

From Curiosity to Disengagement: A Grounded Theory of BeReal User Dropout Among Asian Young Adults

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Abstract

The rapid growth of authenticity-oriented social media platforms has transformed digital communication among young adults, yet little is known about why users discontinue these platforms after initial adoption. This study explores the process of BeReal user disengagement among Asian young adults using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with active and former BeReal users, and the data were analysed through open, axial, and selective coding using the constant comparative method. The findings reveal a sequential process comprising curiosity, novelty seeking, authentic participation, expectation mismatch, social media fatigue, passive engagement, disengagement, and digital reorientation. Based on these stages, the study proposes the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT), which explains how users gradually transition from initial enthusiasm to platform discontinuance. The findings extend existing theories of social media engagement, authenticity, and technology discontinuance by conceptualising disengagement as a dynamic behavioural process. The study also offers practical implications for designing authenticity-oriented platforms that promote sustained user engagement and digital well-being.

Keywords: BeReal, Social media disengagement, Grounded theory, Digital well-being, Social media fatigue, Asian young adults

1 Introduction

The rapid evolution of social media has transformed the ways individuals communicate, construct identities, and maintain interpersonal relationships. While early social networking platforms emphasized connectivity and content sharing, contemporary platforms increasingly promote authenticity, spontaneous interactions, and reduced social comparison. Among these emerging

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platforms, BeReal has attracted considerable attention by encouraging users to share unfiltered photographs captured simultaneously using front and rear smartphone cameras within a limited daily notification window. Unlike Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat, BeReal discourages image editing, algorithmic amplification, and influencer culture, positioning itself as an "authentic" alternative to conventional social media platforms (Bucher, [2018](#); Cotton et al., [2023](#)).

BeReal experienced remarkable global growth during 2022 and 2023, particularly among Generation Z users seeking relief from the highly curated environments of mainstream social networking sites. The platform's emphasis on authenticity, spontaneity, and minimal social metrics resonated strongly with young adults who expressed growing dissatisfaction with performative online identities and algorithm-driven content consumption (Boffone & Han, [2024](#)). However, despite this rapid adoption, recent evidence suggests that user engagement on BeReal has declined substantially, with many early adopters reducing their participation or abandoning the platform altogether (Sensor Tower, [2024](#)). This pattern raises an important question: why do users disengage from a platform specifically designed to address the shortcomings of traditional social media?

Most existing studies have focused on the motivations for adopting BeReal, highlighting factors such as curiosity, novelty seeking, fear of missing out (FoMO), and the desire for authentic self-presentation (Bucher, [2018](#); Cotton et al., [2023](#)). Although these studies provide valuable insights into initial adoption, they offer only limited understanding of the dynamic processes through which users gradually lose interest, experience fatigue, and eventually discontinue platform use. Current research generally treats discontinuance as a single behavioural outcome rather than examining it as a complex developmental process shaped by evolving user experiences.

Beyond BeReal, the broader literature on social media identifies several mechanisms that may contribute to user disengagement. Research on social media fatigue suggests that continuous digital interaction, notification overload, repetitive content, privacy concerns, and emotional exhaustion reduce users' willingness to remain active on social networking platforms (Bright et al., [2015](#); Dhir et al., [2018](#)). Similarly, studies on technology discontinuance argue that users frequently reassess the value of digital platforms when expectations regarding enjoyment, usefulness, or social interaction are no longer fulfilled (Bhattacharjee, [2001](#)). However, these explanations have rarely been examined within authenticity-focused social media environments such as BeReal, where user motivations differ substantially from those associated with traditional platforms.

The present study argues that disengagement from BeReal is not an isolated decision but rather a gradual process involving multiple psychological and behavioural transitions. Initial curiosity and novelty motivate platform adoption, but repeated exposure to routine posting, declining novelty, perceived social obligations, notification pressure, and changing expectations may gradually transform enthusiasm into disengagement. Understanding these transitions is essential because it provides deeper insights into how users negotiate authenticity, digital well-being, and sustained participation in emerging social media ecosystems.

To address this gap, this study adopts a grounded theory methodology to develop an empirically derived explanation of BeReal user disengagement among Asian young adults. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, grounded theory enables the generation of a conceptual model that explains the sequential processes through which individuals move from initial curiosity to eventual platform withdrawal. Through in-depth qualitative interviews and iterative coding procedures, the study identifies the psychological, social, and technological factors that collectively shape users' decisions to reduce or discontinue BeReal use.

The study makes several important contributions. First, it develops a process-based grounded theory explaining social media disengagement in authenticity-oriented platforms, extending

existing research beyond simple adoption and continuance models. Second, it contributes to the growing literature on digital well-being by demonstrating how authenticity-driven platforms may still generate fatigue and declining engagement over time. Third, it provides practical insights for social media designers and platform developers seeking to improve user retention while preserving authentic online interactions. Finally, by focusing on Asian young adults, the study contributes evidence from a region that remains underrepresented in research on emerging social media platforms despite experiencing rapid growth in digital technology adoption.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on authenticity-based social media, social media fatigue, and platform disengagement and identifies the research gap. Section 3 describes the grounded theory methodology and data collection procedures. Section 4 presents the emergent categories and the proposed Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement process model. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, and the final section concludes the study by outlining its contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Emergence of Authentic Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms have evolved considerably over the past two decades, shifting from simple communication tools to sophisticated digital ecosystems that shape social interaction, identity construction, and information exchange. Early platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok emphasized connectivity, visual storytelling, and algorithmically personalized content. While these platforms successfully increased user engagement, they also encouraged highly curated self-presentation, social comparison, and influencer-driven cultures, often leading to concerns regarding authenticity and psychological well-being (Boyd & Ellison, [2007](#); Chou & Edge, [2012](#); Vogel et al., [2014](#)).

Growing dissatisfaction with carefully edited online identities has created demand for platforms promoting more spontaneous and genuine interactions. BeReal emerged as a response to this trend by encouraging users to capture and share unedited photographs within a two-minute daily notification window using both front and rear smartphone cameras simultaneously. The platform deliberately minimizes filters, public metrics, and algorithmic content ranking, positioning authenticity rather than popularity as its defining characteristic (Bucher, [2018](#); Cotton et al., [2023](#)). This design philosophy seeks to reduce impression management and encourage users to document everyday experiences rather than idealized lifestyles.

Initially, BeReal's unique approach attracted substantial interest, particularly among Generation Z users who viewed the platform as an alternative to highly commercialized social networking environments. Early research suggests that users appreciated the platform's emphasis on spontaneity, intimacy, and reduced social pressure (Boffone & Han, [2024](#)). Nevertheless, increasing reports of declining user activity indicate that authenticity alone may not guarantee sustained engagement. This observation suggests that platform success depends not only on innovative design but also on users' evolving psychological experiences over time.

2.2 Curiosity, Novelty Seeking, and Platform Adoption

The adoption of emerging social media platforms is frequently driven by curiosity and novelty seeking. Curiosity motivates individuals to explore unfamiliar technologies, whereas novelty seeking reflects a preference for new experiences that differ from established routines (Berlyne, [1960](#)). Digital platforms often experience rapid initial growth because users are attracted by innovative features, social trends, and recommendations from peers.

Within BeReal, curiosity was reinforced by the platform's unconventional posting mechanism,

restricted posting window, and emphasis on authentic content. Many users joined the platform to experience a social networking environment perceived as more genuine and less performative than Instagram or TikTok. Social influence further accelerated adoption, as participation often depended on existing friendship networks and peer invitations (Cotton et al., [2023](#)).

However, technology adoption research consistently demonstrates that novelty effects diminish over time. According to the Expectation–Confirmation Model (Bhattacharjee, [2001](#)), continued technology use depends on whether users perceive that their expectations are fulfilled after initial adoption. When the perceived value of a platform declines, users are more likely to reduce engagement or discontinue usage. Consequently, understanding discontinuance requires examining the evolving relationship between users and the platform rather than focusing solely on initial adoption motivations.

2.3 Social Media Fatigue and User Disengagement

Although social media platforms facilitate communication and information sharing, prolonged engagement may produce adverse psychological outcomes collectively referred to as social media fatigue. Social media fatigue describes a state of emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and declining interest resulting from continuous interaction with digital platforms (Bright et al., [2015](#)).

Previous studies have identified multiple antecedents of social media fatigue, including information overload, communication overload, notification pressure, repetitive content, privacy concerns, and excessive social demands (Dhir et al., [2018](#)). As these pressures accumulate, users often experience declining enjoyment and increased psychological strain, ultimately reducing their willingness to actively participate.

The phenomenon is particularly relevant within authenticity-oriented platforms. Although BeReal was designed to reduce social comparison, users may nevertheless experience pressure to respond promptly to daily notifications, maintain consistent participation, and share aspects of their personal lives regardless of context. Over time, behaviours initially perceived as authentic may become routine obligations, transforming voluntary participation into perceived social responsibility.

Emerging evidence suggests that this transition from enjoyment to obligation represents an important mechanism underlying platform disengagement. Rather than abandoning social media abruptly, users typically reduce posting frequency, engage passively, or migrate to alternative platforms better aligned with their evolving preferences. These behavioural transitions remain insufficiently explored in existing BeReal research.

2.4 Authenticity, Digital Well-being, and Platform Exit

Digital well-being has become an increasingly important topic within communication and information systems research. While social media platforms provide opportunities for self-expression and social connectedness, excessive or obligatory engagement may negatively influence psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and perceived autonomy.

Authenticity-based platforms attempt to improve digital well-being by reducing appearance-related pressures and encouraging realistic self-presentation. Nevertheless, authenticity itself may generate unexpected psychological demands. Daily prompts requiring immediate participation, concerns regarding privacy, repetitive interactions, and diminishing novelty may gradually undermine users' intrinsic motivation.

Consequently, platform discontinuance should not necessarily be interpreted as technological failure but rather as an adaptive response to changing psychological needs. Some individuals intentionally reduce social media use to restore work–life balance, improve mental health, or regain control over their digital lives through selective engagement or digital detox practices.

These findings suggest that disengagement represents a complex behavioural process influenced by both technological characteristics and individual psychological experiences.

2.5 Grounded Theory as a Lens for Understanding Platform Disengagement

Most previous studies investigating social media adoption and discontinuance employ quantitative approaches that examine predefined relationships among variables such as satisfaction, trust, perceived usefulness, or continuance intention. While these studies provide valuable empirical evidence, they often overlook the evolving psychological processes through which users gradually disengage from digital platforms.

Grounded theory offers an alternative methodological perspective by generating theory directly from participants' lived experiences rather than testing existing theoretical models (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through iterative data collection, constant comparison, and progressive coding, grounded theory enables researchers to identify latent processes, behavioural transitions, and conceptual relationships that may not be anticipated in advance.

In the context of BeReal, grounded theory is particularly appropriate because the platform remains relatively new, and existing theoretical explanations for authenticity-based social media discontinuance are limited. By focusing on participants' narratives, grounded theory facilitates the development of a process-oriented explanation describing how initial curiosity gradually transforms into fatigue, reduced engagement, and eventual platform exit.

2.6 Research Gap

Despite increasing scholarly interest in BeReal and authenticity-based social media, several important gaps remain. First, most existing studies concentrate on platform adoption, user motivations, or authenticity perceptions, whereas comparatively little attention has been given to the process of disengagement. Second, previous research frequently conceptualizes discontinuance as a single behavioural outcome rather than examining the sequential psychological transitions leading to platform exit. Third, studies investigating social media fatigue rarely focus on authenticity-oriented platforms, where user experiences differ substantially from those associated with algorithm-driven social networking sites. Finally, empirical evidence from Asian young adults remains limited despite the rapid expansion of digital media use throughout the region. To address these gaps, the present study adopts a grounded theory approach to develop a process-based explanation of BeReal user disengagement. Rather than asking why users leave the platform, this study seeks to understand how disengagement unfolds over time, leading to the development of a new conceptual model—the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT)—that explains the dynamic transition from initial platform curiosity to eventual discontinuance.

3 Theoretical Foundation and Research Questions

3.1 Grounded Theory Perspective

Unlike quantitative studies that test predefined hypotheses, grounded theory seeks to generate theoretical explanations directly from empirical observations. Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and subsequently refined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2014), grounded theory is particularly suitable for investigating emerging social phenomena where existing theoretical explanations remain limited. Rather than imposing predetermined conceptual frameworks, grounded theory allows theoretical concepts to emerge inductively through systematic interaction with participants' experiences.

The rapid emergence of authenticity-oriented social media platforms such as BeReal presents an evolving research context in which users' motivations, behaviours, and disengagement processes are not yet fully understood. Existing research has largely concentrated on explaining why users initially adopt BeReal, focusing on authenticity, curiosity, novelty, and social interaction (Boffone

& Han, [2024](#); Cotton et al., [2023](#)). However, considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding the dynamic processes through which users gradually reduce engagement and eventually discontinue platform use. Consequently, a grounded theory approach provides an appropriate methodological framework for constructing an empirically grounded explanation of user disengagement.

Consistent with the constructivist perspective proposed by Charmaz ([2014](#)), the present study assumes that participants actively construct meanings from their experiences with BeReal. Therefore, the resulting theory is viewed not as an objective representation of reality but as an interpretive explanation that captures recurring patterns within participants' narratives. Through iterative coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical sampling, the study develops a conceptual model describing the progression from initial curiosity to sustained disengagement.

3.2 Conceptual Sensitising Framework

Although grounded theory does not begin with formal hypotheses, previous theoretical perspectives provide useful sensitising concepts that guide the interpretation of empirical observations without constraining theory development (Blumer, [1954](#)). Several complementary theories informed the analytical process.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) suggests that individuals adopt digital media to satisfy psychological and social needs, including entertainment, information seeking, self-expression, and social interaction (Katz et al., [1973](#)). In the context of BeReal, users initially joined the platform because it promised authentic communication, reduced social pressure, and more meaningful interpersonal interactions.

The Expectation–Confirmation Model (ECM) proposes that continued technology use depends on whether users' experiences confirm their initial expectations (Bhattacharjee, [2001](#)). When expectations are not fulfilled, satisfaction declines, increasing the likelihood of discontinuance. This perspective provides a useful lens for understanding why early enthusiasm toward BeReal gradually diminished among many participants. Research on Social Media Fatigue further suggests that prolonged digital engagement may generate emotional exhaustion, information overload, communication burden, and declining motivation (Bright et al., [2015](#); Dhir et al., [2018](#)). Although BeReal was designed to minimise many traditional social media pressures, participants frequently described new forms of fatigue associated with obligatory daily posting, repetitive content, notification pressure, and diminishing novelty. Finally, emerging literature on Digital Well-being argues that individuals increasingly evaluate digital technologies according to their effects on mental health, work–life balance, and psychological autonomy. Consequently, platform discontinuance may represent an intentional strategy for improving well-being rather than simply dissatisfaction with technology. Rather than testing these theories directly, they served as interpretive lenses throughout the coding process while allowing novel categories to emerge inductively from the data.

3.3 Research Questions

Based on the identified research gap and the exploratory nature of grounded theory, the present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Asian young adults experience the transition from initial curiosity to sustained disengagement while using BeReal?

RQ2: What psychological, social, and technological factors contribute to the gradual reduction of user engagement on BeReal?

RQ3: How do users interpret authenticity, routine participation, and digital well-being throughout their BeReal experience?

RQ4: What conceptual process explains the progression from platform adoption to discontinuance?

Addressing these research questions enables the development of an empirically grounded explanation of social media disengagement that extends existing knowledge beyond technology adoption and continuance models.

3.4 Emergent Theoretical Proposition

Drawing on the iterative analysis of participant narratives, the study proposes the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT) as a process-oriented explanation of BeReal discontinuance. The theory suggests that engagement with authenticity-oriented social media evolves through a sequence of interconnected stages. Users are initially attracted by curiosity and the novelty of authentic self-presentation. Continued interaction leads to routine participation, during which the platform becomes integrated into daily digital practices. Over time, however, expectation mismatches, repetitive interactions, declining novelty, and perceived participation obligations contribute to the development of social media fatigue. As fatigue accumulates, users progressively reduce their activity, disengage from the platform, and eventually redirect their digital behaviours toward selective social media use or digital detox practices. This process-oriented theoretical framework forms the basis for the subsequent methodological procedures and qualitative analysis.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, which assumes that individuals construct meanings through their lived experiences and social interactions. Unlike positivist approaches that seek objective explanations through hypothesis testing, interpretivism emphasizes understanding how participants perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that user disengagement from BeReal involves subjective perceptions of authenticity, social interaction, digital fatigue, and personal well-being, an interpretivist perspective provides an appropriate framework for exploring these complex behavioural processes.

4.2 Research Design

A qualitative research design based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was employed to explore the processes through which young adults gradually disengage from BeReal. Grounded theory was selected because the phenomenon remains relatively underexplored and existing theories provide only limited explanations regarding user discontinuance in authenticity-oriented social media platforms.

Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, grounded theory enables researchers to generate theoretical explanations directly from participants' narratives through iterative data collection and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach facilitates the identification of latent behavioural processes that emerge during participants' experiences with BeReal. The study followed the principles of constructivist grounded theory, allowing concepts, categories, and relationships to emerge inductively from the interview data while acknowledging the active role of researchers in interpreting participants' experiences.

4.3 Research Context

The study focused on Asian young adults, representing one of the fastest-growing populations of social media users worldwide. Rapid smartphone penetration, increasing internet accessibility, and widespread adoption of emerging social networking platforms have transformed digital communication throughout Asia. Although BeReal experienced substantial popularity among young adults, anecdotal evidence and market reports suggest declining engagement after the initial

adoption phase.

Participants were selected because they had firsthand experience using BeReal and could provide rich insights into both sustained engagement and eventual platform discontinuance. The diverse cultural and technological environments across Asia also offered valuable perspectives regarding authenticity, social expectations, and digital well-being.

4.4 Participant Selection and Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling, followed by theoretical sampling, consistent with grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Purposive sampling ensured that participants possessed sufficient experience with BeReal, while theoretical sampling enabled the recruitment of additional participants to refine emerging categories until theoretical saturation was achieved.

To participate in the study, individuals were required to satisfy the following inclusion criteria: be between 18 and 30 years of age; reside in an Asian country; have actively used BeReal for at least three months; have reduced, discontinued, or significantly changed their usage patterns; and be willing to participate in an in-depth interview conducted in English.

Participants represented diverse educational backgrounds, occupations, and countries within Asia, thereby enhancing the richness and diversity of perspectives. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, defined as the stage at which additional interviews no longer generated new conceptual categories or substantially modified existing theoretical explanations (Guest et al., 2020).

4.5 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, enabling participants to describe their experiences freely while ensuring consistency across interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the existing literature concerning social media engagement, authenticity, digital well-being, and technology discontinuance.

Interviews explored several key topics, including: motivations for joining BeReal; early user experiences; perceptions of authenticity; changes in platform usage over time; experiences of fatigue or reduced motivation; reasons for disengagement; and digital behaviours following platform discontinuance.

Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes and was conducted online using secure video-conferencing platforms. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Field notes and analytical memos were maintained throughout the research process to document emerging concepts, coding decisions, and theoretical insights.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the systematic procedures of constructivist grounded theory using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014).

4.6.1 Open Coding

During the initial stage, interview transcripts were examined line by line to identify meaningful statements describing participants' experiences. Codes remained close to participants' own language to preserve the richness of the data. Examples of initial codes included *trying something different*, *daily posting pressure*, *missing notifications*, *routine boredom*, *privacy concerns*, and *switching platforms*.

4.6.2 Axial Coding

Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories by examining relationships among emerging concepts. This process resulted in higher-order categories including: Curiosity and Novelty, Authentic Participation, Expectation Mismatch, Platform Fatigue, Passive Engagement, Platform Exit, Digital Reorientation

Constant comparison across interviews ensured that categories accurately reflected recurring patterns within participants' narratives.

4.6.3 Selective Coding

The final analytical stage focused on integrating all categories into a coherent explanatory framework. Through continuous comparison, memo writing, and theoretical integration, the central category—Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement—emerged as the core process explaining BeReal discontinuance. Relationships among the major categories were refined to develop the proposed Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT).

4.7 Ensuring Trustworthiness

To enhance the quality and rigour of the qualitative findings, the study adopted the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, iterative coding, constant comparison, and member checking, whereby selected participants reviewed the interpretation of their interview responses. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting coding procedures, analytical decisions, and methodological revisions throughout the study. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo writing, transparent documentation of coding decisions, and regular discussions among the research team to minimize individual interpretive bias.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, all participants received detailed information regarding the study objectives, interview procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed during transcription. Digital recordings and transcripts were stored securely using password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

The study complied with the ethical guidelines of the researchers' affiliated institution and followed internationally recognized principles for research involving human participants, including those outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

4.9 Summary of the Methodological Process

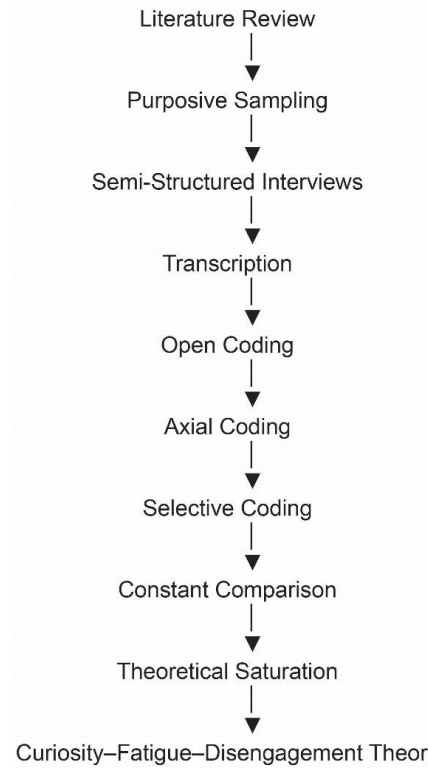


Figure 1. Grounded Theory Research Process

Figure 1 illustrates the methodological process adopted to develop the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT). The study began with a comprehensive literature review to identify the research gap and inform the interview guide. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, and data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts were systematically analysed through open, axial, and selective coding, while the constant comparison method was applied to refine emerging concepts and categories. Data collection and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, indicating that no new themes emerged. This rigorous grounded theory process culminated in the development of the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory, which explains the sequential process through which Asian young adults transition from initial curiosity to eventual disengagement from the BeReal platform.

5 Results & Findings: Developing the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT)

5.1 Overview of the Emergent Theory

The grounded theory analysis revealed that disengagement from BeReal is not a single decision but a progressive behavioural and psychological process. Through iterative coding and constant comparison, six interconnected stages emerged that collectively explain how users transition from initial enthusiasm to eventual platform discontinuance.

The core category identified during selective coding was Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement, which integrates participants' experiences into a dynamic process explaining the evolution of BeReal use. Figure 3 presents the proposed Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT).



Figure 2. Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT) illustrating the sequential stages of BeReal user disengagement identified through grounded theory analysis.

Figure 2 depicts the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT), which explains the sequential psychological and behavioural process through which Asian young adults disengage from BeReal. The process begins with curiosity, where users are attracted by the platform's novelty, peer influence, and promise of authentic self-expression. This initial interest leads to novelty seeking and authentic participation, during which users actively engage with the platform and appreciate its emphasis on spontaneous, unfiltered interactions. As platform use becomes routine, users experience an expectation mismatch, where the initial excitement declines because of repetitive content, limited interaction, and reduced novelty. This mismatch gradually develops into social media fatigue, characterized by emotional exhaustion, notification pressure, and declining motivation to participate. Rather than immediately abandoning the platform, users typically enter a phase of passive engagement, reducing posting frequency while continuing to observe others' content. Continued fatigue eventually results in platform disengagement, after which users undergo digital reorientation, adopting healthier digital practices such as selective social media use, migration to alternative platforms, or digital detox. Collectively, these six stages illustrate that BeReal discontinuance is a gradual and adaptive process rather than a single behavioural decision, thereby forming the central theoretical explanation generated through the grounded theory analysis. The six stages are discussed below.

5.2 Stage I: Curiosity and Novelty Seeking

Nearly all participants described curiosity as the primary motivation for joining BeReal. Unlike traditional social networking platforms, BeReal's emphasis on unedited photographs and spontaneous posting created a sense of novelty that attracted first-time users.

Many participants explained that they were initially interested because BeReal promised a more authentic social networking experience compared with Instagram and TikTok. Others reported joining because their friends had already adopted the platform, making participation a socially desirable activity.

One participant stated:

"Everyone was talking about BeReal. I downloaded it just to see what was different from Instagram." (Participant 8)

Another participant commented:

"The idea of posting real moments without filters sounded refreshing." (Participant 15)

These narratives indicate that curiosity was largely driven by three factors:

- technological novelty;
- peer influence;
- authenticity expectations.

Rather than seeking entertainment alone, participants viewed BeReal as an opportunity to experience a different form of digital interaction.

5.3 Stage II: Authentic Participation

Following adoption, participants entered a period of active engagement characterized by regular posting and interaction with friends. During this stage, users generally appreciated the platform's simplicity and perceived authenticity.

Unlike highly curated social media platforms, BeReal encouraged participants to share ordinary daily experiences. Many interviewees described this stage as enjoyable because it reduced concerns about appearance, popularity, and public evaluation.

One participant explained:

"There was no pressure to create perfect pictures. Everyone looked normal." (Participant 21)

Another noted:

"I actually enjoyed seeing what my friends were really doing instead of vacation photos every day." (Participant 4)

Participants commonly associated this stage with:

- increased authenticity;
- stronger interpersonal connections;
- reduced social comparison;
- enjoyable spontaneity.

5.4 Stage III: Expectation Mismatch

As participants continued using BeReal, many reported that their initial expectations gradually became inconsistent with their actual experiences. The novelty that initially attracted users diminished over time, while repetitive daily posting became increasingly routine.

Participants frequently described feelings that the platform had become predictable and monotonous.

Typical comments included:

"After a few months every day looked the same." (Participant 12)

"The excitement disappeared because people kept posting almost identical pictures." (Participant 18)

Several interviewees also mentioned that the daily notification, initially viewed as innovative, gradually became an obligation rather than an enjoyable reminder.

The main sources of expectation mismatch included:

- repetitive content;
- declining novelty;
- limited platform functionality;

- reduced interaction;
- decreasing social excitement.

5.5 Stage IV: Platform Fatigue

The fourth stage represented the central turning point within the emerging theory. Participants described increasing psychological fatigue associated with continued BeReal use.

Although BeReal was designed to reduce pressures associated with traditional social media, many users reported experiencing new forms of digital burden, including:

- obligation to post every day;
- notification pressure;
- reduced enjoyment;
- emotional exhaustion;
- privacy concerns;
- declining motivation.

One participant stated:

"It stopped feeling natural. It became something I felt I had to do." (Participant 10)

Another explained:

"Missing the notification made me feel like I wasn't participating properly." (Participant 27)

Rather than eliminating social pressure, BeReal appeared to replace traditional appearance-related concerns with participation-related expectations.

Platform fatigue therefore emerged as the central explanatory category connecting early enthusiasm with later disengagement.

5.6 Stage V: Passive Engagement and Disengagement

Rather than immediately deleting the application, most participants described a gradual reduction in activity. Users commonly shifted from active posting to passive observation before eventually discontinuing platform use.

Typical behavioural changes included:

- skipping daily posts;
- ignoring notifications;
- viewing friends' content without posting;
- opening the application less frequently.

One participant commented:

"I still had the app, but I stopped posting." (Participant 6)

Another stated:

"Eventually I realised I hadn't opened BeReal for weeks." (Participant 14)

These findings indicate that disengagement occurs progressively rather than instantaneously.

5.7 Stage VI: Digital Reorientation

The final stage extended beyond simple platform abandonment. Many participants described intentionally restructuring their digital habits after leaving BeReal.

Some migrated to alternative social networking platforms that better matched their evolving preferences, whereas others deliberately reduced overall social media use.

Several participants associated platform discontinuance with improvements in digital well-being.

One participant reflected:

"Leaving BeReal made me realise I didn't need another social media routine." (Participant 23)

Others described:

- digital detox;
- selective platform use;
- reduced screen time;
- greater control over online behaviour.

These findings suggest that discontinuance represents an adaptive behavioural strategy rather than merely dissatisfaction with a single platform.

5.8 Integrating the Categories: The Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory

Selective coding integrated all six stages into a unified explanatory framework termed the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT). The theory proposes that users initially adopt authenticity-oriented social media because of curiosity, novelty, and expectations of genuine interaction. Continued use fosters routine participation, but as novelty declines and participation becomes obligatory, users experience expectation mismatch and platform fatigue. This psychological transition leads to reduced engagement, eventual discontinuance, and the reconfiguration of digital practices toward more selective or balanced social media use.

Unlike existing technology continuance models that conceptualize discontinuance as a single behavioural outcome, CFDT explains disengagement as a dynamic, multi-stage process involving evolving motivations, emotional responses, and behavioural adaptations. The theory therefore extends current research on social media fatigue and authenticity-based platforms by demonstrating how enthusiasm gradually transforms into withdrawal through identifiable psychological and behavioural stages.

6 Discussion

This study developed the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT) to explain how Asian young adults progressively disengage from BeReal. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on adoption motivations or continuance intentions, the present research conceptualizes disengagement as a dynamic, multi-stage process comprising curiosity, authentic participation, expectation mismatch, platform fatigue, passive engagement, and digital reorientation. The findings demonstrate that discontinuance is not a sudden behavioural decision but rather an evolving psychological and social process shaped by users' changing expectations and experiences.

6.1 Curiosity as the Primary Driver of Platform Adoption

The first stage of the proposed theory highlights curiosity and novelty seeking as the principal motivations for adopting BeReal. Participants were attracted by the platform's promise of authentic self-presentation, spontaneous interaction, and freedom from the highly curated environments associated with Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. This finding supports the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which argues that individuals adopt media technologies to satisfy specific psychological and social needs, including entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression (Katz et al., [1973](#)).

The findings are also consistent with studies reporting that BeReal gained popularity because users perceived it as a refreshing alternative to traditional social media platforms that emphasize appearance management and algorithm-driven content (Boffone & Han, [2024](#); Cotton et al., [2023](#)). The novelty of receiving one daily notification and sharing unedited photographs created a unique user experience that differentiated BeReal from competing platforms. However, the present study

demonstrates that novelty primarily influences initial adoption rather than long-term engagement.

6.2 Authenticity Does Not Guarantee Long-Term Engagement

A key contribution of this study is the finding that authenticity alone is insufficient to sustain user engagement. During the early stages of platform use, participants appreciated BeReal's emphasis on realistic self-presentation and reduced social comparison. These experiences align with previous research suggesting that authentic online interactions enhance perceived intimacy and reduce impression management (Vogel et al., [2014](#)).

However, as users became accustomed to the platform, authenticity gradually transformed from a source of enjoyment into a routine obligation. Daily posting expectations, repetitive content, and limited interaction reduced the perceived value of participation. This finding extends existing literature by suggesting that authenticity may lose its motivational power when repeated platform behaviours become predictable and obligatory. Consequently, platform design strategies emphasizing authenticity should also incorporate features that maintain long-term user interest and engagement.

6.3 Expectation Mismatch as a Turning Point

The emergence of expectation mismatch represents a critical transition within the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory. Participants initially expected BeReal to provide continuously engaging and meaningful social interactions; however, repeated experiences of routine posting, limited platform functionality, and declining novelty reduced satisfaction over time.

This finding closely aligns with the Expectation–Confirmation Model (Bhattacharjee, [2001](#)), which proposes that users evaluate digital technologies by comparing their actual experiences with their initial expectations. When experiences fail to confirm expectations, users become increasingly dissatisfied and are more likely to discontinue technology use. The present study extends this theory by demonstrating that expectation mismatch develops progressively rather than occurring as a single evaluative event.

6.4 Platform Fatigue as the Core Mechanism of Disengagement

The analysis identified platform fatigue as the central explanatory category linking early enthusiasm with eventual discontinuance. Participants described emotional exhaustion, declining motivation, notification pressure, and feelings of obligation associated with continued participation. Although BeReal was designed to reduce social comparison and appearance-related stress, users nevertheless experienced new forms of psychological burden associated with maintaining daily participation.

These findings support broader literature on social media fatigue, which argues that continuous digital engagement may produce emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and diminished platform satisfaction (Bright et al., [2015](#); Dhir et al., [2018](#)). However, the present study extends previous research by demonstrating that social media fatigue can emerge even within authenticity-oriented platforms specifically designed to minimize traditional social networking pressures.

Rather than replacing existing forms of digital stress, BeReal appears to have transformed them into participation-related obligations. Consequently, authenticity should not be viewed as a universal solution to social media fatigue but rather as one component of a more complex user experience.

6.5 Disengagement as a Gradual Behavioural Process

Unlike many technology discontinuance studies that conceptualize platform exit as a binary decision, the findings indicate that disengagement occurs progressively. Most participants did not immediately delete the application after experiencing fatigue. Instead, they gradually reduced

posting frequency, ignored notifications, browsed passively, and eventually ceased using the platform altogether.

This gradual transition suggests that platform disengagement resembles a behavioural continuum rather than a single event. Such findings contribute to technology discontinuance research by highlighting intermediate behavioural stages that have received relatively little scholarly attention. Understanding these transitional behaviours may enable platform developers to identify early indicators of declining engagement before users permanently abandon the platform.

6.6 Digital Reorientation and Digital Well-being

The final stage of the proposed theory demonstrates that platform discontinuance frequently reflects intentional efforts to improve digital well-being rather than simple dissatisfaction. Many participants reported that leaving BeReal allowed them to reduce screen time, minimize digital obligations, and regain greater control over their online behaviours.

These findings contribute to the emerging literature on digital well-being, suggesting that users increasingly evaluate social media platforms according to their effects on mental health, autonomy, and everyday life. Rather than interpreting discontinuance as technological failure, the results indicate that platform exit may represent a positive adaptive strategy through which individuals selectively reshape their digital environments.

6.7 Theoretical Contributions

The study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it develops the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT), a process-oriented framework explaining how authenticity-based social media users progress from initial curiosity to eventual disengagement. Unlike existing technology continuance models, CFDT conceptualizes discontinuance as a dynamic sequence of psychological and behavioural transitions rather than a single behavioural outcome. Second, the study extends Uses and Gratifications Theory by demonstrating that motivations satisfying initial platform adoption may gradually weaken as users' experiences evolve over time. Third, the findings enrich Expectation–Confirmation Theory by illustrating how expectation mismatch develops incrementally through repeated interactions rather than through isolated evaluations. Finally, the study expands research on social media fatigue by demonstrating that psychological fatigue may emerge even within platforms explicitly designed to reduce social comparison and encourage authentic self-presentation. This finding challenges the assumption that authenticity alone ensures sustained engagement.

6.8 Practical Implications

The findings offer practical implications for social media developers, platform designers, and digital well-being practitioners. For platform developers, sustaining long-term engagement requires balancing authenticity with novelty. Introducing meaningful feature updates, encouraging diverse forms of interaction, and reducing perceived participation obligations may help prevent user fatigue without undermining the platform's authentic identity. Designers should also consider implementing flexible participation mechanisms that allow users to engage without feeling compelled to post daily. Personalized notification systems, optional posting schedules, and adaptive engagement features may reduce psychological burden while preserving spontaneous interaction. For educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of promoting mindful social media use. Encouraging users to develop healthy digital habits and periodically evaluate their online engagement may contribute to improved digital well-being and more sustainable technology use.

7 Conclusion and others

7.1 Conclusion

The rapid emergence of authenticity-oriented social media platforms has reshaped how young adults communicate and present themselves online. While BeReal initially attracted widespread attention by promoting spontaneous and unfiltered interactions, sustaining user engagement has proved considerably more challenging. This study sought to understand how and why Asian young adults gradually disengage from BeReal by developing an empirically grounded explanation based on participants' lived experiences.

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study identified disengagement as a dynamic and progressive process rather than a single behavioural decision. The analysis revealed six interconnected stages: curiosity, authentic participation, expectation mismatch, platform fatigue, passive engagement, and digital reorientation. Together, these stages form the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT), which explains how users transition from initial enthusiasm to eventual platform discontinuance.

The findings demonstrate that although authenticity initially motivates platform adoption, it does not necessarily ensure sustained engagement. Instead, diminishing novelty, repetitive interactions, participation obligations, and evolving user expectations gradually reduce motivation and contribute to platform fatigue. Rather than abandoning the platform abruptly, users typically experience a gradual reduction in participation before ultimately disengaging or restructuring their broader digital practices.

The study therefore challenges the assumption that authenticity alone is sufficient to sustain long-term engagement. Instead, successful social media platforms must continuously balance authenticity with novelty, flexibility, and meaningful user experiences that evolve alongside changing user expectations.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

The present study makes several important contributions to the literature on social media engagement and technology discontinuance. First, it proposes the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory (CFDT), a grounded theoretical framework that conceptualizes platform disengagement as a sequential behavioural process rather than a single outcome. Existing studies have primarily emphasized technology adoption or continuance intention, whereas the present research explains how disengagement unfolds over time. Second, the study contributes to the growing literature on authenticity-based social media by demonstrating that authenticity is a dynamic rather than static user experience. Although authenticity encourages initial participation, its motivational value declines when repeated interactions become predictable and routine. Third, the findings extend Uses and Gratifications Theory by illustrating that user motivations evolve throughout the technology lifecycle rather than remaining stable after adoption. Likewise, the study enriches the Expectation–Confirmation Model by demonstrating that expectation mismatch develops progressively through repeated user experiences. Finally, the study contributes to research on social media fatigue by showing that psychological fatigue can emerge even within platforms intentionally designed to reduce traditional social networking pressures. This finding broadens current understanding of digital fatigue beyond algorithm-driven social media environments.

7.3 Practical Implications

The findings provide several practical implications for platform developers, designers, and digital well-being practitioners. For social media companies, maintaining long-term engagement requires balancing authenticity with sustained user interest. Platform developers should consider introducing adaptive features, optional participation modes, and more flexible interaction mechanisms that reduce routine obligations while preserving the platform's authentic identity. Designers should also minimise notification pressure and repetitive user experiences. Personalised

engagement strategies, greater user autonomy, and opportunities for varied content creation may help reduce platform fatigue and improve user retention. For educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers, the findings reinforce the importance of promoting healthy digital habits. Rather than encouraging continuous online participation, interventions should support mindful social media use, digital self-regulation, and balanced engagement across multiple digital platforms.

7.4 Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations.

First, the findings are based on qualitative interviews with Asian young adults, and therefore may not be directly transferable to users from different age groups, cultural contexts, or geographic regions. Second, participants' experiences were collected at a particular stage in BeReal's development. As social media platforms evolve rapidly, user perceptions and engagement patterns may change over time. Third, the study focused exclusively on BeReal. Although the findings may offer insights relevant to other authenticity-oriented platforms, caution should be exercised when generalising the proposed theory to different social networking environments. Finally, as with all qualitative research, the objective was to develop theoretical understanding rather than establish statistical generalisability. Future quantitative research is required to validate the proposed conceptual framework across larger populations.

7.5 Directions for Future Research

The Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory opens several avenues for future investigation. First, future studies should quantitatively validate the proposed theory using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) across larger and more diverse populations. Second, longitudinal research could examine how user engagement changes throughout different stages of platform maturity and investigate whether disengagement processes differ between newly adopted and established social media platforms. Third, comparative studies involving platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Threads, Lemon8, and BeReal could identify similarities and differences in authenticity perceptions, social media fatigue, and platform discontinuance. Fourth, future research should examine the influence of additional psychological variables—including Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), digital well-being, privacy concerns, social comparison, self-presentation, algorithmic trust, and habit strength—on user engagement and discontinuance. Finally, cross-cultural investigations involving users from different regions would improve understanding of how cultural values shape authenticity, digital behaviour, and platform disengagement.

7.6 Final Statement

The digital landscape continues to evolve rapidly, yet sustained engagement depends on more than technological innovation. This study demonstrates that user engagement is a dynamic psychological process, shaped by changing expectations, experiences, and digital practices. By introducing the Curiosity–Fatigue–Disengagement Theory, the research provides a new conceptual lens through which scholars and practitioners can understand the lifecycle of authenticity-oriented social media use. As users increasingly seek healthier and more meaningful digital experiences, future social media platforms should prioritise not only authenticity but also adaptability, autonomy, and long-term user well-being. These considerations are likely to become central determinants of sustainable engagement in the next generation of social networking platforms.

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