# Self-disclosure on a Mobile Social Media Application

**Assessment Title：Research Proposal**

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**Introduction**

Despite the fact that digital media technologies are entangled in individuals' daily routines, they are largely taken for granted. This invisible means of being, doing and socialising has changed the way of our engagement and relationship. One key aspect of interaction is self-disclosure, which is displayed with and in digital media technologies and has far-reaching implications.

Given that digitally-mediated communication is increasingly saturated in contemporary society, research on individual everyday self-disclosure online is badly needed. People should have a holistic understanding of their practices within the medium as the gradually changed norms for online interaction have come to denote practices imbued with specific meanings. And this research would be beneficial for practitioners because an over-generalised understanding of the interaction between users and digital media can help them develop applications to meet the needs of the community and ensure future growth. Most importantly, this research would contribute to the scholarship on media practices and culture studies by providing a balanced understanding of people's usage, which alternates between a rational and deliberate process and a unconscious and habitual routine. A focus on self-disclosure practices over time provides a way to understand social change.

The project aims to address how people exercise agency when constructing the meaning of their practices, which will be situated in relation to habit and adaptation to online engagement through digital media interaction. This research will draw predominantly on the analysis of how individuals practise self-disclosure online, because this will elucidate a range of issues around how interaction is initiated, maintained and managed; how people define and understand their online participation and disclosure behaviours, and what role technology and material objects play in an individual's social relations and personal identity work.

The tools of digital communication come with their own sets of cues, sign systems, modes of circulation and patterns of connection. My study takes this into account, defining self-disclosure through the following three approaches: user perceptions, technical aspects and the material object, and analyse how these relationships and dynamics weave and work together to produce particular forms of users' online activity. The research will investigate people's practices as they disclose information in various forms with a focus on diverse populations on a particular mobile social media application. To improve research generalisability, I will contextualise the research within China's broader technoculture, taking the most popular Chinese social media application WeChat as a case study. A mixed method approach including quantitative content analysis, qualitative personal narratives and online observation (supplemented by the digital ethnography approach), as well as web analysis and experimental research will be employed in the research.

## Literature Review

Although much work has been done in investigating the personal connections and usage of digital media, there appears to be little consensus about individual's online practices and experiences. More systematic research is needed on individuals' collaborative involvement on mobile social media applications. This study will fill this gap, and investigate the individual's active role when it comes to the strategies users may apply and what are the identity and intimacy if we look through these three areas in their disclosing process. The interplay and interaction among the different self-disclosure analysing approaches in people's online practices will then be discussed.

## User Perception

People have a strong desire to fit into groups; they build a personal and individualized identity to align themselves with other social relations (Baym, 2010). Social media platforms empower individuals by enabling them to better control the process of social disclosure. This part intends to explore and map the individuals' online self-disclosure process from a sociology perspective.

Individuals tend to project socially desirable identities intentionally or unwittingly (Goffman, 1959). This requires my research to use the self-representation concept to understand practices in social settings. Many scholars have emphasised the nature and influential factors of self-representational behaviour (Brown, 2014; Goffman, 1959) and the tactics in impression management (Newman, 2009; Sinha, 2009) from sociology and psychology perspective, while Dr Thumim proposed that individual's possible intentions and interpretation can be validate yet undermined by different mediated forms (institutional, cultural, and textual) shaping self-representation (Thumim, 2012). My study will follow Dr Thumim's "genre of self-representation" to illustrate how individuals' practices make sense of their intentions online, the arose possibilities and constraints in mediated arenas when constructing and representing themselves. Nevertheless, the self-representation here will be considered a strategic way to self-disclosure rather than a condition of participation. And instead of analysing the disclosed messages, the project will contextualise and bridge self-representation through the disclosing process from behavioural intentions to actual behaviour.

Self-disclosure behaviour has been identified as a key factor in initiating and maintaining sociability (Derlega and Grzelak, 1979; Krasnova, 2010). A large number of studies have investigated the extent to which users reveal personal information on SNS: demographic variables (Liu and Brown, 2014; Tufekci, 2008a), privacy control (Brandtzæg, 2010; Joinson, 2011), trust contexts (Omarzu, 2000; Thompson,2008; Vitak and Kim; 2014) and online friends (Ellison and Boyd, 2013; Marwick and Boyd, 2010) touch upon online self-disclosure. However, there is a lack of systematic examination of the factors contributing to self-disclosure on social media. Therefore,

my research will try to fill this gap by examining and analysing the self-disclosure process through the multidimensional theory of self-disclosure by Wheeless and Grotz (1976). The research will adopt and modify the concept to fit the online setting.

**Technical Perspective**

Social media is one of the saturated interactive technologies that surround and constitutes us nowadays (Goggin, 2006). To identify how activities and habits are produced, defined and shaped by technology, self-disclosure will be understood as the interaction and interplay between the users and the platform.

Platform architectures are engineered to invite yet discipline their users into particular roles and modes of behaviour. Previous studies have focused on affordances and features (Boyd, 2010; Treem and Leonardi, 2012), algorithms, formatted protocols and strategic interfaces with default settings (Beer, 2009; Berry, 2011; van Dijck, 2013) of coding technologies that social media platforms implement to influence users' behaviour. By comparison, little attention is paid to page layout and visual design. My study will fill this blank and examine how the digital self is calibrated on the basis of what the technology proposed and how these elements can be a vehicle for the online community which gives order and coherence to participants' practices and experiences.

Computer output can also be directly shaped by the user input by extracting and exploiting user data. This sparked my interest in exploration of the big data. Scholars have investigated its various aspects at the techno-cultural level, including data capturing and organizing (Kitchin, 2014; Schönberger and Cukier; 2013), patterns and correlations in the data (Boyd and Crawford, 2011; Kitchin, 2014) and its predictions for developing services (Ellison, 2013; van Dijck, 2013). My research will further investigate how the platform makes sense of participants' online practices and steers specific needs through data quantifying and measuring, and move its attention from sites to mobile apps—devices that accompany individuals generate data which can track and trace movement and construct meta maps across time and space. Digital media use has a kind of peaks and troughs, unfortunately, the current research only concentrates on one particular element or one particular time period. In contrast, my research will view practices holistically and cover a longer period of time, enabling a deeper understanding of what is actually going on.

**Material Object Part**

Mobile media devices have become personal, portable, and customisable "services hub[s]" (Hjorth, 2009) in our digital media ecology. The self-disclosure here, with material object—the mobile phone, will be deemed as constant noticing, "check-in" (Turkel, 2008), swiping, geo-tagging and other related proliferating activities revolves around mobile phones.

Literature around mobile media have highlighted the ownership and intimate relationship between user and object (Ling and Campbell, 2011; Thornham, 2014; Turkle, 2008); the continually switching experience of the place (Moores, 2012; Hine, 2015; Seamon, 2015) and its impact on communication; the change of the social environment (Ling and Campbell, 2011; Hjorth, Wilken and Gu, 2013) and the changing patterns of communication and interaction (Farman, 2012; Licoppe, 2004; Hjorth, Burgess, and Richardson, 2012). By contrast, the previous research would fail to recognize the owner's practices and its development around the mobile phone. My research will follow Professor Shaun Moores' phenomenological approach (2012) to explore the mobilised practices and experience by examining the users object immersion, physical presence and their daily habitual activities.

The availability of mobile technology has further fuelled the importance of social media when individuals and relationships become embedded in the mobile software. People are moving from technologies that tether us to people to those that are able to tether us to avatars that represent people (Turkle, 2008). Researchers have noticed a movement towards mobile phones with applications: the accelerated "co-presence" (Castells, 2010; Goggin, 2013), the rise of personal production and consumption activities (Goggin, 2013; Fuller, 2008; Hjorth, Wilken and Gu; 2013), and the extension of identity and enhanced intimacy (Fuller, 2008; Hjorth, 2009). My study will extend it to the owner's new perceptions of the device and their understanding of usage in this new social situation of interaction, and also the role that mobile phones play, alongside the social media and technologies, in transforming experience of connectivity and in creating new sorts of practices.

**Methodology**

This project aims at understanding how participants practise self-disclosure online, and what role this practice plays in the participatory and communicative process. In order to answer aspects of the research questions, this part provides an explanation of how the methodical approach is chosen and how the fieldwork will be carried out.

As social media is becoming a "we are all in it" phenomenon, my research will capture the online activities from varying user groups, ranging from 14 to 55 years old. By including both young and old, and male and female participants it is possible to investigate if the different usage patterns, interpersonal relations, personal, age and gender identities will be reflected through the self-disclosure process. The existing studies associated with online self-disclosure are rooted in western cultural background, in order to explore a different cultural group, the project will choose a Chinese social media platform called WeChat for the research. It was originally a mobile communication service (but has now expanded to other areas) and it dominates social media in China. WeChat can provide a better understanding of users' engagement on mobile social media.

The research begins with quantitative survey-based techniques supplemented by the content analysis. Participants are asked to share information about when they disclose themselves and why in the online survey according to the 5 dimensions of the self-disclosure theory (Wheeless and Grotz, 1976) to map the overall landscape of their practices. Content analysis of a large sample provided quantifiable accounts of how do people portray themselves and understanding commonalities and differences in their self-disclosure. The phase will describe and predict patterns of use across different groups of people, the comparable statistical results and overall trends.

The qualitative phase will include in-depth interviews and observation to understand the prominent themes and dimensions of people's values and behaviour. Certain questions and topics are pursued in semi-structured interviews to anchor the exact answer of the communicative, explorative, and performative aspects of people's self-disclosure, as well as the contexts in which they act. Online observation will also be used to share participants' perspectives by engaging in the participants' own environment. These methods are often employed in the ethnography tradition, which generate an embedded description and understanding of participants' use in and through digital technologies and content in the context of individual everyday practices, experience, relationships and routines, and enable a stronger triangulation of the data (Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis and Tacchi, 2016). This phase will include a longitudinal analysis of disclosed information and the changes in their practice over time.

An awareness of structuring potential of technological infrastructures can be built by careful observation of participants (Hine, 2015). Web analytics and social media analytics will be applied in this phase to measure participants' interaction with a

specific platform. Log files and page tagging will be used to capture participants' online activities which data will be categorized to four web analytics metrics: site content, site usage, referrals data and quality assurance (Booth and Jansen, 2009). Social media analytics will supply the data analysis of the mobile applications to create meaningful key performance indicators. Sentiment analysis will be employed to identify participants' opinions, attitudes and emotions using computational linguistics and natural language processing; and the visual analytics can present and explore the relationships among variables through graphic interfaces (Wamba, Akter, and Kang, 2016). These methods are essential for understanding the combined resources, identifying patterns, structures and trends, responding to the variables and driving the future of the platform operation. Moreover, getting involved with the running of the organization and talking with experts will be necessary in order to better understand how the internet is characterized and how the users' activities are produced and consumed besides the data analysis. This practical work is important to develop the insider's perspective and understand more about behind-the-scenes work.

This phase will explore the role of mobile phones in people's life through experimental research. This can serve to examine the causal link between people's behaviour and communicatively relevant mobile social media application. The device medium of social media platform varies and participants will be randomly assigned to the three treatment groups, some using the mobile application, some using the mobile site version, and the rest using the computer web version. A wide variety of measurement approaches will be used to assess the reacting practices (such as the noticing of the object and frequency of logging into ones account) and the embodied experience (including emotion of place, movement patterns, etc.) The information relied on self-reported usage and observation, and participants of each age group will be combined to ensure comparable circumstances.

The main ethical and practical concern that needs addressing is the use of personal information that concerns individual privacy. Participants will be made fully aware of the nature of the research and how their personal information will be used; the anonymity of participants will be protected and any data collected would be used only for the purposes of the study and destroyed after completion of the study. Additionally, the received data should be carefully analysed, because some of them are self-reported data, which can provide useful information but have limitations as people may (intentionally or unintentionally) misrepresent their self-disclosure levels.

**Progress Plan**

2017: Prepare for empirical work and initial writing. This year I will focus on reading in depth on the topic, including research areas such as: social media platforms, online self-disclosure, self-representation, mobile technologies and research methods. Then develop my research according to previous findings and draft the literature review. After that, I will prepare the methodology part including recruiting participants for the study.

2018: I will start designing the research, make a timetable, consider ethical issues and iron out any potential problems and challenges. Then I will conduct the research, from collecting to analysing data. I will draw a conclusion based on the results of my research and plan on writing an article based on my initial research findings.

2019: Final writing phase. I will integrate the previous written parts, continue revising my theory, and draft the methods and case study chapters. Finally, I will proofread all the sections of my research.

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