

“I Have Learnt These Things by Myself, Because I Always Thought That I Must Overcompensate for My Disability”: Learning to Perform Dis/abled Identity in Social Media

NOMY BITMAN¹

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Learning how to perform an identity in social media is a complex, two-stage process: lifelong environmental learning through socialization and acculturation mediated by self-comparison to others, and the transformation of this learned information into personal knowledge about how to develop one’s identity online. However, disability performance complicates this learning process through oppressive able-bodied medicalization, especially of concealable communicative disabilities. Based on 31 in-depth interviews with autistics, stutterers, and hard-of-hearing users, and 7 social media documentation diaries, this article provides a comprehensive perspective that presents dis/ability performances as a product of powerful learning aspects that involve both disability-related and “able-bodied” dimensions of learning. Although individuals learn how to deal with social media violence regardless of their disabilities, social, cultural, and technical learning of how to be a disabled person in the world dramatically influences dis/ability performances and perpetuates the complexity of performing a disabled self.

Keywords: social media, social learning, disability performance, disability studies, disability media studies, stutterers, hard-of-hearing, autistics

Learning how to perform an identity on social media is complex, even more so when the performer is culturally marked as disabled. The first stage of this process involves social and cultural environmental learning intended to make an individual a functional member of the dominant culture in his or her society by using socialization agents that mediate the world to the individual, who, in turn, compares him- or herself to others while actively interpreting these environmental messages (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Genner & Süß, 2017). The second stage involves the transformation of this information into practical knowledge of the cultural, social, cognitive, technological and communicative skills of using social media, as part of one’s digital literacy and personal identity development online. This stage develops many “selves” as boundaries between the individual and others (Davies, 2012; Robards & Lincoln, 2020). This two-stage process becomes

Nomy Bitman

Date submitted: 2021-06-13

¹ In between this article being accepted and its publication, Dr. Nomy Bitman passed away. Nicholas John, her PhD supervisor, prepared this, the last piece to come out of Nomy’s dissertation, for publication and reviewed the proofs.

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conflictual for users with concealable communicative disabilities, as disability culture contradicts the dominant medicalized narrative (Bruggeman, 2013), despite accessible social media platforms, because of stigmatization and the reproduction of social inequality (Ineland, Gelfgren, & Cocq, 2019).

This article shows how social media users learn to perform dis/ability² as stutterers, hard-of-hearing (HoH), and autistics.³ This is a process that involves both disability-related and nondisabled dimensions of learning. The first dimension presents how dis/ability performances mirror intensive sociocultural learning processes that affect disabled individuals' ability to freely express themselves—offline and online—for years, and internalized perceptions of disability that create fear of stigmatization. This, in turn, leads to constant comparison and self-positioning that results in communicative overcompensation as well as a fear of privacy violations that might be ameliorated following exposure to disability culture. The second dimension is learning how to deal with violence in social media, both direct and indirect, and its practical influence on the user's identity performance. This dimension, which is relevant for able-bodied users as well, includes four stages that describe how this event initiates an individual learning process. Although online violence is widely studied, this article connects it to online dis/ability identity performance learning.

Thus, I show that despite the partial relevance of contemporary online learning and identity development theories for disabled users learning how to perform dis/ability, important aspects of their communicative devaluation and otherness, which are learned throughout their lives, are ignored. This ignorance may contribute to the perpetuation of their marginality in social media.

I begin by introducing three stages of learning to perform dis/ability identity in social media. Next, I present the qualitative research methodology, which is based on 31 in-depth interviews and seven 48–72 hours' social media usage diaries. Finally, I present the two dimensions found in the analysis.

Literature Review

Social and Cultural Learning Online and Offline

Individuals are transformed into functioning members of society through socialization, a complex, lifelong process. This membership is achieved through reciprocal interactions with people in the individual's environment, who function as socialization agents, disseminating society's norms and values (Maccoby, 2015).

Media have two important roles in socialization. First, as a socialization agent in itself, media mediate the world to individuals through access to particular media content, duration of media exposure

² Dis/ability, a combination of "disability" and "ability," describes the range of the interviewees' communicative performance and the personal and the social dynamic transformation between ability and disability, as this term "simultaneously conveys the mixture of ability and disability" (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013, p. 24).

³ The terminology used in this study accords with disability-first language, used to represent proud, self-identified communities. In the current context, this term refers to mark people with disabilities as disabled by society according to the social model of disability.

and use, preferences for specific genres, media skills, risks, and resources (Livingstone, 2009). As such, the socialization process involves Bandura's (2009) social cognitive theory, which emphasizes observational learning of knowledge and skills—from media content, among other things—by imitating others (Bandura & Walters, 1977). This process comprises four stages: attention, retention, production, and motivation to perform the learned information (Bandura, 2009). In addition, media-centered socialization may create *cognitive constructs* that involve behavioral scripts and beliefs, such as violent media use that develops beliefs that aggression is acceptable, and *emotional constructs*, which involve learned emotions, moral development, values, and more, such as becoming less empathetic following exposure to media violence (Prot et al., 2015).

Second, media comprise services that are populated by other users who function as socialization agents (Genner & Süß, 2017; Maccoby, 2015), such as social media platforms. Despite these platforms' questionable ability to be as effective as offline interactions for socialization purposes (Zizek, 2017), media, and social media in particular, are essential to socialization.

Special attention is paid to the socialization of children, teenagers, and young adults, both offline and online (Jurgensen, 2011; Robards & Lincoln, 2020). Parents are central socialization agents, through their introduction and supervision of their children's use of social media, especially around issues of privacy (Genner & Süß, 2017; Robards & Lincoln, 2020). This socialization may be more protective by parents of disabled children, who tend to perceive their children as more vulnerable and place greater restrictions on disabled children's Internet access and use (Chadwick & Wesson, 2016; Kaur, 2019).

Individuals not only adopt attitudes, values, and norms, but they also construct, interpret, and challenge them (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020). Thus, socialization aims at reaching a balance between the individual's personal and social identities (Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer, & Sinner, 2019). Reaching this balance involves self-positioning of individuals, who compare their own attitudes, abilities, and beliefs to those of others (Festinger, 1954). This positioning is constantly driven by social media (Peng, Wu, Chen, & Atkin, 2019) and may create its own "accumulation of media schemata" (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020, p. 41).

This social positioning raises broader intercultural learning: acculturation. Migrants, for example, negotiate with their *host* cultures and their *home* cultures. Four possible processes may result: assimilation in the host cultures, separation from the host cultures, integration that mixes between both cultures, and marginalization in both cultures (Berry & Sabatier, 2011). Social media, by enabling the constant online surveillance of both cultures, is essential to acculturation. Consequently, social media users perform "problematic" identities as part of intercultural negotiations (Yau, Marder, & O'Donohoe, 2019; Yu, Foroudi, & Gupta, 2019), and are assumed to willingly give up on their cultures (Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

Personal characteristics, such as disability, result in a more dynamic acculturation process. This includes a psychological level (identity development, belonging to the group, the degree of willingness to participate in this group, and the importance of one's cultural identity), an instrumental level (individuals' ability to successfully perform cultural identities), a contextual level (perceived similarity between cultures, visibility, social climate, expansion to other cultural identities), and a developmental level (change over time; Garcia, DiNardo, Nuñez, Emmanuel, & Chan, 2020). Acculturation, like other forms of social learning,

involves information that leads a marginalized user to learn how to perform one's identity online. The next step is transforming this knowledge into practice: developing digital literacy and online identity.

Digital Literacy and Identity Development

Individual knowledge of how to use media affordances includes technological, cultural, social, critical, and cognitive skills. It necessitates users' literacy, "the ability to use, analyze, evaluate and create media content" (Genner & Süss, 2017, p. 12), especially in the digital sphere, which emphasizes cultural participation and the reception and production of digital media content (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020). Users' choice of media content addresses their motivations (Bandura, 2009): cognitive learning about the world, mood management, and affective and social motivations. Social media address many of them (Genner & Süss, 2017).

Social media expand the definition of digital literacy by necessitating skills and strategies for coping with digital distraction, information overload, data sharing, preserving one's privacy, and social skills in mediated spaces (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020). These elements are part of "social media literacy" (Manca, Bocconi, & Gleason, 2021), which requires expertise in "different social media skill sets that are either transversal across different social media (global skills) or pertain to a specific social media platform (local skills)" (p. 2). These skills enable users to learn how to develop their identities through social media engagement.

Queer youth, for example, do so in four ways. First, through *traditional learning* via online information seeking about their queer identities. Second, through *social learning* by observing other queer individuals. Third, through *experimental learning* about being a queer person in the social world and identity play to safely explore one's identity before coming out of the closet. Fourth, when queer youth feel comfortable with their identities publicly, they begin *educating* their online ties, both non-LGBTQ people and other queer people who are still coming out (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

These learning modalities demonstrate the transition from learning to performing a marginal identity online, based on an internalized set of social and behavioral norms (Bourdieu, 1997, habitus), to improve their social positionings. The user's personal narrative is developed through the practice of identity performance, based on past experiences and identity markers (Goffman, 1959). However, online identity performance may be problematic because of low literacy. As users mature and their literacy improves, they become aware of the retrospective harm caused by information "oversharing" and make retrospective "revisions" to performances made as teenagers (Robards & Lincoln, 2020).

This gradual development is mirrored in learning the potential risks of online self-disclosure: information loss, privacy violations, cyberbullying, and surveillance (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009). Cyberbullying, specifically, can initiate a learning process of how to perform an individual identity online because of the dramatic effect of a single action by a bully. This might have repetitive effects on the user (Brody & Vangelisti, 2017), which increase the victim's insecurities for a longer time compared with offline bullying (Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013). As a result, social media users learn to strategically disclose information (Marwick & Boyd, 2011): Privacy concerns reflect *how* people disclose in social media, rather

than *how much* they do so. Users with increased privacy concerns made less frequent, less intimate, and less honest self-disclosures (Zhang & Fu, 2020).

These notions of literacy may be challenged by disabled social media users given the digital accessibility divide—the slow adoption of digital technologies by disabled users (Dobrzensky & Hargittai, 2016)—that may decrease digital literacy among disabled users. In this context, disability refers to other aspects of literacy, education, and user support (by using accessible formats, inclusive education, and considering cultural and linguistic aspects of digital inequality, respectively; Goggin, 2017). As such, social media perpetuate traditional power structures when it comes to disabled users (Ineland et al., 2019), making necessary a focus on disability culture and disability performance online.

Disability Culture and Learning to Perform Dis/ability Online

Disabled people's otherness compared with "normate" subject positions validates able-bodiedness as a mark of social, cultural, and political power, which sees disabled people as responsible for their assimilation into able-bodied culture (Garland-Thomson, 2017; Ziv, Mor, & Eichengreen, 2016). As a result, the modern history of segregation and medicalization of disabled people led to the development of "disabled" counter-narratives, norms, and values, such as those of deaf culture, whose members see themselves as a lingual minority rather than as disabled (Barnes & Mercer, 2001). Disability culture uses online communities and personal narratives to reconstruct linguistic, political, narrative and historical power, autonomy, and choice for disabled people (Bruggeman, 2013). It involves disability identities, meanings, rituals, infrastructures, and resources that are essential for the equal access of disabled people (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015).

These cultural elements may be challenged by lack of access to supportive social media resources for disabled people. This cultural inaccessibility explains why online practices of claiming a disability identity in social media may be conflictual and even lead to offensive comments from able-bodied users (Bury, 2019; Ellcessor, 2016). An additional manifestation of online violence is cyberbullying: disabled youth tend to experience not only increased rates of cyberbullying victimization compared with able-bodied peers (Kowalski & Toth, 2018), especially autistics (Triantafyllopoulou, Clark-Hughes, & Langdon, 2021) but also to be involved in cyberbullying (Iglesias, Sánchez, & Rodríguez, 2019). Online violence against disabled people includes cyberharassment and the sexual harassment of disabled women, who are more exposed to offline harassment (Lin & Yang, 2019).

This demonstrates the complexity of disability performance, a fluid and unstable identity (Broyer & Hammer, 2019) that adheres to defined social roles (Hadley, 2014). The broad spectrum of performances ranges from those who validate the ableist social order and include performing able-bodiedness or showing how one has "overcome" one's disability, to performances that challenge the social order by presenting the disability in full view (Broyer & Hammer, 2019), such as "disability pride" (Siebers, 2004). Thus, the disabled body is turned into a cultural spectacle and imbued with meaning by external spectators (Hadley, 2014). Social media provide multiple opportunities for formulating disability identity through political and artistic performances (Hadley, 2014). However, the "everyday" performance of disability online is understudied in terms of the avoidance of disability disclosure and blurring private/public spheres (Bitman, 2021). This is especially significant given the user's surveillance on social media by offline social ties (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017).

Disabled individuals are stigmatized because of able-bodied devaluation of disability (Garland-Thomson, 2017; Goffman, 1963), yet the ability to conceal it adds another stigma. Indeed, expectations of compulsory able-bodiedness lead to the constant performance of normalcy (McRuer, 2006) in a way that "validates" disability controllability (Lyons, Volpone, Wessel, & Alonso, 2017), especially about communication. This stigma might deepen during situations of potential negative evaluation (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009), which complicates "coming out" of the disability closet in cases of concealable disabilities (Samuels, 2003).

This is true for my research population. Stutterers are stigmatized for a perceived inability to control their bodies, and their "broken speech" becomes a social barrier (Pierre, 2017), which is socially and theoretically medicalized. Although online communities offer stutterers a shared identity, they also enable them to hide their stuttering and avoid stigmatization (Rosenberg & Kohn, 2016). Although social media often provide visually accessible spaces for HoH users (Kožuh & Debevc, 2020), the great communicative variety of this group is often ignored. Accordingly, these users' identities may be performed differently to hearing, HoH, and deaf audiences: While passing as hearing is common in offline environments (Bitman & John, 2019), its occurrence is understudied within the context of online environments. In contrast, many autistics constantly use social media (Triantafyllopoulou et al., 2021) to promote neurodiverse collective identity performances (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Stenning, & Chown, 2020). In addition, digital media allow autistics to communicate better with neurotypicals (Alper, 2017). In this research, I focused on "high functioning"⁴ autistics.

The literature on online identity performance learning is focused on two main factors: the deep influence of the individual's environment in making one a functioning member of the dominant culture, and the transformation of this environmental knowledge into personal social media use skills. These factors may lead to various forms of dis/ability performance on social media because of this identity's stigmatization, especially about communicative concealable disabilities. Therefore, I ask: How do dis/ability performances on social media reflect the learning processes of users with concealable communicative disabilities?

Methodology

This research was approved by the institutional ethics committee at my university. Data collection, which took place between July and November 2019, in Israel, included three components. First, two textual pilot interviews were conducted over WhatsApp to test the interview protocol. Following these, the protocol was revised and finalized.

Second, in-depth interviews of 90–150 minutes were conducted with a further 29 participants. The interview protocol addressed aspects of self-perception and self-exposure about the participant's disability and communication, offline and online presentations of disabled identity, emotional and practical aspects of everyday social media use, and the presence of other users' disability performances in one's feed. There were no specific questions dedicated to learning, but questions that were focused on retrospective past

⁴ "High functioning" is a definition that derives from a narrow medical, neurotypical, and ableist hierarchy. Many autistics view this definition as offensive because of its minimalization of their difficulties.

experiences around one's disability in both offline and online environments, as well as past experiences of online violence. The questions covered issues of disabled identity, negative experiences in social media, privacy settings, technical and cultural accessibility, and general use and performance in social media.

Interviewees were recruited through relevant organizations, community leaders, and social media posts. Participants were aged 20 to 70, and included 13 men and 16 women. Seven were autistics, 11 hard-of-hearing, and 11 were stutterers. All were active users of at least two of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, and YouTube. Interviewees were paid \$25 each.

Since I am also hard of hearing, certain adjustments were made. First, communicative adjustments, as well as distance, time, and communications restrictions, meant that 10 of the 29 interviews were conducted via text on WhatsApp. Second, a member-check procedure was performed following the 19 in-person interviews. The interview transcripts were sent to the interviewees for approval, sometimes after corrections.

As an optional component, seven interviewees kept diaries of their social media use for 48–72 hours before interview. The diary was written in a researcher-participant shared Google Doc. In addition to enabling real-time analysis, these diaries provided a better starting point for the interview itself (Gibson et al., 2013).

The interview transcripts and diaries were imported into ATLAS.ti and analyzed thematically. This process was driven by an inductive, grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) approach that involved a theory-led examination of disabled social media users' learning processes about how to perform dis/ability. Given the scarcity of theoretical work that examines relevant aspects of learning processes among disabled users, the analysis combines theories of social and cultural learning (Bandura, 2009; Berry & Sabatier, 2011; Genner & Süß, 2017; Maccoby, 2015), digital literacy, and identity development (Manca et al., 2021; Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020; Zhang & Fu, 2020), to provide a framework for the critical analysis in relation to disability culture and performance (Broyer & Hammer, 2019; Bruggeman, 2013).

Findings

The analysis identified two themes that demonstrate the influence of two learning dimensions that are essential for performing dis/ability in social media. The first focuses on the relationship between environmental learning to becoming a disabled individual in society, and dis/ability performances in social media. The second focuses on the practical influence of violent experiences in social media on the individual's performance.

Performances as Reflecting Social and Cultural Learning

This theme portrays the relationship between the interviewees' social, cultural, and technical learning—about both their disabilities and social media—and the way they perform their dis/abilities identities. Although not every aspect of learning is related to their disabilities, the interviewees' basic otherness lies at the base of many of their experiences with socialization agents, while dealing with privacy risks, and especially given the constant overlapping between offline and online spheres.

Socialization agents introduced many interviewees to social media platforms and even gave feedback about their use. These agents were mostly friends, older brothers or sisters, and parents. An example of the latter category was given by 24-year-old Nir, an autistic man:

I opened my Facebook profile when I was 11. [. . .] I wasn't very active at first, and we played games, but I saw that there were many people in this website. In my home, internet safety was almost a religion, so I was very scared. I couldn't stand the pressure of this lie so I told my mom that I had an account. She said, "Okay, no problem, we'll keep this profile, it's fine. But I do want to see who your friends are there."

Generally, Nir described increased parental involvement when it came to social media privacy and online safety. The described "religiosity" of Internet safety and Nir's feeling of guilt because lying to his mother may demonstrate the extensive supervision, especially about online access and privacy, which were major issues even before joining Facebook. This example echoes the literature about the extra protection that parents of disabled and autistic children apply to their online participation and socialization (Chadwick & Wesson, 2016; Kaur, 2019).

That many young interviewees opened their first social media profiles at similar ages to Nir led to a continuous process of growing up and learning how to deal with changing norms in these environments (Manca et al., 2021). Thus, as these interviewees grew older, they retrospectively revised earlier posts and photos (Robards & Lincoln, 2020). Nineteen-year-old Amalia said:

I just checked every post that I posted in the past and I made them private, to make sure that I was the only person who saw them. I was embarrassed by content posted by me when I was 11.

Interestingly, as her social media skills improved and enabled her to perform her desired identity, Amalia's involvement with the HoH and deaf communities grew, influencing her online performances as well:

I used to be a very passive user. But as I write posts to raise awareness about deaf issues, based on my own experience, that I want to be shared, I try to be more active. [. . .] I don't feel like I have to hide, as I used to few years ago. Maybe it's kind of an absence that I have to make up for. I was very shy and closed as a teenager, with great grades and less social life. I feel like it's my time now to blossom and I have to make up now for those things that I couldn't do then. So now I write a post and I don't care who reads it.

In Amalia's case, her growing exposure to disability and deaf cultures (Barnes & Mercer, 2001) and the meaning of linguistic devaluation made her more active in changing cultural perceptions and dealing with her personal years of otherness and fear of self-exposure and stigmatization (Garland-Thomson, 2017; Zhang & Fu, 2020). As such, her disability performance mirrors both her improved social media literacy and personal resistance to dominant communicative and cultural narratives by claiming an HoH identity online (Bitman & John, 2019; Bruggeman, 2013; Bury, 2019; Mitchell & Snyder, 2015; Siebers, 2004).

In comparison to HoH and autistics, stutterers suffered from increased stigma because of a perceived ability to control their bodies (Lyons et al., 2017; Pierre, 2017). Years of dealing with this stigma have taught them to be very attentive as they perform communicative able-bodiedness. Twenty-nine-year-old Sharon described a painful environmental learning process as a child:

My dad used to tell me to breathe before I talk, made a face when he heard me stutter, turned his face away because he didn't like it, or just walked away from me. He wanted to fix me in every way, so I underwent many treatments that did not work. I understand now that as long as you have self-confidence, even if you fake it, your speech is more fluent. You need more self-love, patience and compassion. I wish my family had encouraged it when I was a child. Maybe I wouldn't be so focused today on how I look when I talk to people and ask myself if I look normal like them.

Like Sharon, many stutterers echoed this constant self-positioning and self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954; Peng et al., 2019), fears of disclosing their stuttering in social media (Zhang & Fu, 2020), careful maintenance of their privacy settings, and an evaluation of their digital skills as excellent in this regard (Manca et al., 2021; Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020). The additional stigma, devaluation compared with fluent speakers (Garland-Thomson, 2017; Goffman, 1963) and difficult experiences of environmental learning made Sharon feel dissociated from her Facebook account and, at the same time, concerned about privacy violations:

I met some guys and after short conversations on WhatsApp I realized that they had looked for my Facebook profile. There was a guy that sent me a friend request before we even met, just to gain more information about me. It happened few times. I don't see any point in accepting these requests since my Facebook profile doesn't represent me.

In contrast, 24-year-old Amitay, a male stutterer who experienced years of social rejection by peers and potential partners as a teenager, described how his online performance today challenges his internalization of environmental learning processes:

I am a very private person, so I barely post anything about myself in social media, unless it's really important. It is the same with my family; I barely talk, and I don't feel like I can really express myself. [. . .] I've been working on it recently. I interact more with people on social media, upload photos to Instagram stories, expose myself more. Recently I even did something that I had never done before: I shared a post about stuttering. [. . .] I became more active as part of psychological therapy. I understand that I have to get over my fears, to be more active and not be afraid to be who I am.

Although most of his social media performances are not related to stuttering, it is important to understand the dramatic implications of this environmental learning on an individual's ability to express him- or herself even in digital spheres, where disfluent speech is often not a problem. However, although Amitay often performs "passing" (Siebers, 2004) as a fluent speaker, his gradual exposure on social media is a retrospective challenge of learning that he has an illegitimate identity (Bruggeman, 2013).

This demonstrates the constant overlap between offline and online spheres of a given culture (Jurgensen, 2011; Robards & Lincoln, 2020) when it comes to environmental learning, which shows the dominance of offline socialization (Zizek, 2017). Another finding in this context relates to social media "manners." These "manners" pointed to offline and online social skills and commitments, such as "likes" to friends' posts or following a friend who followed you first. However, they were sometimes connected to interviewees' disabilities, as with Ofri, a 35-year-old female stutterer. Ofri's reflections in her diary criticized her "overly good manners" and tendency to get carried away with social interactions with others even when they become too intensive and time-consuming. Her diary included remarks like, "How do I find myself in these situations?" and, "I commented on this WhatsApp's group question after a very long time of thinking whether I have to get into it." When asked why she feels that her manners have been so demanding, Ofri explained by referring to her perception of communication and compensating others that she had mentioned earlier in the interview:

Communication for me is so much more than words. It is actually feeling the other person by seeing beyond the words, to become so close to other people that I can understand what they want even without talking. [. . .] I have learnt these things by myself, because I have always thought that I have to somehow over-compensate for my disability to please other people. So I became very good at having good relationships with everybody and communicating with different kinds of people.

This example illustrates the importance of personal interpretation when balancing social and personal identities (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2019). Although she taught herself, following her socialization as a female stutterer, to communicate with many different people, she pays the emotional costs of this online intensive communication. Her "overly good manners" mirror her high social media literacy that involves understanding why she feels the need to compensate others this way (Baacke, 1999, as cited in Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020; Manca et al., 2021).

This theme highlights various elements of acculturation. Sharon and Ofri are assimilated into in the "host" culture (Berry & Sabatier, 2011), which includes social media surveillance (Yau et al., 2019). Ofri's self-reflections show deeper self-positioning evaluations and psychological, developmental, and instrumental levels (Garcia et al., 2020) that are self-interpreted through her "manners" terminology. However, it is different for Amitay and Amalia, who challenge their "host," able-bodied culture to a certain degree after years of fully adopting it. As Amitay shows signs of integrating "host" and "home" cultures (Berry & Sabatier, 2011) to feel more comfortable in being himself, he seldom performs stuttering as part of intercultural negotiation (Yau et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2019). Amalia goes one step further because of greater personal involvement in her "home" culture. This involvement reflects deeper psychological, instrumental, contextual, and developmental levels of a dynamic acculturation process (Garcia et al., 2020).

Learning to perform dis/ability based on environmental learning shows how the basic understanding that disability is a stigmatized identity (Goffman, 1963) that should be performed carefully, as other marginalized groups' (Fox & Ralstone, 2016), is linked to an internalized otherness (Garland-Thomson, 2017). This otherness is a fundamental part of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1997) and influences their social media performance.

Practical Influences of Online Violence on Users With Concealable Communicative Disabilities

This theme shows the practical impact of violent events experienced by the interviewees in social media, whether directly or indirectly, and the four-stage process following a specific violent event. Although these diverse violent events do not necessarily have anything to do with interviewees' disability, they serve as hidden moments of learning to develop their performances as disabled users. An interesting example was presented by 24-year-old Nir:

When I was younger, I fought with someone in a Facebook group. Suddenly, that guy took my then-new Facebook feature of a cover photo on my public profile. I did not even know about this feature, but I had a cover photo of one of my old photos, as a little boy riding a horse. He took the photo [. . .] and posted it in the group thread as a comment. I was really shocked and annoyed, so I sent him a personal message. He refused to answer. So I went to his profile and took an old photo, posted it as a comment and wrote: "Sir, do you want to be an asshole? I can be an asshole, too." Ten minutes later he sent me an apologetic personal message, telling me that he deleted my photo and asking me to delete his photo. So it worked. Yes, I was a bully, but . . . against another bully. It was so scary.

Nir's fear and shock made him realize how (non)private his Facebook profile content actually is, especially given the constantly changing features of this platform. This emotional turmoil was a breakthrough that led him to carefully revise his profile's privacy settings (Robards & Lincoln, 2020):

I carefully checked all my privacy settings, I changed the pictures I chose to present [on my profile], even for people who are not my friends, to more updated and normal photos. Then I checked in the other platforms just to make sure that they were fine, even though they were.

More broadly, Nir's experience shows the short distance from being a victim of cyberbullying to becoming a bully. Both of these identities are linked to disabled social media users (Iglesias et al., 2019; Kowalski & Toth, 2018), especially autistic youth (Triantafyllopoulou et al., 2021). Yet as a young user who is not very skilled in social media use, the exposure to an act of violence—perhaps one of many—could potentially make Nir think that a violent response would solve the problem of violating his privacy (Prot et al., 2015). This example shows how such an apparently "minor" event might take an enduring toll on the user even years later (Brody & Vangelisti, 2017; Slonje et al., 2013), as Nir still justifies his actions. Another example is described by 40-year-old David, another autistic man:

There's someone who likes to complain about the way I run an autistic [Facebook] page. He also threatened to sue me once. It's actually funny, because he can't do that, but it scared me. At the beginning, I thought that I was in trouble, and that I wouldn't be able to express myself freely anymore. But after a while I relaxed. So yes, I will say whatever I want and he will write horrible stuff no matter what. I wasn't worried anymore. It's not that this threat disappeared, it just became permanent, so it's not that scary anymore. It's like a dog that barks, but doesn't bite. When you suddenly hear a dog barking it's scary, but once these barks are always in the background, you don't notice them anymore.

In contrast to Nir, David is older, more experienced, and has a strong autistic identity. This identity emphasizes his social motivations (Genner & Süss, 2017), which may lead to prioritizing them over his fear. In addition, as someone who sees himself as “educating” other autistics toward a positive identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016), providing a space for autistic culture and narrative (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2020; Bruggeman, 2013) is more important to him. As such, the notion that he would stop expressing himself freely on issues related to autism is not realistic.

Although violence against dis/abled users in social media is not new, Nir and David’s examples demonstrate a four-stage learning process that shows the precise influence of violent acts on their future performances. The first stage is experiencing the event itself and recognizing an attack by a specific person. As seen in Nir and David’s examples, this stage includes fear and stress caused by the weakening of their online security (Brody & Vangelisti, 2017; Slonje et al., 2013). The second stage shows their immediate reaction to the attack and the attempt to minimize the risk: Nir’s posting of the attacker’s photo, and David’s taking the time to adapt, lowering his profile and being “quieter” than usual.

The third stage included the practical learning and adding this experience to the “accumulation of media schemata” (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020, p. 41) as part of a constantly developing social media literacy, which includes global skills (dealing with social media violence), local skills, and literacy, which is learned through participation (dealing with a specific violent event; Genner & Süss, 2017; Manca et al., 2021). Nir understood how to deal with a privacy violation by immediately changing his privacy settings and also understood the implications of his own violent performance. David understood the additional burden of being a “public” activist: constantly dealing with “barks,” even if they don’t cause harm. The fourth and final stage is making a personal decision about whether or not to change one’s behavior in social media. Nir changed his entire perception of privacy on Facebook. David, on the other hand, prioritized his right to freely express himself over the cost of constant attacks.

Julia, a 26-year-old stutterer activist, underwent a similar process to David as a result of learning to deal with online sexual harassment:

Today it’s not as frightening as it used to be years ago, but people on Facebook still comment on my posts with “can we go out?” and there was one guy who consistently harassed me, told me that he’s lonely, and so on . . . I just stopped responding. [. . .] In another case, I just wrote him back: “this is the last time that you send me a message. If it happens again, I’ll go to the police and tell them that you are sexually harassing me.” He stopped.

Learning to deal with sexual harassment is not unique for disabled women, but they are relatively vulnerable to this form of harassment (Lin & Yang, 2019). As in other examples, fear was the main emotional response before Julia learned how to protect herself as an activist performer who turned herself into a spectacle for her spectators (Hadley, 2014). Dealing with this issue shows the deep emotional baggage left years after the event (Brody & Vangelisti, 2017) and the high risk of privacy violations online (Debatin et al., 2009).

Indeed, fear of actual danger was a fundamental aspect of learning to deal with violent events and their influence on future social media performances. However, 33-year-old Maya, a HoH woman, presented a different perspective:

When I was a kid we used to chat through ICQ, and someone was threatening me. I was so scared! And a few years ago, I shared a [Facebook] post written by a friend that described what some guy did to her. And that guy saw [that] and said that he would go to the police and sue me for slandering him. I mean, people threatened me so many times. [. . .] I do whatever I like. You can't just live in fear all the time. I've gone through so many things in my life, so I'm not afraid anymore.

Generally, interviewees aged 40 and older had decreased sensitivity to violence compared with younger people. Maya saw social media as a recent development of digital media and did not attribute danger to these platforms specifically. She presented a developed social media literacy (Manca et al., 2021), as she "got used" to experiencing online violence to the extent that she's not afraid of it anymore, so she can freely express herself. However, her clear memory of that fear shows the power of the first time of experiencing online violence (Brody & Vengalisti, 2017).

An important finding in this theme was that of experiencing social media violence indirectly—by observing others' experiences. Interviewees saw what other people went through after performing controversial identities publicly and learned from this what not to perform themselves. Forty-five-year-old Talia, a HoH woman, captured it perfectly:

I saw people who got horrible comments after sharing their political opinions. When I see that violence against other people, it really shocks me. I can't handle it. [. . .] So right, I haven't experienced it myself, but it makes me even more careful online than I used to be in the first place.

Talia's dramatic emotional reaction demonstrates the strong effect of social learning through observing others (Bandura & Walters, 1977) in cases of political performance. Though there is no imitation of the action itself, Bandura's (2009) four stages of the process are indeed present here: attention to the violence experienced by someone else in her newsfeed; retention of the event and of her emotional response; production of the knowledge; and a strong motivation to *not* perform this learned information (Bandura, 2009; Genner & Süss, 2017). Talia's comparison enables her to understand what would happen were she to share her political views as well (Peng et al., 2019).

By showing the influence of violent experiences on disabled users' performances, the second theme complements the first by presenting a learning process that is not entirely related to users' disabilities.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article presents two major dimensions of the process that social media users with concealable communicative disabilities undergo as they learn how to perform their dis/abilities. The first is their

sociocultural learning as disabled individuals who have to assimilate themselves into able-bodied society. While users' technical, cognitive, and sociocultural evaluation and critique abilities are improved, the influence of the negative environmental messages about their disabilities—both offline and online—persists for years, leading them to perceive themselves as unable to express themselves freely, even in social media. This dimension shows interviewees' internalized otherness and devaluation as clearly recognized in many of their learned performances. It appears as part of socialization agents' monitoring of social media use by disabled youth; the increased privacy risks because of the high cost of a potential "leak" of one's stigmatic disability; and the constant overlapping between offline and online spheres that allows certain users to "pass" as able-bodied, and others to challenge this "able-bodied" performance as they try to express who they really are after years spent concealing their disability.

The second dimension is the practical influences of online violence on users' identity performance. This process may be experienced directly by the user through a four-stage learning process: recognizing the event as an attack by a specific person, immediate reaction to this attack and trying to minimize its effect, producing practical knowledge for dealing with similar experiences in the future, and making a personal decision as to whether or not to change the behavior in future identity performances. Violent events may be experienced indirectly, as an observation made by the user on other users' violent experiences—and avoidance of imitating behaviors that led to this violence. Learning to deal with violent events has practical and psychological implications that shape the user's perceptions of social media for years to come. Although this theme does not present findings that are related to the interviewees' disabilities, the influence of violent events may be as strong as the effect of environmental disability-related factors about learning to perform dis/abilities in social media.

These two processes are complementary, as they present a complete picture of powerful learning dimensions that are both related and unrelated to users' disability. This picture provides a comprehensive perspective that integrates often-separated elements into a broad learning process. This process is the key for becoming a disabled social media user in particular, and for understanding disabled users' marginality in social media in general.

As such, online and offline socialization and acculturation processes teach disabled individuals that they have to assimilate their devalued bodies and communication through external practices of stigmatization and internal practices of constant self-positioning to "normal" others (Festinger, 1954) and to able-bodied culture (Garland-Thomson, 2017; Goffman, 1963). As a result, the identity development of these users, offline and online, is pushed toward compulsory able-bodiedness and "passing" (McRuer, 2006; Siebers, 2004). Interviewees' literacy captures their fully-aware avoidance of any potential privacy violations (Genner & Süss, 2017; Manca et al., 2021; Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020) and the fear of "leaking" of their disabilities in public spheres in social media (Zhang & Fu, 2020), to meet their habitus (Bourdieu, 1997).

As such, many interviewees' connections to disability culture, as an oppressed alternative narrative, is often missing. However, when interviewees meet other people like them, a process of challenging their knowledge about the world and themselves is initiated. This process brought to the surface the idea of "host," able-bodied culture, and "home," disabled culture (Berry & Sabatier, 2011; Garcia et al., 2020), and, as such, the ability to resist (Bruggeman, 2013) initiates a new learning process of how to express what

they saw as their real selves. This new development is performed carefully, as part of a growing awareness of risks following learning how to face and deal with social media violence—cyberbullying, privacy violations, sexual harassment, and more (Brody & Vengalisti, 2017; Slonje et al., 2013; Lin & Yang, 2019). However, despite the potential of social media platforms to encourage equal participation (Elcessor, 2016; Goggin, 2017), the ways social media reproduce discrimination against disabled people (Ineland et al., 2019) make performances of claiming disability identity problematic (Broyer & Hammer, 2019; Bury, 2019).

Although these abovementioned elements of disabled users' process of learning to perform dis/ability in social media have been widely studied, this article shows how their combination into a singular perspective creates a disciplining mechanism that shows the dominance of offline sociocultural learning even online. As such, while presenting both major apparent and "hidden" aspects of violence in this learning process, future research should focus on other learning mechanisms of disabled users to expand our knowledge on how these platforms reproduce inequality. An example of such a mechanism may be the process of directing users with highly stigmatized disabilities, such as mental illness, to private spheres in social media platforms.

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