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The Difference Between Vulnerability and Oversharing

IT'S NOT WHAT WE SAY, BUT THE RELATIONSHIP IN WHICH WE SAY IT

In 2020 I was ghostwriting for a venture capital (VC) investor who had just one request: "Please make sure I don't end up on VCbrags."

VCs Congratulating Themselves, or @VCBrags, is an X feed that gathers the most self-aggrandizing, tone deaf content posted online by startup investors. For example, it recently featured a VC who thrashed her husband publicly for having "zero" accomplishments in 2024: "No certifications. No college courses completed. No documentary features. No awards." At their dining table she asked him, "How are you able to go through a whole year without doing any of these sort[s] of things and be OK?"

After I binged VCBrags, X (then Twitter) suggested I check out @LinkedInFlex, a feed that gathers the oddest brags, or "flexes," made by LinkedIn users. In one, a man posts about his struggle with public restrooms, what it has cost him ("I've missed weddings"), and his fears about an upcoming trip to Europe. He then flips it into cliché advice: "...you need to expose yourself to your fears and go outside your comfort zone for success."

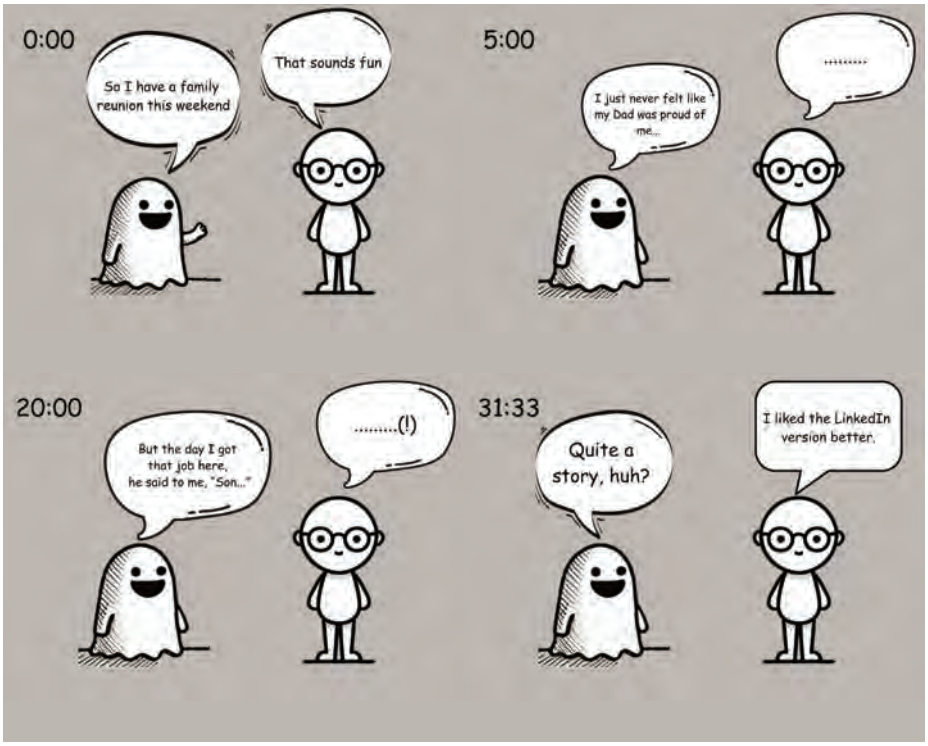
These two posts have something in common: confusion about vulnerability and oversharing.

Almost 15 years ago, vulnerability became trendy thanks to a TED Talk by Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston who is now a celebrated author, podcaster, and public speaker. Brown, a PhD in social work, argued that "We live in a vulnerable world. And one of the ways we deal with it is we numb vulnerability."

Her evidence: debt, obesity, addiction, overmedication, extremist religion and politics, and other destructive behaviors. The solution, said Brown, is "To let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen," to accept the risks of being vulnerable, and to tell oneself, "I'm just so grateful, because to feel this vulnerable means I'm alive."

At the same time, Americans retreated deeper into social isolation. We weren't just "Bowling Alone," as political scientist Robert Putnam warned in 1995. We were beginning to eat, work, shop, and recreate alone, mostly at home. As Derek Thompson writes in *The Atlantic*, men who watch TV now spend seven hours with the TV for every hour they spend socializing outside their home. The average U.S. teenager spends six hours daily with a screen—one-third of every year—and spends half as much time with friends outside of school as they did in the early 1990s.

In the 2000s and 2010s, the norms of communication also changed. Before LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006),



and Instagram (2010), there wasn't a convenient way to have a one-sided conversation with hundreds or thousands of people at once (unless you were famous). If we wanted to talk about ourselves, we did so with a spouse, family member, friend, or colleague. In those conversations, we had the chance to be vulnerable and listen in turn. The reward of vulnerability was a stronger, more meaningful relationship and better understanding of one another.

When social isolation, vulnerability, and social media mixed, however, the output was oversharing. We began to perform vulnerability for an audience, which might reward us with validation in the form of traffic, likes, and comments.

I cannot count how many of my ghostwriting clients lauded Brown but misinterpreted her message. Admittedly, that was good for business. As the transition from print to digital media compressed advertising revenues in the 2010s, online publications laid off staff writers and substituted their work with that of unpaid contributors seeking attention. And to get attention, they needed to be somewhat vulnerable but tasteful about it. So, I specialized in that.

Unlike publications with editors, social media has never rewarded restraint. Like a person who puts on a costume and leans a bit too heavily into the character (you're-ah Borat, huh?), the attention mongers took vulnerability to extremes. Oversharing was the byproduct. Media outlets like the late *Gawker* cashed in on oversharing, as did VCBrags and LinkedInFlex (and now, this writer).

Brené Brown fans may forget that she dealt with her own fear of vulnerability in therapy with a licensed clinician, not on X with 144-character monologues. She told her story to a TED audience—vulnerably and tastefully—in hopes that it might motivate others to be vulnerable. While I can't speak for Brown, I doubt she imagined that people would hear her and think, "Huh, I should tell everyone on this business networking site about my challenges with public bathrooms."

Vulnerability is a two-way exchange between people who care about one another. Oversharing is a one-way exchange in which a person dumps their mind on others, without a desire to listen to them in turn.

When we attempt to replace vulnerable relationships with performative vulnerability online, it becomes solipsistic. It becomes the type of oversharing that would land my client on VCBrags.