

## University of Groningen

### You are the agenda

Bantimaroudis, Philemon; Maniou, Theodora ; Ziogas, Thanasis

*Published in:*

Communications : The European journal of communication research

*DOI:*

[10.1515/commun-2021-0107](https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0107)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2023

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bantimaroudis, P., Maniou, T., & Ziogas, T. (2023). You are the agenda: The pursuit of personal significance in social media contexts. *Communications : The European journal of communication research*, 48(4), 608-629. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0107>

#### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

#### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

Philemon Bantimaroudis\*, Theodora A. Maniou, and Thanasis Ziogas

# You are the agenda: The pursuit of personal significance in social media contexts

<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0107>

**Abstract:** This paper draws evidence from a national survey conducted in the Republic of Cyprus. Respondents provided evidence about their own self-promotion on social media while assessing other users' *personal salience* online. Furthermore, they provided evidence about their own reactions toward other people's personal salience. The study shows that respondents display affective, perceptual, as well as behavioral reactions toward other people's online visibility. Demographic characteristics along with certain types of control variables are associated with individuals' personal salience. Although transferring personal salience constitutes a segmented social media influence, this survey shows that it is recognized as a widespread objective and priority by ordinary individuals.

**Keywords:** agenda setting, agenda melding, agenda selfying, personal salience

## 1 Introduction

The development of digital media has provided ordinary individuals with unprecedented new freedoms in the realm of connectivity, entertainment, information seeking, and self-discovery. However, one of the most noted capacities that new digital platforms provide pertains to individuals' need for personal visibility. Most people desire to be recognized. This is a core human longing, that scholars have examined from various perspectives (Castells, 2009). Research within different scientific disciplines is concerned with identifying the motivations as well as the mechanisms that individuals utilize to seek visibility (Van Dijck, 2013).

---

\***Corresponding author: Philemon Bantimaroudis**, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Journalism Program, University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1152-1392>, E-mail: [bantimaroudis.philemon@ucy.ac.cy](mailto:bantimaroudis.philemon@ucy.ac.cy).

**Theodora A. Maniou**, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Journalism Program, University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4299-5221>, E-mail: [maniou.theodora@ucy.ac.cy](mailto:maniou.theodora@ucy.ac.cy).

**Thanasis Ziogas**, Department of Economic Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9117-4334>, E-mail: [a.ziogas@rug.nl](mailto:a.ziogas@rug.nl).

In the past, individuals struggled to tell their own personal stories. In fact, any ordinary storyteller trying to establish their own salience would face numerous obstacles, most notably in established gatekeepers such as publishers, curators, managers of content, and media owners. The digital world brought down these walls that prevented ordinary individuals from rendering themselves noticeable. Social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for individual “name building”. Our project examines this dynamic enjoyed by everyday users of digital media, who try to satisfy a particular need for mediated significance or personal salience.

## The pursuit of personal salience

Our study explores the notion of personal salience as a desirable individual objective. One of the most established paradigms in media theory, agenda setting, pertains to the transfer of salience from the media to the public. Thereby, we assume that personal salience is transferable from an individual to an online community or public segment (Shaw, Minoie, Aikat, and Vargo, 2019). The current project attempts to identify new agendas that go beyond the sphere of civic or political agendas. These applications of agenda-setting theory incorporate personal agendas, as ordinary individuals attempt to transfer their personal salience to small online communities of “friends”, or large and diverse segments of online users.

Since 1968, scholars have investigated how certain news stories are elevated into a position of prominence, while others are downgraded into oblivion (McCombs and Valenzuela, 2021). Although initial explorations of agendas were confined to the political and civic domains, researchers have recently expanded these spheres of investigation beyond politics and public affairs (Symeou, Bantimaroudis, and Zyglidopoulos, 2015; Weidman, 2016). While the theory is still predominantly focused on traditional “objects” that explain how people recognize, think about, and even behave in relation to news items, political personalities, and various types of organizations, some theorists are now turning their attention in new directions (Guo and McCombs, 2015; McCombs and Valenzuela, 2021).

In this study we argue that, since individuals long for attention, they strive to make themselves noticeable. Shaw et al. (2019) argue that individual agendas converge with group agendas while forming online communities “based on mediated sources” (p. 4). Therefore, we argue that while converging on various “objects” online, individuals will strive to meld while rendering themselves salient. This can be viewed as an *agenda-selfying* influence (Bantimaroudis, 2021). This emerging term seems to refer to interdisciplinary observations of individuals who strive to be visible on social media. Agenda-setting scholars focus on salience-related

processes and constructs (Guo and McCombs, 2015; Shaw et al., 2019; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, and Shaw, 2014). Impression management scholars focus on public relations processes with a particular emphasis on the types of images or attributes that individuals wish to convey to interested recipients (Turnley and Bolino, 2001). Cultural scholars assume a critical stance toward individuals who seek salience, often viewing them as shallow pursuers of vanity. A growing body of cultural studies literature focuses on individual motivations that lead to vanity-oriented behaviors (Abidin, 2016; Maddox, 2017). Our project attempts to incorporate these interdisciplinary approaches under the agenda-setting paradigm, and define a multilayered construct for future agenda-setting explorations.

Although the level of attention in online communities might be of less importance, influencing smaller groups and hybrid communities, these agenda-setting or agenda-melding processes are not negligible. Ragas and Roberts (2009) argue that “while agenda melding marks a departure from traditional agenda setting, the transfer of salience remains at its theoretical core and provides parsimony” (p. 46). Why should we scrutinize individuals as being the agendas? Why would the promotion of oneself be subject to investigation? After all, these are not mainstream agendas with wide recognition.

Individual efforts to achieve personal salience were recognized early on by Manuel Castells (2009), who coined the term “mass self-communication”. This is a profound observation documenting an empowering capacity that ordinary people exercise through their access to social media platforms. Recognizing the new trend, Van Dijck (2013) outlined three primary motivations of lay media users in connection with personal salience: personal expression, self-promotion, and personality assessment. These broad categories of motivations and personal needs encompass numerous actions that people display in online activities. One of the primary motivations for these behaviors is to draw attention to oneself. In Table 1, we draw evidence from the work of Van Dijck (2013), presenting various types of personal salience in possible relationships with multiple expressions of public or online community salience.

If individuals pursue personal salience, advancing themselves as symbolic objects, this may trigger various perceptions of that particular individual in the context of the online community. Furthermore, pursuing personal salience may trigger emotional or behavioral reactions toward that person. As these potential effects are largely unexplored in a unified and cohesive manner, we argue that agenda setting provides a parsimonious context within which we can scrutinize another layer of salience, namely, personal salience. Even if fragmentary notions of personal salience have been explored in other theoretical contexts (e. g., Maniou, Panagiotidis, and Veglis, 2017), agenda setting provides the foundational context in which personal salience can be investigated in a holistic manner. We argue that

**Table 1:** Transferring personal salience.

Personal salience		Community perceptions and behaviors	
Motivations	Content	Perceptions	Behaviors
<b>Promotion</b>	Impression management	Perceived professionalism	Purchasing
	Strategic self-presentation	Perceived competence	Participating
	Self-branding	Perceived conscientiousness	Liking
	Establishing professional identity	Personal brand	Sharing
	Becoming an influencer		Reading
			Listening
			Viewing
			Searching
			Citing
<b>Expression</b>	Self-writing	Empathy	Sharing
	Autobiographical	Awareness	Commenting
	Negotiating public image		
<b>Validation</b>	Dealing with appearance-dissatisfaction	Perceived narcissism	Conflict
	Vanity	Perceived trustworthiness	Becoming a follower
	Releasing negative emotions	Perceived openness	Sharing
	Attention seeking	Perceived extraversion	Liking
	Dealing with self-esteem issues	Perceived physical attractiveness	Reading
	Dealing with mental illness	Perceived social attractiveness	Listening
	Attracting sexual attention	Perceived self-seeking	Viewing
	Constructing confidence	Perceived self-indulgence	Commenting
	Receiving acknowledgement	Perceived sexualization	Acknowledging
	Promotion of identity	Perceived class/wealth	Voting
	Selfie as dematerialized possession	Perceived intimacy	Eating disorders
	Creating the ideal online self	Self-objectification	Mourning
		Perceived social status	Death/Suicide
		Perceived network of friends	
		Perceived loneliness	

these new trends should be investigated, not just as new forms of online media influences and effects, but as new values adopted by individuals around the world.

## Examples of personal salience

In this project, we turn our attention to everyday people as emerging “objects” who have acquired the freedom to promote themselves online at an unprecedented scale and magnitude. Since this capacity has evolved with the advent of

social media, scholars need to consider the repercussions of the new capabilities that individuals possess. Self-promotion encompasses numerous types of messages, with visual content seemingly prioritized over other types of content (Turner, 2006). For example, taking and posting selfies, a social phenomenon that took the world by storm, constitutes a classic example of self-promotion. Various scholars have examined the different motivations and gratifications that have encouraged the growth of this social behavior. Initially, this phenomenon was attributed to the link between narcissism and selfie-posting behavior (Barry, Doucette, Loflin, Rivera-Hudson, and Herrington, 2017), but more recent studies detected several other motives/characteristics, such as self-esteem and life satisfaction (Wang, Yang, and Haigh, 2017), communication and archiving, as well as special personality characteristics (Kim and Chock, 2017).

Social media have been routinely used to promote professional skills or business services (Bossio and Sacco, 2016). Even before the internet revolution, scholars had been examining how individuals create and manage impressions on others. The field of impression management has evolved to encompass how individuals utilize social media to manage their personal impressions. According to Turnley and Bolino (2001), impression management is “the process by which people attempt to influence the images that others have of them” (p. 351). In this particular project, the researchers scrutinize individuals’ habits of self-monitoring, while arguing that people who engage in regular self-monitoring are more sensitive to the personal images they portray to others, making appropriate adjustments to attract positive attention. They argue that individuals do not use impression management techniques in similar ways, but resort to different strategies in different environments and according to their personalities (Turnley and Bolino, 2001). Elison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) observe a tension in individuals between perceived pressures to perform and their tendency to share their authentic self. Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) examine how personality attributes influence self-presentations to others, while arguing that individuals display two types of objectives: “influence goals (also known as primary goals) and secondary goals” (p. 3). The authors differentiate between these categories in the sense that primary or influence goals are related to individuals striving to cause behavioral changes in other people, while secondary goals are divided into “interaction-oriented secondary goals (interaction and identity goals) and self-oriented secondary goals (consisting of personal resource and arousal management goals)” (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011, p. 3).

Drawing on various streams of evidence, various scholars have scrutinized the selfie phenomenon to determine how individual impression management has evolved on social media platforms. Scholars argue that the empowering aspect of social media is recognized by users in terms of upgrading personal impressions all

the way to establishing a digital presence of the “ideal self” (Ozansoy Çadırcı, and Sağkaya Güngör, 2019, p. 275).

In this context, scholars describe the influencer phenomenon as a social media trend (Abidin, 2016). Influencers and micro-celebrities represent a recent trend of individuals seeking attention with the intent of maximizing their appeal on social media and capitalizing on their enhanced publicity. Although not always described as public figures, micro-celebrities strive to establish their mediated presence beyond average media users, however, without qualifying as conventional celebrities, media professionals, or other types of public personas. The need for personal expression manifests itself through various online endeavors, such as writing and sharing stories or opinions, posting messages that a user sees as valuable, or promoting the work of others while indirectly expressing an endorsement of personal ideas. For example, Tufekci (2013) discusses the role of activists defending a wide array of causes, from refugee rights to environmental issues. Non-institutional activists are often described as micro-celebrities, seeking public attention while utilizing ideological causes for promotional purposes. As individuals feel the need to share their views, experiences, and opinions with others, Zappavigna and Zhao (2017) describe “mommyblogging”, an online habit of modern mothers who share their struggles as parents with other media users. Autopathographic content refers to health-related messages about people’s struggles with difficult diseases, visualized and shared online. These individuals post images of surgeries they had to endure or difficult treatments they had to go through. Tembeck (2016) investigates similar practices as performative efforts that “construct a politicized dramaturgy of the lived body” (p. 1).

The third category of “personality assessment” describes a discourse of validation. The primary motivation for uploading content on social media is to seek endorsement by others online. When people seek validation by others, they share information about their friendships or intimate relationships (Miguel, 2016); in certain cases, they share content about risky or dangerous behaviors (Du Preez, 2018; Hart, 2017). One common practice among social media users relates to their efforts to create photoshopped images of themselves in an effort to advance an image of an improved self (Tiidenberg, 2016).

## 2 Definitions, questions, and problems

The term “personal salience” derives from the bibliography of agenda-setting theory, but draws on other streams of evidence as well. If an individual can be viewed as a symbolic “object”, personal salience describes the extent of visibility,

attention, prominence, and valence of an individual (Kiouisis, 2004). Drawing on the available literature, the terms “attention”, “prominence”, and “valence” describe different types and levels of salience. It is useful to acknowledge at this point that personal salience in digital settings takes a hybrid form, as different digital indices provide measures of various constructs including salience (Chadwick, 2017; Ragas and Roberts, 2009). Personal salience can be rendered a measurable construct as social media provide different quantitative user observation records. Such indices encompass the overall volume of posting, viewing, liking, sharing, searching, retweeting, and commenting. While we assess the mediated presence or portrayal of a social media user, “personal salience” describes the volume and the extent of media attention.

Personal salience might take different forms, or it might satisfy personal aims. Visibility, prominence, and valence, three established forms of salience derived from the agenda-setting literature, might evolve into esteem, networking, or building of personal reputation. In this study, our operational definition of personal salience encompasses the individual tendency to upload a lot of personal content, such as videos, photographs, and comments. We specifically asked respondents to provide evidence about their reactions when someone in their community uploads a lot of personal content. The following explorative research question was deemed appropriate for this analysis:

RQ1: To what extent do individuals conceptualize users’ social media presence as a personal salience-building endeavor?

At the other end, communities in the context of which individuals establish their mediated presence might meld in terms of personal recognition, sharing, liking, retweeting, participating in networks, visiting, citing, purchasing, discussing, expressing empathy; or on a negative note, expressing jealousy, being angry, or displaying antagonism. The latter constitute affective reactions to other people’s personal visibility. Because the pursuit of personal salience might produce an array of reactions—perceptual and behavioral, cognitive or affective, positive and negative—the current project constitutes an exploratory endeavor in identifying and measuring transfers of personal salience from individual social media users to their public, online communities (Bantimaroudis, 2020, 2021; Guo and McCombs, 2015). A second research question was therefore formulated for our analysis:

RQ2: What particular online reactions are triggered because of individuals’ self-promotion efforts?



These explorative research questions attempt to capture people's reactions toward the two significant pillars of agenda-setting theory, in this case personal salience versus public salience. The first research question examines mediated personal salience in terms of how respondents perceive individuals' endeavors to achieve some level of visibility on social media platforms. The second examines public salience, manifested in people's reactions toward salient individuals. The following hypotheses were formulated to investigate individuals' personal salience in relation to community reactions:

H1: As individuals' perceived social media presence increases, respondents will display an increased tendency to seek information about those individuals.

H2: As individuals' perceived social media presence in relation to their personal problems increases, respondents' empathy toward those individuals will also increase.

These hypotheses were included to measure specific behavioral as well as affective influences that respondents recognize in relation to self-promotion by other users on Facebook. Searching for an individual perceived as salient is a behavioral reaction related to public salience (Ragas and Roberts, 2009). Searching for someone, in this context, is viewed as an indication of public recognition. However, public empathy goes beyond behavioral reactions, as it extends to a completely different realm of public reactions of the affective category of effects. Various researchers recognize empathy as a significant motivation that leads individuals to publicize their stories (Tembeck, 2016; Van Dijck, 2013; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017). We test this assumption in the context of our project.

### 3 Method

This study relies on data collected through a national survey conducted in the Republic of Cyprus. This particular approach allows us to see how individuals think about salience, and what their reasoning is in connection to their own salience. This capacity to assess a user's thinking about salience cannot be explored by just following online activity on social media platforms. A professional public opinion firm<sup>1</sup> conducted telephone interviews using a random national sample of 1,000

---

<sup>1</sup> The public opinion firm Symmetron carried out a national survey after a bid was advertised nationally. The response rate was 74%.

Cyprus residents<sup>2</sup>. Academics and survey professionals collaborated to design the questionnaire. Professional interviewers conducted phone interviews following specific instructions developed by the researchers. The sample was designed by the firm, following established randomization procedures, and the actual survey was conducted in November 2019. Telephone interviews were conducted in Greek. Raw data were delivered to the authors on December 5, 2019. As we analyzed our data, we decided that both descriptive and inferential measures were necessary to capture the dynamics of individuals' pursuits of personal salience. Apart from standard demographic information examined as control variables, all questions included in this project aimed to assess two primary areas:

A. Personal salience questions—Assessing whether individuals acknowledge they promote themselves on social media.

In this section of the questionnaire, we included several items asking people about their personal habits and online choices in relation to personal salience. For example, one of the questions in this category was phrased as follows: “To what extent do you deem it important to promote yourself on Facebook?”

This set of questions included items asking individuals directly about their personal priorities, perceptions, and behaviors in connection to their promotion online. Although we are aware of the limitations in terms of the validity of responses (since individuals might be reluctant to answer questions about personal habits and priorities), we decided that this category of questions was necessary to reveal some of users' salience-related preferences and online activities.

B. Perceptions of other individuals and their self-promotion efforts.

Individuals were asked what they thought about other people's efforts to promote themselves, and how they reacted when other individuals promoted themselves or whether they perceived their behavior as self-promotion. Thereby, recognizing other individuals' self-promoting content on social media and sharing their own reactions toward other users has been at the core of what this project tries to record. Our primary concern is to determine whether the perceived salience of other individuals is associated with respondents' perceptions.

We focused on Facebook, one of the oldest social media platforms, that attracts users from various segments. First, we asked individuals to indicate the extent to which they used Facebook for self-promotion while assessing various online prac-

---

<sup>2</sup> Due to missing values in some of the variables used in the regression analysis, the latter uses a sample ranging from 832 to 834 observations.

tices as indicative of self-promotion. Second, we asked them to indicate the extent to which they thought other individuals use Facebook as a tool for self-promotion. Third, we asked them to describe their own reactions toward individuals who seek attention or visibility on Facebook.

## Data and variables

Three types of online behaviors, identified as online public salience, were investigated in connection with what users might do when they want to retrieve information about someone on Facebook. We recognized two broad categories. The first category includes two variables: visiting someone's profile (*Visiting\_Profile*), and following someone's posts (*Following\_Post*) on Facebook as a result of a person's efforts to attract attention online toward themselves. These two variables emerge as primary records of public or online community salience, especially when users pay attention to other individuals. They measure virtually the same construct, public attention, and can therefore be combined into a reliable community salience construct, identified as *Profile\_Post*, which is the sum of the two variables. The new variable is measured on a scale from 2 to 14. Subsequently, scores were divided by two, to be comparable with the other two OLS models. As a result, they range from 1 to 7 instead of from 2 to 14. Cronbach's alpha for these two variables registered a value of .76. We have operationalized public salience as individual reactions to other individuals' self-promotion efforts. However, these self-promotion efforts are assessed through the eyes of the person who reacts to them.

The second category of public attention pertains to looking up someone on a search engine, trying to collect information about that person. We named this variable *Google*. It is our understanding that following someone on Facebook in contrast to looking someone up on the Google platform should not be viewed as similar constructs. We tested the hypothesis that the means between the three variables differ and the results suggest that there is indeed a statistically significant difference between the two constructs. Hence, the null hypothesis that *Following\_Post* ( $M = 2.462$ ,  $SD = 1.542$ ) and *Visiting\_Profile* ( $M = 2.493$ ,  $SD = 1.536$ ) differ cannot be rejected ( $t(993) = -0.651$ ,  $p = .515$ ). On the contrary, each of the two variables is statistically different from *Google* ( $M = 1.963$ ,  $SD = 1.455$ ;  $t(996) = 12.63$ ,  $p < .001$  for *Visiting\_Profile*;  $t(992) = 11.56$ ,  $p < .001$  for *Following\_Post*), and *Profile\_Post* ( $M = 2.475$ ,  $SD = 1.390$ ) is also different from *Google* ( $t(992) = 13.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Another reaction that we examine in this study is affective in nature. Instead of asking what users might do to retrieve information about other users on Facebook, we ask whether individuals feel compassion toward, or whether they empathize with, their online friends who share their personal problems on Facebook. In this

case, *Compassion* was scrutinized as an additional dependent variable. The survey question that helps us identify such compassionate reaction asks whether individuals commiserate with their friends when the latter share personal content related to a problem they face. We named this variable *Compassion*. Table 2 provides an overview of the variables used in the regression analysis.

**Table 2:** Description of the variables used in the regression analysis.

Name	Description
Visiting_Profile	“When someone posts a lot, do you visit their profile?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Following_Post	“When someone posts a lot, do you follow their posts?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Profile_Post	Sum of the <i>Visiting_Profile</i> and <i>Following_Post</i> variables [7-point scale: 2–14]
Google	“When someone posts a lot, do you look them up on Google?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Compassion	“When your friends constantly comment and share content related to a problem they are facing, do you commiserate with them?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Gender	Dichotomous variable: 0 = male, 1 = female
Age	Categorical variable with five categories: [18–29], [30–39], [40–49], [50–59], [60+]
Education	Categorical variable with six categories: first grade, lower second grade, higher second grade, post-high school, university, Master or PhD
Income	Monthly gross household income, ordinal variable with four ascending categories: [0–2000], [2001–4000], [4001–6000], [6000+]
Comments	“To what extent do you believe that someone is becoming known when they post a lot of comments on Facebook?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Friends	“When someone has many friends on Facebook, do you think they are important?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Likes and/or Shares	“When someone receives many likes/shares on Facebook, do you consider them as important?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Photos	“When someone uploads photos on Facebook, do you consider them as important?” [7-point scale: 1–7]
Following an influencer	“To what extent do you follow the posts of an influencer on Facebook?” [7-point scale: 1–7]

Since each survey question was answered on a scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*), OLS regression analysis was employed to test our hypotheses. The dependent variables used are *Profile\_Post*, *Google*, and *Compassion*, and we treat them as continuous variables. Diagnostic tests were conducted. For example, we checked our data for the independence of observations, multicollinearity, and heteroskedasticity. Furthermore, assessing people’s motivations in relation to personal salience, we examined several control variables along with demographic variables.

## Descriptive evidence

Preliminary descriptive evidence about individuals' pursuit of personal salience yielded interesting findings. The sample consisted of 48.9 % men and 51.1 % women. Their educational level was recorded using a variable with six categories. The levels of education are: first grade (2.2 %), lower second grade (3.6 %), higher second grade (34.6 %), post-high school (11.6 %), university level (40.3 %), and Master or PhD level (7.7 %). The majority of individuals in our sample use Facebook on a daily basis (77 %), and a sizeable 6.4 % claims to be always online. In assessing some primary personal uses of Facebook, uploading personal content was deemed relevant to personal salience. As respondents provided evidence about their personal priorities versus their assessment of what other individuals think of as important, there are some interesting differences. Communication with friends ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ) and searching for content ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ) seem almost equally significant for both categories, as shown in Table 2, but there are sizeable differences in mean scores with regard to uploading personal content ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) and participating in conversations ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ).

**Table 3:** Why do individuals use Facebook (mean scores recorded on a scale from 1 to 7)?

Why do respondents use Facebook	Respondents' personal preferences	Respondents' perceived preferences of other users
Communication with friends	$M = 4.63$ $SD = 1.88$	$M = 5.43$ $SD = 1.31$
Searching for content	$M = 4.26$ $SD = 1.87$	$M = 5.48$ $SD = 1.27$
Uploading personal content	$M = 2.91$ $SD = 1.82$	$M = 5.23$ $SD = 1.46$
Participating in conversations	$M = 2.67$ $SD = 1.84$	$M = 4.90$ $SD = 1.37$

Source: Public opinion poll conducted by Symmetron in Cyprus, 2019.

Describing their own personal uses of Facebook, respondents rate communication with friends and searching for content higher than uploading personal content and participating in conversations. However, when they describe other users' priorities, all four uses are presented as of almost equal importance. When they were asked about their self-promotion on Facebook, they were less willing to admit to it, while they were more willing to acknowledge that other people clearly engage in self-promotion online. For example, individuals responded to the following questions: "To what extent do you deem it important to promote yourself on Facebook?" and "When someone else posts a lot of personal comments, photographs, or videos on Facebook, to what extent do you think that this person becomes known?" On a scale from 1 to 7, the mean scores for these variables are 2.86 ( $SD = 1.85$ ) and 4.20 ( $SD = 1.66$ ), respectively. It seems that respondents recognized self-promotion efforts in

other users but did not recognize them to the same extent in their own online activities. This discrepancy between respondents' personal priorities, in contrast to what they perceived as other individuals' personal priorities, is manifested in various responses. Several questions were included in the study to assess perceptions of salience. For example, we asked about the importance of having many friends on Facebook. We argued that some people view the number of friends/followers as an indication of salience. Also, we asked people about the number of likes as an indicator of personal salience.

As shown in Table 4, respondents acknowledged the relative importance of pursuing personal salience in the form of perceived professional success, personal success, personal networking, and how visible they are in the context of online friends. Although mean scores for the above indicators all register below 4, the highest mean score ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) is recorded for personal visibility among online friends.

**Table 4:** Mean scores for respondents' personal salience on a scale from 1 to 7.

<b>How important is for you each of the following in relation to your self-promotion on Facebook:</b>	<b>Mean scores</b>
(a) Professional success	$M = 2.71$ $SD = 2.03$
(b) Personal success	$M = 2.61$ $SD = 1.74$
(c) Personal networking	$M = 3.31$ $SD = 1.84$
(d) To be seen by my friends	$M = 3.69$ $SD = 1.85$

Source: Public opinion poll conducted by Symmetron in Cyprus, 2019.

Gender differences were explored in relation to individuals' "photoshopping" or digitally improving the personal photographs they upload to their personal profiles. This popular practice has gained worldwide attention as individuals tend to look younger in their digitally "cleaned up" image on their social media profiles. While this is beyond the main scope of this study, we thought there might be gender-related differences with regard to enhanced digital portraits. When individuals were asked whether they improve their uploaded digital images, there were significant differences between males and females, with females scoring higher on this question. When respondents were asked about other people's tendencies to digitally enhance their personal photographs on social media, gender registered as a differentiating factor. Thirty-nine percent of males agreed with the statement that other users digitally improve their personal photos. The respective percentage for females was 54.3 %. The differences were statistically significant for both variables ( $M(\text{male}) = 1.636$ ,  $M(\text{female}) = 2.063$ ,  $SD(\text{male}) = 0.058$ ,  $SD(\text{female}) = 0.071$ ;  $t(993) = -4.627$ ,  $p < .001$  for editing one's own photographs, and  $M(\text{male}) = 3.899$ ,  $M(\text{female})$

= 4.622, SD(male) = 0.084, SD(female) = 0.082;  $t(924) = -6.158$ ,  $p < .001$  for friends editing their own photographs). Although a majority of respondents reported that they did not follow influencers on Facebook, slightly more females than males reported that they did.

## Inferential assessments of personal salience

The primary agenda-setting question of this paper is whether someone who tries to draw a lot of attention to themselves and is thereby perceived as “significant” by respondents would trigger certain online reactions, such as people paying attention to that person’s personal content or seeking more information about that person. Both paying attention to someone’s profile as well as searching for that person on the Google platform are treated as hybrid indices of public salience.

The first model examines influence on the dependent variable, which is a compound of two items: following someone’s profile and visiting someone’s posts. As already described, the compound variable was labeled *Profile\_Post*. Several control and demographic variables such as gender, age, education, and income were included to detect if they had any influence on public/community salience. Several independent variables were tested as primary candidates for agenda-setting influences: whether individuals attribute significance to someone who uploads a lot of personal content in the form of comments, the number of friends, the volume of likes or shares, and whether they upload a lot of personal photographs or videos. Individuals were asked whether they tend to follow people whom they think of as influencers, a control variable assessing individuals’ tendency to attribute significance to certain online personalities. The results are presented in the first three columns of Table 5. There is robust evidence that demographic variables do not have statistically significant relationships with online public salience. However, posting a lot of comments, receiving a lot of likes or shares, and uploading photographs, along with people’s tendency to follow influencers, are positively and significantly associated with public salience, and in particular with the tendency of individuals to seek information about other users. Therefore, there is support for the first hypothesis. All these independent variables are statistically significant at the .01 level, while uploading photos is not statistically significant. Furthermore, having a lot of friends on Facebook, as the number of friends an individual has on Facebook does not seem to be related to public salience.

The second model assesses a different hybrid index of public salience: looking up someone on the Google platform (*Google*). We thought that individuals perceived as prominent might trigger people’s curiosity. Indeed, there is some evidence that

confirms this notion. Individuals who post a lot of comments on Facebook, along with individuals who receive a lot of likes or shares, are more likely to trigger people's curiosity, as other users might search for them on the Google platform. These relationships seem to be associated with individuals who tend to follow influencers on Facebook. Therefore, there is support for the second hypothesis. Surprisingly, posting a lot of photos or having many friends did not yield any statistical significance. We observe that most of the demographic characteristics display no significant associations with the dependent variables. It is noteworthy that individuals with only an elementary school education display a reverse but statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable. As education levels decline, search patterns are reversed. This finding deserves further attention as it may imply that less educated people favor Facebook over Google as a search engine, while the reverse is true for people with a higher level of education.

Lastly, we examine the affective nature of Facebook activity by looking at whether demographic and personal salience variables are associated with individuals empathizing with an individual who experiences difficulties. This variable was labeled *Compassion*. Although some of our primary independent variables retain their significance, following an influencer, sharing a lot of photos, and having many friends did not display statistical significance. Furthermore, we observe that some socio-economic variables display a significant relationship with the dependent variable. Specifically, the age factor suggests that younger individuals (in the 18–29 age group) are less likely to empathize with their online friends compared to the reference category, which is individuals in the 40–49 age group. Income is negatively associated with the dependent variable but it is only statistically significant for the 4001–6000 income group at the .05 level.

**Table 5:** OLS regression models (behavioral and affective).

Variables	Dependent variable:		
	Profile_Post ( <i>n</i> = 834)	Google ( <i>n</i> = 834)	Compassion ( <i>n</i> = 832)
	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient
Gender (reference group: male)	–0.030 (0.081)	–0.092 (0.092)	0.150 (0.124)
Age (reference group: 40–49)			
18–29	0.142 (0.131)	–0.002 (0.158)	–0.450* (0.205)
30–39	0.084 (0.134)	–0.105 (0.149)	–0.247 (0.214)
50–59	0.114 (0.142)	–0.006 (0.163)	0.195 (0.218)



Table 5: (continued)

	Dependent variable:		
	Profile_Post (n = 834)	Google (n = 834)	Compassion (n = 832)
60–70	0.137 (0.146)	-0.114 (0.171)	-0.011 (0.219)
Education (reference group: Higher second grade)			
First grade	0.094 (0.326)	-0.600* (0.268)	-0.072 (0.450)
Lower second grade	-0.294 (0.225)	-0.420* (0.209)	-0.464 (0.323)
Post-high school	-0.109 (0.140)	-0.103 (0.165)	0.285 (0.209)
University	0.026 (0.098)	0.035 (0.114)	0.151 (0.144)
Master or PhD	-0.137 (0.156)	-0.195 (0.158)	-0.068 (0.246)
Income (reference group: Up to €2000)			
2001–4000	0.073 (0.133)	0.170 (0.146)	0.036 (0.190)
4001–6000	-0.014 (0.136)	-0.000 (0.150)	-0.385* (0.195)
6000+	0.082 (0.157)	0.132 (0.182)	-0.093 (0.241)
Comments	0.154** (0.031)	0.100** (0.033)	0.215** (0.045)
Friends	0.019 (0.055)	0.046 (0.058)	-0.065 (0.074)
Likes and/or shares	0.211** (0.055)	0.160** (0.061)	0.223** (0.067)
Photos	0.100 (0.057)	0.044 (0.066)	0.095 (0.070)
Following an influencer	0.187** (0.030)	0.188** (0.036)	0.032 (0.041)
Constant	0.473** (0.183)	0.493* (0.231)	2.647** (0.300)
$R^2$	0.332	0.209	0.142

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

This finding indicates that affective records of salience should be scrutinized as a distinct reaction toward ordinary individuals. Affective salience seems more

complex than online public salience operationalized as hybrid visibility. Table 5 presents the results from all three OLS models. The  $R^2$  values for the three models presented in Table 5 are 0.331, 0.206, and 0.135. Descriptive statistics for all variables used in the regression analysis are provided in Table A1.

## 4 Discussion and implications

The current project deviates from the “mainstream” of the agenda-setting or agenda-melding research tradition, that is associated with the political or civic domain of human activity. First, we assess whether individuals view themselves and others as salience-seeking individuals in terms of promoting themselves. Although all individuals acknowledge to some extent the significance of seeking personal attention on social media, they are less willing to acknowledge such pursuits of salience for themselves than for other social media users. This is an expected reaction associated with the third-person effect (Davison, 1983).

This attribution of salience to individuals by those who notice their digital presence has been measured at two levels: (a) visiting and following what other people do online, and (b) looking them up to garner more information about them. Both of these hybrid, behavioral records of public salience seem to be correlated with a high visibility of individuals who post a lot of comments and receive a lot of likes. The last finding applies partially with respect to visiting and following someone’s profile. As these indices increase on the part of people who promote themselves: Other individuals pay attention to them by visiting and following them, while searching for them increases. Individuals who tend to follow an influencer seem to be more attentive toward what other individuals do online in terms of their personal salience. However, this finding does not seem to apply in relation to displaying compassion.

Those findings can be recognized as agenda-melding influences, while shedding additional light on the dynamics of personal salience in the context of online communities (Shaw et al., 2019). Those reported relationships between other users’ self-promotion and respondents’ reaction toward them partially explain that online searching of individuals can be attributed to personal salience-oriented activities. Although agenda-melding influences have not been assessed through traditional measures—content analysis versus online behaviors—we deem these self-reported relationships as indicative of online melding.

What are the implications of these findings? Critical and cultural scholars who have made qualitative observations about personal salience see new values of self-absorption and vanity emerging as dominant 21<sup>st</sup>-century trends. As indi-

viduals project constructed images of their online selves, they seem dependent on other people's validation as a source of personal value. Our empirical record seems to support these critical perspectives. For example, individuals who promote their own writing while looking for sympathetic responses to their troubles might be subject to new dependencies in the context of digital media. Ultimately, how can users make sense of thousands of personal stories, complete with pictures? These critical questions pertain to new values becoming manifest in social media platforms. Our empirical record merely identifies new behaviors as expressions of existing human values.

While salience building by lay users might be more segmented in nature, this does not imply that these influences are insignificant. This project supports the notion that, as media become increasingly hybrid, so does salience. Of particular interest is the notion that hybrid indices of salience on social media primarily express emotions, so that they be scrutinized under the affective category of attributes (Coleman and Wu, 2010). This study shows that emotional reactions are clearly affected by people's online visibility while revealing that the affective category is more complex and multilayered than other behavioral records of public salience.

Affective salience is different from behavioral measures of salience, in the sense that demographic differentiations become more pronounced and relevant to the transfer of salience. For example, age-related differences are prominent features, whereas they are not significant in other salience-related variables. Finally, agenda-setting scholars need to pay close attention to the influencer phenomenon. The current research endeavor shows that those who follow influencers on social media are more likely to keep up with other individuals' online promotion. This agenda-selfying aspect of agenda melding converges with other agenda-setting lines of inquiry and particularly with third-level agenda-setting explorations (Bantimaroudis, 2021; Guo and McCombs, 2015; Guo and Vargo, 2015; Vargo et al., 2014). Examining networks of attributes of individuals can be established as a theoretical bridge between agenda selfying and agenda melding, triggering new discussions in terms of the online evolution of agenda setting.

From a theory-building perspective, scholars struggle with the forms of new agendas. In the previous century, agenda setting became a dominant theory, as mainstream media had the power to shape public opinion. We posit that the process of transferring salience assumes different forms in the context of hybrid media ecosystems. Our project shows that ordinary individuals who do not usually represent established elites attempt to transfer their personal salience, not necessarily to mass audiences, but to segments of social media followers who recognize these individuals as prominent in the segment's public mind. The rules of the agenda-setting game have changed in the sense that virtually anyone can now claim

some media power for themselves by directing users' attention toward their personal content.

The current findings imply that social media seem to subtract attention from the major civic and political issues that societies dealt with at a mass scale in the past, shifting people's attention instead toward personal issues and ordinary individuals in the present. If social media advance personal agendas while attracting consumers' attention, it logically follows that attention is directed toward other agendas at the expense of civic agendas.

## Limitations and suggestions for future research

The current study displays evidence from a national survey in Cyprus. Research conducted in other cultural contexts might enhance the reliability of the current findings. The evidence presented is based on what individuals report about their online activities, in connection with how they promote themselves online and how they react when they notice other individuals promoting themselves on social media. Although this is an illuminating exploration as we get to see how individuals view other social media users in relation to their personal salience and how they report their reactions toward highly visible individuals, we focus mainly on individuals as consumers of other users' personal content. We argue that individuals as receivers rather than self-producers and self-promoters would be more willing to report their observations, but less willing to share information about themselves as "objects" of agenda setting. To overcome this limitation, future research should incorporate different types of data focusing on various aspects of personal salience. When individuals identify online communities of "friends", they might exaggerate their responses in terms of what they perceive as personal salience. This limitation deserves additional attention.

Being aware of these potential threats to validity, we compared our findings to evidence from the available literature. Future studies should incorporate behavioral data of online users/followers and influencers that will provide evidence of agenda-melding influences (Shaw et al., 2019). Another element worthy of attention as a moderating factor is the reputation of influencers as a salience-building mechanism.

Building on current evidence, future research should explore various aspects of personal salience such as the motivations of individual seekers of personal salience and the gratifications they seek. What traits do influencers exhibit that render them noticeable by other users? Do people blindly follow fellow human beings online? Is there any real value in these endeavors? Ultimately, is technology empowering some of people's "darker" desires, such as a morbid fascination with

fellow human beings' online activities? A critical examination of any agenda is a scholarly necessity, and personal salience should be critically assessed as well.

**Acknowledgment:** This work was funded by the University of Cyprus (Funder ID: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13039/100012996>, Faculty Grant)

## References

- Abidin, C. (2016). 'Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?': Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media & Society*, 2(2), 1–17. doi:10.1177/20563305116641342
- Bantimaroudis, P. (2020). I am the agenda: Personal salience, agenda selfying and individual name building in hybrid media settings. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 8(1), 1–10.
- Bantimaroudis, P. (2021). Agenda selfying and agenda melding: Advancing the salience of the self. *Agenda Setting Journal*, 5(2), 115–133.
- Barry, C. T., Doucette, H., Loflin, D. C., Rivera-Hudson, N., & Herrington, L. L. (2017). "Let me take a selfie": Associations between self-photography, narcissism, and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 6(1), 48–60. doi:10.1037/ppm0000089
- Bossio, D., & Sacco, V. (2016). From 'selfies' to breaking tweets. *Journalism Practice*, 11(5), 527–543. doi:10.1080/17512786.2016.1175314
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press.
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Coleman, R., & Wu, H. D. (2010). Proposing emotion as a dimension of affective agenda setting: Separating affect into two components and comparing their second-level effects. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87(2), 315–327. doi:10.1177/107769901008700206
- Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1), 1–15. doi:10.1086/268763
- Du Preez, A. (2018). Sublime selfies: To witness death. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(6), 744–760. doi:10.1177/1367549417718210
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 415–441. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x
- Guo, L., & McCombs, M. (2015). *The power of information networks: New directions for agenda setting*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Guo, L., & Vargo, C. (2015). The power of message networks: A big-data analysis of the network agenda setting model and issue ownership. *Mass Communication and Society*, 18(5), 557–576. doi:10.1080/15205436.2015.1045300
- Hart, M. (2017). Being naked on the internet: Young people's selfies as intimate edgework. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(3), 301–315. doi:10.1080/13676261.2016.1212164
- Kim, J. W., & Chock, T. M. (2017). Personality traits and psychological motivations predicting selfie posting behaviors on social networking sites. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(5), 560–571. doi:10.1016/j.tele.2016.11.006
- Kiousis, S. (2004). Explicating media salience: A factor analysis of New York Times issue coverage during the 2000 U.S. presidential election. *Journal of Communication*, 54(1), 71–87. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02614.x

- Maddox, J. (2017). Guns don't kill people ... selfies do": Rethinking narcissism as exhibitionism in selfie-related deaths. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(3), 193–205. doi:10.1080/15295036.2016.1268698
- Maniou, T., Panagiotidis, K., & Veglis, A. (2017). The politicization of selfie journalism: An empirical study to parliamentary elections. *International Journal of E-Politics (IJEP)*, 8(2), 1–16. doi:10.4018/IJEP.2017040101
- McCombs, M. E., & Valenzuela, S. (2021). *Setting the agenda: Mass media and public opinion* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Miguel, C. (2016). Visual intimacy on social media: From selfies to the co-construction of intimacies through shared pictures. *Social Media & Society*, 2(2), 1–10. doi:10.1177/2056305116641705
- Ozansoy Çadırı, T., & Sağkaya Güngör, A. (2019). Love my selfie: Selfies in managing impressions on social networks. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 25(3), 268–287. doi:10.1080/13527266.2016.1249390
- Ragas, M. W., & Roberts, M. (2009). Agenda setting and agenda melding in an age of horizontal and vertical media: A new theoretical lens for virtual brand communities. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 86(1), 45–64. doi:10.1177/107769900908600104
- Rosenberg, J., & Egbert, N. (2011). Online impression management: Personality traits and concerns for secondary goals as predictors of self-presentation tactics on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(1), 1–18. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2011.01560.x
- Shaw, D. L., Minoie, M., Aikat, D., & Vargo, C. (2019). *Agenda melding: News, social media, audiences, and civic community*. New York: Peter Lang. doi:10.3726/b15023
- Symeou, P., Bantimaroudis, P., & Zyglidopoulos, S. (2015). Cultural agenda setting and the role of critics: An empirical examination in the market for art-house films. *Communication Research*, 42(5), 732–754.
- Tembeck, T. (2016). Selfies of ill health: Online autopathographic photography and the dramaturgy of the everyday. *Social Media & Society*, 2(1), 1–11. doi:10.1177/2056305116641343
- Tiidenberg, K., & Gómez Cruz, E. (2015). Selfies, image and the re-making of the body. *Body & Society*, 21(4), 77–102. doi:10.1177/1357034X15592465
- Tufekci, Z. (2013). “Not this one”: Social movements, the attention economy, and microcelebrity networked activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(7), 848–870. doi:10.1177/0002764213479369
- Turner, G. (2006). The mass production of celebrity: “Celetoids”, reality TV and the “demotic turn”. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 153–165. doi:10.1177/136787790604028
- Turnley, W. H., & Bolino, M. C. (2001). Achieving desired images while avoiding undesired images: Exploring the role of self-monitoring in impression management. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(2), 351–360. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.86.2.351
- Van Dijck, J. (2013). “You have one identity”: Performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(2), 199–215. doi:10.1177/0163443712468605
- Vargo, C. J., Guo, L., McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (2014). Network issue agendas on Twitter during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. *Journal of Communication*, 64(2), 296–316. doi:10.1111/jcom.12089
- Wang, R., Yang, F., & Haigh, M. M. (2017). Let me take a selfie: Exploring the psychological effects of posting and viewing selfies and groupies on social media. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(4), 274–283. doi:10.1016/j.tele.2016.07.004
- Weidman, L. M. (2016). Attributes of a cultural/consumer product: Oregon wine. In L. Guo & M. McCombs (Eds.), *The power of information networks: New directions for agenda setting research* (pp. 206–220). Milton Park: Routledge.
- Zappavigna, M., & Zhao, S. (2017). Selfies in “mommyblogging”: An emerging visual genre. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 20, 239–247. doi:10.1016/j.dcm.2017.05.005

## Appendix

**Table A1:** Summary statistics of the variables used in the regression analysis (percentages).

Categories	Visiting Profile	Following Post	Profile Post	Google	Comments	Friends
1 (8)	36.67	38.33	– (7.04)	57.67	5.29	40.92
2 (9)	20.64	21.33	28.67 (3.42)	17.95	12.31	22.67
3 (10)	17.94	14.49	7.65 (4.33)	9.13	17.80	15.85
4 (11)	11.82	12.68	15.59 (2.62)	5.62	21.26	9.03
5 (12)	8.62	8.45	9.66 (1.61)	6.32	22.08	5.82
6 (13)	3.01	4.33	13.38 (0.40)	1.91	13.73	3.51
7 (14)	1.30	0.40	5.53 (0.10)	1.40	7.53	2.21

Categories	Likes and/or shares	Photos	Following an influencer	Compassion
1	37.74	44.39	40.40	13.31
2	20.69	22.65	14.07	11.39
3	15.24	16.48	14.97	10.89
4	11.30	8.59	12.26	14.82
5	8.58	4.75	11.16	19.15
6	4.44	1.82	4.22	23.19
7	2.02	1.31	2.91	7.26

Categories	Age	Categories	Education	Categories	Income
18–29	25.80	First grade	2.20	Up to 2000	15.42
30–39	22.00	Lower second grade	3.60	2001–4000	36.94
40–49	17.90	Higher second grade	34.60	4001–6000	34.41
50–59	18.10	Post-high school	11.60	6001+	13.23
60–70	16.20	University	40.30		
		Master or PhD	7.70		

Categories	Gender
0 (male)	48.90
1 (female)	51.10