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DIGITAL TRACES, SOCIAL RESIDUES: USAGE AS SELF-REPRESENTATION ON LIFESTYLE APPS

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Introduction

Social media platforms are established sites of digital self-representation, or the process of creating and accumulating media traces identified with particular people (Rettberg, 2014). Media traces are gestural and relational “vestiges or marks that indicate our presence, existence, or action through media” (Humphreys, 2018, p. 9). Revisited over time, these traces help us to make sense of our identities and selfhoods, forging meaning from our everyday experiences and personal histories (Thumim, 2012). Self-representation is built into the fabric of social media interfaces and business models, and it is hyper-visible on feeds and profiles that archive millions of personal photos and posts. However, while the majority of relevant scholarship focuses on digital self-making practices in social media environments, self-representation is by no means isolated to digital spaces that are explicitly social or expressive; rather, self-representational behaviors may occur through a variety of atypical contexts and practices (Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2017).

In this project, we aim to extend scholarship on digital self-making by examining cases of digital self-representation in unexpected and unorthodox platform configurations. We shift focus away from explicitly social contexts (i.e., social media platforms that are expressly designed as a “stage” for the enactment of sociality) and turn to examine digital environments that are not explicitly or directly configured for social self-making purposes, but that nonetheless become re-purposed, re-configured, or “appropriated” (by users, platforms, or both) for relational acts of self-representation.

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We are guided by three main research questions: (1) How and why does this process of repurposing platform usage behaviors for self-making practices come about, and what roles do users and platforms play? (2) How might self-representational practices differ in these “re-purposed” environments, when compared to conventional self-representational practices on existing social media platforms? (3) What implications might this hold for user conceptualizations of the self?

Methods

We examine digital self-representation through three popular lifestyle applications dedicated to tracking or facilitating user behaviors that are not generally shared as public social performances online. However, these apps are repurposed with interactional features known as “social awareness streams” (SAS) to encourage user investment and ritual engagement (Caraway et al., 2017). SAS incorporate sociality into the everyday usage of platforms that center on (and profit from) typically private, personal, invisible, or offline user behaviors (Swartz, 2020).

Our three cases of interest include: (a) Venmo, a payment app that displays transactions between friends as social updates; (b) Spotify, a music streaming service that allows users to observe what their friends are currently or recently listening to; and (c) Strava, an activity tracker that shares self-quantification metrics and GPS movement data (e.g., runs, hikes) with friends. We selected these cases because all of them reflect the imposed sociality of SAS while also displaying different kinds of social and potentially self-representational data, including monetary, entertainment, bodily, and spatial information. In these environments, usage of the platform’s primary functions is a prerequisite to self-expression.

In this paper we draw from three “walkthroughs” (Light et al., 2018) of each of the three applications. Based in actor-network theory, this method involves holistically analyzing an application by examining its context and environment of use, features and everyday user experience, and broader narratives and discourses surrounding it.

In combination with the data from the walkthrough method, we will be conducting interviews with users from each of the three applications. This data will help us approach these cases from an interpretive framework, centering how everyday users perform and experience sociality within these lifestyle apps.

Expected Findings

Our expected findings are grouped into three preliminary themes regarding the nature of self-representation on Venmo, Spotify, and Strava.

“Residues” of Usage. These apps specialize in constructing echoes or fragments of platform usage behaviors and mobilizing them as social updates. The updates enable users to observe friends’ interactions with the platforms and, in some cases, with one

another. At the same time, they also displace the social intentionality behind usage behaviors, which are first and foremost interactions with the platform (or on Venmo, one other user) rather than a wider network of friends and followers.

We describe these updates as a particular kind of media trace, which we term *residual traces*. Like any trace, residues are marks that users leave behind when they engage with platforms, but the original purpose of residual traces is only indirectly social. Residual traces describe ambient usage data repurposed into social updates and, in turn, indirect self-representations.

Spectrums of Awareness. We expect to find that some users will intentionally mobilize their residual traces as social performances while others “play it straight” and only engage in the primary activities of the platforms (e.g., listening to music on Spotify without attending to social displays). The performance of usage is highly encouraged by platform design. As our walkthrough data demonstrates, social updates from platform usage are often the “default” setting, which are either required for participation (e.g., transactional captions on Venmo cannot be left blank) or must be manually turned off (e.g., Spotify automatically turns on its SAS every time the application is reopened). For users who lean into the performativity of residues, the self is bifurcated between the material actions of tracking a run or paying a friend and wider projects of digital self-making implicated within them.

Affective Capitalism. Our walkthrough data suggest that platforms encourage this repurposing of self-making, possibly because it furnishes additional, saleable data on users as well as inviting increased usage. Residual traces and the self-representational practices they engender are ultimately displays of user engagement, making users aware of the popularity, frequency, and purposes of platform usage within their social networks. This extends our understanding of affective capitalism: beyond mining people’s digital behaviors, platforms also repurpose their social residues for further gain.

Conclusion

By studying self-making and sociality on lifestyle apps, this research probes existing conceptualizations of digital self-representation and media traces through questions of intentionality, performativity, and displacement. It also problematizes the commodification of self-making and connectivity beyond social media contexts (Van Dijck, 2013). The social streams on lifestyle apps like Venmo, Spotify, and Strava can be spaces for self-making and identity play. However, whether sharing these social residues is more in service of users or platform profit remains an open question.

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