TRADING SELF-CONCEPT FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The importance of possessing a clear self-concept is a pervasive idea in western culture. The notion that self-knowledge is valuable has existed since antiquity – the Temple of Apollo at Delphi is inscribed with the maxim, "Know thyself." Common wisdom has forever urged us to "just be ourselves," and in contemporary society, there is no limit to popular figures professing the importance of authentic self-love. In 2018 Michelle Obama empowered readers saying, "Your story is what you have…It is something to own" (Obama). Yet, in this age of social media, self-representation has shifted from private to public. In place of diaries and journals, people use social media platforms for representation. Peoples' attempts to create representations of themselves have become attempts to represent themselves publicly for others to view and interact with. This shift begs the question, how well can we be or know ourselves when our self-representations exist on platforms intended for immediate, and most often, concise public sharing? Through sharing oneself online, one diminishes and impairs their self-concept. Social media use causes self-concept to become unstable, inaccessible, and commodified.

Psychologically, self-concept is paramount and a key predictor of well being. Whether an individual has strong self-concept clarity or not can predict if they find their life meaningful (Shin et al.) Self-concept and self-continuity, the understanding of a personal, linear life narrative, are inextricable; one cannot exist without the other and one cannot be strong while the other is weak (Jiang et al.).

UNSTABLE

Self-concept typically exists as a relatively stable cognitive understanding of the self. While one's self-concept is subject to subtle shaping over time as well as a few drastic shifts following major events (graduation, marriage, loss, illness), self-concept is, in its natural state, consistent. A stable identity acts as the core understanding of self. It provides individuals with a blueprint or reference on how to act in situations. Self-concept ideally is something with permanence and the ability to provide a foundation for peoples' lives. Self-concept is largely inseparable from the narrative people believe about themselves and their lives. Traditionally, life narratives have been recorded in a linear fashion; they begin at the start and finish at the end. Linear life-narratives include published, print autobiography as well as most personal diaries. However, in the age of Web 2.0 and the advent of social media, life narratives have undergone significant changes, and as a result, so have people's self-concepts.

The End of the Narrative

When individuals present their lives on social media – via popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat – linear narrative dies. Unanimously the coding of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat reject linear life narratives. The temporal algorithms of the platforms make it so, when scrolling or clicking through a life representation, you are shown the most recent events first and the oldest events last. In this way, the classic linear narrative is inverted. Many platforms also now organize posts in sporadic algorithms that factor in popularity, and relevance, making time no longer the primary organizer of narrative. Many sites, Snapchat and Instagram chiefly, also feature "stories" – or life representations that will disappear after a set time (typically 24 hours). Social media has fundamentally shifted how many people record their own lives and understand the lives of others. The reversed temporal algorithms cause users to "[Privilege] the instant and the now rather than the whole story" (Rettberg 454) and subsequently, this brings about the death of narrative. Lee Humphrey, in "The

Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life", accurately employs the term "account" in place of "narrative". The label account is more accurate than narrative as an account "implies a subject in process" (Dix 477). Social media accounts are never finished, preventing life narratives, and self-concept from achieving finality or completion.

Revisable Lives

This instability of online life-writing is made more apparent when considering social media accounts in terms of how the author relates to her content. When representing oneself online, it is very convenient to publish, or re-publish a self-representation to the public, so convenient it can be done within a matter of seconds. Therefore, online life narratives are temptingly revisable to their authors. Who has not wished something in their past was different? Or who does not notice ways to improve themselves and their lives? Because of these basic human longings and the convenient revisability of social media accounts, online self-representations are "inherently unstable objects constantly changing, sometimes disappearing altogether" (Sorapure 19). Considering self-concept and its link to self-continuity, it becomes apparent that using social media to represent one's life makes an individual's life story, and by extension, her self-concept, unstable. How can one possess a concrete idea of the self when her main sources of self-representation (social media) are never complete, and always able to be edited, deleted, or recaptioned?

INACCESSIBLE

In addition to destabilizing self-concept, using social media as the primary form of self-representation alienates users from themselves, making self-concept inaccessible to them. Possessing a strong self-concept allows people to evaluate themselves and know themselves. By extension, people who possess a strong self-concept are able to recognize what they want, what genuinely brings them joy, what hurts them, what they believe in, etc. Possessing a general understanding of who one is provides individuals with an unshakable sense of connection. Adolescents who spend excessive amounts of time on social media and maintain multiple accounts are more likely to self-report loneliness (Azhari et al.). But isn't social media social? And doesn't it connect us to others? It is plausible that this self-reported loneliness is not caused by a lack of external social relationships but a lack of an internal relationship to oneself, brought about by the inaccessibility of self-concept. Arguably the most intimate and significant relationship we have is the one we maintain with ourselves. Social media deteriorates this relationship. Using social media as one's sole form of autobiographical life-writing causes inaccessibility of self-concept in three key ways; the overwhelming amount of self-representations make distinguishing the self impossible, the lack of agency users have in representing the self make considering the self impossible, and a lack of self-reflection when life-writing online makes reaching the self impossible.

Data Excess

Social media provides users with the potential to create an overwhelming amount of brief, fragmented, self-representations. It is not uncommon, and for adolescent and young-adult users it is standard, for someone to simultaneously maintain multiple social media accounts. All these accounts are updated and interacted with regularly. When adolescent users reflect on and study their primary form of self-representation – their social media presence – they are faced with an inordinate amount of information on the self. It is self-representation in excess to the point of inaccessibility. More than just excessive, the self-representations, as discussed above, are brief and lack narrative connectivity. Social media does not provide an excess of rich self-representations that can stand alone, rather, it provides users with an excess of self-representative bits and pieces that are relatively meaningless. Social media promotes "[h]uman existence defined not by narratives but by scraps and fragments" (Longley Arthur 314). When trying to satisfy the question of self-concept, social media users are therefore presented with this mass of fragments and scraps. Social media has caused "the era of the dispersed self" (Longley Arthur 318). Self-concept is rendered inaccessible because of these scattered and excessive bite-size representations.

When discussing the ways in which writing biography has changed since the advent of social media, Paul Longley Arthur states that, "Archives that used to be contained in filing cabinets, drawers, boxes, and attics are no longer containable" (Longley Arthur 313). Moving the issue beyond Longley Arthur's scope of biography, these digital, uncontainable archives also make conceptualizing autobiography, or a life-narrative of the self, impossible. Unlike more traditional forms of self-representation, such as a diary, which is linear and cohesive, social media creates breadcrumb-like trails of self-representations. These representations of the self escape users – because they are so extensive, they become incomprehensible. If a linear life-narrative was a single photograph of someone, social media accounts would be a hundred pictures of each of their body parts. While this new form of self-representation perhaps deconstructs stringent ideas of identity, it makes knowing oneself difficult if not impossible. Mourning what has been lost due to the creation of the dispersed self, Longley Arthur asks "Where, in all this, is the self?" (Longley Arthur 314).

Who Represents Whom?

The mystery of the self, and the inaccessibility of self-concept, is compounded by the co-shaping of identity that takes place on social media platforms. One loses self-representative agency when they rely solely on social media platforms. In "CODA: Data Generation", Paul Longley Arthur uses the term co-shaping to describe how one's identity is in part shaped by the online platforms they represent themselves with. When thinking of how to represent the self on social media, users may feel they have unlimited reign. However, social media platforms fit users into stringent, uniform, and predetermined templates. While the pictures posted within the frames may change, every profile has the same basic layout. There exists, in the age of social media, a "mass-customization" of the self in which, "each individual is fed into the same template" (Rettberg 464). Millions of people and lives are represented within the same parameters, be it that of Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter. This not only robs individuals of a unique form of self-representation, but more problematically, it does not prompt individuals to consider how they want to represent themselves as the template is neatly provided for them. This mass customization leads users to an inaccessible self-concept, as users do not have to consider themselves and represent themselves through their own means. As Jill-Walker Rettberg points out, "Before the Internet most representations of me would have been completely made by myself or by my friends and family" (Rettberg 462). Today however, social media platforms play a heavy hand in representing who we are.

In some cases, social media platforms are the sole creator of user representations. On many platforms, there has been the semi-recent emergence of auto-generated representations. This includes cherry-picking users' posts to show them (and others) their "year in review". Many other temporal-based auto-generated representations exist, including features that collect a user's posts from a holiday over the years or compiles a user's posts from the past month. Social media platforms often group a collection of posts with a specific geographic location or use image analysis to group photos that all include a common subject or background, providing representations such as "In Manhattan Over the Years" or "Out in Nature". Snapchat is the most popular example of a platform that creates auto-generated representations like these for its users. Not only do auto-generated representations of the self use the same algorithms to represent all its users, it does the work of compiling and selecting what users want to represent about themselves and their lives for them. In this way, algorithms have replaced users at the job of conceptualizing themselves. Self-concept is no longer something individuals immerse themselves in, create, and consider – it is something given to them that they look at, causing self-alienation.

Social Media Accounts as Online Diaries

Many people use social media as their main form of autobiographical life-writing. Because of this, personal forms of life-writing, such as keeping a journal, have been forgotten. There exists fundamental discrepancies between print and online diaries. In, "Screening Moments, Scrolling Lives: Diary Writing on the Web," Madeleine Sorapure brings these discrepancies to light. Two of the discrepancies Sorapure

asserts cause the biggest impact on self-concept are the differences in interface and interactivity of online diaries compared to print. The interface, or the medium, is inherently different. Online diaries consist of text and pictures, which a print diary may also be made up of, however, online diaries are essentially a combination of ones and zeroes. Writers are faced not with a pen and paper, but with a keyboard and a screen. Madeleine Sorapure presents a theory on "the material relation of writer and text" (Sorapure 3) and how the interface of online diaries degrades this relationship. As self-concept stems from the narrative people tell and internalize about themselves, this degradation extends to one's relation to self. Sorapure believes that "the physical characteristics of the diary influence the act of writing" (Sorapure 2), meaning that the online interface does impact what one writes. It is harder to be fully connected to one's inner thoughts, and the ease of the backspace (in comparison to the eraser) makes revising and polishing entries nearly impossible to avoid. There is not a pen and paper tangibility to typing social media posts, and so "the material separation of the writer and text calls attention to the ways in which the interface between writer and text influences the structure of the autobiographical self and story" (Sorapure 3). For this reason, the relation of the writer to the text created is a distant one, and the writing may not be as authentic, confessional, or free-flowing. The other of an online live representation can not clutch their life story to their heart, because it is free-floating in the web 2.0 for public scrutiny. This expansive gap that online interfaces places between writer and text contributes to the inaccessibility of self-concept brought about by social media. When the result of one's sole form of autobiographical life-writing is distant to them, the building blocks of self-concept – our emotions, interpretations of experiences, and understanding of our relation to others – are minimized. Life-writing online extends the focus outward to others, and ignores the subject, the self.

Private Becomes Public

Perhaps a greater discrepancy than interface is that of interactivity. The interactivity of a personal print diary is nonexistent. Traditionally, a person writes about their thoughts and lives with no expectation of anyone reading their entries. Social media as a form of diary inverts this. When one posts their life online, it is not for themselves, but as a means to interact with others. The diary then becomes interactive. There is a great shift in the writer's purpose when diaries go online. As Sorapure explains, "[t]he Web's interactivity and the immediacy of its publishing enhance that aspect of diary writing concerned not with solitary and private reflection, but with communication and community" (Sorapure 9). It is clear that as the purpose of autobiographical life-writing changes from self-reflection to sharing, the content of the entries changes as well. Sharing one's life publicly is not so much the problem in regards to this issue, rather, the issue is the fact that sharing one's life publicly has become, for many people, their only form of autobiographical life-writing. Deep self-reflection, as a result, is disregarded and not a regular part of one's life. As mentioned in the section above, when one takes time to reflect solitarily on the events of their lives and their resulting emotions, they begin to build a private understanding of who they are and what they make of the world. Without this knowledge, and with only public autobiographical life-writing, self-concept shifts from a personal entity, to a public one. Social media users mind and value their public image first, with little attention to their own essential relation and evaluation of self.

COMMODIFIED

The instability and inaccessibility of self-concept in the age of social media is compounded by the commodification of the self that social media causes. Commodification increases instability of self-concept because, as one's self-understanding becomes hinged on how their social media presence is interacted with, they subject their self-concept to highs and lows based on external factors. Likewise, commodification adds to the inaccessibility of self-concept because it transforms self-concept from an intimate understanding of the self to a construction of self based on other's interactions and perspectives. In this way, an individual cannot access their self-concept directly without going through other markers of self – how many likes, followers, or subscribers one has as well as the content of the online comments one receives. Life-writing on social media causes commodification of the self because the platforms involve the symbolic capital of likes, follows, and comments, termed "social currency" or, in this age, "social media currency". Like a business that evaluates its products by the amount of capital they

produce, a social media user evaluates their posts and identity markers by the amount of social media currency they generate.

Social Media Currency

Sharing ourselves online, specifically sharing appealing images of ourselves is an "overt transaction of attractiveness for social media currency [that] reduces the self to a commodity" (Dann and Eager 1850). This transaction of attractiveness for social media currency is likely the most prevalent on social media platforms. However, it is also true that social media users trade other facets of themselves for this social media currency as well – things such as humor, secrets, or entertaining stories. In general, when one posts autobiographical life-writing on social media, representations of the self are traded for social media currency. The term "social media currency" has grown from the term "social currency", which originates from the work "The Forms Of Capital" by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of social capital theory. Social currency was conceptualized before the advent of social media, its definition being the social connections and influence an individual has (Bourdieu, 21). Social media currency is more concrete and measurable than real-life social currency; the displayed number of follows, subscribes, likes, or comments one has is a direct measure of one's social media currency. The straightforward quantification of social currency that social media produces makes the commodification of social media users impossible to avoid.

Operating like a business, celebrity, or politician, everyday social media users campaign or sell representations of themselves online to spread influence and gain social media currency. For the business or public figure, gaining influence is directly linked with increase in profit. This may be true for special social media users, such as influencers, lifestyle stars, or Instagram models. However, for the true everyday user, this social media currency will likely not transfer over to actual capital. Social media currency satisfies and tempts these common users all the same as it symbolizes to them a strong social network, acceptance, importance, admiration and popularity.

On the most popular platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, not only is the author of the profile able to see the markers of their social media currency (how many follows, likes, or comments) but external users looking at their profile are also confronted with highlighted numbers of how much social media currency a user has. These markers are given a very prominent spot on a user's profile page, typically beside or underneath the user's name and picture. Social media platforms prioritize social media currency as it provides users with incentive to join, post, and keep posting to stay relevant and build their perceived influence. Because of the social media currency markers, and the visually prevalent position they are given on social media platforms, "[t]he Web has become a vast market where selves can be promoted and sold like any other product" (Longley Arthur 314). In the same way actual currency pushes business owners to brand their business, the existence and prioritization of social media currency pushes social media users to brand themselves.

Branding Ourselves

There are many tools social media users have to brand themselves. Selfies, a popular photograph form on sites like Snapchat and Instagram, "[Allow] individuals to communicate a constructed and curated image of themselves to the world" (Eager and Dann, 1850). Many users strive for this curated image and, in some cases, predominately on Instagram and VSCO, users take it to the extreme, only following an specific aesthetic, of which there are many categories and subcategories. Social media branding tools extend just beyond the selfie and visual aesthetics, the accompanying text, or in the case of some platforms, like Twitter, the stand alone text, also create a human-brand. A social media user's brand is informed by what they post, how much they post, and how they interact with others on social media. Social media enables everyday people to reach the public. Like celebrities, these everyday users become commodified. They feel they need to manage and manicure the image they present to the public. If their image is unappealing or offensive, their amount of social media currency will decrease. Online, autobiographical life-writing, combined with photos of the self and of one's life, combine to create a

cohesive presentation of one's brand (Dann and Eager, 1852). Because social media is so brief, both in the length of the posts but also the time a viewer will spend on an author's post, branding oneself and featuring hints of this brand in each post is necessary to create a presentation of the self.

More traditional forms of life-writing, such as memoir and autobiography, do not necessitate a human-brand, they only necessitate a human story. Reading these forms of life-writing offer a deep look into another's life. Although thorough, it is a concentrated look. It is a representation of self with a specific theme, narrative, and most importantly with an end. Because online life-writing is an account and not a narrative, it appears eternal. There is no end goal or last page. Users presume their accounts are something they will maintain for many years, if not indefinitely. Because of this, social media users not only ask their platforms to tell an appealing story of their lives, but to compile an appealing presentation of who they are, hence the emergence of the human-brand on social media. In this way users become a commodity; they "advertise" and "brand" themselves in easily digestible ways to present a clear presentation and gain social media currency. When one internalizes themselves as a brand, they begin to conceptualize the self as a commodity, something to be perfected and used to gain social capital.

A NEW AGE

The age of Web 2.0 and social media poses significant threats to peoples' self-concept. Mainly, social media renders self-concept unstable, inaccessible, and commodified. The instability of self-concept is the first and foremost effect. Social media is, by nature, unstable. It is ever changing, due to feed and software updates. Because this is the inherent nature of social media, a user's self-concept cannot escape this effect. Flowing from instability, is the inaccessibility of self-concept. Instability feeds inaccessibility; because self-concept is unstable, it is hard to access. Likewise, inaccessibility feeds commodification, because an individual cannot access their self-concept and grasp its inherent worth, commodification takes hold, giving the user something to fixate on and a way to conceptualize their worth.

These effects of instability, inaccessibility, and commodification are all products of the interaction between social media's features and basic human drives. It is human nature to critique and reflect. This, combined with the feature of easy editing and reposting, gives way to self-concept instability. It is human nature to want to connect, this combined with the ease of reaching others on social media, causes users to shun themselves for others, even during private time, causing self-concept inaccessibility. It is human nature to want to be accepted and valued, this combined with the prioritization of social media currency, causes self-concept commodification.

Social media is paradoxically concerned with the self. It prioritizes the self, pushing users to represent themselves on the platforms, yet, in doing so, users lose touch with themselves and damage their self-concepts. Considering the three ways in which social media affects self-concept, making it unstable, inaccessible, and commodified, it appears social media use is toxic and psychologically damaging. While, as argued above, this can be true, social media does provide opportunities for creative expression and social connection. Popular social media platforms and typical social media use requires an update. A new age of social media is needed, one in which users recognize the potential, dangerous effects of the platforms, one in which the owners of the platforms do not exploit human nature to increase their profits, and one in which online life-writing via social media is mediated and balanced with traditional, offline life-writing.

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