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## **The dramaturgy of social media: platform ecology, uneven networks, and the myth of the self**

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### 3 The Dramaturgy of Social Media: Platform Ecology, Uneven Networks, and the Myth of the Self

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For good reason, critical observers of the contemporary digital media landscape have grown tired of Mark Zuckerberg's contention that there is something inherently good about "connection." Even when faced with overwhelming criticism, the Facebook founder and CEO has stuck to his claim, which seemingly counterbalances all evils the company might be accused of, that Facebook facilitates building "community." This is not surprising, since more connection means more users, means more revenue, means more profit for the company and its shareholders. But if we take Zuckerberg at his word, he sees connection as valuable because it shores up social ties, which have been shown to be beneficial to individuals in many ways; from lowering blood pressure to making it easier to find a job. In other words, Facebook and other platforms like it simply add more of a good thing to people's lives.

One reason this simple formula fails to convince is the growing recognition that social media are not simply *added* to what is already there: the institutions, interactions, and effects of everyday life. They have gradually come to permeate everyday life, and this interweaving has left the fabric itself changed. In other words, social media have become *ecological* (Postman, 1998).

For their part, sociologists have long asked whether online social ties develop at the expense of offline social ties. When it was found that this wasn't the case, they were reassured. Now we view the correlation between online and offline social ties somewhat differently. We no longer think of them as additive or interchangeable, but as *mutually transformative*. This changes the verdict. It means the difference they make is no longer linear. Instead, they effect a broad qualitative shift that isn't confined to any particular area but has reverberations throughout the social environment. This has consequences for how we study them. Although platforms have specific cultures, which is the stuff of media studies, there's also much to be said for understanding platforms as sites within a larger ecology.

Hoping to develop an understanding of how such ecological processes "scale down" (Breiger, 2015) to the level of daily life, we turn to the stories of two informants we met in the course of our research whose social position as "very online" women means that the platform ecology is particularly relevant to how their daily lives unfold. Their experiences give us some points of reference to evaluate how well the tools of the sociology of everyday life, particularly dramaturgical analysis, are suited to our task. Dramaturgical concepts, which study the self in interaction, are pervasive in the extant literature on digital media. It almost seems like Erving Goffman, the founding figure of dramaturgical analysis, has experienced a rebirth as an analyst of online life. Even so, our assessment of the dramaturgical approach

is mixed. While on the one hand it helps us bring some of the cross-pressures that shape experiences within the platform ecology into view, it can also lead to an overly narrow perspective. That is especially the case when the self is merely taken as a strategic project subject to deception and manipulation by individuals. In such cases, the dramaturgical perspective obscures the “colonization of everyday life” (a term coined by Guy Debord) by platforms circumscribing what constitutes idiomatic identity displays and establishing a hierarchy among them. Insofar as dramaturgical perspectives account not just for individual strategies but also for normative pressures and systematic interdependencies, they provide a useful tool for making sense of platform ecologies.

### 3.1 Very Online

Throughout our discussion, we draw on some findings from five years of studying Instagram in Amsterdam using both computational and qualitative methods. Early on in our research on social media in urban life, we identified *uneven networks* as one of the defining features (Boy & Uitermark, 2017). For an impression, consider that among the roughly 80,000 Amsterdam Instagram users we included in a computational analysis, the top 50 users (0.06%) received more likes and comments between them than the bottom 30,000 (38.4%). The Gini coefficient, commonly used as a measure of income inequality, when applied to the distribution of attention comes to a stunning 0.76 – considerably higher than the Gini coefficient for South Africa’s income distribution, the world’s most unequal. We found this kind of unequal distribution fractally repeated at every level, from the city as a whole to individual neighborhoods and subgroups of users. Since we wanted to understand how personal appeal and self-exposure through platforms are experienced in everyday life, we figured that the most central users, those getting the most attention, offered a privileged window onto this world – kind of like how social scientists of another era studied the experiences of white-collar workers to understand the social alienation they saw as society’s characteristic mentality. Or, to quote cyberpunk legend William Gibson, “The future is already here – it’s just not evenly distributed” (quoted in Ratcliffe, 2016b).

Using a network metric, PageRank, that initially developed rank search results for the Google search engine, we could identify the hubs of the Instagram network. Not surprisingly given what we know about the “very online,” a high number of these individuals were young women in their twenties and thirties. Many of them work in fashion, marketing, or entertainment – professions that give them facility in the visual idioms of micro-celebrity. The experiences of two women in particular shaped our thinking about the presence of Instagram in the practice of everyday life: Yvette

and Sammy.<sup>1</sup> We briefly introduce them here before returning to their experiences below in our discussion of dramaturgical perspectives on social media.

### 3.1.1 The Insider: Yvette

During the day, Loggerhead's is the kind of hamburger joint where you can get a burger with a truffle-glazed patty, but even the basic burger – Angus beef, lettuce, tomato, onions, slice of pickle – costs over ten euros. The restaurant, located on a busy market street, is small and unassuming and features the same unfinished wood paneling found in bars in gentrified neighborhoods the world over. At night, the back of the establishment is rumored to transform into a nightclub serving exquisite cocktails where you can dance till the early hours of the morning. Rumor also has it that access to the secret back room is only granted to those who know the password. Standing at the passageway between the burger joint and the extravagant speakeasy-style club is a door hostess. She's who you have to convince if you want to be part of what is happening in the back room. "Most people coming are wasted, that's why I call myself a 'door bitch.' I try to be polite," Yvette Legrand tells us, laughing.

In her early thirties, tall, with long blonde hair and wearing an elegant outfit, sometimes with a hint of butch, she cuts an imposing figure in the role of gatekeeper. But that's not her only role –not by far. On her Instagram profile, she calls herself an "Amsterdam insider," and her insider status derives not only from being able to decide who's in and who's out in the backroom at Loggerhead's. Yvette became an insider by entering the city's party scene and getting to know a lot of people not long after her thirtieth birthday. In a matter of just two years, she became highly connected among the movers and shakers of the city's nightlife. In her various other roles – as party organizer, event producer, and photographer – she has put them on a guest list, partied with them, and, of course, taken their picture. There's no question that she belongs.

What ties together these various activities in Yvette's life is the crowd of people in which she moves. In her understanding, this crowd, or "scene," is defined by a shared style above all else. "My photography is a bit more fabulous," she explains. "Either you like it or you don't." Those who like her photography are those she encounters in other parts of her life as well. Because she lives in De Pijp, walking distance from Loggerhead's and most other central venues where the city's party scene congregates, she moves in a relatively small radius and mostly interacts with likeminded people. "I have a certain kind of people that I see in my life wherever I go. They're all in the same crowd. So it's pretty easy for me, because I know a lot of them. When I go somewhere with a camera, they jump in front of my camera. I don't have to ask them, 'Can you

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<sup>1</sup> We use pseudonyms for both people and places to hide our research participants' identities.

please...?” Similarly, when she’s the one hosting a party, she doesn’t have to work particularly hard to get people to turn out. They come, because Yvette’s involvement all but guarantees the party will have the right vibe. Yvette is connected, and she is also recognized as somebody who knows the right kind of people. Her recognition in the scene revolves around her persona – Yvette Legrand is her *nom de guerre*, and she projects a seductive and glamorous image through her appearances in the city’s party venues and online, chiefly Instagram.

Other events she participates in, such as art openings, are a way for her to extend her social circles and to investigate what appeals to people in other scenes. Rather than just draw in the people she already knows, she tries to mix up the composition of her crowd by assembling members of different groups. “That’s the most important thing to keep on going,” she explains. “To be interesting in the scene, it has to be surprising.” Filling a venue is no challenge when you’re as connected as Yvette is; the challenge is to put the right people together. If four out of five attendants are gay men, the women and straight men will be alienated and won’t want to come back. Instead, you have to engage in an activity that Yvette likens to scouting: searching for the right kind of people that will fit in. Another smaller event with an attendance of 80 to 100 that Yvette started serves as her scouting grounds. Each person she personally invites is able to bring two to three other people. “It’s the best cocktail you could imagine,” she says enthusiastically. The event brings together gay men, well-dressed women, and straight men who say to themselves, “It’s a bit gay, but I actually like this!” Mixing this cocktail is a matter of mobilizing the right social connections, but also of having the right communications strategy.

### 3.1.2 The Workaholic: Sammy

In the course of our research we also spoke to Sammy, another young woman thriving on social media. Sammy has *a lot* going on in her life. She runs a program to match brands and social media influencers, organizes talent scouts, is responsible for the creative management for several well-known artists, designs marketing campaigns for various big brands, hosts evenings at one of Amsterdam’s best-known clubs, and manages a co-working space for creative entrepreneurs. She’s a self-diagnosed workaholic: “I never stop. I work 24/7. Go! Go! Go! There is no such thing as a holiday, and we don’t do breaks.”

Not that she minds. She knows no greater pleasure than creating content for marketing campaigns. She loves working with her best friend and long-time collaborator, Cori. Unlike Sammy, who is more into marketing, Cori is a “real fashion girl.” She is also wilder, younger, and taller, so she appeals to a different subset of people in the scene. When they’re at events, the two of them stand out. With her height and looks, Cori is naturally the center of attention. Sammy all too modestly states that she can also attract looks if she dresses up. As a self-professed workaholic, Sammy

abhors the distraction of exhibitions or social events, but she found out that she and Cori are at their best when they're going out. She checks out how other entrepreneurs organize events or promote brands (and invariably comes to the conclusion that they can do better) and gets into contact with business partners or recruits for her influencers program. As long as she attracts attention, she knows opportunities, and new people, will present themselves.

Take her recent foray into deejaying. She had been messing around with a turntable for a couple of weeks when she got her first booking. At the time of the interview, her deejay career was accelerating. That was before she had actually purchased any deejay equipment. When she explains why she is so successful, she mentions looks and connections. Social media are important for both. Sammy consciously crafts a stream of images to maintain visibility, so she's on people's minds, allowing her to outcompete aspiring deejays who have spent years honing their skills. Having an Instagram profile helps her maintain connections and make new ones.

### 3.2 Dramaturgy: The Self in Interaction

The Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman famously conceived of social life as a kind of theater that binds people together as spectators and performers. Starting from face-to-face interactions between two people, he analyzed social interaction through the lens of dramaturgy –the performances and displays we put on in our daily lives. His best known statement of this perspective, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), proposes to think of people in social situations as forming a team engaged in a performance together as performers and audience, the aim of which is to put on a show that accords with prevailing norms concerning conduct and decorum.

Branaman (1997) points out that, over the course of his career, Goffman used different metaphors to develop his dramaturgical perspective. Aside from drama, he frequently spoke both in terms of *games* and in terms of *rituals*. In general, the game metaphor directs our attention to the individual as a strategic actor, while the ritual metaphor directs our attention to the social order and actors' displays of fealty to it. Drama encompasses aspects of both games and rituals. This can be seen in his concept of "face": we have no choice but to preserve our "face" through ritual practices, but it also is subject to strategic manipulation, giving face-work a game-like character. Goffman didn't mean for any of these metaphors to be hypostatized. Instead, he regarded them as "scaffolding" to aid understanding through defamiliarization. All concepts in Goffman are thus provisional. They are not intended to reinscribe the definition of the situation, but to allow interpreters of social life to get a conceptual grip. Goffman never hesitated to tear down his scaffolding to construct a new framework, and neither should we today.

In this section, we review some of the applications of Goffmanian dramaturgy in the extant literature on social media. References to Goffman in the literature on social

media are common. Since the 1990s, social psychologists, communications scholars, and scholars of human-computer interaction (HCI) have adopted his work to analyze what people do online, and publications discussing social media citing Goffman and using his central concepts now number in the hundreds. While these appropriations of Goffman indicate some of the ways in which dramaturgy helps us understand the social media–social order nexus, they are not in themselves without shortcomings. Our review seeks to assess the existing literature and clarify how the perspective we develop here relates to existing perspectives.

### 3.2.1 Self

Posts and profiles on social media are meaningful because they are the expressive products of users who put their selves on display. This was already true of personal websites, blogs and other pre-Web 2.0 formats, but social media heightened the emphasis on the self as the locus of significance because of the insistence, in the words of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, that “[y]ou have one identity ... Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (quoted in Ratcliffe, 2016a). Foremost among the Goffmanian concepts to enter the literature is, therefore, the “self”: its production, presentation, and evaluation.

The literature on social media using dramaturgical frameworks has two main emphases in its discussion of the self: the self as strategic project, and the self as myth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There is also a third emphasis in research by behaviorist scholars, particularly (cyber-) psychologists, who frequently emphasize obsessive or pathological preoccupations with the self. Self-presentation on social media is of interest to these scholars to the extent that it appears to be associated with the so-called Dark Triad of personality traits: machiavellism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Other psychological phenomena connected to social media self-presentation include perfectionism, social comparison, self-esteem and social anxiety. In this literature, Goffman is selectively appropriated for emphasizing the presentation of self qua impression management, but this appropriation is suspect for a least two reasons. First, while Goffman himself took an interest in questions of mental health, he famously spoke out against pathologizing behaviors (Goffman, 1961a). What psychiatry classified as symptomatic behavior, he labeled “situational improprieties.” Second, though it is easy to take Goffman’s description of social actors continually occupied with the work of managing impressions and saving face to be an indictment of the superficiality and alienation bred in capitalist societies (see Gouldner, 1971 for a famous example), Goffman’s dramaturgy does not, in fact, describe a character *type*. To reduce self-presentation to a form of obsessive or neurotic conduct is to misrecognize Goffman’s entire intellectual project. Thus, while there are superficial similarities between this literature and other scholarship on the social life of social media, it is worth bearing in mind that this strand of work asks fundamentally different kinds of questions. As we argue elsewhere (Boy & Uitermark, 2019), narcissism and related labels seem ill-suited to making sense of the draws of self-display. We are better suited following Goffman’s (Goffman, 1959) lead. As he said, we should not take the whole world to be a stage, but we shouldn’t assume where the line can be drawn either. We

### 3.2.1.1 Self as Strategic Project

A significant strand of literature is concerned with the “balancing act” or “double bind” of projecting an ideal self-image in online spaces while remaining authentic (Davis, 2014). The “ideal” or “edited” self that is put on display has to strike the right balance between aspirational and acceptable (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs 2006; Marwick, 2014). Overreach, and you get shot down; don’t reach high enough, and you settle in place. Such balancing acts become especially acute in cases where self-presentation becomes bound up with self-branding and the incessant economic demand to enhance one’s human capital (Hearn, 2008; Duffy, 2017). Livelihoods depend on successful self-presentation. Scholarship has especially focused on how cultural producers such as fashion bloggers, models and live-streamers are drawn into this balancing act.

A related recurring theme is the difficulty of distinguishing between frontstage and backstage regions in mediated communication. Social contexts are easily blurred and frequently collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010; boyd, 2014). This happens, for instance, when parents friend their children on Facebook, only to discover a whole side of them that wasn’t meant for them to see. Writing about Instagram influencers, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin (2020) note that performers purposefully play with audience expectations of greater authenticity in backstage areas. Another example is when patrons supporting cultural producers financially through Patreon<sup>3</sup> are promised access to unedited footage as a reward for their sponsorship. Users of social media are driven to be extra vigilant and strategic in crafting self-images in accordance with various imagined audiences (Dijck, 2013). This intensifies the game-like character of the online social drama.

These appropriations of Goffman are in line with his reliance on the game metaphor. Goffman had a lot to say about what he called “expression games” – social gambles to enhance one’s status. Examples of these kind of strategic interaction abound in his work, though some of the most memorable ones deal with espionage and political intrigue (Goffman, 1969). Spies have to play an extreme version of the expression game as they strategically craft an identity allowing them to carry out their intelligence-gathering work. This requires them to practice a great amount of restraint, such as concealing or controlling emotions, even as they engage in fateful action.<sup>4</sup> Overwhelmingly, dramaturgical perspectives on social media emphasize

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especially should not assume it can be drawn around inherently pathological behaviors or traits (see also Warfield, Cambre, & Abidin, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Patreon is a digital platform through which subscribers can access content produced by artists and performers.

<sup>4</sup> In Goffman’s work, “fatefulness” implies that something may “spill over into the rest of life” (Goffman, 1967, p. 162). A gambler wants the situation at the gambling table to transform their life into one of affluence. Similarly, aspirational social media users may want their online personae to be a pathway to a better livelihood. An excellent literary depiction of such a fateful transformation can



the game-like, strategic nature of online sociability. Having and building an online presence is a gamble taken in hope of sprucing up one's social status.

The game-like cast of online interaction is a reflection of the competitive environment bred by social media which brings strategic considerations to the fore. Social media feature publicly visible personae, tools for reward and appraisal, and multiple clear indicators to gauge the impression made on others. Combined, these features amount to a perfect storm. They conspire to make impression management and self-presentation salient and ongoing concerns for those who maintain a public presence on social media.

Metrics can be an immaterial mark of distinction, and they can also translate into economic opportunities. But in absence of metrics, there are other ways of waging competition on social media. On Instagram (which has stopped displaying the number of likes on posts), appearing alongside celebrity users and being tagged by them is a coveted trophy (Abidin, 2018). On Twitter, the practice of "one-upping" or "dunking on" other users, of concocting "owns" and "burns" in response to others' status updates, is an almost unescapable part of the experience. All of this competitiveness is no doubt intensified by the reigning neoliberal meritocracy which "places a strong need to strive, perform, and achieve at the center of modern life" (quoted in Day, 2018).

Yvette and Sammy's experiences both speak to the importance of expression games. Looking through their carefully curated feeds, it was undeniable that they gave a lot of strategic thought to their appearance. Yvette likened this to being an artist on a stage, and she insisted that aside from that, she is a "normal person" who attends small-town family gatherings as well. She finds it important to not come over as too icy and unapproachable, so she tries to smile and not take herself too seriously. In discussing this with us, Yvette revealed that she was aware of a tension between her desire, on the one hand, not to get too sucked into the frequently competitive game of self-presentation on social media and, on the other hand, managing the impression others have of her. Resolving this tension is a matter of careful reflection, which means her social media presence becomes a larger preoccupation than she'd like it to be. The game never ends.

Sammy saw this, too, and in fact she thrived on the excitement of always being on and always having to remain vigilant. Moving through different scenes at a dizzying pace, Sammy emphasizes she has to act fast, very fast, to keep up with developments and seize new opportunities. But you couldn't tell just from looking at her posts. There she seems to be kicking it. She is having a drink, doing a dance. She's acutely aware that the images are contrived. "Everything I put up there is tongue in cheek.

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be found in Stagg (2016). Almost overnight, the protagonist Colleen rises to influencer status, and the resulting transformation of her life is whiplash-inducing.

You know *exactly* how you present yourself. You're constantly feeding. There's a sort of marketing narrative. It's ridiculous, but it's there."

### 3.2.1.2 Self as Myth

Strategic considerations are a big theme both in Goffman's oeuvre and the lives of the "very online," but they are not the end of the story. For his part, Goffman sharply rejected Georg Simmel's "embarrassing effort to treat sociability as a type of 'mere' play, sharply cut off from the entanglements of serious life" (Goffman, 1961b, p. 21). Understanding social life requires more than a study of individual, strategic action. It calls for understanding something that Goffman elsewhere called "interpersonal ritual" that revolves around the self as the last remaining sacred myth.

Scholars interested in gender display and other parts of Goffman's oeuvre concerned with the ritual dimension of social life understand that strategic action isn't everything. Baker and Walsh (2018) are recent examples, drawing on Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* (1979) to unpack the "ritual idiom" that underlies gender expression in "clean eating" (a sort of minimalist, healthy cuisine) posts on Instagram. They note that proper adherence to the ritual idiom requires observance of a gendered social hierarchy. In his study of advertising, Goffman observed that, almost without fail, women appear physically smaller in visual displays, and their lower positions accentuate the subordinate roles they play. Posed pictures are thus an indicator of the ritual idiom within a society. In their case study of "clean eating" posts, Baker and Walsh (2018) find that it is the idiom of hegemonic masculinity rather than "emphasized femininity" that structures the top displays. Muscle presentation and other displays of virility and strength serve to affirm membership in a community of lifestyle icons. Displays that fall back on a ritual idiom merely draw from a stock of existing display conventions. They are rituals that seek to make behavior legible *as ritual*; they are hyper-ritualized (see also Hancock & Garner, 2014).

This aspect of Goffman's work highlights that self-presentation is not merely strategic, but also a vehicle for establishing social bonds. These bonds revolve around "sacred" objects, namely selves, which participants in the interaction have no choice but to perform. As sacred objects, our selves are the myth we are collectively invested in, turning images of "epidermally bounded containers" (Goffman quoted in Wissinger, 2015) into meaningful social encounters. To the extent that social media are a vehicle of social integration (see Boy & Uitermark, 2020), the integration depends on the myth of the self.

To Goffman, the self is not a utility function, but a sacred object. The reasons we show it consideration are not simply "strategic" in the narrow sense of manipulative. Through our performances, we express deference to the social order through demeanor, propriety, and the display of our connections." Through these expressions, we accord proper levels of veneration to selves – our own and others' – with regard to their position in hierarchies of status. Importantly, showing proper veneration often

means *avoiding* expression rather than engaging in strategic expression games. It's about what we hold back, not just what we put out there.

Despite the evident joy both derive from expression games, the strains of paying homage to the myth of the self are apparent in Yvette and Sammy's experiences. When we met Yvette, she was dressed down in yoga pants and looking forward to getting a good night's rest. For the next four days, she was booked, either as the "door bitch" at Loggerhead's, or photographing events. This meant multiple late nights coming up, and yoga and resting were Yvette's way of anticipating this exhausting stretch and maintaining a degree of balance in her life. Yvette expressed ambivalence about her ability to maintain balance. "I can do a lot," she told us. "But when it's my own party and I need to be there till five o'clock in the morning, sometimes I really don't feel like it." She has to be the last one standing, not just because she bears responsibility as the organizer, but also because she has to keep everyone's spirits up till the end.

Yvette is feeling the strains of playing her role. "I'm always watching and they're always watching me. ... You can see me in social media, being in front of everything. I want to be more in the background. It's pretty exhausting." Her way out is not an exit, but a pivot. She aspires to become an entrepreneur whose involvement in urban scenes is not in the foreground, as an artist, but more behind the scenes. She hopes to achieve this by building a web-based guide to gay Amsterdam, advertising events and locations and providing booking and ticketing services, all from her unique insider perspective. She's built a prototype, but it hasn't really gotten beyond the stage of a passion project. Even so, Yvette hopes this venture will become a "second step" in her career as an insider, allowing her to capitalize on her connections and her persona without having to perform all the frontstage work the scene currently demands of her.

Her planned pivot holds the promise of an eventual reprieve from all this exhaustion. She thinks perhaps she'll even be able to hire somebody to share the load with her. Meanwhile, she has to achieve her hoped-for balance in other ways. Reading about spirituality and practicing yoga are part of her practice of self-care and have been since before she became a scenester. "I'm really into growth. Once in a while I really need to go inside myself for real, like working, healing," she explains when we ask about her interest in spirituality. "That's something I missed in the last two years, when I got really into this world, which is a lot of, of course, like, fake and tough and competition and whatever."

The sense that her world is permeated by fakeness and competition is another source of exhaustion, if not anxiety. Yvette feels a desire to steer against it, to be a beacon of authenticity in the fake world in which she moves. That's the reason she doesn't really like social media, and why she tries to restrict her use of it to building a portfolio of her various activities. Aside from Instagram, where she feels the need to be active, she also maintains a site on Tumblr, a Vimeo profile, and a Facebook Page promoting her work as a photographer. At the same time, because she is aware that everything on social media tends to "look so much more beautiful than it really is" – in fact, that's the whole point of social media as she understands it – she also wants

to show another side of herself. She mentioned making an effort to share things from other parts of her life, such as taking an elderly acquaintance out for a walk or visiting her family in a small town in the south of the Netherlands.

Sammy also told us that she'd recently been looking to make a change. She was hunting for a job. "Not a nine-to-five job," she emphasized, but still something more "corporate." Her attempts so far had been unsuccessful. For one position, she spent an inordinate amount of time on the application. She put together a video clip with help from some friends. She took four days to write an application letter to get it absolutely right. And still, in the end, she didn't get the job. It's not that she can't do the work, because she's already doing it, and at a high level. It's just that, in this industry, short-term or one-time contracts are the norm. While it is exceedingly difficult to get a steady job, it is – at least for Sammy – remarkably easy to move from one gig to the next. Under these structural conditions of intense competition and short-term engagements, people like Sammy are successful as long as they maintain their reputations and keep up with their excruciating work schedules.

Sammy's carefully curated Instagram profile only captures the glamorous aspects of her brutal life-work regime. "I was working five days full-time on a day job. But you can't tell someone what they need to do and then not show up at night to see how they do it. It's not officially part of your job but you have to do it." At 32, she feels she's getting old. She works out in the gym and has a policy of not drinking alcohol or using drugs. "I look to London and New York for examples. Those people get up at six in the morning and get home around one. Sure, they're paid different kinds of amounts, but you have to persist if you want to get somewhere." Working from a canal house in Amsterdam's historic central district and shaping the image of big clubs and large corporations, she has achieved much more than most people in her industry can hope for, but she remains in a precarious position. Her devotion to her career is taking a toll. She suffers from spells of exhaustion. She shares much of the glamour and the suffering with her friends but she can't really relate to her family anymore. When we asked her whether it was difficult to explain what she's doing, she replied that they have stopped asking. In turn, she stopped going to family celebrations.

Bound up as it is with myriad strains and anxieties, self-presentation is not merely strategic, but also ritualized. That means that, while they can tailor their performances to different audiences and use all manner of strategies to improve their status, neither Yvette nor Sammy can avoid self-presentation or turn it off when the costs outrun the payoff.

### 3.2.2 Interaction

Dramaturgy is an interactionist theory. Following his Chicago School forebears in the symbolic-interactionist tradition, Goffman (1959) states that performances create a shared "definition of the situation" between performers and audiences. In

other words, we inhabit a shared social world in which our roles and behaviors are meaningful to each other because of the displays we put on for one another. Every moment of our social existence is an accomplishment rather than a natural outgrowth of our human nature or the functional product of the social order. Both performers and audiences constantly have to affirm, confirm, or correct the impressions fostered in their shared drama. Understanding social life requires close attention to these ceaseless maneuvers. As a “sociology of occasions” (Goffman, 1967, p. 2), Goffman’s dramaturgical approach is interested in the *syntax* of momentary relations rather than their specific content or longer-term structures. It’s all about process.

Goffman thought that face-to-face interaction was the site *par excellence* to study this process. This wasn’t because he deemed other interactions less meaningful; he mainly wanted to redeem the most basic forms of interaction from the condescension of mainstream social scientists dismissing them as trivial. Given this emphasis, it is no surprise that the literature takes differences between face-to-face and mediated interaction as occasion to go beyond Goffman (Cetina, 2009). The *context* of interaction becomes more complicated. “The presentation of self in everyday internet still corresponds to Goffman’s playacting metaphor,” writes Jia Tolentino (2019, p.14). “But the internet adds a host of other, nightmarish metaphorical structures: the mirror, the echo, the panopticon.” While there is broad-based consensus in the literature that we need to study more than the face-to-face, there is no consensus on what that should look like.

### 3.2.2.1 Interactive Affordances

Overwhelmingly, the literature tries to grasp the other structures Tolentino (2019) refers to with the concept of *affordances*. These are the “possibilities for action” offered by the platform ecology (Norman, 1988). The study of affordances directs attention to features of social media as socio-technical systems shaping how they are used by both the producers and the consumers of these systems. While the work of building an online profile – profile-work – bears some comparison to the embodied rituals associated with face-work (Silfverberg, Liikkanen, & Lampinen, 2011), it is distinct in that it affords different levels of control over one’s public image and requires different kinds of work.

boyd (2010) discusses four key affordances of social media: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. These affordances crucially allow mediated performances to extend through time and space because they can be saved, spread, queried, and replayed. While users can and have shaped the affordances of social platforms – the hashtag being a well-known case in point – the literature stresses that product design is typically dictated by the twin demands for profitability and growth. Because business models are invariably advertisement-based, and because venture capitalists backing major tech ventures demand steep growth curves, social media affordances are optimized for interactions that bind user attention to screens for as

long as possible, and that scale up indefinitely. They also try to squeeze as much data out of users as possible to target advertisements or strengthen their positions as data brokers. For that reason, Facebook users are encouraged to share their likes and dislikes in ever more detailed online profiles. These profiles are thus no longer (primarily) symbolic representations of selves, but inputs into larger algorithmic systems.

Despite this strong emphasis in the literature, our conversations with Yvette, Sammy and other participants do not suggest that varying affordances play a big role in their daily lives. Even though they navigate multiple platforms with different affordances and have seen platforms change their affordances, their practices and anxieties had little relation to the shifting socio-technical landscape.

### 3.2.2.2 Network of Mediations

Another way to broaden our perspective on the context of interaction is to regard it as a level within a larger social whole. Henri Lefebvre ([1961] 2002), an influential sociologist studying everyday life from a critical perspective, observes that there is no such thing as “immediate” interaction, because even face-to-face interaction is mediated by language. Thus, to understand the context of interaction, we must have a model of the larger “network of mediations” (Lefebvre [1961] 2002, 2:141) within which interaction plays out. These mediations, broadly understood as interdependencies linking the “micro” and the “macro,” shape the strategies of self-presentation and shape the normative order that makes self-display compulsory.

Our research with Yvette, Sammy and other participants suggests that the endemic insecurity induced by flexible work conditions and precarious livelihoods plays an important mediating role. Neither the imperative to engage in expression games nor the normative demand to remain visible to others would be as acute if they had the option of “dropping out” for a while. This dependency thrusts the weight of the world on individuals, giving them no choice but to maintain the myth of the self through its ongoing reproduction in commodity form. This demand is contradictory because it gives the semblance of unfettered self-expression, which further dissimulates the normative demands of the situation. The result is that individuals accuse each other of being “fake” or engaging in insincere signaling behaviors rather than seeing the larger demands and interdependencies that are at play.

## 3.3 Conclusion

Our review of dramaturgical perspectives in the literature on social media leaves us with a mixed assessment. Particularly when Goffman’s work is filtered through social psychology (a common reference is Leary & Kowalski, 1990), we find a version of dramaturgy that focuses chiefly on individuals and their strategic action. This

is often associated with Goffman's game metaphor. Undoubtedly, the competitive environment of social media brings strategic considerations to the fore. Our research supports that view, which is widely shared by commentators. But our research also suggests that such an individualistic and rationalistic version of dramaturgy is ill-suited to our task of making sense of the social media–social order nexus, since it works with a very thin conception of the social. The social only enters the picture to the extent that it requires individuals to engage in balancing acts. It does not account for the normative demands impinging on users.

Yvette and Sammy maintain a presence on social media as a way of claiming and maintaining membership in their respective worlds. Each has an idiom of displays that members must enact to be eligible as members. Yvette has to be seen partying, with a smile on her face, till the party is officially over. Sammy knows about the “marketing narrative” she has to adhere to in her scene. Though she finds it ridiculous, she knows better than to not follow along. Both have learned the pervasive idiom of micro-celebrity, though both desire a slower, more muted life.

While we could see their presentations of self as expression games helping them to succeed, their stories make it clear that this doesn't do justice to what they are doing. In each case, the price paid seems out of proportion to the benefits reaped. Sammy in particular remains precarious. Both engage in coping strategies like yoga to mitigate the stress induced by the requirement to maintain decorum. They also envision more structural solutions that would allow them to rely less on ephemeral collaborations and shallow images. Yvette wants to do more backstage work; Sammy is looking for a corporate job. As they seek an out, they run into formidable obstacles. In their line of business, short-term engagements are the norm, which means they have to ceaselessly pay homage to the prevailing norms of decorum to remain in view of potential clients or collaborators.

Studying social media as a site of order requires more than an account of individual strategic action. Crucially, we need to see social media as a source of obligation, which requires us to study contradictions, emotions, and strains. We also need to scale up the analysis from face-to-face encounters. This necessitates not just accounting for the affordances of social media as socio-technical systems, as is common in the extant literature, but understanding the “network of mediations” that shapes the economy of display individuals are drawn into.

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