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Infinite content, infinitely content

Self-expression in contemporary digital culture

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CHAPTER SIX

General Discussion

It is less than twenty years since social media have made their way into our lives, yet we have become dependent on them as a way to connect to like-minded individuals, communicate beyond geographic constraints, access a wealth of information, and most prominently, share anything that's on our minds. From 2003 onwards, marking the start of the Web 2.0 revolution, hundreds of social networking applications have been released and re-released for the general public (Ellison & boyd, 2013). As Friedman (2016) illustrates in his chapter titled *What the Hell Happened in 2007?*, it was not until 2007 that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube truly broke into the mainstream media sphere and gained wild popularity worldwide, shortly followed by the widespread adoption of Instagram (in 2010) and Snapchat (in 2011). Together, they represent the current generation of social media platforms, along with messenger applications like Skype, WhatsApp, and WeChat. Over the years, social media have quickly become variegated environments teeming with opportunities for users to interact with others, play games, distribute web and video links, discover new content, or keep up with newsworthy events. Yet they all remain profoundly oriented towards self-expression; users are encouraged to express what's on their mind and share "all of their moments – the highlights and everything in between" (Instagram, 2017).

The scholarly understanding of the expressive potential of online settings has moved from an impersonal perspective to one where communication and self-expressions have become hyperpersonal and hypercurated (Walther, 2007).

Considering the novel and evolving nature of social media, continued research effort is needed to grasp what makes individuals decide to share details of their everyday lives and inner truths on these platforms, and with what effect. A great deal of studies have already attended to such questions in various streams of research (e.g., Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012; Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). To update this knowledge on self-expressive behaviors across currently popular social media platforms, this dissertation looked at both the predictors and consequences of self-related expressions (i.e., emotion and identity expressions) on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, as well as within public and semi-public social media-like settings. The findings from the four empirical studies reported in this dissertation highlight two broader insights that provide useful directions for future research to take. More specifically, the findings underscore that both social perceptions and social contexts matter in patterns of self-expressive behaviors, and the consequences thereof.

Social Perceptions Matter

The first insight connects to the relevance of social perceptions in relation to self-expressive behaviors online. In line with developments in media effects research (e.g., DSMM, Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), this dissertation has shown that across-the-board-generalizations about users of social media and the way they use social media are not justified. First, social media users maintain ideas about normative perceptions on expressions; that is, what self-expressions would be considered appropriate to share. Generally, expressions of joy and pride on social media were found most appropriate. Expressions that involve negative emotions, such as sad, angry, disappointed, or worried expressions, were considered less appropriate yet, interestingly, not inappropriate. Such social norms on self-expression further seem to shape expressive behaviors on social media, particularly in public settings. As demonstrated in chapter three, these individual perceptions on what might or might not be socially appropriate to express appeared to matter in how frequent social media users share their emotional experiences on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Second, the extent to which individuals are socially perceptive seems to determine emotion sharing tendencies on social media. In terms of expressing

negative emotions, impulsive individuals were found to frequently do so independent of normative perceptions. Generally, impulsivity is characterized by an inability to assess consequences (e.g., Chamberlain & Sahakian, 2007), which may extend to social consequences of certain self-expressions. The findings in chapter three also found evidence that socially anxious and narcissistic individuals were more likely to frequently express negative emotions based on the perceived appropriateness of doing so. Narcissistic individuals typically have a higher sense of entitlement and may demand social support and attention from others, whether that be in a positive or negative manner (e.g., Carpenter, 2012; Leung, 2013). This indicates that they are less perceptive of their social surroundings. Socially anxious individuals, by contrast, are commonly typified as inhibited and concerned about disapproval from others (High & Caplan, 2009). It could be, however, that they perceive social media as a safer space to express their negative emotions than they perceive face-to-face interactions. By contrast, self-monitors, specifically those with greater abilities to modify self-presentations, appeared to be least likely to frequently express negative emotions on public social media platforms. Theoretically, self-monitors are thought to be highly concerned with the social appropriateness of their behavior, and are thus more socially perceptive (Snyder, 1974).

In line with the general perception that sharing positive emotions is more appropriate, positive emotions appeared to be more frequently expressed on social media compared to negative emotions. It appears, however, that individuals that are particularly perceptive to their social surroundings (viz., self-monitors) are less likely to frequently express negative emotions on social media, while those less socially perceptive more often do so. This is particularly insightful for the understanding on the positivity bias that has been observed on social media. The idea of the positivity bias holds that individuals typically present themselves more positively online, and refrain from sharing any derogatory or other negatively valenced content (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Spottswood & Hancock, 2016). In other words, social media has given rise to a culture in which people primarily share 'the good'. While the general findings in this dissertation align with such a perspective, they also indicate that not necessarily all users equally abide by such positivity bias. Especially in the social settings that social media create, differences in social perceptiveness may determine the extent of sharing positive versus negative self-

related expressions on social media.

To understand how people act online, it is thus crucial to study the dynamics of behavior as the result of interacting social perceptions and individual differences such as the ones considered in this dissertation. The individual difference perspective taken in this dissertation to understand differences in self-expressive behaviors is not new. Research has for instance focused on how the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which include extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness, may impact social media use and the amount of self-disclosure (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). What is new in this dissertation is the specific focus on individual differences in relation to social perceptions and context. Although prominent in social scientific research (e.g., Bendor & Swistak, 2001), the influence of social norms on expressive behaviors within social media spheres has hardly been studied. The findings showed however that not all individuals equally rely on norms in guiding their emotion expressions on public social media platforms, which ties in with previous insights that foregrounded some people to be under more normative control than others (Trafimow & Finlay, 1996, 2001). It may be that, while the majority of users actively engage in self-embellishment online, some may not necessarily engage in such selective self-presentations based on their limited awareness of, or concerns for, the predominant social rules in certain social contexts.

Social Contexts Matter

The second insight that the present dissertation provides relates to the differences that were found between social media platforms. Social norms seemed to differ between social media platforms. Overall, negative emotions were for instance considered more appropriate to share on Facebook and Twitter compared to Instagram. For the expression of positive emotions, Instagram and Facebook appeared to be better suited in terms of perceived appropriateness than Twitter. Relative to these platforms, WhatsApp was considered the best platform to appropriately express one's inner thoughts and feelings, both in terms of positive and negative emotional content. Previous research has argued that users often make use of different social media to accommodate certain self-presentational needs (e.g., Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). The findings in this

dissertation suggest that people may also maintain several social media accounts to select a platform for which they feel a particular expression would be appropriate. Several scholars have hinted at the unique context that each platform establishes through the collective of features and cues they provide (e.g., Marwick & boyd, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). Indeed, each social media platform appears to presume its own set of norms, and hence social context.

Self-expressions in either public or private social contexts can influence subsequent effects for the self. In chapter four, positive emotion expression was found to lead to an intensification of positive emotions, while negative emotion expression led to a fading effect for negative emotions. As predicted, negative emotions were found to fade more strongly when shared through WhatsApp compared to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The intensification of positive emotions after sharing a positive emotional experience seemed to however occur equally across these social media platforms. It seems to matter, then, whether social media users express themselves in a public or private social context in terms of subsequent self-effects. Looking at the impact of public and semi-public social media-like settings, the results in chapter five did not reveal any effects of expressing oneself as extravert or introvert on subsequent extraversion self-assessments. These findings contradict previous work, which established that individuals subsequently come to see themselves more as the trait they had publicly presented online (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Walther et al., 2011).

The findings in this dissertation on the consequences for emotions and self-concept have theoretical implications for research on self-effects, which concerns the effects of self-expression on the sender rather than on the receiver (Valkenburg, 2017). As a relatively new field of research within the realm of online settings, its underlying mechanisms are still largely unknown. To date, the act of sharing self-related information in public settings, as opposed to private settings, seems to have guided much of this research. Specifically, previous scholars have highlighted that public environments would more likely elicit changes to the self-concept, due to the felt accountability towards an audience and the need to therefore stay consistent (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Tice, 1992). Contrary to this theoretical conviction, the findings in this dissertation suggest that the mere act of publicly sharing an identity expression does not necessarily elicit such self-effects. Moreover, stronger self-effects on emotions were found in private settings. An explanation

for these findings may rely on social-sharing-of-emotion theories. Specifically, this research suggests that the influence of obtaining certain types of feedback largely accounts for beneficial effects in face-to-face settings (e.g., Rimé, 2009). Receiving socio-affective feedback (e.g., attentive listening or enthusiastic responses) may intensify positive emotions or lessen negative emotions (Rimé, 2009). To further reduce negative emotions, obtaining specific advice from others (i.e., cognitive reappraising feedback) may help individuals to further deal with the negative feelings that result from negative emotional experiences (Rimé, 2009).

Against this background, it is plausible that receiving feedback, or at least the expectation of feedback, would impact users more so than the mere perceived presence of others. As Valkenburg (2017) notes, the dynamic back-and-forth between sender and receiver is important to consider in understanding how certain uses of social media may come to affect its users. This may ultimately depend on the specific social contexts of a social media platform. Private social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, facilitate one-to-one or one-to-few interactions with close others, which establish a more intimate social contexts in which receiving positive responses and advice from friends are more likely (Cui, 2016). Conversely, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enable interactions with a wider spectrum of others, with feedback being limited to more superficial responses and likes. Moreover, the risk for dismissive or negative feedback might be greater on Twitter and Instagram on which one's self-expressions are typically more visible to strangers and negative commentary seem to prevail (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015; Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2011). The social context that a platform engenders as such may possibly come to shape what users express, and may additionally inform users in deciding what platform would more likely yield the type of feedback that would benefit the self.

Going Forward: Directions for Future Research

Taken together, the current dissertation may help move the literature on self-expression within social media settings forward in two ways. First, by modeling both socially-focused personality traits and social norms, this dissertation offered a novel perspective on individual users' expressive tendencies that may help to further uncover patterns in self-disclosure and self-presentation online in future research. Second, this dissertation examined differences between several popular

social media platforms from the perspective that each presents its own unique social context. Future research may benefit from taking a similar social context approach to more effectively understand why, how, and what users share about themselves in both public and private social media settings, and the subsequent self-effects this may give rise to.

As self-expression has migrated into the social media sphere, scholars would do well to further elaborate on the changed sociality and visibility on social media that users experience (Ellison & boyd, 2013), as well as the individual perceptions of sociability and visibility that come with it. Considering the now elusive concept of, often unknown, audiences (Litt, 2012), an individual comes to rely more on his or her perceptions as to who will read a post, whether they would deem it appropriate, and what social risks or rewards could potentially take effect. The perception of rewards and risks is particularly relevant given the enduring records of one's self-expression online. Research has established the influence of weighing the perceived social risks and rewards in decisions regarding social behaviors face-to-face (e.g., Lafer & Wolfe, 1977). This dissertation confirms that these social risks and rewards are important to consider on social media, based on the predictive values found for social norms and socially-focused personality traits (*viz.*, need for popularity, impulsivity, social anxiety, self-monitoring, and narcissism). Future research could further examine the specific social risks, rewards, and norms associated with different social media platforms, and what factors underlie the formation of such social perceptions.

Understandings of socially motivated expressive behaviors on social media may be enhanced by integrating the individual perceptions studied in this dissertation with other individual differences. Scholars have for instance argued that decisions on self-disclosure in social media settings also partly depend on individual privacy concerns and goals for disclosure (e.g., Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Dienlin & Metzger, 2016). A comprehensive predictor model may be developed, in which perceived social concerns, social goals, social norms, and relevant socially-focused personality tendencies are accounted for. Such an integrative perspective on the antecedents of emotion expression and other types of self-expressions may further help to understand how and why individuals come to publicly reveal intimate details, post rude commentary, or even withdraw from sharing personal information online entirely.

Future research may further aim to more systematically differentiate between single and multiple platform users. The current dissertation focused on a variety of social media platforms, yet did not take into account the fact that people hold multiple social media accounts. Scholars have argued that different social media platforms cater to specific needs. Van Dijck (2013) for instance points out that Facebook serves performances of a social self, while LinkedIn caters to performances of a professional self. There is however limited research on the concurrent uses of social media platforms, which merits more systematic examination (e.g., Buccafurri, Lax, Nicolazzo, & Nocera, 2015). The use of multiple platforms raises questions on the extent to which audiences overlap across the different platforms in use, the reasons for why users decide to post something on one platform but not the other, or how often users cross-post the same message. Ultimately, having a Facebook account as well as an Instagram account may expand one's audience and raise received social feedback to another level. This could matter in the extent to which users feel a need to present themselves consistently across platforms, and the subsequent self-effects that may occur.

Finally, research on self-effects on social media is in need of further theorization regarding the mechanisms that underlie the strength and direction of such effects. The findings in the current dissertation suggest that 'public' expression is not necessarily the key factor to elicit self-effects. While not tested explicitly in chapters four and five, the findings point to the possibility that the impact of feedback may be more relevant to the emergence and size of self-effects. Future research may focus on how the type of feedback received may be a source of influence on self-effects. While positive feedback is more common on social media, research has found that individuals who engage in risky online self-presentation may more likely receive negative feedback (Koutamanis, Vossen, & Valkenburg, 2015). This, in turn, may lead to negative consequences for the self, such as lower self-esteem, increased social anxiety, or emotional distress. Dismissive or disconfirming feedback on specific identity expressions that are publicly displayed for others to see may also affect how individuals may come to assess their own identity (Carr & Foreman, 2016). For the field of self-effects, it would be fruitful to take such differences in feedback types into account, and examine their impact on self-effects in both public and private social media settings.

Infinite Content, Infinitely Content

For the first time in history, individuals are enabled to create self-related content that may be distributed to a potentially global audience. As with any new form of communication technology introduced to society, social media have been partly met with resistance. The rhetoric that surrounds phenomena related to social media in popular press is marked by ‘fake news’, ‘trivial content’, ‘viral distractions’, ‘trolling’, and ‘inauthenticity’, to just name a few (e.g., The Kernal, 2015; Open Transcripts, 2014; Huffington Post, 2016; The Guardian, 2017). The collective anxiety around social media is further exacerbated by headlines that highlight the oversharing and narcissism ‘epidemics’ we find ourselves in ever since the quick rise of social media (Huffington Post, 2013, 2014; The Guardian, 2016). From the perspective of critics, the world of seemingly *infinite content* that social media has helped to create has given rise to a culture of obligatory, self-absorbed, mundane, and fractured expressions of self, whilst giving free rein to trolls that supply social media with a dose of hateful content (Wired, 2013, 2017). Moreover, within the circuit of self-production, people are perpetually in search of being *infinitely content*, which supposedly puts individuals in a compulsive loop of social sharing and social validation that consistently distracts from ‘real life’ conversation (e.g., New York Times, 2012).

While the above seems somewhat hyperbolic, it does reflect the troubling narrative that seems to have become a cultural preoccupation as outlined in popular press. The findings in the current dissertation, though tentatively, challenges this negative perspective by providing more nuances, at least when it concerns the everyday self-expressions on users’ personal social media accounts. For one, the majority of individuals perceive positive emotion expression to be more appropriate than negative emotion expression. This illustrates that the social norms that prevail online largely mirror those from offline situations. The majority of individuals also generally express themselves positively on public social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and reserve negative self-expressions for private social media interactions (i.e., WhatsApp). The potentialities of self-expression that social media facilitate, in turn, appear to be beneficial. Specifically, social media users are able to capitalize on positive feelings as expressing positive emotions seem to intensify one’s positive emotions. Some individuals may, however, more frequently express negative emotions online for others to see, which could potentially put them at risk

for negative feedback. However, the expression of negative emotions on social media might overall not pose problems, and may actually relieve one's negative emotions. This may be reason enough to sustain users' productive curiosity in sharing anything that's on their minds; the digital traces that social media users leave behind within the seemingly infinite stream of self-related content, whether positive or negative, ultimately just makes them feel better.

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