The Looking Glass Lens: Self-concept Changes Due to Social Media Practices

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Abstract

This study brought an enduring social psychology theory into the era of mass self-communication. Cooley's (1902) *looking glass self* posits that the self-concept is built, in part, by how a person sees him- or herself and, in part, by the reaction of others. For social media producers, neither the reflection nor others' judgment needs to be imagined. Digital media can serve as a mediated mirror and social media sites provide the space where others' judgments are clearly posted. YouTube producers were asked if they had come to see themselves differently since posting to the mega-media site and, if so, how. Forty-six participants reported self-concept changes ranging from being more accepting of their physical appearance to gaining confidence

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from overcoming the sting of negative comments to being empowerment due to a new role within a global, digital environment. The combination of media and media sharing platforms can serve as a digital looking glass lens.

The ability to share self-produced media online is one of the most salient changes brought about by digital technology. This new paradigm, which Castells (2009) calls the *mass self-communication* model, is a significant alteration to the 20th century, top-down, hierarchical model of mass communication. Individuals armed with cell phones, web-cams, GoPro and other WiFi enabled cameras have the ability to express themselves and share these visual expressions widely sometimes with political, legal, and cultural ramifications (Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2008; Yousuf, 2009). Included in this mix of self-produced media is, quite literally, media of *self,* where the creator of an image turns a camera lens on him- or herself to capture a photo or video clip. These new forms of "me-media," such as vlogs (video blogs) and selfies (photographic self-portraits), are rising in popularity ("Self-portraits and social media: The rise of the 'selfie'," 2013). Scholarship tends to focus on either the "mass" side of Castells' model, e.g. the influence of citizen media on news practices (Gillmor, 2004), or on self-presentation styles rather than the more encompassing self-concept (Zhao, 2005). Rare is the study that examines how social media practices *changes* the producers themselves.

Social psychology considers the self-concept much like a cup that contains a collection of identities, roles, and values an individual holds about one's self. These notions

of self are formed through an inner dialog the person has with him- or herself with certain social situations and actors in mind. Cooley's (1902) theory of the *looking glass self* analogizes this process to that of checking one's appearance in a mirror; i.e. a person sees him- or herself in a mirror, begins to imagine how he or she appears to others, anticipates their judgment, which evokes an emotional response. Digital cameras allow producers to easily create a mediated form of self while social media platforms afford an easy means of sharing and gathering others' judgment via replies, comments, likes and shares. This study asked YouTube producers two simple questions: Have you come to see yourself differently since posting on YouTube and, if so, how. Along with Cooley's looking glass self, James' (1890) classification of the self-concept serves as a conceptual framework to categorize the common themes that emerged from YouTubers' responses. The literature review begins with the foundational writings on the self-concept (i.e. James, Cooley) before addressing how the medium (video) and the social environment (YouTube) could fit into Cooley's looking glass self.

The me in the mirror: Self-concept theories

James (1890) first theorized that the "self" has an empirical, known aspect that he called the *me*-self. The empirical self has three aspects: *the material me*, *the social me*, and *the spiritual me*. The material me encompasses the essential self (one's body), material possessions, and the product of one's labor. The social me is fluid and multifaceted because it is anchored in social situations. As James wrote, a person has "as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of

him in their mind" (p. 294). The situation, the person, and others involved determine the role and actions a person takes on. For example, James noted that most people would leave a city devastated by a pandemic unless that person was a doctor or priest. Despite the name, the spiritual me is not so much a religious form of "me" as it is a collection of roles, values, and possessions that come to mind when thinking about one's self in the whole or, in James's words, what "we *think of ourselves as thinkers*" (emphasis in the original, p. 296). The spiritual me, in contrast to the material and social me, transcends the individual as he/she considers contributions to the larger scale of life, e.g. contributions to a community, to society, to humanity, etc.

Although his theory centers on motivation rather than self-concept, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs loosely mirrors James' aspects of the me-self. Maslow theorized that, at the most basic level, individuals are motivated to meet physiological and security needs (material me), then belonging and esteem needs (social me), and, finally, self-actualizing needs (spiritual me). Despite the difference in emphasis, the idealized form of self (spiritual me) and the idealized form of motivation (self-actualizing) share common notions of aspiration beyond one's individual self to contribute or connect to something larger, e.g. to a cause, a quest, a community, etc.

Cooley (1902) was the first to advanced James' concept by articulating how social and psychological forces may influence one's sense of self. The *looking glass self* analogizes the building of the self-concept to that of checking one's appearance in a mirror; i.e. a person sees his reflected image and, then, forms an impression of how others

will come to "see" him. This imagined judgment then evokes an emotion that Cooley called "a self-feeling" which, in turn, influences the person's sense of self and, potentially, his actions. "The social self," Cooley wrote, "is simply an idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own" (p. 179). Key within that quote are two ideas: first, that a notion of self emerges from communicative, social interactions with others and second, that the view is one filtered by what the person holds dear. Not every imagined judgment from every person present in any given social situation has equal weight. Instead, a person must first *interpret* the reflected judgments he/she imagines, *selects* which people and judgments are salient, and then seeks *stability* with the imagined judgment and the own inner sense of self (Franks & Gecas, 1992). Thus, each step in this process is anchored on internal values. The need to witness consistency between an inner sense of self and the outward view a person witnesses of his or her actions is thought to be so strong that, in the presence of inconsistency, people will undertake a number of actions and rationales to bring the two back into alignment (Secord & Backman, 1965; see also Baumeister, 1997). In this manner, attention to self-presentation may be motivated by anticipated rewards from a desired audience or by the reward of bringing oneself closer to an internalized, idealized self (Jones & Pittman, 1982). The need for a consistent, inner sense of self does not mean that the self-concept is a locked down, static view of self. Tice (1992) found that individuals change their self-concept schemas and do so at a greater extent when they believe their actions are public. The looking glass self, then, can act as a magnifying glass "…

so, what one sees in oneself while others are present has an extra powerful impact on self-concept" (p. 215).

In examining narratives across the history of human storytelling, Baumeister (1987) argues that self-concept themes are common to particular eras with popular postmodern schemas being self-actualization and a sense of individual uniqueness. For example, early literature of the 20th century centered on issues of alienation and personal defenselessness amongst the backdrop of the industrial revolution, World War I, and, subsequently, the depression era. In comparison, literary works in the later half of the century center on individuals' inner reflection and quest to know one's self. Simply put, the earlier protagonists were victims to or raged against political and economic structures (think Sinclair's *The Jungle*) whereas protagonists created later on are driven by a struggle for identity and consistency in self-schemas (think Capote's *In Cold Blood*). Baumeister's insight adds to this study in two ways: that certain socio-historical eras may popularize certain self-schemas and that creative products can serve as artifacts that uncover those schemas. Baumeister questioned how the idea of human narratives, as media artifacts, point to commonly held self-concept themes during certain time periods. The questions of this study are the following: Can self-produced content serve as creative artifacts revealing something *about* the producer *to* the producer? And, if so, how? The next section discusses possible locations that may influence YouTube content creators' self-concept; namely in the images and media they post or in YouTube itself.

The me in social media

The mode: Me in the visual. Images have communicative power unlike any other form of media. As Messaris (1997) writes, images serve as evidence "like footprints in the sand" (pp. 129-160). Metz (1974) contends that moving images had the power to say "It is so!" ever since the beginning of cinema (p. 4). The power of images to communicate comes from three inherent attributes: iconicity (analogy), indexicality (causality), and a lack of syntax (order)(Messaris, 1997). Photographs, in particular, are iconic because they give the impression of "standing in" for real-life objects. Photos are indexical because they are evidence of at least one action – the act of taking a picture. Images also lack the syntactical properties that guide other forms of communication. In particular, moving images (film, video, or animation) are open to personal, polysemic, and often affective interpretations. While all three attributes are particularly salient in video, at times they lead to a strange contradiction. A video may appear as proof of what "really happened" but its meaning can be contested and, often, with a great deal of emotion wrapped around the conflicting arguments. For example, consider the court battle over terminating life support to Terry Shiavo. Video clips, recorded by her parents, were used by both sides of the controversy as "evidence" of Shiavo's cognitive state. The clips were so passionately contested that they became a central point for protest and media coverage (Cranford, 2005). Since the Shiavo case, the power of video to both prove and disrupt has influence beyond one court case namely due to the ease to post and extensive reach through social media spaces. Still images and video captured at key moments during political unrest in Arab

nations have swayed public narratives of "what happened" even when official reports and eyewitness accounts describe a different set of facts (Yusuf, 2009).

 The channel: Me in YouTube. YouTube is a classic embodiment of Castells (2001) four cultures of the Internet: techno-meritocratic, hacker, virtual communitarian, and entrepreneurship culture. In Castells' argument, each layer informs and supports the other three. Techno-elites drive knowledge through peer review processes and a quest for discovery; hacker culture takes what the meritocratic side creates and reforms it – hacks it – into something different with new value. The virtual community culture honors self-directed freedom, creativeness, and self-expression; all of which are positioned against mass media communication systems where, in the virtual communitarian mindset, individual free expression is trounced. And, finally, the entrepreneurship culture driven by the notion that any individual with a singular focus on developing a new idea can change the world and, in so doing, reap outrageous monetary rewards. Traces of all four cultures can be found in YouTube. YouTubers sharpen their video craft, gaming, or other skills through the comments and video responses posted by other YouTubers aspiring to master the same skillset. Remix culture represents the hacker philosophy in YouTube. Remixers appropriate commercial and user-produced content to re-edit the clips into a new expression (Lessig, 2008). A certain class of YouTubers often describe the site as "the YouTube community" and express a heightened sense of that community whenever they feel the corporate actions of YouTube, Inc. are in violation of shared norms and values (Burgess & Green, 2009). Meanwhile, commercial aspirations drive YouTu-

bers ranging from adding video content to an existing commercial entity or brand to making a living in YouTube by becoming a YouTube Partner (Burgess & Green, 2009; Maia, Almeida, & Almeida, 2008). In theory, any of Castells' four cultural layers may sway how YouTubers come to see themselves depending on which aspect the person holds in higher regard. For example, the virtual communitarian and the entrepreneurial producer should draw different value from their time on YouTube; i.e. one is focused on gaining social connections and the other on gaining commercial or celebrity success. If their self-concept changes at all, the cultural aspect they hold dear should influence either that change or the perception of their change in self.

Cooley theorized that individuals form their self-concept, in part, from a mental picture of themselves and, in part, from an imagined judgment from salient others in a certain social contexts. Unlike other social media sites, YouTube's main social and commercial currency is *video.* Videos have a contradictory nature; although images are "proof," their interpretation is personally derived. Furthermore, the social space in which media is shared may influence meaning. Can self-produced videos reflect back some evidence about the producer to the producer of the clip? If so, how might the social environment *highlight* some aspect of self? Despite the rise in self-produced media, no research to date has brought Cooley's theory into the era of shared, digital media spaces. As a first step, this study simply asked YouTube content producers if they had come to see themselves differently since posting on YouTube and, if so, how.

Methods

A two-step sampling approach was used to recruit YouTube producers. Producers interested in discourse and social interaction (over entertainment or music) are known to tag their videos with the news/politics or people/blogs content categories (Burgess & Green, 2009; Siersdorfer, Chelaru, Nejdl, & Pedro, 2010). Popularity lists, which rank videos according to the kind of attention the video was attracting, were listed under content categories. To gather participants with a range of experience in You-Tube, two lists were used: the *most discussed* or *most recently posted*. The most discussed list ranks videos gathering enough text comments to move them into a popularity range; the most recently posted simply listed videos as they were posted to YouTube. Videos were randomly selected to identify the content producer who posted it and an invitation to the online survey was sent via YouTube email. Tracing videos back to the person who posted it is a procedure used elsewhere (see Burgess & Green, 2009; Rotman, Golbeck, & Preece, 2009). Sampling took place in the summer of 2008.

In the end, 102 YouTube producers agreed to participate. The people/blogs and news/politics content was equally represented, but the sample was slightly skewed in favor of the "most discussed" over the "most recently posted" (61%) and male participants over female ones (73%). Age was recorded by the decade the person was born. Forty-seven percent of the sample was under 27 years old and nearly a third of the participants (32%) lived outside of the U.S. At the time of sampling, Alexa.com reported that both males, the 18-24 cohort, and U.S.-based users were overrepresented in YouTube. Fifty-one partici-

pants indicated that they had come to view themselves differently due to their YouTube practices. Five responses were not included in the final sample; three participants indicated that they had changed how they looked at themselves but choose not to elaborate and two responses did not address changes directly when asked to elaborate. The remaining 46 responses were coded along James' classifications of the empirical self. Comments where the participants discussed seeing their body, face, work differently or expressed self-concept changes broadly, e.g. a greater self-esteem, were coded as *changes to the material self.* Comments where the participant discussed the influence of other YouTubers, including actual or perceived judgments, were coded as *changes to the social self.* Comments where the participant discussed connecting to, drawing in, or influencing a larger collective (YouTube in general, an audience, society, etc.) were coded as *changes to the spiritual me.*

Findings

This study asked what kind of self-concept changes might YouTube producers experience due to their content-creating practices. Social media practices did sway an inner sense of self for half of the sample. Elaborations from 46 participants are similar to James's empirical me classifications. However, their comments also reflected YouTube's culture in terms of social expectations or aspirations. The findings section focuses on how these responses were similar to the material, social, and spiritual me. How a certain "YouTubeness" is weaved through the comments is left for the discussion section.

Changes to the material self

Twenty participants reported some change in how they viewed their material self. These responses mirrored James' concept of the material me as encompassing one's "possessions." Participants wrote of gaining confidence, enhancing their creative side, or coming to see themselves differently in general terms. Five talked openly about accepting a part of themselves they had struggled with before YouTube – their physical appearance. One wrote:

[a]t first, to even contemplate having my photo on the web was impossible to tolerate…

> I now see myself as more capable than I realised [*sic*], entertaining, funny, even…I am not as ugly as I thought I was. I still see myself as "odd" looking but I accept that without pain, now; without cringing!! … Now, I actively encourage anyone with similar reservations to bear the perceived pain and put them self out there. With total editorial control, an individual can learn quickly that they actually aren't a scary alien from outer-space, and they don't bear the physical characteristics of a slug… Broadcasting oneself is character building, enhances one's sense of self, and builds self-confidence.

Posting self-produced videos helped three participants with debilitating, social hurdles. One wrote that he was "more aware of my autistic gestures and other things I need to improve vocally and physically." Another man wrote that "[w]hile I am still considered 'shy' by most standards, I am now more open than I was before YouTube."

The last participant in this group of three considered You-Tube's social environment, not the camera lens, as making a difference:

> My opinion of myself as an anti-social and asocial paranoid schizophrenic has been in part mitigated as a result of much more human interaction, albeit electronic, with literally several thousand people writing to me, rating my videos, etc. In some respect I find YouTube humanizing.

For these participants the combination of YouTube and a camera lens provided an actual mirror to view self. Two short responses from other participants hinted at a discrepancy between the camera lens and "the real world" but did not elaborate further.

Six participants mentioned gaining self-worth through their work in video or filmmaking. James' considered this view of self, tied to the products that come from one's labor, as part of the material me. Most talked in general terms about how their "creative work" had lead to greater confidence and self-appreciation. Two wrote that their YouTube videos had strengthened their professional image or brand. One man, a software engineer by trade, thought YouTube had brought him closer to long-held personal aspirations:

> … uploading videos that interest me on you tube made me extremely happy. As they say there's somethings [*sic*] money can't buy and happiness is one of them. That's exactly what You Tube bought for me. And now I not only understand what makes me most happy, but also got a insight into my own

thoughts and dreams. … Movies have al-
ways been my first love. My passion for mov-
ies was always alive and you tube just made
it stronger. Hopefully someday I will make a
motion picture. That will be the day.

Most of the remaining participants simply
discussed having more self-esteem and self-respect.
Demographically, the material me group was
largely men (85%) responding from the U.S.

Changes to the social self

Twelve participants mentioned how other YouTu-
bers' had altered the way they viewed themselves. Five
participants considered the feedback they received from
other YouTubers as a positive experience. "When ppl [*sic*]
give you good critick [*sic*] you feel more safe," wrote the
youngest participant, an 18-year old woman posting from
Norway. "And youtube [*sic*] helped me getting out my
thoughts and feelings - this helps." Two of the older par-
ticipants in the sample also talked about the social space
of YouTube as being positive. "People have told me that
my videos expressed a point of view or advice that was
useful to them," wrote one man. " I had not, until this
point, considered my opinion or advice all that notewor-
thy." Another responded to the question by writing "I've
learned so much about myself from social networking/
entertaining - about how I deal with others and how they
view me." One participant, who used YouTube to share
videos of his oil painting process, believed "… hearing
what others have said about my work, and myself as a per-
son have built my confidence and altered the direction of
my life in many ways."

Other participants, though, saw inconsistencies between their inner view of self and how others seemed to be judging them in YouTube. "I have a lot more viewers who share their opinions about me which don't usually match up with how I see myself," wrote one man. "Over time I think it definitely has an effect on your self image." Some were more attentive to their communication or self-presentation styles after being on YouTube. "I'm more careful about what I say online," wrote one. "[I] question my opinions to see if they are really what I believe. I also see other people online as actual, if anonymous, people." Another wrote:

> I'm more aware of how I "come off" to other people. Because of how anonymous com-menters comment and openly express their view me, I now see how just tweaking words or expressions even a little bit can help get an idea communicated properly and with tact.

While her response implies that the attention she received from "anonymous commenters" was not positive, others were more explicit about the negative side of YouTube. For example, another woman wrote:

> … with a fanbase there's also haters or peo-ple who judge you. Sometimes I feel like I'm something I'm not, it's not really easy to ex-plain, but the wear and tear from haters, judgmental people, just takes a toll on my mind. But all in all, I think dealing with all that crap has actually made me a stronger person.

One took the "haters" on as a personal challenge:

> From my experience, YouTube comments
> are usually unintelligent and needlessly
> hateful. But somehow the comments on my
> videos are almost always positive and en-
> thusiastic. The fact that I've turned the Hy-
> dra of antagonism that is YouTube com-
> menters into my lapdog makes me feel like I
> have something special, something genuine
> and enjoyable to offer.

While she may appear to be bragging, she had the proof to back up her words. At the time of the survey, she had nearly 15,000 subscribers— a number surpassed by only one other participant.

Others talked about how *they* were providing value to others. "Its [*sic*] empowering," began one response, "I am able to share important things that others would never believe unless they saw it with their own eyes." Common among these comments is a somewhat self-sighted view of the social self. The responses imply that the participant is not so much interested in what others say about him or her, but focused instead on what *they* do for *others*. For example, one YouTuber wrote, "I wanted others to experi-ence some of the things that I have been lucky enough to do. I see myself as being lucky enough to do some cool things that others might like, so I posted what I have." At least initially, another participant also framed his re-sponse in terms of his influence:

> Any interaction at all provides a sort of so-
> cial mirror of yourself, in which you can see
> what you bring out in others. Youtube [*sic*]
> is a different social arena, and as with any

> prolonged interaction, that sense of self and
> its placement in society adapts to fit the slot
> that society allows it, only differently.

The distinct demographic trait that separated the social me group from the other two was age; exactly half were 28 years old or younger.

Changes to the spiritual self

Fourteen participants wrote about self-concept changes in a grander context, e.g. having impact, being heard, or being connected to a global community. A counter-mass media theme weaved through the group. "I feel more empowered to inform, and not so much at the mercy of the mainstream media," one wrote. Another echoed a similar sentiment:

> It [YouTube] gave me, as I suspect it has
> many others, a sense that I might really be
> heard by some of the public at large,
> whether we agree or not, and might give
> others a feeling that "the common woman/
> man" can still be significant in the processes
> of our society. This is of profound import,
> being that much of what passes for "a free
> press" these days is controlled by rich indi-
> viduals (Murdoch), rich corporations (GE,
> TimeWarner), or "starlet journalists" (check
> ANY over-powdered, loudmouthed, or sanc-
> timonious face on television today).... This is
> a precious gift, this power. And with it
> comes a sobering sense of responsibility:
> whether being serious or silly, eliciting pub-
> lic opinion or expressing that "girls just

> wanna have fun", we each have something
> to say. And say it we should!

One woman saw her YouTube role as a counter-argument to the bias she perceived in traditional news coverage:

> I see myself as a producer of media, not just
> an audience. I see more of the bias in the
> mainstream media, and how easy it is for
> them to lie/give skewed views to the public,
> and I am concerned about it. I think there is
> a Liberal bias, and it is frightening and
> wrong.

Others focused on different power structures than mass media ones. "No longer am I a spectator on the war for democracy in America," wrote one man. Another felt he was:

> … more responsible in having a greater role
> in respect to influencing and effecting a
> change in the zeitgeist of our society away
> from dangerous ancient myths and supersti-
> tions, toward a real appreciation and under-
> standing in the value of reason, logic, and
> empirical evidence. Such a trend of attitudes
> is essential for the betterment of humanity
> and its future in a peaceful "brotherhood of
> man."

Unlike those expressing an anti-mass media sentiment, these participants wrote in terms of being *part of* rather than *oppositional to* something larger. One of the older participants in the sample felt YouTube had brought him some awareness of "…what I missed out on doing many years ago. I can reach out to people and bring people together for a common cause. I no longer have the doubts I

once had about myself." Others talked about gaining a cultural understanding of "others" across the global. "[E]ven though we live far away we still share lots in common," wrote one. Another merged his newfound understanding of others with a more self-sighted aspiration:

> I'm contributing to society more, immortalizing my identity, connecting with people who are less like me, and working in a new field. I have a personal self and a persona. My name, because it is also my username, is a brand now.

These YouTubers considered brand as an *extension of self* rather than enhancing part of a professional image. Still, reaching a "mass" audience was an implied goal. One man simply wrote, "I think it COULD be possible that I could become famous." As with others in the sample, his sentence may appear boisterous until considering his 10,480 subscribers at the time. One woman wrote:

> I am now a personality. I am "*XXXX*" I am an entertainer and educator, a sister and a friend. A knockout. Youtube [*sic*] has now become a medium for me to spread mass messages and teachings across the world. Before I was averse to having my image broadcast and was quite private, now I see that there are tidbits of knowledge and advice that I can broadcast to people who need it. I volunteered in real life, one on one. youtube [*sic*] gives me the ability to do a sort of philanthropy with limitless potential…. I suppose now I see my self and more effective, pertinent, and powerful.

The only participant to discuss community was also the most popular YouTube creator in the survey. His YouTube vlog had over 28,000 subscribers. "I don't think my understanding of myself has changed much," he wrote, "I think my understanding of community has changed radically." No demographic or YouTube data – including subscribers – distinguished this group from the other two.

Discussion

At a time when self-produced, socially shared visual media is becoming ubiquitous online, this study asked two simple questions: Do social media producers come to see themselves differently since they first posted on YouTube and, if so, how? Half of the YouTube producers in the sample reported some change to their inner sense of self. The responses tied to a changes in the material self, i.e. appreciating their actual body or gaining confidence from sharing their creative work, are consistent with James' concept. Not surprisingly for a YouTube sample, some considered video storytelling as playing a role in these changes. More surprising, though, were the frank comments on how painfully some had viewed their physical self before YouTube. For these participants, mostly men, YouTube was a healing mirror through which they could make peace with how they *perceived* they looked to the world. For other participants, YouTube's social space was locus of their self-concept change. Consistent with Cooley's looking glass self, some discussed being more socially aware or attentive to their self-presentation or communication styles. One man experienced such a drastic disconnect between his inner sense of self and how others saw him that he reevaluated core, personal opinions. However,

traces of Castells' Internet culture also begins to appear among the social self changes. In the real world, a person hardly expects others to hurl insults and condemnations their way in everyday, public spaces. As Goffman (1959) noted, individuals tend to seek a consistency between their performance *and* all the other players in the situation. Yet, the freedom of self-expression treasured by online culture sometimes means the freedom to be mean. Merely surviving the onslaught of YouTube "haters" strengthen producers' sense of self; actually taming the beast of negativity was an even greater personal victory.

Castells' Internet culture was most apparent among the group reporting changes to the spiritual self. To James, the spiritual me is the sense of one's worth to the world. While some participants did write about their contributions to a larger context, many discussed this change in either an oppositional or self-directed tone. For example, some saw their role in YouTube as being a voice *against* mainstream media or political structures. These sentiments are common to the libertarian nature of hacker and virtual communitarian culture. Others alluded to community norms by discussing belonging to a larger collective, but they spoke of community broadly in terms such as brotherhood, global connections, or "being a sister" to others. Community theory tends to consider community, both relational and traditional, as having clear boundaries to the members who understand *who is* and *who is not* part of their group (see McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Finally, a hint of the entrepreneurial culture was present as well in the comments about becoming famous, being a brand, or serving an audience. Although these sentiments may appear self-sighted, there is a sense that this group, as a

whole, had experienced profound changes to self; becoming a world citizen, an opinion leader, or having a following had given these producers a satisfaction not entirely expressed in the material or social change responses. This group truly considered their place in the grander scheme of humanity due to their time on YouTube.

This study sought to lay the boundaries by which other work can more robustly investigate self-concept changes due to social media practices. Given that goal, certain limitations and future directions are inherent to the work. First, because responses were drawn from two questions (one dichotomous and one open-ended), more introspect methods, such as in-depth interviews or ethnography, is needed. Second, in the time since the study, YouTube, Inc. has continued to expand its commercial position by forging new partnerships and initiatives. Thus, some responses may be bound to a historical period of YouTube's growth. Lastly, responses were coded along James' classifications of the empirical me by the author. These classifications may be too broad and one person's interpretations too limiting. It is salient to note, though, that this study makes no generalization claims. Instead, the goal of the work was to open a new way by which to consider social media practices within a self-concept frame.

This was the first study to illuminate possible self-concept changes due to posting visual content on a social media platform. More work that flushes out these changes is needed. For example, comparing self-concept changes across different platforms may be a means of understanding cultural expectations that are unique to certain social environments. For example, comparing responses from Facebook users to YouTubers might help in understanding

what self-concept changes are unique to the platform and what are more universal. In regards to visual sharing environments, two parts of the looking glass process are particularly salient for future work: meaning in the image and anticipated reactions from others. For example, asking YouTube producers what other producers' videos "mean" about creators and what in that image "proves" that meaning would be valuable knowledge on how visual elements serve as social proof in digital spaces. Flipping the question around to ask them to explain *their* production decisions in terms of what it "says" about them could help illuminate the expectations social media producers anticipate anytime they post content.

Whether they know it or not, any person picking up a camera is wielding a powerful communication tool. From the most basic level of self (the bodily me) to the most expansive self (the global me), these participants reported subtle and profound changes to how they saw themselves. Weaved throughout the comments are Castells' layers of Internet culture, i.e. the hackers' libertarian spirit, virtual communitarian values and entrepreneurial intent. The findings suggest that digital, social spaces are both similar to and slightly different than the social arenas Cooley and James considered. A mediated form of self, shared on digital social spaces like YouTube, can act as a traditional reflection of self but with a "broadcasting yourself" twist. Neither the media nor the social platform takes center stage in this process. Instead, together the two reflective tools become a looking glass lens that magnifies different aspects of self whether that "self" is the actual, human self or the digital, mediated self.

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