TW: su1(1d3 – Multimodal Self-Censorship on YouTube

Merle Willenberg (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg)

Abstract

This paper aims at introducing and cataloguing different self-censorship techniques on the video-sharing platform YouTube. Special focus is placed on 1) the multimodal nature of self-censorship and the creative use of different semiotic resources on the platform and 2) how these techniques are used differently on the different communicative levels (Boyd 2014, Dynel 2014, Schmidt & Marx 2019).

To that end, a corpus of ten commentary videos is investigated with the goal of illustrating the different techniques and their potential functions. It is shown that censoring processes are focussed on the lexical level, but that other linguistic and semiotic dimensions are involved as well.

Keywords: self-censorship, taboo, multimodality, YouTube

1 Introduction

The video-sharing platform YouTube is increasingly important in linguistic research (e.g. Androutsopoulos & Tereick 2015, Johansson 2017). Among other things, it has been shown that interaction on YouTube is based on a complex, multimodal communication form (Schmidt & Marx 2019, Dynel 2014, Boyd 2014). Users can actualise the communicative potentials and use the afforded semiotic resources like text, sound or image for different purposes, including self-censorship, to avoid sanctionable violations of community guidelines (e.g. in the form of deleted content).

In the currently rather tense relationship between free speech and persecution of hate speech, especially on the Internet (e.g. Jenkins 2022), it seems worthwhile to look at the roles censorship and especially self-censorship play on the second most widely used online platforms (Statista 2023).

In that context, this paper explores the following questions: To what extent do YouTubers use the semiotic resources afforded by the platform for self-censorship? What are the different functions and motivations for the use of self-censorship on YouTube? To put it differently, the quintessential question posed here is: *Who* censors *what* for *whom* on YouTube and *why*?

To be able to describe the linguistic phenomenon of self-censorship on YouTube, this paper starts with a definition of the term, which is followed by a brief introduction of the theoretical background on communication on YouTube. Self-censorship is then explored with the help of sample corpus of YouTube videos. The rest of the paper is concerned with the results of the analysis of the corpus. Without pretending to be able to discuss the phenomenon in all its complexity, this paper instead focusses on exploring categories of multimodal self-censorship that occur in the corpus and its potential functions.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Self-censorship

First, self-censorship has to be distinguished from censorship in general. Anthonissen (2008) offers a comprehensive definition, highlighting the difference between the two phenomena:

> […] censorship is viewed as an action of silencing that occurs in at least two ways: (i) an authoritative body imposes *censorship* in order to obscure information it believes to be harmful either to itself or to others, and (ii) an individual or a group exercises *self-censorship* by withholding information believed to be harmful to themselves or others. (Anthonissen 2008, 401, emphasis added M.W.)

The emphasis on the prevention of harm as a motivating factor is of particular importance in this definition. This has also been pointed out as essential to avoidance of taboo language by other researchers (cf. Allan & Burridge 2006: 1, O'Driscoll 2020: 16). This kind of harm may range from metaphysical harm to social ostracism (Allan & Burridge 2006: 1). When transferred to language, self-censorship can therefore be seen as an avoidance of certain linguistic expressions in order to avoid harm, both for the speaker and the hearer.

In this context, a further distinction can be made between purely lexical taboo, i.e. cases where the word form is dispreferred (e.g. slurs) and taboo reference, resulting in the avoidance of certain topics that are called up via any kind of language expression (O'Driscoll 2020: 42).

2.2 Communication on YouTube

The video-sharing platform YouTube has a multimodal communication form (Brock & Schildhauer 2017) with a complex participation framework. This paper follows Schmidt &

Marx's (2019) model of communication on YouTube. It is based on participant categories first devised by sociologist Erving Goffman (1981) as well as their extension and application to YouTube by Dynel (2014).

Schmidt & Marx (2019) demonstrate that communication on the platform takes place on different communicative levels (CL), which each have unique participation constellations as well as modal affordances (Jewitt 2015: 72). An overview of the different CLs is given in Tab. 1.

CL 1	video interaction	-	basic participation framework, incl. speaker, ratified and non-ratified participants (Goffman 1981, Levinson 1988)
		-	podium/platform formats (Goffman 1981)
CL 2	sender-recipient interaction	-	video production/author
		-	video distribution/(collective) sender/releaser
		-	recipients/(mass) audience
CL 3	comments	-	alternation of sender and recipient roles
CL 4	website-user interaction	-	platform (YouTube) as communicator
		-	user as producer or recipient

Tab. 1: Communicative Levels on YouTube (Schmidt & Marx 2019)[1]

The difference in modal affordances is most evident between videos and comments. Videos on CL 1 and 2 represent a complex multimodal ensemble (Jewitt 2015: 72-73), and can include sound, image, text and speech. The comments on CL 3, in

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[1] See Schmidt & Marx 2019: 130 for a graphic representation of the different CLs and how they relate to each other.

contrast, are dominated by the written mode. CL 4 represents another multimodal ensemble that includes, among others, hypertextual structures like video thumbnails.

For this paper, the embedding of content from other videos or social media platforms needs to be particularly emphasised, since this process takes place in the majority of the videos investigated. In contrast to what Schmidt & Marx (2019: 127) describe, embedding in the commentary videos investigated in this paper is not simply a process of re-publication, but the embedded content is integrated into the commentary video, e.g. in terms of argument structure. The embedded content contains a separate, unique participation framework with possibly several CLs as well (cf. Chovanec 2022), which are partly embedded into the YouTube video and transformed in the process. This transformative process, as will be shown below, has a significant impact on the practices of self-censorship on YouTube. Embedding can be seen to take place on CL 2.

Another aspect of this model that needs to be highlighted for the purpose of this paper is CL 4, which Schmidt & Marx (2019) added to Dynel's (2014) previous model. On this CL, YouTube itself acts as a sender, which influences how censorship and self-censorship are enacted on the other CLs. This is important since YouTube can enforce its community guidelines via a content moderation algorithm on this level (YouTube 2023).

As is shown, YouTube's complex communication form bears the potential for different forms of self-censorship to occur on the different communicative levels, since each level has its own affordances, i.e. "possibilities and constraints for action that people selectively perceive in any situation" (Barton & Lee 2013: 27). These affordances are often technological in nature, for example governing the availability of different modes (Marx & Weidacher 2017: 83). The categorisation of the different forms

of self-censorship and their potential functions is the aim of the rest of this paper.

3   Corpus and Methodology

The sample corpus for this paper consists of ten English language commentary videos, which can be subsumed under the theme "Shane Dawson's Comeback". Shane Dawson is a famous YouTuber, who has been involved in several scandals over the course of his career on the platform. These include racist comedy in his early videos as well as alleged paedophilia and bestiality. Following a break from YouTube, Dawson came back in October 2021 with a new video called "The Haunting of Shane Dawson".[2] This video serves as a reference point for the commentary videos. In their videos, the commentary YouTubers report on Shane Dawson's comeback and give their own opinions to the audience. These videos have potential for self-censorship, as they partly address topics that are presented as undesirable in the community guidelines (e.g. sexual acts of various kinds). The ten videos in this corpus represent the top search results from the search query "Shane Dawson commentary", conducted in January 2022.[3]

The corpus contains the videos (total: 330:17 mins), transcripts, all comments (total: 20,341) and meta data such as title, description, number of views and likes. These have been imported into the software MAXQDA and analysed qualitatively, following the framework of multimodal analysis outlined by Jewitt (2015). The framework aims at "building a

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[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWIAoAzb4tk (last accessed 11.05.2023).

[3] The list of all videos contained in the sample corpus can be found at the end of this paper. They represent a selection of a larger YouTube commentary video corpus that is part of the author's doctoral dissertation project.

rich holistic sense of the modes, semiotic resources, materiality, and interplay of modes and meaning" (Jewitt 2015: 77) contained in a given data set through intensive viewing and careful sampling. In this study, the focus was on the inventory of individual modes (ibid. 77-78) in which self-censorship occurs, as well as its distribution across modes (ibid. 78-79) and communicative levels.

In an investigation of censorship and self-censorship the researcher is confronted with the problem of wanting to investigate something which, by the nature of it, is not supposed to be there. In order to address this problem, special attention was paid to what Thurlow & Moshin (2018: 313) describe as "explicit absences", i.e. absences which "call attention to themselves" (ibid.). Examples for this include breaking with expectations, like misspellings or the common use of an asterisk as a form of partial substitution of a taboo expression, or via metacommunication.

4 Results

Several different kinds of self-censorship can be observed in the corpus, both monomodal (e.g. abbreviations or euphemisms) and multimodal. The following focusses exclusively on the multimodal self-censorship techniques as these represent innovative uses of the affordances of YouTube's communication form.

Self-censorship techniques could be identified in 8 out of 10 videos in the corpus and are presented with the help of selected examples from the corpus. It is then demonstrated how the techniques are distributed across the different CLs and which communicative functions they potentially have in those environments. Most of the identified self-censorship techniques can be found on the lexical level, which is why they are discussed first.

4.1　Typographic Substitution

One of the most frequent kinds of self-censorship is the substitution of dispreferred lexemes (Allan & Burridge 2006: 32). This can be achieved via the use of euphemisms or via partial, typographic replacements with special characters such as <*>, <&>, <$> or <#>. This partial replacement creates interferential uncertainty in the form of an underspecified sign body. For example, the replacement of one vowel in the word *shit* with an asterisk in the form of *sh*t* leads to inferential uncertainty, because now the intended sign body could also be *shut* or *shot*. Thurlow & Moshin (2018: 314) do not distinguish between different types of this form of partial substitution, subsuming them all under the more general label of typographic substitutions. This form of censoring has been conventionalised in written communication and is also used in instances where the replacement leads to less uncertainty, as in the following example from the corpus:

Example 1: Comment under video by greenisnotnick

when you when you wanna watch the new nick is not green video but tw 4 s*icide :[

In this comment, the letter <u> of the lexeme *suicide* has been substituted by an asterisk. Since there is no word in the English language with another vowel or consonant at that specific place (as opposed to the case of *shit – shot*), the correct inference is immediately accessible.

This technique is neither new nor inherent to online communication. It has been previously investigated, e.g. for newspaper communication by Thurlow & Moshin (2018). It can therefore be assumed that this self-censorship technique has been carried over from older text types to digital communication. This

investigation shows that such substitution processes on YouTube do exhibit a difference in the use of the semiotic resources that are available on the platform, and that they also differ in their potential function.

4.1.1 Replacement based on Resemblance

There is a semiotic difference in using characters which simply *obscure* a letter as in the example above, or if a character is used which *resembles* the character it replaces in the sequence that makes up a word. This can be illustrated with the following example from the corpus:

Example 2: Comment under video by Kuncan Dastner

9:30 Nickisnotgreen made a great point in his video about this, it was basically that although yes, su1(1d3 is an extremely unfortunate thing, and shouldn't be taken lightly, Shane knew what he was doing.

In this comment, the lexeme *suicide* has been partially substituted. While the first two letters remain, the following letter <i> was replaced by the numeral <1>, the letter <c> with the special character of an opening rounded bracket <(> and the letter <e> with the numeral <3>.

It can be assumed that the commenter exploits the iconicity of the numerals and the special character strategically to render the substitution more readable via the formal resemblance of the characters. The purpose of the substitution therefore does not seem to be the avoidance of a taboo expression, since it remains readable to an extent (cf. Perea, Duñabeitia & Carreiras 2008). It can be argued that it is the semiotic resource of the visual that is used for meaning-making, rather than that of writing. The exploitation of the resemblance of the typographic characters that the users have at their disposal is most likely aimed at avoiding potential uncertainty which would be created through the partial replacement of a word, as described above.

Another example from the corpus highlights this specific usage. In Example 3, letters <e> and <a> were substituted by the same letters with diacritics, <ê> and <ã>. These diacritics are not

part of the English orthographic paradigm for this word and must therefore serve a specific purpose.

Taking advantage of children & selling them racism, sexism, etc. (In Shane's case, even bêastiãlity! ffs)

In these instances, the apparent taboos 'suicide' and 'bestiality' are referential, not purely lexical. The terms are dispreferred not because of their linguistic form, but because of the topics they refer to. Yet, it is the linguistic form that is subject to self-censorship, rather than the topic itself.[4]

While both of these techniques – the replacement with similar characters as well as the use of letters with diacritics – allow the recipient to access the censored expression more easily, it can be assumed that it is much more difficult for the automatic filters that moderate content on YouTube to find them. A possible function of these kinds of self-censorship strategies is therefore a circumvention of the content moderation algorithms that are present on YouTube.

Uncensored instances of the avoided expressions in the corpus lead to the assumption that self-censorship in this context is not obligatory, i.e. contributions are not filtered out automatically if they do contain these (uncensored) expressions. The commenters therefore seem to use self-censorship for other reasons, which ultimately leads to a marking of the taboo.

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[4] Compare in this case also the more complete absence of the swear word *fuck* in Example 3, hidden by the abbreviation *ffs*, which stands for *for fuck's sake*.

4.1.2   Replacement in Non-Taboo Words

This markedness is also observable in the cases in which words are censored which would usually be considered orthophemisms, i.e. words with a more formal or direct connotation (Allan & Burridge 2006: 33). Examples from the corpus include words such as *racist*, *abuse* or *grooming*:

Example 4: Comment under video by Smokey Glow

[…] Taking into account that and everything else, I can only assume his "fans" are also r*cists and p***philes who support animal violence.

Such lexemes are not tabooed like swear words, but the topics they represent are taboo, i.e. they represent referential taboos. These uses of self-censorship can thus be considered exemplary of the contamination of the sign body (i.e., a word) by the concept it represents, which is a common process observable in euphemisms or words that are similar in form to a taboo expression (Allan & Burridge 2006: 43-46). A question to be explored in further research could concern itself with this and investigate the development of new lexical taboos emerging in digital communication.

The expression of stance could be identified as another potential function of self-censorship in the corpus, evident in the marking of taboo through (self-)censorship of names. Names are often (self-)censored to protect the privacy of the individual (Bös & Kleincke 2019: 90-92). The situation presents differently in the corpus, as can be seen in the following example:

Example 5: Comment under video by Kuncan Dastner

[…] (I don't support j*mes charles at ALL but I wouldn't doubt that sh*ne Dawson would do it to others)

The name of the YouTuber who is discussed in the commentary videos is occasionally censored, e.g. in the form of *sh*ne*. Since the comments containing such forms are left under videos that discuss the referent extensively, it can be assumed that the use of his name does not cause harm to the audience. Therefore, the censoring of the name likely has a different function. It can be speculated that the marking of the name as taboo-worthy through the use of such a conventionalised censorship strategy puts the person that is referred to by that name on the same level as other taboo words. The association of the name with taboo can produce a disparaging effect, which may be used by the commenters to take a stance on Dawson.

4.2   Audio Cuts and Bleeping

The different modal affordances of the different communicative levels (CLs) lead to the occurrence of different self-censorship techniques. The different uses of typographic replacement discussed in the previous section were found in the comments of the videos in the corpus (CL 3), in which the writing is the dominant communicative mode. On CL 1 (video interaction) and 2 (sender-recipient interaction), spoken language is the dominant mode in the videos. This requires the use of different resources for self-censorship, in this case audio cuts (also known as muting) and bleeping.

The substitution of specific words with beep sounds has been conventionalised as a censorship technique in TV communication. In this context, bleeping is a form of institutional censorship rather than self-censorship. This kind of censorship is commonly implemented in the editing process of TV production,

rather than by the speakers themselves.[5] This is a different case for YouTube communication. Speakers in videos on CL 1 are often part of the collective sender or are the sole sender on CL 2. In other words, the person who does the speaking in a video is very commonly also the person who owns the channel that uploads (i.e. sends) the video to YouTube (Schmidt & Marx 2019: 127). This is characteristic of the user-generated nature of content on YouTube and means that on CL 2, the sender can use muting or bleeping also for self-censorship. As a "top-layer author" (Schmidt & Marx 2019: 127), these same two techniques can represent censorship if applied to embedded material and *self*-censorship if the sender applies it to their own video material and/or speech.

This dynamic can be seen as a form of context collapse (Androutsopoulos 2014; Marwick & boyd 2011), but only in regards to possible external censorship on CL 4 (website-user interaction). On this level, the video is considered as a whole unit, and CL 1 and CL 2 fall together. Should a video be flagged (i.e. reported) by either other users or the YouTube content moderation algorithm, no difference is made whether or not the flagged content is contained in an embedded clip or in a sequence of speech by the YouTuber who uploaded the video.

It can also come to a combination of self-censorship techniques in cases where a taboo lexeme is to be avoided altogether, i.e. in different modes. Fig. 1 shows an example of this from the corpus. The screenshot stems from the video by the YouTuber Hotbox.

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[5] Concerning participation frameworks and CLs of TV communication, which are relevant to this point but cannot be discussed here, see Brock (2004, 2015).

Fig. 1: Screenshot from Hotbox video [26:43].

A tweet by Shane Dawson has been embedded in the video. From the context, it is clear that the original tweet contained the word *blowjob*. The word can be seen as dispreferred because of its relation to sexuality, a tabooed topic in Western society (cf. Allan & Burridge 2006: 1). This tweet is read out by the speaker of the video on CL 1. In this sequence, the word *blowjob* is muted from the audio track of the video and there is a brief silence where the word has been edited out (CL 2). Additionally, the written version of the dispreferred lexeme in the tweet is obscured with a picture of the channel's logo, a cardboard box. The obscuration, however, is only partial, and parts of the word (the first three letters and part of the last) remain visible to the recipient. This shows that different communicative modes like speech, text, and image play together to achieve a more comprehensive (yet still incomplete) avoidance of the dispreferred item. The collective sender on CL 2 becomes a censor, the use of the channel logo proving authorship and adding an identity-constructive function to censorship in the video.

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The aforementioned context collapse can also be seen as motivation for the next self-censorship technique.

4.3   Pseudo-substitution[6]

The discussion of the previous example has shown that multiple semiotic resources may be used simultaneously in order to censor a dispreferred expression. The multimodality of a YouTube video also allows for censorship to occur in one mode, while that same censored item remains present in another mode at the same time. This can be called *pseudo*-substitution, since the dispreferred item is only substituted partially in the multimodal ensemble of the video. This self-censorship technique occurs in half of the videos in the corpus.

In the following example taken from the video by commentary YouTuber sixteenleo, the word *blackface* is muted from a clip of Shane Dawson that has been embedded into the video at [03:48].[7]

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[6] This phenomenon was first discussed together with my colleague Janet Russell in an earlier talk at the 26th LIPP-Symposium 2019.
[7] The original of the embedded video is:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ardRp2x0D_E (last accessed 09.05.2023).

Fig. 2: Screenshot from sixteenleo video [03:48].

Concurrent with the audio cut, the word is visible in the video in the form of written text. This text has been edited into the video and is not part of the original clip. The substitution of the apparently dispreferred item *blackface* in the spoken mode with silence (via muting) is thus partial in nature, since the term is not avoided in the multimodal ensemble as a whole. The video producer on CL 2 becomes a censor of the embedded content in the video, while at the same time *un*censoring on CL 2 in a different mode.

In another example, the YouTuber SWOOP substitutes the words *orgasm* and *blowjob* with the abbreviations *O* and *BJ* respectively while reading out screenshots from Shane Dawson content, which are embedded into her video [09:02-09:08]. These two examples illustrate how the embedding of content into YouTube videos leads to differing dynamics of (self-)censorship in relation to the different CLs involved. SWOOP self-censors the dispreferred words on CL 1 in the spoken mode. The words, however, are not censored in the shown screenshots and remain readable for the viewer. Again, the dispreferred expressions are only partially avoided, i.e. in one mode only (speech vs writing). Comparing this to the more comprehensive, multimodal avoidance in Fig. 1 leads to the assumption that an avoidance of the term to prevent harm is not the goal of this self-censorship process.

In the case of this specific censorship technique, different potential functions can be identified: 1) pseudo-substitution contributes to the upkeep of cohesion and coherence for the recipients on CL 2, which is particularly useful when muting is employed (cf. van Leeuwen 2005 on multimodal cohesive ties); 2) it also represents another form of evading the content-moderation algorithm on CL 4. The avoidance of words that seemingly trigger the algorithm in the audio of the video

potentially protects the commentary YouTubers from institutional sanctions such as demonetarisation, i.e. the limitation of ads on their videos, from which they generate income.

Up to this point, the self-censorship techniques presented take place on the lexical level of language use. This last technique moves beyond that level to a discursive one.

4.4 Trigger Warnings

Four of the ten videos contain trigger warnings. These can usually be found at the beginning of the video or before specific segments and warn the audience of potentially triggering sequences. They are often introduced with the abbreviations *TW* or *CW* (content warning). If we consider censorship as a phenomenon that is ultimately aimed at the avoidance of harm, trigger warnings should at least be considered censorship-related. They can occur in different modes, e.g. they can be conveyed through speech or through the display of written text.
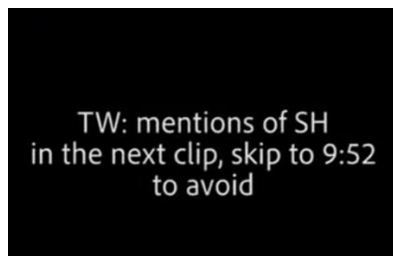

Fig. 3: Screenshot from Kuncan Dastner video [08:48]

In the context of communication on YouTube, trigger warnings give the recipients the opportunity to assume agency in their reception process and become a censor themselves. They can choose to avoid, i.e. censor the whole video for themselves, or,

and more importantly, can choose to self-censor the reception of specific parts of the video. This is facilitated by the inclusion of time stamps by the sender of the video (Fig. 3). The comments in the corpus (Example 1 & 6) shows that this practice is recognised by the audience.

Example 6: Comment under video by The Hot Box

just wanted to say thank you for the trigger warning :) I'm always so happy when ppl put those in

The combination of trigger warnings with other self-censorship techniques is also noteworthy. In the example in Fig. 3 above, the word *self-harm* is censored via the use of an initialism *SH*. The meaning of this becomes clear in the following clip, which contains a joke about suicide. The use of the initialism could be evidence for the aforementioned contamination of the sign body by the referenced concept. However, it seems contradictory to the purpose of the trigger warning. In this instance, two functions of self-censorship that were established thus far seem to be competing: avoidance of taboo language and avoidance of detection through the content moderation algorithm.

An additional aspect that could be observed in connection to trigger warnings is that Shane Dawson himself was listed as a trigger warning in two of the videos. This seems to follow a similar pattern to the censoring of his name in the form of creating an association with taboo (see Section 4.1.2). By using his name as a trigger indicator, he is equated to other topics which are worth a trigger warning. That this use seems to deviate from an established norm about trigger warning becomes evident again in the comments, where it is taken to be humorous (Example 7).

Example 7: Comment under video by greenisnotnick:

I love how Shane Dawson was the TW... I mean... It's true... But it made me laugh

5   Conclusions

The results show multimodal self-censorship techniques are distributed differently across the communicative levels of YouTube. On the level of the video interaction (CL 1), what occurs primarily is verbal censorship. This includes, among other things, using euphemisms or abbreviations instead of the dispreferred lexical item. Multimodal self-censorship techniques can be found on the level of sender-recipient interaction (CL 2) and the comments (CL 3), the precise forms determined by the different modal affordances available.

In terms of external censorship, i.e. via the content moderation algorithm, a context collapse of the first two communicative levels takes place: If clips are embedded into the video which contain dispreferred language or topics, the algorithm does not differentiate if the language is used in the embedded clip or by the sender of the video. Sanctions would be imposed on the channel that uploaded the video which contains the embedded clips, not the original creator of those clips.

On the basis of this, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Commentary YouTubers design their language in a way that addresses the communicative needs of their intended audience (subscribers, viewers) while simultaneously avoiding detection by the YouTube algorithm.
- Consideration of the participation framework facilitated the identification of *who* censored *what* for *whom* and *why*, i.e. who/what is the target of self-censorship and which potential function it has.

This study shows that participants on YouTube use the multimodal affordances of the platform in complex and creative ways to self-censor. In investigating the complexity of the phenomenon of self-censorship, it is worthwhile to combine different approaches to computer-mediated communication. Creating an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates pragmatic concepts like participation constellations, and builds on findings from taboo and multimodality research, can aid the exploration of self-censorship's impact on language use in the algorithmically controlled digital space.

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