

The Online Authenticity Paradox: What Being “Authentic” on Social Media Means, and Barriers to Achieving It

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People often strive to present themselves authentically on social media, but this may not be possible for everyone. To understand how people view online authenticity, how it relates to social media sharing behaviors, and whether it is achievable, we interviewed 28 social media users who had recently experienced major life transitions. We found that to many participants, online authenticity required presenting a consistent, positive, and “true” self across online and offline contexts. Though most stated that they considered online authenticity achievable, their social media self-disclosure behaviors around life transitions revealed what we call the *online authenticity paradox*: people strive to achieve online authenticity, yet because doing so requires sharing negative experiences on social media, online authenticity is often unreachable, or is possible only at great personal cost – especially for those with marginalized identities and difficult life experiences.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: online authenticity; social media; self-disclosure; online sharing behaviors; life transitions

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1 INTRODUCTION

Most people strive to present themselves in ways they consider authentic, in both online and physical world settings [71]. However, what authenticity means is highly subjective and socially constructed [32, 56]. People often struggle with online self-presentation when aspects of their identities and experiences are marginalized, stigmatized, or otherwise not easily shareable [1, 6, 38]. While it is clear that online authenticity can be complex and elusive [55], particularly for people with marginalized identities or difficult experiences [15], open questions remain about social media users’ conceptions of online authenticity and its relationship to their online self-presentation in the

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context of major life events and transitions¹. In line with Anderson et al. [5], in this work major life transitions refer to life changes that people consider to have a major impact on them. Such life transitions include both prevalent life events (e.g., graduation from college, starting a new job) and events that are less common but require major readjustment (e.g., death of a loved one, recovery from addiction).

In this study, we addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do people who have recently experienced life transitions view online authenticity?

RQ2: Do these people consider online authenticity to be achievable?

RQ3: How does people’s conception of online authenticity relate to their self-disclosure and self-presentation on social media during major life transitions?

To answer these research questions, we conducted interviews ($n = 28$) with people who had experienced major life transitions within the past two years to investigate social media self-disclosure behaviors related to both positive and negative life experiences.

We contribute an empirical understanding of how people consider online authenticity, and its relation to their online sharing behaviors during life transitions. Our qualitative analysis revealed that for many, being authentic meant presenting a “true” and consistent self across online and offline contexts, which necessitated sharing both positive and negative content on social media. Yet, though sharing negative content online was difficult and many chose not to (often in anticipation of negative reactions from audiences), most stated that they believed online authenticity was achievable, both for themselves and for others. We contribute a concept that we call the *online authenticity paradox*: people strive to achieve online authenticity, yet because doing so requires sharing negative or sensitive experiences with broad audiences, it is out of reach for many – especially people with marginalized identities and difficult or stigmatized life experiences.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Sharing Difficult/Sensitive Content Online

Research has shown that when people face difficult experiences or their lives are disrupted by major transitions, their social media behaviors shift [35, 65]. People often want to share challenges and emotions with others [61], and many turn to social media to disclose difficult information and gain social support [2]. We describe a large body of previous research about how people consider audiences and platforms when they choose whether to share difficult and sensitive content online, to situate and motivate our study that specifically examined online authenticity’s relationship to self-presentation and self-disclosure on social media.

Literature on online presentation has examined how people share difficult content, including but not limited to death of a loved one [10], job loss [11], and relationship breakups [36]. A growing body of research has examined social media use in sharing negatively perceived and stigmatized events, such as pregnancy loss [2], sexual abuse [3], and addiction [13]. Sharing difficult content can lead to positive outcomes such as resources and support [1, 14], and negative outcomes such as rejection and further stigmatization [8]. Because sharing negative events can be difficult due to factors such as privacy and stigma, people often choose not to disclose them on social media [1]. For people with stigmatized identity facets, disclosing identity aspects is complex; thus, people often conceal stigmatized identities [30]. One of the most common social media disclosure behaviors is not to disclose [1, 36]. However, seeing others receive support after sharing similar experiences

¹Hereafter referred to simply as “life events” or “life transitions” rather than “life events and transitions.” Some life transitions involve multiple stages and take long periods of time to complete (e.g., divorce, gender transition), while others take place on a particular day yet also involve longer identity change processes (e.g., pregnancy, job loss). We use “life transitions” as an umbrella term to encompass life experiences involving both moments and processes of change.

online can influence individuals to share as well [1]. While each of these studies examined people's online sharing behaviors around particular difficult or stigmatized life experiences, our study details how people's conceptions of authenticity may relate to a wide range of life transition experiences.

Online audiences greatly impact people's self-presentation and decisions whether and how to share difficult or sensitive content online. Context collapse occurs when multiple incongruent audiences are present in the same digital space [55]. Many online spaces include people from different facets of one's life, which can make sharing decisions difficult [55]. To manage context collapse, social media users often create boundaries between separate audiences [23, 55, 68]. This separation can be accomplished via multiple accounts on one platform [68], each of which is tailored for a particular imagined audience [55], or by using privacy affordances to segment content to only some parts of a large, diverse network [73], or by participating in communities in separate online spaces [35, 51]. Especially in health contexts, people with similar conditions or diagnoses tend to gather in online spaces where they can share with, form connections with, and receive support from similar others [24, 25, 47, 51, 52, 67, 80]. Additionally, LGBTQ+ people often manage context collapse by tailoring their identity presentations to particular audiences, such as those to whom they have and have not disclosed their LGBTQ+ identity, and by maintaining separate online audiences for these different identity performances [20, 23].

Social media norms, which typically emphasize positive self-presentations [72, 76, 77], can also influence online disclosure. Such factors include positivity bias and social desirability bias. "Positivity bias" refers to people's preference for positive information [42]. Online, this means generally favoring "positive forms of authenticity over negative ones" [59]. It encourages sharing positive experiences over difficult content, despite the latter's crucial role in the relationship between well-being and authentic self-presentation [59]. Social desirability bias – "the tendency... to deny socially undesirable traits or qualities and to admit to socially desirable ones" [57] – encourages showcasing positive social selves [70], hindering exhibition of self-aspects related to negatively perceived and stigmatized events.

As sharing both positive and negative content on social media may be considered "authentic" [59], we next discuss authenticity and how it has been applied to online sharing. To our knowledge, few studies have explored sharing difficult content across a variety of contexts and experiences, and particularly in relation to online authenticity; our study addresses this gap.

2.2 Authenticity

Authenticity is complex, highly subjective, and socially constructed [56]. The term usually carries positive connotations, and is considered a "basic need" that people strive to fulfill [71]. Maintaining authenticity requires effort, as it is not only internal, but also requires "allowing the outside world access to one's inner self" [6]. Some have argued that authenticity is artificial and an "idealized representation of reality" [32] that is performed rather than inherent [56]. Thus, authenticity must be critically examined, as we do in this work.

People often strive to be authentic both in virtual and physical settings, but online authenticity can be ambiguous [55, 63] due to complex relationships between one's "real, embodied self" and "virtual persona" [21]. Rather than being fixed, identity is flexible, changeable, and highly dependent upon context [54]. Research has shown that people are more able to express their "true self" in online settings where they can be anonymous [7]. We further examine online authenticity's complex relationship to online self-presentation in different contexts.

Authenticity online is closely linked with self-presentation and self-disclosure on social media [64]. Though some have argued that authentic identity online is constructed rather than internal [31], social media sites often encourage presenting a single identity or combining potentially disparate facets into one identity [16]. Such requirements reduce user agency by assuming a

“normative, decontextualized concept of self” that is “partly constructed by the application, not the user” [53]. boyd [9] argued that all social media profiles are performances where people give off certain impressions; thus, those who present “fake” versions of themselves are no less authentic than others.

People often struggle with online self-presentation when aspects of their identities are marginalized, stigmatized, or otherwise not easily shareable [1, 6, 38, 58]. For instance, Facebook demands authentic identity presentation (e.g., by enforcing “real name” policies) which can be difficult for some marginalized users, such as transgender people who may not have identification that matches their name, or abuse survivors who use pseudonyms due to safety concerns [38]. Having multiple, sometimes incongruent, identity aspects can lead to self-doubt [26]. Exhibiting oneself inauthentically may reduce both social connections and well-being [33, 59]. Thus, people employ strategies such as creating “finstas,” (“fake” Instagram accounts) [22, 70, 79] and anonymity [3] to present authentic selves online. Some may experience what Gergen [26] called *pastiche personality* – the acceptance that authenticity is unachievable, which enables living with multiple identities without guilt.

Researchers have attempted to measure authenticity using quantitative surveys and validated scales [28, 39, 48, 50, 78]. Wood et al.’s highly-cited Authenticity Scale [78] is meant to measure “a clear definition of the construct” of authenticity made up of three factors: self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influence. Authenticity is also sometimes measured as the (lack of) difference between ideal and actual self [39, 59]. Many works have shown positive correlations between authenticity measures and well-being [33, 50, 59, 78]. Thus, researchers have considered ways to make online authenticity more achievable, such as via privacy settings [71]. In this work, we consider online authenticity, its achievability, and implications for social media platforms in depth.

Prior work in branding and social media has paid specific analytical attention to the concept of authenticity [6, 18, 40]. For example, Banet-Weiser argued authenticity should not be only “understood and experienced as the pure, inner self of the individual, it is also a relationship between individuals and commodity culture” [6]. In Banet-Weiser’s [6] view, online authenticity is both outside of and yet entwined with consumer brand cultures. However, this authenticity-related literature is centered around branding and social media; less is known about social media users’ conceptions of authenticity and how they relate to online self-presentation in the context of life transitions. We expand on previous work by examining perceptions of what it means to be authentic online across different life events and experiences, and examine online authenticity in the context of life transitions and self-disclosures.

3 METHODS

We conducted semi-structured interviews ($n = 28$) to understand perceptions of authenticity online and how they correspond to social media sharing. Our inclusion criteria required that participants: 1) used social media; 2) had gone through major life transitions during the past two years; 3) had disclosed one or more of these on social media; and 4) were 18 or older. We specified a two-year timespan because a longer timespan would cause recall difficulties [44], while a shorter one would leave out many experiences. The study was approved by our institution’s ethics review board.

We recruited 17 participants by sharing the study information and a link to our screening survey on our personal social media accounts, which was widely disseminated beyond our personal networks, and 11 more via User Interviews, a research recruiting platform. Our screening survey enabled us to choose a diverse sample based on demographics, life experiences, and social media sharing behaviors. Participant demographics and social media platforms used are reported in Table 1. All reported more than two major life events during the past two years, in categories

I think for me, LinkedIn at work is an authentic version of myself and how I present myself at work. But when I direct message somebody on Instagram or have a conversation... that to me is this layer of personal identity that I choose to only share with certain people.

Though P24 sometimes withheld aspects of his identity online, he still considered his presentation authentic:

I feel like I'm authentically representing my identity. But I also know that I'm withholding some parts of it. So I'm not lying by being what I am online, but also I'm not saying everything.

Relatedly, P14 stated that despite using pseudonyms on some platforms, his presentation was authentic because his ideas and experiences were real. These examples show that for some, online authenticity can involve inconsistencies and differing presentations depending on context.

4.2 Is online authenticity achievable?

Given participants' conceptions of authenticity, some of which seemed difficult or unrealistic to implement, we asked whether being authentic online was achievable, for themselves and others. A majority ($n = 12$ out of 20 who were asked this question) reported that they thought it was achievable. For some it was simple: "Oh, yes, definitely achievable" (P25) or "Most definitely... for anyone" (P12). Others gave more complex answers, such as P27: "I don't think it's something that maybe comes naturally to some people... We like to see positive things. But I think if you find that balance, you could achieve that." Responses like these reflected views that online authenticity was achievable, but acknowledged potential difficulties.

A smaller group ($n = 4$ out of 20) considered online authenticity to be unachievable, such as P17:

I think it's unrealistic... social media involves... people from different social classes: high class, low class, middle class, it doesn't matter... So, I think that when people see that... other people are at a better place than they are, that kind of causes shame... And people start making posts about things that are not true or, you know, things that look a certain way but really aren't, in order to get that confidence back... that's always going to go on.

P17's response highlights how social comparison [75] can lead to heavily curated content, hindering authentic self-presentation.

Others ($n = 4$ out of 20) saw online authenticity as only partially achievable. P23 said, "People don't want to put themselves in vulnerable positions... So it's not easy... we all go through the same things, and so I don't feel the need to pretend... I think it's achievable, but it won't be." This quote notes that because sharing vulnerable content is difficult, many will choose not to. Though P23 describes life experiences as somewhat universal ("we all go through the same things"), some face unique experiences that they would not be comfortable sharing with those who may not empathize or understand [1].

4.3 Sharing behaviors of positive and negative experiences on social media

Participants experienced a range of life transitions and events which we summarize in Table 2. Some life events were positive experiences for participants (e.g., marriage and home purchase), some were negative (e.g., becoming homeless, loss of loved one), and others were more complex processes that involved both positive and negative aspects (e.g., coming out as LGBTQ+, moving to a different state or country). Life events that involved negative emotions and stigma tended to involve more complicated decisions around whether or not to share about the event online, and which audiences to share with, supporting results from previous work (e.g., [2, 37, 60]). By asking what life events participants had shared or not online and why, we examined their online self-presentation and motivations for sharing. Participants revealed that with broad social media

related to stigmatized identities. For example (as described in our results section 4.3), P11 and P28 both experienced a lack of support from their online networks after posting about difficult negative experiences on social media, which discouraged them from posting similar content in the future. Instead, research has shown that people turn to small groups of close connections or private channels [37, 41, 80], anonymous online sharing [4, 46], and multiple or separate online identities [20, 35, 79] to achieve online sharing that feels authentic to them. In what follows, we describe future directions for design and research that can help to resolve some of the tensions the online authenticity paradox highlights.

5.1 Moving Forward

5.1.1 Implications for Design. The online authenticity paradox is important to consider in designing online spaces and considering how online communities may be constructed and managed going forward. Despite the difficulties people face with online sharing, we must acknowledge that humans desire to share their feelings and experiences in ways that feel honest and consistent. Online platforms can use the online authenticity paradox to provide better user experiences, such as by facilitating connection between people with similar experiences, allowing anonymous sharing, and enabling multiple accounts and self-presentations. While online authenticity will remain elusive, such affordances and features may bring social media users closer to genuine self-presentation *along with* network and content separation. Each of these design implications have been suggested in previous work (e.g., [47, 52, 67, 80]), yet expounding the online authenticity paradox provides new insight on how they may be implemented. We describe how each of these design implications helps to either resolve or provide alternative solutions to the challenges the online authenticity paradox highlights, and may enable people to uphold their conception of authenticity as an important personal value. We use the numbers (1)-(3), to refer to the three parts of the online authenticity paradox, as described above.

Connecting people with similar experiences and identities. Platforms could better enable users to easily find people facing similar situations (in the past or the present), both within and outside their typical online networks (drawing from design recommendations for peer connection and support described in previous work [3, 24, 25, 47, 52, 66, 67]). Features that visualize the prevalence of negative or stigmatized life events may alleviate stress and assure users that they are not the only one in the situation [2]. Such features may enable people to receive social support from people with similar experiences. Facilitating connections with people who have similar experiences that they may want to share but have difficulty doing so due to self-presentation concerns will provide an audience for whom a person can present in a way that will likely feel more authentic to them than attempting to share such information with broad audiences or existing close ties. In this way, connections with similar others enable people to uphold their belief in authenticity's importance (1), provide an alternative solution for the challenge of sharing negative experiences with broad online networks (2), and provide one way to resolve barriers to online authenticity (3).

Anonymous and pseudonymous sharing. Rho et al. [60] described how a configuration of anonymous posts and identifiable responses on Facebook enabled a way for low-income college students to receive social support from their peers without the stigma associated with publicly disclosing one's socioeconomic status. While some platforms already do support anonymous and pseudonymous sharing [4, 46], identified social media platforms such as Facebook could integrate functionality for anonymous posting across a wider range of difficult and stigmatized identities and experiences, such as the life transitions contexts participants in our study described. Anonymous or pseudonymous posting would enable users to disclose negative experiences and receive social support in response without being identified, which could potentially educate a wider audience and reduce perceived stigma while protecting users' privacy, particularly on social media sites

where identified accounts are currently expected. Depending on whether the poster considers anonymous posting to be an authentic form of online self-expression, increased affordances for anonymity and pseudonymity would either uphold or provide an alternative solution for people's belief in authenticity's importance (1). Anonymity and pseudonymity would enable sharing negative experiences with broad online networks (2), and provide an alternative solution to the challenge of online authenticity's potential unachievability (3).

Multiple accounts and self-presentations on one platform. Some social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Twitter) allow users to have multiple accounts on one platform and easily switch between them, giving users more control over self-presentation and reducing the need to switch among multiple social media platforms. Other social media sites could also integrate such capabilities, with special attention to enabling seamless transitions between different accounts. Social computing researchers have discussed the ways that, for instance, throwaway accounts on Reddit enable people to create separate sociotechnical identities for content that they do not feel comfortable associating with their primary online identity [4, 19, 46]. Even on an identified site like Facebook, where multiple accounts are not allowed, users nevertheless use multiple accounts to present multiple identities, each of which they may consider authentic [49]. Additionally, platforms could experiment with ways to alter one's self-presentation and audience for particular content without having to fully switch accounts. While some people would consider posting via multiple accounts authentic, others may not, thus multiple accounts would either uphold or provide an alternative solution for people's desire to behave authentically (1), and either resolves or provides an alternative solution to the challenge of online authenticity's potential unachievability (3). Additionally, multiple accounts provide an alternative solution for the challenge of sharing negative experiences with broad online networks (2).

These features would enable people to more easily manage audiences and curate their online self-presentation(s), and potentially find online spaces where they can behave in ways that make them feel more authentic. Thus, the design implications we suggest may reduce the tensions the online authenticity paradox describes, and help users navigate these tensions. However, each of these design suggestions may also involve negative implications. For instance, overwhelming focus on connections based on similarities may increase online echo chambers and reduce meaningful connections between people across differences, and online anonymity, despite its benefits for sharing stigmatized content [4, 60], is also known to decrease inhibitions and enable harmful online activity [69]. Thus, designers should consider and mitigate each of these potential negative aspects before implementing our design suggestions.

5.1.2 Implications for Research. It may be the case that we – researchers, the popular press, participants in our study, and social media users broadly – fail to capture authenticity's complexity because we have become accustomed to using casual rhetoric to describe a complex and slippery concept. Social media users have a long history of navigating platforms' sociotechnical features to present identity and disclose personal information to the extent they feel comfortable with, even when confronted with large, diverse, and incongruent online audiences [73]. Though our results show that people strive to achieve authenticity in their online self-presentation, and largely view such ideals as achievable, in practice people tend to employ much more complexity in their social media sharing behaviors. Difficulties arise when a multifaceted concept – authenticity – poses as a simple value. While it is unlikely that the word authenticity's use in the English language and in Western cultures will change substantially to embrace more complexity, the online authenticity paradox highlights that as researchers, we can and should be more precise when employing the concept of authenticity.

This research provokes questions about how to think about and measure online authenticity. In qualitative research, how can we best study online authenticity as a value that people strive for yet generally cannot achieve? In quantitative research, how can instruments be constructed that measure authenticity in more holistic and complex ways? Is this even possible? We have described how authenticity is highly subjective and socially constructed [32, 56], and many social constructionists believe there is no such thing as a “real” or “true” self to remain authentic to [12, 26, 27]. Thus, common research practices such as referring to authenticity as “accurate” self-presentation [48, 70], measuring authenticity as a discrepancy between “ideal” and “actual” self [59], or using questions that invoke “the real me” [48, 78], in some ways rebuke research participants for being unable to achieve something potentially unachievable. Based on our results, such research tools could be better constructed with a greater understanding of how people perceive online authenticity and people’s complex online sharing behaviors. For example, rather than asking about authenticity directly, researchers could ask more specifically about particular audiences or sharing behaviors in different social contexts. Such an approach acknowledges that participants may not feel able to consistently present one “true” or “real” self in all settings, but rather makes self-presentational decisions depending on context.

Given that for many people online authenticity is only achievable at great personal cost (if it is achievable at all), and that authenticity is more achievable for people with higher well-being [59, 78] and fewer negative experiences, it is worth considering whether authenticity should be used as a research construct. Doing so may uphold the idea that identity singularity is desirable and achievable, and perpetuates social stigma against those with complex identities and who have experienced negative events that they are uncomfortable sharing with broad social media audiences. Research instruments that attempt to measure online authenticity must account for its subjective and potentially unachievable nature; creating such tools would be challenging, and perhaps of limited use given sharing behaviors’ complexity. Instead, it may be time to retire online authenticity in favor of an understanding that people share content with different online audiences according to personal comfort with disclosure, site norms, and network characteristics. That is, we can apply Gergen’s [26] concept of pastiche personality to online settings and reduce feelings of inauthenticity if we encourage wide acceptance that online authenticity may not be achievable after all. To the extent that a “true self” exists online, it exists multiply and in fragments across different online spaces and networks.

5.2 Limitations and Future Work

We first acknowledge potential sampling biases. We only recruited people who have shared major life events on social media; however, the experience of people who have experienced but not shared about life transitions online should be examined in future work. Next, participants in our study experienced a limited set of life transitions (detailed in Table 2), and thus results may not hold for other types of life events not included in our sample – an area for future work. In addition, despite diverse demographics, participants in our study all lived in North America. We acknowledge people’s life transitions and social media behavior varies in other cultures; future research should consider and address them. Moreover, future researchers can expand on our work by examining online authenticity in the context of additional or specific types of life transitions, as our study has revealed the complexity and diversity of major life events.

6 CONCLUSION

We have examined how people think about online authenticity, uncovering contradictions between what they consider “authentic” and their own self-presentations. According to participants in our study, online authenticity requires presenting identity consistently and sharing both positive

and negative content online – neither of which participants reported achieving. When selective self-presentation and segmenting online participation across multiple social media networks is considered inauthentic, this may be harmful for those with stigmatized identities or difficult life experiences. These results demonstrate how the concept of authenticity sometimes falls short when accounting for the faceted nature of human lives.

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