Han, 2017; Yeo et al., 2020), and natural disasters (Farinosi & Micalizzi, 2016). The findings from previous studies show that coping with traumatic events on social media mostly reflects emotion-focused coping, opposed to problem-focused coping. While a combination of the two is always possible, the latter is most often employed when individuals feel that they can do something about the cause of the stress, and they thereby seek to alleviate the issue (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, predominates when individuals feel that “the stressor is something that must be endured” (Carver et al., 1989, p. 267). Emotion-focused coping includes exactly such reactions as the previous research on social media use in traumatic times has shown, including venting or seeking social support (Carver et al., 1989). The COVID-19 pandemic has already been studied from a social media perspective, focusing on specific content such as (mis-)information (Harsin, 2020; Medford et al., 2020), anti-Asian racism (Abidin & Zeng, 2020) or posting about gaining weight in quarantine (Lucibello et al., 2021). Overall, research on social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic has largely focused on the volume of use

(e.g., Nguyen et al., 2020) but is still lacking a qualitative elaboration on what is shared and how participants describe their own social media use during this time.

However, from previous research on social media use in the wake of traumatic events, we know that people tend to turn to social media to express grief, anger or other negative emotions (e.g., Leaver et al., 2020, p. 157), solidarity (Eriksson, 2016; Garcia & Rimé, 2019; Leaver et al., 2020), and to connect with others who are going through the same experience (e.g., Schmalz et al., 2015). Many studies also show that sharing during traumatic events is further used to negotiate meaning through one's own posts (e.g., Farinosi & Micalizzi, 2016, p. 99). This will be particularly relevant for posts on Instagram since we know that, according to Susan Sontag, photography not only supplies "a record of the past, but a new way of dealing with the present" (2008). It is therefore used as a personal re-configuration of reality. In this sense, taking pictures and curating images on social media profiles can be seen as "making things mean" (see Hall, 1982). Furthermore, according to José van Dijck, image sharing on social media is a means of giving a *personal* perspective on an event and sharing it with others (2008, p. 59, emphasis added). This will be particularly interesting to observe during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic since there was much uncertainty and individuals' lives were reduced to their most private realms where individual storytelling was a possibility of making sense of this time of crisis. By looking at individuals' Instagram posts, we are interested in seeing which images they found share-worthy during this time of crisis.

3. Methods

We employed an Instagram ethnography (Hugentobler, 2022) to gather thick data including social media posts as well as creators' self-proclaimed motivations for posting and their general emotions and experiences at the time of sharing. Because, as sociologist Karen O'Reilly elaborated, researching experiences and behavior in the digital realm requires researchers to rethink what it means to be "watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions" (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 3), we observe Instagram content as visible traces of behavior. The qualitative content analysis therefore corresponds to our digital interpretation of traditional participant observation. However, studying online content without taking into account the context in which it was produced is "almost impossible" (Bock et al., 2011, p. 272). This is because visible behavior does not necessarily allow conclusions about individuals' motivations or experiences, particularly in settings when the performance factor is central to the exhibited behavior (see Clifford, 1986). We therefore also conducted semi-structured interviews in natural contexts (chosen by the participants). While the content analysis thus allows conclusions about visible behavior, the interviews allow us to access individuals' self-proclaimed motivations, identifying fuller narratives about the situations portrayed on Instagram. They revealed information the content did not, and allowed the participants to speak for themselves about their experiences of the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic and their Instagram use at the time.

3.1 Sample

We collected 2,698 Instagram posts (2,258 Story posts and 440 Feed posts) by 47 Instagram users with the permission of the creators. We aimed at a sample whose median age would fall within the age group of 25–34-year-olds, the group which represented 33.8% of global Instagram users in 2020 (Clement, 2020): the largest group. We therefore conducted snowball sampling starting on the first author's Instagram page, whose age was 31 at the time and this indeed resulted in a sample with a median age of 31 (ranging from 22 to 60). This represents an interesting group because few studies have focused on adult use of social networking sites but ones that have found that the sites can help develop a shared community and reduce loneliness and depression (Schmalz et al., 2015). 40 of the participants (85%) resided in Switzerland, while the others lived in Iowa, Minnesota, and New York. Eighty-one percent identified as female.

Snowball sampling was initiated on May 22, 2020. The first author posted a call for participation on her Instagram profile reading:

Friends.

I am doing a project (again) and I want to ask you to help me.

The great thing is: you have to do (almost) nothing!

You can help me with a study by simply giving me permission to look at your Instagram posts over the next four weeks.

I will NEVER publish any specific post without asking you first. I will screenshot your posts but protect your privacy by anonymizing the images immediately and deleting all original, identifiable posts.

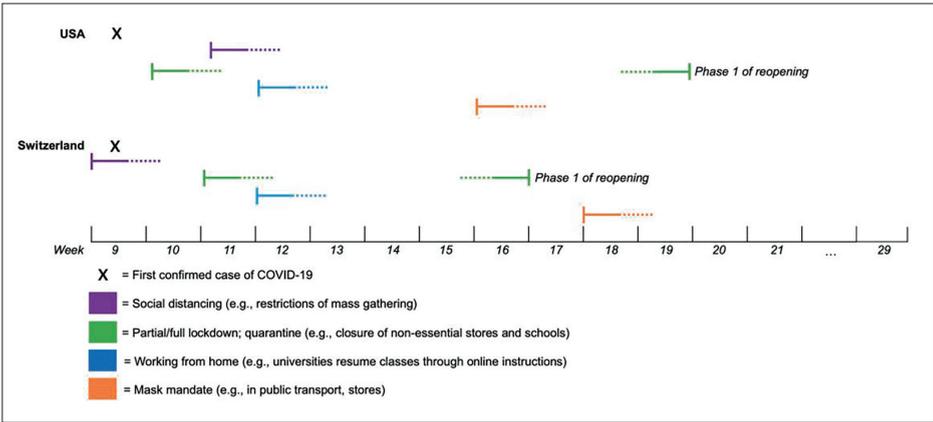
If you want to participate, send me a quick DM saying “yes” or any equivalent.

I will then also send you a short questionnaire, which you can choose to take or not.

If you want more information before saying yes, just hit me up.

The first author was then in direct contact with each of the individuals who positively responded to this call. This was also when a first discussion about how to handle their content (anonymized or not) was conducted. This resulted in a sample of 47 users who allowed us to monitor and screenshot their posts between March 1 (calendar week 9) and June 14, 2020 (week 24), thereby covering the first months of the pandemic when the changes to our lives were still new and – in many parts of the world – most severe. Because Story posts disappear after 24 hours and our participants did not all archive their previous Story posts in “Story Highlights,” we asked all participants if they would also – retrospectively – provide us their Stories between March 1 and May 22, when sampling began. This resulted in a sample of all Feed posts for all participants between March 1 and June 14, all Stories for 30 participants (64%) between March 1 and June 14, and Stories from May 22 until June 14 for 17 users. We therefore analyze both Feed and ephemeral Story posts, accounting for spontaneous and in-the-moment sharing, as well as the ongoing nature and magnitude of the crisis and the concomitant desire to archive some aspects of this extraordinary event.

Table 1. A simplified summary of the measures to contain the COVID-19 virus



Notes. A simplified summary of the measures to contain the COVID-19 virus in the two countries where our participants resided during the time of sampling. For the United States, we indicate the earliest starting and latest ending points for the measures among the States in our sample. Snowball sampling started on May 22, 2020, week 21.

The screenshots reproduced in this essay were all cleared for publication in exactly the form in which they are printed. While some participants preferred to keep some identifiers anonymous (e.g., Instagram usernames or their friends' faces), others wanted to receive acknowledgement for the content they produced. We therefore respected each participant's wish and give credit when it was requested (see Richterich, 2020).

Through the direct messaging function, we asked all participants if they would like to participate in an interview. Nineteen participants agreed to talk to the first author so that we could access their emotions, opinions and experiences at the time of posting including their overall experiences and specific feelings surrounding Instagram use (see Pink, 2021; Serafinelli, 2017). The interviews were conducted in the modality that was easiest for the interviewees to accommodate as many participants as possible and to create an interview environment that felt as natural as possible.¹

Interviewees self-selected into the study and the sample includes the individual who posted the most as well as the four who never posted and four of the youngest participants as well as the oldest. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol which was created from our research questions, relevant literature, and insights we had gained in the content analysis. Interviews were geared toward the specific interviewees, taking into account the content they had posted and analyzing their cases holistically. As is common for semi-structured interviews, there were several questions that all interviewees were asked, but the interviewer followed the conversation mostly where the interviewee was guiding her (see, for example Dahlin, 2021). This was deemed an appropriate strategy be-

1 The interviews were conducted by the first author in person ($n = 4$), via video call (2), chatting through Instagram and WhatsApp via audio messages (4) or text (9).

cause we wanted interviewees to show what they consider important about their own Instagram use and their personal experience of the pandemic. When quoting from the interviews, those led in German or Swiss German were translated by the authors to English. The participants are referred to by first names, which were fictionalized when requested.

It is important to situate our sample within the context of the global pandemic. In our case, we speak of a privileged sample in that none of the participants were directly affected by the virus itself. However, all were affected by the measures to contain it: Some individuals suffered increased workloads in less-than-ideal working conditions at the same pay, while others had to combine childcare responsibilities with paid labor, and others yet lost their jobs. While the countries of residence are all wealthy countries, they were also all significantly affected by the pandemic. Therefore, while speaking of privileged individuals simplifies the specific experiences of these individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic, several participants explicitly mentioned their own situation of privilege, such as Leandra who said: “I was doing well, despite the circumstances, and I was able to work and live alone really well.” Furthermore, a certain privileged status in the sample must be assumed based on the sampling method: The sample was drawn through a snowballing method from the first author’s personal Instagram profile. This most likely lead to a sample with an above-average level of education and living in a more urban environment.

3.2 Data analysis

The Instagram posts – (moving) image and caption text – were analyzed with a qualitative content analysis, a method that combines advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods of analyses (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000, 2010, 2015a, 2015b; Mayring & Fenzl, 2014; Scheufele, 2008; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019), a common strategy to find important themes in online material (e.g., Eriksson, 2016). Images (and videos) and their captions were analyzed together, treating images as text. This paper presents one study from a larger project in which we analyzed individuals’ general Instagram behavior and experiences during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we present results concerning COVID-19-related posts, but, for clarity, we elaborate here on the overall method of the project. Following Mayring (2000), we created a codebook with deductive codes from the literature and inductive codes that emerged from the data, accounting for the unique nature of the crisis. Most of the deductive codes categorizing content into traditional everyday categories came from Lee Humphrey’s seminal work on social media use and everyday life (Humphreys, 2018; Humphreys et al., 2013). Here, for example, we created main codes such as “food” or “leisure activity” parallel to Humphrey’s work and added more specific sub-codes inductively, based on what we found in our sample. We, for example, created a main code “leisure” to include more slow-paced activities such as “movie,” “puzzle,” “diy,” “selfcare,” “painting,” “boardgames” and a main code “active” for leisure activities such as walking, running, or riding a bike which were particularly interesting in the pandemic context when moving outside gained a new importance. We also inductively created different codes for paid and unpaid work

(particularly accounting for discussions about care work during the pandemic (e.g., H. Lewis, 2020)). Differing from Humphreys and colleagues (2013), however, we separated these categories from leisure activities due to the conversations during the pandemic of private and professional lives becoming (more) indistinguishable for many people as work was suddenly conducted from home and no longer spatially or temporally separated from private life. Inductive codes were created from the data, mainly concerning COVID-19 specific issues such as face masks, social distancing or mentions of not leaving the house and being bored.

After the two researchers created a first version of the codebook together, which included a pre-coding to find initial inductive codes, each researcher coded one half of the data set. During this first coding cycle, both authors wrote memos and frequently exchanged ideas and questions, particularly when they came across a post about which they were unsure. The codebook was continuously adapted: this included adding inductive codes (always after discussing them with the other coder), as well as specifying existing codes where necessary. After this first coding cycle and a final discussion of the new codebook, both authors then coded the data which the other one had previously worked on. In this cycle, we added codes we thought were missing or challenged ones that were previously indicated but that we did not find fitting. All these disagreements were solved in conversation between the two coders. Once all the data was coded, we calculated the most frequent themes in our sample (see Mayring, 2010, p. 87).² This allowed us to see overarching themes and their prevalence in our data set, as the method is well-suited to structure material based on defined ordering criteria (in our case this was the relative frequency of the themes) (see Mayring, 2010, p. 67).

However, due to the qualitative framework of the project, we remained open to look at the content in depth: Once the data was coded, we looked at the codes that were interesting for this present paper and its research questions. We then analyzed the different categories in depth, uncovering what type of content really lies behind the category and what it tells us about the posters' experiences and Instagram use. In our analysis, we combined certain codes to overarching themes. For instance, baking banana bread, making a sourdough starter, participating in the pillow challenge, or making puzzles were combined to a theme named "COVID-19 trends." In this paper, we present the most frequent COVID-19 themes, some of which overlap with everyday topics, typical of diary entries such as narratives about work or images of food.

The interviews were conducted between the first and second coding cycles to allow for insights from the interviews to be taken up in the content analysis. Interviews were always conducted after in-depth viewing of the person's Instagram posts. When the interviews were conducted orally, they were recorded – with permission – then transcribed by the interviewer, and subsequently analyzed using a thematic analysis to contextualize the findings from the content analysis and uncover users' posting motivations and personal experiences of these first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 For the frequency analyses, we calculated code frequencies for the different users before aggregating them, taking into account that some users had a sample of over 200 posts while others only posted in the single digits.

4. Findings & interpretation

This findings chapter begins with Subchapter 4.1 which presents and interprets the results for the question of *what* Instagram users shared from their everyday lives during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, relying on the content analysis of the Instagram posts (Chapters 4.1.1 until 4.1.6 are dedicated to the six themes found while Chapter 4.1.7 discusses the tonality of the posts). Following, in Subchapter 4.2, we elaborate on *why* individuals used Instagram during this time and why they did so in the specific manners they chose (active and passive use and creating a positive environment). To answer this latter research question, we relied on the interviews which we analyzed in the context of the respective interviewee's Instagram posts.

Of the 2,698 posts, 653 (24%) were about COVID-19, its impacts, or measures to contain it. This shows that, while – in our sample – most of the content posted during the pandemic was not about COVID-19, it was nevertheless a frequent topic.

Figure 2. “Virus Insanity.”



Notes. After the announcement of the first COVID-19 lockdown in Switzerland in March 2020, Kimberly posts this image from a grocery store. She combines an explicit reference to the virus with an image of emptied-out store shelves, now recognizable as an image of the ensuing panic announcements of the first lockdowns created (published in week 12).

COVID-19 related imagery or text appeared explicitly in 254 posts and implicitly in 238 posts. Explicit posts include comments about COVID-19 such as the words “corona” or “lockdown” while implicit posts show aspects that are visually unique to the pandemic such as facemasks on public transport. One post could include both, explicit and implicit references to the pandemic (see Figure 2

for an example). Among the 43 individuals in our sample who posted at all, only three never posted about COVID-19.

4.1 What individuals shared about the COVID-19 pandemic on Instagram

In the following, we present and interpret the results to the question “what did individuals share about the COVID-19 pandemic on their personal Instagram profiles?” We begin in this subchapter by describing the six different themes found in the posts and then elaborate on their tonality in Subchapter 4.1.7. In our sample, six themes were dominant that mentioned or showed the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following, we present these themes in order of the frequency with which they appeared in our sample, beginning with the least frequent one. In their Instagram posts, individuals showed how their private realms looked and felt during these times and therefore offer a unique glimpse into their personal lives and immediate surroundings as well as how they experienced these extraordinary times.

4.1.1 COVID-19 social media trends

COVID-19 “trends” appeared in six percent of COVID-19 posts in our sample ($n = 36$). These were global trends that originated on social media but were also covered by the popular media (e.g., Kang, 2020). They were trends that made explicit what was sometimes implicit in our sample: people’s boredom and the desire to do something new as well as being part of a larger conversation (see, Schmalz and colleagues’ (2015) finding that individuals (also) use social media to feel connected to like-minded people). Trends included baking banana bread or the pillow challenge in which people “dressed” themselves in pillows and blankets.

Figure 3. Dalgona Coffee “When you try every silly thing”



Note. Published in week 17.

Another popular trend was Dalgona Coffee, a frothy coffee drink, versions of which have been long popular in different nations across the globe (Makalintal, 2020). In Figure 3, Annick refers to the fact that this more elaborate take on an everyday cup of joe was a trend during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and by captioning the image with “when you try every silly thing” and “#howtospendcorona” she refers to the boredom during lockdown and the desire to participate in larger narratives. When everyone else was seen making special coffee, others were tempted to try it as well, even if it was just to know what all the fuss was about. The trends show individuals’ craving for connection through Instagram (see, Hu et al., 2014; Leaver et al., 2020) and they also represent the desire to use the app actively for entertainment purposes (see Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Akin to participating in a game with one’s social circle, individuals posted their interpretation of a common recipe which everyone seemed to be making.

4.1.2 Masks

None of the countries represented in this sample have a history of mask-wearing and media coverage of the discussions surrounding masks shows that they are a contentious topic (e.g., Picheta, 2021). During our sampling time, masks were only required to be worn in public in New York City, which is where one participant lives. In all other locations, for most of the timespan, masks were not generally mandatory.³ Despite this fact, seven percent ($n = 43$) of the COVID-19 posts in our sample show or discuss masks (none of them by the participant from NYC). There is some discussion of their inconvenience, but comments are always humorous, such as in Figure 4: Claudia captioned her picture with “so how do i drink now? #globi at the hairdresser’s.” *Globi* is a Swiss children’s book character – a blue bird with a yellow beak – and her reference to him shows the silliness of her posts and that the complaint is not meant to be taken seriously.

3 New York City instated a mask mandate on April 17, 2020 for all public spaces. In Switzerland, starting on April 27, masks had to be worn in specific businesses such as hairdressers and tattoo studios. These were the only mask requirements in the regions in which our participants were located at the time.

Figure 4. “Globi at the hairdresser”

Note. Claudia’s post shows the new visuals at one of the first businesses where masks were required in Switzerland: the hairdresser (published week 18).

Facemasks – in our sample – present an unusual accessory which is very noticeable and therefore might warrant a selfie. While masks are often considered a nuisance, none of the individuals in our sample make comments about their effectiveness, or about pressures or guidelines to wear them. By showing themselves wearing masks, individuals might have shown an implicit support for the measures by showing themselves in a positive light: as someone who follows the guidelines (see Alhabash & Ma, 2017). It can also be read as a sign of solidarity (see Leaver et al., 2020), as wearing a mask in public acknowledges that individuals, particularly in the beginning stages, were called upon to take care of one another.

4.1.3 Working from home

Working from home, although an option not available to everyone, was not only a topic broadly covered by the media and discussed by policy makers (see, for example Roberts, 2021), but it is also a topic that was visualized frequently in our sample (8% of COVID-19 posts, $n = 51$). This reflects previous research on Twitter, which has found paid and unpaid work to be one of the most frequently shared topics (Humphreys et al., 2013). Here, the framing was not always positive. While 37 percent of the working from home posts were positive, 15 percent were explicitly negative. Despite these negative posts being in the minority, it is the highest percentage of negativity among all our themes, showing that this change to our participants’ everyday lives was shown as the most negatively impactful, most closely reflecting previous research which showed that individuals turn to social media to vent during times of crisis (e.g., Leaver et al., 2020, p. 157). A particular focus of these posts was on having to combine caretaking or

house-work responsibilities with paid work and missing the traditional office-environment. This was striking in the images which clearly showed work occurring in non-working environments such as on beds or dining room tables.

Because work is such a significant part of the lives of these specific participants (all of working age), the changes were felt drastically. Helene captions her post with the hashtag #whyihatehomeoffice and reiterates this in several other posts, explaining why she hates working from home.

Figure 5. “Me in home office.”



Note. Helene showing the distractions while working from home (published week 12).

However, the full caption in Figure 5 reads “Me in home office. I try to focus on work but discover dust only. That’s why I always loved to go to the office. But don’t worry, I will get used to this new reality [sunglasses emoji]”. Her caption shows that while she is not happy with the current situation, she is able to put it into perspective within the larger pandemic and is trying to make the best of it. In a different post, she writes:

I will just say it once: I never liked working from home and now I dislike it even more. I blossom in the company of others and can't concentrate when silence is shouting at me. BUT: There is no time to whine. There are no bombs, no snipers, there is no food scarcity and no contaminated water. And: We know why we are doing this. We experience and shape history ...

This reflects the attitude of many individuals in our sample to highlight how they were making the best of a difficult situation. It can therefore be said that, while not all participants who were forced to work from home felt this was an improvement of their everyday lives, the overwhelming narrative was still one of positivity. If not about home office itself, then at least about one’s own perspec-

tive on the overall situation. The dominance of this visual theme reflects the unique nature of the situation and its significant impact on people's personal spaces: both visually and functionally.

4.1.4 Social distancing

Social distancing might be the biggest misnomer among COVID-19-coinages. Social distancing, in this context, really means to remain *physically* distant from others. The photographs in our sample illustrate this in a striking manner. People still crave human contact, even when they cannot be physically close and they document this type of unusual interaction in relatively high numbers (8%, $n = 53$): people standing awkwardly far apart from each other while being in an exchange turned into a frequent image overnight.

Figure 6. Two friends feeling like Romeo and Juliet during lockdown



Note. A now iconic COVID-19 visual trope showing physically distanced encounters (published week 13).

Betty, who posted Figure 6 is shown waving to their friend from the street, and they captioned their image with “Me as Romeo on my bike,” further stressing the physical distance between the friends by implying the legendary balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. It is an unusual image of an interaction between close friends, but one that is now recognizable as symptomatic of the COVID-19 pandemic. The absurdity of this type of social interaction is often explicitly discussed in posts, as in this example, where the poster uses her humorous caption to signpost the strange nature of the situation while keeping it light enough to not act as a complaint.

Images of friends – together with selfies – are the most frequent types of posts on Instagram (Hu et al., 2014), and research on travel-photography has shown that individuals tend to show themselves with other group members to highlight their own social importance (Groves & Timothy, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that even when people were unable to meet their friends in exciting locations or out on interesting activities, they nevertheless shared images of their get-togethers. This posting behavior reflects Instagram use from before the crisis.

4.1.5 Virtual

Related to the posts showing social distancing, still posting about one's friends – even when in-person meetings were no longer possible – also included posts showing people meeting virtually. Digital technology was used for any-and everything, reflected in nine percent ($n = 59$) of COVID-19 posts which showed suddenly common visuals: People were sitting in their bedrooms at virtual work meetings, but they were also holding wine glasses into the camera, or rolling out a yoga mat in front of a screen.

Figure 7. #DrinksAtHome



Note. Making the best of a difficult situation by bringing friends into the home – virtually (published week 15).

One participant posted an image of herself having drinks with her friends, not only capturing their individual Zoom-images but also including the laptop in the photograph (see Figure 7). The cropping of the photo allows us to see her kitchen in the background, leading the focus even more to the fact that this get-together is happening in her own home, enabled through digital technology, which creates an unusual image. This movement from outside to inside the home is also reflected in the capture where she writes “having a virtual drink les halles style” naming the restaurant where the friends usually went for drinks and adding the hashtags #drinksathome and #livestreaming further stressing the uniqueness of the situation and highlighting the digitally enabled social interaction. We know from popular media that the move of all social activities – in addition to work (for many)

– to screens, can lead to Zoom fatigue (e.g., Walsh, 2020). However, in our sample, visuals of virtual events, including workout classes, were always framed positively. Similar to the posts showing “social distancing,” these photographs of virtual events can be read as the portrayal of the poster as still being part of a social circle, be it work-related or pure leisure (reflecting the desire to represent oneself as a person with social importance (see Groves & Timothy, 2001). It is important to keep in mind here, that our sampling time was during the beginning stages of a pandemic which has now continued for several years. The changes to everyday life captioned here, therefore, were still new and at times exciting.

4.1.6 Lockdown and quarantine

The most frequent COVID-19 theme in our sample was ‘quarantine’ (13% of COVID-19 posts, $n = 85$), followed by ‘lockdown’ (11%, $n = 72$). We combine the two categories because of the incorrect use of the term ‘quarantine:’ None of these individuals were in quarantine at the time of posting but used the word to describe mostly staying home during lockdown which shows how severe the measure seemed: people felt they were quarantined at home. During these days at home, users show their activities using one main narrative: They share many leisure activities, making explicit references to the surplus of free time without any outside stimulation. The COVID-19 trends discussed in 4.1.1 were global phenomena centered around sharing the exact same experience, such as baking sourdough bread. However, Instagram users also created their own shared experience by sharing about individual ways of dealing with the monotony of everyday life. Kimberly, for example, painted a large mural in her home and captured the photograph with the text: “Can you tell I miss travelling? [palm tree emoji] #quarantineprojectnumberfour” (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. #Quarantine project number four



Note. Bringing the outside world into the home (published week 18).

She thus makes multiple references to her current situation: She mentions missing travelling and implies that she does not love staying home all the time. She furthermore calls this mural a quarantine project *number four* showing that she clearly has done other projects during this quarantine already. Therefore, our sample mostly posted about creative ways to spend this unusual time, the theme is a good example of finding the extraordinary in the mundane (see Humphreys, 2018). While not all participants were spending their time with the same activity, by showing “how to spend time at home,” these participants co-created a larger narrative: that of filling one’s time in new ways. Showing how they were dealing with these difficult times allowed individuals to connect with others without interpersonal communication. In this sense, again, they used Instagram according to a logic they had already subscribed to before the pandemic.

Overall, the six COVID-19 themes that appeared most frequently in our sample differ from the dominant images in the media. The images in our sample are more focused on the private realm – as individuals were asked to stay home – and therefore seldom include popular COVID-19 images such as empty public spaces. This finding differs from Leaver and colleagues’ (2020) study on global grieving events where they found that individuals tend to share “an iconic image/scene from ‘the ground’ that captures the essence of the movement, such as a prominent victim or perpetrator photographed in action, or a group of actors performing a powerful gesture (i.e., hands raised in surrender for #OccupyCentral, snaking queues to pay last respects for #PrayForLKY)” (p. 158). However, while not representing “iconic images” from the pandemic and its impact on public life, these images represent recognizable COVID-19 imagery from the private realm. By sharing these types of images, individuals partake in a larger narrative: While being isolated – sometimes alone – at home, using Instagram to share and consume imagery that resembles their own everyday lives, individuals can feel less lonely during this time of crisis. Loneliness is also alleviated by meeting friends in new ways and posting about it on Instagram.

4.1.7 The tonality of the Instagram posts

In addition to the themes, we also coded our sample for the tonality of each post by rating whether it captured something from a negative, neutral, or positive angle. As the analysis of the six COVID-19 themes already showed, our participants shared about the pandemic in mostly positive ways, reflecting previous research on uses and gratifications in social media use (e.g., Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Among all negative posts in our sample, only 43 percent were about the COVID-19 pandemic which means that when participants were voicing negative emotions on Instagram, they did so slightly more often about things that had nothing to do with the ongoing global pandemic. This stands in contrast to previous studies which have found that people tend to react to tragic events with generally negative emotions online (Garcia & Rimé, 2019). When reacting to traumatic experiences on social media, people tend to share feelings such as complaints and anger (Farinosi & Micalizzi, 2016; Han, 2016; Yeo et al., 2020), anxiety and sadness (Yeo et al., 2020) as well as fear (Medford et al., 2020). However, studies focusing on communication during times of crisis have thus far

largely focused on Twitter, while our study was conducted on Instagram, a platform known for its glossy content where individuals frame their everyday moments in the most positive light through beautiful images (Leaver et al., 2020).

This posting habitus of focusing on the positive is reflected in the tonality among COVID-19 posts: Across the entire sample, 49 percent of COVID-19 posts were coded as neutral while 42 percent were positive and 9 percent negative. This relative distribution is also reflected in the median across the 47 participants which was 23 positive posts while the median for negative posts was three. This means that not only is the overall tonality in our sample positive, but also is it true for posts about COVID-19, suggesting a general adherence to a perceived platform-convention where users share the positive moments from their everyday. While this stands in stark contrast to previous research on social media use in traumatic times, our sample in fact also used an emotion-based coping strategy by posting positively on Instagram: By not focusing on the origin of the crisis – the virus – in the six most frequent themes, individuals engage in emotion-focused coping, which

is aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress that is associated with (or cued by) the situation. Although most stressors elicit both types of coping, problem-focused coping tends to predominate when people feel that something constructive can be done, whereas emotion-focused coping tends to predominate when people feel that the stressor is something that must be endured (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). (Carver et al., 1989, p. 267)

Because individuals could not do anything about the cause of the problem, they used Instagram to show how they were dealing with its consequences, making the best of their new everyday realities. They engaged in positive reframing of the situation by focusing on the positive instead of the negative (e.g., celebrating being able to eat breakfast in bed instead of lamenting not being allowed to go to the office) or they conducted self-distraction by sharing positive moments on Instagram (see Carver's coping strategies (1997)). This reflects traditional Instagram posting which is centered around highlighting the positive in the everyday (see Humphreys, 2018).

Using Instagram during this global crisis therefore provided the means to not only archive individuals' personal experiences, but also feel a connection with others. In the following, we discuss the implications of what it means that individuals exhibited a positive engagement with the COVID-19 pandemic on Instagram. By contextualizing our results, connecting it to the literature and illustrating it with our findings from the interviews, we show overarching themes in our limited data set which explain what the posts about changes to individuals' daily lives – framed positively – were supposed to achieve.

4.2 Why individuals used Instagram during the beginning of the pandemic

In the following two subchapters, we present the results from the interviews, connecting them to the participants' Instagram posts, answering our question why individuals used Instagram during this time and why they did so in their very specific manners. Subchapter 4.2.1 discusses the choice between Feed and Story posts, followed by Subchapter 4.2.2 in which we elaborate on different motiva-

tions for and benefits from using the platform actively and passively. We close this section with Subchapter 4.2.3 where we discuss the importance of and reasons for keeping the personal Instagram environment positive.

4.2.1 Platform affordances: Feed and Story posts

Focusing our interviews on the question *why* our participants posted during the COVID-19 pandemic on Instagram, we found that they had different motivations to post on their Feeds or Stories, especially concerning their tendency to publish positive posts. These motivations are directly tied to the different affordances as well as the conventions associated with the two modalities in which one can post on Instagram. In the following, we elaborate on the reasons why individuals posted to the Feed and the Story.

4.2.1.1 The Feed: Archiving through symbolic and positive COVID-19 posts

Interviewees mentioned that their Feed posts were supposed to be positive representations of their personal “Corona times:” Feed posts are shared less frequently and are considered more encompassing of an event or time: While Alec said his Feed-posts are like “summaries” of an event, Daniel said: “most things I post to my feed are things like ‘this image represents my trip to Gstaad to this artwork,’ ‘this is my road trip through the US.’” The focus on visualizing the COVID-19 pandemic as a “summary event” explains the reliance on the six COVID-19 themes we found which are also themes used in popular media to talk about the pandemic and represent visual changes in our everyday lives that are intrinsically connected to the virus. This means that the six themes work as recognizable signposts of the “COVID-19 times” in people’s private realms. It also explains why our sample consist of significantly more Story posts (2,258) than Feed posts (440).

As mentioned above, the pandemic was surprisingly archived in a positive manner. In fact, archival Feed posts were even more positive in our sample than ephemeral Story posts: In our sample, 22 percent ($n = 502$) of all Story posts and 41 percent ($n = 184$) of Feed posts during this time were coded as positive. This reflects an overall more positive mood on participants’ Feeds and even when only looking at posts about COVID-19, we find such a difference in mood. Namely, 21 percent ($n = 109$) were positive on the Stories compared to 37 percent ($n = 68$) of Feed posts. The stronger level of positivity on the Feed can be explained by two factors: Individuals’ desire to archive the positive aspects of their lives (even in times of crisis) and their demands for the aesthetics of their own Instagram feeds.

This ties into what Jacobsen and Beer termed “quantified nostalgia” in that the aim of the ideal-type social media memory is aimed at evoking such feelings [of nostalgia] in the recipient. As such, the quantification of nostalgia is part of the predictive frameworks of social media in which content is measured so that it can be targeted in ways that generate the maximum engagement, as is fitting with the logic of a social media platform. (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021, p. 2)

Therefore, posting about COVID-19 on the Feed, where individuals intend to archive an entire experience, seems to be more positive in our sample than in the Stories because users wanted to remind their future selves and others of the positive aspects of these times, keeping with their impression of the type of content that is popular and expected on Instagram: both, for their own future consumption as well as catering to the expectations of their audiences (reminiscent of the use of traditional diaries (see Humphreys, 2018)).

Furthermore, Feed posts are subject to stricter aesthetic demands. Even when he encountered typical COVID-19 situations, Daniel says: “I never would have posted a line of people in front of Migros [Swiss grocery store], just for aesthetic reasons.” This is despite the fact that he indeed took those photographs for, as he says, his personal archive of the pandemic times. This also became clear in many other interviews where participants stressed the importance of appealing Feed posts. Leandra says that what she posts to a Story can be “‘ugly’ but not ‘ugly, ugly, ugly,’ but here I care less about the quality because it disappears anyway.” There is also a demand for beauty on the Feed as a whole: While Emily says that each post must “aesthetically look good with the rest of [her] Instagram Feed,” Kyle mentions his “Instagram vibe” and says that each post must make sense visually with the rest. The implicit requirements – for this sample – of what belongs on an Instagram Feed are therefore so strong that they are still adhered to during a global pandemic: Feed posts are considered a visually appealing representation of an experience, while Story posts can be sillier and must meet fewer aesthetic requirements (see Leaver et al., 2020, p. 16). In consequence, the posts which are used to archive the COVID-19 pandemic, for this sample, tend to be more beautiful and positive than the Stories used in the moment to connect to followers.

4.2.1.2 The Story: Sharing personal moments to connect with others

While previous research has shown that connection is not one of the main motivations for sharing on Instagram (e.g., Serafinelli, 2017), our sample indeed used Instagram in this time of social isolation to connect with others. However, this was not necessarily done through one-to-one conversations but more by partaking in larger narratives, reminiscent of what Rodgers and Moore call social media’s quality of a “piazza, street or social club:” A space where individuals are leading parts of their lives in full view of others within the space (Rodgers & Moore, 2020). Photographs shared in this way are increasingly used for “live communication instead of for storing moments of life for later recall” (van Dijck, 2007, p. 99). In this sense, the quickly updated Story posts reflected the experience of living one’s life in the open, being in contact with others’ experiences without explicitly discussing them together. Domenica mentioned that, by looking at others’ posts, “loneliness and hopelessness were able to be mitigated through this feeling of togetherness.”

Participation in larger narratives appeared on some profiles through “COVID-19 trends,” as discussed earlier. However, even when participants were not partaking in official COVID-19 Instagram trends, the prevalence of the six COVID-19 themes

across our sample shows that individuals were using Instagram to be part of a larger narrative. Posting about certain activities on Instagram gave individuals a feeling of belonging. Nathalie, for example, who posted several images of challah she baked (see Figure 9 for one example) said:

One thing I noticed about myself: The whole banana-bread topic. So, everybody is showing what they just baked. I am normally not the person who shows, or I don't take pictures of things I want to brag with or what I made in the kitchen... And now I posted things I baked at home. And, I can't really tell you why. But it's sort of contagious and then you see that the others made a beautiful spelt challah and then maybe you also tag that person and then it's a little connection, to an extent.

Nathalie would normally never have shared a picture of challah on Instagram. But now that she was home alone, she saw it as a way to connect with the “outside world” – that was also at home baking – and, thusly, to be part of something bigger.

Figure 9. “Sunday is challah-day. Today: spelt. Recipe: @mrsflury”



Note. One of Nathalie’s Instagram posts about the challah she was baking during lockdown (published week 16).

However, individuals did not only post about recognizable COVID-19 imagery to feel connected to others, but they did also do so through *positive* narratives. Debi elaborates on this phenomenon, saying: “It was generally important to me to make this time as pleasant as possible and to show that to my friends as well: That means to stay in touch with friends more and to be more grateful about the small things.” In the following sections we elaborate more on participants’ motivations to create and maintain this positivity bias on Instagram.

Through their posts on both Feed and Story, our participants therefore exhibited a practice of making their new everyday lives mean something (see Hall, 1982). While the pandemic was a traumatic global event which most often took place outside the homes to which our participants were confined, they used photography and Instagram sharing as a method to give a *personal* perspective on an event (van Dijk, 2008, p. 59): By focusing on the changes in their immediate surroundings, our participants showed their followers how they were coping with the situation.

4.2.2 Active and passive use: Creating and seeking a positive environment

Drawing on the theory of uses and gratifications, individuals' engagement with media can differ with regard to its intensity (e.g., Dolan et al., 2016). For our sample, the interviews revealed that participants' Instagram use ranged from passively scrolling through content to actively creating content. Both active and passive Instagram use served to seek positivity in times of crisis, as we elaborate in the following two subchapters.

4.2.2.1 Active use

The COVID-19 themes, which were used to show one's personal perspective on these drastically different new times, were overwhelmingly framed in a positive manner within our sample. What individuals mainly shared from their personal experience of the beginning of the pandemic was not their frustrations or fears but rather how they were making the best of this new situation, as the overall tone was largely positive. This, again, reflects the potential of social media to give one's personal perspective on an event (van Dijk, 2008, p. 59). Using photography during this time of crisis, individuals were trying to make sense of the present (Sontag, 2008), and therefore focused on the positive during a time of crisis where they were unable to change anything about the overall threat – the virus – itself.

Considering Instagram's reliance on the visual and noting that previous research has found that social media posts focusing on the visual are ideal for self-promoting (Baym, 2011; Cover, 2012; Hu et al., 2014; Humphreys, 2018; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Pearce & Moscardo, 2015), it follows that users would show their everyday life in a positive light. This still seems to be true during a global pandemic: Even in traumatic times, the individuals in our sample showcased how they were making the best of this situation and chose images that were visually unusual or appealing, reflecting the coping strategies of self-distraction and positive reframing (Carver, 1997). This can be seen in a Story by Leandra whom we asked if she felt what she shared during lockdown was different from what she usually shares. She first replied that moving to her first own apartment right before the lockdown probably was the reason why she posted more content from her home. But when she started talking about sharing a video of herself redoing her balcony-floor, she suddenly said:

You know what? I might not have shared this if there had been something more exciting to do. I mean, a video about changing the floor on a balcony is endlessly sad [himmelstaurig] and I probably never would have posted it, if it hadn't been lockdown, that's true. And because we had nothing else to post, I shared the video of me changing the floor on my balcony.

Instances like these show that because users think of Instagram as the platform to share one's memorable moments in life, one's "highlight reel," (Wiederhold, 2018, p. 215) they look for share-worthy moments in the everyday, even when that everyday has been reduced to the most mundane, once again harkening back to the use of traditional diaries which were used to record the extraordinary in the everyday (see Humphreys, 2018).

It is not just that our sample largely *happened* to post about their lives during the beginning stages of the pandemic in a positive manner, but they explicitly looked for positive experiences to share, as their motivation for active platform use included sharing *positive* experiences.

Figure 10. Focusing on the positive



Note. Focusing on the positive while being forced to work from home (published week 12).

As Serafinelli and Villi discussed, Instagram's focus on the visually appealing can lead users to look more explicitly for the beautiful in their everyday lives (Serafinelli & Villi, 2017, p. 179). Our study suggests that this positivity bias is not restricted to visually appealing content but extends to generally "positive" content. Turning to Instagram to share such moments can be read as a form of distraction. This was done in our sample by distracting oneself from the grim and monotone nature of the weeks (see Carver's (1997) coping strategy of self-distraction), or by actually looking for the positive within these changed everyday routines (see Carver's (1997) coping strategy 'positive reframing'). A participant of our study showcased the latter beautifully, when she posted a picture of her lunch to the feed. Meg Zeng captioned it as follows: "I should stop complaining about working from home. At least I still get paid and still have work to do. Plus, I can now prepare proper healthy (ignore

that piece of spam) lunch for myself.” In this post, she therefore shows that the situation is less than ideal, but that it also includes positive changes to her life, which she then shares on Instagram. Lastly, looking for positive ways to represent one’s personal experience of the beginning stages of COVID-19 also corresponds to the motivation to use Instagram to create a positive image of the self. This is tied to the habitus of Instagram posting that many of our users had established: If they regularly posted about the fun aspects of their lives before the pandemic, they were now missing this outlet, the opportunity to showcase and thereby to an extent mold their life in an enhanced manner. Valeria, for example, mentioned that she did not post less during this time but that now, she posted more Stories than before.

Betty, however, mentioned that, while these types of posts inspired them at first, they quickly started feeling oppressive. They specifically mentioned Instagram users posting about working out at home and how that created an environment of pressured productivity for her, which she called “forced optimism.” Betty mentioned that while they have always gone through phases when witnessing others’ optimized versions of their lives on Instagram annoy them, during these times, Betty felt more strongly annoyed when everyone seemed to show how to get even more out of this time. Referring to one of the COVID-19 Instagram trends that helped others feel a connection, Betty said: “That was one of those things where I thought ‘if one more person posts about a Dalgona coffee, I’m going to lose it!’” Therefore, by attempting to represent oneself in a positive light on Instagram, individuals sometimes created a stressful online environment for their peers.

4.2.2.2 Passive use

Betty, who was just quoted above, mentioned that they had gotten annoyed while looking at others’ Instagram profiles during the beginning stages of the pandemic because the overwhelming positivity applied to all aspects of these new realities was too much for them. The majority of our sample, in contrast, described their passive use of the platform as thoroughly positive. They also justify their motivation to look at content on Instagram as being motivated by wanting to enjoy others’ content. This motivation stands in contrast to another popular motivation for social media use which is peer-to-peer surveillance (Helsper & Whitty, 2010): an activity that was prevalent particularly during the lockdowns when some people would look out their windows to see who was not abiding by the protocols. In our sample, however, we did not hear from individuals who looked for others’ rule breaking. Instead, they used Instagram to find positive imagery and stories from the daily lives of others. Domenica, for example, wrote: “It was really nice to see when friends posted positive things. That way, you knew that they were doing well,” reiterating the desire to see positive moments from friends’ lives. Annick similarly said: “For me, Instagram changed during this time insofar as I was able to partake in even more aspects of the everyday lives of my friends. Suddenly, there was a much higher desire to share one’s activities and show them.”

Considering that lurking is one of the primary uses of Instagram (Lee et al., 2015), it is not surprising that this type of activity continued during the pandemic.

Research has shown that individuals who are less involved with others in their offline lives tend to be more likely to go online to fulfill their social needs (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). And while Instagram might not be considered the number one platform for social interaction, previous research has in fact found that using image-based social networking sites can have a positive effect on alleviating loneliness because they offer an “enhanced intimacy” compared to text-based social media (Pittman & Reich, 2016), which seems to be true for our sample. As Sophie said, she used Instagram passively to “feel less alone.” Seeing that everyone was going through the same thing and also seeing how everyone was coping in fact had a self-proclaimed positive effect on our participants in their passive Instagram use: It created a feeling of a common, largely positive, experience, reflecting previous findings on social media use in traumatic times (e.g., Schmalz et al., 2015).

Interestingly, in our sample, the search for information about friends and their well-being was frequent while the search for actual information about the pandemic or specific measures were never mentioned, reflecting only one type of information search on social media, which is traditionally not studied (most frequently, when speaking of “information search” on social media, scholars speak about accessing the news, for example (Mastley, 2017)). Furthermore, among our interviewees, only Jenny – a journalist – mentioned that she shared information about the pandemic on her Instagram profile. Both passive and active use therefore reflect an implicit assumption by our sample that this is not the platform for information about the pandemic. As Fiona said: “I avoid factual pages and keep to pages which are funny or share artistic content,” reiterating the desire for self-distraction through Instagram use during traumatic times (see Carver et al. 1997).

4.2.2.3 The positive environment: Thinking about others

The positive nature of the majority of the posts in our sample appears to not only be owed to platform conventions but also to a conscious effort by users to keep the platform a positive experience during the pandemic for themselves as well as their audience. Our participants not only posted to portray themselves during these extraordinary – and at times dark – times in a positive light, reflecting findings from previous studies on motivations for Instagram use (see Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). They also did so because finding positive moments and sharing about them was deemed an enjoyable activity during this time.

Additionally, however, certain users in fact altered their own Instagram behavior out of a concern for how their posts might affect others’ wellbeing, a concern that was warranted, as our conversations with Daniel showed. He mentioned that he blocked several Instagram profiles because he did not want to see his friends behaving carelessly. Daniel proactively blocked a friend because he knew he would become angry with him, straining their friendship, because the friend was “taking it not so seriously.” Seeing others who ignored the common guidelines for containing the virus could therefore create anxiety, even if the witnessing occurred through Instagram. Daniel took advantage of the Instagram affordance

allowing him to block those accounts which were detrimental for his mental health. However, several of our participants, Daniel included, in fact changed their own posting behavior to avoid such negative impacts on their audiences. Daniel elaborated on his own Instagram posting behavior, saying:

I tried to take pictures here from Zurich from my neighborhood that one might not expect. But it was still supposed to be clear that I am still in Zurich because I also didn't want for people to think I'm getting around a lot. Because I didn't like seeing that on other profiles either. When others went hiking. Went hiking and posted about it.

Similarly, Betty told us that they did not post images of a special celebration because they had friends over for dinner at a time when there was a limit on the number of people who were allowed to gather in private settings. And Jake said he did not post a lot, among other reasons, because: "I was like, oh, am I not actually allowed to meet like, three or four friends? And can I then post a cool picture or is it careless to post such a picture now?" These statements are particularly interesting because meeting other people was technically allowed at this time, meaning that individuals were so concerned about the feelings of others that they did not even post about activities that were legal albeit in a moral grey area.

While some individuals in our sample purposely did not post certain moments from their lives to spare others from experiencing anxiety, some thought about their posting behavior in the context of the larger pandemic. Emily said:

I decided a lot of times when I would want to share something. I held back because I felt guilty about showing that I was actually enjoying my time in quarantine while people were dying of COVID-19. I felt really guilty about leaving a permanent mark if it was too extra, you know. ... I guess maybe I was trying to save others from feeling green with envy or like, wishing that they could have the life that I was living. So, I was just being maybe a bit overly conscious, and my awareness was heightened for how people would perceive our life at this time.

Going a step further, Annick wrote: "I was torn again and again, about what and how much I should/can post. I repeatedly thought to myself: 'Come on, your crap isn't that important. We see images of dying people, nobody cares about your colored Easter eggs'." She makes explicit that much of her posts on Instagram were "silly" and that they paled in comparison to the tragedy of the pandemic. She later added: "I was generally more scared to be condemned or judged than before." Therefore, our interviews showed that a lot of thought went into many of the Instagram posts in our sample. What is surprising about this finding is that the careful selection of moments to post was not purely guided by portraying oneself in the best light but also by considering the potential audience's feelings. In this sense, our sample appears to have been careful in keeping their Instagram space positive for everyone and they saw that responsibility as their own. This Instagram behavior therefore reflects the general mood during the beginning stages of the pandemic which was often described as one of solidarity, of taking care of one another (e.g., Börner, 2021).

5. Limitations

Before concluding, we want to address some of the limitations of this study which mostly come from its limited sample, garnered through snowball sampling on one social media platform at a highly specific point in time. This study answered the specific question how a small sample of 47 Instagram users utilized the platform during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are specific to our sample and the time and platform and should therefore not be generalized to social media behavior during the pandemic.

While this study suggests the tendency for a positive type of Instagram use, it does by no means want to make light of serious negative (mental) health consequences that have been shown to come from (specific types of) social media use. Among them are studies showing an association between social media use and depression in young adults (e.g., Aalbers et al., 2019; Keles et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2016) or the association of Instagram use and body dysmorphia in adolescents (e.g., Chatzopoulou et al., 2020; Couture Bue, 2020; Verrastro et al., 2020). One possible explanation for our findings might lie in the relatively privileged status of our sample, particularly in regards to the global pandemic (see Chapter 3.1 for details). Another potential – partial – explanation can be found in the median age of the sample: As other research has shown, adult social media users (who have also not grown up with social media and therefore started use at a different developmental stage) tend to draw positive consequences from their SNS use (Schmalz et al., 2015). However, since the aim of this study was not to study media use effects, we cannot speculate on the (long-term) effects of the largely positive Instagram landscape, which our sample represents.

Lastly, the conventions on Instagram might have changed after the completion of the present study: In May 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement swept across the globe and individuals used their social media profiles to participate in political discussion and awareness-raising. We saw an increase in posts with political content in our sample and some interviewees even talked about how their Instagram behavior changed during this time, becoming more political and critical, despite explicitly being asked about COVID-19 and not the Black Lives Matter movement. This could mean that Instagram has gone through some changes, particularly considering its platform conventions (what users think the platform is for): Instagram has, for example, turned more into a platform on which individuals also share and look for information. Instagram is now seen more as a platform to voice political opinions, draw attention to inequalities, and calling out misbehavior, potentially softening its positivity bias.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study adds to the literature of uses and gratifications of Instagram by showing *what* users posted on Instagram during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (the six COVID-19 themes and the tonality of the posts) and *why* they logged onto the platform in the first place (to archive and connect with others through positive posts and passive use, and for creating a positive space).

Studying individuals' Instagram posts during a unique time and combining those insights with the users' self-proclaimed motivations for platform use and their thoughts behind their specific posts allowed us to draw an in-depth picture of the experiences of a limited sample of people experiencing the beginning stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. By combining our analysis of the artefacts created with the creators' statements about their motivations and overall experiences of an event beyond the resulting Instagram posts creates a more in-depth picture of the personal experiences surrounding Instagram use. Including individuals' comments about how their Instagram use was part of their overall experience is crucial when we understand media as practice, acknowledging that active media use alone is not the only manner in which media can impact our experiences (see Couldry, 2004). By studying individuals' practices which not only directly but also indirectly focus on media, we were able to understand how, for this specific sample, Instagram was used during this extraordinary time and which benefits individuals felt they gained from their use. This included, for example, statements about the general comfort gained from knowing that, through Instagram, one could see if friends were doing well even in moments when one did not use the app to check in on them. As our findings have shown, only looking at the artefacts would fall short of gaining insights into the lived, embedded experiences of these individuals and, particularly, individuals' perspectives on their own practices. When looking at our findings, what is probably most surprising is that both Instagram posts as well as most individuals' experiences on and with the platform were overwhelmingly positive during this time of crisis. This might be explained by three factors: The nature of the crisis, platform conventions, and thinking about others.

First, the nature of the crisis likely impacted our sample's Instagram behavior: There is no clear culpable person or group responsible for the virus, toward whom one could direct one's anger or whom one could call on to eradicate the issue. This is why individuals turned to Instagram to mainly employ or show offline coping strategies which are concerned with handling the situation in a positive manner, rather than trying to change the situation or its cause (see Carver, 1997).

Second, platform conventions might explain a relatively low number of negative posts. While most previous studies of emotional responses to traumatic events have been conducted on Twitter (e.g., Eriksson, 2016; Garcia & Rimé, 2019; Medford et al., 2020), a platform popular for voicing (political) opinions, Instagram is popular for showcasing one's "best life." This positivity bias (see Humphreys, 2018, p. 18) inherent in the platform's conventions might therefore also be reflected in posts during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that we should refrain from automatically concluding from largely non-negative Instagram posts at this time to claiming that these individuals were indeed only experiencing such positive emotions. The conventions seem to have a strong impact on actual posting behavior and even individual attitudes concerning what the platform is supposed to be for. Betty explains:

For me [Instagram] is a diary, but it is a diary that I share publicly. I do this as privately as I feel ok with, but the fears I sometimes had or the very emotional stuff, the very private stuff, that doesn't happen there, and that

part actually also was an important part of my life [during the first months of COVID-19].

Betty opted into Instagram use for very specific needs. Overall, reflecting previous research (e.g., Alhabash & Ma, 2017, p. 9), our sample seems to perceive Instagram as a place one comes to for entertainment and connecting with others, not necessarily to vent. This is why the use of social photography – snapshots of share-worthy moments (see Jurgenson, 2019) – as a means of connection appears to be strong in this sample. We should therefore refrain from looking at individuals' social media profiles to conclude about full experiences behind a post.

More specifically, the positive manner in which our sample posted about the COVID-19 pandemic revealed underlying Instagram conventions: What individuals think Instagram is for. Our sample used Instagram to archive symbolic images from their private realms during the lockdowns. This means they captured visuals which are recognizable images of the COVID-19 pandemic and which represent a shared experience despite everyone living through the situation in their own private homes. Sharing these images helped to make sense of these traumatic times by focusing on the positive aspects of everyday life. These images were shared in a manner that was still visually appealing and/or unusual, catering to the “visual first” logic of the platform. Those images that were considered to be less aesthetically pleasing were not used to archive the times on participants' Instagram Feeds. Instead they were shared through the Story feature which is seen as a means of communication in the moment and which does not have such high aesthetic standards as Feed posts do. Even through the more communication-focused affordance on the platform, positive content was shared more frequently to create a positive community online. Instagram was not used to vent or complain but to highlight what is going well, even in difficult times.

Third, individuals were not only focusing on the positive to represent themselves in a positive light, archive positive moments, or have conversations around positive topics. Instead, our sample was in fact much more considerate in their posting behavior during a global crisis than might be assumed from previous research on social media behavior, which has shown that active Instagram use is mostly motivated by self-expression needs (e.g., Alhabash & Ma, 2017): centering around the self. In our study, individuals instead thought about others in choosing how to portray their own lives during the onset of COVID-19. Therefore, overall, our study seems to suggest that during the first months of the pandemic in Switzerland and the United States, our sample used Instagram as a creative outlet to share about their own lives by looking for the positive, intent on creating an overall positive environment on the platform. In doing so, they created and experienced a space that was largely positive and felt like “we are all in this together” while everyone was staying home. This feeling of solidarity was frequently mentioned in media-coverage of the first lockdowns and is still referenced when looking back on those beginning days of the pandemic as a unique point in time.

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