

It's Okay To Feel Lost: Young Adults' Engagement With Aesthetic Motivational Instagram Content

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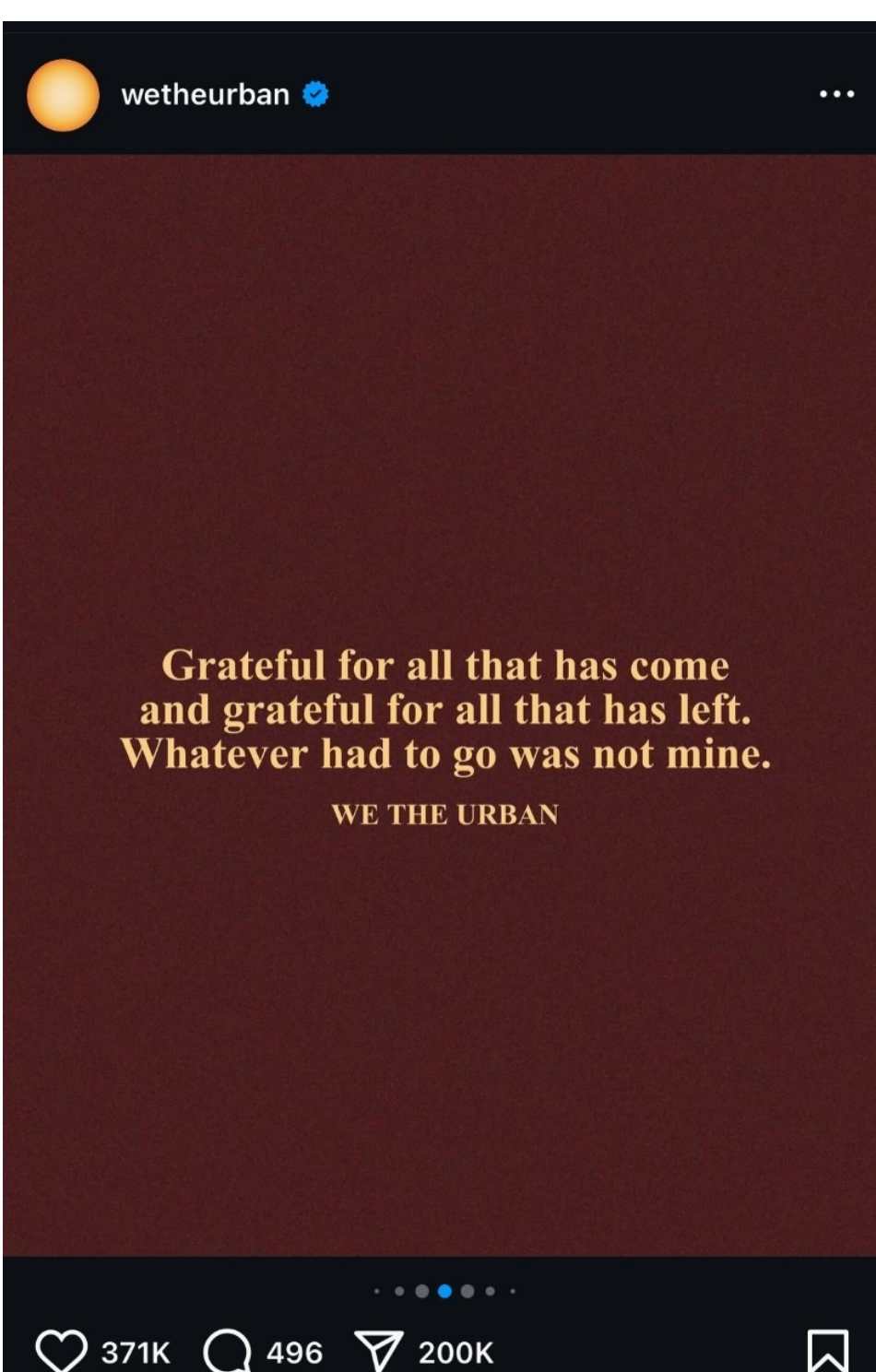
Background

The Pew Research Center reports Instagram as the third most used social media platform by adults in the US.¹ In addition, almost all of my participants stated that they use Instagram for an hour or more each day. With this widespread presence, it may be important to investigate the impact of the content it contains.

Purpose Statement

My study aimed to gain understanding into the appeal of two Instagram accounts: @WereNotReallyStrangers and @WeTheUrban, which post niche content combining aesthetic imagery and quotes. The focus was on uncovering why people choose to consume this content and the personal desires/needs it meets through the framework of the Uses and Gratifications theory. (The theory posits that people have mental or emotional needs that they seek to fulfill, and some ways in which they fulfill these needs are through making active choices on which media they consume and how they consume it.) By applying these findings, artistic context, and my personal thoughts, I created an inspired, but informed, take on the trend in a series of large-scale acrylic paintings.

Instagram Content Examples



Methods

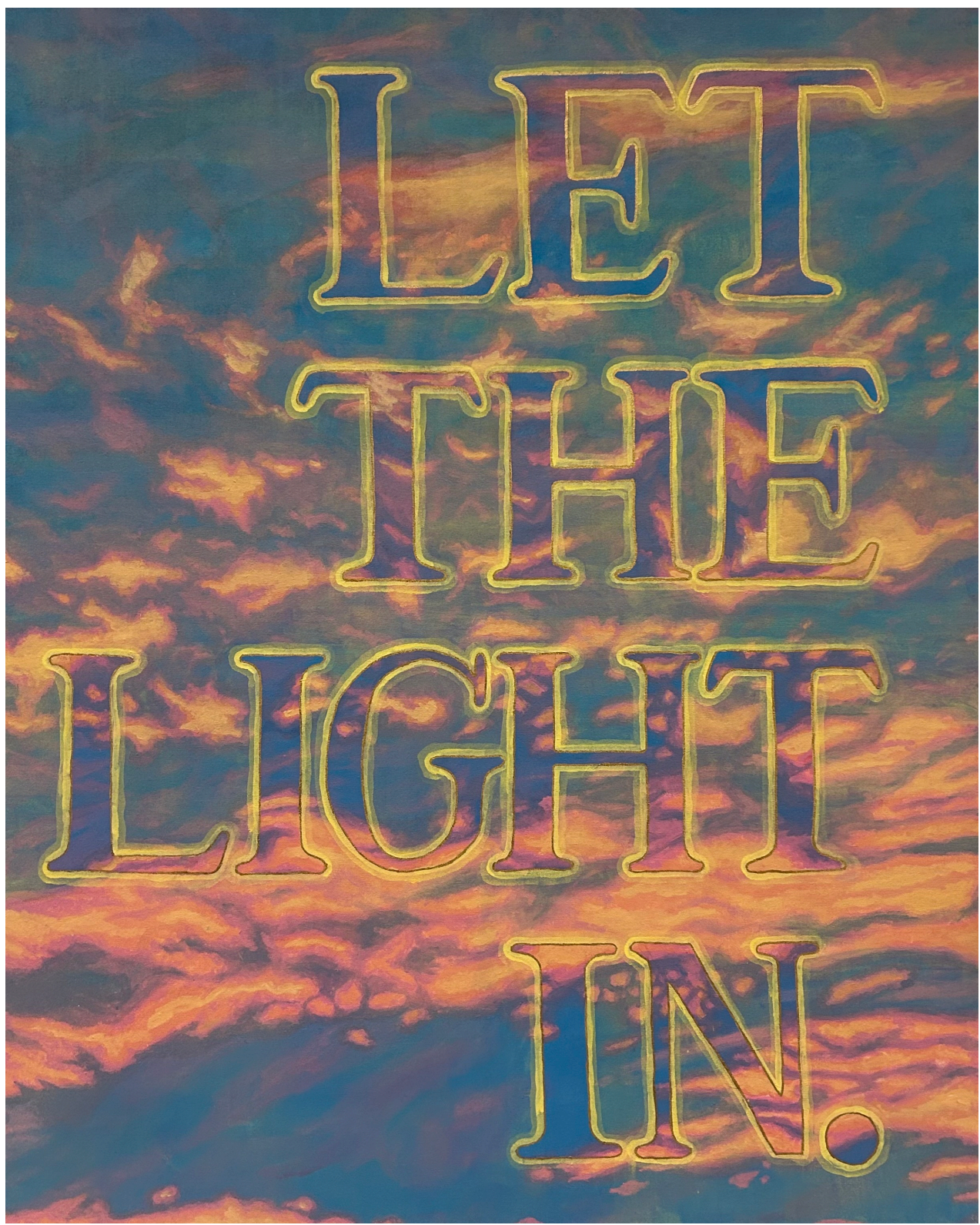
To execute this study, I interviewed 10 students who follow the specific accounts. They were asked questions regarding why the media is consumed and the effects of consumption as well as the relationship between image and word in a piece of content. I also analyzed and contextualized the set of imagery on Instagram by applying relevant art history research. The combination of findings and my personal thoughts and feelings was applied to the creation of a series of paintings. The project culminated in a public gallery display in order to share my findings and reflections through art.

Findings

- This Instagram content is used to fulfill the needs for escape, identity, and companionship
 - it provides an escape from online negativity
 - it provides support for identity cultivation, by prompting self-care, providing means for reflection and representation, and boosting self-esteem
 - it meets the need for companionship by presenting a sense of connection and community, which alleviates loneliness
- This study supports expanded application of Uses and Gratifications theory to contemporary media forms
 - it contributes to research in examining the theory's viability in analyzing consumption choices on Instagram, a form of contemporary social media
 - it evidences an expansion of the need for escape, in which people feel a need to escape from negative media along with traditional stressors
- Participants indicated two main Instagram content design preferences
 - they cared more about the verbal or word component of the posts in comparison to the visual imagery
 - they felt that the imagery component added a layer of depth to the content of the post

¹ Gottfried, J. (2024, January 31). *Americans' Social Media Use*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/>

Artistic Interpretations



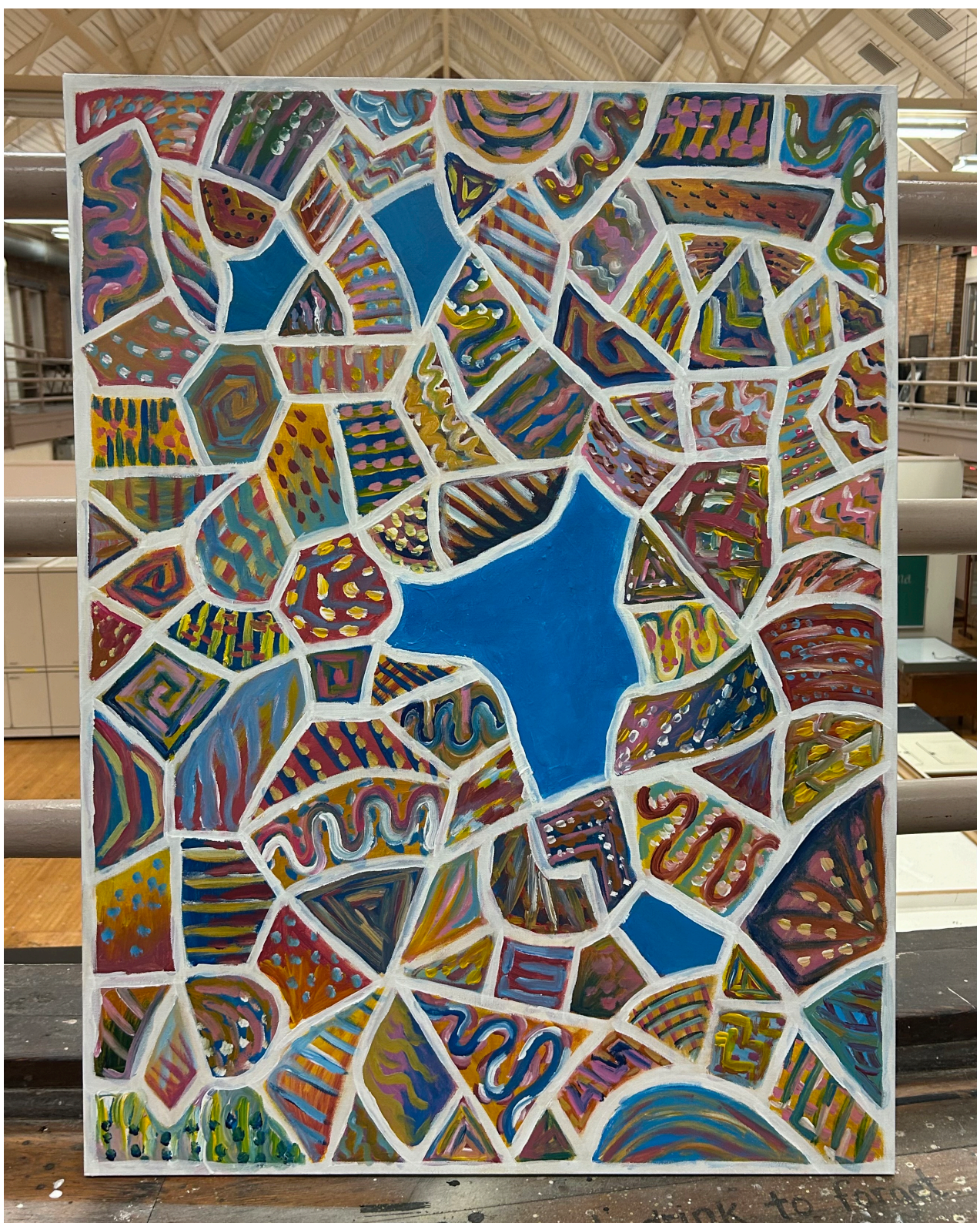
Open Up, 2025
acrylic paint



Advice From Old People, 2025
acrylic paint



Heaven's Sake, 2025
acrylic paint



Peace Within, 2025
acrylic paint

- My use of painting as a creative outlet fulfills my needs of escape and identity support in a similar way that the Instagram content fulfills those needs for my participants, which contributing to the success of my art in reflecting findings
 - through my series of paintings, I was able to deliver uplifting messages and explore nuances of practicing positivity.

Thank you to my advisors, friends, and family. An additional thank you goes to the Copeland Fund for the materials grant. This project would not be possible without you!