Insert Caption That Will Make all Your Followers Like Your Picture Here

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There's a lot more thought that goes into creating captions on social media platforms than one might realize. In this article, Jessi Batterman explores the processes different people go through to create their captions on social media. The platforms she will be looking at are Facebook, Instagram, and VSCO, and she explores how the unique conventions of each platform affect their respective caption-writing processes.

You're scrolling through Instagram and see Jennifer's post from the bonfire last night. It has been perfectly edited; she definitely used filters from VSCO (which stands for Visual Supply Company, a photo editing application that allows you to easily apply filters to an iPhone photo), not the lame and overused filters provided directly from Instagram. Just when you think her post couldn't be any more perfect, you look to the caption and see her extremely clever play on words. Now you're torn on whether you should like it or not (because you're feeling petty and jealous), but the photo and caption are also so perfect. You end up deciding to like her picture and screenshot the post to save her caption for one of the pictures you'll post in the future.

If you're not an Instagram user, my introduction might seem like a completely foreign language, but if you are on Instagram, you probably know exactly what I'm talking about. My friends and I have all spent way too much time stressing over the perfect caption for our carefully edited Instagram photo. With the prevalence that social media has in our lives today, writing captions for our posts is a relatively new **genre** to be explored. According to the ISU Writing Program, one way to describe genres is as

different types of writing that include different **conventions** (or features), which can vary as they move through and across different types of media. For example, the genre I'm focusing on in this article is social media captions, and the specific platforms I want to look at are Facebook, Instagram, and VSCO. The question I want to ask is, what is the process that goes on when creating a social media caption? Since I'm focusing on the *process* of writing a caption on different social media sites, I'm using the ISU Writing Program's version of **cultural-historical activity theory** (**CHAT**) to examine these captions, as CHAT provides us with a framework for understanding all of the different people, objects, activities, and so on that go into the creation of different texts in different genres. I will look at the different genre conventions of each platform and also look at responses from a survey I conducted to better understand the **activity** that goes on while these captions are created. Activity is the practices that happen as a text is created (Walker 76). Each platform's unique conventions make this process different for the three platforms. From my own research, I've come to see Facebook as a platform that helps users keep their friends constantly updated on what's going on in your life in a simple, straightforward way, and captions on Facebook reflect this by being simple and straightforward. Instagram is more of a way to entertain your followers and show off the best parts of your life, and the captions on Instagram help achieve this. Instagram is a prime example that everything truly does always look better in pictures. VSCO is a platform that isn't as heavily used as the other two, which leads to its users posting more obscure photos with more secretive captions than they normally would on Facebook or Instagram. In fact, according to a 2017 blog post written by Jessica Phillips and published by the Family Online Safety Institute, VSCO is a photo-sharing app that allows users to be more creative with their use of filters, and, because it's a less well-known site, "Teenagers often use it to share their riskier photos."

I also think **ecology** is a major factor that goes into creating a caption. Ecology is defined as "the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing," by Joyce Walker in her article, "Just CHATting" in the first edition of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (76). Basically, ecology is a combination of all the outside forces that affect the creation of writing. Factors of ecology that are part of the caption-writing process on social media could be the people who follow you and who are going to see your post, where you physically are while creating your post, or even the communities you are a part of, which is also connected to the term **socialization**. Joyce Walker describes socialization as how people interact while texts are being distributed, produced, and used (76). Once a caption is distributed through social media platforms, people are able to interact with each other through what is written in those captions.

Trust the Process

The genre of writing captions interests me because it's a newer genre that is basically self-taught. It's not like we're taught how to write social media captions in school, but it is a new writing genre most of us face very often. I do have some experience with caption-writing and have written quite a few myself over time.

Unfortunately, when Facebook was in its prime and everyone was making an account, I was still pretty young, and my mom was still very against social media, so I didn't actually end up making my own account until I got to college and felt like it was necessary. I've never actually posted something on Facebook, though. Based on seeing my friend's posts, I think that, if I were to post something on Facebook, it would be a few pictures from an event, and the caption would be just a simple description of what's going on in the pictures or what event they were taken at. My goal on Facebook would just be to inform my friends about everything going on in my life and all that I'm involved in and doing. You can see an example of what this looks like in Image 1.

My experiences with Instagram are very different. I've been using the platform since I was in seventh grade and feel like I'm pretty much an Instagram expert. I start thinking about the pictures I'm going to take and the captions I'm going to use days and weeks in advance. For example, I'm going to a Jason Aldean concert in three weeks, and I'm already planning which song lyrics I want to use for my caption for the picture I know I'm going to take that night. I tend to use song lyrics for captions very often (as seen in Image 2), and I think it's pretty much required to use the artist's lyrics as a caption for a picture from a concert (as seen in Image 3).

Along with song lyrics, I also love to quote well-known lines from movies. I think this can tell your followers a little bit about yourself and is usually relatable. My favorite movies are *Ferris*

Image 1: Photo on my Facebook with the caption, "Class of 2018!"

Image 2: A photo from my Instagram with the caption from Jason Aldean's lyrics, "Girl you got the beat right, killin' in your Levis."

Image 3: My Instagram post with the caption from Zac Brown Band's lyrics, "Ain't it funny how it's the little things in life that mean the most? #zacbrownband."

Image 4: My post with the caption from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, "Life moves pretty fast, if you don't stop and look around once in a while you could miss it."

Bueller's Day Off and *La La Land*, and you can see examples in Image 4 and Image 5.

Another type of caption I often use is a creative spin on a basic description of the picture or of the event that the picture was taken at. It's almost a joke about what's going on in the picture. You can see some examples of this idea in Images 6 and 7. In Image 6, the picture's caption says, "Still burnt my tongue on the hot chocolate." The caption is playing off the fact that in the picture I'm blowing on the hot chocolate to try to cool it off, but I ended up still burning my tongue. I think using that as a caption is a little more interesting and creative than, "Hot chocolate at Crete Country Christmas!"

Liked by others   and 179

jbdeere22 City of stars, are you shining just for me?

Image 5: My post with the caption,
"City of stars, are you shining just for me?"

Liked by others   and 169

jbdeere22 Still burnt my tongue on the hot chocolate

Image 6: Instagram photo with the caption,
"Still burnt my tongue on the hot chocolate."

My followers already can already tell I'm drinking a hot chocolate or coffee, and they can already see that I'm in Crete based on the picture's location. The caption in Image 7 states, "We don't know the final score, but we do know that Butler definitely lost." I could've just said, "ISU Football Game!" but I personally think that's a little lame. My followers probably already know I go to Illinois State, and, if not, they can see we're at an ISU game based on our t-shirts. When I use the creative spin approach, my followers now know who the other team was, how the game went, and that we probably didn't stay the entire time. I personally think that's a little more interesting.

I personally think the best captions, and hardest to come up with, are puns

Liked by others   and 162

jbdeere22 We don't know the final score, but we do know that Butler definitely lost

Image 7: Instagram photo with the caption,
"We don't know the final score, but we do know that Butler definitely lost."

and clever plays on words. They can get a little cheesy and can sometimes be a bit of a stretch, but they're definitely the kind that would convince me to like a post just for the caption. I've given this type of caption a shot a few times, and you can see my best tries below in Images 8 and 9. For Image 8, I knew I was going to be taking a trip to Nashville and to the Grand Ole Opry, so this caption was planned a few days in advance, and the picture was taken for the caption, but that isn't always the case. The picture in Image 9 was taken at my best friend's graduation party, and we were laying in her bed at 2 a.m. when the party was over googling "Hawaiian puns"; that's when we came up with the caption "LuWOW." So, in this case, the caption was created for the picture.

I also have some experience with writing captions on VSCO. I have been consistently posting on my VSCO for probably about a year and a half. Since VSCO is more photography-based and has a smaller audience, I usually use VSCO to post pictures that aren't "Instagram quality" or that are maybe edited a little heavier with harsher filters. Basically, there is a little more freedom on VSCO, and there isn't as much pressure to have the perfect picture where every part of you looks just right. VSCO is a place where you can be a little more real and vulnerable. The pictures you choose don't have to be the best of the best. The captions I use on VSCO are usually either a quote from someone earlier that day, or a short statement that usually stems more from my personal feelings or emotions instead of humor or entertainment, like on Instagram. You can see examples of some of my VSCO posts and captions below in Images 10 and 11.

Image 8: Instagram photo with the caption, "We had a GRAND OLE time."

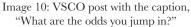Image 9: Instagram photo with the caption, "LuWOW."

Image 10: VSCO post with the caption,
"What are the odds you jump in?"

Image 11: VSCO post with the caption,
"one big clash."

Research, Research, Research

To try to better understand the caption-writing process I had to conduct some research outside of my own antecedent knowledge. First, I looked at other *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* articles from previous editions that had topics that were similar to mine. I studied the vocabulary they used and the formats they set up for their articles. These articles helped guide me in the right direction and helped me create my outline. After studying other articles, I started the research process, which was all primary research. One of my biggest concerns going into this article was my lack of experience and knowledge about Facebook. Even though I wasn't very comfortable with this platform, I knew exactly who I could go to for help: my best friend, Maddie. She's been using Facebook since before we were in middle school and knows all the ins and outs of the platform, and she has definitely watched it change

over time. She helped me understand exactly what people post and the process one goes through to post a picture with a caption on Facebook.

I also conducted a survey about the three different platforms. I asked questions about whether or not the participants use the platforms, if they caption their pictures, and, if they do, how much time they spend on their captions and where the inspiration for their captions come from. I also asked some more specific questions for each of the platforms. I distributed this survey to some of my classmates, and I also tweeted the link on my personal twitter hoping to get responses from some of my friends. The people responding to this survey were mostly, if not all, part of my age group—people who are almost done with high school or people in college. I ended up getting a total of 50 responses, which gave me a broad range of opinions. After gathering all of this research, I felt like I was ready to analyze the caption-writing process for each of the platforms.

Facebook: The Mother of All Social Media Platforms

The first platform I want to explore is Facebook. Like I mentioned earlier, this is the platform I am least familiar with, so I decided to interview my best friend about this platform. First, I asked her about the posting process: what does it involve? She explained to me that to post something you click on "what's on your mind?" so the goal of posts on Facebook is to constantly keep your "friends" updated on what's happening in your life. This makes sense because, when asked in the survey, "where do you find inspiration for Facebook captions?" the majority of people who use Facebook and caption their posts chose the response, "basic description of what is going on in the picture." This makes me think that one goal of captions and descriptions for pictures on Facebook is not so much to entertain your friends, but more to inform them about your life and keep them updated about what's going on in your life. Facebook allows your friends to have a deeper look into your life and see more than just the surface level. So, socialization occurs through Facebook posts. When people are updating their friends about their lives on Facebook they are interacting with each other through their posts and captions. That said, Facebook users have the option to post more than just a few pictures on this platform, so when they post just a single picture the caption is simple, and there isn't much thought put into it. Based on my survey, most people don't spend more than just a few minutes on their captions for Facebook posts. That is, if they even choose to caption their pictures on Facebook; a lot of people responded that they often don't even caption their pictures.

Instagram: Where You Show Off Your Best Self

The second platform I want to look at is Instagram. Instagram is personally my favorite platform out of the three and the one I have the most experience with and feel the most knowledgeable about. Instagram is the platform where people want to entertain their followers and try their hardest to show off their best side. Until recently, you were only able to post one photo at a time so you had to carefully choose your favorite to post. You can post more than one at a time now, but only a few. It's also out of the norm to have more than one post per day or for a specific event, so you have to choose the caption for your single post carefully as well. The results from my survey show that most people claim they spend a few seconds or minutes on their captions, but my survey also showed that there are some people who spend hours on their captions or even plan their captions days in advance, which was not the case for Facebook. My survey showed that people use and post on Instagram more than Facebook as well. I think these two factors show that people have made their Instagram pictures and captions more of a priority. A lot of people even admitted that they do some form of research when creating an Instagram caption, whether it's looking up lyrics, making sure a quote is correct, or even just checking spelling. When asked, "where do you find inspiration for Instagram pictures?" on my survey, most people responded that they use puns or a play on words and humor. I think this stems from the fact that people want to entertain their followers on Instagram, helping them gain as many likes as possible. Most people figure that if their followers don't like their post because of the picture, hopefully they will like it because of the post's caption, because they found it relatable, or because it made them laugh. So, socialization is happening on Instagram too. People often interact as their picture and caption are being produced, such as by getting their friend's opinions before they post. People also interact through likes and comments while their posts are being distributed on the platform. There's even an interaction through the caption because the person posting is sharing a little bit about themselves with the audience.

VSCO: The Secretive Social Media Platform

The last platform I want to discuss is VSCO. This platform is unique for many reasons. First, it isn't as popular as the other two platforms. Fewer people use this platform, so there are fewer people you know looking at your posts. In my experience, most of these users are girls, and I've heard a lot of people call VSCO the "girl's bathroom," not only because most of its users are girls, but also because their posts are often full of hidden secrets.

A lot of times you'll see girls posting pictures on VSCO that you'd never see them post on Facebook or Instagram. I think this is because they think they can get away with these riskier posts on VSCO because not as many people will see it, and the people who will see it are mostly other girls their age. There is no Aunt Pam who, without fail, always comments on your posts on VSCO. Along with these risky and obscure posts usually comes a secretive caption. These captions usually have multiple meanings or have a confusing choice of words. I think the goal of these captions on VSCO is to keep other people wondering and desperately wanting to know what they mean. Below in Images 12 and 13 are two perfect examples of this. Both pictures aren't exactly "Instagram quality." In Image 12 you can't see the girls faces, and in Image 13 you can see there's two frozen yogurts, but you don't know for sure whose they are. I think the goal of these VSCO posts is to keep their friends wondering about what's going on, who's in the pictures, or where they are. You can try to guess by the color of the hair or maybe by the keys

Image 12: VSCO post with the caption,
"Oh, it's been a day."

Image 13: VSCO post with the caption,
"Houston, we have a problem."

and lanyards, but you don't know the details for sure. The caption in Image 12 says, in quotes, "Oh, it's been a day," leaving friends wondering, who said that? Why has it been a day? What happened? In Image 13 the caption says, "Houston, we have a problem." This also leaves friends wondering, what's the problem?

Second, VSCO doesn't "keep score" like the other genres do; you are notified if someone follows you, or likes or republishes your post, but it doesn't keep count of these interactions, and they aren't visible to the public. I think this helps take some of the pressure off of creating a perfect caption. Because, even though your caption might get you more likes and republishes, you're the only one who will know, and no one else can see how many total interactions you've gained on a post. If a post does end up being successful and gaining a lot of republishes, sometimes the person who posted it will literally count every individual republish and state that as their caption so everyone will know how well their photo has done.

Third, this genre is much more photography-based than socially-based like the other two. Because this platform is very photography-based, it is more socially acceptable to post more than one picture per day or for a specific event, so you have the opportunity to come up with and use many different captions. I think this means that you don't have to take the captions as seriously. Additionally, a lot of people responded in my survey that they don't even caption pictures on VSCO, and I think this could be because a lot of people might adore a photo but won't republish it simply because of its caption. This idea was supported by my survey results too. The socialization that goes on through VSCO is unique. The interaction is different because there isn't any direct communication except through the photo's caption, which, as I noted, can sometimes be vague or confusing. Additionally, VSCO captions are usually more emotional and show a little about how you're feeling, so other users don't necessarily want to repost your emotional caption. Because of that, though, someone republishing your photo can be a major compliment because then your photo with your caption appears on their page and their feed.

Final Thoughts

Social media captions are a unique genre that may not seem very important, but that is actually prevalent in the lives of many of us. The caption-writing process becomes different as it's used on different platforms, and everyone has their own unique process for writing captions and their own unique style of caption writing. The answers to my survey reflect this because there was

a wide range of responses for almost all the questions asked. So, next time you're scrolling through Facebook and see Jennifer's update, her perfectly edited photo, or her "punny" caption on Instagram, or maybe even her obscure photo and secretive caption on VSCO, hopefully you will appreciate the process she went through to create her captions on these platforms.

Works Cited

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