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## SHOULD WE GHOST GOFFMAN? SELF- PRESENTATION ON INSTAGRAM AMONG HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**Abstract:** In this paper, we will explore the possibilities of analyzing visual content on social media. Specifically, we are interested in whether Goffman's theory can be applied to the analysis of Instagram. The intention is to investigate how and in what ways the key concepts of Goffman's theory can be "translated" in order to gain new insights. Concepts such as region, team, and role distance. Such an attempt opens up new possibilities in the analysis of social media, but at the same time presents new challenges. The main challenge lies in the way and possibilities of articulating Goffman's dramaturgical model outside the context of face-to-face interaction. The act of comparison requires finding new ways to utilize the theoretical "tools" that Goffman has left us as a legacy. On the one hand, there is the danger of oversimplifying his theory, reducing it to mere analogies without any "added value." On the other hand, there is the risk of denying the significance of the new and different context of its application. Our reconsideration of the possible applications of Goffman's theory has been encouraged by a specific research task, namely the project 'Youth Identity Development Through the Use of Digital Media', supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. The project is led by the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. Part of the project is the content analysis of Instagram profiles of high school and university students. The project also includes other research methods:

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a survey (with the largest number of participants) and a focus group interview. However, these parts (of the research) will not be the focus of this paper. The aim of this paper is to outline the theoretical foundations for the potential analysis of empirical material collected for the purpose of content analysis.

**Key words:** Goffman, dramaturgical model, Instagram, Region, Teams, Role Distance

## Da li da ignorišemo Gofmana? Samopredstavljanje na Instagramu među srednjoškolcima i studentima

**Apstrakt:** U ovom radu ćemo istražiti mogućnosti analize vizuelnih sadržaja na društvenim mrežama. Konkretno, zanima nas da li se Gofmanova teorija može primeniti u analizi Instagrama. Namera rada je da se istraži kako i na koji način se ključni pojmovi Gofmanove teorije mogu „prevesti“ kako bi se došlo do novih saznavnih uvida. Pojmovi kao što su: region, tim i distanca od uloge. Ovakav pokušaj otvara nove mogućnosti u analizi društvenih mreža, ali istovremeno postavlja i nove izazove. Osnovni izazov ogleda se u načinu i mogućnostima artikulacije Gofmanovog dramaturškog modela izvan konteksta interakcija „licem u lice“. Sam čin komparacije zahteva pronalaženje novih načina da se teorijski „alati“ koje nam je Gofman ostavio u nasleđe iskoriste. S jedne strane, postoji opasnost od pojednostavljenja njegove teorije, svedene na puko poređenje bez ikakve „dodate vrednosti“. S druge strane, rizikuje se negiranje značaja novog i drugačijeg konteksta njene primene. Naše preispitivanje mogućih primena Gofmanove teorije podstaknuto je konkretnim istraživačkim zadatkom, i to projektom „Izgradnja identiteta mladih kroz upotrebu digitalnih medija“, koji finansira Fond za nauku Republike Srbije. Projekat realizuje Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet za specijalnu edukaciju i rehabilitaciju. Jedan deo projekta predstavlja analiza sadržaja Instagram profila učenika srednjih škola i studenata. On obuhvata i druge metode: anketa (sa najvećim brojem učesnika) i fokus grupni intervju. Navedeni delovi (istraživanja) neće biti u fokusu ovog rada. Cilj ovog rada je postavljanje nacrtu teorijskih temelja potencijalne analize empirijske građe prikupljene u svrhu analize sadržaja.

**Ključne reč:** Gofman, dramaturški model, Instagram, region, tim, distanca od uloge

## Introduction

Umberto Eco once said: “A text is a machine for producing interpretations” (Eco 1979, p. 195). This sentence succinctly points to the endless possibilities of (new) interpretations that may take the given text as their foundation. Its meaning, in the case of Goffman’s theory and attempts

to apply it in the contemporary (digital) context, can be expanded. One could say—or at least raise the question—must we limit ourselves only to the text? Can we breathe new life into Goffman’s theory if we place his text (or theory) into a non-textual context? This question, along with a series of others that arise from it, will form the backbone of the paper in which we will attempt to offer at least some answers. As can be seen from the title, by “new” we refer to the digital environment of social media. Considerations on how Goffman’s theory could be “translated” into the digital environment have been present in the literature for some time now (Hogan, 2010; Murthy, 2012; Bullingham, 2013; Picone, 2015; Tashmin, 2016; Walsh, 2022).

Goffman’s dramaturgical model is based on a particular understanding of the *social role*. He compares this “old” sociological concept to an even older institution — the theatre. As in the case of the theatre, individuals, that is, the bearers of a certain (social) role, have *performances* and an audience that observes them. *Performances* are carried out before an audience with the intention of controlling the impression made on them. This approach provides us with insight into important questions relevant to the analysis of Instagram profiles: how exactly do individuals perform their social roles? What impressions do they want to make on the audience before whom they perform? What kinds of challenges can other (co-) performers present to them? How does the audience’s reaction affect those who are performing? And so on.

Our reconsideration of the possible applications of Goffman’s theory has been encouraged by a specific research task, namely the project ‘Youth Identity Development Through the Use of Digital Media’, supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia. The project is led by the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. The research is still ongoing, so I will not present raw and incomplete data. Part of the project is the content analysis of Instagram profiles of high school and university students. In this paper, we will present only a few observations and notes related to Goffman’s dramaturgical model. They are inspired by the research we are conducting (a content analysis of Instagram profiles). More specifically, by reflections on how the collected data could be analyzed.

## The Rise and Role of Instagram

Leaver et al. offer an insightful account of the very origins of the social network Instagram:

Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger initially began working together on an app in 2010, but it was not focused on photography at all. Rather, inspired by the emergence of location-based check-in apps, the pair were developing a Foursquare competitor, a check-in app called Burbn, based on locating and sharing details of the best bourbon locations. After realizing their app was unlikely to compete with a glut of locative media apps, the two completely stripped their work back to photos, comments and likes with an optional check-in (Leaver et al., 2020).

Much more important than this interesting story about Instagram's early days is the clarification offered by the same authors that Instagram did not introduce technological innovations, but rather achieved a well-balanced combination of key elements. "Notably, Instagram did not invent photo sharing, or photo filters, or even square frames. Instagram's success was based, in part, on their successful integration and balancing of these elements, but all of them existed at the time in other apps which pre-dated Instagram" (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram experienced very rapid growth at its beginning. In the first two months after its launch (2010), the platform was used by 2 million users. The rapid development certainly contributed to the interest from larger companies. In April 2012, Facebook announced the acquisition of the social network Instagram for one billion dollars. Today, Instagram has around 2 billion active users worldwide MAU (Monthly Active Users) (Backlinko, 2025). Recent studies clearly indicate that Instagram users utilize this platform to construct their self-identity (Aulia & Subarsa, 2024, pp. 39-40). With such a large number of users, Instagram is not just a network where individuals (as private persons) present themselves to other individuals. A significant portion of activity on Instagram is connected to and driven by commercial, marketing, promotional, and generally economic purposes. In our paper, we will not devote special attention to such activities and practices, although they too may be part of the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this paper. What can a user actually do on Instagram? What are the basic features?

The answer may be clearest when looking at the main menu tabs: "Instagram's core interface includes five bottom menu tabs—Home, Search, Reels, Shop, and Profile. Each section opens up a new layer of navigation, letting users dive deeper into content, analytics, and more" (Vale, 2025). We believe that, in analyzing Instagram as a social network, not all technical or software features are equally relevant to the topic of this paper. In this regard, we will focus primarily on the possibilities and dynamics of individual self-presentation on the profile. More precisely, in this context, of particular interest may be how individuals present themselves in the posts on their profiles. Although "stories" also carry Goffmanian potential for analysis, we believe that this potential is greater and more significant

in the case of posts on users' profiles. This conclusion is based on several evident facts. First, posts on users' profiles are generally available for a longer period of time. Most posts remain on a user's profile for a very long time—some for as long as the account itself exists. On the other hand, a story is relatively short-lived (unless manually removed by the user, it lasts for 24 hours). An even more important difference lies in the interactional potential of these two Instagram features. Like and comment options are available for both profile posts and stories. However, only in the case of posts is this interaction visible to others, thus creating an *audience* of all other users who merely observe the interaction (See more about this concept, as well as other key concepts of Goffman's dramaturgical model, in Spasić, 1996, pp. 43-62). More precisely, an audience that is not simultaneously an (active) participant. Why is the audience important to us? Primarily because we aim to consider potential answers to the above-mentioned questions through Goffman's dramaturgical model. In such a model, the audience constitutes an essential part of the analysis. We are aware that Goffman has already opened a door for the analysis of visual materials (photographs). His work *Gender Advertisements* (Goffman, 1979) could, in that regard, serve as a sufficient guide. But why are we "knocking" on the wrong door of Goffman's theoretical legacy? An analysis limited solely to the interpretation of visual materials (photographs and videos) would exclude the very interactional potential of the dynamics that many consider to be the heart of contemporary social networks—likes, comments, reposts, hashtags, and so on. The possibility of including this very important aspect of social networks in our analysis is provided by Goffman's dramaturgical model of sociological analysis.

The fundamental question, then, is whether we can apply old sociological "tools" within a new digital environment. This question—and the answer to it—has profound implications for how we understand contemporary communication more broadly. These implications are not purely academic. It has become almost a commonplace in public (media) discourse to claim that youth possess a lower level of basic social skills and reduced capacity for self-articulation in face-to-face interactions. That the digital world makes them "alienated" and insufficiently prepared for the "real world" of encounters in physical space and real time. Goffman's theory, in this sense, may serve as a kind of test. If it remains relevant and methodologically applicable, it compels us to at least question how sustainable such a hypothesis truly is. If his theory can transcend physical space as the foundational category of face-to-face interaction, then the often-voiced public concern (usually framed within the context of worry for younger generations) may not be entirely well-founded. Of course, in this regard, we must proceed with caution. The complexity of communication and its implications for psychosocial development are much broader and deeper.

Goffman's study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), will undoubtedly occupy a central place in our paper, primarily because it forms the backbone of his dramaturgical model. In this paper, we could engage in a general discussion on how Goffman's core concepts—such as impression management or performance—can be situated within the digital context. We could focus solely on these concepts and attempt to understand what they offer in analyzing social networks like Instagram. We are confident that even such an analysis could lead us to interesting conclusions, or at the very least, open new paths for future research. However, we believe that within the limits of such a restricted space, such an analysis would remain too general in nature. It might merely leave the impression of very rough analogies that would not lead researchers toward more informed interpretative positions when analyzing empirical findings. That is why we have decided to use more concrete concepts from his work as illustrations. These concepts are: region, team and role distance. We do not have obvious or systematic arguments for this choice. It partly emerged as a result of insights we found interesting during the course of our empirical analysis. It could be said that these concepts helped us *ad hoc* to better understand certain behaviors and practices on Instagram. On the other hand, they seem concrete enough to us (sometimes even somewhat “technical”) to protect us from overly general and empty analogies. To “protect” us from overly general analogies that do not contribute to a better analysis of the data or a specific topic.

## Region

The concept of *region* for Goffman has a clearly defined spatial and temporal dimension. In this sense, it poses a significant challenge when applied to the digital context, as the digital world differs precisely in these aspects from the “real” one. How does Goffman define the concept of *region*?

A region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. Regions vary, of course, in the degree to which they are bounded and according to the media of communication in which the barriers to perception occur. Thus thick glass panels, such as are found in broadcasting control rooms, can isolate a region aurally but not visually, while an office bounded by beaverboard partitions is closed off in the opposite way. (Goffman, 1959, p. 106)

The key differentiation Goffman makes in relation to the concept of region is between the *front* and the *back*. Elsewhere, however, Goffman states the following:

Given a particular performance as a point of reference, it will sometimes be convenient to use the term “front region” to refer to the place where the performance is given. The fixed sign-equipment in such a place has already been referred to as that part of front called ‘setting.’ We will have to see that some aspects of a performance seem to be played not to the audience but to the front region. (Goffman, 1959, p. 107)

On the other hand, the *back* (region) holds a completely different position in relation to the performance being carried out or enacted:

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. There are, of course, many characteristic functions of such places. It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters. (Goffman, 1959, p. 112)

How, then, is it even possible to translate these concepts—so firmly rooted in space and time—into the digital world, which is often said, in a sociological sense, to dissolve such boundaries? What, in that regard, would constitute the front and back region? To what extent, and in what ways, can we apply Goffman’s concepts in the analysis of Instagram posts? It is not particularly difficult to determine that a post, as such, could be viewed as a front region—that is, as the place where the performance takes place, serving the purpose of managing impressions in a desired manner. However, before we attempt to offer even a preliminary answer to the question of what the back region might be, it must be said that the issue of the front region does not end there. As every social media user today knows, it is possible to control who—meaning which audience—will see the posts you share on social networks. These posts can be completely public or restricted to a specific group of people (e.g., followers). Certain posts may be intended only for a “selected” audience, while others serve to present ourselves to a broader group of people—or even to the entire world. In that sense, the behavior of the actor—as well as the content of the post—changes depending on who the post is directed to and whether it is intended for a “broad” audience. However, during our research, we observed a phenomenon—among both high school students and university students—that is not so uncommon: the existence of active profiles that contain no posts at all. In a conversation (focus group interview) with one high school student, we learned that such a practice is not unusual for them at all. The existence of a profile with not a single post does not mean that the person does not have another profile where they do share content. On the contrary. The practice of maintaining

several “parallel” profiles on social media is precisely aimed at creating regions where impression management can be carried out for a specific and deliberately selected audience. Such a practice makes it possible to keep certain categories of “undesirable” viewers separate from other segments of the “audience” to whom one wishes to present oneself in a very specific way. We cannot make well-founded assumptions about exactly whom or why students wish to avoid—or at least which audiences they want to “separate.” In general terms, it would make sense to assume that this kind of “closure” is generational in nature, serving to limit access for parents, relatives, parents’ friends, and similar groups. To understand the full scope of the potential continuum between the back and front regions on social media, we must also take into account one more possibility that often remains outside the scope of researchers due to its ethical and methodological sensitivity—group chat. Only when we take such interactions into account can we speak of the fundamental digital mechanisms through which a division between the front and back regions is enacted—with the overall aim of impression management undertaken by users through their activities on social media. Each of these possibilities can serve as a basis for outlining such distinctions between regions. However, we must not forget the important differences that arise in comparison to the original (Goffmanian) use of these concepts. The boundary between the front and back regions that one can establish in the digital environment of social media is far more flexible. The actors themselves can decide where these boundaries lie to a much greater extent. The examples Goffman provides in his study do not allow for such boundaries to be altered arbitrarily, quickly, or easily. In that regard, group chat may most closely correspond to the back region. When we make this claim, we are not referring to just any group communication. Rather, we have in mind those group interactions that specifically revolve around commenting on posts intended for a broader audience. We can assume that such conversations—at least when it comes to young people—often focus on the post itself (e.g., who liked the photo and who didn’t, who left a comment, how good or appealing the post is, and so on).

## Team

What does *team* mean for Goffman? “I will use the term ‘performance team’ or, in short, ‘team’ to refer to any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine” (Goffman, 1959, p. 79). Goffman recognizes that the analysis of individual performance is, in some situations, insufficient. In other words, in certain social settings, cooperation emerges as too significant to be viewed merely as the coordination of individual actors:

[...] an emergent team impression arises which can conveniently be treated as a fact in its own right, as a third level of fact located between the individual performance on one hand and the total interaction of participants on the other. (Goffman, 1959, p. 80)

In addition to everything mentioned, one key characteristic of a team is the shared control of impression. Cooperation implies shared intentions, that is, coordination in the effort to leave the desired impression in front of the audience. In order to achieve this, the team must share a common back region. Finally, there must be trust and loyalty among the members. For the performance to be successful, team members must assume that everyone will act in accordance with an explicit or implicit agreement. How could we apply this concept in the context of researching social media? The actions of a team can be observed on several levels when analyzing the use of social media platforms such as Instagram. First, in the analysis of posts, it can be noticed that the same circle of people often appears in the comments—individuals who can reasonably be assumed to be close to the account owner. The comments frequently consist of compliments or praise regarding the post. Sometimes, team members ask questions to which they most likely already know the answers. In doing so, they provide the account owner with an opportunity to further explain the context of the photo or to highlight a specific aspect that might otherwise go unnoticed. Liking posts is taken for granted. Members of a team could easily be identified through an analysis of the frequency of mutual liking and commenting (setting aside the technical and methodological challenges of conducting such a research). The activities of team members—their collaboration—do not begin and end solely in the digital world. Team members often take part in the very production of photos and videos. They may appear in the posts themselves, contribute to the creation of content, help prepare the account owner for taking photos or videos, and so on. In the case of Instagram as a social network, the tagging feature is used. It can explicitly indicate a team member who is relevant to the given post. Another feature on this social network can also be methodologically useful in identifying team members: the option to share stories. That is, users can repost a story originally published by another person who is part of their team. However, this practice should not be taken as a sufficient or definitive indicator for determining whether someone is a team member. Ultimately, the most reliable way to determine the composition and boundaries of teams is through communication in the backstage (back region). Chats in group conversations that take place around Instagram posts—especially those concerning performance strategies—reliably reveal who the members of a given team are. The only

problem with this method of identifying team composition is methodological in nature. Access to such data is confidential and, in most cases, cannot be directly observed.

## Role distance

In the case of the third concept – which we have selected as an exemplary case of applying Goffman's theory – we will rely more heavily on another work. It is the study *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (1972). In this work, Goffman elaborates on the concept of *role distance*. A large part of the aforementioned study is dedicated specifically to the concept of *role distance*.

In any case, the term 'role distance' is not meant to refer to all behavior that does not directly contribute to the task core of a given role but only to those behaviors that are seen by someone present as relevant to assessing the actor's attachment to his role and relevant in such a way as to suggest that the actor possibly has some measure of disaffection from, and resistance against, the role (Goffman, 1972, pp. 95-96).

Can this Goffmanian concept be relevant to the ways in which people present themselves on Instagram? In the case of Instagram users, two levels of role distance can be observed. The first refers to the display of distance toward roles that individuals perform in everyday life. In this regard, Instagram appears merely as a medium that records acts of expressing such distance. Among student and pupil populations, examples can be found in situations where they present their roles (as pupils or students) in a humorous or ironic manner. However, such examples do not actually go beyond the conventional framework of applying Goffman's theory and do not address the fundamental questions we raised at the beginning of this paper. Such examples cannot be taken as evidence for the potential applicability of his dramaturgical model within a digital context. Nevertheless, we consider this concept useful and applicable for analyzing Instagram profiles among students and pupils. The reason lies in the occasional appearance of posts that challenge the dominant narrative matrix of self-presentation. Distancing from the role being performed does not have to refer solely to social roles in real space and time, but also to the role that is constructed through posts on this social network. For example, if the account owner seeks to present themselves in the role of an influencer or gamer, we can find posts or other forms of activity on Instagram that deliberately display distance from such a role. These roles are often portrayed in a humorous or grotesque manner. At times, the self-image—or

the role that has been constructed through a series of previous posts on the profile—is directly and explicitly disrupted. In this regard, a clear parallel can be drawn with the ‘merry-go-round’ example that Goffman describes (Goffman, 1972, p. 98).

## Conclusion

The central question in this paper is the possibility of translating Goffman’s dramaturgical model into a digital environment. We believe that such a model could be of interest in the endeavor we have undertaken (analyzing the content of Instagram profiles of students and pupils). Our aim was to show that physical space and time are not, or do not necessarily have to be, insurmountable obstacles to applying Goffman’s theoretical legacy in a digital context. The concepts we have selected—region, team, and role distance—were chosen solely as illustrations appropriate to the scope of our study. This line of inquiry could have been pursued further, in a more systematic and comprehensive manner. Nevertheless, in conclusion, we are obliged to offer at least a few remarks concerning the limitations of such an undertaking. The digital environment (Instagram) must, in some sense, still be regarded as a secondary level of reality. The roles that all profile owners perform, and the impressions they seek to leave on their audience, are ultimately grounded in a context that is not digital. In other words (at least within the framework of our analysis), within the Instagram environment, an individual cannot consistently and convincingly manage the impression they wish to convey to an audience if they are not capable of doing so in face-to-face interactions. Certainly not in the long term. Performance or self-presentation in the digital world can be suspended or entirely avoided—an individual simply needs to make that decision. Some might argue that even when we completely withdraw from the digital world, we no longer remain subjects within it, but we can still be objects—someone can photograph us, write about us, or discuss us. However, this fact does not change the essence of the matter. At that point, we can no longer speak of an individual’s intention to present themselves in a certain way, but only of how they are perceived by others. In face-to-face interactions, however, such a decision is not possible, or comes at a significantly higher cost. On the other hand, an individual on social media can simultaneously maintain multiple impressions or performances—across different accounts or through various posts. From a technical standpoint, such possibilities are virtually unlimited. In face-to-face interactions, however, one can perform only a single role at any given time and in a specific physical space. It should be emphasized that any comparison

between face-to-face interaction and interaction in the digital world must take into account certain ‘spaces of freedom’ that may be particularly interesting for analysis. The digital environment allows for a certain degree of manipulation regarding both the manner and timing of interaction. One is not required to respond promptly to a message, comment, like, etc. What matters is not only the nature of the interaction, but also its temporality. Such a practice is simply not possible in face-to-face interaction.

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