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## Brené Brown, “Wholeheartedness” and the Hyperpersonal

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### Abstract

Brené Brown is a researcher and author who has written several bestsellers and whose 2010 TEDx talk has been consistently in the top five in the history of the organization, among many of her other accolades. Her research about vulnerability and authenticity is the foundation for all of these projects. In this paper, the author will examine Brown's academic work, books, and also several speeches and podcasts to suggest some of her contributions to computer mediated communication. Specifically, this analysis focuses on communication in the "hyperpersonal" (Walther, 1996) and how connection or disconnection may occur as part of the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) that takes place in these interactions as users encounter challenging ideas. This research analyzes Brené Brown as a Christian communicator and makes a case for the invaluable contributions that she has made to a greater understanding of computer mediated communication.

*Keywords:* Brené Brown, Computer Mediated Communication, Hyperpersonal

### **Brené Brown: “Wholeheartedness” and the Hyperpersonal**

The debate over the goodness of mediated communication is not a new one. Since its inception, scholars have sought to understand how these technological mediums change the way that communication takes place and its influence on our lives. Advances in technology have given users the ability to connect with people on the other side of the world, have information at their fingertips, and be an active part of political and social dialogue instead of simply observing it. Yet with these advancements have also come challenges. Online spaces are a place where one can observe some of the best and worst behavior that humanity has to offer.

Mark Poster’s *The Second Media Age* (Poster, 1995) introduced New Media theory to the world and began a discussion about the hyperpersonal aspect of Internet communication even while the Internet was in its infancy. While the term was not yet used, Poster suggested that the Internet changes not only the way we communicate but also our communication needs. He suggested several pertinent criteria for new media usage that would prove to be continually more apparent as the technological timeline progressed. He found that users want both an individualized experience and media that helps them find a greater understanding of their own consciousness (Poster, 1995). This means that we expect media to gratify us at a personal level. We expect our media to be tailored to us. Moreover, we utilize this individualized experience as a means of self-exploration in addition to connection. This suggests that there is an intrapersonal element to mediated communication. How we interact with others in online spaces is a challenging idea because of how we identify their role in our interactions and media experience.

The idea of the “hyperpersonal” other comes from Walther’s 1996 work in mediated communication. Walther suggested that in the hyperpersonal aspect of communication in online spaces, users experience both a connection as a result of shared identity and a disconnect created

by cyberspace despite the fact that they may not recognize it. While users might believe that they are participating in an interpersonal community, in reality, mediated spaces are often more intrapersonal in nature (Walther, 1996). Many users use terms like “they” and “it” to describe these spaces and dehumanize the generalized “other” with whom they interact, even if those with whom they interact are known outside of the online space. For instance, Facebook users might interact differently with someone through social media than they do in face-to-face interactions. This “hyperpersonal” and process of dehumanization changes our interaction in online spaces.

The result of this disconnection is often hate-fueled online banter, over sharing, or social media fed narcissism. Yet, problematic to a clear understanding of the nature of hyperpersonal communication, in these same spaces, we often see moments of connection. Online support forums see complete strangers offering encouragement to one another. Online video games turn anonymous players on opposite sides of the world into friends. Research has tried to find clear answers that point to distinct factors that explain this juxtaposition in the same spaces, sometimes by the same users.

Social Work Researcher, Brené Brown, is a surprising source of possible answers to this challenging question. Her work in shame and vulnerability offers some important clues of answers to a much larger and complex debate. How do these hyperpersonal interactions impact us? How do we communicate differently? What causes people to be kind or unkind on the Internet? Brown’s research suggests that the answer to all of these questions may be based in shame and vulnerability.

### **Brené Brown, the Reluctant Christian Leader**

Brown's research began in 2001, a turning point in the United States with the fall of the Twin Towers in New York City, and also in the world of technology. The Internet was on the upswing with technology entering more and more homes.

Her research came as a result of trying to understand her own need for control and perfectionism. She shares this journey in her 2010 TEDx Talk, which is arguably the turning point in her career that shined a light on her academic work. In it, she practices the vulnerability that she encourages as she explains the breakdown that came as a result of working through her own perfectionism. She surprised audiences with her candor as she unashamedly shared with the world what she learned in therapy. The talk, entitled "The Power of Vulnerability" catapulted to popularity and has remained in the top five TED Talks since the year of its release. It is notable that she was discouraged from doing research on shame by several of her professors and mentors who suggested to her that doing so would be detrimental to her career as it had destroyed the careers of many before her (Brown B. , SuperSoul Sunday: Rising Strong, 2015). Brown ignored their warnings and the risk paid off.

Her faith journey also heavily influenced her research. She grew up in a Catholic home but currently identifies as an Episcopalian, yet her faith journey has always been a challenging one. Her research has played a role in sifting through her faith to a better understanding of God, religion, and spirituality, things that she does not always see as being interwoven. She notes of her research:

Spirituality is a guidepost. It is a very important piece of wholehearted living.

Every man and woman that I've interviewed that had a strong sense of wholeheartedness - who believed in their self-worth, who believed that despite the fact that they were imperfect and afraid and vulnerable, that they were worthy of

love and belonging - every one of those people had a spiritual component in their lives. That was very controversial in academics but not controversial among the 'regulars' as you would say. (Brown B. , 2017)

Her faith journey and her research go hand in hand. They both inspired her to seek understanding of vulnerability but also changed the way that she understood it. While faith has always been important to her, according to her, her relationship with organized religion has been much more challenging.

In this same interview, she shared "I've had a very tumultuous relationship with the Church and a very clear relationship with God." Her research on shame helped her to understand the dysfunction that she found in the power structures within the Church and helped her to recognize that they did not come from God but from the imperfection of humanity. She shares: "I fell in love with the faith and the mystery piece. It [church] became less about faith and mystery, and more about politics and certainty" (Capretto, 2015). Understanding the need for uncertainty and vulnerability as the core for connection both with God and in human relationships helped Brown to pinpoint and sift through the complexities of her faith that she had struggled with for most of her life.

For Brown, who describes her relationship with church as being "in need of couples therapy" (Brown, Holy Eucharist and Sunday Forum, 2018), the idea of being a leader within the Christian community is a challenging one. Yet, it is a position in which she finds herself. On January 21, 2018, Brené Brown took the stage at Washington National Cathedral to share her message of vulnerability, connection, and humanization with over 8,000 people, some of whom professed the Christian faith and many of whom who did not. Against the backdrop of political protests on the one year anniversary of the Inauguration of President Donald Trump, Brown's

message was well received as she urged her audience to remember the humanity in their neighbors. She encouraged them to “come to the rail and break bread” (Brown, Holy Eucharist and Sunday Forum, 2018) with those with whom they disagree. Finally, she urged Christians to rise above the divisive political climate and bridge the gap through love. At the end, she called upon all 8,000 attendees from a variety of faiths, ethnicities, and walks of life to break bread together in holy communion. Whether she signed up for the role or not, Brené Brown has found herself as a Christian leader.

### **Brown’s Research: Shame, Vulnerability, and Dehumanization**

There are several components to Brown’s research that are foundational to understanding how it applies to computer mediated communication, some of which Brown has discussed herself but many of which center on the field of communication.

The first basic premise of Brené Brown’s work is that every human being is valuable. This applies both to the human self and also to the people around us. While in some instances, she extends this to suggest that this value comes from God, sharing “for me, God is the divine reminder of our inherent worthiness” (Brown, SuperSoul Sunday: Daring Greatly, 2017), in her books, she often references only “spirituality” recognizing that spirituality can manifest itself differently for different individuals. The idea of “worthiness” is core to her belief in vulnerability; however, she often elaborates to explain that a belief in God is not required for a belief that one is “worthy.” She posits that the thing that keeps people from being who they authentically are is the belief that who they are is unworthy in some way.

The second premise of her work is that we all hold a desire for love and belonging. Her research indicates that we are “hard wired for connection” (Brown B. , The Power of Vulnerability, 2010). Moreover, she suggests that connection is “why we are here” (Brown,

Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, 2012, p. 8) and that it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. Lack of connection, she explains, leads to anger and antisocial behavior, even if those experiencing it do not attribute it to connection. The Internet often offers a place where people seek this connection and community through various means. While Brown would suggest that some of these aspects are unhealthy and manifest themselves as coping mechanisms, like the need for social media “likes” and a place to engage in unhealthy diffusion of anger, of others she would suggest that community is a place where people can practice authenticity.

Authenticity or vulnerability is the third and most important point of her research. Years of qualitative interviews have led her to the understanding that the only way to truly achieve this love and belonging that we seek is through being truly “seen” for who one authentically is. She defines this as “vulnerability” and explains that “true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world” (Brown B. , Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, 2012, p. 145). This means living with vulnerability and “daring greatly,” an analogy that she derives from Theodore Roosevelt’s “Man in the Arena” speech, known for its themes of perseverance despite criticism. She suggest that “daring greatly” means “showing up and letting ourselves be seen” (Brown B. , Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, 2012, p. 16) despite how others may perceive us and the fact that success if not guaranteed.

She refers to this as “wholeheartdness,” a term she coined when she could find no other word to describe the people that she identified, after thousands of qualitative interviews, as believing they are “worthy of love and belonging” (Brown B. , The Power of Vulnerability,



2010). These were the people that she found as a result of this worthiness, are willing to practice vulnerability. They “lean into discomfort.” She suggests that those who practice this are willing to take risks, not because they believe that they cannot fail, but because they believe they are good enough in success or failure and are not defined by either. They do not believe that vulnerability is comfortable, but rather, they believe that it is essential to living well.

This definition “wholehearted” comes from these years of research on shame, during which she found the repeated trend that those who often struggle to live wholeheartedly often do so because they live with the shame that they are inadequate. This often results in a need for control of their life and attempts at shaping the perception of others rather than living with authenticity. This often leads to perfectionism or certainty. She posits, “Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: If I look perfect, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame” (Brown B. , *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, 2010, p. 130). The alternative, she suggests, is living with vulnerability and authenticity and being willing to face failure or rejection.

These ideas make up the core of her research, as she applies these ideas to relationships, parenting, leadership, faith, and many other areas of life. An application of these concepts to an online setting offers some interesting and important insights into how and why users utilize online spaces in both positive and negative ways. It offers insights in to why some humans respond to uncertainty with fear and others seem to embrace it. It seems appropriate, then, that her research would offer a greater understanding of not only how we communicate and connect in face-to-face interactions but also via computer mediated platforms. Moreover, they offer

insight into why people practice connection or disconnection in their computer mediated lives, specifically with regard to the hyperpersonal.

### **Cognitive Dissonance and Vulnerability in Online Spaces**

The important bridge between Brown's work and the hyperpersonal comes in the form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that human beings are psychologically uncomfortable with information that feels contrary to what they already believe to be true. As a result, people attempt to alleviate the discomfort. They do so by diffusing, explaining, or numbing the new information. While they are capable of accepting the new information, this only occurs after they have taken steps to reduce the discomfort, if at all.

There are four ways that people diffuse the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance, according to Festinger. The first two are types of justification. One type is by making or addressing behavioral changes that do not address the issue itself but may impact it in some way to make the person feel as if they have made a change. For instance, one might hold a political belief that cuts funding to those living in poverty but alleviate their dissonance by making a donation to a charity. While it does not address the issue itself, it does offer temporary peace of mind. Another way that one might justify it is by reframing their thinking about that particular thing to justify a particular idea or behavior. For instance, that same person might decide that they are actually helping those living in poverty because it might motivate them to seek employment. The third way is through numbing or refusing to address it. In the same scenario, that person might simply ignore stories of families impacted by their belief. Finally, the last way is to accept the information and change the behavior or belief. In this instance, the person might change their mind about it being the right choice. They also might accept that while they still

hold their current belief, there is nuance to it and people are impacted by it but decide that it is a necessary evil.

Brené Brown suggests that the component of communication that separates connection and disconnection is the willingness to be vulnerable and believe that discomfort is not a desirable emotion but instead, a “necessary” one (Brown B. , *The Power of Vulnerability*, 2010). The ideal outcome for those that face the dissonance of contrary ideas, according to Brown’s work, would be to engage the new ideas and thoughtfully consider them. Her ideas on vulnerability would suggest that a “wholehearted” mediated communication user would approach those with opposing ideas with dialogue and the request to “tell me more.”

Today’s Internet users live in a world of discomfort. Cognitive dissonance is an emotion that is experienced hourly as conflicting media messages, memes, and advertisements fly across user screens. The problem that Internet users face today is not a shortage of information but the challenge of discernment as they sift through millions of messages to decide which ones earn their attention and which ones are credible. Yet, Brown’s approach is not a frequently utilized method of communication in hyperpersonal spaces. The output of discomfort for those who refuse to embrace it are often the quest for control, shame, and numbing.

### **Numbing in Online Spaces**

Like Brown, Festinger suggests that people often diffuse dissonance by choosing to block out the uncomfortable messages. Brown calls this “numbing” (Brown B. , *The Power of Vulnerability*, 2010) and suggests that we often choose this rather than embrace vulnerability. New media users can choose to numb in a variety of ways.

First, users can choose to remove the unwanted messages by opting out of platforms, like social media, where friendships are divided over politics or by avoiding the comment sections on

news articles. They can avoid online forums that present challenging ideas. Moreover, in an individualized media world, users no longer have to sit through a 30 minute news broadcast to get their news, but can sift through the articles, videos, and feeds that best suit what they want to hear. Users can make the choice not to engage with ideas that they find unsettling. Thirty years ago, this would have been a harder choice and involved skipping articles in the newspaper or muting out parts of the broadcast that felt uncomfortable. Today, it simply requires the lack of a click.

Similarly, media sanitization is often used as a numbing mechanism to sift through the conflicting messages by surrounding oneself with only messages that reinforce pre-existing ideas and offer explanations for challenging ones. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance states that we often deal with uncomfortable ideas by reframing the idea or offering explanation to make it fit into preexisting ideas to diffuse the discomfort. Rather than avoiding them altogether, users have the option of utilizing 24-hour news networks, social networking groups, media personalities, podcasts, and newsfeeds of others who share their ideological perspectives to present suggestions for how to frame or discredit the new ideas. In these instances, media users are not required to experience the dissonance of wrestling with the challenging ideas because gatekeepers have already framed the information for them, although often at the expense of seeking the full picture of the event or idea.

Memes are also often utilized in this way. Memes are a reproduced image, idea, or thing, most often utilized through contemporary social media. They often present a one-dimensional image or one-liner that lacks nuance about a particular issue or ideology. Susan Blackmore, in her 1999 book *The Meme Machine*, refers to memes as being "anti-evolutionary" in the sense that humanity is always seeking to improve, while memes do the opposite. She suggests that

memes oversimplify complex ideas and remove dialogue from the equation. Instead, memes cater to those who already hold similar views and encourage “likes” while offering little room for nuance. Memes suggest a level of dissonance by those posting them because the refusal of dialogue or nuance infers that the poster is disinterested in engaging in discourse and is seeking only to discredit opposing arguments without being willing to hear them. In her TED talk, Brown explains:

The other thing we do is we make everything that's uncertain certain....I'm right, you're wrong. Shut up. That's it. Just certain. The more afraid we are, the more vulnerable we are, the more afraid we are. This is what politics looks like today. There's no discourse anymore. There's no conversation. There's just blame.

(Brown B. , *The Power of Vulnerability*, 2010)

This lack of discourse, specifically in the political arena, has given rise to the popularity of memes. Festinger and Brown both present evidence that these memes represent a much larger problem.

Poster’s new media theory posits that new media users require an individualized experience in their contemporary media usage (Poster, 1995). While this can be positive because it allows users to skip through unnecessary information and users can build connection over shared ideas, it can also be problematic when users opt to surround themselves by messages that reinforce what they already believe and create excessive cohesion around political, ideological, and religious lines. It discourages the practice of actively interrogating media messages and seeking out multiple perspectives to gain the full scope of information about a particular incident or belief.

Yet another problematic form of numbing is the use of blame, often in the form of inflammatory online dialogue. Brown suggests that this comes from a place of fear, although the specific thing that people fear varies. She explains: “I’ve watched fear change us. I have watched fear ride roughshod over our families, organizations, and communities. Our national conversation is centered on ‘what should we fear’ and ‘who should we blame’” (Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, 2017, p. 56). Brown’s explanation of “blame” as a “way to discharge to pain and discomfort” (Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, 2010) speaks to the core of the divisive climate that has divided people across political and ideological lines.

Brown’s suggestions would indicate that the wholehearted media user would see the divisive messages as uncomfortable but would respond to this discomfort by seeking multiple perspectives to sift through the information. The wholehearted would seek connection across these ideological lines and place humanity at the center of interactions rather than differences. She states, “I believe, however, that most of us can build connection across difference and fight for our beliefs if we’re willing to listen and lean in to vulnerability” (Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, 2017, p. 57). The idea that one might encounter information that contradicts what one already believe is an uncomfortable reality but also a meaningful one, because the wholehearted new media user would not run from differences but rather seek understanding.

### **The Humanity of the Online World**

The word that seems to answer the question posed above: “what determines connection or disconnection in online spaces?” is “humanization.” Murrow and Murrow define dehumanization as “prejudice proposing that the relative value others, persons or groups, or even

non-human entities, is ultimately based upon their perceived degree of humanness” (Murrow & Murrow, 2015). Their research indicates that when practicing dehumanization, people ascribe a different value to some human beings than others or even strip the humanity from others entirely. Those practicing it are rarely aware of it. Most often, it becomes apparent in their outward attitudes, language, and behavior.

While the atrocities in Nazi Germany and the systematic brainwashing of the German people are often cited as an example of dehumanization, it can occur on a much smaller scale. Often, dehumanization comes in the form of ascribing “less *ideally human* traits and target social categories or groups, such as the longstanding, stereotypical association of African-Americans with crime, or of women and girls with weakness and irrationality” (Murrow & Murrow, 2015). Moreover, it often begins with removing the human element of interactions by identifying people by their groups rather than by human characteristics. More extreme is when the categorization changes to derogatory names such as “snowflake” or “femi-nazi.” In this process, individuals are able to detach the humanity and human qualities from those with whom they interact. Of course, this familiar form of disconnected discourse permeates today’s world of mediated communication.

Brown addresses the dehumanizing that often stems from dissonance in her work as a form of numbing. She suggests that it often stems from the discomfort or fear of the unknown. During her 2018 talk at the Washington National Cathedral, Brown explained:

...when we feel extreme hatred, or more likely fear, we engage in a process of dehumanization.... Every genocide in history started with a dehumanization campaign of a group of people. And that started with my words.... If we continue down this path we will get to the place where we don't see Humanity in each

other, much less connection, we will be able to do anything we want to other people and we're close. And if like me, you're a person of faith... you are called to find the face of God in every single person you meet and there is really nothing more unholy than stripping the humanity and away from a person... (Brown, Holy Eucharist and Sunday Forum, 2018)

The problem is that this dehumanization of which Brown speaks is not as overt as she implies that it is. It is not always in the words that are used but also often in the words that are not used or even more so, in the words that go unacknowledged.

The negative impact of cognitive dissonance in a globally connected world is that dehumanization is not only prevalent, but also the easier choice. Rather than wrestle with the lives impacted by ideologies and political views, it allows humans to dismiss the impact of their words on others. Specifically, the hyperpersonal makes this dynamic easier because the namelessness and facelessness of online spaces makes it simple to discount human characteristics, emotions, and experiences. It allows an “us” versus “them” narrative where each side of important political issues can retreat to safe “ideological bunkers” as Brown refers to them (Brown, Holy Eucharist and Sunday Forum, 2018) where views are affirmed rather than wrestle with the alternatives or the lives impacted by it. These offer a comfortable alternative to dissonance. But this does not come without a cost. To do so, one must separate humanity from their human characteristics, stories, and emotions to numb the feelings of empathy. It makes it easier to villainize and dehumanize those with whom one disagrees. At best, it results in apathy. At worst, it can come in the form of name calling, mockery, or threats. While most would agree that name calling can taunts are unhelpful and dangerous for connection, Brown suggests that the numbing practiced in online spaces is also problematic.



In Brown's famous TED talk, she discusses how we numb vulnerability. She shares, "I learned this from the research — you cannot selectively numb emotion. You can't say, here's the bad stuff. Here's vulnerability, here's grief, here's shame, here's fear, here's disappointment. I don't want to feel these" (Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, 2010). As a result, she explains, we also numb joy, happiness, and gratitude. In choosing to numb the human side of the people with whom we disagree in online spaces, we also lose our connection with them. She explains, "Huddled behind the bunkers, we don't have to worry about being vulnerable or brave or trusting... except doing that is not working. Ideological bunkers protect us from everything except loneliness and disconnection" (Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, 2017, p. 59). The belief that throwing "verbal rocks" (Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, 2010) at the opposing side is a relief to the discomfort is an inaccurate one. It is a temporary diffusion of discomfort but moves us further from the core of what we desire as humans: connection.

To return to the original question: "how can both connection and disconnection occur in the same online spaces?" Brown's work would suggest that the key component that separates the two is the ability to see the humanity in one another. Side by side with these moments of disconnection are places where people are funding one another's hospital bills, buying gifts for strangers, and spending hours of their day counseling one another in online support forums. If Walther's belief that the hyperpersonal allows for more of an intrapersonal experience, this concept is a challenging one. The only explanation is that these people have chosen to practice empathy and embrace the shared humanity of others. They have not only chosen to see the humanity in other human beings, but also chosen to see themselves, their hopes, dreams, and struggles, in the people on the other side of the Internet. They relate to the struggle of the others

on the online eating disorder support forum. They see their own child in the child with cancer to whom they donate. They remember the feeling of receiving a random act of kindness and choose to give that same gift to someone else, despite the namelessness and facelessness of that person. If humanization in online spaces is a choice, the choice to connect rather than disconnect is one of shared human experience.

Not only does it require the vulnerability to interact with challenging ideas, but it also includes recognizing the humanity in the people on the other side of the Internet even in disagreement or when they are cruel. It requires the belief that every human being is equally worthy of love and belonging and the willingness to lean in to the discomfort of dissonance and choice to seek understanding even when approaching challenging and nuanced issues for which there is no clear “correct” answer. It requires a willingness to embrace vulnerability, empathy, and the humanity of each person with whom one interacts, even in online spaces.

### **Discrepancies in Brown’s Work**

The greatest inconsistency in Brown’s research is the broad categorization of people into “wholehearted,” those who embrace vulnerability, versus those who do not. In reality, people can experience these emotions in some aspects of their life but not in others and these do not always occur for unhealthy reasons. Someone who has experienced trauma, for example, might be unwilling to practice vulnerability in engaging survivor stories of those with similar experiences or having discussions with someone who minimizes that trauma. Brown does discuss the idea of practicing vulnerability in spaces and places with people who have earned it and that vulnerability must also include boundaries and the preservation of one’s own physical and emotional safety (Brown B. , *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, 2017, p. 38). Yet, this line between authenticity and vulnerability seems

to be a blurry one. She both encourages encounters with those who think differently but also suggests that there is little point to engaging with someone who is approaching the interaction from an abusive or unhealthy place. She never clearly defines how to identify when conflict is healthy and when it is not. She also never clearly defines how one knows the difference between practicing boundaries and failing to practice vulnerability.

This oversight seems to become more apparent in online spaces where difficult conversations often take place, or often, fail to constructively take place. Moreover, in online spaces, people can be open to new ideas in some arenas but not in others. The broad categorization of “wholehearted” seems like an incomplete one. While one might be open to drastically different political ideas and willing to engage in challenging conversations about most of them, one might struggle with some specific ideas after growing up in a culture that treats a particular ideology or belief as foundational. Given this, Brown’s “wholeheartedness” feels less like a human characterization and more like a practice. Yet, it is an important practice. It is the practice through which we humanize and see the value in not only ourselves, but those around us.

### **Conclusions**

Brown’s ideas about vulnerability offer an interesting element to our understanding of computer mediated communication, specifically with regard to the hyperpersonal. Humanization is essential. While the nature of the hyperpersonal interactions that occur in online spaces make it easy to detach ourselves from the humanity of other users, this practice is detrimental to our ultimate goal as humans: connection.

Dehumanization is often the result of numbing. The challenge of living in a world of nuance is that we are required to sift through this nuance to make judgement calls about practices

and ideologies. The challenge of doing so in a technology-fueled world is that we are required to sift through this nuance while being surrounded by information and opinions about it. It is almost inescapable. While the natural response to the dissonance of challenging ideas is to numb and disconnect from it, Brown's work affirms the Biblical call to see the "image of God" (Genesis 1:26, New American Standard Bible) in each human being. Brown suggests that the right answer to the problem of disconnection is vulnerability and a willingness to practice empathy, understanding, and feel the dissonance of challenging ideas, even when it is hard.

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