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Infinite content, infinitely content

Self-expression in contemporary digital culture

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CHAPTER ONE

General Introduction

Our everyday lives have become inseparable from the digital potentials of self-expression; status updates, snaps, stories, texts, and tweets enable us to share our every thought, feeling or experience with the world, or to closely monitor those of others. These bits and pieces of our digital 'selfhood' accumulate on social media platforms, essentially forming online repositories of self. While social media afford us the freedom of limitless self-expressive creativity and instantaneous connectedness, we also sometimes become nostalgic toward the 'offline', to the point that we occasionally disconnect or 'detox' from social media or take pride in quitting social media entirely.

In popular press, plenty of voices have commented on the shift to a culture of social media consumption we currently find ourselves in. Social media cater to the desire to 'be recognized', as it facilitates convenient ways of expressing ourselves for the world to see. Critics argue that a so-called 'oversharing epidemic' has emerged (Huffington Post, 2013; Dose, 2016). This disinhibition is reflected in the continuous stream of public self-revelations and rude remarks across social media platforms. In a world where prominent figures have become Twitter trolls (The New Yorker, 2017), Instagram is replete with sexual harassments (Huffington Post, 2015, 2016), and racist slurs populate comment sections (Telegraph, 2016), we could surely doubt whether this convenience of self-expression represents a positive development. Conversely, much of what is shared consists of trite holiday stories and everyday trivialities, and occasional pictures of our cats. We however edit and

polish these messages to portray ourselves as original and exciting. Consequently, we see everyone else having an exceptional life which, as argued, leaves us with an overwhelming fear of missing out (Huffington Post, 2017). Likewise, this development is regarded as dangerously narcissistic (The Guardian, 2016); we are perpetually in search of micro-affirmations and validation through the scoreboard of our online performances (i.e., number of followers, likes, retweets etc.), as we try to establish a sense of self-relevance.

The public concerns that have been voiced stand in contrast with the widespread adoption and continual use of various social media platforms. It seems, on the whole, as if a love-hate relationship has emerged; the oversharing and triviality makes people want to 'log off', yet they cannot resist to near-constantly 'log on'. This all does however hint at a transformation in expressive behavior, and raises some interesting questions: which self-expressions do we actually consider appropriate, who engages in these different types of self-expression, and what are the consequences of self-expression for ourselves? This dissertation aims to contribute to the understanding of self-expression in contemporary digital culture by addressing these questions. Scholars have already shown interest in the expressive behaviors that social media bring forth, and the consequences thereof. Research on social media uses and effects is however still in its infancy, given that (Web 2.0) social media did not gain prominence until around the year 2003 and have been subject to rapid and continuous evolvments ever since (Van Dijck, 2013a). By way of introduction, past and current theoretical perspectives that have taken central positions in the field of social media research are briefly revisited next.

Social Media and Self-Expression

What we say and how we say it defines in part who we are (Goffman, 1956). Self-expression, referring to the verbalization of information related to the self (e.g., thoughts, stories, or feelings) in speech and in writing, is inherently tied to the way individuals wish to be perceived by others. In the pre-digital world, everyday impressions were formed and managed in face-to-face encounters, letter writings or telephone conversations. Today, social media provide convenient spaces in which individuals showcase their personal thoughts, feelings and experiences, as well as manage the impressions others may form of them. Social media constitute Web 2.0 internet-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-

generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Given the centrality of 'exchange', social media are argued to service a culture of connectivity through the sharing of expressive and communicative content (Van Dijck, 2013a).

Social media platforms present novel spaces for self-expression, most notably because of the properties that characterize them. As outlined by boyd (2011), interactions sustained by social media are asynchronous, which means that people do not necessarily share and respond to each other in real time and are able to do so beyond geographic constraints. By default, then, the bits of information people express online persist; self-expressions are archived, and as such remain available for others to see long after they have been shared on social media. This offers the possibility for self-expressions to reach a wide spectrum of others (boyd, 2011). At the same time, the scalability that social media interfaces afford does not guarantee enhanced visibility, and may also be used to minimize it. On the contrary, some social media may offer a sense of invisibility, in terms of physicality, due to their reduced-cue setting (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Especially in the early days of the internet when communication was solely text-based, exchange of nonverbal cues (either visual or auditory) was hardly possible. This initially led scholars to view computer-mediated communication as impersonal, as it would lack socioemotional content and thereby hinder social connectedness and impression formation (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Rice & Love, 1987).

The hyperpersonal view as developed by Walther (1996) runs counter to this impersonal view. He argued that the absence of non-verbal cues does not deter socioemotional content; instead, it leads to more intimate, favorable, and affective exchanges. The hallmark of computer-mediated settings, from this hyperpersonal view, lies in the opportunities to more effectively manage the impressions one wishes to leave on others (Walther, 1996). As individuals are not physically visible to the other and interactions do not require immediate response, users do not necessarily have to worry about their physical appearance and, rather, rely on selective linguistic cues. In turn, this is argued to lead to a (positive) idealization of the other, especially when a commonality with the other is sensed (Walther, 1996). By the same token, one is able to draw up self-expressions such that, selectively, certain self-aspects may be emphasized, embellished or obscured. In their current state, social media's opportunities for selective self-presentation allows users to express and construct their identities in a manner that has never before been possible.

Theoretically, then, these premises suggest that social media make for an attractive environment to express oneself in. And indeed research has found social media to be rich in personal and self-related content, a phenomenon Castells (2007) has come to define as 'mass self-communication'. Specifically, compared to face-to-face settings, online settings seemingly create a safe space for frequent and more explicit emotion expressions (e.g., Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008). This online disinhibition is partially due to not only the perceived manageability of one's expressions, but also due to social media's architecture. After all, social media are not just about listing one's favorite movies, music, hobbies and other personal details. Rather, many platforms steer performances toward emotional, immediate and intuitive expressions as a result of the emphasis on 'friending', 'liking', 'connecting', and 'following', as well as the variety of expressive tools on offer (e.g., Van Dijck, 2013b). In light of this, it is hard to disagree with the proposition that computer-mediated settings, and social media in particular, represent hyperpersonal spaces.

Predictors of Self-Expression Online

Over the past 50 years, the act of self-expression has thoroughly been studied, chiefly in reference to which factors may predict behaviors of self-disclosure and self-presentation. To capture and explain how and why individuals verbally express themselves, research has taken either an individual difference perspective or an interpersonal process perspective (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). The former relies on personality characteristics of the discloser and receiver, while the latter takes into account the social relationship between them as well as the back-and-forth interaction process. The individual difference perspective has been readily extended to social media. Many studies have for instance examined demographics (gender and age) and the Big Five personality traits, representative of five broad dimensions on which individuals differ in their predisposition (extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism), in relation to social media use and disclosure (Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). This research has revealed that not everyone behaves in the same way online. However, as several scholars have noted, empirical attempts at understanding the predictive value of age, gender, and personality on differential online self-expression have so far generated inconclusive results (e.g., Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Ross et al., 2009).

In light of these inconclusive findings, the influential role of the receiver is increasingly acknowledged in research on predictors of social media self-expression. As social media are marked by 'mass' self-communication (Castells, 2007), audiences unsurprisingly play a defining role. By and large, social media allow their users to reach a greater number of people compared to offline settings (boyd, 2011). Likewise, one's self-expressions may be read by a more varied set of people, including strangers. Accordingly, the concept of audience has taken a prominent position in theoretical advancements within social media research in recent years. What scholars have come to term the 'imagined audience', seizes on the idea that social media essentially provide little cues as to who really views one's self expressions (e.g., Litt, 2012). In a similar vein, scholars have noted that on social media different social groups are, often unknowingly, collapsed into one single space, known as a 'context collapse' (e.g., Marwick & boyd, 2011). Posting a message on social media intended for friends, for instance, may be read by colleagues and family members as well.

To further decipher relevant predictors of self-expression variations, social media scholars have become rapt in these dualities of public and private, mass and interpersonal. While some social media platforms can be understood as public, and other platforms as private, it is not completely binary. For instance, Facebook presents a more constrained, semi-public platform where users take charge in who to accept as their 'friends'. Platforms such as Instagram and Twitter are commonly more open in allowing their users to follow and read messages from anyone with an account, unless of course one customizes their privacy settings. In light of the 'imagined audience' and 'context collapse', the properties of social media platforms have muddled the social contexts in which people perform and express themselves. Social context matters to the extent that people adapt their self-expressions to the audience that is in front of them (e.g., Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000; Walther, 1992). Essentially, people present themselves differently to parents, colleagues, best friends, or strangers. Research has already found greater audience size and audience diversity to be associated with increased self-disclosure (Vitak, 2012). These complexities of social context, as such, may potentially impact the way people express themselves online.

The changes in public and private boundaries of sharing, giving rise to unique social contexts, are thus gradually becoming a critical way of looking at social

media platforms and comparing the expressive behaviors found across them. This social context perspective, however, has yet to be integrated with an individual difference perspective. Especially in light of online self-expression, typically involving the sharing of personal and intimate content, the perceived social context may bring about tensions in what information to reveal and what information to conceal (Binder, Howes, & Smart, 2012; Lambert, 2015). Before sharing a specific self-expression, social media users therefore need to consider whether its content is suited for the audience one is able to reach. From an individual difference perspective, not everyone may carry the same perceptions on what is or is not appropriate in a given social context, is as active in sharing personal stories, or maintains equal awareness of their potential audience.

Consequences of Self-Expression for the Self

With the hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996), the scholarly perspective on computer-mediated communication has shifted from negative to positive; instead of impersonal settings ill-suited for relational maintenance and development, online settings are now seen as facilitators of greater conversational intimacy and social connectedness (e.g., Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Nevertheless, much of the public concern articulated in popular press highlight negative consequences of self-expression on social media for the self, such that social media users have become more disinhibited or narcissistic. To date, media effects research in the context of computer-mediated communication has generally taken a reception-oriented approach, referring to a focus on the extent to which (online) content impacts the recipient (Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016). A steadily emerging line of research now intends to understand how the content that one posts online not only affects the receiver, but also, and maybe more importantly, the sender of that content (e.g., Pingree, 2007; Shah, 2016). Summed up under the heading of 'self-effects', the composition and sharing of self-related content may have an effect on the senders' cognitions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors (Valkenburg, 2017).

Originally observed in face-to-face settings, expressions about specific aspects of the self may come to further shape how one sees him or herself, which in time could lead to a self-concept change in the direction of the presented self (e.g., Tice, 1992). Likewise, individuals may come to persuade themselves by expressing

a particular alternative opinion (self-persuasion; e.g., Aronson, 1999). Others have found that expressive writing and sharing may lead to improved health or well-being (venting effect; e.g., Pennebaker, 1997; Rimé, 2009). Though still a matter of theoretical contention, two classes of mechanisms seem to underlie such effects (for an overview, see Valkenburg, 2017). First, self-effects result from intrapersonal processes, such that individuals seek internal consistency with their overt behavior. Second, interpersonal processes based on ‘imagined audiences’ have been put forth as important factors that accelerate intrapersonal processes. That is, public behavior may strengthen the need for consistency due to a felt accountability towards an audience. In addition, the anticipation of receiving feedback may increase attention towards a written message (Pingree, 2007), and obtaining actual feedback may in turn stimulate internal processing of the contents of one’s message (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Again, this underscores the relevance of social context, specifically the differentiation between public and private, not only in shaping self-expression, but also in the subsequent effects on the self.

For social media, the after-effects of specific self-expressions on the sender have so far received little attention. Given that self-expression on social media is more frequent and more public, Valkenburg (2017) contends that there may be more room for online self-effects to surface. The control that social media afford over one’s self-expressions may, for one, activate intrapersonal mechanisms. The scalability that characterizes social media, along with the idea of an ‘imagined audience’, may further stimulate the internal processes that give rise to self-effects. In light of the novelty and dynamic growth of social media, self-effects in the context of social media are deserving of more systematic study which will in turn, as noted by Valkenburg (2017), facilitate a better understanding of reception-effects. All in all, the literature has yet to establish a clear perspective on what self-effects manifest online, in which settings these are more or less likely to occur, and whether such effects are beneficial or damaging for the self.

Overview of this Dissertation

Despite the body of knowledge that has accumulated since the quick rise of social media, there are a few shortcomings worth addressing. Two key issues have been identified in the literature. First, much empirical work has relied on broader-level conceptualizations of online expressive behaviors, as well as potential predictors

and consequences in relation to them. For instance, many studies have looked at general self-disclosure online, even though self-disclosures may vary considerably in the personal topics one addresses (e.g., thoughts, feelings, goals, likes or dislikes etc.; Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). Another key issue has been the assumption that behavioral findings may generalize to social media as a monolithic entity. Clearly, not all social media are equal, and each platform lends itself to different uses and activities. The different algorithms, protocols and default (public or privacy) settings implemented in the interfaces of social media platforms, as argued, contribute to unique social contexts (Van Dijck, 2013b). To these points, several scholars have declared a need for more specificity in variables under study, as well as a need for more comparative research between platforms (e.g., Hughes et al., 2012; Ross et al., 2009; Van Dijck, 2013b).

Research would thus benefit from a more refined approach to the study of online self-expression, which in this dissertation is accomplished by looking at specific types of self-expression: Expressions of emotion (sadness, anger, disappointment, worry, joy and pride) and selective expressions related to self-concept (extraversion and introversion). As highlighted by the hyperpersonal model and subsequent research, social media foster more intimate and personal expressions of self. The expression of emotions on social media is therefore highly relevant, yet surprisingly understudied (e.g., Derks et al., 2008; Lin, Tov, & Qiu, 2014). The possibilities for selective self-presentation on social media further suggest that identity expressions prevail. To fully grasp specific patterns of self-expressive behaviors on social media, this dissertation first examines prevailing normative perceptions on self-expression, which, remarkably, have not yet been considered in relation to emotion expressions online. In light of the individual difference perspective, these norms will subsequently be modeled in relation to specific personality traits to gain thorough insights into predictors of frequent emotion expression. With the aim to contribute to the emerging line of research on 'self-effects', this dissertation additionally seeks to analyze the specific self-effects of emotion expression on emotion, and selective identity expressions on users' perceived self-concept.

In like manner, the above outlined study aims are examined across different platforms. By taking such a comparative approach, this dissertation acknowledges the unique social contexts that platforms give rise to. Much of the work in this dissertation focuses on social media platforms that have maintained consistent

popularity over the last few years: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. In doing so, we are able to better understand differences in public and private social contexts, and the psychology that surrounds individual's social media use. Throughout the dissertation, the focus will be on (young) social media users between the ages of 15 and 35, as young individuals are known to represent the most avid and active users of social media and their expressive features (e.g., Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013).

To summarize, *Chapter 2* sets out to examine how social norms (i.e., perceived appropriateness) of emotion expression differ across the four social media platforms of interest. Gender and age are additionally examined to understand possible variations between males and females, as well as late adolescents and emerging adults, respectively. *Chapter 3* models the antecedents of the frequency of emotion expression online. Specifically, we examined how personality traits variably contribute to engaging in frequent positive and negative emotion expression on public social media platforms, as well as the mediating role of perceived injunctive norms herein.

The two subsequent chapters focus on the consequences that self-expression may have on the self. *Chapter 4* addresses the potential self-effects of expressing emotions on social media. Specifically, the study tests whether positive and negative emotion expression would lead to either a fading or intensification of emotions as experienced afterwards. Additionally, differences in self-effects between public and private social media platforms are examined. *Chapter 5* further extends research on self-concept changes as a result of selective identity expressions (extraversion vs. introversion) in public social media-like settings. Specifically, different degrees of publicness (semi-public vs. public) are examined to assess differences in self-concept change, as well as the potential reinforcing effect of being able to customize (expand or restrict) the degree of publicness through interface properties. Finally, *Chapter 6* summarizes the works presented in Chapters 2 to 5 in an effort to gain a clearer perspective on self-expression in contemporary digital culture.

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