Title:

Self-Improvement Through Self-Tracking: An Analysis of the Quantified Self in Media

Introduction:

With the advancement of technology, specifically those relating to quantifying numerous facets of our lives, we often find ourselves pushed to constantly achieve the "highest score," dictating our perception of what it means to improve ourselves. This perception can be attributed to the Quantified Self and its emphasis on quantifying. The Quantified Self is a cultural phenomenon where individuals turn to self-tracking tools to "answer a health question, achieve a goal, [or] explore an idea," according to the movement's website, QuantifiedSelf.com. It encourages self-tracking in hopes of improvement, a concept that is increasingly becoming more popular, as it is "starting to be a mainstream phenomenon as 60% of U.S. adults are currently tracking their weight, diet, or exercise routine … [and] there are 40,000 smartphone health applications available" (Swan 2013). As a result, visual media have been highlighting the effects of quantification through cinematic and serial/episodic formats, interpreting the phenomenon in numerous ways. Analyzing a wide range of narratives surrounding quantification and self-tracking provides an insight into the messages about the Quantified Self that media portrays. This can shape our own knowledge about the movement, thereby affecting how we interact with self-tracking technology.

Background:

The social pressure to become better combined with technology that can quantify our daily lives can lead to the Quantified Self. Introduced in 2009 by former editors of Wired

Magazine, Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, the Quantified Self emphasizes self-tracking using technology to improve self-knowledge through numbers, such as the number of steps they have taken or the number of calories burned. The aforementioned Wired article titled "Know Thyself: Tracking Every Facet of Life, from Sleep to Mood to Pain, 24/7/365," states that self-quantifying will not only allow users to track their health status and habits, also sharing this data provides an "insight [that] will come not just from our own numbers but from combining them with the findings of others" (Wolf 2009). Users, specifically "self-quanters" are given the option to share their data, with other users, creating a sense of competition and encouraging "high scores." "Self-quanters" believe in the "general progression in human history of using measurement, science, and technology to bring order, understanding, manipulation, and control to the natural world, including the human body" (Swan 2013). Utilizing the pressure to improve, tracking technologies encourage "self-quanters" to constantly seek to raise the numbers from their data, in order to be - what they believe - healthy.

My research goal is to understand the proliferation of the Quantified Self by analyzing media that feature self-quantification. With Honors research funding, I will be able to research how the Quantified Self is represented in media, and what message this media is sending about self-quantification. As the Quantified Self phenomenon becomes more widespread, there have been more media that spotlight the effects of quantification on its characters, oftentimes to their detriment. For example, in the HBO show *Made for Love*, the main character Hazel finds herself trapped in a marriage with tech billionaire Bryan Gogol, surrounded by tracking technology that forces her to quantify her sex life, happiness, etc. on a daily basis. Gogol is always seeking to improve his life by meticulously monitoring quantitative data collected from all aspects of Hazel and his life. She realizes how harrowing this constant tracking and surveillance are and attempts

to escape her relationship and the presence of her husband's technology. Films, shows, and other media that focus on quantification should be explored because their narratives can reflect the effects of the Quantified Self through cinematic and serial/episodic formats.

Methods:

To achieve my research goal, I will research the history of using technology to track health, the Quantified Self movement, and media studies accounts of technologies of the self. I will then expand my research by examining histories of self-tracking, theories of technology and the self, and sociological studies of quantified health and digital health technologies. Any observations and notes will be recorded to shape my analyses. Not only is textual research important for this project, but also being able to access films, television shows, and other media is key for being able to get an insight into the messages being made in media about quantification. Close analysis of media allows me to recognize patterns in media representing the Quantified Self phenomenon and examine how media support or critique self-quantification technologies and practices. This is why funding for books, media, and streaming services is needed to conduct research. Throughout this process, guidance and resources can be provided by my research advisor, Dr. Kressbach. Furthermore, using self-tracking technology, such as Fitbit, will be crucial as experiencing first-hand self-tracking shapes my understanding of my topic. This allows me to be able to have a unique insight into the practical nature of self-quantification while being able to immerse myself in the practices of "quant-selfers". Research on self-tracking has historically avoided subjective accounts, and hands-on work will allow me critical data on the experiential effects of self-quantification. At the end of my research this summer, I will be

able to write an abstract for a paper on the Quantified Self in media and be able to present at the following LMU Undergraduate Research Symposium.

Expected Results:

There is currently a lack of scholarship on quantification in media, despite its significance reflected in our culture and habits. Studies have shown that the effects of the use of self-tracking technology are unclear, as "studies have found that there may be detrimental effects, while others have documented the overall benefits of self-tracking to health and wellness outcomes as well as the psychology of empowerment and responsibility taking" (Swan 2013), showing a need for more research on this topic. However, trends relating to the Quantified Self indicate that although some may use self-tracking technology to improve their health and other states, the quantification of aspects of their lives can result in harmful perceptions. When analyzing media that focuses on quantification, the character that is affected by quantifying themselves oftentimes finds that the constant tracking and surveillance creates an obsessive and detrimental environment. More visual media must be taken into account before drawing a conclusion about the Quantified Self and quantification in media, despite this.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, understanding how media portrays self-quantification shapes our knowledge of the effects of quantification, as the films and shows investigated reflect the nature of the Quantified Self phenomenon. Moreover, analyzing portrayals of quantification and its effects allows for an interpretation based on a multisensory experience (sight and auditory) that visual media provides. Not only is analyzing visual media crucial to my research but also using

self-trackers provides a first-hand perspective of "self-quanters," adding subjective descriptions

of the effects of quantification. Understanding quantification and how phenomena like the

Quantified Self can signal how to approach using self-tracking technology.

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