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# Without You, I'm Nothing: Performances of the Self on Twitter

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Online social platforms collapse or converge public and private boundaries, creating both opportunities and challenges for pursuing publicity, privacy, and sociality. Presentations of the self thus become networked performances that must convey polysemic content to audiences, actual and imagined, without compromising one's own sense of self. This study explored how individuals perform the self through the use of Twitter trending hashtags. Content and discourse analyses were used to examine performative strategies and the form of performance in 140 or fewer characters. Findings underscored play as a dominant performative strategy and pointed to the reordering of grammar, syntax, and literary conventions as prevalent ways through which play is performed. Affect, redaction, and deliberative improvisation frame performances that become part of the ongoing storytelling project of the self on Twitter.

*"Performing is a public dreaming"* (Schechner, 1977/2003, p. 265).

Performance conjures expectations of theater. Performativity is associated with preparation, presentation, script, symbolism, props, drama, and last but not least, an audience, actual or imagined. People rarely self-identify as performers when engaging in everyday rituals, but they frequently adjust their behaviors for different audiences. Change the audience, and the performer must adapt. Remove the audience, and the context of the performance is lost. Imagine an audience, and the performance may take on new meanings. Twitter affords a platform for condensed yet potentially rich and variably public or private performances of the self. This study examines identity as performance, projected to known and imagined audiences via Twitter. Using both content and discourse analyses, it investigates Twitter trending topics and how individuals perform the self in 140 characters and under.

This research is relevant to contemporary directions in communication for several reasons. First, Twitter users are ethnically and culturally more diverse than the greater U.S. population (Pearson-McNeil & Hale, 2011), rendering Twitter a platform that potentially affords visibility to marginalized points of

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view. Performativity becomes an essential step in *presencing*[1] these cultural viewpoints and identities (Brock, 2011; Couldry, 2012), and this study clarifies how trending conversations on Twitter afford this process. Second, previous studies have shown that individuals balance social benefits with privacy costs when performing identity and sociality through online media (e.g., Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vitak, 2010; Livingstone, 2008). The present research explores how individuals strive for balance in this process by adapting performances of the self. Third, recent research on identity expression on Twitter suggests a variety of performative approaches that resemble microcelebrity, personal branding, and strategic self-commodification (e.g., Marwick & boyd, 2010). This study extends such findings by focusing on the performative context of trending hashtags. Moreover, emphasis is placed on how individuals seek to overcome the expressive restrictions of the Twitter platform and manage collapsed audiences through performativity and play.

Online social platforms collapse or converge public and private performances, creating both opportunities and challenges for pursuing publicity, privacy, and sociality. Twitter is a social awareness platform that specifically enables condensed performances of the self, as expression is limited to 140 characters. This research combines the use of discrete content and discourse analyses of statements produced in the context of trending conversations to trace how a networked self is assembled and identity performed to a variety of actual and imagined audiences and publics. (e.g., Miller & Taylor, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010). In the tradition of previous work on performativity (e.g., Sedgwick, 2003), this work examines forms of performativity through the use of Twitter trending topics and explores the texture and affect of vernaculars of performativity afforded by the sociotechnical context of Twitter. It is driven by literature on producing subjectivities that make up a storytelling of the self, further curated through digital media.

## The Self, Performed

A performance involves the practice of doing, but also the practices of pointing, underscoring, and displaying the act of doing (Schechner, 2002). Goffman (1959) broadly defined a performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 15). Social roles associated with gender, race, and class, as well as those involved in professional, family, and social circles, are performed through repeated behaviors. In late modernity, performances of the self are indicative of the shapes individuals take on as they claim agency and negotiate power within social structures and imaginaries. They are part of the ongoing story or the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). Contemporary performance theory suggests that individuals now, more than ever, live by means of performance (Madison & Hamera, 2006).

In everyday cycles of self-presentation and impression formation, individuals perform on multiple stages, creating a *face* for each interaction and developing *faces* for a variety of situational contexts (Goffman, 1959). Patterns of action unfolded during a performance become known as "parts" or "routines," although in subsequent work these are referred to as "restored" behaviors: "twice-behaved

[1] The term is introduced by Couldry (2012) as one of a variety of practices afforded through online media and refers to the practice of maintaining a continual online existence for others to encounter.

behaviors [or] performed actions that people train for and rehearse" (Schechner, 2002, p. 28). Restored actions include the mechanical and conscious activities that become part of the performative repertoire marking identity. Language is essential to performativity, as it both describes and presents a form of doing (Austin, 1962). Derrida (1967/1978) updates this understanding by explaining that while words possess a material effect, at the same time they are *reiterative* of conventions and customs that reflect context and established ways of doing things.

As the individual, or performer, plays the same part to the same audience over different occasions or situations, social relationships are formed within the context of a preexisting habitus of practices. Similarly, multiple social roles or aspects of roles are compiled through performing and combining restored behaviors. Schechner's (2002) work is used as a starting point because it has opened the way for scholars to examine the connection between performance, repetition, and representation.

For Butler (1990), it is stylized repetition of acts that makes performances seem natural, yet at the same time, such repetition attains and evokes a naturalized historical context. Whereas restoration and repetition of behaviors reproduce "the Other as the Same," performativity enables a reproduction of the Other in which "the Same is not assured" (Phelan, 1993, p. 3). Hence, while performativity enables individuals to "do" social or gender roles, it also permits, even if ephemerally, subjective claims to symbolic capital via both habitually performed and reinvented identities. These behaviors form the narrative of the self and sustain particular narratives by connecting, integrating, and sorting external events (Gauntlett, 2002; Giddens, 1991).

In constructing identities as performances, imagining, mimicking, and restoring behaviors become essential processes in assembling a performative repertoire. The subjunctive mode, wherein individuals imagine behaviors *as if* they were performing them, permits social actors to rehearse and reinvent behaviors. Play affords make-believe performative space to try on roles and identities by combining, remixing, and rehearsing restored behaviors. These playful practices combine language and aesthetics to construct everyday narratives that support a storytelling of the self, ever in progress and unfinished (Hamera, 2006). Autobiographical performances, aimed at sustaining self-storytelling, reflexively employ performativity to traverse from private to public and back. Such performances frequently produce staged personal narratives, which construct interpretive audiences and are further remixed through the interpretations of those audiences (Miller & Taylor, 2006). In this manner, performativity enables both everyday doing and the rhetorical construction of a personal narrative of the self (Langellier & Peterson, 2006).

It is through strategies of play that individuals mix public and private to deconstruct, reconstruct, and transform performances in search of an authentic sense of self (e.g., Grazian, 2007). Typically, play is central to staging a performance aimed at disclosing a previously concealed aspect of oneself (Muñoz, 2006). Performance then becomes disclosure through play, or "a public way to show private stuff" (Schechner, 2003, p. 265). Performances thus enable individuals to traverse from private to public, but also, potentially, from the personal to the political, or from the individual to the collective, and back. It is this potential that leads Schechner to suggest that performing is a public dreaming (2003, p. 265). Sedgwick (2003) clarifies, however, that such traversals are further supported by affective processes,

which infuse new meaning into the texture of a performance, frequently through linguistic play or reversal of norms. Potentialities for being, then, are both reproduced and multiplied through play and interpretation.

Information communication technologies, such as Twitter, further augment these tendencies by saturating the self with ever-expanding networks of people, relations, and performance stages. Gergen (1991) termed these "technologies of social saturation," suggesting they provoke a form of performative incoherence by populating the self with multiple, disparate, and even competing potentials for being. As a result, each self contains an ever-increasing multiplicity of other selves, or voices, that do not inherently harmonize and are presented in contexts that frequently lack situational definition (Meyrowitz, 1985). Networked technologies might thus be understood as enabling access to multiple audiences, as well as multiple voices or aspects of one's own personality.

In seeking to understand and combine these multiple potential performances into a coherent narrative of the self, individuals become increasingly self-reflective and self-aware. Understanding one's multiple potentials requires constant, intense self-reflection. Self-monitoring becomes a preferred strategy for the *mutable* self that emerges, shifting the emphasis from stability of the self (self as object) to change of the self (self as process) (Gergen, 1991, based on Zurcher, 1977). This is not far removed from Giddens' ongoing project of the self, potentially leaving the self, in postmodernity, slightly more narcissistic and styled as a result (Gergen, 1991; Lasch, 1979).

## Performances of the Self in Ambient Spaces

The sociotechnical affordances of networked, always-on platforms like Twitter further augment social saturation. Blending the public with the private, they produce what boyd (2008) referred to as "context collapse" for performances of sociality lacking the situational definition inherently suggested by public and private boundaries. At the same time, these social awareness platforms expand the array of performative props, offering a heightened potential for theatricality and drama, which individuals find appealing (Parks, 2010). boyd (2010a) explains that persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability are important affordances of networked publics. They imply that presentations of the self, performed in data, persist and are difficult to erase completely, are easily replicated, are available to large scales of known and unknown audiences and publics, and are easily searchable. These affordances are augmented in architectures emphasizing information sharing by default (Papacharissi, 2010; Raynes-Goldie, 2010).

Individuals are challenged to manage the persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of their performances fluently in environments that prompt (and in some instances reward) sharing. *Shareability*, then, might be also understood as an affordance of networked digital spaces, because it constitutes an architectural feature of networked structures encouraging sharing rather than withholding information. What renders networks lively is the flow of information between individual network nodes. Networks are only as lively as the information flowing through them and, ultimately, are rendered via the flow of information.

This study examines Twitter as a social awareness platform that affords networked and condensed performances of the self. A content analysis of Twitter posts was first undertaken to examine what performances of the self look like as they take place within the ambient social environment of Twitter. In line with previous research on performances of the self in everyday life, the content analysis is designed around the following questions:

*$RQ_1$: How is the self performed in organically generated trending conversations on Twitter?*
*$RQ_2$: Which performative strategies become prevalent in this context?*

Launched in 2006 and presently claiming 190 million individual users, Twitter, a microblogging service, allows expression in "tweets" containing 140 or fewer characters. Typical Twitter users are young (median age = 31), slightly older than the average Facebook user (26), and younger than the average LinkedIn user (40). Twitter users are more ethnically and racially diverse than the full U.S. population; they are typically urbanites, and are more likely to access the web and other media services from a mobile device (Lenhart, 2009). Tweets vary, and may include personal thoughts, reactions, comments on affairs public and private, responses to others, conversation, and repetitions of others' comments, as well as news posts and direct reporting from live events. Several researchers characterize Twitter as a peripheral awareness system that enables social grooming (Marwick & boyd, 2010) and social monitoring (Naaman, Becker, & Gravano, 2011).

To address these research questions, a randomly drawn sample of tweets from trending hashtags was manually coded to reveal elements of performativity, including strategies for play and performance complexity. The sample, drawn from exogenous topical threads, excluded tweets from celebrities, public relations professionals, and others using Twitter for a commercially related or educationally driven purpose. As a second step, a discourse analysis was combined with the content analysis to examine the texture of performativity in greater depth; the premise for this discourse analysis is presented below.

Early forays into why people tweet reveal that people do so to fulfill needs for expression and social integration, and to relate to others in general (Zhao & Rosson, 2009). Frequent Twitter users report gratifying a need for connection, fulfilled by posting tweets and @replies, and retweeting others' public posts (Chen, 2010). Even though they frequently cover mundane details of everyday life, tweets are creative and literary, and they embed performative elements that qualify them for copyright protection (Haas, 2010). More significantly, however, they are embedded into social routines essential for forming and sustaining connections between communities that are both imagined and actual. Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) suggest that community on Twitter is dual-faceted: personal and collective at the same time, sustaining the sociality forms of a networked individualism (Wellman, 2001). These tendencies suggest the presentation of a *networked self*, sustained through sociality performed to a network of relations, via this network of relations (Papacharissi, 2010). These performances are polysemic, because they must make sense to a variety of audiences without sacrificing narrative coherence. Performing the self is simultaneously a way of expressing the self and managing its complex webs of relations.

Consistent with the practices of everyday expression and conversion, the form of connectivity on Twitter varies depending on conversation participants and topics covered. Exogenous or organically formed conversations tend to generate more independent contributions and are more likely to sustain

stronger ties (Naaman et al., 2011). The majority of Twitter posts either are "me-now" status messages or contain information shared and reproduced across networks, thus distinguishing between "informers" and "me-formers" (Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010). Informers tend to have more followers and tend to refer to others via @replies in their posts more often. Research results confirm that expression and connection via Twitter reproduce existing ties and patterns in sociality, but also vary in conversationality depending on both actual and imagined audiences (Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011; Yardi & boyd, 2010). Embedded in everyday interpersonal communication rituals, Twitter can be understood as one of many tools of mobility that enable a recalibration of social cohesion (Ling, 2008).

As exercises in sociality, performances of the self on Twitter generate a level of intimacy that may sustain and further cultivate social ties. When communicating with networked audiences, Twitter users frequently craft polysemic messages, encoded with meanings that are decoded differently by each potential audience member. One such strategy for polysemy is social steganography, or the practice of hiding in plain sight (boyd, 2010b). Through this practice, individuals may create messages that are reassuring to some audiences but convey vastly different meanings to those in the know. This strategy can help individuals balance expectations for authenticity with conflicting needs for privacy, publicity, and sociality. It thus facilitates the heightened self-monitoring and self-awareness technologies that social saturation invites.

The centrality of self-awareness and self-monitoring is underscored because the individual "represents the common intersection of myriad relationships" (Gergen, 2009, p. 152). In the context of social awareness systems, self-awareness and self-monitoring are heightened as individuals advance into a constant state of *redaction*, or editing and remixing the self. Redaction enables the gathering and editing of identity traces to form and frame a coherent performance. Thus, redactional figures are collaboratively *produced* as representational of the self, presenting an edited mix of available meanings (Hartley, 2003; Papacharissi, 2010). These redactional processes are simultaneously simplified and compromised by the structural affordances of platforms at hand. Thus, self-censorship and polysemy or steganography become popular strategies for negotiating the self across multiple networked audiences on Twitter (Marwick & boyd, 2010). People typically combine both strategies to convey a compelling narrative about the self, aimed at maintaining a socially coherent environment for the individual across audiences that may be collapsed, imagined, or actual.

A discourse analysis was conducted to generate a more in-depth interpretation of the performative strategies identified through the content analysis, and to specifically examine the performative practices constructed around polysemy, including social steganography, self-commodification, microcelebrity, and redaction. Drawing from the *as if* context of performance as play, the discourse analysis investigated how the networked self is performed via social awareness streams that simultaneously heighten autonomy and require constant self-monitoring. In technosocial environments of social hypersaturation, what shape does performance of the self take, and how does it balance needs for publicity, privacy, and sociality? What processes of redaction are invoked to permit an editing of the self? How do redactional and other performative strategies enable authentic performances? How are performances of the self on Twitter part of the ongoing story about the self, and do they resemble public dreaming?

## Methods

A total sample of 1,798 tweets was manually coded and analyzed for the content and discourse analyses. The sample, drawn over a six-month period, was chosen from endogenously determined topics of conversation that achieved trending status. The research team randomly selected one such topic every other week during this period, collecting tweets from a total of 15 trending hashtags. We used a sampling interval that varied depending on the length of the tag, and a random starting point.

### *Content Analysis*

For the content analysis, we manually coded for a number of descriptive features of the tweets sampled. The total number of tweets sampled from each tag varied, typically ranging from 100 to 300 depending on the size of the tag. Average word count was 12 (*SD* = 6.2), ranging from 1 to 31 words, and average character count was 63 (*SD* = 28.70), ranging from 2 to 140 characters. Average number of accounts followed by each user was approximately 484 (*SD* = 2,886.18), ranging from 0 to a maximum of 76,198 accounts followed, with a modal value of 182. Average number of followers per user approached 742 (*SD* = 6195.52), ranging from 0 (private accounts) to a maximum of 216,203, with a median value of 59 followers. Out of all the tweets coded, the majority (83.4%) did not contain @ mentions or replies. Some tweets contained mentions (20%), were replies (10.9%), or were retweets with the absence of a mention (4.2%); very few (2.4%) included links, the majority of which were to photos or video. We also manually coded for the following performative strategies, prevalent in performance theory.

**Magnitudes of Performance.** Magnitude refers to the complexity of a performance. Schechner (2003) presented the following magnitudes of performance, which describe the transformational steps, stages, or elements that performances advance through: brain event (prebehavior), microbit (smallest trace of behavior), bit (smallest unit of restored behavior), sign (composition of bits), scene (sequence), drama (complex system of scenes), and macrodrama (large-scale social actions viewed performatively, or social drama) (pp. 325–326). The magnitude of the performance provided an understanding of how individuals attempted to condense loquacious everyday performances into the restricted context of 140 characters or fewer. We adapted the above elements to Twitter and coded on a scale ranging from 1 (brain event) to 7 (macrodrama).

Brain events were rare. Microbits were frequently short tweets comprised of an emoticon ("#wordsthatdescribeme :-( "). Bits were slightly more expressive ("#wordsthatdescribeme talkative"), signs more developed ("#wordsthatdescribeme Weird metal goth head doing stupid shit . . . . BORED "), scenes further evolved ("#WordsThatDescribeMe Pathetic,Stupid,Worthless. . . Nd Tats Juss Thee Begining. . ."), and drama or macrodrama inclusive of a variety of interconnected behaviors leading to an outcome ("#wordsthatdescribeme talking to myself, answering myself, and laughing at my own jokes.I am ME !!"). Most performances (*M* = 4.51*, SD* = .94) were signs (36%) or scenes (33.7%); fewer were characterized as bits (10.3%) or dramas (12%) with intercoder reliability reaching .80.[2]

[2] Reliability for all content analysis variables was calculated using the Perreault and Leigh (1989) reliability index: $I_r = \{[(F_o/N) - (1/k)][k/(k-1)]\}^{0.5}$, for $F_o/n > 1/k$, where $F_o$ is the observed frequency of agreement

**Play.** Following Schechner (2002, 2003), we coded the presence or absence of play in the tweets sampled by defining play as the restructuring of other behavior to impart a light-hearted or playful context. We coded play as present if messages alluded to or involved the restructuring of restored behaviors. Examples of such instances included plays on phatic conventions, variations of social ritual, and variations of established everyday social routines. The majority of most tweets were playful (66.4%), with reported intercoder reliability at .86. Many endogenous and trending tags are frequently devised as games, so it is difficult to imagine them not being playful. Still, almost a third of statements coded were not playful. Examples of such tweets included: "#HonestlyHour you piss me off, a lot. but i still care for you, and will always be here if you need me," or "#honestlyhour : Dangerously in love by Beyonce has some of the best composition of any song made in the last 15 years."

We also adapted Schechner's (2002, 2003) strategies for play to the context of Twitter and coded for reordering, exaggeration, repetition, fragmentation, exaggeration and repetition, and (in)completion. *Reordering*, which referred to rearranging the sequence of restored behaviors, was present in 55% of the messages coded. In the context of Twitter, reordering involved playing around with syntactical or grammatical rules, rearranging conventional sequencing of words to form sentences, and generally going against the norm of presenting thoughts into a written sentence ($I_r$ = .82). *Exaggeration*, employed in 41.2% of the tweets sampled, had to do with the use of hyperbole in the sequence of restored behaviors and included affective statements that used word selection, syntactical placement, and punctuation to convey overstatement ($I_r$ = .85). *Repetition*, which appeared in 8.8% of the sample, captured the tendency to repeat certain movements within a sequence unusually frequently, including repetition of words, thoughts, and punctuation that produced redundancy and/or rhythm in a sentence ($I_r$ = .88). *Fragmentation*, found in 33.65% of the sampled tweets, is the breaking off of a sequence altogether by introducing irrelevant activities ($I_r$ = .75). In the condensed context of Twitter, this referred to a tendency to abbreviate words, use incomplete words or fragments of words, or otherwise break up the stream of the tweet. *Exaggeration and repetition*, present in 5.3% of tweets, referred to textual movements both exaggerated and repeated ($I_r$ = .85). Finally, *incomplete movements* characterized textual movements within the sequence that were unfinished or interrupted, referring both to the beginning of a movement (the *intention element*) and to its ending (the *completion element*). Incomplete movements appeared in 48.3% of the tweets coded ($I_r$ = .78). For example, a tweet like "#WhenIWas13 fireworks fireworks fireworks!" was coded as playful, as including both repetition and exaggeration, as incomplete, and as fragmented. By contrast, a tweet like "bored. as. fuck. #undateable" was coded as playful, incomplete, fragmented, and inclusive of exaggeration and reordering. "#WhenIWas13 ... Wait I'm not 13 yet ... #WhenIWas12" was coded as playful, incomplete, and inclusive of reordering and repetition.

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between coders, *N* is the total number of judgments, and *k* is the number of categories. This index accounts for coder chance agreement and the number of categories used, and is sensitive to coding weaknesses. Reliability scores range from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating greater intercoder agreement.

### *Discourse Analysis*

For the purposes of the discourse analysis, the same sample was read thoroughly and then reread several times as notes were taken regarding language use and tone, and presence, absence, and prevalence of performative strategies. Qualitative textual analysis techniques (e.g., Fairclough, 1995, 2000; van Dijk, 1997) pursue a deep explanation of meaning by observing and recording patterns present in a mediated text. The qualitative analysis sought to verify, expand, and illuminate the quantitative findings of the content analysis. This study examined discourse as a text, defining discourse as "all spoken and written forms of language use (talk and text) as social practice" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 19). Therefore, the aim of this textual analysis was to understand the "systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices" in identifying performative strategies (Fairclough, 1995, p. 17). Attention was directed to thematic patterns, repetition, and redundancy in the observed trends. Finally, notes and findings were categorized and further analyzed in light of previous research and the thematic questions presented earlier. The combined quantitative and qualitative approaches sought to expand validity and reliability. The findings of both methods are integrated in response to both research and thematic questions, and are summarized below.

## Performances of the Self on Twitter

The content analysis results revealed several performative tendencies characterizing the sample of tweets studied. High correlations were noted between the number of accounts followed and followers ($r$ = .82), and between the total number of tweets to accounts followed ($r$ = .58) and to followers ($r$ = .76).[3] Word count and character counts shared statistically significant, yet very low correlations with all of the above three variables. This suggests a connection between tweet length and numbers of followers, followed, and tweets sent, although it may not be of a defining nature. Consistent with previous research that distinguished between "me-formers" and "informers" (Naaman et al., 2010), most tweets in the sample contained no mentions or replies. Since mentions or replies are frequently interpreted as indicators of conversationality, one might infer that the majority of the tweets were self-focused. Still, these tweets were categorized by their authors into specific conversational categories through the inclusion of the hashtag. The assumption that they may be less conversational may not be entirely accurate. They may simply represent different conversational strategies associated with the presentation of particular thoughts that affirm one's sense of self. This possibility is further supported by the findings of the discourse analysis.

Understandably, the magnitude of the coded performances correlated positively and highly to word ($r$ = .74) and character count ($r$ = .68), and correlated modestly to tweets containing no mentions or replies ($r$ = .15). Play was a dominant performative strategy for presentation of the self in this context, with the majority of tweets featuring some form of play. Reordering was the preferred method of play, with the majority of authors rearranging words playing with syntax and grammar rules, using innovative spelling, and adopting other expressive strategies aimed at adapting self-expression to the confined expressional context of Twitter, always with a good measure of fun. Fragmentation and incomplete

[3] All correlations reported in this article are statistically significant at $p < .05$, .01, or .001 levels.

movements were also prevalent play strategies, supported via the affordances of the platform, but also reflecting attempts to playfully engage readers. The interruption of sentences and words fragmented expressive gestures, leaving them unfinished and thus open to the interpretive imagination of potential audiences. Language use and tone, as traced via the discourse analysis, further support this interpretation.

Correlations noted between performative strategies and structural features of coded tweets indicated additional tendencies characterizing self presentation. Specifically, the presence of play and strategies for play were negatively associated with word and character count, but also with total number of followers and accounts followed. All correlations were statistically significant and modest, the highest being noted between character count and repetition ($r$ = -.27), exaggeration and repetition ($r$ = -.18), and exaggeration ($r$ = -.13). Most hashtags begin as games, so findings pointing to play are unsurprising. The strategies and texture for play are of interest, however, and are further explored next, through both quantitative and qualitative findings.

The quantitative findings suggested the prevalence of play as a performative strategy, with the tendency to use play as a way of adjusting self performance to the condensed expressional context of Twitter. What is of interest, then, is not necessarily that these messages are playful, but rather that individuals confronted with a restricted stage for self-presentation seek to overcome expressive restrictions through imaginative strategies that include play. This interpretation is supported by the relationships between play, performative strategies for play, and the magnitude of the performance, which indicated that the shorter the message, the more playful it tended to be. The correlations were modest but statistically significant, connecting magnitude of performance inversely with play ($r$ = -.07), reordering ($r$ = -.12), exaggeration ($r$ = -.09), repetition ($r$ = -.11), exaggeration and incompletion ($r$ = -.08) and incomplete movements ($r$ = -.11).

It is worth pointing out that in the context of technopersonal technologies of social saturation that invite exposure, individuals choosing play as a survival strategy frequently do so at the expense of coherence. The *as if* aspect of play supports a premise for the convergence of private fantasy and public disclosure that may make individuals more comfortable expressing thoughts they would otherwise withhold. Play thus enables this practice of *public dreaming*, but should this practice be misunderstood, the premise of play can be used to reclaim and reframe that performance. Here play both rhetorically establishes space for public dreaming and offers an excuse for any performative incoherence or misunderstandings that may ensue as a result of it.

Furthermore, Gergen (1991) suggests that, when confronted with these tendencies and tensions, self-presentation frequently evolves from play and forays into carnival. The performative arena of carnival holds a pastiche of performative strategies that underscore both the importance and the impossibility of authenticity across audiences that are diverse and collapsed. Self-reflexivity, irony, and play are central themes in performing the sel(ves) in realities that are relational. The discourse analysis sought a deeper understanding of these tendencies by examining dominant trends in text, language, tone, and performance. Overall findings supported the playful performative context prevalent in the content analysis. Playful expressions were frequently humorous, although not always. Typically, they involved

rearranging norms for expression and going against what might be expected in conventional conversational settings. For example, tweets like "#honestlyhour i've never been on a date" or "I didn't change, I just found myself #honestlyhour," were playful beyond the use of humor, especially given that intention and perception of humor is a highly subjective affair.

Irony was combined with provocation as these statements of the self became ways of actualizing inner thoughts and fantasies. Occasional profanity, incivility, or simple broaching of risqué subject matter was adopted for the sake of being utterly frank, and thus possibly more authentic. For example, "#whenIwas13" prompted users to tweet "#WhenIWas13 girls blew bubbles instead of boys," or "#WhenIWas13 I was the baddest bitch in middle school," or, "#WhenIWas13 I waz watchn porn n spankn my monkey." These tweets may be interpreted as potentially offensive, but they were frequently presented from a premise of playfulness that made it difficult to do so. Instead, I would argue, tweets like "#whenIwas13 i rode rides not boys," or "Any guy is #undateable if they say #ideservehead," among other, similar tweets dominating this sample, can be seen as exercises in affirming the self and impromptu minuets into topics that are taboo in some environments. While these statements might be inappropriate for general conversation in a professional or other social setting, the thematic context provided by the hashtag invited them. In this manner, they are understandable within the greater context of *as if*, that is, of playing out the fantasy of saying shocking or potentially provocative things in public. The premise of play renders the public stage of Twitter a safe platform for expressing these private thoughts.

Provocation is thus both an outcome of authenticity and a possible strategy for authenticity. Interviews with those tweeting and further research would be necessary to determine the connection between impromptu behaviors, authenticity, and occasional expressive vulgarity. For the time being, however, it might make sense to understand these behavioral tendencies as strategies that sustain a state of *ersatz being*, or "the capacity for entering immediately into identities or relationships of widely varying forms … [which] may be ripped out of customary contexts and played out wherever time and circumstance permit" (Gergen, 1991, p. 183). In contexts that lack situational definition but afford individuals limited opportunity to *insert* situational definition, irony, play, and occasional bursts of utter frankness emerge as prevalent strategies for expressing the self.

It should be noted, however, that the tone of tweets varied and adapted to the topical nature of the hashtag, which afforded some situational definition. The thematic orientation of the tag provided the context for *statements* of the self, suggesting how these statements might be encoded by the self and then further decoded by audiences actual and imagined. Authors adjust their performances to their perception and feel for the conversation in which they are participating. So naturally, most profane or uncivil messages were found in the #honestlyhour tag and #juststoprightthere. By contrast, #whenIwas13 and #iwish contained messages with a nostalgic and wishful yet playful tone, and although profane or uncivil messages were still present, they were less frequent. The author's predisposition and the topic of conversation shaped the inflection of the performance. The act of tagging thus evolved into a performative act, as authors consciously decided to include their comments in a conversation by tagging them in such a manner.

In public art cultures like graffiti, tagging is an act of signing an art performance, and artists develop specific tags that eponymize their works among known crowds. For those tweeting, a tag presents a similar signature that situates a behavior within a social context. Moreover, tagging both categorizes the performance and makes it accessible to wider audiences. It thus affords performative statements of the self greater visibility, effectively eponymizing them.

Finally, a recurring theme in the performances rendered through tweets involved the presence of affect, that is, emotion subjectively experienced. It is common for ambient platforms that enable social awareness to host expressions that frequently combine opinion, emotion, and fact to release emotion through the act of expressing it. This form of emotional release simultaneously invigorates and exhausts tension, a phenomenon that in Lacanian terms is labeled *jouissance*, translated (imprecisely) in English as affect. Affect is embedded in the circulatory drive that characterizes networked publics and in the ambient streams of premediation they produce, sustained by ongoing reflexivity and connection (Dean, 2010; Grusin, 2010).

The practice of making an affective statement in front of an actual and imagined audience is potentially empowering, and it becomes even more so in the context of tags that invite provocative statements. For example, statements like "I'm #undateable," or "Your a follower #undateable," or "I hate when people all like "aye you remind of…" #JustStopRightThere I'm original; not a copy thank you very much" were declarative and affective expressions aimed at presenting and affirming a sense of self. As such, they reordered grammar and syntax rules and employed profanity, as in "If you don't like me, #juststoprightthere and go stand in line with everyone else waiting on me to give a fxck." or "#WhenIWas13 I was living like no concern." They forayed into the contemplative or nostalgic, as was the case with "#WhenIWas13 I was in the present, not the future, nor the past." They delved into the casual poetry of Twitter, as in "im on drugs, now #letsmakelove," or, "Oh by the way, Get in my bed? #letsmakelove." Tweets also involved affective statements of self-pity, like "#honestlyhour I hate wearing swimsuits. I wish I was skinnier." But they also featured powerful statements like, "#wheniwas13 i was gangraped." These affective statements employed emotion to locate private thoughts in a public setting. The act of intimating publicly or visibly sharing thoughts one has only imagined articulating can be a self-empowering act, evocative of performance as public dreaming. It is, then, not necessarily the act itself but rather the feeling it is infused with that grants the statement its own unique texture.

The improvisational character of Twitter, which thrives on impromptu form, invites such affective statements. At the same time, the condensed nature of expression may require redaction on the author's end, presenting performances that are potentially *deliberately improvised.* Performance theory suggests that all authenticity and intimacy derives from restored behaviors, and is thus performed. These performances, or more precisely, these *statements* of the self are deliberately improvised in the same way that rhymes are improvised in poetry circles, or B-boys showcase a dance move in break dancing circles. In such cultures of staged yet impromptu public performance, some private preparation is typical prior to the spontaneous enactment of previously restored behavior.

Rehearsed movements are thus further enhanced through improvisation or accented with a touch of profanity or vulgarity that does not offend (as it might, in a less performative context) but instead

surprises. These performative gestures may be interpreted as underscoring but also mocking the pretense of authenticity of what Gergen (1991) terms the mutable self, or as what we might understand as the chores of a reflexive self striving for authenticity.

## Storytelling of the Self on Twitter

This study examined performances of the self as they occurred in topics identified as trending on Twitter through accounts that shared no commercial affiliations. Most performances presented were playful. This playfulness was typically associated with the manipulation of conventions that shape what is publicly or privately appropriate. Playfulness was also associated with the reordering of syntactical and grammatical conventions. These tendencies are invited by the architecture of the platform and partially enabled through the expressive and connective tendencies of the self in late, networked modernity, that is, a networked self. This networked sense of self evolves out what Gergen (1991) describes as a mutable self, or ersatz being, combined with patterns of connection and expression described as networked individualism (Castells, 2001; Wellman, 2001).

Performing a networked self requires the crafting of polysemic presentations that make sense to diverse audiences and publics without compromising one's own sense of self. Understood within the greater paradigm of the ongoing, reflexive storytelling project of the self, networked selves assemble via practices of authorship, listening, and redaction (Papacharissi and Easton, 2012). Twitter presents a performative platform for the networked self in the greater context of the habitus of the new—a social architecture that is in constant flux. Certain trends that emerged in this study demonstrated the performative palette of the self in this context.

First, play in everyday life was formative in individuals' approaches to the particular performative context of Twitter. Confined to expressing the self in fewer than 140 characters, individuals used play to craft performances that both adapted to and expanded these semantic confines. Interestingly, play rested upon both the reproduction and the reversal of social norms, and reproductions and reversals of norms were mutually reflexive. In this sense, we may interpret play as a strategy for dealing with the fixity of norms and also consider ways in which the performative contexts afforded by social media reproduce social norms, so that we have the opportunity to engage and reverse them through our own performances. Naturally, the ability to do so requires digital fluency. It is intriguing that digitally literate behaviors on Twitter require reversal of the grammatical and syntactical norms that typify literacy offline. The performance of digital fluency may thus require deviation from the literacy norm, and further research may examine which individuals tend toward this and why. Overall, individuals approach these media with a measure of playfulness—typically studied only in game studies—that could be afforded greater centrality in the approach to media in everyday life. Playfulness invites the acting out of micro-, meso-, or macrofantasies of experimentation with a potential set of behaviors in an "as-if" mode that is not too far removed from how we integrate role-play and role modeling into our daily rituals.

Second, emotional release, and thus affect, is an important part of the expressive and connective gestures afforded via Twitter. Affect includes emotion and extends beyond it to describe mind and body movement toward a particular state that has not actualized yet, but is anticipated through a variety of

affective gestures (e.g., Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Emotion remains an understudied variable in communication research that, even when researched, is typically incorporated as an isolated variable. Affect allows us to examine emotive gestures blending opinion expression, phatic communication, and emotion into one, not unlike many of the utterances of everyday life, which typically converge a number of orientations rather than being strictly emotional, rational, or social. Affective gestures are of particular interest because they facilitate emotional release that exhausts tension or leads to subsequent action. Affective gestures infuse the storytelling of the self with emotive impressions that enhance performances of the self but may also entrap the self in a continuous loop of (mediated) affect. Understanding these connective and expressive practices in environments that are networked—and, frequently, converged—can help us situate and find a place for performative platforms like Twitter, or public dreaming in everyday life.

Finally, affect and play are important elements in integrating fantasy into the everyday, and are helpful for thinking through ways in which emotive gestures may reproduce and reinterpret our habitus of predispositions for publicity, privacy, and sociality. It is through these affective gestures that practices of expression and connection are improvised and edited into the performative context of Twitter. Ultimately, it is the potential for deliberate improvisation, present in the majority of the tweets analyzed, that appeals to those performing the self on Twitter—and in most everyday contexts.

Fluency in drawing from restored behaviors, which can be remixed and redacted to suggest, produce, and perform different inferences, is essential to everyday presentations of the self. The combination of improvisation and redaction, and possibly the reflexivity implied by these practices, sustains the theatricality of a performance in a context that blends print and oral conventions of storytelling. In the performative context of the secondary and, possibly, digital orality, we are afforded a more "deliberate and self-conscious orality," one that permits us to "plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous" (Ong, 1982, pp. 136–137).

In the deliberately improvised performances of a digital orality, interplay between spontaneity and preparation enables individuals to blend print and oral practices of storytelling in presenting themselves. Deliberative improvisation permits the reconciling of print and oral storytelling traditions. The print tradition invites planning and the oral tradition affords spontaneity: Deliberate improvisation is a response to these conflicting demands in the condensed storytelling context of Twitter. The resulting performance may produce theater, but to interpret it simply as theater distracts from the authenticity of the production. At the same time, to interpret it in the absence of theater undermines the meaning of the audience in this performance. Without an audience—actual, imagined, or a blend of both—who are we telling these stories to?

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