Instagram won’t solve inequality

Science Sam is a big name on campus. She’s a Ph.D. candidate in the sciences who wants to pursue a career outside of academia, like me. But unlike me, she is our school’s science communication, or #scicomm, superstar. Her Instagram page, which aims to show the “fun and trendy” side of science, was recently celebrated in the school’s newsletter for increasing the public’s trust in scientists. At a career workshop, graduate students were urged to follow Science Sam’s example and use #scicomm to build our personal brands as we enter the job market. I already have an Instagram account, but it reflects my interests in photography and baking more than my love of science. The workshop got me thinking: Should my posts focus less on pastries and more on pipettes?

I followed Sam on Instagram, and I soon found many other female graduate students and postdocs whose Instagram pages are filled with pretty selfies, fun videos, and microscope images captioned with accessible language and cute emojis. These researchers assert themselves as scientists who don’t fit the stereotypes that are typically applied to women in the field. They are not boring or unfashionable. Instead, their posts demonstrate that they’re interested in clothes and makeup, that they’re physically active, and that they are attractive romantic partners. By visibly contradicting stereotypes about female scientists, it is clear that they hope to inspire girls to pursue science and to encourage female scientists to showcase their femininity in our male-dominated work spaces.

If I had seen these posts when I was 17, maybe I would have been more confident that I would excel in engineering even though I spent my time in the darkroom developing photos, not in the computer lab learning to code like the male engineers I saw in popular culture. But instead of cheering on Instagram’s dynamic and vibrant #scicomm women, I felt an increasing bitterness with each post I came across, though I struggled to understand why.

After long conversations with other women in my lab, I realized that I am not bitter toward the authors of these posts. Although I am annoyed that the majority of the posts seem to celebrate a very narrow representation of femininity, my real bitterness comes from the systemic challenges that these posts are working to address, and from seeing so many young female scientists compelled to turn to their personal social media pages to try to correct the system’s failures.

I have come to understand #scicomm on Instagram as a digital demonstration of the efforts that many female scientists exert daily to correct for gender disparities. Female scientists spend demonstrably more time teaching, mentoring, and participating in community outreach than their male colleagues, just as there are far more female #scicommers on Instagram than male. I liken the many hours that Science Sam spends on her Instagram content to the volunteer work a female professor in my department put into organizing a summer program to introduce teens from underrepresented communities to biomedical engineering.

A lot of good comes from the work of female scientists on Instagram. But it disturbs me that these efforts are celebrated as ways to correct for the long held and deeply structured forms of discrimination and exclusion that female scientists face. I wonder whether our efforts should instead be directed toward advocating for policy changes at institutional and governmental levels.

When I next interview for a job, I won’t have an Instagram page to show that my love of science doesn’t make me boring and unfriendly. Publicly documenting the cute outfit I wear and the sweet smile I brandish in the lab isn’t going to help me build a fulfilling career in a field where women hold less senior positions, are paid less, and are continuously underrated. Time spent on Instagram is time away from research, and this affects women in science more than men. That’s unfair. Let’s not celebrate that.

Meghan Wright is a doctoral candidate in the Institute of Biomaterials and Biomedical Engineering at the University of Toronto in Canada.
Instagram won't solve inequality
Meghan Wright

Science 359 (6381), 1294.
DOI: 10.1126/science.359.6381.1294