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5. May 2023

Abstract for the topic-specific panel: Representations, portrayals, and effects

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Research title: Stages of disclosure: The role of social media in the identity development of transgender individuals

There is not enough research investigating social media's impact on identity as an ongoing process or constructed/emerged entity. This research presentation investigates issues that transgender people (henceforth "trans*") face in establishing and validating their identity through online disclosure and the impact of social media on the "coming out"-experience of trans* individuals. Technological developments such as the internet, smart devices and social media networks connect people and brands in real-time across the globe with a diverse and broad audience. This virtual sphere enables people to communicate and create digitised content without the restrictions of geographic boundaries (Papacharissi, 2008). The technological advancements and the provided infrastructure facilitate the integration of our online and offline lives. On social media, its users are sharing their most private and intimate moments not only with their friends and family but also with a worldwide audience. Social media is one way people use to connect with others; it offers a platform to explore LGBTQ+ identity in a "safe space". Transgender people can "come out" to their online communities before they do in "real life".

Indeed, the "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004) explains how a lack of face-to-face interactions and the anonymity provided by the internet can lead to increased self-disclosure. Disclosure for trans* people can reduce prejudices around this marginalised group in society. Disclosure has various consequences and is complex, as it can lead to experiencing discrimination and being the target of hate crimes. This research aims to investigate the impact of social media on the identity development of transgender individuals, focusing on the different stages of identity disclosure. The research question aims to understand the role social media plays in developing and establishing an emerging gender identity, and how disclosure of transgender identities works on social media. The research area covers an understanding of identity and the self, gender and transgender identities, computer-mediated communication, and identity disclosure on social media.

A methodology combining qualitative and quantitative research methods was used to collect data from 234 anonymous online survey participants, and longitudinal interviews were conducted with 9 participants. The research is limited to participants from the United Kingdom identifying as part of the trans* umbrella. The theoretical foundation of this research understands knowledge from a critical orientation of meaning-making, with a blended approach to the experiential orientation of how the participants make sense of their identity, how they experience disclosure or view social media as a safe space. Knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through language and its active use. This research draws from Judith Butler's understanding of performativity (Butler, 1999), Erving Goffman's dramaturgy approach of the Self (Goffman, 1978) and Castell's understanding of identity (Castells, 1997). A social constructionist lens with a dominant post-positivistic paradigm is prevalent in this research. Identity is explored in different ways and through various components such as cultural, national, or religious identities. Before disclosing their trans* identity and living as the gender they are assigned to at birth, trans* people experience a discrepancy between how they are publicly perceived and how they identify themselves. Transgender people can experience and live according to their gender identity through personas

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and social media, even before accepting their identity or medically transitioning. In this research, participants share their experiences of transitioning in online and offline spaces and the impact online communities have on their "coming out"-journey and access to medical information. How is (non-)binary identity managed online? The research investigates the participants' social media usage, use of visible signifiers on their online profiles (such as pronouns or the trans* flag) and their sharing of LGBTQ+-related content created or consumed by them. The extent to which social media affects identity disclosure is largely unexplored. The presentation will focus on reporting on the preliminary findings on how trans* people navigate online spaces and their identity disclosure.

References

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