

! Time to BeReal. !

Caitlin Migon

BeReal is an app that is often overlooked despite it allowing people to feel comfortable in their skin while participating in selfie-posting. Caitlin Migon shares how genre, activity systems, antecedent knowledge, and P-CHAT terms correlate to self-acceptance and long-lasting friendships, which they learned while taking ENG 101.

What Is BeReal?

On April 14, 2022, my best friend, Blaine, insisted that I download the new and trending app, BeReal. I questioned what it was and how it even worked. Every day, BeReal goes off and gives you two minutes to post a picture. The goal is to post within the two minutes to see what your friends are up to. If you miss the two minutes, you can still post. Not only does BeReal take a picture from the back camera, but it also takes a picture from the front camera as well. You can see the perspective from all angles which allows you to be real. There are features within the app that allow you to react and comment on your friend's post. Every picture taken is viewable until the next day when it goes off again. All posts are saved through the memory feature, which is my all-time favorite feature. It is a calendar that shows your post from each day. It is incredible to believe that I started with just my friend and I on BeReal. Now I have over 50 friends on BeReal, and I love to see what everyone has to share! Seeing my friends' faces every day always brings a smile to my face.

A lot of the new friends I made in my English 101 class happened to have the BeReal app. What was cool about my teacher, Professor Bowman (you're



Figure 1: Professor Bowman taking a picture for BeReal during our ENG 101 class.

awesome!), is that she was also aware of the app and didn't mind us using it from time to time during class. There was a day during class when the two-minute timer went off, I handed my phone to Professor Bowman, and she took our picture with me and my newly found friends in class (Figure 1). We all talked about it and realized that when BeReal goes off in a classroom setting, it can help students connect with each other and build empathy. It encourages everyone to participate and acknowledge that everyone has imperfections and struggles. Your post doesn't always have to be a perfect day at the beach or a skiing trip; it can be a picture of you lying in bed, relaxing on the couch, or even crying after receiving a poor score on a test. It's also a fascinating tool that can be discussed and examined in various ways in an ENG 101 class—which I will get into

in the next section. Additionally, through the app, my classmates and I had an easier time making friends with each other and would be able to keep in touch even when the semester came to an end.

BeReal With Genre and Activity Systems

The idea to write this *Grassroots* article sparked when BeReal went off during my English 101 class earlier this semester. We had recently learned about genres and how often we view them in everyday life. A **genre** is a type of production—such as a movie, a resume, or even a street sign—that can be identified by its **conventions**, or its standard practices, features, and characteristics that make it unique (“Genre Research Terms”). A movie has features different from a Broadway play even though they both include actors and storytelling. A resume is unlike a job application or housing rental agreement because it has specific conventions that set it apart, and street signs have certain practices that people have to follow that distinguish it from traffic lights. I wondered if BeReal was considered a genre because it is definitely unique. It's not quite a messaging app, and it's not like Instagram even though the focus of both is sharing photos with the public.

Social media is definitely a genre and a broad one at that. It's a digital platform for communication across a global scale, which is different from

texting, emailing, talking on the phone, or mailing letters even though all are used as communication between people. As I came to this conclusion about social media as a genre, I understood that BeReal is a category or subgenre of social media. As I said, it's unlike Instagram due to the feature of it taking pictures from the back and front camera. It's also different from Snapchat because you have two minutes to post a photo. It's not similar to TikTok because one of the conventions is that it doesn't include videos. It's certainly not like Facebook or X (Twitter) because a characteristic of BeReal is that it's purely image-based. I personally think BeReal has a practice of promoting empathy, which isn't always the main goal of other social media platforms.

At the same time I was piecing together that BeReal was a genre, I also concluded that it was an activity system—another concept I learned in my ENG 101 class. According to the ISU Writing Program, borrowing from genre studies scholars, **activity systems** are cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal, using designated tools and rules to get there (“Literate Activity Terms”). BeReal is a perfect example of an activity system. The tools everyone uses are their phones and the app. There are guidelines for pictures you are allowed to upload, and the main rule is that everyone has two minutes to post one photo a day. That way, everyone can view what their friends are doing while on the app. I like that it doesn't encourage you to check the app constantly since everyone will be using the app once during the day. Additionally, with each picture you decide to post to the people on your friends list, you interact with others.

In ENG 101, I learned that activity systems are historically developed, meaning that they develop over time and interactively with the culture in which they operate. It wasn't until April 2022 that BeReal became a trending app. Now, many students at Illinois State University have the app downloaded or have at least heard of the app. BeReal updates their app to change for the culture we currently live in. An example of an update they added was the flashback for the year 2022. BeReal constructed a flashback video of the year with music and your personal posts. People were fans of this update and shared their videos on TikTok. It encouraged BeReal to have constant updates to better their app and to please the everyday users.

With all these discoveries about BeReal as a genre and activity system, I knew it was an exciting and layered subject for a *Grassroots* article!

“An **activity system** refers to a group of people or community working toward shared goals over time. When we talk about activity systems, we include the people in the system, the tools people use to accomplish shared goals, the rules surrounding their activity, and how people go about doing work in the system” (“Literate Activity Terms”).

Sometimes I Don't Want to "Say Cheese"

Antecedent knowledge is a term we use to describe all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when they take up any new kind of writing ("Uptake Terms"). For the purposes of BeReal, we can think of antecedent knowledge as what potential users already know about selfies and social media prior to them downloading the BeReal app. For example, people might assume that BeReal has no positive effect because it is considered social media. Many of us have also had experience with taking bad selfies. Some of us have endured our pictures being negatively received from others or at least have seen people's pictures and videos being ridiculed on social media. Social media can be a scary and overwhelming genre. It's easy to become lost in a sea of unknown, faceless feedback. We internalize negativity seen online, and it can be hard to remember what's real—to be real.

I certainly had reservations about joining yet another social media platform and one that required me to show my face in one way or another. This was the prior, antecedent knowledge that I took with me as I downloaded an app I had never interacted with before. I first learned about antecedent knowledge in my 101 class when we discussed that prior knowledge isn't always helpful; it can hold you back, cloud your judgment, or give you false information about new things. I realized that was the case

for me once I started using the BeReal app. My friends were just posting themselves in the moment regardless of what they looked like or their setting. I skimmed BeReal screenshots online and saw candid photos of everyday people in normal surroundings looking ... well ... normal. Michelle Santiago Cortes, a digital culture writer, shares, "the app is authentic, spontaneous, and candid and aims to make people feel good about themselves and their lives and say good-bye to addictive social networks." She continues to share that "it dangles the prospect of a social-media experience that feels fun and airy, that can be small and intimate and doesn't threaten you with your own 'brand'" (Cortes). Whenever I take a BeReal, I don't try to look good and impress; I do it for my own joy. As I scroll through my memories, I look at me smiling and laughing in blurry pictures. Figure 2 is a perfect example of taking a picture in the moment. It is a picture of my friends and me studying at the library for the night. I didn't sit there for a long time



Figure 2: A BeReal photo of my friends and me studying at the library.

trying to get a good picture; it was only for the moment. This allows you to be yourself and feel confident sharing your true self.

P-CHATting About What's Real

In my ENG 101 class, as I was learning about genre, we were also introduced to pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, known as **P-CHAT**. It's a type of research strategy used to examine genres and all their complexities, understand how they work in the world, and discover how people engage with them ("Literate Activity Terms"). There are seven elements in the research strategy known as P-CHAT: distribution, activity, representation, production, ecology, socialization, and reception. When I began to process that BeReal was a subgenre of social media, I figured I could use the P-CHAT elements to explore the platform. For this article, I am going to focus on five of the seven: representation, production, ecology, socialization, and reception.

As a P-CHAT term, **representation** involves how people want others to interpret and understand the texts they create in certain genres ("Literate Activity Terms"). When it comes to BeReal, representation presents itself when people post their pictures, and pictures are a great way to represent meaning and emotion. Users have to plan what their BeReal will be and what it will look like. Individuals have two minutes to post, so there is a bit of time to decide where to take the picture and how they will look. In that regard, BeReal photos are no different from selfies posted on any social media platform. However, the app is called BeReal, and the front and back photo feature encourages people to be themselves, displaying who they are and where they are at the photo alert buzz. It's not about wanting to impress the people viewing your content but to show people your honest state—being *real*. There's a motivation for users to be natural and present, not having fussed over their looks or surroundings. Some users also want to inspire and influence their friends or family on the platform to feel more comfortable in their skin. If photos appear perfect, it might not come across as genuine or true to the platform.

Production deals with how a text or genre is produced ("Literate Activity Terms"). Concerning BeReal, this simply means opening the app on your phone, deciding what type of picture you want, and then taking the picture. One aspect of decision-making for this process is determining who you may want to include in the frame or if you want it to be a solo shot. When I take my BeReal, I like to include all my friends so I can look back using the memory feature of the app and see who I was with that day (Figure 3). The location is another important factor of BeReal production. Where

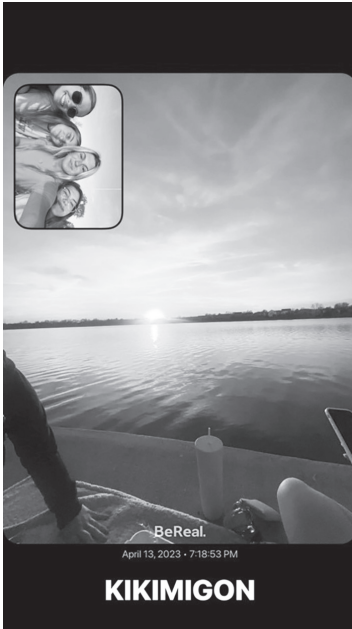


Figure 3: My friends and I taking a BeReal together as we eat outside for a picnic.

you are says a lot about what activities you enjoy or your daily schedule. One day I could be pictured at the mall with my mom, and the next day I could be photographed on a walk around my neighborhood park. I could also be seen in my ENG 101 classroom or in line at Starbucks waiting for my coffee and breakfast sandwich.

Ecology points to all the uncontrollable outside forces—environmental, biological, physical, and social factors—that influence the text or genre someone produces (“Literate Activity Terms”). When it comes to taking pictures, there are many factors that affect BeReal photos. One factor is weather: It could determine if you take an inside or outside photo. If it’s a rainy day, it might deter people from posting outside. On the other hand, people who love the rain or want a diverse collection of photos may go out into the wet weather for a shot. The same goes for snowy weather and hot, sunny days. The condition of a person’s phone is also part of the ecology of BeReal. If my phone battery is super low, I might not

be able to post a photo. Likewise, if I can’t access my phone for quite some time, I will miss out on the alerts and will have gaps of not having taken pictures. Location is another factor not always in people’s control. Not every teacher will be OK with you taking a BeReal during class, and you certainly shouldn’t take one while driving!

Socialization involves how we interact with each other as we engage with a text or genre (“Literate Activity Terms”). If I am with my friends and want to take a BeReal, I ask them if they want to be in it with me. If they do, I then decide if I’m taking the picture or not. I might ask a friend to take the selfie and tell the others to get ready to pose for the back camera. Sometimes I tell my friends to smile or make some sort of silly face as the camera clicks. There’s usually laughter involved. And because of how much pressure society has placed on us all to be perfect all the time, there’s usually the few seconds of fear and horror when someone goes, “But I look bad,” or “My hair is a mess,” or “Ugh, I don’t have makeup on. I don’t look good right now.” It’s these thoughts that BeReal tries to pull users out of. You’re not supposed to look ready for prom night in the photos. You’re just supposed to be yourself in the moment. This is also a conversation that usually happens between me and my friends as a BeReal is taken. We remind each other that what we look like isn’t the point. All these conversations and comments that happen before

and after the picture is taken are a part of socialization, and I believe BeReal is trying to change the socialization of picture taking.

Lastly, **reception** revolves around how texts and genres are perceived and used by others (“Literate Activity Terms”). For BeReal, this means people’s reactions to your pictures. As I mentioned when talking about representation, if photos look filtered or perfect, it can make others believe it’s not genuine or might make them roll their eyes at the poster and find the photo annoying. It could even make people feel badly about themselves because their own shots aren’t perfect. It’s very easy for self-esteem to rise or fall when selfies are concerned. From the conversations I’ve had with friends, we usually compliment each other for our BeReals. There have also been times when my friends and I have subtly teased each other for obviously prepped photos.

BeReal is a very simple app that merely requires a user to post a single photo, yet through P-CHAT, it becomes clear how complex and compelling BeReal is.

What I Can Take Away

I never viewed myself writing about a social media platform in ENG 101, but here I am. I can apply my knowledge about genre, activity systems, antecedent knowledge, and P-CHAT to BeReal. I can confidently say BeReal has taught me to be myself. Never would I have thought I could share pictures of myself on social media without being judged. I no longer feel the need to fix my hair or smile when taking a selfie. I can be my true self and express that to all my friends on the app. I am so grateful to have met such genuine people in my English class and connected with them through the BeReal app. Not only did this create bonds, but it also made us closer to our professor. The feeling of not being judged for simply being ourselves is favored by just about everyone. We all want to live with no filters, no likes, and just be real.

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