Media Ideologies, Contested Authenticities, and Socality Barbie

@socalitybarbie, 2015’s Instagram sensation, has an impressive 1.3 million followers on the platform, up from just over 7,000 back in September. Although not as popular as @taylorswift (with 60.4 million Instagram followers), @socalitybarbie’s mysterious curator, only recently revealed as photographer Darby Cisneros, far exceeded the attention she expected to draw with her parodic and intentionally provocative Instagram account.

Journalists have praised @socalitybarbie for addressing troubling social networking trends having to do with visual self-representation, conspicuous consumption, and the high editability (i.e., filterability) of images regarding one’s lifestyle for various online publics. One tech journalist pronounced @socalitybarbie’s status as “a fantastic Instagram account satirizing the great millennial adventurer trend in photography. It’s an endless barrage of pensive selfies in exotic locales, arty snapshots of coffee, and just the right filter on everything.” People Magazine described Cisneros’s Instagram as a “brilliant hipster Barbie account [that] makes fun of That Girl on social media who always manages to make you feel bad about yourself for a) not traveling enough, b) not having enough friends, let alone hip ones and c) not eating artisanal ice cream on a regular basis.” “Socality Barbie is here to show you, with just the right amount of irony,” The Atlantic commented, “how cliché the #liveauthentic aesthetic really is.”

But what does this “liveauthentic” hashtag communicate? And against whom or what exactly does Cisneros direct her witty, playful, image-driven diatribe? As various news media have attested, @socalitybarbie critically parodies hipsters, Instagrammers, iPhone photographers, nature and hiking imagery framed with inspirational quotations, and hyper-curated strategies of visual self-representation on the subjects of travel, foodie cooking tips and restaurant suggestions, high quality coffee shops, and other artisanal consumer patterns. But working in the anthropology of religion and the study of digital media language, one might point out that journalists too quickly gloss over—or completely ignore—the evangelical roots of @socalitybarbie’s criticisms. Make no mistake; Cisneros takes issues with hipsters and Instagrammers. She directs her ire, however, toward a recent brand of aesthetically inclined evangelicals. @socalitybarbie is both a Christian discourse, in a narrow sense, and an encompassing media ideology, in a broad one. Authenticity language, in these debates, operates hand in hand with discourses of religious orthodoxy.

Relevant Magazine, the flagship publication of youngish, contemporary evangelicals, recently interviewed Cisneros. “How much of your original intent was aimed at spoofing the Christian hipster thing specifically?” inquired the magazine’s editors. “It’s the big reason I started the account,” Cisneros replied. “I know Socality is full of Jesus-loving people with good intentions, and I’ve had some good conversations with people in Socality. But I feel like their overall message was lost amongst the pretty landscape images, inspiring quotes and product promotions.”

A bit of background on the Socality organization—whose title stems from a complicated acronym: “We are a (SO) social (C) community (AL) all for eternity (ITY)”—will help us trace the origins of the hashtag(s) in question. The group’s “Who We Are” page self-describes as a Christian organization. Socality is an institution that postures itself, using popular buzzwords, as a “community,” “collective,” or “movement,” “designed with purpose initiated by people and aimed at bringing the heartbeat of God to humanity.” Socality intends to mediate or construct bridges of connectivity between a person’s presence in the online world and so-called “real life,” or what one might take to mean existence outside of digital networks. The organization aims to function, in other words, as a communicative technology...
or platform that erases or blurs the gap between the local and the global, the real and the hyper-real. Creation of online spaces of belonging and a transitioning of those very spaces into less-mediated, “real life interactions,” in fact, constitute Socality’s mission. “Authenticity” and “authentic” relationships, as Cisneros will later take to task, are rhetorics central to the network’s identity. Yet, Socality has what one might analytically construe as a religious agenda. “We are committed to being a space where people can find community and work together in the common goals of social impact, community development and working out their faith,” the site details. As founder Scott Bakken writes, the group identifies as conservatively Christian with a reformist, minimalist bent: “At the core, we believe in Jesus and the gospel He teaches through the Bible. We want to get back to the basics and focus on the central theme of Jesus, which is about loving God and loving His people.” (Bakken and his spouse, notably, trained for five years at Australia’s evangelical megachurch and home of the contemporary music empire, Hillsong Church.) The network, to summarize, is a visually narrative socio-religious platform, with the goal of inspiring communicants by telling stories with pictures. Making use of socially descriptive, self-affiliating micro stances (i.e., hashtags)—often via interconnected platforms including Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram—Socality efforts to build a community extending beyond both online and material worlds.

To return to Cisneros’s Instagram account, the parody make more sense when analyzed in the above context. The photographer’s commentary from the Relevant interview tellingly pinpoints what she views as the problem with Socality’s agenda. “One of the issues I wanted to address was the way many of us Christians were using social media,” Cisneros clarifies. Note the use of the pronoun in the first person plural; here the @socalitybarbie originator both engages in linguistic stancetaking as she criticizes a religious organization (i.e., Socality) but self-identifies with the umbrella category (i.e., Christianity). An inundation of Socality-related hashtags on Instagram, in Cisneros’s perspective, promotes “a shallow view of faith and could give off the wrong idea about what it’s like to follow Jesus.”

Contrary to Socality’s depiction of such a process, authentic Christian living involves much more than curating aesthetically pleasing pictures framed with Christian inspirational texts. Living as “a follower of Jesus is hard work,” actually, “and there are a lot of ugly and difficult things we encounter in our walks with Christ.” Cisneros’s suggestions for improvement for Christian Instagrammers include (1) resisting “curating every image” and (2) avoiding using the dubious “live authentic” hashtag originated by Socality proponents.

By way of a conclusion, I’d like to issue some critical reflections on the @socalitybarbie media event and ensuing contestations online. Indeed, the experiment does submit a trenchant depiction and rejection of what one scholar of media and consumption has described, in a Bourdieuan vein, as a *taste regime* or set of discourses that seek to “tell us how to prop our lives, how to set a dinner table, what not to wear, and more importantly, where to hang that fake antler in our living rooms.” Pervasive visual ideologies “prescribe us ways to document our lives.” Both @socalitybarbie’s images as well as the unabashed endorsements of her work by journalists, then, fall squarely into the analytic category of *media ideologies*, or discourses posited by various social actors in elaboration of the ways media ought to be correctly used. On the other hand, Cisneros’s project itself is ripe for critical discourse analysis, especially from a religious studies standpoint.

What @socalitybarbie offers is an embedded discourse, a criticism-within-a-criticism. Socality, forming in 2014, postured itself as a better form of Christianity than the alternatives and in doing so rejected existing rituals and forms of practice as limiting or insufficient; @socalitybarbie agrees with
much of Socality’s agenda but sees it as a largely failed or shallow attempt at a more genuine possibility of living. The contestation between Socality and Cisneros is, in point of fact, an insider’s battle between emic claims re: correct Christian deportments. Consider again the photographer’s language in the above paragraph. What Cisneros vies for is an allegedly more “authentic” mode of existence, a profound and ostensibly deeper way of following Jesus and engaging social networking apparati. The @socalitybarbie debate is a landmine for scholars of religion as it both elaborates and maintains a compellingly broad media ideology—with which even secular media outlets appear to agree—and reveals strategies and tactics for the management of evangelical registers of orthodoxy and correctness. Instagram, whatever its exact social effects, is a productive means of social boundary maintenance on a number of levels. Hashtags, by this reading, operate simultaneously as micro-commentaries, theological stances, and performances of socio-cultural identities, aesthetics, and affiliations.

[Image courtesy of Socality Barbie.]