



Article

# Posting vulnerability on LinkedIn

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## Abstract

Digital spaces such as LinkedIn, the world's largest professional digital network, constitute central sites for self-promotion, where job seekers and the employed present their polished “best” professional selves. However, in recent years, LinkedIn members are increasingly publishing accounts that highlight their vulnerabilities and struggles. This article examines the emergence of vulnerability on LinkedIn by analyzing how vulnerability is articulated in a sample of 40 posts (2021–2023). It identifies three genres: (1) Triumph over tragedy: vulnerability as a vector for self-growth and resilience; (2) Snap: vulnerability as a breaking point; and (3) Subversive commentary on self-promotion. On one hand, posting vulnerability on LinkedIn is a strategic form of digital self-branding, which monetizes vulnerability and depoliticizes its meanings. At the same time, vulnerability posts have the potential to form a basis for resistance to digital and work cultures' glorification of overwork, individualized resilience and self-sufficiency, and the constant pressure to self-promote.

## Keywords

Authenticity, genre, professional self, self-promotion, social media posts, vulnerability, work

## Introduction: the turn to vulnerability on LinkedIn

Digital spaces have become increasingly central sites for self-promotion for both job seekers and the employed (Gershon, 2017; Scolere et al., 2018; Vallas and Christin, 2018). Among these, LinkedIn is arguably the most popular, as the world's largest professional online network with 830 million users, generating around 8 million posts and comments

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on people's posts a day (Kelley, 2022). For many of its members, LinkedIn is not just a platform to talk about work and professional life; it is also a space where they work, by promoting their services and skills and building their self-brand. Indeed, since its early days, the platform has positioned itself as a forum for professional self-promotion, explicitly instructing its users to emphasize their skills, strengths, and proficiency by presenting their polished, skilled, confident, "best" professional selves (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013). As José Van Dijck (2013) noted a decade ago in one of the first studies of the platform, LinkedIn profiles "function as inscriptions of normative professional behavior: each profile shapes an idealized portrait of one's professional identity by showing off skills to peers and anonymous evaluators" (p. 208). LinkedIn users, in turn, have largely adhered to the platform's advice, for example, by following its recommendation to post their headshot (rather than full-body) portraits, looking at the camera (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018) and smiling a "business smile"—a smile which, as a LinkedIn guide explains, "looks confident, friendly and engaged" (Kline, 2018).

However, in contrast to the platform's normative directive to self-promote, in recent years, LinkedIn users seem increasingly to be publishing accounts that highlight their vulnerabilities, failures, hurt, and struggles—a trend noted by several journalists (Jacobs, 2021; Kelley, 2022; Mahdawi, 2022) and by a senior data science manager at LinkedIn (during a private conversation in 2021, conducted as part of the study). LinkedIn editor-in-chief, Dan Roth, claims that since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, "users have increasingly veered into personal musings, considering what they want to do, are they working on the right things, how are they dealing with the pressures of work and life?" with mental health hashtags growing "exponentially" (cited in Jacobs, 2021). This shift is evident also in the type of content that trends on the platform. Alongside hashtags such as #networking, #success, and #productivity, hashtags including #burnout, #mental-health, and #layoffs gain growing popularity, while on the platform's public section, LinkedIn News, content about issues such as burnout, stress, and mental health is now being published regularly. Thus, whereas previously LinkedIn asked users "*not* to provide their life story but prompt[ed] them to highlight specific skills, thus promoting their strengths" (Van Dijck, 2013: 208, italics added), today, lengthy posts where users share highly personal stories about mental health problems and traumatic experiences related to abuse, depression, ill health, overwork, and burnout are becoming common.

How can we make sense of this ostensible turn to vulnerability, why it occurred and what it means? Some commentators consider it an "epidemic" of "oversharing" (Bindley, 2022; Borchers, 2023; Kelley, 2022; Sanghera, 2021), a communicative trend that crosses and blurs the boundaries of what is considered "appropriate" for a professional networking site such as LinkedIn. However, unlike this approach, in my study, I am interested in the cultural significance of this trend and the ambivalence it produces. Specifically, I want to lend what Sara Ahmed (2017: 203, 2021: 3) calls a "feminist ear" to the forms of the expressions of vulnerability posted on LinkedIn. Ahmed (2021) encourages us to attend to expressions of vulnerability such as "grief, pain, or dissatisfaction, something that is a cause of a protest or outcry, a bodily ailment, or a formal allegation" (p. 4), as a way of hearing what is not being heard or what is often being dismissively heard as interference and complaining. In the context of this study, this means deliberately refusing normative judgments of LinkedIn users' expressions of vulnerability as

“inappropriate” and “unprofessional” “moaning” or “oversharing.” Instead, defining vulnerability as the state of being exposed to the possibility of violence and/or pain (a definition inspired by Butler (2020) and Chouliaraki (2021)), I ask: how does vulnerability materialize on LinkedIn? What is the significance of this apparent turn to vulnerability in users’ communication on the world’s largest professional digital platform?

To address these questions, in what follows I first situate the discussion at the intersection of two trends: self-promotion at work and in digital spaces and the turn to vulnerability at work and in digital spaces. I then move to the second section of the article, where I present the study’s methodology, followed by an empirical analysis of a sample of LinkedIn posts that I term vulnerability posts. Exploring how vulnerability is figured and materialized in these posts, I identify three genres: (1) Triumph over tragedy; (2) Snap; and (3) Subversive commentary. The article concludes by considering how posting of vulnerability on LinkedIn becomes part of and furthers digital self-branding, which monetizes vulnerability and depoliticizes its meanings, while at the same time challenging the neoliberal injunction to deny and hide pain and vulnerability and inviting an understanding of vulnerability as a shared condition and a relational experience, which demands interdependence.

## **Self-promotion at work and in digital spaces**

Over the last decade, the logic of self-promotion and self-branding has significantly shaped employment discourses and practices across sectors, professions, and worker levels (Hong, 2022; Scolere et al., 2018). Situated in neoliberal regimes of self-governance, self-branding constitutes a purposeful, strategic work of crafting a perfectly curated and polished presentation of the “authentic self” aimed to garner attention, reputation, and/or profit (Hearn, 2008, 2010). In her study of hiring and job-seeking in contemporary United States, Ilana Gershon (2017) describes this new logic of employment, where today individuals consider themselves a business which compels them to engage in self-branding. Gershon (2017) shows how self-branding becomes particularly instrumental in an employment market characterized by precarity, fragmentation and insecurity, for it is “a strategy for representing yourself as stable and legible” (p. 57), which enables imposing coherence and consistency on a work trajectory that no longer is a coherent narrative (if it ever were).

Professional self-branding has been commonly couched in workplace discourses in terms of aligning one’s “authentic self” with their professional self (Blyth et al., 2022; Ciccone, 2023; Gershon, 2017). However, paradoxically, the “authentic self” that employees are incited to cultivate as part of their self-promotional efforts relies on what Arlie Hochschild (1983) has famously called emotional labor: the performance of emotions that workers do not necessarily feel but are expected to perform for the job and hiding emotions which do not match the job’s requirements (Gershon, 2017: 37, 57). Feminist scholars have underscored the pressure on workers across sectors, professions, and employee levels, to hide emotions that are rendered inappropriate, undesirable, and even abhorrent in the contemporary world of work. In academia, for example, Maria do Mar Pereira (2017), Rosalind Gill (2010), and Sara Ahmed (2017) have shown how workers are “struggling to keep up with insistent institutional demands to produce more,

better and faster” (Pereira, 2017: 100), while maintaining their physical and psychological health and emotional wellbeing, and that these struggles are profoundly affected by gender, race, age, class, and disability. And yet workers are continuously exhorted to deny pain and hide their vulnerabilities, to refrain from complaining and to engage in what Renyi Hong (2022) calls “passionate work”—the dominant and normalized affective structure of the post-Fordist era.

Directives to engage in strategic self-promotion at work dovetail with the broader contemporary normative imperative to produce a self-brand on social media (Banet-Weiser, 2021a; Van Dijck, 2013) and with the specific “codes of impression-management and status-building endemic to social networking sites” (Scolere et al., 2018: 1; see also Gehl, 2011; Hearn, 2008; Pooley, 2010). Indeed, digital media platforms have become increasingly central sites where, especially in the knowledge economy, workers and job-seekers are expected to incessantly curate and monitor a professional image, cultivate social relationships, and construct a professional reputation (Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016; Gershon, 2017; Scolere et al., 2018; Vallas and Christin, 2018).

Scolere et al. (2018) found that creative workers engage in what they call “platform-specific self-branding” (p. 2), namely, the calculated deployment of multiple social media selves whereby workers present simultaneously curated (polished) and “authentic” selves that are tailored to the platform’s specific affordances. Thus, workers mobilize their authenticity for, and as an integral part of self-branding, demonstrating an impetus toward “strategic authenticity” (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021) or what Jeff Pooley (2010) calls “calculated authenticity” (cited in Scolere et al., 2018: 7). The compulsion to self-brand and “continuously rework the self” (Scolere et al., 2018: 1) has become particularly pronounced in the way that creative workers, whose work conditions are characterized by precarity, insecurity, and intense competition engage in self-promotional activities on social networking sites, including Pinterest (e.g. Scolere and Humphreys, 2016), Instagram (Abidin, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2015), Twitter (Gandini, 2016), and LinkedIn (e.g. Gandini, 2016; Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013). Specifically, studies of workers’ use of platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter (Gandini, 2016) and Upwork (Blyth et al., 2022), highlight how self-branding is instrumental in securing employment in the freelance-based labor market of the digital knowledge economy, and the intense and continuous labor that digital self-branding entails.

## **The turn to vulnerability at work and on social media**

At the same time, while an emphasis on self-promotion, resilience, and “passionate work” (Hong, 2022) has suffused contemporary discourses of work (and cultural discourses more broadly, see Orgad and Gill, 2022), in recent years there has been a seemingly notable shift in workplace discourses, related particularly to management and leadership: not only are expressions of vulnerability allowed in the context of work, but vulnerability is increasingly being seen as advantageous and even mandatory for positive and successful employee performance (Cicccone, 2020, 2023; Corlett et al., 2021; Orgad and Gill, 2022). Business leaders such as David Solomon, CEO and chairman of the investment bank Goldman Sachs, and Apple’s CEO Tim Cook have vocally encouraged their leaders to “be more vulnerable” (Son, 2018) and share their personal lives. In the

context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the global management consulting company McKinsey published a series on “leadership in crisis,” calling on business leaders to cultivate “compassionate leadership” by “role-modeling vulnerability” (Nielsen et al., 2020). The person/brand perhaps most recognized for championing and popularizing this idea is Brené Brown, social work professor, best-selling author and star of a highly popular Ted talk and the 2019 Netflix program *The Call to Courage*. Brown promotes vulnerability as “the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change” (Walters, 2012) and calls on employees to bring their “whole self” and “vulnerable self” to work, to attend to their uncomfortable and difficult feelings, and to cultivate a willingness to be seen by others in the face of uncertain outcomes.

The turn to vulnerability in professional and managerial work is situated within several concurrent processes. First, the culmination of decades of increased dissatisfaction among workers with modern work, its rigid hierarchies, bad management, and inflexibility, and with employment forms employees regard as “completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious”—what David Graeber (2018: 9) famously called “bullshit jobs.” This has led to a broader re-evaluation of people’s relationships to work (Hunt, 2022), increasing critical discussions about the ways the meaning of work and leisure is being reconfigured by digitalization (Wajcman, 2014), and a growing refusal of the toxic, punishing, and damaging consequences of overwork, as evident in recent phenomena such as the “Great Resignation” and “Quiet Quitting.”<sup>1</sup>

Second, the turn to vulnerability in the context of work is related closely to and shaped by the rise of vulnerability in digital spaces. Several trends have contributed to and animated this rise. One concerns the intensification of the imperative to be “authentic,” as embodied especially by influencers, YouTube producers, bloggers, and vloggers. As Banet-Weiser (2021a: 141) notes, influencers are “an intensified version of authenticity in the production of culture” and “the most developed form of brand authenticity.” Studies highlight how influencers seek to create authenticity through an emphasis on ordinariness, for example, use of colloquial language and transparency about lack of expertise, communicating amateurism, spontaneity, and passion (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021; Banet-Weiser, 2021b). Arriagada and Bishop (2021) note that self-branding—as in the case of influencers’ efforts to craft themselves as authentic—depends on performing a “vulnerable self,” that is, the communication of “failure, pressure, depression, tears, vulnerability” (Banet-Weiser, 2021a: 143, cited in Arriagada and Bishop, 2021: 9; see also Mäkinen, 2021). Another related growing trend in digital spaces constitutes the move toward anti-perfection and anti-happiness, as seen in the rise of the “0.5 selfie” and the popularity of the anti-Instagram BeReal photo-sharing app, which deliberately refuses the curated character of selfies and promises “unvarnished glimpses into everyday life” (Duffy and Gerrard, 2022; Gill, 2023; Huang, 2022; Prins, 2020). Fredrika Thelandersson (2023) similarly discusses the emergence of the “sad girl” aesthetics and discourses, primarily on Tumblr and Instagram, as an indirect response to a popular culture overtly focused on happiness, confidence, and perfection.

These developments are part of a broader process that Lilie Chouliaraki (2021: 20) calls “the platformization of pain,” namely “the communication, amplification and monetization of vulnerability on and through social media platforms.” It centers on the performance of a therapeutic narrative of the self: “a narrative which combines the aspiration

to self-realization with the claim to emotional suffering” (Illouz, 2007: 4, cited in Chouliaraki, 2021: 13). This narrative, Chouliaraki argues, decontextualizes the claim to suffering from its claimant’s (anonymous) identity and amplifies already popular claims to suffering, through the quantification of user engagement and its monetization. For example, Thelandersson (2023) demonstrates how young women on social media employ vulnerability as a tool for profitability, by producing market-friendly “easily digestible” iterations of weakness and mental health that fit within the otherwise largely positive affective register of neoliberal confidence culture. Similarly, in her study of mummy bloggers, Mäkinen (2021) shows how vulnerability is part of what the bloggers are selling to their followers, while in their study of influencers in the platform economy, Duffy et al. (2023: n.p.) argue that “putting one’s personal insecurities, injustices and even trauma on public display” has become “a strategy for growing community and improving career prospects.” At the same time, the monetization of vulnerability exists in tension with more radical iterations of vulnerability on social media. Thelandersson (2023), for example, suggests that “Tumblr sad girls can be read as playing with the potential of impasse and resting in sadness by refusing to work immediately toward a cure” (p. 5), and that the different versions of “sad girls” on social media show “how people can share their experiences of depression and anxiety in ways that complicate the regular biomedical narratives and function as nodes of support for those who are suffering” (p. 216).

## The study

The emerging scholarship discussed above, which highlights the increasing centrality of vulnerability in the communication on digital platforms (Chouliaraki, 2021; Duffy et al., 2023; Mäkinen, 2021; Thelandersson, 2023), has focused on social media platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch. Building on this literature, I now turn to examine a very different and understudied platform: LinkedIn. LinkedIn explicitly distinguishes itself from platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, “which cater to personal interactions and entertainment.” By contrast, the professional networking platform underscores that it “is strictly business-oriented” and that its users have “a professional intent: to network, learn, and find business opportunities” (YouLynq.me, 2023). Yet in recent years LinkedIn members seem to be posting more frequently about their personal vulnerabilities. It is this apparent paradox—the proliferation of personal vulnerabilities on a “strictly-business” networking platform—that I explore in this study, listening to users’ articulations of their vulnerability with a “feminist ear” (Ahmed, 2021—see earlier discussion).

The study is based on an analysis of LinkedIn posts I collected between June 2021 and June 2023, a period during which I observed increased visibility of displays of vulnerability on the platform, as part of a wider project examining the “vulnerability turn” in other cultural and discursive domains—namely a growing emphasis and encouragement, directed especially at women, to express publicly their weaknesses, insecurities, and self-doubt (Orgad and Gill, 2022).

LinkedIn does not allow searching for a random sample of profile accounts or portraits (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018). Therefore, the sample inevitably is affected by inherent biases. Some of the posts arrived through feeds to my personal account, others



were identified through the LinkedIn search function using keywords such as “vulnerability,” “vulnerable,” “anxiety,” “burnout,” “exhaustion,” “mental health,” and filtered by “Posts.” Employing this search method, over the 2-year period (June 2021–June 2023), I collected 120 posts in which users discuss the state of exposure to the possibility of violence and/or pain—the definition of vulnerability adopted by this study. I then excluded from the sample posts that did not include personal accounts, for example, posts that recited general mantras about the importance of showing vulnerability at work but were not related to the poster’s or someone else’s personal experience. This resulted in a sample of 92 posts, which I clustered by topic: work-related issues such as overwork, stress, burnout, exhaustion, being laid off, workplace discrimination, bullying; health issues including illnesses, physical pain, pregnancy and birth, menopause, miscarriage, and abortion; as well as mental health issues including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), addiction and suicide attempts; caring for children, ill and vulnerable family members; loss and grief; domestic and sexual abuse; university/study-related experiences; domestic emergencies and moving house. In the interest of creating a manageable sample for the purpose of conducting a detailed qualitative analysis of the posts, I selected 40 posts that represented the range of topics in the original larger sample, aiming for variation within topics. For example, for the topic of grief, I included accounts that referred to losing a child following a miscarriage and losing a partner. I also sought to include posts by posters in different career stages, types of professions and sectors, from jobless university graduates, to interns, freelance consultants and coaches, senior lawyers, managers and CEOs, in both the public and private sectors. Finally, I sought to reflect the gender distribution of the larger sample, by selecting a majority of 35 posts by women and 5 by men.

Using an inductive approach based on a close reading of the selected posts, I identified three key distinct genres spanning the different topics covered by the posts. “Genres operate dynamically as interaction between two interdependent dimensions, conventions and expectations” (Lüders et al., 2010: 953). I therefore conducted genre analysis (Devitt, 2009; Miller, 1984) to code repeated conventions displayed in the posts: narrative structure, rhetoric, discursive positions, and stylistic and visual features. For example, as I discuss later, the Snap genre is characterized by posts that highlight the slow temporality of reaching a breaking point, in which the tone is often one of irritation and expressed in less nuanced and “professional” language, and which are accompanied frequently by images of the “weeping employee.” The posts in the sample also carry distinct normative expectations among their writers and readers. As Lüders et al. (2010) observe, “expectations are often focused on exemplary or canonical texts as representatives of genres, to which other texts implicitly refer, and take part in the constitution of genres as the connection between distinct texts and society” (p. 954). Thus, the analysis involved identifying connections and similarities between the LinkedIn posts and expressions of vulnerability in other genres and media (studied elsewhere in Orgad and Gill, 2022). For example, as I show in the analysis, the *Triumph over Tragedy* genre is characterized by a communicative form typical of celebrity confessions and motivational genres that include triumphal narratives, upbeat images of confident selves and metaphors of movement, growth, and war.

The research was approved by my university's (LSE) Research Ethics Committee. It adheres to LinkedIn guidelines, which state that while research about the platform does not require notifying users of the research, researchers should not "copy or use the information, content or data of others available on its services (except as expressly authorized)" (cited in author's university guidelines, see LSE 2024). I follow my university's ethical guidelines on social media, personal data, and research, as well as previous studies of social media and particularly LinkedIn posts, including studies by Jørgensen and Utoft (2022) and Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2018). I avoid using direct quotes that would risk identifying posters and their specific posts. Rather, I identify repeated discursive and visual patterns and use mainly "illustrative snippets of the original posts" (Jørgensen and Utoft, 2022, drawing on Pickering and Kara, 2017). Crucially, like Jørgensen and Utoft (2022), my interest is not in individual posts, but in what they cumulatively represent about the emerging cultural and discursive shift toward vulnerability. The few direct quotes from posts or users that are included were published publicly (for example, cited in press articles or reproduced on LinkedIn public sections, which anyone can access). I also cite directly from a post of one user who gave their written consent to be cited and asked to be credited for their post.

Research has shown that workers' vulnerability and its expressions (or disavowal) are profoundly shaped by gender, race, class, age, and disability. However, accounting for most of these dimensions based on textual and visual analysis of users' posts is impossible and would require studying users' lived experiences, which is beyond the scope of this article. In particular, while race is a central aspect of the theorization of vulnerability (Banet-Weiser, 2021b; Koivunen et al., 2018) and, thus, attending to the racial composition of posts and user profiles in the sample would prove very important, inferring the race of posters based on their social media posts is extremely problematic. Not only is the classification of people into racial or ethnic groups based on subjective reading of facial features or idiomatic speech biased and unreliable (Golder et al., 2022), it is also ethically thorny, as it runs the risk of reenacting discriminatory surveillance practices and reinforcing racial stereotypes. The only identity dimension of posters I do discuss is gender. This is since unlike race, on which posters do not include self-identifying statements in their profiles and posts, most posters explicitly identify their gender by indicating the pronouns they go by on their profiles and/or by identifying themselves in their posts with gendered roles such as mothers, daughters, and/or wives.

## The genres of LinkedIn vulnerability

The vast majority (35/40) of posts are by users who identify as women, a pattern that is consistent with the gendered character of the expression of vulnerability in western culture (Schwartz, 2022). The length of and level of detail in these posts vary from posts of one or two paragraphs to posts consisting of nine to ten paragraphs. Some posts are more confessional in tone and recount the poster's experience in detail. Others are shorter, but all mention personal experiences of vulnerability.

I identified three main patterns in the ways vulnerability materializes in LinkedIn users' posts, each constitutes a distinct genre: (1) Triumph over tragedy: vulnerability as a vector for self-growth and resilience, where posters share their vulnerabilities to



underline how they have overcome them and, as a result of that experience, have upgraded their selfhood. In this genre, vulnerability tends to be located safely in the past, as something that has been experienced and is being described “from the other side”; (2) Snap: vulnerability as a breaking point, where posters share their past, present, and/or ongoing experiences of vulnerability, exposing the personal injuries caused often by a toxic overwork culture, and expressing their refusal of its pressures; (3) Subversive commentary on self-promotion, which critiques in particular LinkedIn’s culpability in self-promotional culture. I next discuss each of these genres and examine how they are articulated discursively and visually in users’ posts.

### *Triumph over tragedy: vulnerability as a vector for self-growth and resilience*

Just under a third of the posts (12/40) constitute personal stories of struggle, pain, and failure that conclude with the personal lessons learned by the posters from their difficult experiences. The conclusions to these stories often take the form of motivational and inspirational statements, echoing celebrity confessions and popular mantras, such as “don’t stop dreaming and go for what your heart desires,” and “always believe in yourself no matter what challenges life throws at you.” Posters use metaphors such as going on a journey, a process of self-growth, survival, and conquering a road. In some posts, triumphal narratives are reinforced by photos of the posters in professional gear and confident poses—emblematic of LinkedIn’s self-promotional visual regime (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018) and of confidence culture (Orgad and Gill, 2022) more widely. For example, in several posts, university graduates detail the adversities they experienced during their studies, how they triumphed the challenges, express gratitude to those who helped them, and offer encouragement and inspiration to those on similar journeys. Many of the posts in this vein include graduation photos which signify achievement and success; they do not hint at the struggles involved in reaching that position. Resonating Brené Brown’s and managerial discourses’ framing of vulnerability, the posters use their personal stories of hardship to cast their injuries as opportunities for growth (Ciccone, 2020). Thus, as Ciccone (2020) observes, “the performance of vulnerability is, paradoxically, a central means through which the self is legitimated as a resilient subject” (p. 1316). Injuries are acknowledged, but only temporarily, becoming resources “to bolster resilience-building potential” (Ciccone, 2020). In this genre, as Robin James (2015: 7, cited in Ahmed, 2017: 189) puts it, “resilience recycles damages into more resources.”

Being vulnerable is celebrated here as long as it is temporary; that is, as long as the subject ultimately overcomes the vulnerable “phase” and becomes the confident, self-loving, resilient, idealized professional subject, embodied by the photos. Vulnerability is instrumentalized through the focus on lessons, tools, and strategies that individuals can adopt and master, as opposed to focusing on changing work cultures and structures (Orgad and Gill, 2022). The posts frame vulnerability entirely as a subjective state that one has to overcome to achieve self-sufficiency, by harnessing individualized and psychologized tools. Thus, the “Triumph over tragedy” posts depoliticize vulnerability insofar as they disconnect the claim to suffering from its social structure

and conditions (Chouliaraki, 2021) and channel disappointment underpinned by structural injustice and inequality toward personal and psychologized resilience.

Expressions of vulnerability in the “Triumph over tragedy” genre resonate the idea of “strategic authenticity” (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021) or “calculated authenticity” (Pooley, cited in Scolere et al., 2018: 7), in which users incorporate glimpses of their “vulnerable self” into their professional self-representation, reiterating organizational injunctions to employees to bring their “whole self” and “real self” to work (Ciccone, 2023). This strategic approach is pronounced in the visual juxtaposition some users employ, where they post their “perfect” professional “business smile” headshots next to another image of what they describe as their “authentic,” “real,” or “vulnerable” selves. The latter type of image commonly appropriates brands and celebrities’ iconography of “natural,” “unfiltered,” “real” appearance, for example, no make-up, no use of photographic retouching, and casual clothing. These images are often selfies that purposely make visible the exhaustion of the photographed, for instance, by showing their noticeable bags under the eyes, and/or by showing the poster lying in bed or on a sofa. The text accompanying the juxtaposed images conveys the poster’s embrace of their “real” vulnerable version as integral to their professional self. A typical caption reads: “I am proud to be the person you see on the left and to bring my real self to work.” It anchors the meanings of the images, casting the desirable shift as moving from the “perfect” curated image of the professional self to that of the “authentic” vulnerable self. However, the latter remains tightly sutured to notions of “passionate work” (Hong, 2022). For example, posts often conclude with statements such as “I love the work I do as my true self” or “I found my purpose and I am passionate about the work I do.” Thus, the acknowledgment of vulnerability in this genre is a means to bolster one’s self-promotional narrative and is part of an optimistic investment in the idea of a “true” fulfillment and self-realization at work.

### *Snap: vulnerability as a breaking point*

A second, more radical (at least in its potential) type of posts includes those I refer to as “snaps.” Sara Ahmed (2017) describes a snap as a breaking point when the person recognizes resilience as the requirement to take more and more and refuses to succumb to its pressure. The snap, Ahmed (2017) writes, is “when she can’t take it anymore” (p. 190).

In just under half of the sample (19/40), the posters—almost exclusively women (only one man)—center on the snap: the break point when the user can no longer and is no longer willing cope with an overworked life. “If a snap seems sharp or sudden,” writes Ahmed (2017), “it might be because we do not experience the slower time of bearing or of holding up; the time in which we can bear the pressure, the time it has taken for things not to break” (p. 189). This temporality is articulated vividly in many of the posts. For example, in one post, a woman entrepreneur describes in painstaking detail the slow experience of succumbing to the demand for resilience: how she had ignored constant physical pain, which was compounded by her not being believed and being told she was exaggerating the pain, how she carried on working in a highly demanding environment, including, most extremely, conducting work meetings from her hospital bed. Ultimately, she had been diagnosed with a medical condition that forced her to stop working. Other

users similarly reflect in their posts on how they ignored physical pain and mental issues and carried on, participating in and feeding a toxic overwork culture, until they reached the breaking point. It is from this breaking point that the posters urge readers not to repeat their mistakes—to listen to their bodies, to slow down, to care for themselves. Unlike the vulnerability expressed in the “Triumph over tragedy” posts, which is cast as already been overcome, the temporality of the feelings of despair, anxiety exhaustion, and incapacity to cope expressed in “Snap” posts is the present.

There is an underlying sense of irritation in many of these posts; the language is less nuanced, more direct, rougher—sometimes even rude—compared to much of the smooth, considered, polished language of the communication on LinkedIn. An illustrative example is a post from Taqdees Shah, Recruiter and Founder of Centric Consultancy, who describes being made redundant from the job she thought was “the job of her dreams.” She writes how the New Year, when she was made redundant, “showed up like an arsehole” making her feel as if “a relentless flow of horse turd [was] being poured directly into [her] ‘cup’.” “To speak from irritation is to speak of being rubbed up against the world in a certain way,” Ahmed (2017: 190) contends. Other similar posts convey a sense of being rubbed again and again by a toxic world of overwork, of the pressure that has built up and tipped over until the person could not take any more. A poignant example is of a post by a person who was forced to retire in their early 30s due to a chronic debilitating pain. The poster confesses how they refused to slow down until they lost control and the decision to quit working was made for them.

Snap posts include two central visual tropes. The first is the weeping employee. Seven posts in the sample include close-up photos of the poster crying. The image of the weeping worker, which departs radically from LinkedIn’s visual regime, visualizes the “breaking point” and underscores the importance of exposing it. These images are often reinforced by texts in which posters encourage readers: “allow yourself to cry,” “listen to yourself and your body,” or “don’t be afraid to be yourself.” It is perhaps not surprising, but is nevertheless noteworthy, that all the weeping photos depict women—strikingly, one of these is by a man posting a photo of his wife crying at work. This is consistent with the study by Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2018), which found that in LinkedIn profiles, women were more likely than men to signal emotions in their portraits. More broadly, exposing one’s social and psychological vulnerability—as in these posts about difficulties at work and the images of the poster crying—has been long feminized in masculinist western ideology that favors independence and resilience (Schwartz, 2022). Indeed, as Arriagada and Bishop (2021) remind us, “feminine authenticity”—and, I would add, feminine vulnerability—“encompasses deep expectations and pressures—a bricolage of intimate confession, aesthetic labor shared with audiences, and discourses that sustain relatability” (p. 10).

The second visual trope in the “Snap” genre is the fragile body. Just under a third of the posts (13/40) in the sample<sup>2</sup> include photographs of the users (often selfies) in hospital settings, wearing hospital patient gowns and oxygen masks or connected to medical equipment, of images of abused bodies and bodies with deformities. On one hand, during the Covid-19 pandemic, such images became a common feature of the visual habitat, circulating in news reports, government campaigns, and on social media platforms. On the other hand, postings of these images by LinkedIn members represent a

significant—even radical—diversion from the platform’s normative visual regime, which is characterized by portrayals of healthy, able, resilient, and confident bodies, confined, usually, to headshots (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018). Rather, the fragile body images show half or full bodies and center pain, feebleness, and uncertainty. On a platform and in a work culture where, at least until recently, the imperative has been to represent oneself as a successful, productive, independent, passionate, stable, and secure self (Gershon, 2017; Hong, 2022) and to eliminate injury (Ahmed, 2017), these images communicate the opposite. They show vulnerable, anxious, dependent, and fragile bodies. The broken body, Ahmed (2017: 184) contends, acts as a reminder of illness, injury and fragility that are unwanted and that workplaces invest in erasing. The fragile body demands—even if temporarily and minimally—that we recognize pain and the forces that injured that body. Indeed, the “Snap” posts in the sample received a significant number of responses from other users who acknowledge the poster’s pain, although examination of these responses is beyond the scope of this article.

The moment of snapping, Ahmed (2017) writes, “can be the basis for a feminist revolt, a revolt against what women are asked to put up with” (p. 210). This can be seen in the way “Snap” posts often end with calls to the reader—whether employee or employer—to challenge and resist work cultures characterized by punishing hours, unsustainable workloads and lack of work-life balance. However, the dominant critique and form of resistance these posts advocate are largely individualized: posters often diagnose the problem as individuals’ lack of boundaries, wrong priorities, struggle for perfectionism, and desire to please employers. The solutions they propose similarly tend to be focused on work on the self, through the practice of self-care and prioritization of rest and wellbeing. They exhort the reader to “give yourself time to relax” and encourage them that “you’re not a failure,” “your feelings matter and you MATTER!” and that they should not be afraid to show their vulnerability at work. The proposed solutions are mostly directed at readers who are employees, and urge them to change themselves, not the system. As such, the more radical force of the Snap is not (and perhaps cannot be) realized on LinkedIn—a point to which I return in the conclusion.

### *Subversive commentary on self-promotion*

The third genre, evident in just under a quarter of the sample (9/40 posts), is marked by reflexive and often playful and subversive commentary about the pressure to constantly promote and brand oneself. Some users publish a typical self-promotional photograph of themselves smiling, juxtaposed with text which points to what the image hides. This juxtaposition aims to highlight the discrepancy between self-promotion culture and its demand for perfection (the image) and the struggle, pain, and/or failure the poster experiences (the text). For example, a photo of a smiling professional female reads: “behind that smile is a serious trauma,” and the poster goes on to talk about how, for years at work, she disguised her pain and struggle, encouraging others to avoid her mistakes and to seek help. De Benedictis and Mendes (2023) observe a similar type of image-text juxtaposition used by Instagram posters about maternity care during the pandemic in the United Kingdom. Users posted aesthetically pleasing images of baby bumps or baby shots, juxtaposed with captions expressing anger and frustration at lockdown restrictions

and having to birth alone. In so doing, the authors observe, the posts “highlight the myth of pregnancy on Instagram by underscoring the curated nature of such posts. On the contrary, they use familiar pregnancy conventions to say something new about pandemic maternity inequality while disrupting Instagram’s normative expectations of pregnancy” (p. 8). In a similar manner, the LinkedIn posts that juxtapose “perfect” images and “vulnerable” texts underscore the manufactured nature of self-presentations on the platform, exemplified by images of headshots of users in business attire smiling a “business smile.” They puncture the constant pressure and desire to self-promote, which LinkedIn has played a central role fueling.

In other posts, users juxtapose two images to underscore what the self-promotion culture of “the perfect” hides. For instance, in one post, juxtaposing a manicured image with an image of the poster visibly exhausted, without makeup, eyes red from crying, the user admits to the ongoing emotional, psychological, and physical struggle of managing work with caring responsibilities and grief. They describe the daily struggle involved in hiding this lived reality and the labor of performing the happy, resilient, worry-free employee. The poster urges others to make their grief, loss, and struggles visible at work. Such posts not only make vulnerability visible but also, significantly, underscore the pressure of the culture of “the perfect” (McRobbie, 2015; Gill, 2023)—expressed especially by women—to hide their vulnerability and imperfections. Posters talk explicitly about feeling they were obliged to hide loss, grief, pain, and ill health. However, as in the “Snap” posts, many of the “Subversive commentary” posts end with an individualized message: they call on readers, as individuals, to resist the obligation to perform the happy, resilient, invulnerable employee and they stress that the onus is on you, the individual reader/employee, to refuse the oppressive pressure of self-promotion and to expose your vulnerability. Only a few posts direct their calls to employers and government to provide better protection and support for employees by, for example, allowing leave after a miscarriage, or to care for grandchildren or cope with bereavement. One such post calls on the UK government to increase the current insufficient statutory sick pay for people forced to stop working due to ill health.

Interestingly, the critique expressed in some of the “Subversive commentary” posts is targeted directly at LinkedIn and its culpability in supporting an unhealthy self-promotional culture. For example, several posts comment on LinkedIn’s promotional norms and rules and, in particular, its aesthetic conventions of professional self-presentation and self-branding, reflecting on the time and labor users have to invest in manufacturing their profiles and the pressure to produce a “good headshot” and hide any imperfections. Critiques of LinkedIn’s and the broader work self-promotional culture are communicated also by use of pastiche in order to create an ironic effect. One discursive strategy several users employ is appropriating the phrases conventionally used to start LinkedIn self-promotional messages to celebrate professional achievements, in order to highlight the reverse: failure, lack of achievement and uncertainty—aspects deemed undesirable and abhorrent in capitalism’s hyper-productivity work culture. For instance, several posts start with hyperbolic phrases such as “I’m truly honored and humbled to announce that . . .” or “I’m absolutely thrilled to share the news that . . .,” but these are followed not by the (anticipated) announcement of a professional achievement, but by the fact that the poster is now jobless, has been laid off or has had a job application rejected and has

no idea what the immediate or long term future hold. These posts underline the pernicious demands and pressures of self-promotional culture as well as the precarity of the labor market, where many are unemployed. They also offer a sarcastic nod to LinkedIn's own self-promotional culture, captured by the hyperbolic self-promotional phrases at the start of many of these posts.

## Conclusion

How are we to understand the rise in expressions of vulnerability on a platform that for two decades has actively encouraged its members to engage in self-promotion by presenting their polished, skilled, "best" professional selves?

Rather than being antithetical to self-promotion, the posting of vulnerability on LinkedIn can be argued to be strategic and calculated, an iteration of digital self-branding. The "Triumph over tragedy" posts, for example, demonstrate what Thelandersson (2023) calls "profitable vulnerability": a market-friendly expression of weakness that fits within the wider dominant register of media culture and its emphasis on resilience and positivity. The other genres of vulnerability also prove profitable insofar as their posts tend to garner a lot of attention and attract many likes, shares and comments, and LinkedIn's algorithm rewards such posts by promoting the most liked, shared and commented on (Jacobs, 2021). For example, one of the "Snap" posts in the sample from a member who published a selfie of herself weeping with a caption about anxiety and the challenges of her precarious job, received over 2.7 million impressions. Its author said that choosing "to be vulnerable in a post" led to business opportunities and many new connections and followers (Kelley, 2022). "The way you can go viral is to be really vulnerable," commented another professional who reported a big increase in engagement, followers and inbound business leads after posting on LinkedIn about his mental health challenges (Kelley, 2022). Thus, while expressions of vulnerability on LinkedIn are partly a reflection of and a response to a labor market characterized by precarity and insecurity, in turn, they become an instrument to survive amid these forces of precarity by garnering attention and reputation.

Strikingly, the confessional post of the member who published her selfie weeping has been used by LinkedIn's podcast series *LinkedInformed* as an example of "optimizing your posts & engagement" (Thomas, 2022). Indeed, (the right degree) of vulnerability is good for the platform's business: it is perhaps not accidental that "LinkedIn's shift from the more buttoned-up corner of the Internet coincides with a 40% increase in the number of members engaging with content on the platform" between July 2021 and July 2022 (Bindley, 2022). Although LinkedIn has been careful to distinguish itself from other social media platforms and their more personal and intimate communication styles and affordances, arguably, the company has a business interest in the move toward the personal and toward vulnerability. For one, employers can use the platform "to monitor an employee's [and a potential recruit's] social behavior and assess his or her professional value" (Van Dijck, 2013: 212). Furthermore, the turn to vulnerability in corporate workplaces has been closely associated with fostering more supportive and inclusive work environments, and so the rise of vulnerability posts on LinkedIn sits comfortably alongside the tech industry's efforts to appear proactive in advancing diversity, inclusivity, and



wellbeing (Beattie and Daubs, 2020). More broadly, vulnerability on LinkedIn can be seen as a digital variant of the commodification of injury, pain, and loss under capitalism.

At the same time, while posting vulnerability on LinkedIn monetizes and depoliticizes vulnerability, in other ways it signals a significant departure from the demands of the neoliberal world of work and digital platforms to deny and hide vulnerability and to incessantly engage in self-promotion. In the same way that Tumblr “sad girls” (Thelandersson, 2023) refuse in their posts to work immediately toward a cure in the form of resilience, happiness, and self-confidence, so too some LinkedIn vulnerability posts—especially in the “Snap” and the “Subversive commentary” genres—refuse to “recycle damages into more resources” (James, 2015: 7, cited in Ahmed, 2017: 189). These posts make visible conditions and experiences that continue to be largely invisible in the workplace, including, for example, miscarriage, domestic abuse, grief, physical pain, and mental health conditions, but have a profound impact on workers. In so doing, the LinkedIn vulnerability posts reflect, and in turn reinforce, wider changing attitudes to work. In particular, these posts echo and express a growing disillusionment with hyper-productive work cultures, and a refusal of their demands to work punishing hours with passion and grit, in toxic environments that deny pain and vulnerability. Furthermore, some of the posts puncture the relentless pressure of self-promotion and what Angela McRobbie (2015) describes as “the violent underpinnings of the perfect” (p. 3), to which particularly women are subjected.

In some of the posts, the displays of vulnerability invite an understanding more akin to the relational notion of vulnerability advocated by Judith Butler (2020): “as a feature of our shared or interdependent lives” (p. 39). In particular, posts that include images of fragile bodies can act as reminders “that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible” and that “we are never simply vulnerable, but always vulnerable to a situation, a person, a social structure, something upon which we rely and in relation to which we are exposed” (Butler, 2020: 39). Indeed, LinkedIn members who post images of their fragile bodies often reflect in their posts on the falseness of their sense of control and resilience and the realization of their dependence on social conditions not of their own making, and their fundamental dependence on others.

Posters also underscore slowing down, free time, and idleness as a mode of resistance to the pressures of hyper-productivity and of digital culture of self-promotion, and the algorithmic logic that supports and bolsters this culture. In one of the “Snap” posts, the author reflects on what it means to slow down for a long time due to a health condition, in a context where one’s social media activity is entangled with one’s livelihood and in an environment where the algorithm rewards continuous presence, visibility and consistency. A decline in health demands rest and withdrawal from the network, modes that are completely incongruent with the requisites of self-branding, namely consistency, visibility and coherence (Gershon, 2017). A forced digital resignation can thus become a mode of resistance to platforms and cultures that demand constant visibility and presence (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2022). Resignation, as Ahmed (2017) writes, “can be a feminist hearing” (p. 203).

In these ways, the LinkedIn vulnerability posts have the potential to form a basis for resistance, that is, to refuse the glorification of overwork, individualized resilience and

self-sufficiency, and the constant pressure of the platform and work cultures to self-brand the “perfect” worker. However, where the LinkedIn posts remain largely limited is in their capacity to translate the expression of vulnerability into a recognition of interdependency as a requirement for the political organization of life and into a demand that workplaces, societal institutions, civil society, and government acknowledge and address that (Butler, 2020: 39). Even in posts that address these wider structures, for example, where users draw on their stories of mental health struggles to call on employers and government to support employees’ mental health, the call is rarely focused on tackling systemic and structural injustices. Rather, posters recommend ad hoc instrumental solutions: “seven tips on how to identify burnout in your employees and help them manage stress,” or “four ways to help your employees build self-confidence and silence their inner critic.” In this sense, the more radical and political potential of posting vulnerability on LinkedIn is curtailed by the platform’s affordances: the platform’s culture remains heavily individualized, self-instrumental, and apolitical, where members are encouraged not to bring politics so as “to keep politics from dragging down your job search” (Jelliff-Russell, 2019).

Future research into LinkedIn users’ experience could shed light on how and why the platform affordances and the way members imagine them compel them to produce certain types of content and expressions whose more radical force—amid a profoundly precarious, insecure and unequal job market—remains unrealized. Furthermore, what would it require for expressions of vulnerability on LinkedIn to be more than individual expressions, that is, to form the basis of a feminist bond and collective rebellion? We might look at Liberty Chee’s (2023) analysis of migrant women domestic workers’ TikTok videos as an interesting comparative example. Chee (2023) argues that the platform’s characteristic affective registers of humor, fun and play, enable domestic workers who post their video performances, to comment on their precarious and vulnerable labor conditions and subvert domination, exploitation, and subjection. Through these TikTok videos, Chee (2023) argues, posters “craft windows into which we are invited to witness them transform themselves and each other, and perhaps even for us the audience to share their vision” (p. 611). Can a similar sense of community, feminist bond, and subversion be cultivated on LinkedIn, given its norms of “serious,” “professional,” and apolitical discourse and its by-definition exclusionary character as a business and employment-focused professional social media platform?

Finally, while this study highlights how expressions of vulnerability on LinkedIn, within the three genres I have discussed, challenge neoliberal logics of work and professionalism, future research should further attend to hearing what is not being said and who is not being heard (inspired by Ahmed’s “feminist ear”): What kinds of vulnerability are not allowed on this platform? How is the capacity and willingness to express vulnerability on social media entwined with gender, race, class, age, disability, and other factors (dimensions it was impossible to infer based on the data available in this study)? Who can afford to express their vulnerability on LinkedIn and other social media platforms, who does and does not benefit from “embracing vulnerability” (a notion popularized by Brené Brown), and, crucially, whose vulnerability is not being heard and why?


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## Notes

1. The Great Resignation refers to the trend where following the pandemic, hundreds of thousands have quit their jobs, most to take early retirement or live off savings (Hunt, 2022). Quiet Quitting is associated predominantly with Generation Z's disillusionment (notably since 2022) about the role of work in their lives, the avoiding of the idea of going above and beyond, as a refusal of the hustle culture mentality (Campbell, 2022; Newport, 2022).
2. One of the 13 posts with images of fragile bodies does not belong to the "Snap" genre.

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