

# I Am the Agenda: Personal Salience, Agenda Selfing and Individual Name Building in Hybrid Media Settings

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Received: Jan. 6, 2020

Accepted: Feb. 17, 2020

Online Published: Mar. 2, 2020

doi:10.11114/smc.v8i1.4677

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v8i1.4677>

## Abstract

This theoretical paper introduces the notion of personal salience, expanding the traditional paradigm of agenda setting theory to encompass digital, online activities for the establishment of personal agendas. Self-agendas have been examined from many diverging points of view and competing perspectives. In this paper, we aim to place them within the precise categorization of the agenda setting paradigm. In its fifty-year history, scholars have examined the specific mechanisms and processes that render “issues” and “objects” salient. The current paper aims to classify personal agendas and personal salience as distinct typologies of mediated significance.

**Keywords:** agenda setting, personal salience, personal agendas

## 1. Introduction

In Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, there is a famous story that both religious and non-religious people recognize, the story of the tower of Babel. This ancient city with its extravagant architecture reaching high to the heavens became known as a tale that explained the proliferation of languages and, therefore, peoples’ cultural, linguistic and ethnic divisions. Regardless of how we choose to read this old narrative, it still bears significance for our media-saturated world. The author of Genesis reminds us that the most noteworthy aspect of the ancient story was not the tall tower of Babel, but people’s unquenched desire “to make a name” for themselves:

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves’” (Genesis, 11:4).

Their relentless desire to make a name for themselves rendered their story and their tower memorable throughout the centuries. Modern media scholars agree that one of the most important objectives that people passionately pursue is salience -- a synonym for prominence, visibility, attention or significance. Salience remains at the core of every human endeavor throughout history; or in biblical terms, “making a name” for themselves. How do people make a name for themselves? Humans have been very creative throughout history. First of all, they continue building tall towers. In fact, modern cities compete against one another, while leaders and developers compare their tallest and most extravagant infrastructure. Apart from building tall towers, people engage in various textual endeavors to make a name for themselves. After all, building a tall tower is by definition a textual or semiotic accomplishment. As people saw the city of Babel from afar, it communicated significance. Modern cities and their imposing structures produce the same effect on travelers. However, along with very visible and imposing creations, people engage in various semiotic efforts to convey significance. They seek publicity. They try to establish their brand. They advertise personal accomplishments. They upload their personal lives on Facebook and they collect “likes.” Digital media offer a multitude of opportunities to individuals who strive to make a name for themselves – to achieve some kind of personal recognition. And people take advantage of these unprecedented digital opportunities.

Humans have changed little since the days of Babel. In those ancient days, they constructed a huge, brick platform, as they were hungry for attention and eager to communicate their significance throughout history. The outcome of their name-building effort was quite successful. Thousands of years later, the significance of Babel, its tower and its builders, rings from the distant past.

## 2. The Successful Fifty-Year Story of Agenda Setting Theory

What does the story of the tower of Babel have to do with media theories? I hope one can see the connection between this old narrative and users’ hybrid media endeavors to achieve personal visibility and “significance.” In other words, the

underlying theme of that ancient story as well as people's current mediated presence pertains to salience. The primary objectives of the current essay are the following: Firstly, to describe a type of salience that has not hitherto been a part of the agenda setting story. Secondly, to survey the available literature to describe the motivations that drive people's search for personal salience. Thirdly, to outline some influences of mediated personal significance on public perceptions and behaviors.

The digital world offers an unprecedented capacity for self-promotion, which the average user of digital media exploits in many ways. This quest for digital significance satisfies a human need to stand out. Like those tower builders in ancient Babel, media users seek to make a name for themselves. Thereby, striving for mediated significance brings about new waves of media influences that in turn have an impact on modern societies.

Agenda setting theory has been described as one of the most influential media paradigms. The success of this theory can be partially attributed to its capacity to unravel the processes and the power of salience. For centuries, people have displayed a great deal of interest in the mechanisms that lead to mediated significance. There is something existential in the pursuit of significance. Although initially focused on the visibility of news stories and political figures – what the founding fathers of the theory described as the civic domain – the agenda setting paradigm has captured some of the power that drives people's interest in significance (McCombs, 2014). Throughout history, human creators have displayed their interest in salience through multitudes of creative endeavors – they tell stories, they recite poems, they act, they sing, they perform, they construct, they fight, they advertise. The list is not exhaustive by any means. The theory was initially most widely known for its civic applications, namely how journalistic endeavors and political performances of various types become visible and recognizable in the public mind. Subsequently, scholars considered how visibility and attention influence people's perceptions and even behaviors. Recently, the theory has encompassed questions that have repercussions beyond journalism and politics: business organizations, museums, movies and even wineries (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Bantimaroudis et al., 2010; Symeou et al., 2015; Weidman, 2016).

In the early days of mass communication, the media promoted only a handful of stories in a given period of time and mass audiences could cohesively reach consensus in regards to a small number of news stories that demanded their attention. Consumers of media content recognized a special media role in providing content hierarchies of significance while focusing people's attention around those special topics.

As the theory was further refined, scholars recognized different levels of analysis. The ways messages were formed, the architecture of every message, revealed some of the secrets of salience. As researchers' interest in political personalities became prevalent, they started scrutinizing numerous symbolic elements of a personality that could render a candidate worthy of attention. "Attributes" of personalities were scrutinized as semantic elements that enhanced people's likelihood of achieving mediated significance. (McCombs, 2014). Recently, a third level of agenda setting deals with networks of "objects" and "attributes," a significant next step in the context of an evolving digital world (Guo & McCombs, 2016).

### **3. Digital Media and Hybrid Agendas**

The advent of the digital era brought about monumental shifts in the ways we decide what is important in public discourses. One of the fundamental differences between the analogue and digital media eras is the active user/consumer phenomenon, empowering individuals and rendering them flexible consumers/creators who exercise newly discovered freedoms in the ways they navigate through, disseminate and consume digital information. These major shifts in the ways people process information have not completely deprived mainstream media of their ability to set agendas for the masses. Mainstream media still retain some of that power of transferring salience to large groups of consumers, but media ecosystems have become hybrid in the sense that various gatekeepers as well as ordinary individuals with varying agenda setting capabilities strive to influence smaller segments of users (Chadwick, 2017). In hybrid media settings, people try to assess the relative significance of content among multitudes of choices. Apart from mass media still trying to establish the salience of stories, personalities, organizations and products, users also convey significance to numerous recipients through their online activities (Ragas & Tran, 2013). Salience is still very important in hybrid media environments, but its power is shared by different users and stakeholders as mainstream media do not monopolize their grand capacity "to tell people what to think about" (Cohen, 1963). Recognizing these changes, McCombs et al (2014) have discussed the roles of vertical and horizontal media, the former describing mainstream, mass media and the latter referring to online media. In the old days, public salience was recorded through public opinion polls, in which people were asked about social issues or personalities they perceived as significant. Nowadays, hybrid forms of users' salience take different forms: for example, visiting, searching, voting, liking, participating, gaming, purchasing, interacting and many other online activities can become indicators of salience (Bantimaroudis, 2017).

According to Takeshita (2006), "the new media landscape affects the agenda setting process because mainstream media have a weakened capacity for consensus-building, while losing their ability to establish a 'common public agenda'" (p. 286). Takeshita's observations recognize a hybrid shift that affects the nature of agenda setting, including the primary

mechanism that explained salience in the old world: people's need for orientation. Since the 1970s, scholars agreed that the agenda setting process was driven by people trying to make sense of their environment. Scholars described the need for orientation as "the most prominent of the contingent conditions for agenda-setting effects" (McCombs, 2004, p. 67). Matthes (2005) defined people's need for orientation as "the tendency of an individual to seek information about an issue in the news media" (p. 423). Two lower-level concepts, "relevance" and "uncertainty," further explained the need for orientation. How relevant an issue is to a person's needs and the degree of uncertainty that characterizes that issue drive people's attention toward what media have to say about it.

#### **4. The Evolution of Salience**

Salience has been operationalized in various ways. For example, Kiouisis (2004) defines salience as attention, prominence and valence. Valence is linked to affective attributes, and has progressively become synonymous with tone. In many studies, people have been asked to record their positive, negative or neutral disposition toward different topics. Such traditional operationalizations are still valid and useful. Public salience, on the other hand, has morphed into various indices of online behaviors. McCombs et al (2014) have proposed both vertical and horizontal salience as they express the capacity of different types of media to convey significance to different publics. Vertical media salience is linked primarily to mainstream media and thereby is identified as a conventional understanding of mediated significance. Horizontal media salience emerged to describe agendas promoted by numerous digital media platforms. Furthermore, Shaw et al (2019) promoted the concept of agendamelding to capture how individual agendas meld in the context of online communities. The current discussion on personal salience could be viewed as both agenda building and agendamelding processes. Indeed, individuals seem to promote themselves in the context of online communities, interacting with other individuals who pay attention to individual agendas.

#### **5. Personal Salience: I Am the Agenda**

The current exploration examines a new type of agenda as well as a new type of agenda setter. Before the advent of digital media, the average consumer of media content enjoyed limited opportunities for self-promotion. Promoting one's content often proved to be a tedious process, as powerful organizational gatekeepers controlled the flow of information. In other words, editors, directors, managers, professional artists and curators decided on what constituted worthy content that deserved attention by audiences. The old gatekeepers decided on the "quality" of worthy stories and texts. Content that passed through the gates was subject to scrutiny by various types of editors who exercised the ultimate authority on deciding which content should be "published."

Nowadays, users and consumers celebrate a new type of freedom. No editors and gatekeepers present any obstacles to self-promotion. In fact, the advent of social media is celebrated as a revolution of the individual, abolishing the "tyranny" of the "experts," while abiding by the standards and the regulations of digital media platforms. There is practically no limit on what individuals choose to create and circulate. There is no sense of "nonsense." There is no discernment of "quality." There is no clear identification of what constitutes "news." What is "science" is also subject to online debates. There are, however, segmented types of digital distinctions, such as users' interest, participation and liking in various forms and indices.

A current hybrid mediated ecosystem has weakened the authority of powerful gatekeepers, while empowering average users to promote themselves and their creations. This capacity for self-promotion has established a new type of hybrid agenda, the promotion of oneself. Users' capacity for self-promotion not only created new types of agendas, but self-agendas have recognizable influences that merit scholarly attention. As people around the world started discovering that promoting themselves is easy and not subject to gatekeeping filters, agenda-selfing has reached global proportions.

#### **6. The Salience of the Self**

Scholars have started exploring this new ability for setting personal agendas, though this is not always framed as agenda setting. Throughout the 50-year history of agenda setting, what has driven media salience of news stories? Perhaps the need to inform, to educate, to establish the importance of certain news, to rally the masses around a certain cause, while organizations made money on the way. At the other end, what drove people's attention? The literature informs us that their need for orientation drove their search for information. While salience was transferred from the media to the public, people thought of certain issues and stories as more significant than others.

As the theory evolved, media salience of politicians and leaders was driven by a need for visibility and prominence. Certain segments of the public, on the other hand, recognized those personalities as more important than others. Although there are attributes of personal salience worth scholarly attention, there are systemic factors that drive the transfer of salience. Western democracies have relied on informed citizens who know enough about political candidates and what those candidates stand for. The current discussion deviates significantly from what we know about agenda setting, the nature of public consensus and satisfying the public's need for orientation.

As the average individual seeks some visibility – and, if possible, mass publicity – there are new elements that deserve our attention. One might recognize some of the motivations that encourage individual pursuits for personal media salience: visibility, professional success, personal advertising of accomplishments, networking, vanity; to use biblical terminology, “making a name for oneself.” At the other end, public perceptions and behaviors might be affected in different ways: e.g. personal recognition, liking, participation in networks, jealousy, antagonism, sharing, visiting, citing, purchasing, discussing online, to name just a few.

### **7. Typologies of Personal Salience**

As we explore newly discovered freedoms that individuals exercise in seeking personal salience, the literature provides evidence about individual mediated significance but not always conceptualizing those attributes as salience. Revisiting this evidence through an agenda setting perspective might provide a reconceptualized, precise map of individuals’ influences. In the current essay, indices of salience are revisited as individual expressions of self-promotion. Naturally, we consider selfies, a social media phenomenon that took the internet world by storm. Scholars from different backgrounds have examined the roles and influences of selfies in various human endeavors. For example, Krämer et al (2017), drawing from impression management studies, examine influences of selfies on viewers. Their experimental work shows that pictures of oneself are perceived differently from portraits photographed by others. Their analysis showed that selfies are often perceived as more narcissistic and less trustworthy than photographs taken by others. Furthermore, perceptions of openness and extraversion differ significantly between the two groups. Viewers often question the motives of people who take selfies. Ozansoy et al (2019) describe selfies as “dematerialized possessions” which are used to “build, enhance and extend another self” on social networks (p. 272). The authors describe how people use selfies to manage impressions, but they also emphasize people building their online self, creating images that serve various promotional objectives. They describe selfie constructions as collaborative, since individuals draw from other people’s feedback to improve their online image hoping to build eventually their “ideal self” (p. 275).

Sung et al (2016) describe four categories of motivations that drive people’s desire to take selfies, with attention seeking arguably the most important. Personal salience is not the only reason individuals take selfies, but it is one of the most important motives. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) investigate individual motivations in sharing tourism related content, including selfies and videos from their travels. They examine different types of motivations such as “self-centered,” “community-centered” as well as “individual action and personal cognition” oriented motivations (p. 48). Recording and sharing traveling and leisure experiences has been subject to analysis by scholars representing a great variety of perspectives. However, seeking salience through displaying personal wealth, knowledge, networks of friends – often articulated as social and cultural capital – have a common denominator in scholarship that examines tourism and leisure. Mediated attention has been closely associated with tourism experiences.

Miguel (2016) discusses the role of selfies in conveying perceptions of intimacy as a distinct form of seeking attention. Hart (2017) examines why young people engage in risky behaviors by sharing selfies of themselves naked online. Tiidenberg (2016) examines the effects of altering or photoshopping selfies while arguing that conflict is one of the primary outcomes of altered selfies. Nemer and Freeman (2015) see selfies as a form of empowerment, especially in third world environments. Though the authors did not examine the public salience factor, how viewers read images from the Brazilian favelas, the authors treated Brazilian selfies as empowerment because Brazilians used selfies to avoid censorship and to promote their identity. Chua and Chang (2016) discuss the role of personal salience pursued by teenage girls as they seek attention, recognition or validation, sometimes in relation to low self-esteem and insecurities. How teenagers manage those issues in relation to seeking attention is a theme that applies to that age group, while scholars discuss ways that these problems should be tackled.

Bossio and Sacco (2017) discuss the role of selfies in establishing a personal as well as a professional identity. They argue that personal and professional selfies constitute distinct forms of salience while in some cases personal and professional salience blend together. Choi et al (2017) argue that selfies are about other people’s responses and how they perceive the person who posts a selfie. In other words, people who post a lot of selfies care about other people’s reactions. As users seek acceptance, they crave personal salience in order to generate mediated versions of acceptance by others. Maddox (2017) is critical of selfies as expressions of extreme narcissism. She revisits the fable of Narcissus falling in love with his own image, which eventually led to his death. Drawing from a rich body of literature, she examines a link between exhibitionist selfies and people dying while taking a picture of themselves. Similarly, Du Preez (2018) explores a connection between people photographing themselves while engaging in extreme and dangerous acts. “In the analysis, three categories are identified to focus the scope: namely, selfies unknowingly taken before death, selfies of death where the taker’s death is almost witnessed and selfies with death where the taker stands by while someone else dies” (p. 745). These pursuits of sublime experiences, captured on a smartphone, are described by the author as “selfies with death” in documenting the lengths people go to in order to achieve mediated attention. Flirting with death and recording the experience can be motivated by multiple factors, but attention and salience are beyond dispute.

Abidin (2016) discusses the capabilities of influencer selfies utilized by microcelebrities and lifestyle bloggers in attracting followers. She describes relationships between influencers and followers as dynamic, while various tools are used to cultivate common interests. In fact, the term “microcelebrity” is treated as a hybrid formation which gained attention because of social media. Marwick (2015) discusses the habits of microcelebrities as they upload luxury selfies, conveying status in what the author describes as the “attention economy.” Tufekci (2013) discusses promotional efforts undertaken by non-institutional activists with microcelebrity status, seeking attention for ideological causes. This networked microcelebrity salience aims at rallying groups of people around certain causes, generating different types of reactions against established institutions. Abidin (2016) argues: “good selfie-taking skills comprise the ability to capture a well-framed digital self-portrait and the ability to edit the selfie to maximize “likeability” – using the number of “Likes” on a post as a way to quantify its popularity, and thus the potential to monetize audience reception through this measure of attention on-screen” (p. 4).

Apart from microcelebrities, a hybrid status that describes individuals who attract a moderate following online, major celebrities like many Hollywood actors, singers and directors use social media to seek and maintain audience attention. Those celebrities not only take advantage of digital tools to keep promoting themselves, while maintaining a positive public valence, but they become role models and agenda setters in regards to their personal media practices and their strategies that attract follower attention. Ordinary attention seekers imitate celebrities and microcelebrities in terms of style, aesthetics and mechanisms that lead to salience (Marshall, 2010). Thereby, the way people behave in social media settings, “the performance of the self” can be described as an art form generated by cultural gatekeepers who influence patterns of style. Ordinary individuals are influenced by these norms in creating and performing their public self (Goffman, 1959).

Koliska and Roberts (2015) argue that there is a connection between selfies and journalism, as public figures take selfies with people they meet in public places. These constructions advance personal agendas, as they push certain stories to the forefront of public attention. Thereby, they achieve two objectives at once: personal and “news” salience. Zappavigna and Zhao (2017) present an interesting case study on “mommyblogging,” calling people’s attention to how modern mothers try to raise people’s attention and awareness around the difficulties and challenges of motherhood. Kozinets et al (2017, p. 4) examine selfies as art form, exploring theoretical dichotomies that describe individual endeavors to capture their authentic identity while noting scholarly critiques of selfies as expressions of self-absorption. The authors approach the selfie phenomenon as a “lived embodied experience” which can be included in museum collections and exhibitions.

Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz (2015) examine how individuals utilize selfies to renegotiate their public image through reconstructing and remaking their digital body identity. The authors compel their readers to think about the pressures women feel in delivering what they perceive as acceptable body image, often finding themselves trapped by their own effort to achieve a popularly accepted self.

Tembeck (2016) deals with the difficult topic of health-related selfies as individuals capture their agonizing fight with difficult diseases, sharing their struggle in a very visual way online. The author uses the term “salience” to describe autopathographic selfies which belong in the following typologies: diagnostic, cautionary, and treatment impact selfies. The goals of sharing autopathographic representations extend beyond just raising awareness. Tembeck (2016) sees those selfies as performative efforts that “construct a politicized dramaturgy of the lived body” (p. 1).

On a similar thematic path, Hall (2016) explores “cue card confessions of the self” through social media platforms. This is a form of self-writing that is quite popular on social media, as (usually) teenagers stand quietly in front of the camera displaying hand-written cue cards, sharing a painful personal tale of struggle in school, racism, bullying or some other kind of personal difficulty. Drawing from the writings of Michel Foucault, Hall (2016) describes an enduring, transmedia mix of photography and video that advances popular texts of an autobiographical, confessional or self-writing nature. Cue card confessions are also described as correspondence or personal diaries. Several reactions can be produced from such texts. While complex indexicalities are subject to discourse analyses, clearly one of the aims of video cue card producers is “to grab the attention of the viewer” (p. 235).

Berger and Milkman (2012) pose a significant question: What specific attributes render a message viral? Their contribution is interesting as they imply that individuals share various types of content to achieve virality. The authors conducted extensive quantitative research, analyzing different characteristics of content in relation to its virality. They argued that positive messages, along with messages exhibiting emotion, are more likely to become viral.

## **8. Establishing Personal Agendas**

As we explore people’s quest for personal mediated significance, the literature demonstrates that, despite the short history of social media platforms, there has been a significant body of scholarship that tackles some of the issues of personal salience. Personal salience has been explored both in terms of personal achievement and success, as digital media allow individuals to take advantage of new freedoms, while, on the other hand, there is a dark side to the same story, a quest for

vanity and validation, a story about individuals' unresolved issues in connection with their identity. Van Dijck (2013) tackles this problem of multiple identities, as individuals utilize social media to display different versions of their conflicted self, while adapting to the perceived demands of diverging groups who supposedly pay attention to such online presentations. The author draws from multiple bodies of evidence in assessing a dichotomy between self-expression and self-promotion. This interaction is difficult to delineate as it expresses conflicts within the self as well as a fluid interaction between the individual and the digital platform. The byproducts of this interaction should be scrutinized as identity-oriented schisms. Various scholars have discussed identity related dualities that seek attention online, including Goffman (1959), and especially Manuel Castells (2009), who coined the term 'mass self-communication.' Van Dijck (2013) scrutinizes conflicting expressions of identity holistically, discussing the limits of expression, promotion and personality assessment.

The current essay explores this concept of mediated significance – salience – in hybrid media environments as an emerging construct and a human habit that has been encouraged by digital media platforms. Although this is hardly a new concept, hybrid media have greatly upgraded individuals' capacity to pursue personal salience. Furthermore, this interaction between individuals seeking salience and digital platforms has advanced new discourses, sometimes expressed as conflicted dichotomies. Nevertheless, agenda setting theory could easily encompass the concept of personal salience while continuing a fifty-year scholarly tradition whose primary concern revolved around the dynamics of salience. Agenda setting emerged as a paradigm that empirically measured the transfer of "issue" salience from the media to the public. It progressed with the advancement of "object" salience, encompassing politicians, businesses, products, creators and experiences.

Currently, adding personal salience to this vast matrix of "objects" captures a hybrid media evolution allowing the average user to pursue a perceived empowerment that was not attainable prior to the digital era. This survey of the literature is not exhaustive. However, it captures personal motivations toward salience that exceed the traditional need for orientation. The literature review confirms van Dijck's (2013) assessment that describes people's drive toward personal salience: expression, promotion and personality assessment. Scholars describe multiple motivations falling under these three primary categories. For example, individual management of impressions, strategic self-presentation and self-branding describe individual or professional efforts for self-promotion. The language used is derived from the fields of marketing, management and public relations, but applied to those who seek to establish a professional brand for themselves. In the same context, the idea of an individual who aims to become an influencer or a microcelebrity is clearly linked to personal marketing.

The second category of motivations, according to van Dijck (2013), is described as salience motivated by people's need to express their view, to have a voice and to articulate their concerns. A deeper look at this motivation might suggest that ordinary individuals have traditionally felt left out of public discussions. Their voice could not be heard and their problems remained unnoticed. Perhaps the old media world did not provide adequate forums for ordinary individuals. This need for personal expression is manifested in the literature through autobiographical, confessional or self-writing content. Autopathographic presentations can be viewed as autobiographical. The self-expression category of motivations can be treated as identity related discourse that satisfies a human desire to express and celebrate everything that defines the self.

Validation, according to van Dijck (2013), constitutes a distinct motivation that leads to personal salience. This category applies to individuals who crave acceptance and other people's positive reactions to their personality. The literature presents rich evidence of validation-oriented motivations such as appearance-dissatisfaction, coquetry, releasing negative emotions, dealing with self-esteem issues, mental illness, attracting sexual attention, constructing confidence, receiving acknowledgement and creating the "ideal" online self.

Table 1. Transferring Personal Salience

Hybrid Media Salience		Public (Segmented) Salience	
Motivations	Content	Perceptions	Behaviors
<b>Promotion</b>	Impression Management Strategic self-presentation Self-branding Establishing professional identity Becoming an influencer	Perceived professionalism Perceived competence Perceived Conscientiousness Personal Brand	Purchasing Participating Liking Sharing Reading Listening Viewing Searching Citing
<b>Expression</b>	Self-Writing Autobiographical Negotiating public image	Empathy Awareness	Sharing Commenting
<b>Validation</b>	Dealing with appearance-dissatisfaction Coquetry Releasing negative emotions Attention seeking Dealing with self-esteem issues Dealing with mental illness Attracting sexual attention Constructing confidence Receiving acknowledgement. Promotion of identity Selfie as dematerialized possession Creating the ideal online self	Perceived Narcissism Perceived Trustworthiness Perceived Openness Perceived Extraversion Perceived Physical Attractiveness Perceived Social Attractiveness Perceived Self-Seeking Perceived self-indulgence Perceived sexualization Perceived class/wealth Perceived intimacy Self-objectification Perceived social status Perceived network of friends Perceived loneliness	Conflict Becoming a follower Sharing Liking Reading Listening Viewing Commenting Acknowledging Voting Eating disorders Mourning Death/Suicide

This brief survey of motivations reveals multiple factors that drive people’s quest for publicity. At the other end of the spectrum, users’ reactions have been recorded in the literature through diverse records and indices. How do people perceive other individuals’ efforts who seek public attention? How do people react to other individuals’ portrayals of themselves? And how do specific attributes of personal salience influence perceptions of those individuals in the public mind? These exploratory questions emerge from classic agenda setting studies, providing evidence that might enhance the theory’s explanatory capacity with clarity and precision. In the realm of public perceptions, this brief literature review has extracted interesting findings. Personal salience influences public perceptions, pointing toward diverging bodies of evidence. For individuals who seek personal promotion or attention, there is evidence that points toward their enhanced public significance, expressed in the form of awareness, social status, conscientiousness or perceived professionalism. As

the evidence shows, there are professional applications that individuals find useful in terms of building their personal brand or establishing their professional status. For those who seek external validation or personality assessment, the literature documents several indices of perceptions such as perceived narcissism, trustworthiness, openness, extraversion, self-seeking, self-indulgence, physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, sexualization, class/wealth, intimacy, self-objectification, social status, loneliness, agreeableness or neuroticism. The term “perceived” precedes every supposed effect.

For individuals who seek personal salience in the form of expression – autobiographical, confessional or self-writing – public salience can be assessed in the form of perceived empathy externalized through a network of friends. Such primary assessments of personal salience are expressed through a preliminary reading of the literature. The aforementioned lists of perceptual influences are not exhaustive but only indicative. They should be treated as a preliminary typology of personal forms of salience followed by different types of influences, while additional surveys of scientific evidence might generate additional categories.

In addition to perceptual influences, scholars document some behavioral influences which should be subject to discussion. This survey identified a small number of behavioral effects such as: becoming a follower, conflict, eating disorders, mourning and death. Each of these opens new horizons of research possibilities. Consider death, for example. There is evidence that selfies recording extreme and dangerous experiences have in many cases led to death. This is not a negligible finding, considering the cost of that selfie that led to personal salience for the last time.

## 9. Conclusion

I started these thoughts with an ancient Old Testament story about a group of builders constructing a very tall tower in the prehistoric city of Babel – a predecessor of Babylon. The readers of the story are informed that the primary aim of these builders was not utilitarian in nature – to satisfy a need for shelter and safety. Their ultimate objective was their personal salience – to build a name for themselves. But their name-building effort resulted in a profound confusion. If people’s desire to build a name for themselves was textual/semiotic in nature, the effect that was generated because of their efforts, their confusion was also language-oriented. Losing their ability to comprehend the world in a unified manner lead to a semiotic chaos. Although this narrative comes to modern readers from the depths of history, the effect of their name building should not be treated with negligence. This ancient story has traces of what scholars currently describe as post structuralism, unfolding paradoxically in a distant, prehistoric setting. Apart from its religious teaching, there is something deeply semiotic or constructionist in this story. As individuals strive to establish their self-salience, they seem to lose their collective and cohesive understanding of their world. Perhaps words lost their meaning because words ceased to express universal meanings. In Babel, people displayed their individual readings of their salience-oriented reality, but a unified, cohesive understanding was no longer possible. The world revolved around themselves.

Whatever interpretation one might draw from the old story, modern scholars observe that a quest for personal salience drives a significant portion of information traffic online. People share pictures of themselves, along with other types of content, which promote their personal agenda. This flow of information revolves around the self. As modern individuals seek salience, people’s collective understanding of the world is breaking apart. Takeshita (2006) observed this break up in public consensus even before social media platforms became global phenomena. As individuals strive with multiple identities, as they share content with their friends because it resonates with them in a very special way, as they engage in self-writing, they find interested recipients of their perspectives but at the same time they lose or neglect competing points of view that merit attention as well. As they actively seek those individuals who will see them in a positive light – in agenda setting terminology, positive valence – they lose sight of the notion that they could learn more about themselves from their critics and antagonists. Missing competing points of view, resisting information they disagree with, ignoring what seems incomprehensible, tends to lead individuals toward a myopic view of a very complex world, but most importantly it leads users toward a blurry picture of themselves.

Finally, as billions of “autobiographies” are advanced, telling self-constructed tales of personal significance, how is distinction achieved? In the old days, the founders of agenda setting argued that the salience of issues was possible because only a handful of news stories was brought to the forefront of public attention. If a new issue advanced to salience, it pushed another issue to the background. This principle was described as a “zero-sum game” application of agenda setting (McCombs, 2014). In the digital world, billions of individuals strive to achieve mediated prominence, but they lose themselves in a sea of obscure self-agendas, deprived of consensus. What distinction can be achieved in blurry and uncharted oceans of attention craving users? Perhaps the story of Babel bears more significance for modern day users of online media than for those confused prehistoric builders and their semi-finished construction.



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