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Communication Arts and Sciences

Title of your research project.

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

Description of research. Please provide a few sentences that explain the question and the methods employed in this research project.

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

Did this project include Penn State students as researchers?

Yes

If yes to the above question, please state where it was published.

This article was co-authored with former Penn State student Julia Schuller. We published it in the Ohio Communication Journal.

What problem do you address with your research?

How facework, as originally envisioned by Goffman in the mid-20th century, has been changed by social media in the 21st century.

