

Emotionally Authentic Narrative

Elizabeth Calero

What place does emotional authenticity have in shaping digital narratives in the face of finstas and paid social media influencers? In this article, Elizabeth Calero analyzes her Instagram feed through a CHAT lens in order to understand what role her emotions play in creating her own authentic digital narrative.

Breaking Down the Genre

Starting this article has been a little bit like falling down the rabbit hole. My research initiated from the article “Settling in to Genre: The Social Action of Emotion in Shaping Genres” by Faith Kurtyka, which explores how emotion affects the uptake of a writer in new, unfamiliar genres. In the article, Kurtyka works with a student, Jocelyn, who is attempting to operate within the unfamiliar genre of a sorority recruitment video. Jocelyn finds some of the conventions of typical sorority videos inauthentic and wants to create a video that is an emotionally authentic representation of her organization. This article pushed me to wonder how emotion informs my own literate activities. I chose to explore this question within a genre I use frequently, the social media platform known as Instagram. Similar to Jocelyn, I wanted to examine how I resist genre conventions I disagree with, therefore remaking the genre, but also identify the areas where that resistance fails, and, in turn, I am remade by the genre itself. Here, **genre conventions** refer to general rules or expectations a reader may have of a text within a specific genre. In order to do this, I needed to identify the common genre conventions of

Instagram posts, see which conventions I disagreed with, and then analyze my own feed to see if my resistance was successful. The problem with this is the vast diversity of Instagram posts available. There are so many subgenres under the Instagram umbrella that I had difficulty identifying common conventions used in all posts. Even within the subgenres, conventions tend to vary from post to post. A simplistic formatting conventions list for a post might be as follows:

- Header with author's profile picture and Instagram handle
- Photo/video itself located beneath header
- Social interaction options below photo
 - Heart = like
 - Message bubble = comment
 - Paper airplane = send post
 - Bookmark = save post
- Optional caption space below photo/video
 - Caption tagged by Author's handle
 - Caption can feature text, emojis, and/or hashtags
- Comments of Author's followers beneath caption

Pulling out the format conventions of a post itself are easy; Instagram uses a template for posts limiting creative freedom to the content of the post itself and the caption used to describe the post. It is difficult to try to identify trends within the types of posts. Take the generic subgenre of selfie posts, for example. While the category of selfie guarantees a photo (or video) of a single person, usually a portrait of that person's face, there is no wide-ranging regulation as to how these selfies are created. There is no typical selfie post. There may be a trend for a specific user—for example, there may be a user who takes a selfie in the same exact pose every post or always uses a song lyric as a caption. But while that may be characteristic for that user, to me it is not a convention of the subgenre since another user may engage with that subgenre in an entirely different way. This overwhelming diversity of posts pushed me to focus instead on the trends I could spot within my personal feed and how they communicated, or were influenced by, my emotions. I decided to apply a **CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory)** lens to my posts to better understand the emotions behind the production of my posts and my audience's response to them.

The Data

My profile features a total of 1,645 posts since its creation in September 2011 and is available to an audience of 198 followers. My account is set to private, my audience limited to approved followers with whom I have an actual acquaintance. I decided to limit my study to a specific time period within my feed, since 1,645 posts is an overwhelming amount of data to get through. For the sake of tracing an emotional journey through my literate activity, I settled on analyzing posts from the public announcement of my acceptance to the ISU English Graduate Program on April 14, 2017 to a recent outing with friends on October 7, 2017. Over the past 176 days I have posted 174 times, featuring 163 photo posts and thirteen video posts. In order to analyze my posting trends, I created six categories, or subgenres, that my posts could be categorized under that I also found existed in the more public Instagram realm. The subgenres are as follows: Selfies, Landscapes, Food, Pets, Other People, and Miscellaneous. Selfies have been previously explained as just pictures of lil' ol' me. Landscapes are typically photos of natural landscapes but also feature some indoor locations. Food is any photo that features only food and no human subjects. Pets is a category created in order to honor my obsession with my dog, Dory. Other People is a category that includes photos or videos featuring just other people or myself with other people. Lastly, miscellaneous is for anything I couldn't fit in the previous categories, including birthday dedication posts, memes, and photos of random objects. Out of the 174 posts, fourteen fell under the category of Selfies, sixty-eight under Landscapes, eighteen under Food, seventeen under Pets, and Other People and Miscellaneous each had twenty-two. Figure 1 below features the category and percentage breakdown of my findings.

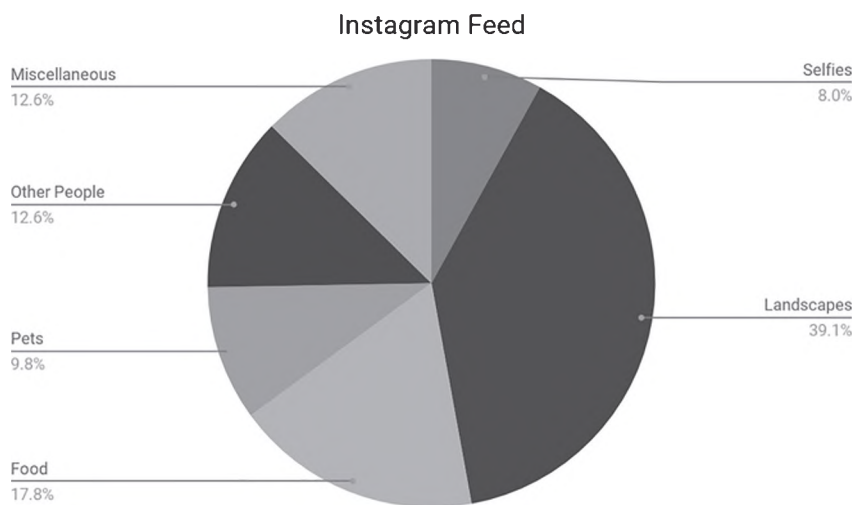


Figure 1: Percentages of each category of posts.

I also wanted to look at my audience’s interaction with what I deemed “High Emotion Posts.” These were posts that I had created in a time of high emotion relative to the rest of my feed as a whole. For example, the first post in this range of study was a High Emotion Post. What we’ll call “ISU Announcement” was for me a celebration of the months of hard work I had put towards my applications and of the exciting future I was envisioning. This post received seventeen likes and three comments, which for my feed is a fairly high number. Out of the 176 posts, I identified nine posts as High Emotion and have provided the audience response and category they belong to in Figure 2.

High-Emotion Post	Category	Likes	Comments
ISU Announcement	Miscellaneous	17	3
Getting a Car	Miscellaneous	9	1
Family Reunion	Landscape	6	0
Difficult Days Ahead	Selfie	6	0
Last Day of Work	Miscellaneous	6	0
The Last Sunrise	Landscape	5	0
Mom & Moving Day	Miscellaneous	7	0
Orientation Complete	Miscellaneous	13	0
How to Student	Miscellaneous	16	3

Figure 2: Category and audience response of high-emotion posts.

Translating Emotion into Posts

After analyzing my feed, I began to wonder if I could identify any specific emotion that was fueling the representation behind my individual posts. **Representation** is one of the ISU CHAT terms that for me means the conceptualization or brainstorming behind the production of a text. In other words, it asks questions like, “What do I want this post to say and how do I want to say it?” It can even ask, “What is the goal of my text?” Now a word about the style of my feed and my posting habits in general: I like to think I have a sort of minimalist posting style. To me this means I try not to alter the original photos with additional filters, and my captions are usually a short few words (only twelve out of the 174 are more than one sentence), letting the photos speak for themselves. I also am quick to post after actually taking a photo. I rarely allow twenty-four hours to go by before the photo is shared on my feed. This is important to note because it means the emotion I felt at

the time of the capture is a relevant motivating force in the representation of my posts.

After reviewing the categories of my feed, I realized that I was motivated to create in each category when I was experiencing a specific emotional range and that my goal was usually to convey this emotion to my followers. Selfies, for example, were primarily born out of a moment of physical confidence. I posted a selfie at times when I felt like I looked good (which feels like a very vain statement to make). I wanted to share or communicate this feeling with my audience through a smiling face and a caption that typically comments on my appearance in a positive way. While I felt this confidence and wanted to share it, I also felt a sort of hesitation in making such an assertion, which is evident in a lot of the captions accompanying my selfies. For example, one selfie caption reads, “This is the nicest I’ll look all weekend,” and another says, “Orientation time is upon us (which means I have to officially try at work).” While the selfies acknowledge that I feel confident in my appearance, through limiting the post to the subject of my face and using phrases like, “nicest I’ll look” and “officially trying,” my captions, born out of a self-conscious hesitation, also attempt to reassure my audience that this is a rare occurrence.

Landscapes were usually conceived out of a reverence or awe for my surroundings. I was moved by the beauty of my surroundings and sharing that reverence was the goal of my post. I was the most prolific in this category at sixty-eight out of 174 posts. These posts differ from the selfies in that they have fewer descriptive captions. I felt no need to undermine the beauty of my surroundings, or even explicitly state my reverence. Some have no caption at all, some use only nature-themed emojis (suns, clouds, flowers, trees), and others still have only a minimal reference to a time or place (“Saturday,” “Yesterday,” “6 am”). While I feel a deeper emotional attachment to these posts, it seems like I try to let the pictures speak for themselves.

Food seems to be motivated by a feeling of celebration or joy. I love food. It makes me happy, simple as that. Food posts can also be connected to a kind of celebration of companionship. Most



Figure 3: Landscape post.

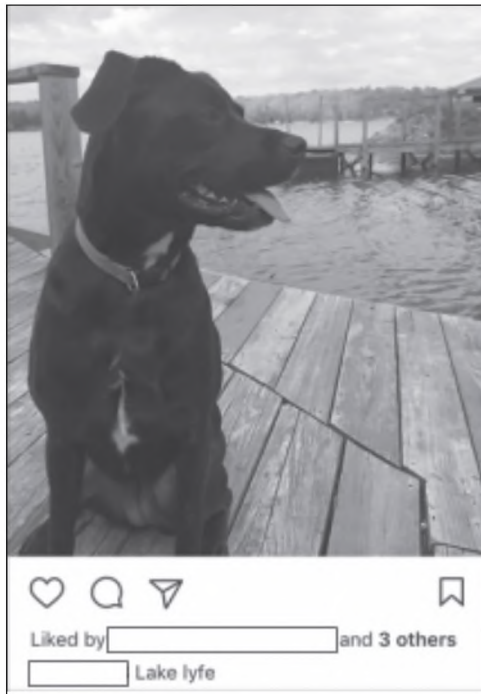


Figure 4: Pet post.

crowns) coupled with phrases and words like, “What a Queen,” “Cutie,” and “Why you so pretty.” Her photos with Nugget are usually set on my Mom’s boat with friendship-related captions like, “Best Friends” or “Boat Buddies.”

Other People posts are created from a love for my family and friends. These posts feature my niece and nephew eleven times, other family members six times, and my friends the remaining five out of twenty-two. It may be more accurate to say that these posts are created from a place of adoration, similar to my Pets posts. They are characterized by a close-up of the photo’s subject paired with captions that try to communicate the adoration or love that I feel. These captions include emojis (hearts, two women dancing, smiley faces, star twinkles) along with words and phrases like, “Bbs,” “Cuties,” “Sibling Love,” and “My favs.”

Miscellaneous is the only category I can’t ascribe a specific emotion to, due to its wide variation in content. There is some of that celebratory adoration in the birthday posts, which feature the longest captions of any of my posts by far since they combine a collage with an actual narrative or very brief letter. There is relief in the post featuring a photo of my English 402 composition notebook with the caption reading, “Day 1 ya’ll. Have survived orientation” accompanied by some festive emojis. My emotional motivations are as abstract as the category itself.

of my food posts are created when I eat food with other people. Eating food and being with people makes me happy enough that I want to share and celebrate that with my followers. The captions reinforce this celebration with words and phrases like, “Out here livin my best life ya’ll” under a close up of a cupcake, “Heaven” under an ice cream sandwich, and “Reasons to come home” under the spread at a family cookout.

Pets is a category that comes from pure adoration. My dog is my best friend, my partner in crime, and the cutest being in existence. She is always the sole subject of my Pets posts, with the occasional exception of her best dog friend, Nugget (who I also adore). Her captions are characterized with frequent emojis (hearts, star twinkles, puppy faces,

Do You Feel Me?

When it comes to **reception**, a CHAT aspect that refers to how my audience reacts to or interacts with my text, I wanted to examine the response to my High-Emotion Posts. I was curious if I could gauge if the intense emotion I felt or expressed in the posts themselves was felt by my audience. Since social media doesn't allow me to observe the silent reactions to my posts, I can only gauge audience response through likes or comments left on the post itself or direct messages to my profile. These responses may require some translation on my part since Instagram limits its social interactions to these likes, comments, or messages. What I mean here is that knowing my audience, when they like a post that may feature a sort of emotional struggle or frustration, they are really communicating solidarity or sympathy instead of an actual "liking" of my pain. I can only say this of my specific audience, since it is limited to a selection of my personal acquaintances, and I like to think they are better than those that would laugh at my pain.

The three High-Emotion Posts with the highest engagement from my audience were "ISU Announcement," "Orientation Complete," and "How to Student." Each of these photos represented a time of high celebration or uncertainty for me in reality. When I review these posts, I can remember my exact feeling, but it doesn't seem that those feelings were necessarily understood by, or stimulated an equal response in, my audience.

"ISU Announcement," which featured a screenshot of my Facebook post about my acceptance to ISU with a caption of "FYI" and an emoji smiley face, was given a total of seventeen likes and three comments from my followers. It was a post created out of joy and excitement at my accomplishment and what it meant for my future. Two of the comments were from the same user, and the first comment did try to match my emotional high with a "yessss" followed by several emoji hearts. This elongated yes, along with the emoji love, can be read in such a way that it matched the celebratory nature of my post. This single word is the best indicator that my emotional representation was received by my audience. The second comment was a simple response to a



Figure 5: ISU Announcement post.



Figure 6: Orientation Complete post.



Figure 7: How to Student post.

question I had asked. The second user to respond did not leave a comment of a celebratory nature, but one of solidarity. They just wanted to let me know they lived in the area and that my move would make hanging out in person much easier.

“Orientation Complete,” which was a photo of a glass of wine set against a backdrop of board games in my apartment with the caption “Orientation complete” and emoji praise hands, gained thirteen likes and no comments. Moving to a new city and interacting with an entire department of new peers was the most daunting aspect of my admittance to graduate school. I was incredibly relieved to have survived the orientation process and looking forward to the opportunity of some social isolation that following weekend. While my followers connected with my success, they were not moved enough to comment.

“How to Student,” which was a photo of my planner on top of the desk of my first class of the semester with the caption “Done teaching my first class, now to pretend I remember how to student” with an emoji, has sixteen likes and three comments from the same user. This post was created out of a moment of intense feelings of inferiority. I had always been comfortable with the idea of teaching—I enjoy being in front of a class—but I was incredibly unsure of my capabilities as a student. The photo itself does not do much to convey this emotion, and the caption downplays my fear with the smile of my emoji. The first comment was a recognition of my achievement—“How cool!”—followed by the question of “What are you teaching?” The other comments were just a continued conversation

about the class I taught. While I may have felt intense inferiority and the representation of my post came from that specific emotion, I don't think I did a great job of conveying it to my audience. This may be why the reception of my post did not directly address the high emotion of my post.

It is also worth noting that none of these posts motivated communication outside the Instagram platform itself. I received no congratulatory texts or phone calls mentioning the posts and no one (besides my mom) reached out to see how my orientation process or first day of class went. My audience communicated through electronic hearts and brief comments and left me to fill in the blanks when it came to connectivity. This may also be a reflection of the level of seriousness given to a social media platform. As the author, I'm the only one who has access to the weight of emotion behind the representation of each post. Without explicitly telling my audience, they have no way to know that this may be my only acknowledgement of the event and accompanying emotions.

These High-Emotion Posts are also not an accurate reflection of reception for all of my subgenres. While these three posts gained a reasonably large number of likes, they were not the most liked posts in the range of my study. I have created Figure 8 below that details the average number of likes and comments for each subgenre.

As you can see, the largest measurable success of reception, in terms of likes, takes place in the Selfie category. Most of my High-Emotion Posts fall into the Miscellaneous category, and only one out of the nine fell under Selfie. While I may be sharing these intensely vulnerable milestones in my narrative,

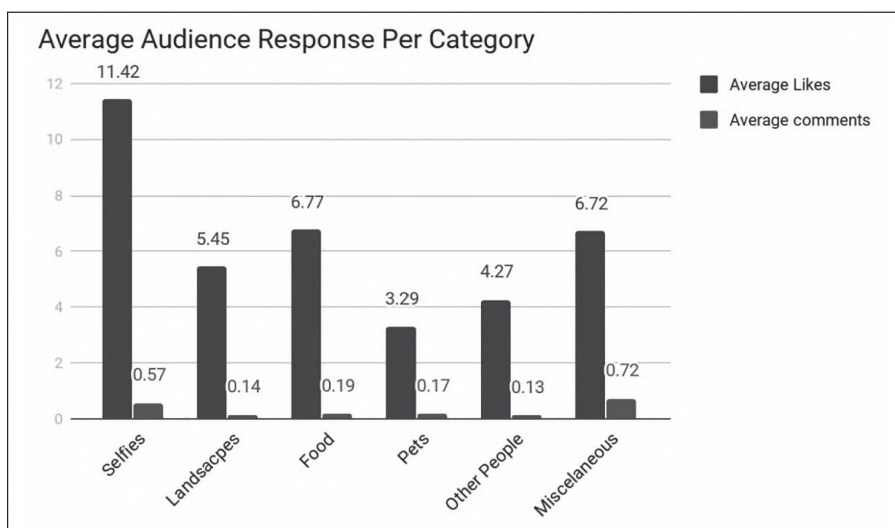


Figure 8: Average audience response per category.

I'm not often using my face to communicate those emotions, even though my audience has repeatedly communicated their appreciation of that style of post.

Authenticity

Looking at these High-Emotion Posts and the narrative they create is the closest I could get to the kind of examination Kurtyka performs in her article. While there are no specific formatting conventions I try to resist in each of my posts, I think that, overall, I try to maintain an authentic narrative. For me, this means a narrative that does not cater to the interests of my audience but, instead, is as true a representation of myself as I can get. Kurtyka says that Jocelyn found “the existing genre to be emotionally inadequate and emotionally inauthentic” (1) in representing her group, which is what motivated her to try to shape the genre of sorority recruitment videos to suit her needs. I think this frustration of negotiating with a potentially emotionally inauthentic genre is an experience we frequently encounter on our social media platforms. In an age of “Instagram models” and paid “social media influencers,” I am often left wondering what lengths an author has gone to in order to produce a post and what incentives exist beyond a desire to share their narrative. I'm an emotional creature, and, as I've discussed at length, a large part of my motivation for my posts is to share the emotional markers of my narrative. For others, their representation may be more focused on satisfying monetary or social engagement needs.

I think the data behind my High-Emotion Posts supports my endeavor to be emotionally authentic. I pulled out three posts with the highest interactions in order to discuss representation, but if you refer back to Figure 2, you'll see that most of the posts that I deemed high-emotion garnered fewer than ten likes. Even the three posts discussed are not the most liked posts in the range of this study. Figure 8 demonstrates that my audience expresses the most enjoyment in the Selfie subgenre. In the creation of my High-Emotion Posts, my representation is born from a much more vulnerable position than my more habitual posts, but is not getting a large response from my followers. Yet, I persist. These moments may not be significant to my audience, but they are moments I find to be significant to my narrative. In fact, there would be almost no coherent narrative without them. Just the titles in Figure 2 almost tell their own story: I found out I was admitted to an amazing graduate program; I purchased my first car so I could survive in a newer, bigger place; I celebrated the summer with my family; I experienced financial instability as the state government fell into chaos; I left my job (where I had worked for about six years); I watched the last sunrise over my parents' house; I moved into my new apartment accepting I would be hours from my family for the first time in my life; I survived a week of new people and new mind-

boggling approaches to writing; and somehow I made it through to my first day of teaching and “studenting.” The journey of leaving my home of about fourteen years and moving to an entirely new place has been a difficult one, full of highs and lows. These highs and lows are featured in the range of my High-Emotion Posts, with all the regular posts filing in the cracks, detailing the steps of the days in between.

Made and Remade

While I strive to make the genre of Instagram posts into an individual, emotionally authentic space, much as Jocelyn did with sorority recruitment videos, I am still remade by the conventions beyond my control. The conventions related to **distribution**, or the CHAT aspect I think of as the means by and purpose for which a text is sent out into the world, are those I am powerless to change to better suit my own purposes. For example, the interpretation I have to perform for my audience response is necessary because the platform limits their response options. If I use Instagram to send out a post, I cannot alter the option to like, comment, or even save my post. My audience cannot choose a “reaction” with a varied emotional range like they can on Facebook; they can only tap the little heart, choose to say actual words, or keep on scrolling. The narrative also no longer belongs to just me once distributed. Once it is available to my followers, they are able to screenshot, save, and redistribute my content as they see fit. They are not allowed to claim the posts as their own, but nothing really stops a user from redistributing a post. Instagram also has the licensing right to use my content however they desire (for free), including giving it to a third party.

It is in this way that I found myself in a position similar to Jocelyn’s. She wanted to produce a text that was a true representation of her organization, but still employed some of the very conventions she wanted to avoid. I am remade by the genre of Instagram posts in small ways, in the loss of some creative freedom with the formatting of my posts and true ownership over the narrative itself, but I am still able to make the genre my own in ways I find satisfying. Despite my audience showing more support for my day-to-day posts, I have continued to use High-Emotion Posts as a tool to keep my narrative as emotionally authentic as I can.

Works Cited

Kurtyka, Faith. “Settling In to Genre: The Social Action of Emotion in Shaping Genres.” *Composition Forum*, no. 31, 2015, compositionforum.com/issue/31/settling-in.php.



Elizabeth Calero is ever the emotional creature trying to survive her first year as a Master's student in the English Studies program at Illinois State University. When she's not procrastinating by watching *The Office*, she can be found cuddling her dog, Dory, or laughing obnoxiously in the English hallway with her work wife, Charley.