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Self-spectacle online:

The construction and representation of identity in  
contemporary digital culture

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by

Mayanna Framroze

2017

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Self-spectacle online:

The construction and representation of identity in  
contemporary digital culture

by

Mayanna Framroze

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Douglas M. Kellner, Chair

Given the ubiquity and pervasiveness of digital technologies within contemporary society, scholarly exploration about how life is lived in this digital era is critical in order to understand the impact upon our lives, as well as upon society. One aspect of living a digitally oriented life involves how and why one represents oneself in virtual environments, and how one interacts with others within the digital ecosystem. As individuals spend more time online, their interactions, perceptions, and behaviors -- even their sense of self -- are shaped by new technologies as well as by the social contexts within which these manifest. Understanding this is particularly relevant for educators, as they engage with students who are increasingly conversant

with technologies, and whose life experiences may best be appreciated, by educators, if grounded within a broader sensibility about digital life.

This study focuses on how and more critically *why* the self is constructed and presented as it is within online environments. In order to assess this, particularly from the perspective of those emplaced within this mode of living, this inquiry is situated at the intersection of three scholarly disciplines. Thus, this study draws from the following theoretical frameworks: a constructivist developmental approach emanating from social psychology, wherein symbolic interactionism and performativity are invoked; a communication studies approach that considers how technologies mediate identity representation and interaction; and a critical cultural studies perspective that examines media culture, with a particular emphasis on the role of spectacle within society. This study presents the results of qualitative research that examines the online self-representations of 12 students at a large urban university in Los Angeles. This study also employs a longitudinal approach, as five of these 12 participants have been observed for a period of nearly two years, and comparative assessments of their activities as well as their own interpretations of the same have occurred over this time period. Since the primary focus of this study is to enable understanding regarding the motivations, meanings, and value associated with self representation online, it is necessary to derive these insights directly from participants themselves. As such, interviews have been conducted with all participants, and in some cases, more than once.

The findings of this research reveal four broad patterns that address how and why participants construct their online identity representations. They do so 1) to enhance their employment prospects; 2) to position themselves in a particular light to formulate a self-brand; 3) to engage socially with others; and 4) to engender feelings of self-worth from which they derive feelings of

self-satisfaction, among other positive emotional benefits. In consideration of these self-representation, this study further proposes a new theorization with which to frame these findings. It proposes that what is occurring might be viewed as a form of self-spectacle, one that derives its foundation from previous iterations of societal spectacle, inclusive of some of the tenets of broader spectacle, yet is distinct, given its singular focus on the individual. It is suggested that this micro-level spectacle instantiates in the myriad shapes online self-representation assumes today and, if the rapid adoption of self-facing technologies is any indication, is likely to continue unabated. As such, this study contributes to the emerging scholarship regarding life lived online, and offers a perspective that attempts to contextualize what is occurring during this contemporary moment.

The dissertation of Mayanna Framroze is approved.

Kathryn Anderson-Levitt

Kimberly Gomez

Leah A. Lievrouw

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2017

## DEDICATION PAGE

I owe an immeasurable debt to my family and, in particular, to my husband Jim for his staunch encouragement, good humor, and love throughout this long process. He has provided the foundational support I have needed to persevere in this, and numerous other endeavors.

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Austin, who has always provided me with unwavering support, and whose insistence that I pursue my academic goals has propelled this journey forward. From the start, I have enlisted his help as a fellow student, intellectual collaborator, and unyielding editor. He has been generous with his time and counsel, pushing me when I required instigation, listening when I needed a confidant, and encouraging me – always – to press on. The reality of this dissertation has much to do with loving the path of scholarship and lifelong learning that resides within both of us. It is a deeply felt bond that I am grateful to be able to share with him. Yet it is not only – or even mostly -- his academic proclivities that I aspire to. Austin inspires me because of the compassionate way he lives his life, the manner in which he responds to his curiosities, and the positive impact he has on the lives of so many others. As one of those others, I will never be able to thank him sufficiently for his candor and friendship, his uncompromising faith in me, and, most of all, for his relentless love.



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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mayanna Framroze has worked in communication, journalism, and marketing since 1982. She began her career as a journalist, covering business and industry, and then moved into corporate communication, public relations, and marketing. She is currently Senior Vice President of Communication and Marketing at the California Association of REALTORS®, where she oversees the organization's internal and external communication for the public, as well as for the core audience of 180,000 members. In this capacity, she spearheads the organization's thought leadership initiatives, consumer advertising campaigns, industry conferences, revenue generation activities, internal publications, media relations, and digital initiatives. Since 1995, she has managed the development of the organization's web sites and various other technology initiatives.

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## **Introduction**

We live in a media saturated world. The narratives and news, messages and images exert immense influence in terms of shaping opinion, framing ideologies, defining who we are as individuals. Though media have historically played an outsized role in shaping the contours of society, today the sheer proliferation of media outlets, the fragmented and distributed nature of media content, the unique modes of consumption, and the emergence of new technologies constitute a wholly new media ecology and life experience. Increasingly, we are no longer separate from media; we are in many instances the content -- consumed in a remixed and reconstituted loop, and often with our explicit and willing consent.

According to the US Census, nearly 75% of households report Internet use and 84% report owning a computer (US Census ACS Report, 2013). Despite such high levels of Internet adoption, the report finds that households with greater incomes in metropolitan areas have measurably higher rates of technology usage than those with lower income levels in more rural areas of the country. With respect to social media, according to Pew Research, nearly two-thirds of American adults use social media and a whopping 90% of those aged 18-29 use social media (Pew Research Center, 2015). Indeed, on the largest social networking site (SNS), Facebook, there are nearly 1.66 billion monthly active users as of September, 2016.

The scope of contemporary Internet usage points to the continued need to study this multi-faceted domain. There exist numerous aspects of online life that require examination and research if we are to better understand the world in which we live and use those learnings to address current social issues.

While the data highlighted demonstrate the scale of technology usage in this country, in many quarters, the emphasis tends to be on issues concerning access or on mastering new digital skills rather than on cultivating deeper levels of understanding about how these technologies affect our choices, behaviors, and even our identities. As one who has devoted a career to communication as both a practitioner and educator, I am ever mindful of the impact of living such a mediated life, and concerned about the lack of critical media literacy that exists within the United States. Historically, communication studies have stressed a utilitarian approach to media scholarship, focusing on mass media analysis and, with linkages to social science, engaging in more administrative kinds of exploration. Emanating from the cultural studies tradition, however, are more critically oriented analyses that tend to concentrate on the media's role and influence within society. Both disciplines have much to share with each other and with the world at large. As such, they intersect in this project, along with constructivist theoretical strands borrowed from social psychology, to examine digital life during the contemporary moment.

Given the ubiquity and dominance of online media usage in contemporary society, it is critical to understand how -- and more importantly *why* -- individuals inhabit these digital spaces, as well as what value they derive from these particular experiences, in order to better comprehend life during this emergent and transformative era. It seems clear that, today, online identity construction and attendant behaviors occur in a highly networked and mediated digital ecosystem. As individuals increasingly spend more time online, their interactions, perceptions, and opinions are shaped by the technologies they embrace and by the emerging digital contexts within which they operate. On an



individual level, construction of one's identity represents, for many, a real-time work in progress that is fluid, tenuous, at times burdensome, yet also a source of reward. It is also a relatively new phenomenon, an unprecedented amalgamation of the private and public, constrained and liberated by the technological affordances of the hour. Despite the extant literature about identity development -- scholarship that spans multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, science and technology studies in addition to the aforementioned cultural and communication studies -- the unique age in which we live demands examination of identity through new lenses fitted for this digital era.

With respect to certain generations, particularly those who have come of age in a world filled with digital technologies, online interaction and self-presentation are the primary means by which they communicate and represent themselves to the world. As such, being able to explicate how identities are constructed, and how presentations of self are influenced by technologies and by others is critical to understanding how the self manifests at this moment in time.

The purpose of this study is to examine the online practices of a particular cohort of individuals -- young adults who have been exposed to digital technologies for significant portions of their lives -- in order to understand more fully how and why their identities manifest as they do, and what meanings might be associated for these individuals as a result of their self-representations. As such, examining how, but more importantly why, online identity representations occur is a central driver of this research. My intent is to understand the value derived from such online representational behaviors,

and suggest a broader conceptualization of how one might approach the construction of self as part of today's digital world.

Without question, quantities of emerging scholarship offer much in terms of comprehending the status of self-hood as part of the contemporary moment, and a few scholars have even amassed long-term analyses regarding life online. A large portion of this work appears to be descriptive, enumerating *what* individuals are doing online and, as such, this research is deeply instructive in terms of better understanding actual practice. However, I would maintain there is significant need for additional exploration with respect to these virtualized instantiations of self, situated within the parameters of an evolving digital ecology. Such work would extend some of the more recent scholarship in this area and hopefully add clarity to what is undeniably a complex field of inquiry relating to conceptions of selfhood. Evolving research that approaches this issue of the digital self from multiple vantage points -- for there is no well-lit pathway illuminating the 'true' causes of why individuals become who they are or appear to be online -- is thus necessary.

Indeed, despite a growing body of literature that examines the individual within today's digital ecosystem, there is much to be learned about how this technological moment impacts our very selfhood. The rapidity with which technologies emerge and the attendant shifts in behavior, consumption, collaboration, and representation conspire to continually widen the gaps in knowledge even as scholars race to construct new meanings about these phenomena. The transformative digital era in which we live exerts its impact on so many aspects of our daily lives, our future hopes. From an educative stance, developing a more robust digital media literacy is a pedagogical requirement; it is,

I would argue, foundational in order to adequately equip individuals today and in the future with the resources and information they need to shape their lives and the lives of others. Educators Paulo Freire and bell hooks state that the power to think critically and deeply about who we are or want to be (whether online or off) is vital, not just to liberate, but also to dignify, enhance, and perpetuate the state of our own humanity (Freire, 2014; hooks, 2010).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The ability to comprehend one's own lived experience and situate it temporally and contextually is representative of a cultivation of mind referred to by C.W. Mills (1959) as "the sociological imagination" (p. 5). Elucidating the task of those who engage in social scientific inquiry, Mills states it is necessary to recognize that individual lives contribute, even minutely, to "the shaping of this society and to the course of its history" (p. 6). In articulating why I feel it is vital to understand what is occurring to the self online during this transformative moment, I would borrow from Mills, who offers three broad lines of inquiry to those interested in understanding society: 1. What is the general structure of a particular society and what meanings are associated with particular features? 2. How are these features affected by, and also affect, the historical moment within which they exist. 3. What types of human conduct and character are in evidence as part of society during this period? (p. 6-7). It is in the asking of these sorts of questions and the discursiveness of engaging with multiple perspectives that the construct that is the sociological imagination offers hope in understanding the place of humans in society and within history, and that inspires my curiosity and this research.

In terms of the epistemological approach taken toward this project, since my primary objective is to gain greater clarity about how humans perceive their own actions as part of today's digital landscape, I draw not only from an over-arching constructivist perspective but also, in complementary manner, from the branch of pragmatism known as symbolic interactionism. The philosophy that one's conceptions of oneself derive primarily in interaction with others, and that one's comprehension of one's reality occurs upon reflexive engagement with life experience, is used to guide this study (Bazeley, 2014). Moreover, my interest in understanding the meaning-making that occurs on the part of individuals as they engage and live in this digital world points to undertaking a study that is qualitative and ethnographic in nature.

In similar vein to Mills, Clifford Geertz (1973) characterizes ethnographic research as "particular" to be sure, yet such specificity of analysis does not obviate the potential for eliciting larger themes (p. 23). Whether studying sheep or Balinese cock-fighting, such findings, Geertz notes, are the raw stuff necessary for the sociological mind in the course of engaging with the task of observation and subsequent theorization. He states, "social actions are comments on more than themselves; that where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go" (p. 23). Following both Geertz and Mills, I attempt here to study an admittedly small set of individuals, their activities, estimations, and observed proclivities, and draw from these examinations some inferences to answer my inquiry about how the self is constructed within contemporary digital culture.

Thus, this study is situated at the intersection of three broad theoretical traditions: critical cultural studies, particularly media studies and with emphasis on a key sub-theme

-- that of spectacle, social psychology, largely from a social constructivist standpoint; and communication studies, which examines the effects of new media upon digital life. By examining the manifestations of self online from these angles, this project utilizes a multi-perspectival approach that allows for the possibility of threading connections between these varied disciplines and theories.

Given its overarching objective to understand and interpret the lived experiences of individuals from the perspectives of the individuals themselves, this study's philosophical bent hews toward the phenomenological (Merriam, 2009). As Merriam states, one of the primary characteristics of qualitative research is to understand how individuals construct their own meanings in the course of their lived and interpreted realities. Consequently, I utilize methods that allow for a contextualization that embraces on and offline instantiations of daily life as understood by my study's participants and as interpreted by me. Further, in attempting to characterize what is occurring, the methodological approach offered by ethnography is particularly useful.

As scholars note, ethnography is a mode of discovery when the subject at hand involves society and culture (Merriam, 2009; Wolcott, 1999). Ethnography's affordance of allowing those under examination to provide their own understandings of their situations is even more important when that study occurs within the context of the Internet (Hine, 2015). Exhorting that ethnographers must train themselves to accept that a certain level of uncertainty is bound to be present when studying such a fluid phenomenon as digital culture, Hine allows that Internet-focused research must be viewed as highly interpretive "as its users weave together highly individualized and

complex patterns of meaning out of these publicly observable threads of interaction” (p. 4).

As such, in order to understand the reasons that individuals construct and reconstruct their online selves in the ways they do, this work is situated within the current digital environment, one invariably referred to as new media or Web 2.0. For definitional clarity, information studies scholar Leah Lievrouw and her colleague Sonia Livingstone (2002) offer a framework that integrates not only information and technology, but also social behaviors. Their definition of new media entails:

The artifacts or devices that enable and extend our abilities to communicate; the communication activities or practices we engage in to develop and use these devices; and the social arrangements or organizations that form around the devices and practices. (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002, p. 23).

This holistic approach to describing the new media environment, encompassing human activity and social structures alongside the technologies themselves, is a useful starting point for understanding what is constitutive of this particular culture. What also is important is that it is integrative, acknowledging that the digital environment stands not outside our real-life doors but rather, to use Hine’s phrasing, is “embedded” within everyday life (Hine, p. 31).

The primary assertion of this study, influenced by the results of my pilot project detailed later, is that individuals are becoming increasingly attuned to the notion of strategic self-representation online as a means by which to satisfy personal objectives or to fulfill individual needs. My sub-assertions are that these individuals then operationalize this heightened sensibility via specific and sustained approaches in order

to engender the desired representational states and responses from those who consume these presentations. They do so by engaging actively with their self-representations, by monitoring the ways in which they represent themselves to others, and by paying close attention to the benefits they receive – or don't – from others online.

As digital media culture increasingly encroaches into everyday life as part of a broader consumerism, commodification, and societal spectacle, I feel it worthwhile to examine these self-representational practices within these larger contexts. In developing this proposition further, I anticipate drawing from cultural studies scholarship that privileges, particularly, the role of spectacle to explore whether we might be engaging in new, more individualized versions of spectacle via these disembodied instantiations of our online selves.

### **Literature Review**

Though lacking the historicity of identity studies grounded within the various disciplines due to the recency of the new media environment, there nevertheless exists a significant body of scholarship that examines the concept of the online self. Indeed, in the past three decades, a trove of theory and theses has yielded an online self characterized as fragmented, distributed, dematerialized, extended, mediated, protean, deconstructed, reconstructed, saturated, virtualized, digitized, postmodern – its trajectory coursing through axial progressions, merging via intersectionalities, and residing in the reflections of the larger society. To engage in any analysis of how and why identities manifest online and the meanings derived from these instantiations is to first accept the complexity of such an agenda and admit that meditations on such dimensions as social construction of the self and consumption of the self (as 'content' that is produced in order to be

consumed by others) cannot be wholly problematized nor handily reconciled – though not to engage them dialectically also is not a viable option.

The contemporary moment, it appears, is one preoccupied with the self. At the risk of committing historical hyperbole, there seem to be few epochs equal to the current one whose gaze is so trained on the nature and manifestations of selfhood. Scholars from various disciplines offer theories of why this is so, bringing to the fore a rich body of thought from which to draw. For this study, a merging of scholarship that concretizes online identity development -- one that pays particular attention to the presentational aspects of representation -- with scholarship that looks more broadly at digital media and consumption practices is necessary. As such, this review of the literature is segmented broadly between social psychological studies, critical cultural studies, and communication studies. However, it should be noted that a seepage between these three divisions does occur, if for no other reason than the fact that it is difficult to divorce concepts of self-presentation that might ordinarily remain tucked within social psychology from cultural notions regarding self-branding occurring within the contemporary digital media environment.

### **Self and Identity – Social Psychological Perspectives**

As part of an examination of how and why constructions of self occur in online environments, it is useful first to draw from frameworks emanating from the social psychological tradition that posit, broadly, that the construction of self arises situationally and reflexively as part of social interactions with others. A developmental psychological approach is also necessary, as this study follows the lives of a cohort of individuals



during a specific point in their lives. In contrast to more positivistic epistemological frameworks, this study cleaves to more constructivist philosophical frameworks.

Reflections on who we are as human beings, what makes us human, and why are found in centuries of thought. Situating the self within the context of social relations – positing that selves manifest and are constructed in response to the larger society– has largely been the purview of social psychological domains. Indeed, more recent theories of identity development, such as identity theory and social identity theory, have built upon earlier conceptualizations emanating from the theoretical framework that is symbolic interactionism (Burke & Stets, 2009), a perspective that ascribes the uniqueness of human nature to the capacity to communicate and interact in ways based upon shared meanings of symbols. I raise this here to foreshadow the theoretical streams followed throughout this paper.

Yet, before taking those paths, it seems necessary to offer some definitional context for terms such as “self” or “selfhood” and “identity.” Worth noting --though of no surprise -- is the fact that these terms are invariably employed interchangeably across and even within academic disciplines. For instance, cultural theorists and sociologists tend to find identities occurring as part of interaction with the world, influenced by context and (especially if they are post-modernists) negotiable, fluid, partial, or multiple (Jones & Abes, 2013; Gergen, 1991). Psychologists, on the other hand, posit it is the individual who comes first, then society; that there is a singular identity, one that manifests as a result of one’s own cognitions (Jones & Abes). Certainly, within psychology, there are differing viewpoints, say between behaviorists and cognitivists, the latter of whom have analyzed the self since the 1970s as a kind of thinking machine,

thereby opening up diverse ways to regard the self (Morf & Mischel, as cited in Leary & Tangney, 2012). And psychosocial psychologists such as Erickson (1959) frame the creation of selfhood as a series of developmental life stages, each possessing the marked characteristics of a crisis that must be resolved in order to move to the next stage of development.

More recently, with the advent of imaging technologies such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans that enable us to peer into our prefrontal cortices, neurobiology has delivered intriguing new theories as well as empirical findings that link, though still in mysterious ways, the physical brain to the non-physical mind. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2010) speaks of the self not as a thing, but as a process. Among his definitions, the self is “a dynamic collection of integrated neural processes, centered on the representation of the living body, that finds expression in a dynamic collection of integrated mental processes” (Damasio, p. 10). Acknowledging the advances within neurobiology in terms of understanding the conscious mind from three inter-linked perspectives – that of personal experience and witness, that of behavioral observation, and that of the direct visualization of brain structures – Damasio nonetheless states another dimension is required, one that goes beyond these, by looking at history.

His framework extends back for antecedents of the self and of consciousness, and while his detailed explication about the development of neurons and protoself structures lie beyond the scope of this paper, in brief, Damasio builds his theory of self by noting that it is when this protoself comes to mind that the conscious mind begins. It is these “primordial feelings, the elementary feeling of existence” that serve as the first base construct of who we are, followed by what he terms the “core self,” which is the self in

action, and finally the “autobiographical self,” that self which is able to understand and recognize its past and anticipate its future (p. 24). Though noting that some mammals may have both, it is humans who possess both core and autobiographical selves (p. 27).

As he states,

Once self comes to mind, the game of life changes, albeit timidly at first. Then the devices of reward and punishment and drives and motivations, which had been shaping the life process in earlier stages of evolution, help with the development of complex emotions. (Damasio, 2010, p. 304).

For scholar Anthony Giddens (1991), the concepts of self and identity are enmeshed with the idea of self-reflexivity. Adjacent to Damasio’s concentrations of core and autobiographical selves, Giddens believes self-identity is about a self that is “reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (p. 53). When he speaks of the ontological security so necessary to transport humans from the anxieties of infancy toward later stages of maturation and self-sufficiency, Giddens points to this notion of self-identity, a compilation of cognitive schemas about the self – an ongoing biography of sorts – as the existential key to one’s being. Acknowledging the importance of inputs from others as well as one’s own behaviors, he notes one’s identity is as much about the perpetuation of a particular narrative of oneself, one which integrates external realities, but which does not necessarily derive its own sense from it. In this sense, it is the consciousness one has towards oneself and one’s actions, via continuous self-monitoring and awareness that, through such discursiveness, produces not just reflexiveness but also a “concept of a person” (p. 53).

Recognizing the various strands of discipline-specific conceptualizations regarding the self -- not to mention the rhetorical judo that exists when referring to the self and/or identity -- Leary and Tangney, in their tome *Handbook of Self and Identity* (2012), strive to offer an integrative reading of the self as a construct -- one that is useful to this project. They seek to organize, in some way, thoughts about the self in terms of the following states: that the self is involved in how we experience ourselves; as part of our perceptions and feelings; and in specific actions that regulate behavior. Underlying these states is the “human capacity for reflexive thinking,” they maintain (p. 6). It unfolds, then, that the self is “the set of psychological mechanisms or processes that allows organisms to think consciously about themselves” (p. 6). They do not, however, feel there is sufficient evidence to link the self to emotions and motivations except for self-thoughts.

Damasio may have a slightly different spin with respect to motivations and intentionality. At the most elemental of levels, as part of the history of evolution, Damasio states there is an incentive mechanism that guides the behavior of even the most basic organisms, ones with no discernable knowledge structures or selves to speak of -- in other words, even simple organisms are incited by the will to survive and their behaviors unfold toward that end. Again without digressing too far into neurobiological territory, what is similar between Damasio’s neuroscientific perspectives and the viewpoints of psychologists and social psychologists is that the notion of self is complicated, involving a congeries of self-aware consciousness and self-appraising constructions of meaning.

As Leary & Tangney demonstrate, there are numerous constructs such as ego identity, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-identity, and so forth that appear to fall under the auspices of the self; they offer a list of 66 such constructs -- evidence that the roads leading toward definitions of self are neither few nor narrow. For my study, the frameworks utilized to define self involve a robust concern for reflexivity that purports that a constructed self occurs as part of a processual continuum based on self monitoring and regulation as part of a broader engagement with the world, a dialectical work-in-progress ongoing through one's life.

If "self" follows the reflexively inclined "my" to include the totality of who I believe myself to be, then "I am" serves as another reasonable linguistic representation to explain the various identities I appear, believe, or wish to possess. As with self, definitions of identity emerge differently when utilizing different disciplinary optics. To use one definition, identities encompass traits, roles, memberships, and characteristics that serve to define who one is (Osyerman, Elmore & Smith, as cited in Leary and Tangney). Erickson (1959) uses the term "ego identity" to refer to "the awareness of the fact that there is a selfsameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods," and moreover that these methods are adequate representations of such personal identity for others to understand (p. 22). McCall & Simmons (1966) focus on role identities – how the self behaves in interactions with others, while William James, referring to "selves" rather than "identities," notes several selves may be in play as a result of one's positionality within society (James, 1890, as cited in Burke & Stets, 2009).

A key philosophical strain, emanating from the University of Chicago school of sociology, developed by Sheldon Stryker (1968), concerns structural symbolic

interactionism, whereby the positions one occupies within the larger social world provide referential meanings from which, via symbols, identities are constructed. In their approach to identity theory, Peter Burke and colleagues follow Stryker's approach but veer somewhat by focusing more on the internal mechanisms of self-processes involving meaning and behaviors, noting that identity can predict behavior but "only when the meaning of the identity corresponded to the meaning of the behavior" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 287).

These brief explanatory mechanisms of what constitutes a self and what passes for identity notwithstanding, it is necessary to contextualize the self as constructed within the web of social relations and within the broader social milieu, as that is the context most relevant to this study. As such, it seems appropriate to refer to a particular intellectual lineage that posits that selves manifest via a dialogic and reflexive engagement with others and the world.

**Symbolic interactionism and the social self.** The mind's capacity to selectively perceive and reflectively construct a sense of self is at the heart of what is known as symbolic interactionism (Burke & Stets, 2009). Though the term "symbolic interactionism" is credited to Herbert Blumer, a student of scholar George Herbert Mead, who remains a central figure in the development of symbolic interactionism, it was during the 1700s in Scotland that some of the earliest thinking underlying symbolic interactionism occurred (Burke & Stets). In his book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, economist Adam Smith conceptualizes how, at their core, humans are social animals, and that their capacity for imagination (to engage with images) enables them to become socialized and differentiated from other animals (Burke, 2006). Smith states:

We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behavior and endeavor to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of the other people, scrutinize the propriety of our conduct. (Smith, as cited in Burke, p. 3).

Prescient as Smith's words would be in terms of our current culture of extreme spectatorship, he might have been among the first to suggest that the self is not a singularity. He writes:

When I endeavor to examine my own conduct, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons...The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavor to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself. (Smith, as cited in Burke, p. 3).

As such, Smith and others concern themselves with how behaviors manifest as a result of societal influence wrought via the human processes of communication (Burke, 2006). Propelled forward through the centuries, we find further refinements to his philosophy on domestic shores where American pragmatists were to refine and develop the theoretical framework known as symbolic interactionism. Building upon the seminal work regarding the communication and meaning of signs by Cambridge philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, philosophers William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, all influential in the development of pragmatism -- a pivotal philosophy that stresses the primacy of utility and the practical consequences of appropriate action -- contributed significantly to the advancement of symbolic interactionism (p. 5). Of them,

it is Mead who became the central figure in terms of its development. He was to unite theories of meaning from the pragmatists with a theory of mind through his conceptualization of gestures and symbols, the latter of which have the capacity to evoke similar responses – or meanings – in others (p. 5).

Meaning, Mead states, is a “response of one organism to the gesture of another in any given social act,” and it is these gestures and corresponding responses that provide the basis for a social process that is a defining characteristic of self in society (Mead, 1934, p. 78). Language, then, is necessary for the developing self which, in itself, is not present at birth, but rather develops via a “process of social experience and activity” (p. 135). It is this dialectic between what Mead refers to as “the generalized other” – constituted as the social group at large – and individuals that is essential to the development of self (p. 154). It is challenging to adequately express the groundbreaking nature of Mead’s theoretical corpus regarding the emergence of self through society. His emphasis on the mind’s ability to reflect on itself and treat the self as an object provides the central thesis for this theoretical framework. He notes that the word “self” is reflexive and, as such, can be viewed as both subject and object. Philosopher Jurgen Habermas, singling out Mead’s contribution, notes, “G.H. Mead was the first to have thought through this inter-subjective model of the socially produced ego” (Habermas, 1992, p. 151).

In his articulation of the “I” and the “me” aspects of self, Mead (1934) stresses that the values associated with what he differentiates as the action-oriented “I” and the reflexive other-oriented “me” should not be considered arbitrary or fictive. Rather, when one takes the attitudes of the other into account and into the “immediate experience of



one's self," one is inhabiting that part of the self that is the "me" (p. 196). In contrast, the "I" is that part of the self that responds to the attitudes of others and consequently appears in the form of a memory of what one has done (p. 196). Such imbrication reveals an ever-reconstituted self, according to Mead, whose thinking paved the path for others to further grapple with the socially constitutive qualities of self.

Two other American philosophers wrote extensively about the self from a socio-psychological perspective: Williams James and Charles Horton Cooley. James, credited with founding what is referred to as functional psychology, was among the first to stress the complexity of both self and society, and also to state that the social self is actually a multiplicity of selves (Burke, 2006). Cooley is credited with extending the notion of the looking-glass self to explicate the reliance on the opinions of others and the appraisal of such opinions in the constitution of the self (Burke & Stets, 2009). In speaking thusly about the development of the individual self, Cooley also remarks on the constitution of society, which he sees as an accumulation of collected selves linked inextricably to create a greater whole (Schubert, 1998). Specifically with respect to the well-known looking-glass metaphor he developed in the early 1900s, he writes:

A looking glass self seems to have three principle elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification... The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. (Cooley, as cited in Schubert, 1998, p. 22).

As such, Cooley reiterates and extends his colleagues' scholarship by stating that "Self and society are twin-born, we know one as immediately as we know the other, and the notion of a separate and independent ego is an illusion" (p. 142). These symbolic interactionists contributed to the intellectual heritage that stipulates human beings do not arise distinct from society. Rather, it is from a reflexiveness emanating from engagements with others that humans construct their own notions of selfhood. That today there exists a Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, with its own YouTube channel, blog, and conferences, would not astound the early thinkers, as they would allow that societies, like identities, are always temporally and contextually constituted.

As part of their treatise on the sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckman (1966) admit the influence of symbolic interactionism upon their own theorizing regarding how reality manifests and is understood by individuals. The reality of the world, they say, is shared with others: It is apprehended by us via a deliberate consciousness toward external objects; and it is constituted, together with others, in a dialectical loop of subjectification and objectification. The development of the human organism is a highly iterative process, one intimately related to the external environment (Berger & Luckman). The self, they say, is constituted not only as part of ongoing organismic development, but also simultaneously by socially derived processes and interactions that serve to mediate the environment within which that self exists. They further state:

The genetic presuppositions for the self are, of course, given at birth. But the self, as it is experienced later as a subjectively and objectively recognizable identity, is not. The same social processes that determine the completion of the organism

produce the self in its particular, culturally relative form. (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 50).

As Cooley himself writes, “social consciousness, or awareness of society, is inseparable from self-consciousness,” and that to consider humans as distinct from that which constitutes society is “quite as artificial as to consider society apart from individuals” (as cited in Schubert, p. 133). The notion of a separate individual is an abstraction, he says, and it is both the collective aspects, as well as the distributive aspects of society at large, that respectively promote the establishment of institutions and structures and give rise to the constitution of the self within the larger sphere of interaction with others.

These characterizations provide a particular optic apt for comprehending how selves and identities manifest and present in contemporary digital society. They form a base solid enough to hold the weight of further theorizing about how and why individuals appear to be constructing themselves in front of – *and for* -- our very eyes. Clearly, this is not a novel idea. Identity theorists have long pointed to the notion that we humans are elaborately intertwined with our social environments and that our interactions with the world and others determine who we are, become, and affect. What is new to this age are the technologies that serve to mediate expressions of our being by offering modes of producing and shaping identity ... but back to the theoretical contributions of the traditional symbolic interactionists, who readied the path for the development of contemporary identity theorization.

In some contrast to the notion that society, filled up with social selves, remains perpetually in a state of flux and is always being recreated, structural symbolic

interaction, as theorized by Stryker, maintains that society is not quite so amorphous but rather possesses a stability and structure that can be found via larger patterns of behaviors (Burke, 2006). As with the traditionalists, Stryker (1968) notes that the self consists of distinct identities – designations reflexively assigned to oneself – but which for him “exist insofar as persons are participants in structured social relationships” (p. 559). These designations, at times referred to as roles, are the result of shared societal expectations (the role of teacher, student, etc.), and manifest via a reflexivity toward the self in terms of self-labeling, as well as along a continuum of other dimensions such as self-identification with them (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Additionally, Stryker (1968) posits that these various parts of the overarching self – these labeled identities -- exist within a hierarchy of salience, instantiated via the probability that a particular identity will be invoked over another depending on the situation. This notion of salience, he states, may be used predictively for behaviors in social situations based on an understanding of the levels of commitment to any particular identity. The utility of such predictability becomes apparent when faced with a situation where more than a single identity may be relevant. In such cases, salience and commitment will assist the individual in presenting variants of his or her identity. Stryker assures that “concurrently invoked, different identities do not necessarily call for incompatible behavior. But sometimes they do and it is under this circumstance that the hierarchy of salience becomes potentially an important predictor of behavior” (p. 560). Here it is relevant to understand Stryker’s rank-ordered identity preferences if we are to infer about the multiple aspects – or even multiple identities – of online selves that may achieve prominence over others deemed less salient to one’s purpose.

This commitment, Stryker continues, displays two dimensions: one quantitative in terms of reflecting the number of relationships associated with that particular identity, and one qualitative, concerned more with the depth of relationships as a result of the selected identity. The stronger the commitment to a particular identity in any given situation, along either of these two dimensions, the higher the salience of that identity and the greater the likelihood of performance of that identity.

What is interesting about this theorization is how it appears to undergird so much of what is observed today with respect to individuals' use of new media as parts of their constructions of self. Building a base of "followers" on social networking platforms is not only considered a key indicator of the perceived value of one's self presentations by others (and possibly for oneself?) but also is seen as normative, an important means by which one comes to regard oneself through the eyes of these many others, known and unknown.

To draw from Stryker, the salience of a particular identity – perhaps one that resonates most with the largest amount of followers – increases the amount of commitment toward that identity, with attendant expectations that future behaviors conform to this representation of self. That there are highly individualized degrees of understanding on what constitutes acceptable levels of followership (how many followers on Instagram are necessary for one to be considered influential, for instance) reflects the liminal nature of such states of living in the online ecosystem.

With respect to multiple identities, beyond salience, McCall and Simmons (1966) conceptualize the formation of selfhood primarily through the construct of what they refer to as role-identities, described as furnishing somewhat idealized and aspirational

conceptions of oneself in any given situation. Maintaining that each individual has a multiplicity of role-identities, these scholars state that each role-identity can be split further into two: those they term conventional, which are defined via social expectations (father, boss, etc.), and those they label idiosyncratic, which are aspirational and relate to self-conceptions. Similar to Stryker, McCall and Simmons stipulate the existence of a hierarchal continuum across which span these various identities, even as they focus on “prominence” to effectuate how individuals instantiate these idealizations in any given situation (p. 74). Prominence, then, refers to how individuals prefer to view or imagine themselves. Here again, the notion of commitment plays a central role in the configuration of identity. Commitment is greater, they assert, when positive feelings of esteem or external or intrinsic rewards are derived from an identity, and individuals take care to enact those identities to which they are most committed. They explain:

These rewards, however, must be contrasted with yet another determinant of prominence, the various intrinsic gratifications obtained from the performance of roles and the fulfillment of the corresponding role-identities. These gratifications differ from rewards like money...intrinsic gratifications include, to begin with, the sheer sense of efficacy in having done something with reasonable competence. (McCall & Simmons, 1966, p. 76).

I would venture that it is increasingly clear that those who engage in strategic self-presentation online do so because they are able to extract and experience benefits from such practices. A central purpose of this study is to understand what those benefits might be, why they are so valued, and how individuals perform themselves in order to accrue such perceived value.

As Burke and Stets (2009) note, whatever meanings one associates from engagement with others and from the reactions of others, these attributions back to oneself are subsequently enacted as types of identity. In this sense, they too acknowledge a vast debt to the notion that the self is contextually relevant. They posit there is negotiation between these ascribed meanings and role identities in any given situation, and the resultant enactment represents a form of display – or performance – with the ultimate expectation of some form of verification of self (Stets & Burke, 2000). More specifically, Burke’s approach focuses on the existence of the reciprocal arrangement between behaviors and meanings: “The meaning of one’s identity has implications for how one will behave, and one’s behavior confirms the meanings in one’s identity” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 49).

As part of the many theories evolving out of the symbolic interactionist framework, Burke and Tulley (1977) construct a means by which to measure these identity-focused meanings via semantic differential scales (as cited in Burke & Stets, 2009). While accepting that societal structural components impact and have mediative effects upon one’s identity creation, Burke’s various studies encourage more cybernetically oriented viewpoints which contain evaluative feedback loops between individuals, others, and social situations. A key component of such a loop is the feedback one receives about the self from others; the other three components are the identity standard (self-meanings); the process of comparing the external inputs with the identity standard, and the resultant behaviors. In this sense-making, Burke notes, behaviors are oriented toward ensuring that any perceived meanings regarding the self within specific situations mesh with internally held self-meanings as part of one’s identity standard.

Following Stryker's notion of commitment toward a certain type of identity representation then, motivation to conjoin as much as possible situational identity expectations with internally held self-meanings is an important predictor of behaviors.

These identity theorizations are particularly relevant to what we are witnessing today online regarding representations of self, as well as the behaviors undertaken in response to inputs received from others. The levels of external feedback available pre-Internet appear almost primitive as compared to the sophisticated instantaneous feedback loops that have emerged during the past decade, a result of technological prowess that enables this to occur. Today, the generalized other is on steroids, and as technology-minded researchers like Sherry Turkle (2011) have observed, one's iterative capacities are being strained by the unrelenting generative pace required in service of keeping one's presentational identity and social relations up to prevailing norms.

**Verification + validation = self-esteem.** Whether referencing Burke's cybernetic theory of identity (Burke & Stets, 2009), McCall & Simmons' (1966) role identity conceptualizations, the research of symbolic interactionists, or the constructed self instantiated via systematic cognitive processes, the binding characteristic of these concepts is that humans derive their sense of self in interaction with the greater environment and others, via a labyrinth of inputs interpreted, perceived, internalized, and acted upon. To categorize such complex phenomena, some have referred to this as a self-system, noting it is both reflexive and dynamic, private and public, conscious and nonconscious (Hoyle, Kernis, Leary & Baldwin, 1999). Among the key aspects of this self-system, these authors posit, are "self-referent thoughts, feelings and motives," that provide "an enduring experience of physical and psychological existence" (p. 11).



Referring to empirical research within social psychology, the authors further elucidate that this self-system facilitates three main functions: planning and interpreting behaviors otherwise referred to as internalized standards, that are construed in terms of values that serve to spur individuals toward actions; monitoring the environment to ensure that organismic needs such as social inclusion and cultural adherence are fulfilled; and information processing, the aspects of the self whereby external and internal experience is comprehended and contextualized.

As Burke maintains, as part of the feedback loop noted in the second of these functions above, the inputs (which arrive in the form of meanings regarding signs and symbols) to our selves must undergo a process whereby we seek some measure of verification to our identity standards (Burke & Stets, 2009). Perceptions must be regulated to either match the identity standard or to adjust accordingly. As such, incongruence between one's held identity standards (for instance, "I believe I'm an extrovert") and externally derived social inputs (say, from online followers who suggest otherwise) can be cause for stress, as well as behavior modification to attempt a return to some acceptable level of stasis. George Mandler (1982), in remarking about emotional states and stress, in particular, proposes that it is interruption of thought patterns and actions that cause stress. Interruptions introduced by external feedback to one's identity systems can be extremely disruptive (Burke & Stets, 2009). This may be one reason, among many, why some scholars observe rising anxiety levels among youth who feel pressured to continuously enact themselves online (Turkle, 2011; boyd, 2014; Elliott, 2014).

Regarding such self-verification, numerous studies appear to support the notion that individuals are motivated to gather external evidence that supports their self-views (Swann & Brooks, 2012). They do so for both epistemic and pragmatic reasons, the authors contend -- the former in order to know about themselves and form a coherent sense of self; the latter so that such knowledge can be employed to guide behaviors that enable the smooth functioning of social interactions and relationships. As individuals gain such information, their certainty regarding their own identity standards is bolstered, enabling them to navigate a complex world (Swann, Pelham & Krull, 1989). As these authors state, while the ways in which people seek to self-verify are manifold, “people’s desire for worlds that are predictable and controllable are central” (p. 783). Is it any wonder that given the profusion of online platforms (from messaging apps to blogs, dating sites to social networking sites) through which life is enacted, that individuals work tirelessly to maintain coherence in their representations in order to shape others’ responses? The current obsession with “likes” (conveying approval via platform-specific features) and amassing followers or friends online is simply further evidence that humans have always required validation of their humanity in some form or another.

Burke & Stets insert self-verification into their identity theory as an important construct. “People seek ways to establish and maintain social situations and relationships in which their identities are verified,” naming these as “self-verification contexts,” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 59). They cite Swann’s work, noting that individuals gravitate toward creating “opportunity structures” whereby they procure supporting self-conceptions via the display of signs and symbols that proclaim who they are or wish to be seen as (p. 74). This is accomplished via “selective affiliation,” which involves preferring

to engage with certain individuals over others, as well as via reciprocal “interaction prompts” that appear to solicit responses that fit with their identity self-views (p. 74). Self-verification theory purports individuals prefer that the evaluations they receive from others fit their own estimations – those with positive self-views tend to seek out the same from others, whereas those with more negative self-views also seek out the same from others (Swann & Brooks, 2012).

The display of iconography and text online that presumably coheres to present a holistic – or pseudo holistic -- impression of an individual self might be viewed as a contemporary manifestation of Swann’s opportunity structures. If we accept that, as the socially derived beings we are, we seek out affirmation and confirmation of our existence via others, then it is no stretch to imagine that we seek out information that not only supports our own sense of self (self-verification), but also that we prefer to live in a world that thinks well of us. Among the most central of psychological tenets is that humans have a fundamental need to pursue such self-affirming input (Swann, Pelham and Krull, 1989).

Such self-fulfilling strategies can be conceptualized and operationalized in any number of ways. The self-actualization theory of Abraham Maslow (1943) points to individuals’ needs to aspire toward increasingly higher states of self-fulfillment, whereas the self-consistency theory espoused by Lecky (1945) states that individuals strive for consistency in all aspects of life. With respect to self-enhancement theories, Swann et al. (1989) point to two distinct pathways: simple self-enhancement, whereby individuals are systematically motivated and behave in such manner as to foster positive impressions of themselves by others, and compensatory self-enhancement, whereby individuals who

hold negative self-views are more apt to behave in ways that increase their self-enhancement through others. Though a substantial body of empirical evidence exists to buttress the first concept, there is less to support the latter, note these authors.

While volumes have been written about the concept of self-esteem, it is helpful to briefly note how various scholars have conceptualized why self-esteem plays such a central role in the development of selfhood. Self-esteem, the evaluation of self by the self is, in essence, an attitude one holds about oneself (Burke & Stets, 2009). James (1950), whose conceptualization of self-esteem is widely cited, offers a dual approach to considering self-esteem, noting it is reflective of the ratio of one's successes as juxtaposed against one's aspirations, or that it may exist as a kind of self-feeling one has about oneself, regardless of external objective facts or reasons to the contrary (as cited in Hoyle, Kernis, Leary & Baldwin, 1999). High levels of self-esteem are said to provide a heightened sense of meaning and purpose for individuals, a consequence of the positivity one feels toward oneself (Hoyle et al.) Those with high self-esteem tend to self-promote more than others, and tend to defend themselves more strongly against negative appraisals than those with lower self-esteem (p. 106). Addressing this, Burke & Stets posit that self-esteem has three "bases": self-efficacy, which refers to a general sense of one's competency; self-worth, which refers to the sense of value one feels one has; and self-authenticity, a state of being where one feels one is being true to oneself (p. 117). Self-esteem, then, encompasses the consequential feelings one has about the beliefs one holds about oneself (Leary, 1995). Invoking Cooley, since we largely look to others to frame our self-concepts based upon their appraisals, it is clear to see why individuals

engage in self-enhancing tactics to elicit the positive approvals they require. This is true on or off line.

**Group-think: Negotiating social identities.** In addition to focusing on the development of the self from an individualistic perspective, the emplacement of the individual within a group also must be considered as part of a constructivist agenda. Social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1974) notes that human beings require the sense-making properties categorization of others affords to simplify a complex world. He states such categorization results when an individual constructs orderings of the larger environment in accordance with what is meaningful, and further that such groupings offer continuities between the role being played and its value or relevance within the structure that is the group. Employing constructs developed by symbolic interactionists, Tajfel construes that the idea of a social identity must be juxtaposed with the concept of social categorization, an outcome implicating that individuals seek forms of group membership that provide some measure of meaning and contribute positively toward one's sense of self. Absent that, they may seek to leave the group or engage in alterations to either the situation or the self. This, of course, is a simplistic rendering of Tajfel's delineations of intergroup structure and behavior, but serves as texture for other conceptualizations of how self-identification within groups might occur.

As has been established in the literature, individuals derive a large part of their sense of self socially. The cognitive processes associated with this social or collective self result in the production of group behaviors (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The authors refer to Tajfel's work on social categorization, noting that in the process of this categorization of others, individuals adhere to notions of similarity or difference, the former resulting in

inter-group associations and the latter accentuating the divides between groups. This is similar to what other identity theorists have suggested when they refer to in-groups and out-groups. Stets & Burke (2000) note, “Persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group” (p. 225). Individuals tend to selectively approach certain contextual situations and groupings if these provide mechanisms for self-enhancing application (p. 225).

There is growing understanding of the pull online communities exert upon individuals in their daily lives. As part of the Digital Futures Survey, a resounding 98 percent of those who say they are part of online communities believe these communities are of importance to them (Kozinets, 2012). Communities and groups of people online may be virtual in many respects, yet they are comprised of real people who may interact with each other in offline spheres as well, notes Kozinets. Social networking platforms such as Facebook and Instagram offer unique affordances that make group selection simple to accomplish. Instagram offers both private and public accounts, allowing an individual to broadcast images (as this is its core functionality) to a wide audience, some of whom may not be personally known to the author, whilst also enabling users to create private accounts viewable only by those who have been granted access. In this way, this widely used social networking site encourages group-level categorization. Followers may be grouped based on personal interests at fairly granular levels. Thus, the self selection that occurs may serve to categorize individuals quite narrowly in terms of their outlook and interests. A category such as food interests may be quite broad, bringing together a

large and diverse group of individuals; a category such as teenage boy bands might yield a more discrete audience.

Still, “because social categorization almost always involves self or is in reference to self, we not only categorize others but also categorize self. This is the key insight of self-categorization theory” (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p.11). Yet, as much as group affiliation serves to define and contribute to one’s sense of self, there also exists a larger group identity stemming from the larger organism, these authors say. For the individual, this may contribute to both reflexive and public forms of depersonalization -- a loss of unique identity markers – in that individuals may be categorized or stereotyped as part of the group. Yet, the depersonalization occurring through such categorization also may mean closer identification with the salient parts of oneself within a group, and this may lead to the strengthening of shared beliefs and attitudes. Hogg and Reid note that normative beliefs are developed, modified, and influenced by in-group prototypes. Moreover, given the common desire for conformity, individuals are particularly attuned to these prototypes and how they match, or don’t, these group-based idealized selves.

When assessing why individuals appear to select particular group affiliations, in addition to Tajfel’s sense-making thesis with respect to imposing order upon a chaotic world, foundational conceptions of social identity salience with respect to accessibility and fit should also be factored (Burke, 2006). Characterizations such as race and gender are readily available for self-categorization, and if valued and viewed as critically defining aspects of oneself, constitute variant pathways that may be shared with others. Conversely, if there is not an apparent fit, individuals “are motivated to make categorizations that favor the in-group fit and may go to some lengths to do this” (p. 119).

If one subscribes to the notion that there are multiple ways of self-definition and that individuals identify with the groups to which they belong, then it seems reasonable to inquire about how self-verification works at the collective level in terms of definition of self. Through findings from three studies, Chen, Chen, & Shaw (2004) suggest that individuals are motivated to verify self-views as part of a larger group. Moreover, they demonstrate the impact of four moderating influences on such self-verification practices: The assuredness which collective self-views are held; the kinds of bonds between the individual and the group; the salience of the idea of the collective self; and the criticality of the collective identity to one's own self. As such, they confirm that the construct of self-verification occurs not only at individual levels but also is present in the collective – something useful to keep in mind when assessing online interaction.

**The emerging self – adulthood knocking.** “To be given an identity involves being assigned a specific place in the world” (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 132). Drawing from their theorizations regarding the social construction of reality and, more narrowly, on their expositions about how the individual is socialized via others, what is notable is this assertion that identities take place within the social world that exists for an individual at a particular moment in time. Any discussion about a cohort of individuals must be inclusive of temporal dimensions and sociohistorical context. It is insufficient, in my estimation, to address any individual biography, let alone that of a demographic segment, without situating such narratives within a larger social arc. As such, I find a relatively recent distinction regarding a subset of the larger population apropos for this project (population here refers to the U.S. population). I refer here to the designation given to the population segment between the ages of 18-25, the specific cohort



represented in my study, as that of “emerging adults,” (Arnett, 2000). In conceptualizing the life stage that follows the late teen years, this developmental phase has been variously characterized as young adulthood, youth, late adolescence, or prolonged adolescence. Prior to delving into Arnett’s categorization, a cursory review of identity development theories from a psychological perspective seems warranted.

As part of his developmental theory encompassing eight life stages, Erickson refers to the period following adolescence (18-40 years) as young adulthood (Erickson, 1959). This is the stage that signals the end of the substantial crisis of adolescence (he utilizes the concept of crisis at each juncture to reflect the nature of the radical change that must be overcome to move through successive stages), (1959, p. 122). He notes, however, that this stage – as with others – does not signal any particular break or beginning, but rather represents a continuum of development throughout life. During this stage, the task at hand for the ego identity – the conscious and subjective self-feeling one has -- is to begin exploration, primarily of relationships but also of other aspects of life (1959).

Using Eriksonian constructs, Marcia (1966) suggests that identity status and development are a result of exploration and commitment –learning about life and the decision to take this or that path. He classifies identity stages as follows: Identity achievement, demonstrated by high commitment to an occupation or ideology; identity-diffusion, resulting from low levels of commitment toward any one path as well as low exploration, though not suggestive of an imminent crisis; moratorium, where one experiences crises as part of a struggle between commitments and having to make compromises between his/her wishes and others’ demands; and foreclosure, typified by

high commitment despite not having weathered a crisis – as such, the high possibility that an individual is merely following the expectations of others (p. 552). Employing this scale, in terms of maturity levels, it is the achieved identity status that manifests as most well-adjusted, whereas the diffused represents the least developed identity status (Ickes, Park, & Johnson, 2012).

Though much has been written about adolescence and its primary task of defining one's identity, Erikson (1959) would note there is more confusion than clarity about roles during adolescence. To this, Arnett (2000) might add that a key element of emerging adulthood is the desire to explore and experiment, particularly in the areas of love, work and worldviews. He states, "Identity formation involves trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions. In all three of these areas, this process begins in adolescence but takes place mainly in emerging adulthood" (Arnett, p. 473).

Arguing that the period stretching from the late teens to the mid-to-late twenties is reflective neither of adolescence nor of young adulthood, but rather is a span long enough to warrant its own segmentation, Arnett proposes a new demographic stage – that of the emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2015). He cites that the requirement for such distinction is precipitated by structural and macro-level societal changes in industrialized countries during the past half century. Moreover, in comparison to identity stages that precede this age-span -- and in response to those who would question the need for yet another categorical demarcation -- Arnett stresses there is considerable variability within this demographic subgroup that doesn't exist for earlier stages. For instance, the vast majority of adolescents and children in the U.S. live at home, are unmarried, may be

undergoing puberty, and attend school (Arnett, 2000). By contrast, residential variability among emerging adults is quite marked, as is participation in higher education.

Still, there are those who might question why this phase of life might not simply be considered young adulthood. Here Arnett's response focuses on semantical meaning, noting that to characterize these individuals as young adults implies they are already adults. He feels this term is better applied to those in their thirties rather than what is, in his mind, a transitory state approaching adulthood (p. 477). This "transition to adulthood" also is well documented as taking longer today than during previous eras (Arnett, 2007, p. 69). Today, those in this age range tend to live at home for longer periods; hold higher expectations relative to finding fulfilling career paths, rather than settling for any job; are better educated; are delaying marriage; and are often accused of being the entitled progeny of over-indulgent Boomer parents (2007). Interestingly, within popular culture at least, this transition seems to be somewhat negatively characterized. Media representations regularly point to this generational cohort in comparison to earlier counterparts: A 2005 *Time* magazine article titled, "Grow Up? Not So Fast," warns that social scientists have started figuring out that the years between 18-25 are...

A distinct and separate life stage, a strange, transitional never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in which people stall for a few extra years, putting off the iron cage of adult responsibility that constantly threatens to crash down on them. They're betwixt and between. You could call them twixters. (*Time*, 2005).

Despite evidence from economic data that appear to substantiate such claims, the disparaging connotations associated with such labeling appear to have attached themselves to this population -- to their understandable chagrin. Arnett responds that a

certain level of truth has been unnecessarily hyperbolized – “exaggerated” he says, “to the point of caricature” (Arnett, 2007, p. 70). He further points to studies showing that many emerging adults seem quite satisfied with this extended period of self-exploration and that, ultimately, this stage affords them the ability to arrive at their own levels of self-sufficiency, which eventually does occur.

While it is worth reiterating that none of what Arnett is proposing is entirely contained to the contemporary moment in terms of human development – scholars have always maintained that identity development occurs along a spectrum of maturation -- the fact that so many characterizations have been made to describe the qualities of those in this emerging adulthood group underscores its contested and mutable nature. That said, there is no denying that the world is a very different place from half a century ago, and for those freshly emerging from adolescence, navigating through the thickets of their futures is proving inordinately challenging. Economically, the current picture is rather bleak for many 18-34 year-olds. Since 1960, the number of those living at home with their parents has risen from 20% to 32.1% in 2014, and this cohort (classified here as Millennials) shoulders significantly higher levels of student debt than those in either the Gen X or Boomer generations at the same stages of life (Pew Research Center Data, 2014). Despite the hardships of any era, by and large, individuals do end up growing up. Arnett notes that by their thirties, a large segment of this population has married, many have children, and most are not only financially independent but do not live with their parents (2007).

More compelling is the fact that these individuals do not see themselves fully as adults – nor, of course, do they consider themselves adolescents. In his original study

with this age cohort, the greatest response discrepancy occurred to the question: “Do you feel you have reached adulthood?”. The response category “yes *and* no” was higher than for any other age cohort (p. 471). Such ambivalence with respect to how these individuals regard themselves in terms of their own maturation may well play a role in their explorations of their selfhood online.

Indeed, how these individuals regard adulthood has been subject to inquiry – do they use different standards to conceptualize adulthood, for instance. A study that compared a subset of this age group who perceived themselves as adults to other age-related peers using the same 43 criteria for adulthood found no differences on the criteria both groups used to define adulthood (Nelson & Barry, 2005). However, those who believed themselves to be adults were found to have a stronger sense of identity, were more definitive in terms of the type of romantic partners they desired, were less depressed, and engaged in fewer instances of risky behavior. In terms of what both groups identified as the key indicators of arriving at adulthood, independence and feeling prepared to have a family ranked highest. The findings from this study confirmed that this demographic valued more individualistic types of behaviors and milestones as being representative of moving toward (or achieving) adult identity status rather than more traditionally oriented events such as marriage, leaving school, or being employed.

Using a broad brush to capture some of the key tenets of identity construction and development from social psychology and developmental psychology, it seems appropriate now to situate such perspectives within the larger culture, by incorporating theories regarding media culture within society.

## **Digital Culture – Cultural, Communication, and Information Studies Perspectives**

Digital media culture within the United States exists within the larger milieu of late capitalism and tech-infused consumerism. Duly noting that disciplinary approaches to the study of media and communication utilize different theoretical lenses, from my perspective, integrating scholarship from a critical media studies approach – particularly with respect to spectacle culture – with scholarship emanating from communication studies that focuses on digital media offers utility in terms of grounding my own theorizing regarding manifestations of the online self and self-spectacle.

Historically, from a critical cultural studies tradition, the study of media culture within the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon, taking root most forcefully post World War II (Kellner, 1995). Still, earlier strains of analysis regarding the influence of media are of note -- in particular the Frankfurt School of the 1930s. Kellner states a group of German scholars, having experienced the hegemonic effects of fascism, fled to the United States and began analysis of how culture was mass produced via the media, and within a system of capitalist control. It should further be noted that these scholars were among the first to include the audience as part of their theorizing, though they argued that this largely passive spectator class was controlled by a dominant class that wielded influence over the mass media. While this conceptualization of a docile and unquestioning audience has been debated in ensuing years, it is nonetheless seminal that these theorists opened the door to include audiences in their assessment of media culture – something considered *de facto* today.

Yet it wasn't until the 1960s, an era of significant political turmoil in various parts of the world, that new scholarship, this time emanating from the British school of cultural

studies at the University of Birmingham, expanded the discipline by situating the study of media within a broader socio-historical context (Kellner, 1995). These theories emerged from within the political and social upheaval regarding systemic class oppression occurring at that time in Britain, a period of social destabilization certainly not confined to the European continent, as the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States confirm (Hammer & Kellner, 2009). Adopting a multi-perspectival stance to studying culture and critically evaluating representations of class, gender, race, and nationality via cultural texts, British cultural studies (referred to as the Birmingham School) brought a radical and critical sensibility regarding the influence of the media on cultural practices (p.xxiv). This thinking contrasts with the Frankfurt School in at least one key area – that of presupposing that individuals were handily inoculated via the media and exercised minimal agency in their use of media texts and artifacts. Rather, Stuart Hall, one of the founders of the Birmingham School, posits that audiences actively encode and decode messages within media representations not only by discerning embedded meanings regarding power and ideology, but also by bringing their own life experiences and identities into that dialectic (p. xxv).

As Hammer and Kellner note, deconstructing cultural practices works best when disparate theoretical traditions coningle as part of a dialectic approach that critiques, even-handedly, cultural artifacts and media representations. Moreover, as philosopher Douglas Kellner notes, the importance of British cultural studies was to begin to stress the criticality of media culture and its hegemonic instantiations, (Kellner, 1995). Rejecting, as the British theorists did, the terminology of either ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ culture, the former because it connotes an elitism between high and low culture, the latter

because it is too uncritical and “celebratory” in its presentation of culture, Kellner prefers to use “media culture,” noting it does double duty in dissolving arbitrary barriers between communication, cultural, and media studies, as well as avoids overt ideological positions (p. 34). Definitionally then, Kellner suggests that “the term ‘media culture’ has the advantage of signifying both the nature and form of the artifacts of the culture industries, as well as their modes of production and distribution (i.e. media technologies and industries)” (p. 34).

Acknowledging the outsized role that media play within society, contemporary media culture represents a vast interplay of capitalism, technology, culture, media representations, individual actions, and political activity (Kellner, 2003). With advancing technologies infiltrating so much of daily life, he states, “Experience and everyday life are thus shaped and mediated by the spectacles of media culture and the consumer society” (p. 2). From a critically oriented media studies approach, it is important to conduct contextually relevant, critical, and multi-theoretical analyses of media artifacts and systems – termed “diagnostic critique” – in order to interpret underlying ideologies and offer dialectically produced insights (Kellner, 1995). Utilizing a critical cultural studies approach is particularly relevant to my study, as it most directly points to the range of aspects that must be taken into account when deliberating on the broader instantiations of selfhood within digital culture. Utilizing Kellner’s and cultural theorist Guy Debord’s conceptualizations regarding spectacle culture as both foundation and springboard, I suggest later the application of spectacle in micro-level increments when considering how the self is constructed within the contemporary digital era.



From a communication studies perspective, certainly there is no shortage of scholarship on how the media instantiates within the larger culture. Some of this dialectic is more technologically deterministic, arguing it is technology that is at the core of changes in social behavior; some more socially oriented, preferring a constructivist approach that propounds technology is but an effect of ongoing social changes among peoples and cultures, an effect rather than a cause (Kember & Zylinska, 2015).

Hewing toward a more deterministic bent, communication scholar Marshall McLuhan, in explicating how media shape as well as control human interaction, expounds that all social and personal extensions are but outgrowths of that “scale that is introduced into our affairs” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8). He proposes it is not only the content (the message) that must be decoded and emphasized, but also the “medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates” (p.11). To this, scholar Joshua Meyrowitz adds that electronic media absolutely have altered the significance of time, space, and place (Meyrowitz, 1985). Citing a range of research, Meyrowitz remarks that much of what is referred to as ‘media studies’ has tended to focus on the content of the message rather than on societal changes and impacts wrought by emergent media.

Writing nearly two decades before the creation of Facebook, Meyrowitz presciently articulates it is in the examination of how and why these new media cause fundamental shifts in behaviors that linkages between media analysis and social structure might be discovered. He points to the ways in which electronic media have caused previously distinct social spheres to overlap. Whereas, previously, divisions of people by social situation fostered different world views, allowing for sharp distinctions between “onstage” and “backstage” behaviors, now the fact that so much information can be made

available to audiences means a diminution of the area formerly constituted as the backstage (p. 6). Further, these newer constructions of social situations may be arbitrary, yet are no less real or binding because of the nature of shared expectations and meanings we have with others (p. 24). As such, it is conceivable that today's social situations are every bit as constitutive of an acceptable reality – something to keep in mind when pondering how increasingly artificial selves (using artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, for instance) become more normative in the decades ahead. In conversation with both Meyrowitz and McLuhan, I would note that one consequence of such technological influence over the scale of human affairs can be palpably felt in terms of the mobility and spatial fluidity afforded us today via such technologies as Skype and live streaming, making our embodied existence provisional in many respects. To take up McLuhan's point that media technologies afford greater distributiveness of our selves, we increasingly appear to be swimming in an era of bodily and sensory enhancement via technological prostheses and imaging.

Other media scholars, such as Neil Postman (1985), have offered more opinionated accounts of the effects of media technologies upon individuals. Postman, in decrying the decline of public moral sensibility and the capacity of individuals to think critically, a precipitous slide he blames largely on the dominance of entertainment-oriented media, notes we are “getting sillier by the minute” (p. 24). And while he makes it clear he is not suggesting that media actually have the capacity to change the cognitive structures of the human brain -- something now being empirically challenged via neuroscience, and the key thesis of author Nicholas Carr's book *The Shallows* (2011) – Postman's measure of the impact of media is that it changes the nature of discourse by valorizing certain kinds

of content and information over others. In buttressing his assertion that the primary modus operandi of television culture is to provide entertainment, Postman quotes Robert MacNeil of the televised news program the “MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour” as saying that the idea of television news is “to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone...to pay attention to no concept, no character, and no problem for more than a few seconds at a time” (p. 105). This abbreviation of our attention spans is seen in numerous ways today, from emoticon symbols increasingly utilized to convey more complex human emotions to communication modalities that keep getting shorter. Indeed, if the speed of current online communicative practices is any indication, the notion of taking up to 140-characters to say something may seem antiquated before too long.

Communication studies, quite naturally, has a long and storied history of examining media usage and its effects in terms of interpersonal and mass communication. From early studies on social learning (Bandura, 1971, as cited in Bettinghaus & Cody, 1994), to Katz et al.’s uses and gratification theory (1974, as cited in Littlejohn & Foss, 2005), which maintains that individuals are agentive and proactively seek out media to fulfill their own objectives, to Lazerfeld and Katz’ two-step flow model of media influence (1955, as cited in Hodkinson, 2011), the field of communication studies has tended to focus more on “administrative research,” – that is, research designed to empirically understand audience effects and usage (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. xviii). As part of this trajectory, such research has tended toward examinations of how media encourage associations and, by extension, how media serve to shape public discourse.

In his over-arching trilogy of communicative practices and networked society, communication scholar Manuel Castells (2013) states that the framing of the public mind

occurs largely within the context of socialized communication – whose primary source is the media. As part of the socialization that the media effectuate, three major processes occur between the media and individuals: agenda-setting (the power of media to assign significance to certain factors over others); priming (based on the idea that associative thought can be influenced via specific media prompts); and framing (the selection, or lack thereof, of specific aspects of information to foster certain types of interpretations on the part of the audience), (p. 158). As Castells notes, in today's highly participatory digital ecosystem, it is clear that individuals have the tools to affect their own forms of self-framing. As part of the careful curation (read: editing) of their personal representations, whether photos or posts of themselves, or the selection of text or other visual assets they find appropriate, individuals are, in effect, engaging in activities of self-framing. It is not much of a conjectural leap to suggest that individuals also have the capacity to engage in the other two processes of communication noted above, previously only the purview of heavily corporatized mass media.

Scholars who focus on new media from an information studies perspective understand well the push and pull between this causality and agency (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2012). In terms of new media research, scholars approach from disparate directions: One strand hews to the diffusion of innovations sensibility, whereby technologies are essentially interjected, distributed, and adopted among the wider society, and the other instantiates as a social shaping of technology theory (SST), whereby it is acknowledged that human and societal agency influences and activates technologies, rather than the other way around (Lievrouw, as cited in Lievrouw & Livingstone). As such, SST scholars likely would refute a more unilateral determinism surrounding

technology, suggesting rather that social forces engage in a dynamic dialectic that influences not only the development of technologies but also the production of knowledge (p. 249). Lievrouw notes that those cleaving to the SST model possess a specific view regarding the production of knowledge itself, one that privileges the contingencies of human and social context upon the production of scientific knowledge (p. 249). As scholar Sandra Harding explains, “one of the most fruitful insights of these science studies is that sciences and their societies co-produce and co-constitute each other” (Harding, 2015, p. 18). While the need for SST thinking is well-founded, there is similar necessity for diffusion studies. As Lievrouw (2012) notes, the proclivity of diffusion studies toward network analysis underscores the vitality of the latter’s existence as we shift increasingly away from more “reductionist and cumulative explanations, and toward explanations of complexity in which parts are defined by their interactions” (p. 251). As part of his trilogy on the networked society and communicative practices, Castells offers this succinct aphorism regarding networks: “We are networks connected to a world of networks” (Castells, 2013, p. 139).

**The new ties that bind: Network society today.** Among the most prevalent of conceptualizations regarding communication, culture, technologies, and the media – and even extending beyond these domains to broader realms of the economic and political – is a focus on the construct of the network. The concept of a networked society, of networked individuals, networked technologies, and a global network predates the digital era and, certainly, has foreshadowed it. Network analysis, an admittedly broad moniker covering a plethora of diverging disciplinary trajectories, has contributed to the understanding of virtual communities and technological diffusion (Barabasi, as cited in

Papacharissi, 2011). Explaining the role of individuals as nodes within a social network, Barabasi first points to the notion of a “random network,” posited by mathematicians who were unable to discern why certain nodes (people) decided to link together, and thus offered a premise that adjudicated a randomness that then could be delineated via probability (p. 1). These nascent characterizations of a randomized and thus rather democratic distribution of nodes and links still waft through the discourse surrounding the democratizing influence of Web 2.0 social technologies. However, as part of his large-scale study of Web-based networks spanning more than a decade, Barabasi finds that rather than such randomized networks, where the size of networks are roughly similar, there exists a large percentage of quite small networks alongside a few highly connected ones. He refers to this as a “power law distribution,” one which can be used as easily to chart airline routes and airport hubs, as it can be employed to create a map of the technical Internet of routers connected to smaller nodes, or even to illustrate online communities of individuals (p. 4). Referring to various communication studies of online practice, he notes, “No matter what measure they looked at, whether people just poked each other, traded email, or had a relationship, the same picture emerged: most people had only few links and a few had a large number” (p. 5). The intricacies governing network distribution notwithstanding, Barabasi notes these hubs occur due to preferential attachment – in short, there is a bias toward connecting with a network that already has a large number of connections. Clearly, this may not always suffice as the singular operating principle, at least with respect to individual communities. In that regard, Barabasi states it is the notion of fitness, a node’s capacity to continue to attract links, that must be considered.

Admittedly a cursory review of a complex domain, the concept of a networked existence online nonetheless serves to operationalize thinking about digital connectivity, and how individuals may seek to influence others. In this capacity, scholarship examining the tensile strength of those nodal links – those ties – is of utility. Though conventional wisdom would purport that it is strong ties that yield the most fruitful outcomes in a given situation, with respect to the spread of information, Granovetter (1973) paradoxically finds it is weak ties that generate higher levels of information exchange and knowledge. Though limiting himself to micro-level networks and personal interactions, Granovetter's results have been similarly observed by Barabasi (2011), who notices that information “very rarely comes from the strong ties” (p. 13). However, after adding weights to the links, his findings show that nor does information spurt from weaker ties, but rather from intermediate-strength ties (p. 13). Distinguishing why this is so, he rationalizes that information doesn't flow as well from weak ties as tie strength is too weak to follow, nor does it emanate from strong ties since everyone in such a network has access to the same information (p. 13).

**Together at last: Participation society.** Regardless of tie strength and the structure of online communities, it is necessary here to diverge and discuss the modes of participation and interaction that occur online in order to re-affirm that these communities and ways of being are not esoteric abstractions but have real-life consequences. Castells (2010) reminds that though virtual communities have their own protocols and practices from offline communities, this should not insinuate that they harbor a virtuality so differentiated from the physical world. Notwithstanding the high degree of anonymity and ease of accessibility, to name two differentiators between on and offline worlds, a

substantial body of research demonstrates that online groups adhere to many of the same group-based norms and practices abided by physical communities (Kozinets, 2012). The fact that these are digitized networks rather than corporeal states does not make their existence any less real (p. 15).

The notion of participation online, whether as part of a community or individually, is detailed by media scholar Henry Jenkins, who coined the term “participatory culture” in 1992 (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016). Referring then to fan communities which he studied, Jenkins maintains we should be circumspect when ascribing a certain recency to this phrase. Individuals, being the social creatures they are, have always found ways to interact and participate with each other, though access to such participation has been greatly expanded due to the presence of the Web, these scholars maintain. Jenkins summons forth his grandmother’s quilting circles as evidence that humans have long practiced forms of sharable culture.

Given the ubiquity today of social technologies in the lives of individuals, and particularly for those associated with my study, non-participation would seem highly improbable. Indeed, it is widely noted that FOMO, or fear of missing out, leads to sometimes obsessive behaviors in terms of staying connected to others online. In my discussions with students over a decade, several articulate a fatigue or feelings of pressure with respect to having to be always online, available to others, and maintaining acceptable levels of contribution. Yet, the cost of not remaining constantly engaged via social networking appears too high for these individuals. The frequency of online interactions is, in some ways, a unique qualifier of online presence, bestowing a multiplier effect for this form of interpersonal communication.



Markers such as reciprocity – a key factor within network exchange theory – are particularly important in online social environments (Faraj & Johnson, 2011). Responding quickly to a friend’s posts is a small, but powerful, show of how such reciprocity unfolds. But social exchange online is more complicated than simple linear or even diffused reciprocity. In online environments, these authors say, such social interactions occur within defined social networks, and the fact that the interaction is visible to all participants within the network is highly significant, a fact underscored by social exchange theory.

**Commodity culture: How much value does a self have?** In addition to characterizing digital media culture as participatory and reciprocal, there is another dimension involving commodification that needs to be included. As with the general culture, to varying degrees, there is a Web logic that commodifies all content. There exists a vagueness with respect to content posted by those who would rather their contributions not be appropriated for any purpose other than to facilitate communication and those who don’t mind having their content capitalized (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016). Certainly, with respect to personal representation online, one sees increasingly a nexus between the logic of commodification and the desire for greater individuation. That so many have discovered that the content they produce and present on social sharing platforms about themselves has the potential to yield not just recognition but other tangible benefits serves as a reminder that everything – including oneself – may be turned into a commodity.

In exploring the permeability between commodity and gift economies as detailed by anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986), it is worth noting that the same item that may be

a gift at one point may be viewed as a commodity at another time – a fungibility that particularly resonates within digital cultures (Jenkins et al.) One has only to visit the YouTube Partners Program web site to receive detailed instruction on how best to monetize one's personal videos, an invitation that characterizes such production as empowering and liberating. Less overtly are articulations of the neo-liberal market logics undergirding this. One has to become a partner of Google's Ad Sense platform first (Google owns YouTube), and YouTube then splits any revenues from advertising with the content creator 55-45, with 45% going to YouTube. A business model whereby one side reaps economic benefit largely from the labor of the other is a handy one indeed. Still, as numerous bloggers and YouTubers demonstrate, there is money to be made in creating content featuring oneself.

This type of commodification is induced by the transposition from brands that are products to brands that are people, a new ethos emblematic of digital culture today. Indeed, the development of one's self-representations online can manifest and be regarded in numerous ways: as a tool to achieve specific intangible objectives, as a value proposition aimed at achieving status, or as a means by which to generate revenue, among others. To characterize any of these, and particularly the latter, as positive or negative seems unduly facile. There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to make money from one's labor – many of these YouTubers attempting to monetize their videos are college students with hefty loans, for instance – inclusive of whether that labor is autobiographical. Any memoirist can attest to that. Yet it is somewhat troubling that individuals feel a sense of pressure to develop online self-brands based on their implicit understanding of a modern-day caveat that not to do so can negatively impact very real

aspects of one's personal and professional life. For instance, to not have a well-produced LinkedIn profile may be seen as a real handicap for many in the workplace.

While such norms are part of popular digital culture, scholars who have spent the past few decades examining the shape of the constructed self offer finely grained evaluations of digital culture. In addressing the seeming duality of fake vs. authentic culture, branded vs. commercialized selves, scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) wrestles with the fact that none of this is easily compartmentalized or mutually exclusive. After what she concedes as significant exploration, she arrives at a juncture where she views contemporary brand culture (and within this, self-branding) as ambivalent. She explains, "My cynicism around consumer culture and marketers stemmed from my assumption that commercial culture is about selling lived experience, not actually being lived experience" (p. 213). She further states that "consumer capitalism is a nuanced, multilayered context for identity formation – as such, it is an explicitly cultural space," noting that not only are the marketers who set many of the norms and practices of commodification a part of this space but that consumers, too, via their relational labor, are part of such a space (p. 215).

New technological affordances clearly are behind the self-branding practices of innumerable individuals. One need not travel farther than one's smartphone to encounter varied instances of the packaging, branding, displaying, and even selling of one's self-representations. From being a YouTube celebrity to becoming Instafamous, to borrow from current vernacular regarding popularity on the social networking site Instagram, from being seen as an online influencer, an honorific achieved by hitting an agreed upon milestone in terms of one's number of followers, to getting paid to take selfies (photos of oneself taken by oneself via one's smartphone) with brands, the digital ecosystem

manufacturers new potentialities for self-display on a regular basis. For those who have successfully exploited these systems of commodification, there is money to be made, notoriety in which to bask, and careers to fashion. Using the social platforms of one's choosing as self-promotional spaces (and, in some cases, self-aggrandizing) is increasingly seen as normative.

A cottage industry of entities who serve as brokers between brands that want to co-opt the reach private individuals have with their followers and those individuals represents a growing phenomenon. One such entity, Instabrand, explains it is the “trusted voice” of the individual consumer that is most sought after – nothing new to those in marketing who know well the power of word-of-mouth promotion (Dave, 2015). That said, for every breathless article in the popular press detailing successful digerati who have managed to monetize themselves, there are untold stories of individuals hoping to hit that magical pivot point where their photos turn into bucks or bitcoin. Yet it is becoming widely understood just how much effort it takes to successfully create a self-brand online.

One well-known example is Jenna Marbles, whose real name is Jenna Mourey. Her YouTube channel is routinely rated among the highest in terms of numbers of fans. At the time of this writing, she has approximately 16.5 million subscribers to one of her channels. Her repertoire includes such videos as one titled “Ultimate 100 Coats of Things Video,” in which she spoofs a popular online challenge applying one hundred coats of makeup to her face. As of this writing, the video has been viewed roughly 9.7 million times. In her one-line appeal to have viewers follow her, she states: “Please subscribe to my channel and my vlog channel! I make new videos here every Wednesday and make

vlogs during my majestic daily life.” In a style both witty and intimate, Marbles manages to parody herself as she provides a steady stream of content for her audience. Evidence of her success is easy to discern: Prior to gaining access to this particular video, one has to watch the entirety of a 14-second commercial. No skipping ahead allowed.

Whilst Marbles is an extreme example of a bona fide YouTube celebrity, new opportunities for remuneration for more ordinary mortals can be found rather easily. An entity named Pay Your Selfie works with brands seeking innovative ways to conduct consumer research (Rubin, 2016). Individuals sign up to take selfies of themselves with the brands they use; these photos are then uploaded to a private server. Once consumers hit a pre-determined benchmark of number of images, they are compensated – anywhere from 20 cents to \$1 per image. Consumers pocket a little extra cash, and brands gain access to market information.

These activities point to increasing levels of self-disclosure that also play a substantial role in constructing an online narrative of oneself. Such self-disclosure engenders a social exchange that is part of an ongoing dialectic in which value is purportedly derived (Cheung, Lee, & Chan, 2014). According to these scholars, four primary benefits or value drivers associated with self-disclosure on social networking sites are: “convenience of maintaining existing relationships; new relationships building; self-presentation; and enjoyment” (p. 282). These advantages of social exchange via self-disclosure also appear useful in terms of promoting one’s self-brand for recognition and/or profit.

Indeed, none of these activities are easily pegged. For one thing, the definition of what it means to be a consumer has changed. Consumption today involves a heavily

imbricated form of co-production that invariably appears as an inverse of traditional branding concepts: the consumer becomes the producer, the brand consumes by appropriating the consumer's user-generated artifacts. The rise of self-propelled online entrepreneurship notwithstanding, brands and consumers appear to have embraced a new kind of social contract, where activism and consumerism co-habitate easily. As such, brands and consumers now engage in a reciprocity previously unimagined. Who would have envisioned that buying a T-shirt or bag could work to end world hunger? Or make one feel so good about playing even a small role in ending world hunger? In this mode, one locates an activism defined and instantiated less via action and more through acts of consumption (Hearn, as cited in Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Hearn states: "In the absence of larger frames of meaning, perpetual attention to the construction of 'self' through processes of consumption provides the only remaining continuity, or through-line, in our lives" (p. 25). Moreover, the labor that individuals now must put into their entrepreneurship of themselves – regardless of whether they are promoting brands or themselves – creates what Hearn calls a "flexible personality," which exacts its price in terms of an increasing cynicism and disentanglement with prevailing societal structures and rules. Set within a larger neoliberal framework and capitalistic consumption practices, the commoditized self becomes a new mode for capital: "We see a shift from a working self to the self *as* work in the form of the self-brand" (p. 26).

Focusing on this notion of individual commodification via self-branding, Banet-Weiser (2012) stipulates that self-branding is not "a tired rehashing" of the objectification of bodies, "but rather a new social arrangement that relies on different strategies for identity construction" (p. 69). As part of her exploration of the culture of self-branding as

it relates to women, Banet-Weiser points to the increasingly viable construct of “self-as-commodity,” one that “involves a social relationship with oneself, one of innovation, production and consumption, charged with ideally producing a unique ‘authentic’ self,” (p. 73).

Indeed, it is this self-branding, this willing commodification of one’s personhood, body, thoughts, and acts that differentiates the individual practices during this era from previous ones. I use the framework of societal spectacle (to be covered later) to suggest that individual spectacles exist along a spectrum, from relational to tactical, generative to sustaining, self-fulfilling to exploitative. I don’t find it necessary to either celebrate or condemn these forms of self-construction and display. By considering these practices contextually, as representations of the times, one can remain open to oppositional possibilities – that digitally oriented self-commoditization might offer self-actualization potentialities which could well be considered empowering and democratizing, but also that these practices instantiate as labor that might be exploited.

**Looking at the real me: Self-monitoring and authenticity.** Among the variant forms of self-branding occurring online, autobiographical narration seems to be the most prevalent. Perhaps due to the rise of a kind of digital-ready individualism, an outgrowth of market-driven logics that have for decades stressed personal consumption and the primacy of place that the individual occupies within late capitalist societies, the self as ever-evolving project is now written into being, one rapid keystroke at a time. Distinct from non-digital kinds of autobiography, the self presented online is constructed not in isolation to others, but in communication with others. It is a self that generates via discursive routes, a dialectically produced self, a networked self – in conversation and re-

mastered at every turn with the rest of what floats in its digital orbit. However one's self performances online are characterized, whatever goals are hoped for – from self-actualization to confessional, relational to capitalist – the significant self-disclosure in evidence occurs ostensibly to provide value for those who are to provide, in return, their attention. Indeed, all of the participants in my study thoughtfully consider the opinions and responses of others with respect to their own online actions. A relatively high degree of monitoring among this cohort appears to be the norm, and any perceived diminution in response levels is questioned.

As one aspect of the larger domain of online surveillance, the ability to monitor external reactions to one's online activities and to engage in regular surveillance of others is indicative of the porous nature of public-private discourse on the Internet.

Distinguishing between social surveillance and traditional forms of surveillance, theories about power can be useful (Marwick, 2012). Drawing from Foucault's models of power, and in particular his notion of how power, at micro-levels, is present in all human relations, Marwick suggests that these "capillaries of power" are what flows "between networks and individuals," rather than a more hierarchal and omnipresent power dynamic found in a more traditional sense (p. 382). As such, she frames social media sites as a type of capillary, noting that the context collapses that occur within and across these sites aids further in weakening any notions of hierarchy. In other words, individuals at all levels of power are at once able to view one's representations and one's relations with others. As Marwick remarks, and as noted in my study, such social surveillance can be useful in terms of self-monitoring, precisely because it depends so heavily on the



intimacy of established relationships and the expected reciprocity within networked ecosystems.

In their more granular explication of what social surveillance within social networking sites looks like, Trottier and Lyon (2012) note:

Users participate in a collaborative identity construction with other users; friendships provide unique surveillance opportunities as users often engage with a particular audience in mind; the construction of a personal social network means social ties become visible, measurable, and searchable; (Facebook's) ever changing interface and privacy controls alters users' visibility through the site. (As cited in Owen & Imre, 2013, p. 474).

Noting that "the authentic life must be the public life," Owen and Imre suggest that if one is seeking some measure of visibility or recognition, even "fame or fortune" online, then there is a kind of public presence that must connote a sense of realness that is digestible enough to be attended (p. 475).

One way such kinds of self-disclosure are recontextualized is by the social media platforms themselves, which in conjunction with third parties (advertisers, for instance), are able to utilize personal data provided by individuals freely and turn it into lucrative enterprise. That these platforms routinely engage in altering the parameters of usage, as stipulated in their largely unread privacy policies, lends credence to the understanding that it is they, and not the ostensibly empowered individual, who press the levers of discourse and participatory activity online.

To be considered a successful self-brand, one has not only to construct one's persona as authentic, but has to *be* authentic as well (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Yet unlike

previous eras, where being true to oneself – to seize upon one definitional possibility of authenticity – meant an inward exploration, contemporary culture requires that authenticity be externally facing for others to determine the veracity of such representations. She states:

In the contemporary context, the creation of the ‘authentic self’ continues to be understood as a kind of moral achievement, but moralism itself has metamorphosed into a fun-house mirror version of Rousseau’s conviction, where to truly understand and experience the ‘authentic’ self is to *brand* this self,” (p. 61). She continues, “to be authentic to yourself, one must first be authentic to others; it’s about external gratification. (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 80).

Irrespective of whether one wishes to cultivate online a particular self or to engage in social relations, the mandate to present an authentic version of oneself is writ large. Nevertheless, that so much is visible online makes it rather more challenging to pull off divertissements that pirouette too far off self center. Perhaps this is why it appears to be implicitly understood (particularly by those who heavily utilize digital media) that self-representations may not necessarily be wholly accurate. Most comprehend the need to want to appear publicly in the best possible light. And yet there exists more than a passing suspension of circumspection regarding online representation. We believe quite easily what we read online; we are influenced more readily by those perceived to be influential; we participate more quickly – and more superficially? – when called to action online; we construct and maintain our ‘authentic’ identities, invariably with a little help from Photoshop or the newest Snapchat filters. There is nothing simple

or unidimensional in the ways in which individuals and technologies co-mingle. There is simply this fused reality.

To be sure, there is ongoing debate about the veracity of individuals' online representations, given the high degree of manipulability possible in online practices. With the term "authentic" nearing mythic proportion, determining what is real and what is not is an exercise best left to those who can ascertain this based on the intimacy of their knowledge of others. Aiming his critique squarely at the Internet, scholar Andrew Keen would likely say it is near impossible to find anything smacking of authenticity (Keen, 2007). He excoriates an online ecosystem where everyone is an author and one can't easily tell between the fools and the fakes, lamenting that Web 2.0 has done little to democratize society and ways of knowing and has, in fact, resulted in a dumbing down of social life.

Certainly, others have offered similar injunctions about the deleterious effects of online culture, so Keen is hardly an outlier in this regard. For instance, describing the deconstruction of the printed book into a searchable, link-laden artifact thanks to Google's grand project of digitizing the world's library, author Nicholas Carr (2011) cautions we not get too swept away by the find-ability of it all, noting that what is lost with such expeditiousness is the contemplative state that occurs as part of a more linear and deeply grounded excursion during the reading of a *real* book (p. 165). He cites the evolutionary transference of information from aurality to the written word to electronic screens, where earlier modes of meaning-making have been eroded by non-linear and fragmentary information, paths of distractedness that come at the expense of introspective thought.

Having outlined some of the larger themes associated with digital culture, it is necessary now to narrow the focus on a sub-theme – that of societal spectacle – in order to set the scaffolding for further exploration of how the digital self manifests.

### **Spectacle and Self-Presentation**

In 2006, *Time* magazine's Person of the Year was none other than ... "YOU"! As the magazine's Lev Grossman gushed, "For seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, *Time's* Person of the Year for 2006 is you." Apologies to the runners-up – they'd been sidelined by the blogger down the street. Nearly a decade earlier, the cover of another magazine, *Fast Company*, emblazoned with orange and yellow graphics designed to resemble a box of Tide detergent, featured an article titled "The Brand Called You," (1997). In it, management pundit Tom Peters extolled the virtues of branding, the Holy Grail of commodity culture, and exhorted it was time the average person acquired a branded persona by strategically appropriating tactics employed by successful brands. By stressing our features and benefits, by drawing points of differentiation between ourselves and others, by writing our own mission statements, by increasing our visibility (awareness being the first construct of effective brand-building), we too like a box of Tide would gain a measure of ubiquity, some standout-ness that would materialize in the form of a better career path or upward mobility. Perhaps a swimming pool. Since then, similar-themed missives have proliferated, presumably to slake the dormant desires for personal recognition in each of our unbranded selves.

While many elements of *Time*'s proclamation have come to fruition, particularly in today's media saturated environment, of course not all its predictions regarding the triumph of the individual over institutional structures have been instantiated. Corporate hegemony is thriving, as neo-liberal market-driven practices manifest in disparate arenas, from economics to politics, entertainment to media. But what does appear now to be prescient in the honorific bestowed by *Time* a decade ago is that the culture of self has burgeoned in unimagined ways, aided in no small measure by the emergence of technologies which have facilitated this contemporary moment of me.

Here, I engage more directly with the idea of spectacle and its pervasiveness within contemporary society. I theorize that current manifestations of the online self may well be representative of a nascent form of micro-spectacle, one that privileges a self mindfully produced and publicly consumed. However, prior to utilizing spectacle as a lens through which to peer at the individual online, it is necessary to explicate this phenomenon in some detail.

Spectacle, if we are to understand the word to mean a public display, something to be viewed by an audience presumably for some reason such as entertainment, has existed for millennia. Yet to characterize this phenomenon as no more than a binary of viewer and viewed limits its scope and ignores what more recent theorists have purported – that spectacle, intrinsic to the contemporary moment, represents myriad forms of social relations that reach deeper than -- to borrow from the discipline of communication studies -- a sender-receiver model. As a starting point for the discussion of spectacle's role within contemporary society, the notion that spectacle is deeply embedded within society

and exerts a profound influence on social life as articulated by French critic Guy Debord (1967) seems appropriate.

Debord, as part of a group of French radicals during the late 1950s and 1960s known as the Situationists, penned his opus, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), in which he contemporizes Marxian thinking by reframing key Marxian concepts to reflect more closely his interpretations of culture in Paris. As such, he extends Marx's theorizing regarding the role of commodification by featuring its totalizing effect upon society: "When culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society" (Section 193). He stresses it is commodity that appears to have become the full "occupation of social life" (Section 42). Classifying spectacle as the "general abstract equivalent of all commodities" (Section 49), Debord notes that in such a milieu, production is nothing more than a series of spectacles to be consumed (Section 1).

Thus spectacle -- if used as an over-arching explanation of social phenomena, having as its chief goal nothing, and itself (Sections 10, 14) -- becomes an organizing principle for society. Further, Debord delineates the inherent quality of spectacle as one of imagery, holding images of consumption as *the* privileged form of sensation and sense-making, maintaining that the spectacle "which inverts the real is in fact produced" (Section 8). This "endless cycle of representation and manipulation of desires by mass media industries and technologies" is what Debord sees as constituting the new framework of society (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 34). As Debord notes, social life has moved from "having into appearing" (Section 17). The influence Debord refers to is indeed

totalizing, reaching into areas of social life that were “previously non-colonized,” (Kellner, 2012, p. xvi).

Half a century later, Debord no doubt would have more to say – along with perhaps an “I told you so,” – were he to observe the cacophony of commodified representations and commodity structures constitutive of society today. Debord’s privileging of representation as ‘the real’ is also reflected in the thinking of others. Theorist Roland Barthes, for instance, views spectacle through the prism of mythology (Barthes, 1957). Linking myth to language, itself a subset of a larger order of signs and significations drawn from the work of semiologist Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes offers an impressionistic view of French society during roughly the same time period. He writes about societal spectacles such as the first World Detergent Conference in Paris to the staged drama of a wrestling match. His desire to draw distinctions between what he terms “nature” and “history” (ostensibly his lexicon to represent ‘real’) and what they are made to signify through representation – what he terms “significations” – is the theme that connects his disparate and entertaining vignettes. Barthes observes how one draws inference from signs, and how derived meanings are dependent upon how the thing itself is signified, the weight given to its sign. While he focuses more on speech and language, Barthes – like Debord -- circles around the idea of image and appearance, lending credence to Debord’s articulation of the primacy of visual spectacle within society.

As with Debord and Barthes, for whom the examination of daily life within society was to be their frame of analysis, sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1981) conceptualizes representation in ways that go even further. Baudrillard, in taking part of the new theories of language and code being developed at the time and which influenced

several French thinkers (Kellner, 1989), moves beyond examining the representational qualities of life toward his own theories of reality – or rather, hyperreality, (Baudrillard, 1981). Shifting from earlier conceptions that simulation serves as a referential entity toward a theory that simulation – in consuming all representation -- becomes simulacra, Baudrillard narrates what he views as the collapse between the real and the simulation of it that then constitutes another form of reality: the hyperreal. Using Disneyland as one example, he explains it is not unreal but rather more than real, and its role as a hyperreal form is to conceal “the fact that the real is no longer real” (p. 13). Baudrillard focuses on this presence of simulacra as a form that seeks to divert from the unreality of what is ostensibly considered real. To clarify Baudrillard’s sometimes circuitous prose, Kellner (1989) explains the argument by saying, “commodity signs refer to and gain their significance in relation to other commodity signs ... rather than to any external referents or ground of value, just as media representations refer primarily to other media representations rather than to any outside world” (p. 63).

One finds echoes of this sentiment in Debord’s earlier oeuvre: “When the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior” (Section 18). The sense of separateness that is a result of such simulation and simulacra is similar to Debord’s conceptualization of spectacle, where he too refers to the alienation and distance that spectacle creates.

For Baudrillard, this phantasmagoria of images, media messages, and information does not generate more meaning or substance; rather the opposite. The produced nature of information verily guarantees a collapse of meaning at any level beyond the superficial, and the staged nature of communication generates nothing more than a whirl



of simulated noise endlessly recycled. Examples of Debord's consumption-minded society and Baudrillard's reality-inversion sense-making are easily locatable today, from thematic fantasy lifestyles pedaled by brands such as Ralph Lauren, to the manner in which news anchors routinely report -- as news -- what other anchors have reported about the presumably newsworthy event, to the elevation of "real" experience of what are constructed and often contrived events that fuse consumer and commodity into new branded wholes representing the sweetest spot for marketers. Boorstin's term "pseudo-event" comes to mind (Boorstin, 1961).

Debord's and the Situationists' contributions to the corpus on spectacle notwithstanding, some critics point to the high degree of abstraction and lack of empirical specificity as particular weaknesses of this theorizing. For scholars Gotham and Krier, the Situationists fail to explore competing logics, nor do they take into account contradictory viewpoints regarding the holistic nature of spectacles (Gotham & Krier, 2008). While Kellner (2012) finds useful Debord's notion of spectacle as a critique of consumer capitalism and culture, he focuses more specifically on media spectacle, which he feels dominates and drives much of contemporary life. He describes this form of spectacle as "technologically mediated events" which proliferate and appear to distribute instantaneously, which are propagated by an immense media infrastructure, and which serve to provide salience to issues by virtue of dramatization and disruption (p. xi). Employing diagnostic critique, Kellner routinely analyzes a variety of contemporary spectacles spanning multiple spheres such as politics, entertainment, sports, and the media.

In his book *Media Spectacle* (2003), Kellner interrogates different modes of spectacle from a critical cultural studies framework and posits about what these spectacles reveal regarding the human condition. He peers at the ideological underpinnings behind such productions, raking through the politics of representation, rejecting dualisms such as modern and post-modern, and ultimately contextualizing the subjects he dissects through a multiplicity of perspectives and a thorough decoding. For Kellner, spectacle today is as much a part of what he terms “technocapitalism” as anything else, a fusing of capitalist hegemony and technologies which together give rise to a ubiquitous form of “infotainment” culture that privileges spectacle (pgs. 11-12).

He notes it is the pursuit of profitability, an elemental part of a hyper-competitive global economic structure, that pushes the capitalist drama into ever more spectacular iterations in order to optimize its goals. For instance, to explicate the concept of commodity spectacle, Kellner critiques McDonald’s, tracing its rise as an arbiter of cultural values and mores from the 1950s – an era of new-found social mobility, conformity and instrumental rationality – to its more recent state of existence as a global powerhouse, exporting not merely its Happy Meals and process-engineering efficiencies but also a distinctly Western set of values (pgs. 39-42). He cautions that to interpret the phenomenon that is McDonald’s as merely representative of commodity spectacle is to miss a larger point: that McDonald’s is, on a grander scale, a purveyor of cultural values, ideologies, and normative practices on a global level. It is through this larger spectacular phenomenon, he maintains, that we are inculcated and educated about what it means to eat together, live in a diverse society, and enjoy the conveniences of modern life. McDonald’s, then, represents a budget-conscious version of the American Dream, a

uniquely American narrative symbolizing the promise and potentiality of the good life, one that with appropriate localized referents, can be expeditiously exported, comprehended, and consumed. Kellner notes his exploration of McDonald's yields both affirmation of instrumental rationality as well as Baudrillardian hyperrealism.

Kellner's more recent writings explore how media spectacles proliferate in a media ecosystem inclusive of new media technologies (Kellner, 2012). He traces the circuitry between Web 2.0 media and more traditional mass media, noting that disruptive and (presumably) newsworthy events are not only amplified as they travel through these new networks, but their footprints are substantially enlarged by the participation of others engaged in the discourse. In this manner, media spectacles become the "common denominator" underlying individual participation and consumption (p. 209).

As the notion of spectacle becomes increasingly prevalent in contemporary society, scholars continue to grapple with how to unpack Debord's theories. In re-theorizing Debord, scholar McKenzie Wark (2013) explains that Debord focuses on two types of spectacle: the concentrated and the diffuse, whereby the former requires the presence of a centralized personality (Stalin, for instance), and the latter eschews this cult of personality for a more populist variant of Big Brother culture focused on the cult of commodity. He explains that Debord himself, in the late 1980s, reframed his own thinking, merging both the concentrated and the diffuse into a new "integrated" spectacle that Debord claims re-inserts the power of an invisible state which itself remains such a falsified mystery to both the public and itself that ultimately it is rendered impotent (no one is really in charge, and everyone is ungovernable anyway).

Wark remakes Debord's form of spectacle into what he feels is more reflective of today's era. He refashions his conception as the "disintegrating" spectacle – an homage to Debord -- noting that the integrated spectacle was reliant on the centralizing means of production by the culture industries, whereas today such distribution and production are essentially the responsibility of the spectators themselves (p. 6). He explains:

Ever finer fragments of the time of everyday life become moments into which the spectacle insinuates its logic, demanding the incessant production and consumption of images and stories which, even though they take place in the sweaty pores of the everyday, are powerless to affect it. (Wark, 2013, p. 7)

His comments are particularly germane to this project; in essence, Wark's characterization of how today's disintegrated spectacle manifests – by allowing the spectators to do the work of producing the spectacle and where technologies allow for the profusion and diffusion of these microscopic bits of individual spectacle (whether about the self or not) – is closely related to my central thesis whereby I suggest that individuals today are engaged in forms of self-spectacle which, to distinguish from the mass cultural spectacles as espoused by Debord et al., I refer to as micro-spectacle.

Thus far, discussion has been about spectacle as an operational force within society. Yet, if we are to delve more substantively into the nature of spectacle as it operates today, particularly on the individual level and particularly within the digital realm, one needs to shift to the nature of contemporary visual culture and the claims it makes upon us as part of discrete levels of spectacle such as they are infused throughout the culture.

**Imaging techniques: A culture of visibility.** While Debord (1967) is clear about the primacy of imagery's role in spectacle, he stipulates that spectacle is not about mere images, nor even things in themselves, but rather reflects the social relations among individuals whose entire lives are mediated by images (Section 4). And yet there can be no denying that we inhabit a world that is highly visually oriented, increasingly so with technologies that hasten this facilitation toward a culture of imagery. The volume of images and messages that confront us daily is enormous. Social networking site Facebook reports that the average amount of time spent daily on its site, particularly for those in the 18 to 34 age range, is 50 minutes (Stewart, 2016). Another report, this time from media ratings stalwart Nielsen, notes average TV viewership among 18 to 34-year olds amounts to roughly 2 hours and 45 minutes daily (Nielsen, 2016). No doubt similar statistics can be found about other social media platforms, and regardless of which set of metrics one chooses to believe, it is clear that significant chunks of time are spent looking at screens. Add to this all manner of omnipresent non-screen media – billboards or brand-specific iconography, for instance -- and one finds such visual representations seeping into the tiniest crevices of daily life in unprecedented ways.

For Andrew Darley, who traces the visual properties of spectacle historically through the technologies of film, television, and the computer, the distinctiveness of digital visual culture and spectacle are to be found in its reproducibility and repetition, (Darley, 2000). He notes the fact of technological reproduction and, by implication, that repetition is a distinguishing factor of the current moment whereby an exponential increase in images -- essentially refined, remixed and redistributed copies of the original - - flood a culture brimming with viewable things. He characterizes how “constant raids on

the image bank,” result in “a game of perpetual recombination” that along with the use of newly minted digital techniques yields innumerable variants of the original (p. 128).

Emblematic of digital culture today then, these recombined images – the remixing of which is recognized, not hidden, as part of the process – are constitutive of a culture of surface play. From the standpoint of the spectator, there is an expectation of “intensities of direct sensual stimulation” and while these can vary, they nevertheless share a continuity in the spectrum of feelings involved with spectacle -- those of excitement and stimulation (p. 168).

Darley’s reference to a certain “sensuous immediacy” (p. 169) occurring today is as relevant, if not more so, to the viewing that occurs on more individualized and localized levels via digital and social media. Admittedly exerting a partitioning effect between the spectator/viewer and the subject/performer, there is nonetheless the potentiality of a more personal exchange between these actors, something unique to the moment and to the nature of what might be considered individual spectacle. In this sense, performing in one’s own spectacle affords unique opportunities to interact with one’s audience, engaging continually in an iterative loop of feedback. In another sense, observing others’ self-spectacles allows for a form of digital voyeurism that is increasingly enabled by technologies that strive to give us more of what they want us to want – anywhere, anytime, rapid access to private imagery now made available for public consumption, that directs our attention toward it, and away from other things. As the rate at which this is accomplished accelerates – a simple swipe is quicker than a click, and two clicks are better than three – the ephemerality of the realities we consume increases.

Pre-dating the digitization of imagery, photographs of course have long been reproducible artifacts. Essayist Susan Sontag (1977) observes it is the very contingency of photography that underscores the truth of reality – that it *is* fleeting, perishable, and to side with Baudrillard to an extent, unreal. Citing the reasons why people take photographs, Sontag notes the ability to document one’s life, to construct a visual narrative of oneself, to use photography not as art but as “a social rite” -- even to forestall anxiety. She remarks how the medium is a tool to depersonalize social relations (Sontag, 1978, as cited in Manghani, Piper and Simons, 2006). Commenting before the advent of social digital tools used to snap and send photos to others who might easily comment, share or appropriate, Sontag notes:

It (photography) offers, in one easy, habit-forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others – allowing us to participate, while confirming alienation. The final reason for the need to photograph everything lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn, use up – and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more. (Sontag, 1978).

Yet to dwell only on the reasons why we create images does a disservice to the epistemologic nature of what is visual. As Sontag (1977) notes, it is photographs that teach us what is worth looking at; they provide evidence of reality such as it is, to be interpreted. Photographs are a way “of certifying experience” (p. 9).

In one of the more impactful instances of the use of imagery to compel action, in the late eighties, a campaign called ACT UP was among the first to break through the stereotypes that had dominated the general discourse of AIDS by using different visual

strategies than had been previously employed to represent the disease (Takemoto, 2003). In so doing, the campaign spawned a new dialogue by dissolving the distance people felt in the viewing of only horrific images of the devastation wrought by the illness (p. 83). As the editor of the journal, *October*, who compiled a special issue on AIDS, inclusive of the ACT UP campaign, Douglas Crimp addresses the utility of representation for activist politics in this way:

An image isn't simply negative or positive but rather is the product of social relations and produces contradictory social effects. I was trying to examine how the images that were being put forth in the media or even called for by activists could be problematic in various ways. (Crimp, as cited in Takemoto, 2003, p. 85).

This campaign was heralded for its recognition of how imagery could be used to inform and change mindsets, as well as behaviors.

Indeed, in theorizing that what is visual is pedagogical, and that the apparatus of spectacle culture secures its power (at least in one sense) from its ability to inform, fine arts scholars Garoian and Gaudelius (2008) reach consensus that it is “spectacle pedagogy” that characterizes the present moment (p. 38). Their conceptualization of spectacle pedagogy comprises polarities – of absorption via individuated mass representations, as well as the inclusion of more critically oriented approaches that interrogate the in-between spaces and meanings of kinds of representation. Drawing from the movements of the early 1900s, they cite the artistic lineage of the Dadaists, Surrealists, Cubists, and others who constructed new modes of representation as part of their goals to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo and what they saw as the dehumanizing effects of modern society and its affinity toward mass production. The



authors point to the significance of collage, montage, assemblage, installation and performance as five types of representation with the power to express the political and cultural objectives associated with various cultural movements.

With respect to the Dadaists, their intent indeed was to shock and disrupt, to demonstrate that art was not something to be separated from the everydayness of life, but rather to show the randomness, banality, even horror of daily existence (Lievrouw, 2011). It is the disruptive quality of Dadaist representation combined with their use of the aforementioned techniques of appropriation that surfaced within the Situationists' re-characterizations of spectacle within culture (p. 34), and which today may be seen as further evolving. Certainly, it was the fracturing of traditional artistic sensibilities that elicited the reactions from the public that the Dadaists sought (Benjamin, 2008, p. 39). They understood well the power of distraction, and the ability to force attention via presentation of a provocation.

In problematizing the issues of distraction and attention, there are features other than opticality that must be considered (Crary, 1999). Arguing that the constant privileging of visualness within culture means reducing the relevancy of other factors such as specialization and separation, which are precursors to visuality, Crary pushes back against the "hegemony of vision," suggesting that the definability of a subject or object be considered not merely via the visual, but also from other vantage points inclusive of aurality, sentience, and other modalities, (p. 3). He echoes Debord, stating that to focus on the visual aspects of spectacle is to miss the point. As does Debord, Crary maintains it is necessary to consider how spectacle is created via conditions that separate,

isolate, and individuate subjects. He points to how media manage attention by partitioning audiences, and by exerting control whilst giving off the perception of choice.

As such, Crary concludes it is attention that “becomes the key to the operation of non-coercive forms of power,” and that “spectacle is not an optics of power but an architecture,” (p. 75). Here, it should again be emphasized that the digital infrastructure that enables such presumably agentic participation is never neutral, and practices of self-branding, social relations, and self-display occur atop a substrate laid and controlled by institutional interests, whether corporate or political.

Yet a mediated life, suffused and constituted by images, has always been part of the human story. “The language of images is everywhere,” states Daniel Boorstin (1961, p. 183). Writing nearly 60 years ago, Boorstin finds the image to be a “value-caricature” that must be believed, one that becomes more important than reality as it is consumed, one that encourages both action and passivity, and that occupies that liminal space between the imagination and the senses (p. 193). As a kind of gateway drug to pseudo-events, images tend to replace ideals, assuming an even greater import in our imaginations. Such “deference to images” (p. 202) is a commonplace of today’s era, and as our infatuation with images increases, our suspicions of the abstractness of ideals increases as well.

In charting the genealogy of visual studies, Nicholas Mirzoeff (2006) reminds that “visuality is very much to do with picturing and nothing to do with vision” (p. 67). Utilizing Patrick Joyce’s writings (1994), Mirzoeff states that a “mode of imagination” is required not as “the ‘image of something else, but without which there cannot be something else” (p. 67). There is something resonant in this invocation of the

imagination. It offers perhaps another perspective on why individuals today are as entranced as they are with the imagery of themselves. What could be more compelling than to imagine a reinvention of one's self or, if not a full-scale redo, perhaps a minor remodel, aided through the lens of an object no larger than a deck of cards? Here it is -- the opportunity to rethink one's self, to bring forth different and new aspects of self shaped by text and imagery, to see if it gains traction with unseen others, to imagine other possibilities. It is a marker of this era that these "discourses of visuality," to appropriate Mizroeff's language (p. 76), offer new spaces for self re-creation. Regardless of the emphasis placed upon the outward facing representational qualities associated with the embodied self, there is always the internal unseen self that shows up in the frame and upon which we, as observers, confer our own sensibilities and narratives and through which we, as subjects, hint at our own (desired) identities.

Thus far, the dialectic of spectacle and spectatorship has been about that which occurs at the dermal boundaries. Yet if we are to truly approach the self within the context of contemporary visual culture, a spectatorship that pierces through these physiological configurations must also be considered. As a result of the sophistication of medical imaging technologies, images of our corporeal selves, as well as simulated data instantiated renderings of our bodies, are in ready supply for viewing and conjecture (Czegledy & Czegledy, 2000). In an era of advanced visualization modalities, we now have new ways to understand, look at, and re-imagine the human body. Appropriating from the constructs of visual culture, these authors specifically discuss the idea of spectacle as it relates to the human body and how, prior to current medical visualization technologies, the constituted reality of the body occurred only through sensory

experience and self-reflection. Referring to both imaging technologies as well as to the possibility of augmenting such visual information with external data to yield wholly new pictures, they state, “We now see the body in plural ways: via electronic pulses, magnetic cadences, thermal signatures, etc. Such differing forms of visualization signal a qualitative difference in bodily understanding by way of technological mediation” (p. 107).

These scholars stress the parallelism of these phenomena alongside the rise of visual culture, noting that digital imaging technologies represent among the fastest growing industries today. To extend Baudrillard’s simulations, here we are able to simulate bodily states and gaze at virtual possibilities as related to our very own molecules. Thus, whether via technologies such as PET (positron emission tomography) scanners that peer deep inside us, or Fitbits worn outside the body but which flash a constant visual reminder of our internal states, the spectacle that is us becomes even more palpable, consumable, and sharable.

And sharable... current manifestations of such practices abound. A web site called Quantified Self ([www.quantifiedself.com](http://www.quantifiedself.com)) claims to be a community of self-sharers who wish to discover more about their own bodies. Via meetups, constant posting about bodily states (site contributor Richard Sprague, for instance, offers a cellular composition of his microbiome for us to observe), and conferences, the site invites us to blog about the minutiae of our corporeal selves. Such microscopic visualizations, it is held, promise the way toward better science, productivity, and self-actualization (Kelly, 2007, as cited in Banner 2014). Such lifelogging, a form of continuous tracking and self-monitoring of bodily states and life experience for the purpose of generating data,

instantiate as a discursive aspect of contemporary cultural practice regarding self-display, self-disclosure, and self-spectacle. The claim that “we want our health to be a number” (de Brouwer, 2011, as cited in Banner, 2014) is reflective of the validity and primacy afforded to such kinds of data (p. 198).

Pioneered by Microsoft researcher Gordon Bell, who in 2000 began wearing a camera around his neck to record and store data about his life that would, in the future, presumably obviate the need for memory (Elgan, 2016), lifelogging has with the entry of the smartphone and other technological wearables recently assumed greater viability and newfound popularity. Though Bell’s project of recording an entire life still requires levels of technological capacity absent today, there is no question that the ability to extract data about bodily states has progressed significantly. Moreover, as scholars and others maintain, our current fetishization of all things data falls well within the constructivist paradigm of a self in becoming. Such representations of our biodata are mediated via digital technologies, resulting in a dynamic that enables (many would assert empowers) individuals to recontextualize, even reshape, their self narratives via these graphic presentations (Banner, 2014). Such a presentational mode, she says, is a form of biomediation, of “turning the self into data” (p. 201). Banner’s research describes the ways in which the performance of biomediated selves, in spaces such as online sites like PatientsLikeMe.com, is complicated by the capitalistic practices of such sites (p. 203).

Utilizing the liberationist parlance invariably attached to digital technologies, sites such as PLM promote their practices and espouse their *raison d’être*. From the web site, the following description covers what they do with personal data:

PatientsLikeMe members aren't just transforming their own lives, they're helping to transform the very system that serves them. We analyze their data and experiences to create a new kind of medical evidence and truer picture of human health — and then we bring that evidence to our partners to help them fill the gaps in how they treat their patients. From pharmaceutical companies to research institutions, we team up with leaders in the industry to bring the patient perspective to their products, services, and care. ([www.patientlikeme.com](http://www.patientlikeme.com)).

AstraZeneca, Genentech, and M2Gen are the big pharma partners listed below this text. For pharmaceutical entities, the extremely costly and difficult process of recruiting and retaining patients is thus mitigated via this site, which affords easy access to research subjects willing to provide their data free of charge (Banner). It is unclear, however, how much PLM makes in its own partnership deals with such entities. Reduced to data, as Banner notes, we enable ourselves to enter into yet another neo-liberal commodification process. This said, Banner does not engage in discussion about what benefits accrue to individuals themselves, many of whom might well be cognizant of the capitalistic proclivities of the site.

Indeed, the ability to provide information about oneself publicly can also be viewed as an act of individual agency, one not always provoked or coerced. It is widely understood that participation on the Internet, via support groups, like-minded online communities, or on sites such as PLM, can be enormously beneficial for individuals in terms of broadening their communicative outreach and understanding their own situations in discourse with others. In such cases, tacit or explicit knowledge about the subsequent

commodification of one's personal information still may not preclude one from offering that information willingly. The notion that one is somehow contributing to the greater good by offering personal information also may serve as a motivating factor. Thus, the fusion of aggregated data and personal information existing within a broader digital ecosystem that overtly extends its neo-liberal reach into the most intimate aspects of our humanity may yet be seen as offering benefits to individuals. Such interactions make the pathologizing of new corporate/individual exchanges via digital technologies more ambivalent, and certainly opaque. Such practices, manifesting as new-found expressions of agency, also may be regarded as new modes of self-spectacle.

Pointing to what they refer to as “the cult of the measurable,” Evans and Giroux (2015) decry the current infatuation with self-monitoring (p. 67). They view the return of “data storms” characterized by metrics that are merely amassed and not contextualized or interpreted as lacking in moral imagination, an implication – or indictment – of a heightened capitalist agenda (p. 68). The data, notes scholar Sherry Turkle (2015), herd us into narrower canals; we must find ways to tell our narratives through the numbers that tell our stories for us (p. 89). Through such self-tracking mechanisms, a new mindset emerges – one becomes one's number (p. 90). Like images, numbers tell effective stories, and like images, they can be reductive. Wearable technologies such as Fitbits that monitor one's every step have the ability to transmit that data elsewhere as well – to be aggregated for general research purposes, to sell us something, or perhaps to convince an insurer to issue a policy based on our now visually verifiable fitness levels. In the emerging field of people analytics, Ben Waber (2013) who wrote the eponymously titled book *People Analytics*, is the CEO of a company called Humanyze, which has developed

processes to collect and analyze data culled from workplace interactions between employees. Using their proprietary badges –sensor devices worn around the neck that monitor interpersonal behaviors – Humanyze offers employers data about communication and workflow patterns. Such data are used to understand internal networks, to observe the functioning of cross-departmental teams, and to generate metrics to inform such processes as space planning. Where one’s cubicle is placed may well be a function of who the data say one interacts with most, or least. While the dangling sensors may seem off-putting, they are at least a visible reminder that one is under scrutiny. Contrast this to VoloMetrix’s data gathering, where the company combs through an employee’s outlook calendar, email message headers, and instant message logs to ascertain presumably anonymized data on who is conversing with whom and for what purposes. Their website stresses in numerous ways the anonymity of the process, yet also promises to divulge “who and exactly how many employees are involved in business processes,” ([www.volometrix.com](http://www.volometrix.com)). While my project doesn’t delve into the burgeoning world of analytics, privacy issues, and surveillance, from the perspective of generating data about ourselves, it seems there is little more compelling to us than the spectacle of ourselves, or others. These nano bits of us – a kind of digital DNA – darting in and through vast unseen algorithms that attempt to snare them into new twists, promise to accrete over time in unforeseen ways and will come to shape who we once were by those peering back at this impressionistic lode of numbers and narratives.

**Seconds of fame: The rise of digital micro-celebrity.** Within a culture that valorizes the visual, images must be contextualized as necessary commodities to be consumed, distributed, and increasingly appropriated for one’s own use. While much in



the current infotainment society can be culled to what media scholars Best and Kellner (1999) refer to as the logic of commodity spectacle, whereby aspects of culture take on a packaged veneer ready for widespread consumption, the Internet in particular has enabled practices of self-commodification and attendant consumption. These scholars find that Debord's characterization of spectacle is even more in evidence today, pushing his earlier analysis even further to suggest we are "in a more advanced stage of the spectacle, which we call the interactive spectacle," and one that involves a much more active individual in engagement with emerging technologies (p.11).

Indeed, there is little question that those who engage in strategic self-presentation online do so because they are able to extract and experience benefits from such practices. Invariably, garnering attention, whether via Facebook followers, Twitter re-tweets, or YouTube views, offers the adjunct benefits of achieving a form of micro-celebrity (or in some rare instances, macro-fame) that may yield tangible, as well as psychic, rewards. Reframing these markers of achievement as "status affordances," Marwick (2013) comments on how displays of oneself on social media serve to reify inequalities between high and low status individuals by "reducing complex relationships to visual displays of quantity and quality" (p. 93). As part of her four-year ethnographic study of Silicon Valley, Marwick finds that because social media technologies tend to reflect the values of those who create the software, these technologies "illuminate and reward status-seeking practices that reflect the values of the technology scene: idealism, privilege, business acumen, and geek masculinity" (p. 77). Using social media is a way to display one's status by posting about one's busy life, filled with interesting experiences and interesting people – all of which conspire to create a specific narrative, one worthy of attention at the

least, adulation at the extreme. Marwick details the ways in which hierarchies of power, so prevalent in the highly competitive environment that many consider the epicenter of technological innovation, are substantiated via social media use. For instance, within this ecosystem, being able to attend events that hold some significance – such as the Burning Man gathering or the South by Southwest conference – confer opportunities to further burnish one’s reputational scorecard by publicly demonstrating that one is able to rub shoulders with those higher on the food chain.

Quality and quantity matter, Marwick claims. “If you only have 150 followers while your peers have 150,000 followers, you are considered, by those in the tech scene, to be less important” (p. 97). Additionally, it is often not just about the followers one has amassed; there are other metricized displays of influence that may be seen as more relevant. The ability to have one’s posts retweeted is seen as another status marker, perhaps an even more compelling one, since the implication is that one’s content is important enough to be distributed by others, she states. Perhaps it is the digital equivalent of a third party endorsement – a little added luster to one’s own spectacle.

Such status-seeking behavior is not confined, of course, to the Valley, and while instant fame remains elusive for most, there are enough examples circulating in the popular press to give the false impression that it is achievable at the individual level. While many realize it takes a significant amount of labor and ambition to create an Internet presence that yields metrics sufficient enough to warrant being considered a celebrity, there continue to circulate examples of individuals who, by sheer happenstance, have become famous online. Alex Lee, a sixteen-year-old whose photo was snapped by a stranger while he was working at a Target store, and then posted on Twitter by a teenage

girl in England with the caption “YOooooooooo,” became an overnight sensation, presenting him with 100,000 new followers by the time his shift had ended. Two days later, he was on a plane to be on the Ellen DeGeneres Show (Bilton, 2015). On Instagram, Lee currently has 1.7 million followers and his opening statement reads: “I was once a cashier.” Though it is uncertain what Lee does currently other than post online, he has been outspoken about how this accident of fate changed his life. Despite the many photos of himself on his Instagram page, an indication that he has not entirely eschewed the fame that has visited him, Lee nonetheless notes his celebrity “is starting to get old,” and that “I have to dress nicer now. I can’t wear sweatpants. That really upsets me” (Bilton, 2015). That said, Lee appears to be mining his micro-celebrity for whatever its worth.

As with this example, it is evident that micro-fame (a term used to indicate a form of celebrity garnered by ordinary individuals who haven’t done anything to amass such elevated status) at times arrives unbidden. In addition to Lee, we have as another example Jeremy Meeks, whose face “went viral” (an over-worked term indicating widespread and quick dissemination via social media channels) on Twitter in 2014, during the time he was in prison, bestowing upon him the moniker “hot convict” and enabling him to procure an agent. He has since been released and is pursuing a career in modeling (Fowler, 2016).

While it would not be incorrect to point to the rise of Web 2.0 technologies as a significant factor contributing to the relatively easy manner in which immense visibility and celebrity are created, the notion of raising the profile of ordinariness has a nested history within a larger tapestry of celebrity culture (Gamson, 2011). Decades ago, it was

the Hollywood-based studio system that assiduously crafted celebrity-dom for its contracted actors by utilizing public relations. More recently, it is expected by audiences that the more mundane aspects of life about those who are “stars” be shared publicly. In this way, a conflation between the public and private occurs, and a sense of perceived intimacy emerges among the audience in relation to these out-of-reach others, (p.1063). Even more, reality television enables ordinary folk to become known for their very real (seeming) foibles. As media theorist Neal Gabler (1998) notes, we are seeing an undeniable shift toward the “life movie” which creates its own celebrities; in a sense “people who had starred nowhere but in life” (p. 147).

Defined by Marwick (2013) as “a state of being famous to a niche group of people,” she continues “it is also a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention” (p. 114). Referring to Internet fame, Marwick explains such micro-celebrity requires a hefty dose of self-presentational tactics, such as the careful arrangement and selection of photographs that depict a certain self-portrait, as well as an understanding of online cultural mores and their use in service of one’s objectives. Creating such a persona, whether for the purposes of achieving micro-celebrity or to project a desired narrative of oneself for public consumption, is a hallmark of contemporary culture today. As she notes, “People imagine a self or a life and use social media technologies to bring this self into being” (p. 193).

The notion that the self can be constructed and promoted for distribution holds broad appeal, particularly for those who have grown up with these new media, but also for those who understand well the power of such distribution networks. Yet to contextualize all this ‘newness’ within a historical frame, even these instantiations should

not be regarded as entirely new. Explicating his conception of what constitutes a “pseudo-event,” Boorstin reminds that these are not spontaneous – that they are structured events for the purposes of gaining attention and reproducibility (1961, p. 10). Pseudo-events, then, represent the convergence of planned and ritualized events or “synthetic novelty” found within society (p.9). As part of his oft-cited aphorism that celebrities are mostly “known for their well-knownness” (p. 74), Boorstin explains that within a culture that perpetuates and valorizes pseudo-events, the democratizing feature that exists is that “anyone can become a celebrity” (p. 60). As is increasingly understood by those who utilize new media technologies today, the lines between what is considered ‘real’ and what is ‘staged’ for one’s smartphone camera blur.

In the end, what one needs is a story – a narrative, an artifice, to facilitate the route toward personal celebrity, notes journalist Chris Hedges (2009). In an indictment of contemporary culture, Hedges expounds upon the ways in which individuals lust after personal celebrity, disregarding semblances of reality, preferring instead the gaudiness of unrealistic imagery. It is a fantasy culture, he purports, one of illusion, that relegates notions of propriety or intellectualism to the fringe, insisting rather on a highly commodified and plasticized version of life.

**Impression management online: Performativity and display.** In the contemporary moment, in a culture increasingly obsessed with celebrity, self-identification, and sociality, there has never been a better time to become micro-influential. That the self-performativity associated with online representation is so widespread underscores the fact that the desire to be seen -- literally and figuratively -- is inordinately compelling. The potential for micro self-spectacles is significant.

Since a large part of my research involves understanding the motivations behind why representations of self are constructed online, it is noteworthy to consider these identity representations from the perspective of impression management scholarship. The self-portrayal that occurs online, its discursiveness, and the range of self-presentational tactics utilized in service of various objectives tend to cohere into an online identity that is both generative and revisionist. Impression management scholarship stipulates that individuals modify their behaviors and representations in response to feedback received from others. That these types of collaborative interactions occur so routinely in digital environments underscores the level of impression management that has to occur during the construction and maintenance of one's digitized identity. Theories of self-presentation and performativity tend to support a constructivist approach to identity work and appear to be increasingly relevant today.

Grounding much of the discourse on self-presentation is scholar Erving Goffman's (1959) work, which proposes a dramaturgical model wherein individuals act out various roles in life while others, the audience, watch and react. Goffman, through his meticulous explanations of how individuals conceive of, manage, and maintain their 'performances' in the presence of others, argues that all such identity work is done to affect some control, either in service of an objective or to control the perceptions of others. Drawing upon their stores of "social discipline," humans find ways to tamp their manifold variable impulses and project the "expressive coherence" Goffman says is vital to the appearance of a consistent identity image (p. 56). In this sense, it is not unlike the motivations that exert their influence on the objectives of individuals today who, in creating their online personas through constant adjustment to the social environment, may

be incentivized to present a version of themselves to meet certain presentational goals. Unlike Goffman's face-to-face settings, however, today's performances occur within the vast theatre that is cyberspace.

Interestingly, while the 24/7 metaphor to denote a warp speed culture is frequently applied to digital life today, the ways in which one's digital presence occur – singularly and usually privately behind a computer screen – mean there is actually more room for deliberateness and thought with respect to performing an online self. This degree of anonymity, lacking the instant feedback and judgment inherent during live face-to-face encounters, appears to engender a more varied self-expressiveness (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Working on one's strategic self performances in the privacy of one's own space behind a computer screen (and with a delete button handy) evokes Goffman's analogy of the back region, whereby we are able to not be 'always on' but rather can test out our acts or read aloud our posts with others before having to perform in the front region (aka hitting the 'send' button).

Beyond Goffman, other theorists have chosen performance as their metaphor to explain behavior and modes of being. In considering gender, scholar Judith Butler (1990) espouses that gender identity itself is rather a continuous process of becoming than a fixed state of being, and that only through a series of ongoing acts which occur within settings and via culturally contextualized discourses, is gender identity created and recreated. For Butler, who has written extensively on gender – and what is more salient an attribute to one's identity or sense of self? – it is a series of acts or performances to be repeated “as a signifying practice,” with its end goal survival within a cultural rubric that is punitive if gender is not performed correctly (p. 191). As she further specifies, these

performances are mostly enacted under duress. She delineates that the word “strategy” be used to denote this reality. In such fashion, Butler is clear that to perform gender as part of one’s identity means to act with strategic intent (p. 191). For both Goffman and Butler, the concept of strategy towards identity figures prominently, and indeed when it comes to the self-representational work undertaken by individuals online today, if the results from this project are indicators, intentionality and strategic aim loom large for many.

In attempting to demonstrate how theories of performativity translate to online representation, recent media scholars have a rich field from which to draw. Weaving Butler’s theories throughout his work, scholar Rob Cover (2012) studies the effects of social networking sites (SNS) on identity construction. In this study, Cover posits that the ways in which individuals construct their online profiles within the parameters of a given SNS represent aspects of performativity online, acts also affected by online normative practices (as afforded by the platforms themselves). He expands his thesis about performance activities used just for purposes of self-representation online to include relational acts, such as friending someone, as well as acts of surveillance, whereby individuals “police each other’s subjecthood for coherence,” an alignment with normative aspects, or easy-to-read stereotypes (p. 181).

As such, Cover stresses that engaging in such social practices in the course of self-presentation is not representative of a single activity but rather “interactivities” inclusive of one’s own practices and those of others (p. 178). He maintains that the repetition work required by Butler to inform and stabilize one’s identity manifests in these online activities and, more importantly, that these activities should not be viewed as



distinct from other “ostensibly embodied performances of identity categories” (p. 179). His anti-essentialist, post-structuralist conceptualizations leave room for the ways in which individuals display unique forms of agency online – from deciding how to construct profiles of themselves, to the ongoing work of narrating their lives, commenting on the autobiographies of others, or incorporating the perspectives of others into their own self-narratives. In this way, Cover considers the project of constructing and determining selfhood online as an ongoing process of creating subjectivity. He explains:

Following Butler, and viewing identity and selfhood as nonvoluntarist, those unconscious performances that cite and repeat discursively given identity categories or stereotypes allow us to explore how online behavior is more than an expression of different ways of doing identity and, instead, as a set of acts and behaviors that constitute those very identities. (Cover, as cited in Poletti & Rak, 2014, p. 58).

Addressing these interactions directly, researcher danah boyd’s (2014) multi-year study into the social networking habits of teens yields a portrait of behaviors that are varied and not altogether that surprising. Noting teens fluidly cross the boundaries of public-private behaviors as they interact with each other while also being exposed to a network beyond the bounds of direct relationships, boyd states all this makes impression management – and its cousin performativity – “tricky,” since one never knows where one contextual sphere begins, or ends (p. 49). Being networked in innumerable ways means one’s performance can rarely be truly private. As such, teens are fairly masterful at negotiating between the multiple points of feedback they receive from others in terms of

their self-presentation strategies – again, not unlike what Goffman posits when he speaks of others offering commentary on one’s performance.

Another scholar, Lee Farquhar (2012), looks at the how individuals actually perform their online identities. His 12-month cyber-ethnography recounts the profile constructions and interactions of 346 Facebook users, and examines the imagery utilized by these individuals as they seek to gain social acceptance online in the ways in which they present themselves to others. Farquhar finds that the use of devices such as bumper stickers and flair -- identifying paraphernalia not unlike posters in a teenager’s bedroom that serve to communicate something about the individual -- are used extensively by Facebook users to convey their personality to others. In these cases, the choice of devices serves their objectives to be viewed in the best possible light by others. In such fashion, this study demonstrates how online identities manifest as continuous performative acts of individual agency within a defined web of networked interaction.

In yet another study seeking to show “identity as performance,” scholar Zizi Papacharissi (2012) examines the micro blogging site Twitter as a space where contexts collapse as part of a larger public-private performance of identity work (p. 1990). Among her findings, Papacharissi notes that the tweets examined via a framework of discourse analysis demonstrate a high degree of deliberately improvisational performances that afford emotional release in public environments. Such behaviors, she says, are part of a larger self-monitoring and awareness of self-representation that occurs in order to effectuate a narrative regarding one’s desired identity representation.

While Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor is frequently utilized to lay a contextual foot path for research regarding self-presentation, scholar Bernie Hogan (2010) suggests

a somewhat different approach in considering the ontological scope of either online performances or online exhibitions. In describing the interactive, mediative, and reproducible qualities of social media, Hogan suggests that “the world, then, is not merely a stage but also a participatory exhibit” (p. 377). In so saying, he distinguishes between performance spaces, whereby actors act for audiences who watch, and exhibition spaces, where artifacts are displayed to be viewed by others whenever and wherever they wish.

Calling upon Goffman’s thesis where both the performer and audience are bounded, Hogan suggests that to automatically consider online content about oneself as strictly about performance seems inadequate. Once content, even self-referential content, is recorded, it no longer carries with it the sense of boundedness that is attached to either the individual or the audience. He notes that the “distinction between ephemeral act and recorded has an instructive parallel in the domain of art” (p. 380). Content via performance that is ephemeral – that contains the “aura” that Benjamin (1967) wrote of regarding original art versus art that was reproduced and later consumed – is different from content that is recorded in some fashion, stored in a database, perhaps reconfigured by others, searched for, and later consumed (p. 381). The latter is less performance and more a form of exhibition, held within the exhibition spaces that constitute online sites. Hogan’s definition of exhibition spaces comprise two key components: That the information regarding an individual is produced for the audience on-demand, and the fact that the individual creating the content -- which is to be stored and possibly reproduced -- “does not continually monitor these data as an audience is receiving it, and may possibly never fully know the audience” (p. 381). Ultimately, Hogan’s point is not to suggest that

the performance paradigm is of no value in scoping online representation and behavior, but rather to offer that it provides an incomplete picture.

His conceptualization of exhibition – personal display, not just of images but also of one’s thoughts, comments, relational interactions for others to view – is valuable to my thesis regarding the spectacle-ization of life online. In this project, a consistent theme of self-display and concern for response from others – qualitatively and quantitatively — seems to be prevalent for all study participants to varying degree. As such, it is useful to consider the concept of self-spectacle as a fusion of performativity and exhibition.

This also seems to be the conclusion of a study by Van den Broeck, Poels & Walrave (2015) that examines social networking use among those within the emerging adulthood segment (18-25). These individuals are found to be generous at self-disclosure as part of their desire and need to experiment with their identity formulations. Their penchant for self-display – and the concomitant comprehension of how to effectively navigate through issues of privacy via their understanding of manipulating platform-specific settings -- is part of an overall consciousness, these authors claim, that particularly characterizes the behaviors of this cohort. I would suggest that this consciousness, in many instances, is overlaid by a strategic sensibility in terms of intentionality and awareness.

Moving further into the realm of expression and display in virtual spaces, Lievrouw (1998) explores yet another instantiation -- what she terms heterotopic communication (p.83). Drawing from Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, spaces that carry with them betwixt-and-between qualities of being of the world yet being outside the world (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986), Lievrouw explores the range of heterotopic

communication that is present, particularly within virtual environments, as part of her study of interactive communication in information-oriented societies. She stipulates that heterotopic communication occurring within these virtual spaces is constitutive of two distinct components: a cultural ideology that privileges communicative action and valorizes its power to transcend most if not all societal problems, and the belief in instrumental rationality, inclusive of “subjective individualism, and strategically practiced self-interest” (p. 84). Of the former, she states:

The features of virtuality that are most important to interaction and discourse are that the communicator’s presence and presentation of self or identity in an intangible and fluid network of social links takes precedence over his or her proximity to others in physical space. (Lievrouw, 1998, p. 85).

Moreover, prime among the characteristics of such kinds of interaction are spectacle and simulation, as articulated by Debord and Baudrillard respectively, (p. 88). Lievrouw notes that new types of “virtual social forms” may indeed afford individuals with participatory options that propel agency and move away from the passivity mentioned in Baudrillard’s instantiation of simulation culture (p. 89). Today, we see evidence everywhere that individual agency and appropriation of media technologies for personal use have given rise to new forms of heterotopic communication.

**Audiences, publics, or networks?** Much as Goffman (1959) and Hogan (2010) have addressed both bounded and unbounded spaces within which performance and exhibition occur, others like Meyrowitz (1985) have addressed the fact that media (in his case, broadcast media) also have contributed to the creation and dissolution of boundaries. In contrasting between Goffman’s privileging of face-to-face interaction and

McLuhan's (1964) emphasis on media effects rather than direct interactional experience, Meyrowitz stipulates that these complementary strands nevertheless miss a crucial linkage: that of the impact social situations exert in terms of mediating and effecting social relations, behaviors, and media consumption practices.

With respect to online media, Marwick & boyd (2010) consider, in particular, the influence of audience on blogging activity. Regarding the individuals they study, these scholars find significant variability with respect to how these bloggers perceive whom they write for. Those whose audience size is smaller tend to refer to their audiences as their friends, while those with more expansive reach speak of fans; the term 'follower' is interpreted in multiple ways (p. 119). In this particular study of Twitter, a micro-blogging platform, Marwick and boyd observe that those who engage in the very public practice of sharing 140-character-filled thoughts do so with audiences who are imagined. They further note that Twitter "flattens multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon they refer to as 'context collapse,'" which causes tension given the requirement to present a coherent and consistent identity (p. 122). The necessity of utilizing differing self-presentation strategies is ever-present, and individuals undertake creative means by which to enact different aspects of themselves – using multiple accounts or nicknames, for instance – in order to present an authentic-seeming self.

Without traversing too deeply into the thicket of authenticity studies, an area rich with scholarship and contested meaning, acquiring the status of appearing real or authentic online is a much sought-after achievement. Perceptions of what is considered real are brokered in terms of the variability of self-presentation tactics employed, and based on what one perceives one's imagined audiences expect, say Marwick & boyd. The

ability to self-reveal is a skill to be honed, particularly if one is attempting to be strategic about constructing a self-narrative online. “Revealing personal information is seen as a marker of authenticity, but is strategically managed and limited,” they note (p. 127).

Among the hallmarks of social interaction using digital media is the availability of appraisal mechanisms – comments, ratings, thumbnail ‘like’ icons that vote up or down -- that arrive in constant waves of incoming feedback. These are utilized in hopes of reducing the ambiguity associated with one’s online presence (Courtois, Merchant & De Marez, 2011). Drawing from uncertainty reduction theory, these scholars suggest that on the video sharing platform YouTube, it becomes necessary for one to imagine the contours of one’s audience – or networked public, as these authors prefer -- since the audience is unseen. As such, individuals pay close attention to the visual cues regarding the attention their videos receive to ameliorate their tensions -- cues, by the way, that are visible to the full universe of YouTube-watching publics.

Of course, this can be said of other social media platforms as well – as long as one has not made one’s account private, self-representations and social relations are visible to everyone. As such, there is awareness on the part of individuals of the social amplification that can occur given this reality. That everyone in one’s known social ecosystem, and possibly unknown others, is able to watch one’s stream of interactions can serve as a powerful motivating factor to behave in certain ways. This may be why so many individuals find it necessary to ensure that their posts receive a certain amount of likes – important in terms of the personal benefits they receive from direct positive appraisals and third-party validations, all of which come with the added boost of being publicly visible.

In discussing the intersected effects of media properties and audience activity upon self-representational tactics online, increasingly, there is a sense that the term “audience” may be somewhat lacking. Indeed, it is challenging to find nomenclature to describe individuals who direct their attention to that which is presented to them. Are they audiences? Or publics? Networked publics? Communities? Fans, friends or followers?

Taking up this question are Lievrouw and Livingstone (2012), who problematize the notion of audience – or rather “how to characterize people collectively with regard to their sociality and cultural practices via media and information technologies” (p. 7). They assert that the term “audience” does not adequately convey the array of practices that now comprise Internet-based communication and media consumption (p. 8). In sifting through various options, they lean toward an expansive approach – suggesting the use of “people” rather than “users” for instance, in order to capture the essence of all that occurs, noting it is also a term that may be used broadly across disciplines (p. 8).

Moreover, in regarding the evolution of mass media toward a more individuated media ecosystem, the concept of “audience” becomes even more problematic (Livingstone, 2006, p. 234). As new modes of participation and consumption occur with respect to media, traditional kinds of audience analysis and media effects research can no longer contain the totality of what is occurring today, she states. As such, Livingstone notes that cultural studies approaches that critically interrogate media influence, as well as communication studies approaches that hew toward uses and gratification theorizations of agency, are being “rethought as the media and communication environment becomes increasingly diversified, globalized, individualized and privatized” (p. 243).



If one is to approach contemporary audience research from the perspective of online networking, then it is largely the affordances of technologies that structure and shape social interactions (boyd, as cited in Papacharissi, 2011). Via her ongoing ethnographic studies, boyd observes that social networking sites have as their primary constituents “networked publics,” which she defines not only as a technological space, but also an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice,” (p. 39). These publics share similarities with other publics, she maintains, yet are distinct because the architecture of their environment shapes the nature of the engagement that occurs. Citing differing scholarship that expounds upon what a public is, from Habermas’ public sphere (1964) for instance, boyd leans more toward Mizuko Ito’s version of “networked publics” (2008) as indicative of how communication and information flows are molded by networked technologies (p. 41). Similar to Jenkins, who addresses the inherent spreadability or diffusion of media technologies (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013), boyd too points to the ability to document, store, and spread that occurs online (boyd, p. 45).

These are a few of the aspects of networked publics found within this digital broth. Regardless of terminology, any discussion of publics or audiences as part of an examination of representation online needs to acquiesce to the incontrovertible fact that such presentations of self are conducted for the purpose of being consumed by others, for it is through this new digital looking glass that much of contemporary self-hood takes its shape.

**The making of a digital self.** In terms of how the digital self gets made, scholar Nick Couldry (2012) examines what people do with media texts. He considers this as

“media as practice,” a shift from either textual analysis or a focus on production and consumption toward actual engagement with media. He summons the work of Theodor Schatzki (1999), who conceptualizes that practice itself offers organizing properties from which broader social orders emerge. What is critical to understand, Couldry states, is “Schatzki’s point that it is the socially achieved patterning of practice that enables the flux of everyday activity to be intelligible between actors” (p. 40). In this vein, Couldry applies Schatzki’s concept of practice to examinations of media culture: “What types of things do people do in relation to media?” (p. 40).

Castells (2009), too, draws attention to recently altered practices that cause a blurring of boundaries between mass media and mass communication – practices such as viewing (television, for instance) or using (the Internet, for instance) -- whereby the mediums themselves are transformed by other media. Digital social media (blogs, wikis, email, social networks, etc.) that enable individuals to create their own horizontal networks materialize into what Castells refers to as “mass self-communication” (p.65). YouTube is a prime example such mass self-communication, he notes. Castells circles around the notion that the nature of certain kinds of online self-representation presumes a level of overt and deliberate display.

Certainly Couldry is twirling in similar fashion. He coins the term “presencing” to denote representational practices engaged in by individuals and groups using digital media to manage “a continuous presence-to-others across space” (p.49). Moreover, he asserts that presencing occurs because of an “emerging requirement in everyday life to have a public presence beyond one’s bodily presence, to construct an objectification of oneself” (p. 50). Indeed, one has only to draw from features embedded within popular

social networking sites such as Snapchat or Facebook – the former offering users the ability to watch their Snaps (photos) disappear in a few seconds yet also to record Stories (photos strung together) lasting 24 hours, the latter providing various kinds of functionality to document the progression of one’s life -- to find examples of this. Such platforms have inexorably altered the course and practices of how individuals construct their online identities. Citing data from the Pew Internet Project, Castells (2009) notes that 32 percent of Americans say they blog *for their audiences*, (p. 66), -- metrics that underscore the significance of a turn toward a more public and quantifiable expression of oneself.

From a sociological perspective, this outward and reflexive orientation is characterized by Peter Burke and Jan Stets thusly:

The responses to the self as symbolized object are from the point of view of others with whom we interact (taking the role of the other toward ourselves), and this implies that our responses are like their response, and the meaning of the self is a shared meaning. Thus, paradoxically, as the ‘self’ emerges as a distinct object, there is at the same time a merger of perspectives of the self and others and a becoming as one with the others with whom we interact. The self is both individual and social in its character.” (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 10).

This confluence of seeing the self as both individually distinct yet also socially responsive reflects a contemporary conundrum whereby identities are understood to be uniquely malleable and strategically constructed whilst also remaining authentic.

Moreover, as individuals invest increasingly greater time and energy into their digital interactions and representations, sociologist Paul Hodkinson (2011) wonders whether

these virtual representations become “more important or more real than their identity off screen” (p. 277).

Psychologist and founder of MIT’s Initiative on Technology and the Self, Sherry Turkle would likely answer with a cautionary “yes.” As one of the earliest scholars to examine identity representation in digital environments, Turkle has observed the evolution of the digital self for more than 30 years. In her 1995 book, *Life on the Screen*, she reports on what were then the first stirrings of identity formulation via digital interfaces as part of the emerging phenomena of MUDs (Multi-User Domains), within which occurred the subset of multi-user games. Exploring these virtual worlds and the challenges they present to existing epistemologies grounded in the constructs of modernity that privilege a world of origin – of a fixedness -- rather than the boundary-less places that now seem to exist, Turkle addresses the phenomenon of identity simulation. In so doing, she regards the Internet as becoming “a significant social laboratory for experimenting with constructions and reconstructions of self that characterizes post-modern life” (p.180). This experimentation has been greatly advanced in the last decade by new media technologies, which encourage unfettered personal display and communication – albeit within the prescribed strictures of the platforms and technologies.

In more recent analyses, she examines what occurs when part of life takes place virtually:

In games where we expect to play an avatar, we end up being ourselves in the most revealing ways; on social networking sites such as Facebook, we think we

will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else – of the fantasy of who we want to be. Distinctions blur. (Turkle, 2011, p.153).

Documenting scores of interviews, primarily with young adults and adolescents, Turkle sketches an assemblage of portraits that reveal their “presentation anxiety” with respect to how the self is presented, or played as a character (p. 182). In her 2015 book, *Reclaiming Conversation*, her subjects tell her they go into “performance mode” when they share their thoughts and think about “how they will ‘play,’” (p. 83). She writes, of one: “So Melissa wrote a pleasing profile for Facebook, one that reflected the person she wanted to be, her aspirational self,” (p. 83).

Interestingly, what Turkle finds is that as young adults use their aspirational selves for the purposes of self-reflection, the busy-ness of performing online toward an idealized self may well be beneficial -- but it has a curious property: it can make them feel envious ... of themselves (p. 84). Here, keeping separate boundaries between one’s real self and one’s online representations of oneself is increasingly challenging. Still, a desire to “witness their own personal growth” is among the chief motivators for young authors of blogs and personal web sites (Stern, as cited in Buckingham, 2008, p. 103). In addition to the self-reflection involved, which these participants report as a “reward” they receive from these self performances, they also feel a deep-seated obligation toward their audiences to keep their online personas updated and interesting (p. 102). Recalling Castells’ trope of mass self-communication, it is important to remember that for these youth, there has never been a time in their existence where addressing vast publics has not been possible. As Stern writes about the technologies that facilitate such expression, “these affordances are not lost on youth authors, who candidly offer dozens of examples

of tactical choices they have made about what they post online in an effort to manage others' impressions and to gain social approval" (p. 106).

Russell Belk who, in 1988, offered the notion of an extended self, enlarged through association and acquisition of material possessions, writes years later about the need to rethink his previous assertions (Belk, 2013). He argues that the digital self is not merely managed actively by the individual, but also by others who are part of creating this autobiography, yielding what he terms an aggregated self. Though offering greater possibilities to create one's own desired narrative via new technologies, the fact that others can so easily manipulate and distribute information also means a loss of control. He writes, "The aggregate self can no longer be conceived from only a personal perspective and is not only jointly constructed but shared, that is, a joint possession with others" (p. 490).

To the extent that others influence perceptions and presentations of self online, that may be true; however, the claim that one's identity is substantively *possessed* rather than shared with others might brook some opposition from those who take pains to cultivate a persona that is representative of their sense of their authentic selves. Belk, however, considers the pieces that comprise a digital self – photos, avatars, videos and posts – emblematic of the disembodiment and subsequent re-embodiment occurring online.

Continuing this motif of pastiche of self, psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) offers a framework to explain why this is so, by situating what he calls the fragmented or distributed self within the context of "social saturation," a condition arising primarily as a result of massive technological upheaval and resulting in substantive shifts in the ways

humans comprehend their being-ness. He defines this saturation as a kind of over-stimulation wrought by the pervasiveness of technologies and the resultant increases in exposure to others outside smaller, more traditional communities wherein which our predecessors played out their lives. The broad impacts felt by these technological advances, he posits, manifest in a dislocation of self and an increased relativism, resulting in a self that is fragmented and discordant with more linear, less variable modalities of being as found in prior eras.

Gergen's landscape presents a foreground of the constructed digital self inhabiting the techno-cultures that serve to bisect it, breaking it into numerous pieces and layers, yet also freeing it to explore new intersectionalities. The aforementioned social saturation, so central to his notion of contemporary identity, is reflected as such: "There is a populating of the self, reflecting the infusion of partial identities through social saturation. And there is the onset of a multiphrenic condition, in which one begins to experience the vertigo of unlimited multiplicity" (p. 49). Gergen bemoans the losses incurred during the transition from the modernist to post-modernist self, decrying instances whereby today's hapless self floats adrift in a cacophonous sea populated with the voices of others, and with no rudder to direct the way. He states that the post-modern individual, being pulled in so many directions, "may feel a sickening sense that one's true emotions are being lost in the charade" (p. 148).

While I would agree with many of Gergen's assertions, my conversations with students and colleagues over the years about online life leads me to question some of his more strident characterizations of an unmoored, endlessly drifting self. In many instances, accompanying the admitted anxiety -- perhaps even stretching toward anomie -

- that confirm the existence of a fragmented and highly distributed self, is also a new-found groundedness, presumably the outcome of being able to shape one's identity however one desires. To be sure, Gergen concedes that these "technologies of social saturation" allow for increased exposure to others, expand opportunities, and give rise to new emotions; invoking Walt Whitman -- "we contain multitudes" -- he states that "with social saturation, each of us comes to harbor a vast population of hidden potentials" (p. 69).

Giddens (1991) likely would agree with this blended approach. He suggests that contextual fragmentation, though viewed by many as causing disruption and "disintegration into multiple 'selves,'" can just as easily be viewed as a mechanism by which the integration of self can occur, as one finds ways to incorporate disparate and unique elements into one's personal sense of self (p. 190). In his consideration of the political arc of life, where public and private selves intertwine, Giddens suggests a dual interpretation, that of emancipatory politics and life politics. The former concentrates on the liberation mechanisms that work to unhook individuals from life constraints, the latter is more about the choices one makes with respect to lifestyle and self-actualization. Chief among the decisions one makes concerns identity, he states, and these undergo continuous change in response to external shifts. He cites many of the civil rights and feminist movements as examples where questions of identity have been at the core and, as such, have created new conceptualizations of self.

Referring to identity, gendered or otherwise, Giddens moves into the territory of the corporeal self, noting that "the more we reflexively 'make ourselves' as persons, the more the very category of what a 'person' or 'human being' is comes to the fore" (p.



217). Here, the body needs to be surveyed as a reflexive instrument, one in concert with the larger society. Though he refrains from referring to this as post-modernist thought, Giddens does suggest a contrast between prior forms of thinking about the body from purely a physiological standpoint and more recent instantiations where “the body, like the self, becomes a site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation,” linked via systems, processes, and technologies in a liberating schema that enables it to be “worked upon” (p. 218).

While it is this reflexivity that is at the heart of my project in terms of understanding what it is we are witnessing today regarding self-construction online, it is worth a small detour to consider what some who have been looking at the dematerialization of the body into information clusters and expressions of data have to say. Characterized as a fusion between human beings and machines, the conceptualization of what it means to be a post-human gains purchase as we increasingly witness the emergence of body-modifying or self-extending technologies. Beyond the transmutation of the self when it undergoes a recontextualization by way of imaging technologies that render one’s internal biology as expressions of data, there are other extensions of the embodied nature of ourselves to consider. Certainly, humans have always had a close relationship with their tools. Yet it is perhaps the rate and scope of the technologies being created today that give one pause. It is indeed becoming possible to envision that which has been relegated to the realm of science fiction. As Andy Clark notes, such concerns are symptomatic of what is a misconception about our own humanity (Clark, as cited in More and Vita-More, 2013). It is “a vision that depicts us as ‘locked in agents’ – as beings whose minds and physical abilities are fixed quantities, apt

(at best) for mere support and scaffolding by their best technologies” (p.113). Suggesting that it is not desirable, let alone feasible, to restrict the body in such a narrowly defined manner, Clark focuses instead on the mechanisms of distributed cognition, our innate neural plasticity, and our overall adaptability. He reminds that there is nothing too new about enhancing human potential and adaptation.

Braidotti (2002) expands upon this, noting not only is it due to our innate need for control over our lives and environments that we employ technology, but also that we humans have always tended to anthropomorphize. Her emphasis being on what technological systems are doing to the female body, Braidotti takes issue with the ways in which we still refer to our bodies, given their existence in a web of abstract systems of media, chemistry, psychology, and science. She finds this interwoven tapestry between the human and the technological as “a new kind of unity” (p. 225). She states: “It has become historically, scientifically and culturally impossible to distinguish bodies from their technologically-mediated extensions” (p. 228). Via the complex information pathways available from sensors and other imaging modalities, the body itself becomes a vast generative system, offering itself as data to larger communicative systems (p. 230). Braidotti, as with others studying the post-human state, claims it is time to rethink embodiment and entertain more expansive theorizations.

Addressing this interface between humans and computers, Turkle (1980) notes the computer can be thought of as “a projective device” in the ways in which it is anthropomorphized and related to (p. 19). She suggests that computers are “powerful social actors,” and indeed that what we project onto computers is precisely that which computers “do” (p. 23). Whether or not such projection is utopian or dystopian is

subjective. For instance, there are those who would point to the comfort lonely elderly individuals receive when in the presence of a robot who keeps them company, while others decry that such technologically mediated reality is a poor substitute for human interaction. Such presence is but a simulation, one requiring a measure of disbelief and overly dependent on the design of technologies (Dotson, 2014, p. 12). As another example, moe culture in Japan demonstrates how individuals engage in romantic relationships with two-dimensional characters (p. 15) – not dissimilar to the Nintendo game *Love Plus*, wherein young men pursue intimate relationships with virtual girlfriends. For every *ménage à deux* occurring in Japan with synthetic others, there are countless -- albeit less expressive -- forms of human-machine interactions in the United States; consider our limited conversations with virtual personal assistants Siri or Alexa.

As the boundaries between humans and technology continue to dissolve, are we not inhabiting Baudrillard's hyperreality, questions Dotson. And if the fakes end up seeming as real, or more so, than reality, what reasons will remain to draw stark outlines around our bodily online selves? Indeed, it is plausible to think our online selves may become more interesting than our offline selves – particularly as such representations are further enhanced technologically. The spectacle that is us could become a whole lot more fascinating than -- well, us. Rather than interpreting this as disquieting or entrancing, for it is both, it seems more pragmatic to consider it as one plausible trajectory. As Dotson asks: "Since technologies inevitably engender new constitutive practices of the self, what kinds of selves will such technologies help to bring about?" (p. 18).

Slicing through the conjectural mass of what she refers to as "ecstatic pronouncements and deleterious dreams," regarding the disappearance of the material

body in a post-modern world, scholar Kathryn Hayles (1999) prefers to entertain a different kind of subjectivity. In her definition of what constitutes the post-human, Hayles suggests that because informational patterns and systems are privileged over materiality (that is, the body increasingly is seen as a prosthesis that can be replaced or augmented with other prostheses), the embodied self may not so easily be distinguished from other systems. She states: “The post-human subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (p. 3). She further explicates that such dematerialization instantiates as both a change in the organismic materiality of the body, as well as a “change in the message (the codes of representation)” (p. 29). What this does is offer new kinds of signification as technological interventions do more than merely add to the novelty of new kinds of textual and distributive models; they affect the relations between that which signifies and that which is signified. Her characterizations of the post-human seem less threatening if one accepts her basic thesis: that the body as prosthesis does not translate to being anti-human, but rather is a reconceptualization and broadening of how we might co-exist with technologies. In Hayles’ estimation of post-humanism, our desire to conquer our externalities is a more limiting way of envisioning this melding of man and machine in contrast to a more reflexively oriented subjectivism.

Whether one finds such theorizations regarding the co-habitation of humans with technologies objectionable or intriguing, it seems at least prudent to acknowledge that the technologies we are creating, echoing Turkle and others espousing similar sentiments, have the power to shape our existence as we do theirs. Scholar Nancy Baym (2013) notes “digital media aren’t saving us or ruining us. They aren’t reinventing us. But they are

changing the ways we relate to others and ourselves in countless, pervasive ways” (p. 153). To be sure, as technologies contribute to the ways in which we are able re-envision ourselves, we embark upon new dialectical paths, with ourselves and others.

**A final stop: Narcissism – too big a word?** Based on the self-focused behaviors so prevalent in contemporary digital media culture, it is unsurprising that some of the more popular categorizations made about younger demographics include labels such as the Selfie Generation or the I/Me Generation. Millennials, also referred to as Gen Y, are an admittedly fluid cohort encompassing those born after 1980 and, depending on the source, up to 1992 or even 1997 (Pew, 2007, 2016). The generation following, dubbed Post-Millennials or Gen Z, are loosely qualified as those born between the mid-1990s to roughly 2010 or up to 2014 (Pew, 2016). This study’s participants fall within the 18 to 25 age range; as such, we might expect some level of shifting on the cusp regarding categorizations conferred upon them.

Of all the various characterizations, however, one appears to have stuck more rigidly than others — that of narcissism. Widely stereotyped as being highly narcissistic, many young adults (representative of both Gens Y and Z, and with due acknowledgement to Arnett’s “emerging adult” classification) are indisputably involved in self-facing identity work online. Indeed, this lies at essence of my thesis – that there are nascent forms of self-spectacle occurring within contemporary culture, whereby certain elements of mass spectacle are being reconstituted in ways that instantiate as individual spectacle. Moreover, in a culture of such extreme individualism, whether via self-display, self-disclosure, self-monitoring, or self-branding, to name a few variants of normative online practices, a culture where undue reliance on market-based dynamics appears to exert an

outsized influence in terms of commodifying and objectifying so many aspects of ordinary life, there seems to be little to buttress any argument against such overwhelming evidence of self-mindedness.

And yet, I find such sweeping characterization problematic, if only because this now-popularized terminology conflates the archetypal myth with the everyday clinical diagnosis in a newly choreographed interpretation applied too casually and without exemption. In asserting that individuals engage in strategic self-presentation, the amalgam of which is a mode of living which may be viewed as self-spectacle, I do not mean to aver this is somehow evidentiary of a gross-level narcissism that many insist is at the taproot of these online life reels. Over the past decade of discussions with students about their online representations, I am ever more mindful of the motivations, value, and meanings reportedly associated by these individuals with respect to their practices. Though there is an undeniable focus on the self, to ascribe the totality of these individuals' existence to a simple narcissism is unsatisfying. Here I must further belabor the fact that I fully appreciate the levels of self-representation occurring online today and, particularly given my thesis, in no way aim to undermine this. Indeed, what this study finds is that there are various possible other motivations for engaging in online self-directed behaviors that do not have their genesis in narcissism. Moreover, by casually conflating the pathology of narcissistic disorder with online life, there is the possibility of fracturing comprehension of what is a serious personality condition, defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy” (DSM-

IV, 1994). As with any personality disorder, levels of impairment vary considerably and are dispersed within the general population at all age levels.

Despite the previous dearth of information that examines narcissism in relation to online self-representation, there are stirrings that some of this is being re-considered, if not in the popular press, then in emerging scholarship. In a study hypothesizing that because social networking sites offer myriad ways to “display vanity” and “self-promote,” the authors were surprised to find that narcissism did not correlate with the reported time spent on these sites or the frequency of updates (Bergman, Fearington, Davenport & Bergman, 2010, p. 706). They acknowledge that those who already are narcissists find significant utility in the more exhibitionistic qualities of these technologies – something I would agree with.

To some scholars, however, the reality that narcissism is directly attributable to today’s younger generations seems more clear. In her book, *Generation Me* (2014), scholar Jean Twenge, who has studied generational differences for two decades, reports that Millennials are highly narcissistic. In charging Boomer parents with raising highly self-absorbed and coddled offspring, Twenge cites the fact that books about self-esteem doubled between the 1940s and 1990s, that journal articles on self-esteem doubled between 1970 and 1980 while increasing another 52% during the 1990s, that “teacher training courses often emphasize that a child’s self-esteem must be preserved above all else,” and that “unconditional validation, to translate the educational mumbo jumbo, means feeling good about yourself no matter how you act or whether you learn anything or not” (p. 75). While she distinguishes between a narcissist and someone simply with high self-esteem, the former being “more likely to be hostile,” or “so focused on

themselves they have a difficult time taking someone else's perspective" (p.92), Twenge states that her review of 49,818 college students taking Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) scale revealed that "the average collage student in 2009 scored higher in narcissism than 65% of the students in 1982" (p. 93). She offers numerous sets of data from other studies to corroborate her points.

To be sure, Twenge offers many insights that are emblematic of today's self-oriented culture. Yet I would suggest that characterizations of self-centricism and display be examined in a form inclusive of individuals' own explications of why they behave as they do online. With respect to the data points regarding the increase of self-esteem related information, there should also be consideration of the socio-historical antecedents that may have contributed to the operationalization of self-esteem as a construct. To offer one example, pedagogy that is student-centered or that privileges students' life experiences and opinions increasingly is seen as effective and necessary in terms of creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments, and particularly for those students who have been marginalized due to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability (hooks, 2010). Indeed, hooks affirms how vital it is to empower students to understand their own life trajectories. She asserts this greater sense of self is often necessary for many students whose life histories otherwise might remain in the shadows.

It is true that one cannot live in the celebrity-driven and consumptive culture as we do and be oblivious to the attendant narcissistically inclined behaviors increasingly a part of this milieu. Yet one would do well to acknowledge that the march toward heightened forms of individuation and personal commodification started occurring before the first Millennial was born. Christopher Lasch (1979), in his interpretation of the



cultural zeitgeist of modern times, propounds that narcissism is a key response to the anxieties of contemporary capitalist culture. In his characterization of culture in the main, Lasch appropriates Debord's 'society of the spectacle' to explicate the image-filled rotunda of our lives, using Goffman's performativity to paint a portrait of a heavily objectified self enmeshed in a one-act play furnished with props provided by the larger capitalist market-based culture. To those who would use his treatise as evidence that Gens Y and Z must then be more narcissistic than prior generations, I would note that this was written in 1979. Facebook, arguably the first new media platform to gain substantive traction in terms of self-presentation practices, came along 25 years later.

Here again, we might be well served by following the lead of the symbolic interactionists: that it is through the eyes of the other that we *all* come to know ourselves. That today we may fashion our self-representations via artifacts, or communicate via short bursts of imagery does not necessarily suggest a heightened pathology. As Giddens notes,

In assessing the prevalence of narcissism in late modernity, we have to be careful to separate the world of commodified images, to which Lasch frequently refers, from the actual responses of individuals. In Lasch's account, as we have observed, people appear as largely passive in their reactions – in this case to a world of glossy advertising images. Yet powerful though commodifying influences no doubt are, they are scarcely received in an uncritical way by the populations they affect. (Giddens, 1991, p. 178).

To reiterate, I would state here that my discomfort with a somewhat totalizing characterization of young adults as narcissists does not preclude my acceptance of their

self-branding proclivities. However, I hope to contribute with this study that engaging in self-spectacle and identity work that is highly visible can occur for a host of reasons and, thus cannot be categorized unidimensionally.

As noted at the outset, this study blends disparate theoretical strands from social psychology, critical cultural studies, and communication studies in order to evaluate what is occurring online with respect to the instantiation and presentation of the self. It is this co-mingled substrate of multi-disciplinary scholarship from which this project extends. It is to this intellectual heritage that I remain indebted.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Responding to the requirement that one make a statement of sorts regarding one's positionality, I offer the following as evidence that my interest in the subject at hand is not new, but rather the latest iteration of a longer-held curiosity about society, culture and, more recently, digital culture.

In addition to working in the field of media and communication for more than three decades (as noted in my biographical sketch earlier), I also have taught digital communication and marketing for several years. As part of my career, I engage in all manner of digital communication. I have worked on the construction of web sites since the mid-1990s, for instance. Moreover, as part of my teaching, I am afforded the opportunity to observe and dialogue with students about their online lives, among other aspects of digital culture.

In other words, in some form or another, I have pursued lines of inquiry regarding the impact of new technologies upon individuals and society for quite a while. My

master's thesis focused on identity representation online – this occurring prior to the widespread use social networking sites – by examining how individuals communicate via email and how these practices alter self-perceptions and behaviors toward others. My strong belief in the need for significantly higher media literacy levels among the general population keeps me attached to these sorts of intellectual pursuits.

My facility, such that it is, with new media technologies, as well as my interest in the topic, may well contour my appraisals of online identity representation. I am aware of my positionality with respect to this study and, as such, have attempted to be mindful of pre-conceived assumptions I may bring with me, making sure to rigorously enforce any potentially biasing situations – such as not utilizing my students, present or previous, as participants either in the pilot study or the current one.

Despite my familiarity with digital media culture, the fact that this study's participants are 'digital natives,' a popularized label denoting they have never experienced life without the presence of digital technologies, means I am not able to share those same life experiences, nor do I have the same sensibilities they do regarding new media usage. In that sense, I remain an outsider. Still, my positionality of having lived in both worlds -- pre and post digital -- offers its own comparative optic that may be of some utility. During this study, for instance, my understanding of current online practices proved beneficial in terms of establishing quick rapport and facilitating robust conversation about digitally oriented topics. That said, I also am continually reminded that my facility with all things D is nowhere near the sophistication of today's digital denizens.

## Methods

### Research Design

Since this study examines the nature of individuals' constructions of their online identities and why they are motivated to represent themselves as they do, as well assess how these representations relate to their sense of selfhood, this research employs qualitative ethnographic methods. As stated in the conceptual framework, ethnography is particularly suited to this project, where observation of individuals' lives as they interact with others, occurs. While my participation in the field is more that of an onlooker than of one who interacts (which traditionally is seen as a hallmark of ethnographic emplacement), the structure of how this inquiry is conducted falls within the general auspices of ethnographic research, since interviews and participant observation comprise the methods utilized. With respect to not participating in the online field sites I regularly visit, I would offer Hine's (2015) explanation: "Even though I might not myself be participating very actively, as a passive reader, my reading is shaped by the expectation that this is a participatory space. Thinking of the Internet as a participatory space enables me to see myself mirrored in it" (p. 12). Moreover, following Kozinets (2012), this study incorporates aspects of netnography, a subset of ethnographic research that "uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data" in order to elicit interpretation about cultural phenomena (p. 60).

As scholars who study the Internet can attest, the Internet of 2000 isn't the same as that of today. Hine is clear in distinguishing between her earlier writings in 2000 on virtual ethnography (in 2015, she eschews the word 'virtual' as not being representative enough of the embeddedness of Internet culture in physical life) and more recent

refigurations of the Internet as being not only embedded, but embodied in the sense that a deep fusion now exists between on and offline identity. Hine's theorizing is taken up by Postill and Pink (2012) in their consideration of how to conduct ethnographic research on the Internet. They concern themselves with the concept of "Internet-related ethnography" since "social media practices cannot be defined as phenomena that take place exclusively online" (p. 125). In terms of methods to be used, they claim that when more traditional methods -- such as interviews -- are employed, "they allow us to refigure social media as a fieldwork environment that is social, experiential and mobile," (p. 125).

Invoking the ethos of bricolage, so often part of ethnographic research, this study incorporates participant observation of online daily life on a variety of new media platforms, as well as in-person interviews, a subset of which includes a panel study over a span of 18 months, with observation continuing for two years. Multiple forms of data -- general text and images, personal photographs, interview transcripts, comments from others, and statistics generated by online platforms -- are integrated to yield a coherent sense of these individuals' online lives. As Postill & Pink remind, it is in the range of online and offline contexts considered as sites of research that rapidly changing digital spaces are best assimilated with physical localities.

Salient, in terms of describing the structure of this study's research design, is the fact that it strives to be integrative as well as multi-perspectival -- integrative in the sense that it engages with both online and offline methods of discovery, multi-perspectival in terms of the different theoretical strands that ethnography itself invariably consists of. In line with one of the chief inspirational forces of this study, Mills' (1959) conception of the sociological imagination stresses the ability to be able to move across "a variety of

viewpoints” (p. 214) and to shift, in essence, between data inputs and the literature in order to stimulate the imaginative thought that forms the base of theoretical construction. Maxwell, too, in tracing the intellectual goals of qualitative research, reports it is in how individuals themselves “make sense” of their behaviors and influences upon their behaviors that coherence emerges (Maxwell, 2013). “This focus on meaning,” he states, is a hallmark of qualitative analysis (p. 30). This research design is thus structured to facilitate a synthesis of multiple strands of data that ultimately yield an accurate portrayal of life online for these study participants.

### **Pilot Study**

In 2014, as part of work for a qualitative methods course series, I devised a pilot study to examine self-representational activities online. The experience informed my dissertation topic, refined my research questions, and afforded me deeper insight into the possibilities at play regarding different modes of ‘being’ online. This study involved five participants who used the social networking platform Facebook on a daily basis. Given the brief amount of time for this project, I relied on purposeful sampling and drew from the student population at a major university. The decision to utilize young adults was predicated on the assumption that they would be heavy users of new media and would have experienced Facebook at some point during the past ten years of their lives. In the course of this project, I conducted in-person interviews, as well as gained access to participants’ Facebook accounts for a period of several months during which I was able to observe their self-representations. My interviews probed for answers regarding how and why these individuals represented themselves as they did on Facebook.

Most striking for me was the sophistication displayed by four of the five participants in their articulations of the processes they undertook in producing their online selves. While I expected this to some degree, I did not anticipate the cogent and strategic intent they were able to describe as rather routine modes of online practice. From this group, four indicated in numerous ways how they purposefully constructed representations of themselves in order to elicit certain outcomes. Overall, they confirmed that they act in deliberate ways to construct online identities that they feel best represent who they are or who they wish to be seen as. They do so by monitoring the ways in which they represent themselves, and by paying close attention to the benefits they receive – or don't – from these representational practices. The one participant who maintained she did not deliberately employ representations on Facebook to achieve specific goals -- and as such is deemed as somewhat of an outlier -- nevertheless demonstrated a keen awareness of how she understood her online self was being regarded by others.

Enhancing one's self-worth and self-efficacy appeared to be highly salient objectives for most of these students. These findings suggest that these individuals possess a rather sophisticated awareness of the value derived from their self-representations and thereby carefully construct their online identities in nuanced ways. Among the key strategic objectives mentioned by three of five participants, and corroborated by their Facebook representations, is that much of what is presented on these pages is done to affect positive perceptions of themselves for the purpose of future employability. Three participants displayed high degrees of awareness when describing how they construct their online personas toward achieving this goal.

Moreover, there is evidence throughout of the influence exerted by the enactment of social relations in a visible manner. These individuals also possess a tacit understanding of the role self-branding plays in enhancing their off and online identities. In these ways, this preliminary project provided fodder for my larger research project, and further allowed me to test and refine my research questions.

### **Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following broad research questions, with related lines of inquiry listed below each:

1. How do participants construct their online identities?
  - How do participants decide what to portray as part of their online identity constructions?
2. Why do participants present themselves as they do online?
  - What do they believe about their online identities?
  - What is important for them to represent to the world? Why? What are their objectives?
  - What are their motivations behind these objectives?
  - How critical to their sense of self are their online identity representations? Why?
3. What sorts of things (emotions, perceived benefits) do participants believe they derive as a result of their online self-representations?
  - Do participants believe their online identity constructions are influenced in any way by being online? If so, how?



- How do participants deal with social demands regarding self-presentation online?
- Do participants care about what others think of their identity representations? If so, why do they think they care, and how much do they care?

### **Sample Selection**

Twelve participants, who self-identified as being daily users of social networking platforms, form the sample used for this study. The five individuals who participated in the pilot project are part of the overall sample. As such, a portion of the study offers a longitudinal perspective on the research topic. Following Maxwell's (2013) articulation that a sample that seeks to provide information specific to one's research questions and objectives should be defined as "purposeful selection," (p. 97), this study thus incorporates non-probabilistic purposeful sampling, drawing from the undergraduate student population at a large metropolitan university.

Predicated on the need for study participants to have more than a passing familiarity with digital media use, indeed to be steeped in such modes of life on an everyday level, study participants from this undergraduate population are between 18-25 years of age. Focusing on this age cohort is particularly salient for this study since it seeks to understand the representational and relational aspects of life online. The relative recency of social media platforms (Facebook launched 13 years ago; Instagram launched seven years ago) suggests that this demographic is well suited to expound upon the phenomenon under study. Moreover, as stated earlier, while much research has been conducted on teens and adolescents, there appears to be less scholarship that examines

the online self-representations of young adults, particularly those who are at such a significant transition point in their lives with respect to presenting themselves to the larger world.

With respect to ensuring diversity within this sample population, participants represent a mix of gender (five males, seven females), ethnic backgrounds, and academic disciplines. The majority are seniors, regardless of whether they are in their third year (one student) or their fifth year (two students, one of whom is concurrently obtaining his Master's degree, the other whose Bachelor's degree is a five-year program). In terms of socio-economic status, and acknowledging that this is a major metropolitan university, it should be noted that more than 70 percent of this university's students receive financial aid with many on full scholarship. Thus, it is not necessarily a given that this study's sample skews significantly toward those whose socio-economic backgrounds fall within higher income tiers. Within the range of students interviewed, although I did not inquire into this, I was made aware by two participants of their scholarship/aid status. That said, I am mindful of the fact that this study's participants likely are afforded greater forms of access to the latest technologies, among other privileges, that may not be available at other institutions of higher learning across the United States, and that indeed is a delimitation of this study.

With respect to how I achieved this sample, I utilized network or snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009), thus procuring participants who met the initial criteria for the study – that they be undergraduates and, somewhat de facto, significant users of new media technologies. As part of the recruitment phrase, during my initial communication

with prospective participants via Facebook messenger, I ensured there were points of diversity as noted earlier.

In terms of site selection, as characterized previously by Hine and others, field sites for such projects need to depend on those spaces where the participants themselves frequent. Unlike my pilot project, this study is not confined to just examining Facebook. Confirming, as I did during the test project, that individuals perceive themselves and their identity work differently across different social networking sites, it is important to follow them on the platforms where they self-represent most frequently. As such, this study is multi-sited in that researcher observation takes place on three social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. While Facebook offers a variety of features that enable users to post text, photos, and videos, as well as interact with known and unknown others (an intrinsic feature of all such social media platforms), Instagram is a social networking platform built upon the concept of imagery, though it also enables users to interact and comment on photographs and videos. Twitter is a microblogging platform whose claim to fame is its forced brevity – one is to “tweet” in 140 characters or less, and one can “retweet” the postings (distributing the original tweets of others to one’s own Twitter audience) as well, in addition to being able to comment and interact with others. All these platforms facilitate the expansion of one’s circle of influence or connection. That said, it is up to the individual to make his or her account private. All share similarities in terms of providing users with the ability to amass followers, to follow others’ pages, and to tally the quantity of responses one receives at any given moment for any given post.

One condition of participating in this study is that I be given access to these platforms from the outset. Though Snapchat is routinely utilized by these participants, it is used primarily as a private communicative mechanism; as such, I did not feel it appropriate or necessary to ask for access to this platform. Indeed, it likely would have been viewed as an unwarranted intrusion into the private goings-on of these individuals. The reason Snapchat is so valued by these participants is that it serves as a direct line of communication to a select and usually small group of friends with whom one interacts under an implicit understanding that even those communications are rendered impotent by the ephemeral nature of the medium.

The reasons for selecting the field sites notwithstanding, from the perspective of anthropological research, the determination of the field site has always been discrete and identifiable – a “place” in which ethnographic observation occurs (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 59). In concretizing the notion that a field site can just as easily be an assemblage of individuals in places or spaces that are virtual as well as physical, these authors stress that the social relations of the physical world exert an inescapable impact upon the virtual and so cannot easily be sidestepped. I use this line of reasoning as support for my inclination toward exploring the complexities associated with on and offline life, dimensions seen neither as spatially discrete from each other nor mutually exclusive.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this study were generated using two distinct approaches: via in-person interviews with participants, and by my immersion in the online spaces these individuals

inhabit. As part of the participant observation so central to ethnographic research, I accessed these online social networking sites on a nearly daily basis, almost always at the end of the day. From the outset, I examined all the visible areas of each individual's online social media activities on these platforms. In essence, I reviewed comments posted on participants' newsfeeds within Facebook, their photographs or videos, and their cover photos and profile pictures. On Instagram, I made note of all photographs posted. In all instances, my field notes consisted of brief descriptions of what I observed, along with any impressions or categorizations I may have made. Over time, I increasingly parsed these into various categories that seemed to fit the types of postings I was witnessing – for instance, if there were pictures showing the participant posing with friends, those were tagged as being social or relational. I also indicated attributes, such as whether photos were casual, taken at social events in the evening, in specific locations, of objects, of the participant alone, and so forth. These were then utilized to provide me with a sense of the self being represented via various social media platforms, and were also included as part of my impressions for each participant's bio sketch. Moreover, as the primary themes emerged, I made it a point to double-check that what I was sensing as a major theme or pattern was indeed occurring. For instance, as I note later, whilst eight of the 12 participants indicated representation for the purpose of career enhancement was a primary motivator for them, I was able to assess this via examination of their online representations for only four of them.

For the five original students, I observed their online behaviors from the start of my pilot project in early 2015. For the other seven, I observed their online behaviors since mid-2016. This aided significantly in terms of my being able to ask them about

their behaviors and representations online, as well as becoming familiar with their styles of visual presentation. This further enabled me to observe responses and interactions among their audiences, and allowed me to determine whether statements made during interviews corroborated my impressions.

As part of the direct observation of these online self-representations, I also procured influence measurements generated by the social networking sites, which provide additional data points. Metrics regarding followers, friends, likes, and retweets all contribute to the larger sensemaking required for this project. Two tables portraying these metrics for Facebook and Instagram, the two major platforms utilized by all participants, are offered (See Figures 1 - 2). Certainly, written memos regarding my observations over time proved helpful with respect to noting any substantive changes in online representations, and generating an ongoing record of these artifacts.

In addition to gathering data from direct observation, I engaged with these participants via interviews lasting roughly 45 to 90 minutes. At the outset of each interview, study participants were presented with a study information sheet (Appendix B). Each interview was conducted on the university campus, and the majority occurred on weekends for the sake of convenience. All interviews occurred either in a privately situated space outdoors or in a private room reserved by me in advance. All interviews were audiotaped. As Seidman notes, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Utilizing a semi-structured format as part of the interview protocol, specific as well as open-ended questions were employed to elicit conversation in a casual, yet purposeful, manner (Appendix C).

Seven of the participants were interviewed once. For the original five participants, second-round interviews were divided into two sessions: one was a general conversation, and the other, a briefer session where they showed me examples of their online representations they deemed significant in some manner. Several of the other seven participants also showed me examples of representations they perceived as meaningful to them during our interviews. Short analytic memos were written immediately after each interview to record my impressions.

In essence, the collection of data occurred in a progression of phases over time. At first, during the pilot project phase, I was able to begin my assessment of representations that then were further explored in terms of subsequent interviews with the five project participants. In a subsequent phase, I re-interviewed these five nearly 18 months later and was able to ask what had changed for them. It should be noted that I was able to continuously monitor these participants' online representations since the start of the pilot project as my access to their social networking sites remained active. Indeed, I continue to do so currently for all 12 participants. As of this writing, my observation spans two years for the original five, and several months' worth for the additional seven participants. The ability to observe five individuals over this period of time and be afforded the opportunity to ascertain what changes have occurred for them personally has been of significant value to my understanding of this topic.

In his reference to the longitudinal process of observation espoused by Chicago School pragmatists such as Mead, Hermanowicz (2013) states, "Implied, thus, if not explicitly articulated in the School's work, is a *temporality* in the study of social life. Selves and societies, individuals and institutions, pass together in historical time, each

successively adapting and ‘coming into being’ through their interaction” (p. 191). For the original five participants, new or comparative perspectives relative to how they view their online self-representations over time are noted in a separate section within the findings though, where appropriate, these participants also are included within the general thematic sections.

### **Data Analysis**

Utilizing annotated transcripts and notes pertaining to my observations, data analysis was ongoing whilst I was in the process of collecting data. As I interacted with the data, I progressed inductively toward the development of coding schemas that arose as part of increasing familiarity with the data. Transcribed interviews were coded sequentially as part of four successive rounds on separate occasions, with each round resulting in finer-grained parsings of the number of codes affixed to various parts of the data sets. All coding occurred manually. Upwards of 45 codes were generated from the data during the initial coding rounds. Over time, these codes were categorized as part of a winnowing process from which ultimately emerged the four broad themes detailed in the findings.

Utilizing Saldana’s (2013) coding taxonomies, in terms of the initial rounds of coding, I incorporated attribute coding in conjunction with structural and process coding to affix descriptive labels to the interview transcripts with the objective of segmenting what I was reading. To a lesser degree, I utilized in vivo coding in terms of drawing out particular themes from the language used by these participants. For instance, repeated use



of the words “validation” and “self-gratification” were duly noted as part of in vivo coding whenever they were unaided by me in the conversation.

Over time, and as part of the iterative process of recoding and reflecting about the data, I utilized a combination of pattern and axial coding. The former was used to engender themes that were beginning to emerge from data, the latter to stratify and prioritize these in terms of their salience for answering my research questions. In later stages of coding, four distinct themes emerged from my interpretations.

Among the most important aspects of the comparative mode of conducting ethnographic research is that it enables the researcher to “compare what people *do* with what they *say* about what they do” (Boellstorff et al., p. 170). In this respect, having the ability to continuously notice and mark any deviations based upon my observations of their online representations with what participants indicated offered the evidentiary basis for pushing ahead with the thematic segmentation that I eventually settled on.

### **Data Validity**

In thinking about issues related to the validity of a study (whether conclusions are accurate and reflective of the data) within the context of a methods section, it is worth recalling Maxwell’s admonition: that following rigorous methods is no longer viewed as the failsafe route to validity. He states, “Many prominent researchers, both quantitative and qualitative, have argued that validity is a property of inferences rather than methods, and is never something that can be proved or taken for granted on the basis of the methods used” (p. 121). Merriam explains that since the notion of validity concerns whether findings match reality, and since reality – according to constructivists at least –

is always a question of interpretation and different inferences, “validity, then, must be assessed in terms of something other than reality itself (which can never be grasped)” (p. 213). What that is, she says, concerns credibility – “are the findings credible given the data presented?” (p. 213). Further, she doesn’t move away from the notion that validity should somehow be thought of as elusive to the qualitative researcher. In this sense, remarking that what is being studied are individuals and thus *their* constructions of *their* realities, qualitative work may indeed render findings that are “closer” to reality than what might be presumed by those favoring purely quantitative methods. She explains:

“What is being investigated are people’s constructions of reality—how they understand the world. There will be multiple constructions of how people have experienced a particular phenomenon, how they have made meaning of their lives, or how they have come to understand certain processes.” (Merriam, 2009, p. 214).

Finally, Maxwell adds it is not methods that render challenges to validity “implausible,” but rather evidence (p. 121). Both scholars’ works influence and guide my approach, in concert with others who – though their main focus is on case study methods – also contribute to my understanding of methodological rigor. Certainly one of the central tenets of ensuring credible outcomes involves triangulation. For Stake, this may be achieved via four pathways: through triangulation of data sources, investigator, theory, or methods (Yazan, 2015). In addition to these, both Merriam and Maxwell note there are other ways a researcher might answer questions regarding the veracity of the findings: via repeated and long-term observation, presence in a field site, and via the inclusion of “rich” data.

In terms of triangulation, this study employs various methods of data collection and generation, from accessing participants' online platforms, to writing notes pertaining to the examination of varied online artifacts, to the annotated transcripts of the in-person interviews. Moreover, the fact that the observable data pertaining to each participant is drawn from *their* representations and behaviors across a variety of online sites and not just one site offers further evidence to support any inferences. In terms of data sources, the presence of 12 participants also provides multiple examples from which to elicit comparative perspectives. Still, it should be noted that a limitation of this type of approach stems from the bias that is inherent in self-reported data. Finally, in terms of theoretical triangulation, though it would have been possible to undertake this study drawing only from a specific theoretical perspective – conceptions of spectacle as drawn from a critical cultural studies tradition, for instance – it seems necessary to engage with various scholarly disciplines in order to understand and frame what is being studied. As such, this study incorporates the various theoretical strands noted in the review of the literature.

In research that seeks to understand human behavior, one mode to ensure that findings hew closely to what is being studied is to provide what Maxwell regards as rich description. I attempt to do that by providing substantive quantities of verbatim quotes from participants. It is their wording, not mine, that guides this study and shapes my thinking about the subject. It is from their online accounts directly, via observation, listening, coding, and reflection that themes have emerged and cohered as findings. Adhering to Yin's principles to ensure that analysis is "of the highest quality," (Yin, 1994, as cited in Tellis, 1997), care is taken to present vignettes and quotes that speak to

the phenomenon being studied in ways representative of the full range of responses collected, regardless of whether they fit my assertions. As such, mention of outliers that may not fit the initial hypotheses are included.

Though attempts to portray participants' online representations are made, it is problematic to ensure participant confidentiality whilst also demonstrating visually those representations. As such, it is not feasible to simply excise any identifying information in order to provide screenshots of online social media pages (the vast majority of posts are images containing the participant). Thus, I opt for summative textual sketches, which I have composed of participants' online pages. These offer metrics provided by the platforms that a reader might use to crosscheck what participants state about their own scopes of influence, as well as my characterizations of images and text participants choose to present. Beyond concerns regarding confidentiality, such an approach also seems practical given that the volume of observations amassed by me would make for exceedingly lengthy reading of a rather banal nature, since the tenor of most of this content tends not to change dramatically over time.

This said, there is virtually (pun unintended) no pathway that wholly banishes the fact that researcher bias will exist in some fashion. It does here, it does in other qualitative studies, and it does in quantitative numerically laden studies, where it is up to the researcher to decide which data to present and how. As Maxwell states, it is "impossible to deal with these issues by eliminating the researcher's theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens" (p. 124). Instead, he suggests, it is important to consider how these aspects may have influenced the study at hand (p. 124). In that regard, I would offer that while my understanding of what is occurring with respect to digital self-representation is

informed by this study, it would be disingenuous to not acknowledge that the observations and interactions I have had with students and colleagues over the past several years have not influenced my sensibilities regarding digital culture.

In attempting to be mindful of what might be my own inclinations, I have attempted to provide findings directly from the data at-hand. Of course, as any individual interpretation contains bias, so too this study is reflective of the beliefs, attitudes, and theoretical dispositions I hold and that influence my assessments of what is occurring. Perhaps the time I have spent immersed in this particular culture may serve not as a detriment, but as a supplement to that which is considered evidentiary. As Kozinets notes, “We cannot write about cultures we do not truly understand. And the ethnographer’s creed is that we cannot truly understand a culture unless we have spent sufficient time within it to understand what membership means” (p. 182).

### **External Validity**

Given its small sample size and limits in terms of the homogeneity of the participant pool, the lack of generalizability to the larger population is acknowledged. Indeed, the ascribed motivations compelling the online practices articulated here are unique to the participants themselves, and the reality presented is their stated and enacted reality, accompanied by my interpretations of the same. As detailed in the previous section, the mechanisms to ensure levels of internal validity – that “the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, p. 221) – have been articulated. While these would meet the benchmarks associated with internal validity, they do not with respect to external validity.

Still, it is worth considering how one might view the conclusions emanating from this study. Merriam notes that while generalizability from a statistical standpoint may be beyond the scope of some qualitative studies, this does not mean transferability of the knowledge arising from such studies does not occur. Drawing from Cronbach's notion of providing a "working hypothesis ... when we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (Cronbach, 1975, as cited in Merriam, 2009), Merriam states, "Every study, every case, every situation is theoretically an example of something else. The general lies in the particular" (p. 225). I offer this here not to minimize the issue of generalizability in any regard, but rather to acknowledge what has been leveled at qualitatively oriented work for quite a while and move toward what is characterized by Boellstorff et al., (2012) who suggest that "another way to scope our claims is to use 'moderatum generalizations'" (p. 178). Considered as more moderate assertions, these scholars offer that such conclusions are: "not attempts to produce sweeping sociological statements ... they are moderately held, in the sense of a political or aesthetic view that is open to change. This latter characteristic is important because it leads such generalizations to have a hypothetical character" (p. 178). Such "middle ground" to be found between the presentation of findings from a small group of individuals and more over-arching conceptualizations, can be "very effective to help scope our claims" (p. 178). In this sense, then, I offer these findings in as thorough a manner as possible, alongside an assessment of what I perceive is occurring for this population at this time, in such space.

## Findings

The fundamental objective of this study is to better understand the motivations, objectives, and reasons why individuals present themselves as they do in online worlds. My overall interpretation of the data has yielded four distinct themes that respond to my research questions about *why* these individuals construct their online selves as they do. As stated earlier, these themes arise from the data and, as such, I arrange this chapter thematically and, for the most part, allow the participants themselves to speak to the questions by providing verbatim excerpts from our interviews. In segmenting the overall findings then, the following four themes represent what I interpret to be the key drivers of why these individuals choose to represent themselves as they do online. These individuals construct their online selves for the purpose of 1) advancing their professional careers; 2) creating distinct self-images or self-brands; 3) engaging relationally with others; and/or 4) creating opportunities for positive reinforcement that engender feelings of self-worth.

The notion of visibility, of having one's life on display for others to observe and interact with, permeates all four thematic areas. Self-branding, impression management, and even what might seem as more private interpersonal aspects are connected in this fusion of public and private online life. As multiple participants articulate, there is an expectation that their self-representations online are being viewed by others. Indeed, implicit in these participant accounts is a conscious awareness of whom they are constructing their online selves for. Even those who utilize digital platforms primarily for relational purposes acknowledge they do so with full awareness of their perceived audiences. For instance, they are clear about what they do and do not post depending on

whether family members or potential employers frequent those platforms. In these ways and others, participants reify the primary condition under which all such self-representation online occurs – that what is posted is suitable for public consumption, with all the consequences that accompany such practice.

Prior to delving into the findings, it seems beneficial to offer brief portrayals of each of the 12 participants as a way to provide some insight into their personalities and online self-representations. As such, a sketch of each participant offers snapshot biographical data derived from our interviews, followed by descriptions of their Facebook and Instagram accounts, with particular emphasis on their profile photos. These profile pictures, cited as being among the most critical of elements for any online account, are usually infrequently changed. For Facebook, there are two images on each individual's page: a larger horizontal cover photo and a smaller profile picture, which usually consists of an identifying image of oneself. For Instagram, there is one small photo image, usually of oneself. Bio data, as stated in this chart, refers to the 3-4 lines of text below the images on one's Facebook page. In a few cases, Twitter is included if the participant indicates he or she utilizes the platform to any significant degree.

To protect the confidentiality of each participant, all have been given pseudonyms, and the name of their university, though stated in their publicly viewable bio data online, is nevertheless omitted here. Participants who have been observed by me for nearly two years (who were part of the original pilot project) are indicated with an asterisk next to their names.

To reiterate what is stated above, subsequent to the presentation of these 12 mini-profiles, this chapter continues with the start of the findings as segmented by theme, and



concludes with a section specifically focused on findings that compare how the five original participants have changed over the past 18 months with respect to their views concerning their online self-representations and those of others.

### **Bio Sketch: Kat**

Female. 3<sup>rd</sup> year student. Major: Music industry.

She will graduate with her Bachelor's degree in three years. She states she is extremely focused on a career as a manager of rap artists. Her long-term goal is to have her own management company in A&R (artists and repertoire). She states she wishes to be seen as a tastemaker, someone whom others turn to for guidance with respect to music. She remarks she is someone with wide ranging and eclectic tastes.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of Kat with someone who appears to be a friend. Profile picture is of her, full-length. Bio data states she is a booking agent/promoter at various major music firms, and that she studies music industry at her university.

Her photos and posts are extremely varied. It is not readily apparent that she works in the music industry. There are photos of Kat and her friends, Kat alone, dogs, political issues, artistic photos, and photos of musicians.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is of Kat dancing. She does not use her name for her account but rather a combination of words using her name partially. As with her Facebook page, there is significant variety in the kinds of photos posted, many of which also can be found on Facebook. Of the most recent ten photos, Kat appears in four of them. Other photos feature people, illustrations, and food.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Given the specificity of her comments during our interview (covered in Findings) regarding the importance of a unified aesthetic on these platforms with respect to color scheme, types of content, size, and quality of photos, Kat's social media presence across these two sites seems rather diverse. It is, however, obvious that for some photos she has devoted time to their composition. She seems to be someone with wide-ranging tastes, someone who has a unique and often humorous point of view, and someone who enjoys people and life in general.

### **Bio Sketch: Pierre**

Male. 5<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Architecture. Minor: Business entrepreneurship.

He states he is heavily involved in his triathlon group, as well as his fraternity. He is unsure about whether he will pursue a career in architecture, and is currently exploring his career options.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of Pierre crouched in a racing sprint with academic regalia around his neck. Profile picture is of Pierre wearing the same regalia. Bio data states he studies architecture at his university, and lives in Los Angeles.

Numerous images exist of Pierre posing with friends who also are triathletes. There also are numerous photos of Pierre and others at the beach in swim attire. To a lesser extent, there are photos with family members, and photos showing Pierre's social activity at parties.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is of Pierre with a young woman. Of the most recent ten photos, Pierre appears in all of them. He mostly is seen with friends, though it appears there is at least one photo with a woman who might be his mother.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Pierre is highly social, and presents himself as an athlete. He is invariably seen in racing attire, along with others wearing the same. His online self-representations suggest a student enjoying college life, and someone who is well-liked by many others as evidenced by the different individuals he is shown with.

### **Bio Sketch: Jack**

Male. 3<sup>rd</sup> year student. Major: Public relations.

He is interested in music and politics, and plans to work in both arenas. He is well-known on campus because of his successful management of a public relations campaign for the individual who was to eventually become head of student government. He was largely responsible for the substantial press coverage she received from media outlets such as the Huffington Post and the *LA Times*.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of Jack at a Hilary Clinton rally. Profile picture is of him wearing graduation regalia. Bio data states he is a senator and speaker pro tempore for student government, an industry relations intern at a major music industry organization, and studies public relations at his university.

It is clear from his posts and photos that Jack is a politically oriented individual. There are many lengthy posts and photos of the 2016 Clinton presidential campaign, as well as a photo of him with Hilary Clinton. There also are other pro-gay posts and sentiments expressed about equal rights, along with his own election photos and those from the campaign he conducted for another student. Other photos display a mix of family portraits, party pictures, football games, and Jack socializing with friends.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is an artistic black and white headshot of Jack. He uses his first and middle names. As such, unless one knows this derivation of his middle name, it would be difficult to locate his account simply by knowing him in person. Of the most recent ten photos, Jack is in nine of them with others. One photo is of Hilary Clinton.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

While it seems apparent that Jack is a student enjoying time in college with friends, it is also obvious he cares significantly about social justice issues. Both his social media accounts appear to convey that this is someone who is serious, direct, involved in many issues, and sociable.

### **Bio Sketch: Anton\***

Male, 4<sup>th</sup> year. Major: Biomedical engineering.

He credits his online activities to adding immeasurably to his self-confidence and feelings of self-worth. He wishes to be seen as someone who is extremely serious about his chosen profession. He articulates how the strategic online presentation of his offline activities -- those connected to his chosen field -- has aided him in crafting a persona that is perceived as highly successful within the scope of his influence at his school.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of Anton with a group of friends. Profile picture is of him alone. Bio data states he is an engineering intern at a major biotech corporation, a freshman academy coach at the school of engineering, a student assistant at the library, and that he studies biomedical engineering at his university.

His posts display two broad themes: one relational, showing him with friends; the other involving engineering, whether via photos of Anton standing in front of engineering buildings or working with other students in labs. Since early 2015, when I first began observing Anton's Facebook page, not much has changed, though there seemed to be a few more pictures of his family back then.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is of Anton and friends. Of the most recent ten photos, Anton is shown in eight of them with others. These photos are the same as those on his Facebook page. The other two photos are of someone else.

**Twitter:** Profile shot is the same as Facebook. There appears to be more topic variety on Anton's Twitter account than on his Facebook or Instagram accounts. Videos and retweets of politically oriented tweets, as well as comments about college and life in general, comprise the bulk of this page.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Anton's profile is consistent across Facebook and Instagram. He presents himself as someone who has many friends and/or acquaintances, someone who seems very positive (always broadly smiling), and someone who possesses a strong interest in engineering.

### **Bio Sketch: Dirk\***

Male. 5<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Screen scoring/orchestral composition.

He will graduate with a Master's degree in screen scoring. Dirk considers himself to be trendy, artistic, and outgoing. He has worked steadily throughout college on his music compositions, and held high profile internships with major film composers.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of Dirk standing at a lectern in a recital hall about to conduct musicians. Profile picture is of him standing at a smaller lectern in a studio. Bio data states he studies screen scoring at his university, and lives in Los Angeles.

His photos usually are about his music-related work. They are accompanied by links to his compositions so that viewers of his social media accounts may listen to his music. Other photos are of his mother, and friends.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is of Dirk. Of the most recent ten photos, two show Dirk with a friend. The rest are artistically curated photos of architecture, food, or art.

**Twitter:** Profile shot is of Dirk, taken from the back, showing him conducting an orchestra. Smaller photo is the same one featured on Instagram. There appears to be a variety of retweets, many concerning politics and social issues.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

There seems to have been a conscious shift in the past year or two, at least on his Instagram account, toward displaying a more professionally oriented self. It is clear he is placing significant focus on his musicianship. One also is able to get a sense of his artistic bent via various other aesthetically oriented representations, as well as by reading his comments regarding art and music in general.

Many of his Facebook posts have narratives that provide context for the imagery. For instance, one quickly gets the impression that he and his mother are extremely close. Among the many caring comments he writes about her, he pens a particular poignant post about a photo showing his mother and her fiancé.

### **Bio Sketch: Lily**

Female. 4<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Film and journalism.

She has gained experience via several media internships in New York and California. She has significant interest in the film industry, claiming she has been obsessed with celebrities since she was a young child. Having grown up in a very small community, she greatly values the opportunities she now has with respect to pursuing her career objectives within the entertainment industry. She is proud of this and tries to show her family and friends at home that she is on track to pursue these objectives.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of her and her mother. Profile picture is a headshot of her. Bio data states she is an intern at a major Hollywood studio, studies at her university, and lives in Los Angeles.

Photos are heavily relational in nature, mostly showing Lily with friends. There are a few photos of possible family members, and some photos of food and beverages.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is of her standing in the snow. Of the most recent ten photos, half show Lily alone, and the rest are of her with friends or family. These photos depict two locations: one is snow-bound, and the other is a tropical locale where she appears to be vacationing.

**Twitter:** Lily states she uses Twitter only for journalistic purposes and retweets rather than posts original content.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Across platforms, Lily's self-representations appear to be reflective of her social interactions with friends and family. There are numerous comments from her mother and friends, and a majority of images show her affectionately engaging with these individuals. Her social media accounts seem like digital photo albums of sorts.

### **Bio Sketch: Joy**

Female. 4<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Public relations.

She states she would like to work at a public relations agency, then eventually work for a non-profit entity. She prefers to keep her Facebook and Instagram accounts private (except for public-facing profile shots). She feels that social media is so much a part of her generation -- that it is so natural -- that there is very little reflection occurring. She notes, as part of our conversation, that she has realized “so many things, which to me were perfectly normal until I said it out loud.”

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is a chart of the campus-based leadership group to which she belongs. Profile picture is a headshot of her. Bio data states she is a corporate intern at a major public relations agency, and that she studies at her university.

Photos represent a mix showing Joy with friends, at parties, with her leadership group, and at events on campus. Several photos appear to be of evening events, showing Joy and friends posing in evening attire.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is a headshot of Joy. Of the most recent ten photos, eight include Joy with friends and family. The other two are landscapes. Though these photos tend to be the same as those on Facebook, on Instagram, they are of better quality and more carefully composed. There are more artistic shots in general on this platform.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Based on her thoughtfully worded responses to my questions during our interview, Joy’s social media accounts appear to be consistent with what she says about utilizing new media tools to effectuate a particular public self-image. There are, for instance, artfully arranged pictures showing her in side profile, and with lighting framing her facial features. Most of her photos across platforms seem to be carefully considered, and do not project an overly casual feel.



### **Bio Sketch: Ben**

Male. 4<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Screen and television writing.

While admitting he primarily uses Facebook and Instagram, Ben feels he should make more of an effort to get his writing on Twitter as well. He enjoys providing his point of view – something he refers to as coming “from left field” about his own life experiences. He views this as his contribution online. During our interview, he refers to other individuals whose unique narratives he particularly notices or is drawn to. He states his desire to have his own brand of humorous writings read by more individuals.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of a “Proud to be me” poster. Profile picture is of Ben. Bio data states he is a former research assistant and lab technician at his university, and that he studies writing and television.

Photos represent a mix of shots of Ben with friends, at parties, with his mother and family, as well as several shots of him as a very young child.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is of him with two young women at a party striking funny poses. Of the most recent ten photos, Ben appears in seven of them. Each of the ten photos is, in some way, humorous. Of the three other nostalgic photos of children, two are of him as a toddler; the other is of a young girl. He juxtaposes one of these photos of him with a more recent shot of him holding the same pose. There is another photo of him with his mother, where they both are striking a similarly humorous pose.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Whether one views each of these photos individually, or takes them as a collective across platforms, it is easy to find oneself smiling. There is a playfulness and joy emanating from these compilations. This appears consistent with what Ben says he is trying to do with respect to showing the world that he has a particular – funny – point of view. He seems comfortable with himself, his family, and appears to have fond memories of his childhood, as evidenced by the many photos of himself as a young child.

### **Bio Sketch: Shay\***

Female. 4<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Music industry.

She is clear (during both our interview sessions) that she views social media primarily as a way to stay in touch with friends -- current and past. She remarks she is still friends with those from her elementary school and routinely comments on their posts. She also keeps in touch with cousins in different parts of the world. She admits she used to be hesitant about what she would post online, but since starting college, has found herself feeling more “free,” something she mentions on several occasions.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of the rap artist Drake. Profile picture is of her, full-length. Bio data states she studies at her university, and lives in Los Angeles.

The majority of her photos show her with friends, her parents, and extended family around the world. Many photos show Shay with friends at parties having fun, as well as several others that show her at parties with family members.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is a headshot of Shay. Of the most recent ten photos, Shay is in all of them. Six are of her with other friends and family. All her photos are of people either posed or enjoying themselves.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Consistent with what she expressed to me during the pilot project, as well as more recently, Shay uses social media to interact with friends and family. The vast majority of her photos are taken during evening events rather than casual daytime activities; as such, she and others are shown in evening attire.

### **Bio Sketch: Eliza\***

Female. 4<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Photography.

During our second interview, she appears to be rather introspective about the changes that have occurred since she was in high school, during the start of college (when I first met her), and now as a senior. She posits that one reason people post so much during the early college years is to show their high school friends how much they've matured, and how their world has expanded. She states she posts primarily to show people how she's changed, and how much she has grown as an individual. She is proud of her artistic capabilities, her close-knit friends in college, and her triathlon activities.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of Eliza's mother pushing her boyfriend, Bob, in a wheelchair, while Eliza and another woman walk alongside. Despite the sad circumstances of Bob's illness (covered in Findings), everyone appears to be happy in this photo. Profile picture is a headshot of Eliza. Bio data states she is an art/design intern at a foundation, and studies visual arts at her university.

Her photos represent a wide variety of themes, inclusive of shots with friends and family, travel photos, party and food shots, as well as political posts (related to the 2016 presidential election).

**Instagram:** Profile shot is of Eliza hugging another young woman. Of the most recent ten photos, Eliza appears in four. The others are artistic shots of scenery such as frozen pine branches or a PowerPoint slide half reflected in light, with words that have to do with the body and illness.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

There is a fairly sizable divide between Eliza's Facebook and Instagram accounts, even though they may share several similarities. Her Facebook page is heavily relational and it is possible to glean that she is close to her mother, and has a small group close friends who tend to reappear frequently in her photos. While some are posed, these particular photos nonetheless convey an intimacy that many other similar photos lack. Her Instagram account, while including a few relational photos, is far more artistically inclined, with photos of objects and scenes portrayed in a distinct style.

### **Bio Sketch: Kirby\***

Female. 4<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Business administration.

She is considerably more subdued than when I first met her in 2015. In reviewing my notes from our first meeting, it is clear she regards online representation as “what you portray to the public.” She believes this makes her a realist, as opposed to a cynic about such things as authenticity of self-representation. The issue of identity is something she feels very strongly about (covered in Findings). As such, she expends her energies online toward promoting her ethnic identity, and seeks to promote positivity via her posts to counteract what she considers as excessively negative content on social media sites.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover photo is of street graffiti art of a rap artist. Profile picture is of a very young girl on a boat, presumably Kirby, wearing a life-jacket, and smiling broadly. Bio data states she is the executive director of the on-campus association that promotes her ethnic heritage, and that she studies at her university.

Several photos and posts are political in nature, a few showcase Bollywood, many showcase specific cultural issues such as Sikh Awareness Week, and various others cover social justice issues, such as female infanticide. There are almost no family photos, and few showing Kirby with friends.

**Instagram:** Profile shot is the same as her profile picture on Facebook. Of the most recent ten photos, Kirby is shown in poses by herself in three. Two photos show her dog, one shows food, and the rest are of landscapes.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

On Facebook, aside from the profile picture, there are very few photos of Kirby herself. She posts quite regularly, but about the social justice causes she believes in. On Instagram, there are a few more shots of her, and here one also sees a somewhat more humorous side. She appears to be a rather strong individual – her commentary, when it is provided, is unambiguous, and her point of view on issues is clear.

Kirby’s Instagram has a very different look and feel than her Facebook page. Of the 12 participants, the distinction between these two accounts is most pronounced with Kirby. As stated above, her Facebook account seems to be about her social and political beliefs; her Instagram account is far more personal and even playful.

### **Bio Sketch: Annette**

Female. 4<sup>th</sup> year student. Major: Cinema.

She considers herself to be an extremely visual individual. She speaks about being always mindful when she posts, even about mundane objects like her homework. For instance, she says, she will work to ensure that the lighting is as good as it can be to make it an interesting shot. She initiated a Photo of the Day project on Instagram for herself. She notes that this challenge allows her “to view the world in a more visual way.” As such, she feels she is expanding her artistic repertoire.

She maintains she is extremely conscious of what she posts on social media, partially due to her parents’ initial cautiousness which may have rubbed off on her, but also because she wants to be perceived always as authentic.

### **Social Media Usage Observation**

**Facebook:** Cover profile is of her interviewing someone on set and being filmed. Profile picture is a headshot of her. Bio data states she studies at her university, and is from Pennsylvania.

Most of her recent photos and posts are of her travels through Europe, since she spent a semester studying there. Via text, she describes her travels, and comments on such things as the US elections. Several photos show her with friends seemingly enjoying themselves.

**Instagram:** Profile photo is of her with her arms spread wide, a photo that shows her as enjoying life. Of the most recent ten photos, she is in nine of them. These are taken in various locales throughout Europe, in front of famous landmarks. In all, Annette is smiling broadly. The tenth photo is of a garden, presumably somewhere in Europe.

### **General Impression of Social Media Presence**

Annette is someone who, as she herself acknowledges, is extremely conscious of how images are presented. As such, one finds myriad images on her social media pages worthy of framing. She appears, at least online, to be leading a highly interesting life, filled not just with extensive travel, but also with unique life experiences. Based on her comments regarding taking the time to carefully think about the photos she posts – appropriate given her field of study – this visual sensibility contributes to creating a compelling narrative about her. She is someone you want to meet because she seems to be leading such an interesting life, and seems warm toward others, as seen in these photos.

## **The Online Self: Presenting the Professional Me**

Among the key strategic objectives mentioned by eight of the 12 participants is that much of what is presented via their social networking accounts is intended to affect positive impressions of themselves for the purpose of future employability. The notion of being known for what one ‘does’ and plans to do in life professionally is reported by these participants as an important factor, though my observations of some of their online self-presentations do not necessarily bear this out. Of the eight, only four appear to present themselves in such manner that one might be able to ascertain, even cursorily, their career aspirations, backgrounds, or professional talents. Rather, the relational aspects of their lives (being shown in social situations with friends or family) appear to be far more prevalent. That said, four participants display a high degree of strategic intent in their descriptions of how they construct their online personas in order to achieve career objectives.

Demonstrating his keen understanding of who his audience is online, Dirk, a music composition student, is as mindful today about how he shapes his self-brand to aid his career as he was two years ago when I first interviewed him. He explains what a challenging field orchestral film composition is to break into, and that there are only a handful of composers who consistently work at highly productive levels. He states that achieving that measure of success tends to happen in one’s forties and until then, it’s a dogged march to build one’s portfolio and industry presence. The talent, he reminds, has to be there from the outset, but it is the connections that matter. Most of his updates and posts occur on Facebook, as it affords him the opportunity to post videos of himself conducting orchestras, as well as link to Soundcloud, where one can listen to his various

compositions. These updates are “more professional,” he says, anticipating there will be those -- known to him and unknown others -- who might be in a position to work with him in the future. As he explained when we first met:

With my career, a lot of it is creating a good image for yourself and even though I’m not going into pop music or something like that where image is really important, I’m still going into a field where having a following, and having a good name for yourself, and having a good reputation and connections is really important, so representing myself in an appealing light to maybe people who may not know me really well but are Facebook friends with me means that maybe in the long run that could benefit me in some way. I know that there are people who could be hiring me in a year that can see all that content. (Dirk, 2015).

He adds he is proud of his musical achievements and artistic sensibilities and, as such, feels compelled to share these important aspects of who he is with others. Indeed, as I noted when I first encountered Dirk, his Facebook representations provided me with what I felt then to be a comprehensive sense of who he was as a person. From his page then, as now, I am able to deduce that he is a musician of considerable talent, that he is extremely close to his mother as evidenced by numerous pictures and caring posts written about her, and that he possesses a honed aesthetic sensibility, as evidenced by carefully staged photographs of people and artifacts. His Facebook page is filled with musings about the arts, as well as with provocative cultural imagery. He stresses that while he understands the career-centrism of his social media activities, that this is “also how I am. It’s not all some agenda. It’s kind of innate in that I have a very strong sense of who I am as a person. It’s my personality, so I try to convey that.”

Like Dirk, Kat also is training her sights on working in the music industry, though not as talent, but rather representing talent and rap musicians. Asserting she has known she was destined for the music business since the age of 12, Kat appears as determined as Dirk in terms of creating a career-focused online persona. She states a primary objective is to demonstrate her capacity to brand herself online in anticipation that others will be impressed enough with her self-brand to realize she has the ability to do the same for them. She is forthright about “what I try to get out of the platforms.” Facebook, for her as with several others, is used more for events and calendaring, perhaps some messaging. She speaks briefly of having a Tinder account (as do the others), and using Snapchat constantly as a communication tool. Tinder is an application program designed to facilitate meeting individuals for the purposes of dating. It is Instagram, however, that she relies heavily on to build her personal brand, with an eye toward future employment.

She is detailed in her explanations of how she has studied more than a hundred successful artists to find patterns of success in their online representations, to learn why some bands sell well while others don’t, what the most successful musician profiles have in common, the types of comments they receive, and whether their social metrics appear reasonable or suspicious (evidence of bots that inflate follower metrics and which can go undetected to the untrained viewer, she offers). Kat explains this is all part of her job -- to know the difference: “Social numbers are a huge aspect of that. For us, that’s not a good investment because that’s not true fans who are looking at your material and going to buy tickets.” Such is the singularity of purpose directing her online activity. She explains that the most effective Instagrammers achieve their impressive metrics by being attentive to minute details in terms of how their photos appear. She offers the following as guidance:



“Typically, it’s two colors, three subject matters, and then every image is the same size and edited the same way. Very high resolution photos that look as if they’re candid do better.”

It is vital for Kat, off and online, to be recognized as someone “important,” and she is mindful of how she presents herself to that end. For instance, she says she always dresses for class, has well-prepared presentations, and tries hard to have good relationships with her professors, who might one day serve as connections to others in the music industry. To summarize her self-branding aspirations, Kat notes that “when people think of rap, they think me, or when people think music industry, they think me. I think I’ve done a good job of branding myself within the school.” Online, as well, she feels she has made inroads with respect to being connected with musicians via her internships and other projects. She explains:

I take Instagram pretty seriously because, in the music world, you have to take it pretty seriously. I’m trying to do more self-branding as I became aware of how simple it is to do things to remain consistent, and it makes a difference in terms of people understanding you. I love finding music and I’ll share it with others consistently. I’ve used it as a business tool. I took my profile off private so they (graphic designers) were able to go through and see my pictures and that would give me a heightened chance that they would take what I had to say seriously or be interested. (Kat, 2016).

With respect to the latter, Kat describes her aptitude for working with diverse sets of professionals. She remarks she has even used Tinder for the purpose of finding

individuals with whom she might work with. The quote below demonstrates the strategy she employs here:

Typically it's younger men pursuing the LA dream of being in the entertainment business but with lots of free time on their hands. I'm not trying to generalize but that's your Tinder pool, so I would swipe right with anyone who had their Instagram account connected and mentioned they were a photographer, send them my artists' music saying 'interested in your work,' and we set up two free photo shoots. So that's been good. (Kat, 2016).

Indeed there is a certain pragmatism, not to mention resourcefulness, that comes through in listening to how these individuals shape their online identity representations in service of their career objectives, utilizing new media technologies to wrest specific value from them. In this respect, the resume or CV appears slightly anemic in terms of standing up to the new self-representational capacities found within the digital ecosystem. For study participants who are exceedingly clear about their professional goals, branding themselves online for career advancement seems natural and obvious.

As with Dirk, Anton was one of the individuals I interviewed two years ago and, like Dirk, he continues to be meticulous in the crafting of his online identity. Constantly honed to reflect a seriousness with respect to his intended profession within biomedical engineering, Anton's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts have a similar ethos based on my observations. On Facebook, he appears as a happy, energetic engineering student who clearly works on many group projects with others. He is frequently shown with other similarly smiling students (the field of engineering is communicated via captions or explanatory banners in front of which they pose). The other kind of

photographs on Anton's Facebook page show him with friends at football games or other collegiate activities – nearly all are posed. When queried about whether my inferences regarding his postings are accurate, Anton agrees they are. On Instagram, though many photos are similar to Facebook, there is more thematic variety. For instance, there are artistic shots of canisters, relational shots, and photos of scenery. On Twitter, it appears he mostly retweets rather than generate original tweets, and there is a greater randomness to the subject matter – politics and general comments appear alongside the posts about pharmaceutical companies.

Noteworthy here is that his careful efforts appear to have paid off. He not only received a summer internship at a large engineering conglomerate in 2016, but a job offer as well. Two years ago, when I first met him, Anton stated his goals in terms of being perceived as a mover and shaker within his university's biomedical engineering community. Back then, he explained why he was including promotional posts for pharmaceutical companies on his Facebook page and how he intended to use social media to achieve his career goals:

We had Baxter reps come in and talk to the BME (biomedical engineering) students. We have a lot of events like that, and I'm trying to get that type of involvement onto my social media. I'm trying to be like, 'I'm not partying all the time, but look what I'm doing instead.' We went to LACMA with the BME students. I posted about that. Look at me, I'm at the career fair. I posted pictures with board members. I think it's working and it's helping me connect more with my other engineering students, which I think are more important connections than my social connections. I feel more a part of the engineering student body and that

has become my social sphere and I love that. It makes me feel good. (Anton, 2015).

As such, Anton is able to demonstrate how preparation for one's career, concerns about employability, and nascent impressions of one's own development as a professional within a specific field can coalesce online to effectuate a specific self-brand. Certainly, he also derives significant pleasure and pride in being able to demonstrate to others his passion for his chosen profession. As part of our second session, whereby I asked him to select online representations that held particular meaning, Anton eagerly shows me a video he posted of an important medical device event that took him eight months to work on. "We made this video and I really wanted to share and wanted people to see what we had done, and especially because ASBME (Associated Students of Biomedical Engineering) is such a big part of who I am now. I was so proud of this," he remarks as he shows me his video posts.

This artifact, as well as his comments, though salient for his stated objective concerning career-focused self-branding objectives, also speaks to motives related to self-worth. His references about how he feels about himself based on his affiliation with those who share similar career interests can be viewed as expressions of self-worth derived from the gratification and validation he says he receives from this identification. His pride is evident as he recounts how he is known within this community, and how good he feels when he hears others invoking his name in passing as someone who is a leader within the engineering school.

Likely due to the ages representative of this study's cohort and that these individuals are about to enter the workforce, there is a more acute sense of needing to

appear professional and mature online say these students. As seen by these examples, such heightened attentiveness has, for some, been rewarded handsomely.

### **I am My Brand: Impression Management Online**

Though some participants state they are motivated primarily by career objectives in terms of shaping their online self-representations, in general, the drive to publicly depict a desired self image and manage others' impressions about oneself appears to be a key objective for the majority of study participants. All but one indicate this is so, and even for that individual (Shay), it seems clear by her comments that she is highly attuned to the public presentation of her online self. Within this theme of self-branding, it is unsurprising that those who study public relations would have a greater sensitivity and acumen for branding and promotion. And while they may not be representative of the larger population, even within this study cohort, their insights into the nature of self-branding are particularly instructive with respect to understanding contemporary online culture.

In rapid fashion, public relations major Joy frames how she develops her self-brand on various platforms, and explains why she considers her actions as strategic. She admits her presentation of self is slightly different on the three main platforms she uses: Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, and this has to do primarily with the kinds of affordances each offers and the expectations of performance by the viewing public on each. Facebook, she explains, is better suited for longer forms of storytelling, where connections and conversations occur, articles are shared, and personal narratives shaped. Since on Facebook one has to use one's real name, there is a stronger connection to one's

real self, Joy explains. Instagram is for the iconic image, an opinion widely held. Joy further explains why individuals use social media in the ways they do:

Social media is a place where you have the opportunity to not show everyone the sides or parts about you that you'd rather they not know. It's to present yourself in the best light. People only post when they're having fun. It's like having, for me, a movie production, a highlight reel. These are all the best scenes but you don't really show anyone the behind-the-scenes. I want to show the part of my identity that I'm proud of, and I want my social media to be as accurate as possible, to appear genuine, fun, warm, friendly, attractive; all of those things – to be someone you, if you don't know, would want to know. (Joy, 2016).

To affect this end, Joy admits it takes work. "I know I want to craft this image of myself, and I'm going to make an effort to do that." The need to devote such effort is generally understood by the others. Joy offers examples of friends who routinely attend events and announce that many pictures need to be taken given their need for a new profile picture. While composition and other aspects of producing a good enough photo to post must be taken into consideration – indeed, she is clear that it is "rare" to have really candid shots since much posing must occur to get "your best angles" -- Joy notes it is also the caption that is all-important. There have been occasions where she has delayed posting a photo for days because she hasn't been able to produce the right caption. She appears extremely mindful of the way she is seen by others, bespeaking an understanding of an imagined audience and the idea that the self-image she is curating is, indeed, intended for public consumption. "If I'm going to post something, I want it to mean something to someone else. Otherwise, I'd just write in my own diary. I'd write it for

me,” she flatly states. This simple statement underscores much of what is said by others about how they perceive the nature of their audiences – those others on the viewing end. The truth of it is that the digital self manifests in a highly public manner, and having an awareness of who is watching can be extremely instructive in terms of what to produce.

To Joy’s point, one might just as well keep a private journal in the bedside drawer if one’s goal is simply to conduct personal reflection and private documentation. As study participants attest, it is not. Presenting, or playing, to one’s audience is not lost on these individuals. Moreover, this heightened sensibility is a consequence of the ubiquity of data so visibly displayed on these platforms – metrics that constantly calculate one’s likes, followers, those being followed, and so forth. Metrics that are publicly viewable. The ensuing self-evaluation that occurs daily, or hourly, exerts a powerful influence upon these individuals, as their comments suggest.

As with others who, while bemoaning the state of affairs that may cause one’s emotional state to be affected by the absence -- or overflow -- of likes, Joy nonetheless maintains, “it’s a legit thing. If I get on my Facebook profile picture 200 likes -- that’s what I consider to be acceptable -- that’s good. If I got more, wow. If I got less, it would be okay, but also like...,” her voice trails off. When pressed, she states she would have to re-evaluate why this occurred and, depending on her mood, she might even take down the picture. Again, if one is to recall that an objective of such self-branding is to present oneself in the best possible light, then having something posted on one’s page showing very few likes means there is an overt display – and reminder – that somehow there’s something less than favorable associated with one’s persona.

For Jack, another student who studies public relations, and someone who has worked aggressively to create a more public profile of himself and for the causes he believes in, metrics are a vital tool for measuring whether he is performing up to his own standards. Utilizing primarily Facebook and Instagram for self-presentation, Jack maintains:

Branding strategies go into all my postings, a lot because of what I'm genuinely interested in, but it's also because my brand on social media is genuine to me. On Instagram, it's worth noting, that if I don't think I'm going to get traction – likes or views – I'm not going to post it. Let's say most of my photos get 300-400 likes, and let's say one photo got 150, well, that clearly wasn't on brand and it probably wasn't that interesting to most people. I might have loved that photo but I could have kept it to myself. It wasn't on brand for me, which is showing people parts of my life that they will also find interesting. My Instagram is public therefore I'm playing to a larger audience. (I want) as large an audience as I can get on Instagram; that goes for me personally across the board. (Jack, 2016).

In terms of the key reason why this is so important to him (here, his stated reason also fits within the theme of self-worth), Jack notes the most obvious motivator “is that everyone gets so much self-gratification out of the likes, and if anyone says they don't, they're lying.” Still, he is quick to add that he feels strongly that the content he shares is important to him and is about issues he cares deeply about. His statements can be easily corroborated by viewing his public pages. Jack's Facebook and Instagram accounts are filled with political statements, comments regarding social causes, as well as innumerable photos of friends with him in social situations. He mentions a particular post of his about



freezing tuition that “went viral on campus” as being particularly gratifying not necessarily “because of my name, but 90 percent because I’m getting people to care about an issue that I feel passionate about. It makes me happy if I feel I’m furthering those items,” he remarks.

When the subject of micro-celebrity comes up, Jack finds this terminology intriguing and applicable, in some respects, to how he views himself on campus. He says he likes this term because it seems to fall somewhere in-between the desire for real celebrity and not being known at all.

It’s a really good term. You could ask an incoming freshman do you know (Jack) and they say ‘yes’ from my Instagram, so that could be micro-celebrity. I want to be appreciated to the biggest extent and widest audience possible without being ‘I’m famous,’ just like a professor wants to be appreciated for the work they write. They’re not looking for fame, but for micro-celebrity within that academic world. It’s recognition (here, he gets animated, and repeats this twice). (Jack, 2016).

Revealing a sharp sense of how to cultivate a desired self-image online, business student Kirby speaks candidly about using Facebook as “a marketing tool” in order to brand herself. She describes herself as a “realist” rather than “cynical” in noting that most people use social networking platforms in similar fashion. When I interviewed her initially, she explained:

I view my Facebook as the permanent construction of my identity and who I am as a person on the Internet that will be seen forever. It’s a branding tool. I have a Twitter, a Tumblr, and an Instagram. It’s all branding and you are your personal

brand in today's day and age, and I think that if you aren't aware of what your words on the Internet are doing for your brand or image, you're not looking around. Facebook is your public profile and everyone can see what you're up to. I think there is an obsession with being seen, being noticed, being talked about. (Kirby, 2015).

Referring more recently to Instagram, she notes:

I think everyone's kind of trying to use it for the documentation thing, but it's also about the likes. I've seen this happen – they'll take the picture with a real camera and then upload it to Instagram. That's so much work.” (They are doing that) “for personal branding. I think everyone has become obsessed with their own personal brand. Like for me, I use the same username for every single social media thing I have. My username is my personal brand. (Kirby, 2016).

When asked whether she feels others are as aware of the notion of personal branding as she seems to be, she responds: “If you're not, and you're my age, I don't know where you're, like, are you under a rock?” Later in the interview, she maintains that she doesn't engage in the “actual branding. I'm just aware that it happens,” she says.

While this seems to contradict her effusive statements regarding branding, she attempts to explain this by noting that, today, those who have attained some measure of celebrity are everywhere to be found, and their paths to such notoriety can be instructive to others seeking some level of micro-fame. Observing how bona fide celebrities expand their brands – “they're musicians and artists with their own coat and make-up lines” – Kirby finds such social media practices to be particularly educative:

And then normal people think they can do the same thing. You get these people like Kylie Jenner, who's literally the queen of every social media platform, and you get these people explaining it to you in real time. This is how you build a personal brand. (Kirby, 2016).

Kirby's comments, recently and during the first time I met her nearly two years ago, seem to indicate she is acutely attuned to the potential benefits that can accrue from being mindful about presenting oneself online.

Though several participants seemed to possess an almost innate sense of how to shape their online self-representations, being strategic about what one posts also is actively taught to them. Being told in his class that, as a screenwriting major, the potential for having one's social media posts evaluated by others is high, Ben has been attempting to do a better job of making sure he represents himself in ways that demonstrate he is witty, entertaining, and creative. He is, in his own words, trying to "step up his Instagram game" based on the advice given within his academic discipline. Whereas on Facebook, he primarily uses the platform to connect with others, he states:

With Instagram, it's more strategically putting out something that I'm trying to make people laugh. At least for me, it's to post funny things. I'm trying, and it sounds a lot more strategic and manipulative than it really is, but I'm trying to brand myself. I can't do jokes, I'm not a standup comedian, but I'm trying to give a unique, offbeat perspective of something or how I'm experiencing life because what I tend to write is more offbeat and dramady type stuff. (Ben, 2016).

As part of our interview, Ben moves back and forth between conversation and flipping through his social media accounts to read some of his posts out loud to me. It

appears he is pleased with his writings and wants to share them with me. He finds one about his visit to Cornell and his characterization of the engineering buildings as “Cornell’s Houdini school for the magically gifted,” writing, he says, that elicited a positive response from someone he used to know who now works at Cornell. For Ben, whose career goals are “to be paid to write,” such a response is particularly affirmative.

Regarding her attitudes toward branding, Annette, a cinema student, offers the following:

It’s a constant push to keep improving your content regardless of what your brand is. You just need to be true to your brand and keep improving it. We (a campus-based leadership organization of which she is a member) had a conversation on ‘what’s your brand,’ and we asked the group how they perceive themselves and do others perceive you in the same way. For me, that’s something I have a very strong hold of. I’m very conscious of how people perceive me, so personal branding for me is something that, before I knew the term, was important to me because I’m conscious of my image that I’m putting out there, not just visual, but personality and everything of who I am. (Annette, 2016).

As much as these accounts appear routine and specific to these individuals, taken together they transpose that which might be merely regarded as self-directed activities to that which might well speak to the breadth of impression management occurring online. The reciprocity associated with these practices -- the presenting of self in terms of offering presumably valuable content that results in some level of meaningful exchange – ensures that there is more to the dialectic than just uni-directional self exhibition. Drawing such energies from one’s publics is often a means by which individuals come to

define and understand themselves; certainly the symbolic interactionists would have us believe that. The need for affirmation, for one's existence to be acknowledged in some measure, is present in all these stories. The use of the language of branding, though culturally constituted, is but one aspect of the age-old desire of humans to think well of themselves through the gaze of others.

### **Social Relations: Staying -- and Seeming -- Connected Online**

As part of any observations of self-representation using new media, there is always the display of interpersonal interaction. Even informational and news sites have their healthy quotas of reader comments and debate among audience members. All 12 study participants acknowledge the importance of maintaining good social relations online. All state that staying in touch with friends and family, maintaining connections with acquaintances who they may not have cause to interact with otherwise, and finding new individuals to add to their rosters of followers are positive aspects of their social media use. It is clear that the photos and missives one elects to post largely highlight the positive aspects of college life for these participants, so much so that a couple of them wonder why their friends appear incredulous or envious upon reading their posts.

Stipulating first that she launched into online media use late in life, since her parents allowed her to have a Facebook account only when she was a high school senior, Annette admits to being cautious and aware that her parents and family are able to see her posts. Stating that her accounts are private as she wishes only to connect with friends and family, she nevertheless wonders whether others might be able to see what is being posted, quickly asserting she does nothing she would be ashamed of. It seems to concern

her that though she and her friends at home in Pennsylvania share the similar experience of being in college, her experiences in Los Angeles are unique, and this gives her pause.

She explains:

I have started to notice and have qualms with, when I started posting, I started having friends who commented things like ‘omg, your life is so fun, I’m so jealous of you.’ All this stuff and it was like a close friend back home. I thought it was very interesting that they perceived my life this way. We’re both doing the same thing, I’m studying. But if I post a picture of me at a museum, it looks like you go to museums all the time. You’re inferring a lot what the other person’s doing and how they’re living their life, so I want to say it’s fabricated in the sense on both ends because the person posting it, it’s a little fabricated because you’re taking a strategic picture of what you’re doing, but the person receiving it is associating it with all these connotations. (Annette, 2016).

As an assignment she gave herself to upload a photograph a day, Annette says she engages in this activity for herself and her close friends. Yet, of late, her friends have told other friends about this project and, as a consequence, others whom Annette doesn’t know are now following her activities. She finds this “kind of funny, because I don’t know you, why do you care about what I’m doing every single day of my life? At the same time, it’s just an extension of regular social media; it makes sense.” Reflecting aloud, Annette appears to enjoy and question the value she receives from her social media presence as related to this latest experience.

Another transplant to Los Angeles, Dirk, also admits to using social networking sites as an efficient means by which to stay in touch with family and friends in Illinois.

Like Annette, Dirk refers to Facebook as a viable tool for this purpose. He notes:

I've been involved in a lot of different things and met a lot of people, so it's kind of nice to be able to post a status about something that's going on with my life, and all these people can see it without (my) actually having to tell them all. It's a time-saver. And I only see specific friends maybe once every few weeks or every few months even, just because we're all so busy. I feel like posting that content is a really easy way to almost feel like you're still friends with that person. It's a good way to keep up your niceties. It's like virtually holding the ties of your friendships and, the way I see it, you never know when you might end up moving one day or what filmmaker might need music one day or some job opportunity, or someone's giving out free concert tickets to something, you know. So as selfish and non-selfish as that is. (Dirk, 2016).

Dirk stresses that staying in contact, even tenuously, makes good sense – his instincts are borne out by Granovetter's (1973) research on the importance of weak ties for career purposes, in particular. While keeping up with one's social networks pre-dates the Internet, what is unique today is that online representations of social interactions, visible as they are to even more others, necessitate some of the same types of impression management associated with more straightforward kinds of self-representation. Here, technological affordances assist. For instance, Instagram displays the numbers of those following one's page, as well as how many others one follows. This, plus the ability to "like" photos adds up to an Instagram life (a phrase in popular usage) that is rated and

ranked, an online existence where one's attention is duly drawn to the metrics on one's own page as well as to those of others, in a constant comparative rhythm that rises and falls with the numbers.

From Anton's perspective, he approaches his Instagram page with the specific goal of wanting to be seen "as someone who enjoys themselves, is with their friends a lot and goes to interesting beautiful places." It is of importance to him to "show people how close I am with my friends, because I think for me the people in my life are one of the most important things, so I like showing that." When posting photographs of himself with individuals he might not know as well, he explains this is to demonstrate to them that he considers them important enough to him to be shown as part of his friend group. He states (after some back and forth with himself) that he does not know all those who follow him, as this number has been growing steadily over the years, and though he used to hold the view described below, he no longer does:

A lot of people follow me and I don't follow them back. There's sort of this mindset -- whatever. It's more followers for me, because another thing that's important is your followers-to-following ratio. Having more people follow you than you follow back, that's kind of a sign of prestige maybe. I used to do that but I don't anymore because I don't care about other people's status. But I used to check other people's profiles to look at their ratio. If someone follows you and you're not sure whether to follow them back, you can check their ratio and see if their ratio is really high -- that they have more people following them than they follow. It's more meaningful that they follow you, but if it's the other way



around, that they follow more people, you're not going to follow them back. (Anton, 2016).

As with some of the others I interviewed two years ago, Anton notes that when these platforms were more novel, he used to utilize them more frequently. Now, a combination of less time, energy, and a propensity to focus more on the actual quality of offline relationships seems to have lessened his overall use of social media. While this is somewhat apparent in my observation – I can, for instance, tell by the dates of items posted that there seem to be fewer posts of late – this doesn't indicate to me that social media usage overall has decreased appreciably since I am aware that much interaction now has shifted for this cohort to Snapchat. It is the go-to platform numerous times a day in order to stay in close contact with friends, participants say. However, as one notes, this can also have an adverse effect.

Lily, who studies film and journalism, finds herself increasingly hesitant to use Snapchat for the very reasons she and others have articulated they use these platforms: to represent themselves in the best possible light. Though saying she is “a complete hypocrite” as she too uses the same approaches for self-representation – posting on Snapchat or Instagram that a celebrity is standing close to her (she interns at various entertainment related publications and as such attends several red carpet events) -- nonetheless, Lily finds herself feeling less positive about some of her experiences using these new media. She explains:

After my time is spent on it (Snapchat), I'll feel negative or sad because it's witnessing all these cool things that people are doing that I either wasn't invited to or I wish I had time to do. I come away a lot from it not feeling good. Even like

this semester, I don't check it as much. Instagram is about showing off and showing the peaks of your life; it's not always professional. I hate going on Facebook because I get people's perfect relationships shoved in my face every five posts. No matter the individual's reason for using it, deep down it's always about wanting to make an impression on people. No one's going to post a photo of them having just cried for two hours. They'll post a selfie, 'I just got a dream internship for the summer, so glad dreams are coming true, hashtag blessed.' (She laughs.) Yes, how cool is it that we can put our lives on display and just show the positive aspects. That's why people use it so much. Why wouldn't you want to use a platform that thousands of your friends consume every day to show off how great you are, how great your life is, your boyfriend or girlfriend is? Within my close group of friends, everyone is much more stressed and overwhelmed and unhappy than what they show on social media. The positive peaks that they put on social media have as much value in real life, and emotions are validated, but it's not the full picture. It's accurate for the part that they put on. (Lily, 2016).

Lily's characterization that representations of such seemingly over-filled lives may not be telling the whole story are echoed by others. It is interesting to note the frequent commentary regarding the lack of genuineness participants perceive with respect to others' self-representations. In terms of online visual displays of social connection, in particular, there appear to be tensions and confusion as articulated by several of these students. Here again, Lily offers an example of something that is bothersome to her. She notes:

One of my biggest problems is with my sorority, which I'm not very involved. I never found my niche in it; it's not my priority. I don't like the fake emotional connections that social media fosters. There are 150 girls and I'm friends with the majority of them, and they all look and comment on my stuff and interact as if we were really good friends. And when I see them at my sorority, they don't even acknowledge me, look at me, talk to me. They pretend like they don't even know me, so that's annoying that this relationship is solely on social media. It's completely online. I'll smile at a girl and she won't acknowledge it, and I'll be on Facebook later that night, and she'll like my status that I got an internship in New York. I don't know why. The more friends you have the better you seem, so I think those girls interact with each other because they like to be engaged with a really large group of people, because that makes them look like they are very popular and engaged. It's a numbers game definitely. (Lily, 2016).

Indeed, while candid about the downsides of social relations online, Lily also is cognizant of the advantages of such activity. She describes her small town upbringing, the fact that she grew up "literally in the middle of nowhere" and how she has been "obsessed" with all things Hollywood since she was very young. For Lily to be able to show her old friends and family what she is accomplishing is extremely meaningful. "From a professional stance, I want them to see I'm fulfilling my goals professionally and academically. It's called social media and there's a whole social branch to it. I want what anyone wants – that you can have a fulfilling life and great friends," she remarks.

Echoing similar sentiments regarding how the ability to view interpersonal relations online has the potential to complicate those relationships offline, Shay recounts

how these technological affordances can impact emotional states. Shay, a music industry student whom I interviewed in 2015, now notes it “definitely bothers me when I know someone in person and I know who they are on Facebook, and I do think less of them if they’re fake on social media or fake with me in person.” Still, she modulates her statements by adding that perhaps it is a “safe place” for individuals to express their opinions. She uses phrases such as “it’s so funny” or “it’s interesting” to explain away her admitted puzzlement about why individuals -- those who are not her close friends, she clarifies -- behave in ways online that contradict how they appear to be offline. During our most recent conversations, Shay says she believes even more strongly today that relationships that aren’t particularly close to begin with can be more easily perceived as inauthentic online. She states:

Social media to me is kind of fake, in a sense. Take Snapchat. I’ll see videos or posts of people hanging out. And the day before someone was telling me that they hated that person. And they’re hanging out. And they’re all happy. So it’s that concept where it’s pretty fake, similar to the Instagram posts of people changing how they look and everything. I don’t know if it’s college or just my circle of friends. But they all say stuff and then go and hang out with those people. (Shay, 2016).

Joy, too, who notes people (herself included) take pains to construct their best online versions, states she doesn’t think individuals are “the same as they post. I really don’t.” Adjoining her statements about presenting a well-edited self-portrayal online, Joy concludes individuals cannot be fully authentic online if, indeed, they are selectively

representing themselves in the most favorable manner possible. Still, she seems unbothered by this, accepting it as the new reality of life online.

As a running theme throughout these interviews, there is extensive commentary regarding what participants feel are their own authentic representations of self-hood, albeit they acknowledge that the deliberate work they undertake to construct their online identities can also be construed as manipulative or strategic. This is usually juxtaposed with their opinions of the inauthenticity they find with respect to others' identity representations. Most don't appear overly disturbed by this, nor particularly judgmental toward those they deem as fake or less than genuine. Part of this is the ease with which online platforms enable the construction of personas in the first place, representations created without much to corroborate the veracity of what is presented. In response to a question about Facebook as a platform that stresses authenticity, Anton states:

It's almost never the case. The biggest problem with inauthenticity to any degree is just because it's so easy to be something else. If you're not satisfied with parts of who you are or your identity, you might want to change it. It's easy to appear how you want to appear rather than appear how you are. It's all just data and you can post something and have it completely be (in a) different emotional state than what you're in and no one would know. (Anton, 2015).

When asked what he finds to be intriguing about others' representations online, Anton continues:

What's interesting to me is that I've noticed that between even some of my good friends, that their real life representations of themselves in person, their

Facebook representations, their Twitter representations, their Instagram representations can all be incredibly different. Even between Twitter and Facebook, people are different. Even, I think, I represent myself differently on different social media platforms. It's different sides of who you are but for some people it's not necessarily different sides but who they want to be. (Anton, 2015).

While, to most study participants, the utilization of new media technologies to operationalize instantiations of themselves in service of objectives such as image management and career pursuit represent key motivators, for Shay and Eliza, it is the relational aspects that are of greatest importance. Eliza notes she posts a lot of photographs of various groups of friends showing her different interests, from athletics to fine arts. "I want people to know that I'm an artist," she explains. As such, for her, the relational blends with the purely representational. While what she is sharing is specific to her craft, she also has an expectation that there will be a reaction from those viewing her content. She explains,

I think people have this fascination of putting images of themselves on social media, or even doing photographic projects, in my class, of themselves. I've heard people speak about why -- they feel like they can know themselves best, people who deal with self-portraiture, and that they can address any particular theme through themselves. (Eliza, 2016).

What seems of importance to Eliza involves representing the relational aspects of her life. On Facebook and Instagram, in addition to photos of objects and scenes artfully presented, most photographs are of Eliza with friends, a significant other, or with her mother. As part of our second interview, Eliza turns to a post she recently uploaded as

being of considerable importance to her. It is an image of a framed photograph of her mother's longtime boyfriend, an individual who has been in Eliza's life since her parents' divorce when she was six. The photograph sits on a table by itself, a vase of lilies nearby. It is situated near the front door of her mother's home on the day a celebration of his life occurred, succumbing as he recently had to cancer. During our interview, Eliza becomes quite upset in sharing this experience, yet remains insistent about continuing, expressing that this aspect of what she is experiencing on social media is important to relate to me. Recalling how upset and busy she was during the three months prior to his death, Eliza notes how the news of his demise transpired on Facebook, and how upsetting this was to her, even as she acknowledges that people express sorrow in different ways.

To provide context for the following quotes, it should be noted that this individual, let's call him Bob, had his own active Facebook page. Though he had been ill for quite some time, it was a period of roughly a week where, close to expiring, he decided to stop all treatment and passed away a day later. Eliza relates her online experience of this life event:

It caught me when (Bob) passed away when people were posting photos of him and writing on his wall. I was like 'what the hell is this, why are people posting photos? I felt like I didn't even want to look at it (her voice choking). A Facebook post isn't enough. I know people deal with grief in different ways, but it felt to me like, 'first, let me post something about him, and then let me grieve.' If that makes sense. The posting and public recognition and social recognition of his death was more important than what actually happened. I know that's just me jumping to conclusions but I couldn't help thinking that. I just find Facebook mourning a

weird thing. It happens a lot now, especially with people who have passed. Their Facebook accounts are still there. A lot of people need that but for me, really, I wanted to get away from it. (Eliza, 2016).

She states she was unable to write anything herself publicly until the day of the celebration, when she finally decided to post the earlier referenced photograph online. She admits to still being confused by her emotions and the public/private dichotomy of experiencing a traumatic life event within the virtual sphere. Indeed, for her, such outpourings of emotion and remembrance virtually -- well-intended though they were -- appeared ill-suited to the gravitas of the situation. She continues:

I'm being really hypocritical because I'm doing what I was feeling weird about, but I guess for me, until that moment, that was one step toward closure for me and my mom and everyone. It was like 'I'm ready' and we felt a lot better. It was lovely and it was justice to have that moment and that day for him, so I did post something because it just came to me. I felt that's what I wanted to do, rather than posting a photo and then grieving. I felt like this came after, for me. I think just because I was so close to (Bob) it was just like I wanted to write about him, and write to him privately, and I'm seeing it so publicly; it was something there that didn't line up for me. (Eliza, 2016).

She offers another example of a classmate of hers whom she was not close with but who had passed away several months earlier. In this case, she took the position of observing others' interactions on social media, explaining:

I could tell it was really necessary for those people. It was kind of like journaling publicly, and I think for some reason, for people my age, it is necessary -- keeping



memories, thoughts, revolving in a group so everyone who saw it would know what they were talking about and think about it. So it's very public and helpful for people to keep his memory alive. (Eliza, 2016).

In lieu of writing one's name in a guest book at a memorial service, for the deceased's family to review later in private, here we have new forms of grieving publicly, new ways to memorialize and portray to others our role in someone else's life. The digital life, filled with its share of frivolous pursuits, a place to pass -- or waste -- an inordinate amount of time, also offers a space where the full range of human drama may occur.

### **I'm Okay, You're Okay: Finding Self-Worth Online**

Despite some of the more directed responses given by participants regarding their motives for constructing their online selves, it is under the auspices of self-worth that many participants say they derive the most benefits, why they fret about how they will be perceived by others, why they feel pressured (their word, not mine) to post constantly. Repeatedly, their responses circle around characterizations I classify as relating to feelings of self-worth. They frequently use the words "validation" and "self-gratification" to describe what it is they receive from their publicly experienced online lives. Of the 12 participants, 10 used either of these words or word pairs; of the two who didn't, Shay spent a considerable amount of time relating how one's sense of self is negatively affected by feelings of being excluded from social activities. As such, it might be construed that the converse might also have resonance, though this is only my supposition. In essence, these individuals state that the myriad ways in which it is now possible to send and receive plaudits publicly -- acts as small as a "like" or as large as a

flattering comment -- aid significantly in enhancing satisfaction with oneself. Noting first that her social media use has as much to do with self-expression as anything else, Kat explains what else it's good for:

My personal gratification from being able to have my own thing. The only thing I've really gotten out of it is the benefit of people seeing my profile. (People) get immediate gratification. It's immediate. You upload a picture and someone can like it in seconds, and yes, when they like it, it makes you feel good. If you get more likes than usual -- it's so creepy that it makes you feel good. I don't think it's necessarily a positive thing, but it's the truth -- you feel good. Say it's a selfie and you get more likes. I do get excited about it. It's appealing to my own sense of worth. If I weren't to get likes, I'm not going to cry about it, but if it goes well, it feels good. I think that's kind of frightening and if I feel that way a little bit, there's probably a lot of people who take it super seriously. (Kat, 2016).

Though several of these participants acknowledge the emotional uplift they receive in similar situations, more than a couple of them appear somehow discomfited when considering how much they value these minute online affirmations whilst also admitting that these seemingly innocuous actions seem to exert a control upon their psyches. For instance, Lily also begins positively when speaking about online contributions of hers that are admired, then mentions that it is also troubling:

Any person gets joy and values the 'like' factor. I certainly do. I'm definitely very attached to how many likes I'm getting. I think it gives me, it sounds so high school, but it's popularity, validation. But it's so sad because it makes me feel so shallow. No one actually admits that, but in your mind, that's why you want those

likes. It's social validation. It's everything people want from the time they're 12-years-old. Because we rely so heavily on social media now, that self-esteem confidence boost -- you get more from that than from someone passing me on Trousdale and saying, 'Hi, you look nice today.' That doesn't happen anymore -- occasionally -- but you put yourself out there on this social media platform and people comment, 'You look so good, glad you're having fun.' Because society has put so much value in it (social media) in the last couple of years, social media is such a big thing and used so universally, my attachment to it has increased. (Lily, 2016).

It is worth reflecting on what Lily says -- that she can value an online compliment almost as much, or more, as if it had occurred offline. The value derived from living an online life is brought home with this simple articulation. Lily also uses the term "value" frequently, making determinations of influence between the various platforms. Receiving a response on Instagram is more valuable to her than receiving such input on Facebook. She feels it is a more selective platform and, as such, individuals tend to post items of higher value to them in the first place. Again, the reference is made to the number of likes one's photo receives on Instagram, as opposed to Facebook, where there are numerous modes of available response, from shares, to likes, to comments. Measurement, in all its guises, seems always to be the key. "I look at people's profiles on Instagram and the first thing I look at is how many followers they have," she states.

Anton, who points to a level of vulnerability that exists when one steps onto these digital platforms in full view of others, expresses a modicum of unease in the waiting for responses to occur online. As he explains:

You're constantly checking it, and you're anticipating it, and you're waiting for it, so that when it finally comes, it's like 'Okay, I got another one,' (here, he is referring to likes). It doesn't really make sense because maybe that person was really busy today and didn't see it for five hours. But when you post, you feel much more exposed. This comes back to validation; obviously on a personal level, you want to feel validated that people are willing to engage with your social media posts and like them. The other component of that is knowing that second parties are going to be seeing your success on your post. (Anton, 2016).

Kirby likens the penchant for taking selfies to having one's image flipped in ways that not only reflect oneself, but also that reflects how others see one.

When someone takes a picture of you, it's the other side of the way you actually look, but you're not used to looking at that. When you take a selfie, it's your image flipped. Part of it is validation. If I put this picture of myself out, and people like it or comment, or give me any sort of positive feedback, that means I look positive, in a positive way. That's tied to the way our sense of self is so tied with our appearance. (Kirby, 2016).

Much is made of the narcissistic tendencies of this 'selfie' generation, and here several participants flatly declare they and their cohorts are narcissists, though when pressed, they also bristle to think they are somehow more so than previous generations. Indeed, it seems widely held by these participants and others of this generation that had older generations been able to avail themselves of such technologies of surveillance, behaviors and usage would have been similar.

Still, Pierre, who is in his final fifth year as an architecture major, characterizes much of what occurs in terms of identity work online as “shameless” and “self-absorbed.” He feels his social media use has altered over the past few years and says he is less enamored with it. Nevertheless, he appears to post quite frequently since that is what is expected, though he clarifies by saying he would prefer that five good friends comment on his posts rather than receive a hundred random likes. Referring to others, he feels that the validation received via social media practice is what many are really seeking. He states:

I think a lot of people are more insecure from it (social media) but then I also think a lot of them are reaffirmed through likes. It’s not neutral, and it depends person to person. Girls are way harder on themselves. It says a lot that the younger generation than me uses Twitter more than Facebook, because Twitter is very much about your likes not about community or groups. Twitter is literally how many likes are you getting on your stupid posts, so it’s even more fake. (Pierre, 2016).

Though admitting to constant digital media use, Pierre appears to not take it too seriously. He, like others, concedes there are self-affirming benefits that accrue from social media interaction, though he also repeatedly makes the point that, at his age, he is past becoming too emotionally vested in what others think of him.

Though his comments may be reflective of a certain maturation that is apparent, particularly with respect to the five individuals I have observed since they were sophomores, I would add that in a digital environment where so much is tagged with a qualitative assessment, the ability to shrug off opinions leveled at one becomes an

increasingly more challenging proposition. Moreover, as the developmental psychologists would likely say, it is the rare individual who doesn't care, even slightly, about how he or she is perceived.

### **Then and Now: A Longitudinal Look at the Online Self**

As noted elsewhere, Arnett's delineation of the transitory state of development between adolescence and adulthood called emerging adulthood seems fitting for this study's cohort (Arnett, 2000). Relevant is his assertion that this stage of life is an emotionally complex one, replete with generous quantities of positive feeling, yet also with its fair share of anxiety inducing moments (Arnett, 2004; 2015). He notes that while a majority of those he studies characterize their lives as "fun and exciting," an equal number report that their lives are filled with stress and anxiety (2015, p. 231).

Indeed, in the course of this research and particularly in terms of my interviewing again, a year-and-a-half later, the five individuals whom I originally interviewed for my pilot study, I find marked differences in the tenor of our conversations. As a whole, these participants appear not only to have matured but, in some instances, also to be more skeptical and somber. The tone of these conversations was not effervescent, as it had been for three of them during the first round. Indeed, what is most striking was that the two individuals who displayed the most carefree attitudes toward their online selves and social media use during our first meeting spent most of the time, during the second, commenting on life online in decidedly negative fashion. Not necessarily missing, but definitely tamped down, is the enthusiasm for living life in the hot glare of the digital spotlight. While not desiring to make too fine a point about this, it would be misleading

to gloss over my annotated interview transcripts for these individuals. Of the original five, only Anton and Dirk, who were singularly career-focused at the outset of this project, still remained so, though both also seemed to have refined their estimations somewhat of new media practices. For all, the actual use of these media shifted, either in terms of the platforms they now favor, the kinds of self-representation they focus more on, or the frequency of their use in general.

Though findings from this sub-group are included in earlier sections where appropriate, in order to present comparative longitudinal findings, in this section, each participant is separately discussed. In addition, observations regarding the online artifacts they were asked to show me are included here unless these examples already were covered in previous sections.

**Kirby**. In our first interview in early 2015, Kirby presented herself as an exceedingly self-assured go-getter, focused on using social media to address the political causes she was passionate about, educating the world about her ethnic identity, righting wrongs as she saw them, and being self-aware of creating her online brand. Interspersed throughout that transcript and via analytic notes were numerous jottings of the words “giggles” or “laughs,” descriptive of our high energy discussion.

During our second meeting 18 months later, such was not the case. Though still pleasant and self-assured, Kirby now appears more thoughtful, her articulations saturated with a certain pensiveness elusive to grasp, yet palpable. She still remains clear about the use of social media as a marketing tool to be utilized for the purposes of branding oneself. To perhaps a greater degree than some of the others, Kirby’s brand seems tied to

her connection with her ethnic lineage, with championing social justice-related causes, and with showcasing hip-hop music. During our first interview, she spoke about how she wanted to be known for two things on social media: to be considered by others as a champion of social justice and to share and defend her ethnic heritage. She stated that when people read her posts, see her photos, engage in commentary with her, she wished to be known as “a social justice queen.” She also wanted her ethnic culture to be recognized and saw it as her mission to educate others about her heritage primarily through her dance practice and, in so doing, correct misperceptions about her culture that she feels widely persist. The following quote from the first interview addresses why she felt it was important to ‘brand’ herself in such manner:

I don’t do many statuses anymore. When I do, it’s about social justice or music. It’s goal-oriented. During the Ferguson protests, I was out there and letting all my 1,500-plus friends know that if you’re in LA, these are the spots they’re getting arrested, so don’t get arrested. (Kirby, 2015).

With respect to portraying her ethnic heritage, she described growing up in Berkeley, and how she was frequently bullied in elementary and middle school “for being Indian.” It was not until she went to a private high school that cultivated an acceptance of individual diversity that she was able to embrace her cultural identity and translate that into a personal mission to educate others about her heritage. She began using social media for such self-expression, and to showcase her training in Indian dance, a key aspect of her identity that had heretofore remained in the shadows. She explains:

I started wanting to be more Indian when I went to high school. I tried to bury that for a very long time. But I’m okay with being an American and an Indian and I



can do both. So I post a lot of pictures of (dancing) because it's what I love to do, and I want people to know it. It's a way to inform people, this is what bhangra is, this is what Punjab is, this is what Sikh is. I make that a big focus of who I am on Facebook. I have my own YouTube channel with all my performances. (Kirby, 2015).

During our second interview, when reminded of what she said earlier, that she wanted to be known as a social justice queen, she reacts strongly, saying "Oh no! I don't want to be known as that anymore. I grew up a little bit (repeats twice)." She explains that the term "social justice" has been "tainted by so many people on social media" that it has lost value for her. She finds the phrase has become ...

like this aggressive, ignorant – I don't want to use this word because of the way it is being used in media too. It's essentially coddled children who refuse to understand the nuance behind the argument. It's just very immature in my mind now. (Kirby, 2016)

Continuing, she refers to the "really toxic" environment on social channels such as Twitter, noting that while social media can provide positive reinforcement, the negative occurs "at a much more exponential rate. I think people are more willing to send hate behind screens than to send love, because you're hiding behind anonymity," she says. To provide an example, she refers to an event she created under the auspices of a campus organization with which she is affiliated. She called it "I stand with Ahmed," referring to the young boy who, in 2015, was arrested mistakenly for bringing a mechanical clock device to his school. Despite her action being received overwhelmingly positively, Kirby notes she is still dealing with negative fallout. "To this day, like a year

later, I'm still getting hate posts. Every few months, I have to go in and clean up the event and delete all the hate," she says. Though appearing to brush these incidences off, it is obvious she is affected by them. She seems far more chastened overall. Her recent comments may be juxtaposed against what she said during our first interview about Twitter: "A lot of people get into fights on Twitter, and that's fun."

When asked to show me an online artifact that holds meaning for her on social media during our second round interview, she opens her Twitter feed, showing me a phrase she has posted: "Unlearn, heal, grow, repeat." It is meaningful, she explains, because of the hardships she has had to endure, and this is a reminder that "I can just exist in the way that I am, in the space that I am, and be okay with that. And that is the healing and the growth."

While Kirby still asserts the importance of branding oneself and portraying a certain image to the world online (covered in an earlier section), even here, she says she wants to be seen differently now.

(It) has changed, actually, over the past two years. I'm much more open about certain things I've been through, and this past summer I came out as someone who had gone through sexual assault and someone who had gone through therapy for that. I claimed a lot of parts of myself publicly. I've also claimed that on Twitter and stuff. I've done that because had I known someone my age when I was going through it, who had also experienced it, I would have been in a much better place to get the help I needed and to ask for advice. But I guess the space I want to take up this year, as a senior, is someone who can help freshmen and

sophomores through whatever they're going through, like a mentor. I didn't have a senior doing that for me. (Kirby, 2016).

Kirby's online representations of herself today appear to parallel her "becoming" sense of self. Utilizing new media technologies enable her to be who she feels she needs to be, and points to the not insubstantial role that public display can play in the evolving construction of one's selfhood.

**Shay.** During our first meeting, Shay was – and remains – the outlier among the group of five, though less so today. She is the one participant who strenuously asserts throughout both interviews that her online representations are in no way guided by external or internal objectives but rather are representations of whatever she feels like sharing at the moment. In 2015, she appeared rather laissez-faire in terms of characterizing her activities on Facebook. Today, she restates that not much has changed about how she uses the three platforms she favors. Indeed, my observations of her Facebook and Instagram pages appear to bear this out. However, what has changed is the manner in which she appeared to me during the second round of interviews. The Shay of 2016 appears significantly more subdued and wistful, as she speaks about the experience of life online. She is less a sophomore and more a senior, one who exhibits a certain wariness when referring to the impact of social media upon one's psyche, a sensitivity notably absent when first we met. Since I have access only to her Facebook and Instagram accounts, and not her Snapchat account, I am able to confirm that on both platforms, the majority of her photos are of her posing and having fun with friends and, to a lesser extent, family. As with the others, Shay admits to using Facebook less frequently than

other platforms, and to being mindful that her family is on Facebook, and not on Instagram. She also is quick to clarify that she doesn't post anything inappropriate on Instagram (a fact to which I can attest).

Yet it is with Snapchat that our discussion takes a turn. Due to the temporal status of the content posted there, Shay's assessment of how this platform has impacted her view of offline relations is worth digesting. She explains that because Snaps are taken in the moment, one is able to quickly see who is doing what with whom and, as such, one questions perhaps why one wasn't included. While this occurs on other platforms as well, photos usually are posted after an event has occurred and not during. This time differential makes all the difference in terms of how Shay interprets these public presentations of sociality among her set of relations.

You'll see people hanging out with people and you're like 'wait why am I not there? Why wasn't I invited?' It's weird because we're all friends, but then when you hang out, it's very situational. But when you see it on Snapchat, you think they've planned it, so it messes with people's heads. You fill in your own context. But then I tell myself, it's like life, you know? Like even this week, a bunch of my friends hung out the other day and I was like, wait, why wasn't I invited? But then it was just like they're all roommates and it's a lot easier for them to like, hey, 'let's go grab dinner' and you know, be in the moment. It makes me feel left out, for sure, but it's not that important. You know the value of your friendship, in person. So social media I feel is messing with everyone's minds on that. (Shay, 2016).

Claiming it has taken her awhile to come to terms with this, she feels she is in a stronger position now in terms of understanding the diverse paths social relations can take. She adds, “I’m realizing that when I leave college, I might have ten friends, but only a handful of them I’ll take away.” This makes her feel both sad and happy, she continues, adding she has some time left to spend in college with those whom she senses she will not be in close contact with afterward.

What differs, during the timespan of this project, is the way in which Shay characterizes the effects of online engagement upon her. In early 2015, she used the phrase “I don’t really care” on numerous occasions as she spoke about displaying her life on Facebook. Her demeanor, too, was carefree to the point of being happily dismissive when asked about the effects of social media representations upon her. In 2016, she invariably describes the online display of social relations as “weird.” She notes repeatedly that “they mess with” one’s thinking. Such can be the travails that accompany the monitoring of others’ and one’s own social media presence – the anxieties associated with such visible social relations are well-documented by scholars such as Turkle, boyd and Marwick.

While Shay appears far more reflective in terms of evaluating the effects of social media use on her, she claims not to have ever really been overly concerned by all the noise. Still, the fact that she, too, discusses the ratio of one’s likes to one’s followers and is able to provide her metrics with little hesitation – the highest number of likes she has received is just over a hundred, and the average number of likes per post falls within the 60-70 range – suggests that her online representations have some degree of impact upon her.

Given her prior dismissiveness of using these platforms to create a self-brand or for the purposes of furthering her career, Shay is asked again about what utility they might hold for her. She responds by noting that social media, for her, is about documenting her life with those who mean something to her. She goes so far as to say “that’s the only reason why I use it,” referring to the capacity to review photos and posts from several years ago. In the session where we review together her most meaningful posts, Shay elects to show me two. One is of a high school friend who has been diagnosed with cancer. It is a photograph showing this young woman’s newly shaved head. Shay describes the image:

She always has this upbeat quality about her and every post she does, but this for me really hit home. I love this post. It’s talking about how she shaved her head but also about the three things she’s grateful for, and it has some jokes in it. Like she’s joking, eat good food for me like she couldn’t have. Her spirit is so uplifting even though she’s going through something like this and wants to share it with all of us. (Shay, 2016).

The other post is of Shay’s parents, and she uses it as an example of others like it where she posts a photo of them to wish them a happy birthday or anniversary. What she finds particularly gratifying is viewing the comments posted by others, comments that demonstrate to her the relations these individuals have with her family. She notes that whenever she posts a photograph of her parents:

It really gets a lot of likes. I love seeing the comments. It’s really warm; comments that no one in my generation ever does stuff like this. If I posted a

photo like this of me and my friend and said ‘happy birthday’ or whatever, people would just like it. They wouldn’t comment on it. (Shay, 2016).

She agrees emphatically with my subsequent comment that it’s extremely easy to hit the ‘like’ button. Given this, there is an implicit appreciation for the value of reciprocity and face-saving techniques -- quickly liking others’ posts, for example.

**Anton**. Of the original five participants, it is Anton who appears to have changed the least with respect to his online self-representations and his views concerning them. Still, he finds himself using Facebook less today, and transitioning to LinkedIn as he nears the end of his college years and moves into career mode. He appears more at ease with himself today because, as he notes, he has achieved what he set out to do using new media platforms when he entered college – to create an image of himself as a leader within the engineering community on campus, to be seen as having many friends, and to position himself in the best possible manner in order to secure a job. By his own admission, he has accomplished these objectives, and while he still actively engages in self-representation, he seems more relaxed about this. And yet, he too, refers to the anxiety noted earlier, and while he states this has decreased somewhat, he states he still cares about the number of likes or other responses he receives. He explains:

I’m not going to be devastated if I get only 30 likes. Back then, I had less followers and I was trying harder to develop or present some identity, especially coming to college. It was a really big portion of that. Coming to college, a bigger pond, the progression from freshman year to now has been extreme. But now I’m comfortable with who I am, especially on social media, and I have the followers. I

don't really have anything to prove; it's more about sharing now, so the importance is less, but it is still there, I think subconsciously it's still there. (Anton, 2016).

His acute awareness of the visibility of his online practices makes Anton feel as if he must adhere to the standards he feels are important in terms of self-presentation. He is consistent, as observed over the two years, in posting photos of himself with friends in social situations, sharing information pertaining to his field, or depicting himself strategically with other engineering students, as noted earlier. His ability to view his self-portraits over time has bolstered his confidence. He states:

Not only do I have the personal background and leadership experience, but I have the professional experience to back that up even more. I'm more certified, my confidence is more meaningful because I have evidence and things to back it up, so now it's even stronger. Going into my senior year, I do feel kind of top dog and I do feel very confident in myself and in my ability. The biggest influence has been becoming a part of ASBME, and we try to be very active on social media. So me being part of leadership is viewed often on social media; they see me all the time so there's visibility there and that's why a lot of people know me and I don't know them. The imagery, the actual pictures of my involvement on campus have probably been the most important, and then also the network of people – other movers and shakers at Viterbi (USC's School of Engineering). I know them now and we interact on social media, so people from their groups see me a lot. (Anton, 2016).



Indeed, as one builds a self online for others to view, this same profile may well serve to reflect back to its owner an emerging portrait of someone one who seems worthy of admiration. As photographers well know, an air-brushed image of one becomes assimilated rather quickly in the mind's eye as a true representation. Invariably, we see and remember what we wish, rather than as things are.

**Dirk.** Among the more introspective of participants from the 12, Dirk displays a keen sensibility about what online self-representation is useful for, as well as how it can be detrimental. The first time we met, he articulated how living in such an image-conscious environment as Los Angeles impacted expectations of how one should behave and appear online.

At least for my specific case in LA, it's a very image-based place and I mean LA is in general, especially on Instagram and Facebook. People really have an idea of what they're supposed to look like and what they're supposed to be doing, and what people expect them to be doing for our age. I think people feel obligated to behave a certain way. I guess I only post things that I think somebody will actually find interesting or exciting about my life, or fascinating. I don't like to post things that are irrelevant. I guess because I try to really paint myself in a really positive light, I do think about it (the audience) before I post it. (Dirk, 2015).

It appears from the start of his forays online, Dirk has employed a methodical approach to presenting himself. He didn't have a Facebook page until his senior year in high school. He explains he didn't want to share much about himself, preferring to be private, as he

wasn't quite sure of who he was then. That, he says, is the opposite of how he feels now; moreover, his realization of the importance of cultivating a serious persona with respect to his musical career is a primary driver of his online labors. During our second interview, he recalls he used to care much more about maintaining a certain image than he does today; however, it is clear from his comments, as well as from his artfully produced Facebook and Instagram pages, that he remains quite mindful of the impressions he produces for others. He says:

When I was a spring chicken, my first two years in college, maybe I cared more about likes and things like that because you know my whole life had changed, and I was meeting a ton of new people and wanted to be accepted and liked in a new place. But now that I have my friend group and have a life here, I don't really care as much. I am pursuing a master's and I have way more important things to be worrying about. There's more going on that's more important to me. (Dirk, 2016).

In addition to being busier and anticipating entering the workforce, Dirk's stated attitude toward online self-image seems to have changed since first we spoke, when presenting an impeccable image was deemed extremely important. While acknowledging he still attempts to present an appropriate self online, he is less enthralled by the quest to appear attractive or famous. He states:

The thing that really turns me off from social media is that perfection ideal because obviously people want to paint themselves in the best light that they can. And I try to do that, but I don't try to seem perfect, because I feel like everybody's trying to be an Instagram model these days. They always look perfect, and I think to myself, 'what is your day job?' It seems like every day they

post a photo of them at the beach. I think that's really harmful to most people who don't have those opportunities or maybe the money to necessarily live that kind of lifestyle. It creates unattainable goals for 98 – 99 percent of people who are actually using these social media. (Dirk, 2016).

In contrast to the teenager who wasn't sure of himself, today, Dirk's self-assuredness about his identity as an artist is evident in how he chooses to portray himself online.

**Eliza.** Along with Shay, Eliza focuses mostly on utilizing social media for relational purposes but, in her case, she is less cognizant – and interested – in being strategic about her self-representations online. She doesn't know how many follow her on Facebook, and doesn't have any plans to assure that a certain number of followers observe her postings. That said, she is a photographer and, as she noted during our first interview, she says she wants to present this aspect of herself to others, partially because this is who she is and partially as it might aid her career. This has changed somewhat since our first meeting, a change she acknowledges. During our first interview, she discussed the practical realities of showcasing her work online, worrying about having that work product appropriated in ways that might hurt her career in the future. She notes:

Because I study photography and because I consider myself a photographer, I definitely post what I'm taking photos of. I wrestle with it. There's a whole thing about copyright and things on my Facebook can obviously be taken by anyone and it's a bit of a dangerous ground to be posting myself so freely. I don't want anyone to take my creative for their own. It's just interesting because I want

people to see what I'm doing and if I'm proud of my photographs, that's the reason I put them upon Facebook. (Eliza, 2015).

Since then, concerns about copyright seem to have receded. Some of it is a function of being busy due to her internship at a studio; some points to an evolution in her thinking and the importance she now places on sharing her work with others. Using Instagram more than Facebook, her photos tend to depict moments she wishes to capture as well as photos of her with family and friends. One finds tableaus such as a brass fire hydrant with pink flowers falling around it, or a periwinkle screen in front of which stand five cacti, with a caption that reads "Frieda's cactus fence." In thinking about which photos to post online to represent her *métier*, Eliza states that audience is very important to her. She explains:

Speaking as more an art platform, I don't think that without critique and feedback and experience from someone other than myself, that I can advance my work. I'll get stuck in some idea I have and continue and never challenge myself until I have a critique. My work depends on people immediately experiencing my work and what their immediate reaction is, so I value an audience. (Eliza, 2016).

While for her, there is a close association between the photographs she takes and her sense of self, the link she makes between others' reactions and acceptance of her photographic output is something all study participants, in one way or another, also acknowledge is important to them. Whether it's receiving enough likes for one's posting, being complimented on one's new profile picture, or engaging in ongoing banter started by a post or photograph, these all are constitutive of the ways in which individuals come to terms with themselves as a result of their carefully constructed online personas.

While this chapter has focused on presenting findings from the points of view of the individuals themselves, based on the considerable emphasis expressed by most of them regarding the quantity of likes and feedback they wish to receive (except for Shay and Pierre, both of whom state they are not concerned about this aspect), it seems useful to present data that depict the scope of each participant's influence online as determined by the very metrics they utilize to formulate their assumptions about themselves and others. The following tables (see Figures 1 and 2) present comparative metrics taken from the two social media platforms most utilized by this study's participants: Facebook and Instagram, and reflect data captured at a specific point in time during the writing of this paper.

In analyzing these data for Facebook (Figure 1), it is worth noting that Jack has the greatest number of friends (3,323), trailed by Pierre at 2,332, and Kat at 2,090. Further, reactions to Jack's profile picture on Facebook (772) far exceed those of anyone else, including Pierre (434). Jack's cover photo reactions (287) exceed -- by an order of magnitude -- those of any other participant. As might be expected when one thinks about the reciprocal nature of online self-representations and interactions, as evidenced by the numbers in this table, it is one's profile picture, and not one's cover photo, that receives the greatest reaction from others. It is, in a sense, acknowledgement that one's self-portrait, such as these are, is being received well by others. This is why, as participants explain, effort and thought goes into the production of this particular item. Interestingly, the two students majoring in public relations, Jack and Joy, both opt to make private the metric regarding number of friends. They both state they do so in order to avoid

providing random viewers of their Facebook page the opportunity to review their friends' Facebook pages.

On Instagram (Figure 2), it is again Pierre (241) and Jack (525) – particularly Jack -- who outstrip the others in terms of the average number of likes each receives based upon their top ten photos. Still, it is worth noting that Annette (165), Lily (146), Joy (118), and Shay (112) all have fairly healthy averages, particularly when considering the size of their audiences. In terms of followers, however, it is Dirk who exceeds everyone at 3,154. Comparatively, Jack has 2,918 followers and Pierre has 2,586. With respect to the followers:following ratio, again it is Jack (4.4) leading, with Pierre (3.1) and Dirk (2.5) behind.

In reviewing these metrics, as with any data, one may interpret them in a number of ways. In these instances, there is most assuredly an individualized notion (nested within norms about what constitutes online influence) held by each participant that instantiates as meaningful for each of them. For instance, it would be misguided to conclude that Ben or Anton, each of whom are lowest in terms of Instagram followers at 248 and 301 respectively, are somehow unsuccessful as compared to those sporting higher follower numbers. Their followers:following ratios, at 1.8 for Ben and 1.2 for Anton, fit right behind the top three (Jack at 4.4; Pierre at 3.1; and Dirk at 2.5). Moreover, one might recall that Anton is quite specific about the kind of audience he is most interested in cultivating – the bioengineering community – and thus online success for him needs to be measured in terms of penetration of this target audience. As such, making general determinations based merely on such comparative data can be tricky.

## Participant Usage Metrics

	<b>Facebook</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Friends</b>	<b>Profile Picture Reactions</b>	<b>Cover Photo Reactions</b>
Anton	753	172	22
Lily	1,303	157	42
Joy	(P) 1,313	242	12
Pierre	2,332	434	46
Eliza	1,334	49	48
Kirby	1,909	174	63
Dirk	1,972	187	32
Shay	1,062	134	78
Jack	(P) 3,323	772	287
Kat	2,090	47	14
Annette	1,061	272	97
Ben	1,149	125	59
<b>Average</b>	<b>1,496.5</b>	<b>230.4</b>	<b>66.6</b>

**Notes:**

*Profile pictures are the smaller inset photos on one's page.*

*Cover photos are the larger banner images on one's page.*

*Reactions are either Likes or other graphic representations (similar to Likes and provided by Facebook) one uses to comment.*

*(P) stands for private. The individual does not make this metric publically available.*

**Figure 1**

## Participant Usage Metrics

	<b>Instagram</b>			
Anton	301	248	1.214	64
Lily	755	676	1.117	146
Joy	424	531	0.798	118
Pierre	2,586	830	3.116	241
Eliza	466	496	0.940	63
Kirby	778	620	1.255	89
Dirk	3,154	1,239	2.546	86
Shay	373	367	1.039	112
Jack	2,918	659	4.428	525
Kat	673	482	1.396	51
Annette	550	628	0.876	165
Ben	248	137	1.810	42
<b>Average</b>	<b>1,168.4</b>	<b>595</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>152.6</b>

**Notes:**

*Followers represents others who are following one's account.*

*Following represents others who one follows.*

*Followers:Following represents a widely used ratio used to assess one's influence online.*

*Average Number of Likes represents the average of Likes received by the top ten photos.*

**Figure 2**



## Discussion

### Summation of findings.

As indicated in these findings, there are varied reasons why individuals represent themselves online in the ways they do. Among the points made elsewhere in this paper, it is worth restating that as individuals spend increasingly more time living online, their perceptions, activities, and sense of self are being continually constructed in a dialectic with technologies and others. As corroborated by the findings, for many individuals of a particular generational cohort, their online identity work is a work-in-progress. The self-narratives of this study's participants, as told through the online portrayals I have observed, as well as via their individual explications, form the evidentiary base that supports this project's assertions: that those who have spent the majority of their lives as part of a larger digital ecosystem act in thoughtful, deliberate, and intentional ways in order to construct a specific (some would say curated) online self, and that they operationalize their intentions in strategic ways to elicit the outcomes they desire.

To summarize the findings in an over-arching sense, regardless of the digital platforms they utilize, it appears that participants engage in different modes of impression management online. It is clear they comprehend the weight of what it means to project a public self and engage in highly visible relations mediated by digital technologies. This constant surveillance is at the core of why digital social media exerts such a pull. If not for the swift recognition by others of one's presence and actions, there would be little need for such performative self-representations. The ostensibly one-to-one relational dynamics that play out in full view of others means a constant calibration of response is necessary, not only to present the best outward facing self, but also to behave in ways that meet normative standards as ascertained by the networked publics associated with each

platform. That so many participants mention they value Snapchat, as it allows them to be more in the moment and thus more who they believe they really are, offers further evidence that more deliberate kinds of representation are occurring on the other platforms.

Whether creating a particular autobiographical narrative intended to resonate with particular publics or engaging in relational activities with others, it is the need to have one's humanity witnessed, in some way, that makes such technologies of self-expression so compelling. Throughout the findings, one finds instantiations of how this motivation to be acknowledged fuses with the need for connection with others.

### **Implications for self-spectacle within digital culture.**

Drawing from critical cultural studies, I utilize the concept of societal spectacle in terms of framing what is revealed by the findings, as well as from my experiences with other students. Though the trope of spectacle abounds today, perhaps it does so because no other characterization so captures the essence of the contemporary moment. While the indiscriminate use of the word eventually may rob its purchase, appropriately applied, the concept of spectacle is, I would argue, even more apropos today than before, given the vast array of spectacles -- grand and granular -- that permeate throughout the culture. As such, I theorize that current manifestations of the digital self are representative of a nascent form of micro spectacle -- which I alternatively refer to as self-spectacle -- one that privileges a self mindfully produced and externally oriented, existing within a larger digital ecosystem whose commodity structures reify such types of spectacle.

To do this, I invoke portions of Debord's (1967) oeuvre regarding spectacle (though I do so selectively), as well as incorporate aspects of Kellner's (2003) corpus regarding media spectacle. To briefly summarize, I must first note the key qualities of societal spectacle borrowed from Debord and Kellner before expounding upon why they are relevant for my conceptualization of self-spectacle. From Debord's definition of societal spectacle, I appropriate the following three aspects: 1. That social life is expressed primarily through the visual -- that the visual is indeed privileged when invoking the concept of spectacle; 2. That social relations manifest via mediated representations; and 3. That representations -- indeed, culture itself -- become commodities, to be produced, replicated, and consumed.

Where Debord provides the ideology, Kellner offers the pragmatism necessary for my understanding of contemporary culture. As such, I draw from his perspectives regarding media culture; in particular, that the media are purveyors of cultural mores and social values -- that it is the media, in large measure, that configures meaning for much that constitutes culture. Further, I follow Kellner's thinking that spectacle, as instantiated in numerous domains of life, becomes an organizing principle of life. In the following sections, I mix these strands to weave my own narrative about self-spectacle.

In my elucidation of why I regard self-representation online as a form of spectacle of the self, I funnel the macro-level componentry of societal spectacle to reach the individual level. Beginning with the idea that spectacle requires a degree of display or exhibition, of showing, I posit that the highly visual instantiations of daily life -- as evidenced by this study cohort's attentiveness to the public nature of their representations -- point toward a spectacle-ization of their online selves. Whilst individuals may not

characterize or see themselves as creating self-spectacles (particularly since the word is understood to connote grander scale meanings), I nevertheless believe spectacle represents one approach to interpreting the phenomenon of showing oneself to the world in the specific ways one desires.

As demonstrated by this study, thoughtful self-representation is paramount to living a successful digital life. Certainly for younger generations, online life is seen as quite a bit more than merely an adjunct to “real” life. Without such display, there now is a risk of being cast as absent from one’s jointly enacted life experience. For instance, several participants note that when they cease to communicate in any way using these digital media – when their online social relations are interrupted -- others are quick to notice and inquire whether there is something amiss. The visual spectacle that occurs in the course of engaging with others online impacts not just the actors themselves, but also those who view, or are the recipients of, such virtual social interactions. When one refrains from participating in one’s life spectacle online, even briefly, consequences may arise making such practice unsustainable for the long term.

Hewing to Kellner’s explication of how such minute displays work within the larger media spectacle culture, I would agree there is an “obsessive fascination” (p. 103) with the details of our lives and the lives of others as manifested online. Referring to the insinuation of outsized media culture into the lives of average individuals, Kellner remarks, “In media culture, the private sphere disappears and the most intimate details of everyday life are revealed in the white-hot glare of media focus” (p. 103). The fact that, in contemporary digital culture, much of what is represented and communicated about oneself is fairly mundane does not appear to have any dampening effect on degrees of

interest in such material, or the purported value generated for those who live so much of their lives online.

Spectacle texturizes not only the displayed quality of online social relations and directed self-representation, but also addresses how these dynamics impact offline social relations and perceptions of oneself. The emotional terrain traversed as a result of such outward facing personal expressions (feelings of validation and satisfaction engendered by achieving certain levels of likes, or negative emotions that arise when this does not occur) can be bumpy. As part of the work necessary to ensure how one's self-spectacle is being received by others in the course of daily living thus becomes a vital pre-occupation – not unlike Debord's claim that spectacle exerts a mesmerizing and totalizing effect upon individuals.

As Kellner notes, part of what constitutes spectacle is the immediacy of the event, possibly its disruptive nature, and certainly its novelty. In performing publicly the details of one's daily life, one manages to fulfill in some way at least two of these. Both the immediacy of receiving messages and the disruption these incoming streams cause are constitutive of digital life today. Of course, it should be noted that consumption of digital forms of representation does not always occur in real-time. The ability to access content previously created and saved is a key technological affordance that serves to facilitate on-demand spectacle. In such manner, one is able, not only to retrieve one's own documentations of oneself as desired, but also those of others.

With respect to novelty, it is perhaps this factor of spectacle that appears the weakest on an individual level. In the zeal to commandeer the attention of others (attention being among the most prized of commodities within capitalist structures), there

is a high degree of redundancy via the appropriation and simulation of that which already exists throughout the culture. There is only so much new under the sun. Thus, the novel, when it does appear in some form, exerts an even more outsized influence than perhaps what it should. In speaking about how their own self-representations must offer something of value to their publics, study participants indicate they are mindful about offering, if nothing new, then at least a uniqueness of perspective – a nod to the fact that they understand that securing the gaze of another is not always guaranteed because of existing relationships, but is something that must be earned. In such ways, individuals understand the logics of consumption that must be attended to in producing their self-spectacles.

As part of their constant monitoring and quantification of responses they receive, most participants demonstrate the tendency to rate their online self-representations according to individual yardsticks in accordance with cultural norms. In so doing, a generative stream of critical evaluation pits them not only in contest with others, but also with themselves, and in very public ways. Beyond their stated motivations for doing so, the rewards of successful self-spectacle represent the values associated with contemporary digital culture. One's self-spectacle, assuming it meets the prevailing standards of what constitutes success online, may yield valuable social currency, such as being considered popular, influential, or powerful. Publicly measurable and demonstrable via the affordances of new media technologies, individual-level spectacle exists not just for its own sake or even to achieve personal objectives. It thrives because it is a vital component of the larger digital ecosystem, one that requires such micro-level spectacles to exist and flourish for its own functioning. Without the willing participation of billions

of individuals uploading their life stories daily, the digital ecosystem, such that it is, would cease to exist. In addition to the self-referential content so integral to this system, the value derived via social engagement with others translates into a social currency that can be both deeply meaningful and potentially profitable on an individual level. Certainly, it is profoundly lucrative for the corporate interests that create and control the technological infrastructure of the digital ecosphere.

It is worth emphasizing that many young individuals, having grown up with these technologies of the self, seem to have a far greater affinity and tolerance for the insinuation of commodity capitalism in their lives than previous generations. They appear eager to demonstrate their knowledge of how to increase their audiences, for the sake of being validated by others, sure, but also for the possibility of turning their online self-representations into cash, careers, or merchandise. And, while most do not seek the kind of celebrity found within the larger context of media spectacle, they are fully amenable to garnering robust doses of recognition from their followers for the reasons noted above. This is found throughout this study, even from those who summarily dismiss the idea of carefully curating their self-image online. For instance, participants understand that their performed digital selves, while amalgamating into a displayed corpus representative of who they wish to be seen as, also are deconstructed into innumerable data points by other entities. There is general acceptance of a neo-liberal quid pro quo, an understanding that one has to somehow pay the price for content one consumes, via advertising, subscription, or even as part of reciprocal exchange. For some, these tacitly understood realities form the backdrop against which their desires to capitalize on their produced self-facing content plays out.

In this sense, Debord's criticisms regarding the alienation that commodity spectacle produces as it separates individuals from their labor may be found in digital culture, though I would suggest there is significantly more value created by and for individuals today who seem far from the dispossessed passive spectator class of Debord's characterization. That said, today, there may be other forms of distancing occurring, as the self becomes endlessly photographed, documented, and distributed. As they mature and gain more life experience online, some participants note they increasingly feel an odd detachment toward others. In more than one instance, where online representations are perceived as disingenuous, these same relations offline are likely to be affected negatively. The widely acknowledged inauthenticity of others' self-presentations, as articulated by these participants, appears to possess the capacity to drive a not-so-virtual wedge in real-life relations. It is less the literal erosion of relational quality that I point to here and more a kind of protective detachment that seems to be summoned by these individuals, perhaps to serve as inoculation against the pliancies of online relations. Though I do not make it my place to theorize about this, it is a strand worthy of future study and, as such, I mention it here.

As yet another fruitful area for exploration, in an odd twist that might be occurring with respect to the recent influx of body-altering technologies, we may well be witnessing a new kind of separation. The appetite for these provocative tools – software apps that minimize face size, change eye shape, and so forth – is robust. Selfie applications such as Meitu, which promises one-touch image-enhancement tools, take self-representation into entirely different territory. For instance, one wonders at what point self-spectacles cross from being fairly accurate representations of physical states to



being more akin to avatars. Are both to be considered real enough to represent our selves? What sorts of fissures might occur between the real self – whatever that may mean – and the represented self, or selves? No doubt, such inquiry will continue as the technological self iterates in unique ways.

Approaching today's cultural realities, however, through the lens of visual spectacle, it is worth recalling Sontag's aphorism regarding the fragility of all things, as they pass into other new things, rendering a reality that is "fundamentally unclassifiable. As if only by looking at reality in the form of an object – through the fix of the photograph – is it really real, that is, surreal" (Sontag, 1977, p. 80). I offer this not to suggest that the reality of ourselves is less than real unless frozen as image, nor that those who participate in self-spectacle are at odds with the reality of their offline lives. Rather, I suggest this as a means by which to regard the life spectacle produced today via digital means as transcending singular perspectival assessments.

Self spectacle should be conceived in multi-dimensional ways in order to have it apply to the myriad instantiations of digital life --from strategic depictions of ourselves to achieve personal objectives, to the representation of our corporeal states as discrete sets of visible data, to performed shows of sociality. This study's participants, in articulating the reasons why they practice online self-representation as they do, point to the continual work it takes to construct a worthy online self. It is a self-spectacle imagined by one and considered by others on a daily basis, a dialectic between technology and the self that grows increasingly kinetic.

## Conclusion

The wholesale and, I would maintain still largely uncritical, embrace of all things digital makes thoughtful examination of such issues an even greater priority, particularly so for educators. Many of us live a significant portion of our lives online and this is certainly true for younger generations. The need to study what occurs within the online ecosystem is especially valuable if we are to appreciate what our students' lives are really like. A grasp of how students view the digital environment that so shapes who they are is a meaningful step toward what Mills would consider to be a sociological imperative. In this sense, there are implications for future research particularly in the field of education, but also for communication studies and cultural studies. That so many educational institutions and disciplines strive valiantly to expose their students to new technologies is laudable. Nonetheless, the need to impart knowledge that engenders critique regarding how human and non-human activity occurs in virtual space is extremely necessary. Whether understanding better how and why we instantiate our selves as we do online, or questioning the mechanisms that collect and reconstitute data (as shown in this study, data about us, but also data in general), the need to study how contemporary technologies insinuate themselves into every aspect of life is imperative. As noted earlier, we increasingly become our own content and that content is repurposed, monetized, and utilized in unseen ways by others – by for-profit entities such as PatientsLikeMe, for instance, and certainly by the social media platforms studied here. That such societal trends will continue and increase in scope seems rather evident.

From a practical standpoint, new knowledge about how technological systems undergird that which is presented as – and taken as – normative strands of daily life

would serve students well, especially if educators were to lead the charge in terms of raising such awareness and facilitating such scholarship. All too often within the classroom, in our race to keep up with technology, study is centered around the uses of technology or, within the discipline, scholarship attends to issues regarding access to technology. While this is entirely appropriate, there needs to be an evenly measured dose of critical exploration regarding the social, historical, and economic implications of new technologies and their affordances, and more understanding of how these new modes of influence may be impacting individuals' activities online.

As early as 1985, Turkle (1995) called the computer “the second self,” fusing machine to the idea, essence, and materiality of the human self. Though referring then to the identity formation occurring within gaming environments, she nevertheless presciently wrote:

Once we take virtuality seriously as a way of life, we need a new language about talking about the simplest things. Each individual must ask: What is the nature of my relationships? What are the limits of my responsibility? And even more basic: Who and what am I? (Turkle, 1995, p. 231).

Articulated decades ago, these inquiries hold even more relevance today, as we have moved further along the virtual continuum.

Understanding the self has been the project of humankind for as long as can be imagined. Yet understanding what is happening now, during what is arguably an epochal moment regarding the state of individual identity, seems particularly urgent and necessary. Urgency springs from the perspective that life, as mediated by emerging technologies, must be grasped in order to not be subsumed by those technologies; that

this life requires the application of critical thought to make sense of what is occurring. Necessity comes, perhaps, from the point of view of individuals themselves, for in rushing to create the right self for themselves and ensuring they meet the normative standards of the day, they are active agents in the creation of their identities as never before and, at the end of the 24/7 cycle, they need to know not just whether their representations are well-received but, more significantly, whether these constructed selves contribute meaningfully to their sense of self. To contribute to the discourse surrounding how and why we choose to act and 'be' as we are online is something, in some measure, I aspire to accomplish with this study.

## Appendix A - Recruitment Email Script

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You were referred to me by one of your fellow students as a potential interview subject for my dissertation study on the construction of identity in online settings. Given the ubiquity and pervasiveness of digital life as part of contemporary culture, this study seeks to better understand how individuals decide to portray themselves online, what is important to them as part of their online identity constructions, how they are influenced by others, and what meanings are derived from their representations of themselves online. For the most part, the questions will focus on whichever social networking sites (SNS) you happen to be most engaged with.

The interview will occur in person, and you and I can set up a time that is mutually convenient. We will meet in a private area on campus. The interview will take between 45-90 minutes.

Thanks so much for your time and I look forward to meeting you!

## Appendix B - Recruitment Email Script/Past Participant

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As you'll recall, you and I met nearly two years ago when you agreed to be an interview subject for my dissertation study on the construction of identity in online settings. In my attempt to understand better how individuals decide to portray themselves online, how they are influenced by others, and what significance is derived from their online self-representations, I would like to ask you to meet with me again no more than twice to discuss your thoughts about how your online representations might have changed during these past two years and how you think about this issue today. The eligibility requirement for this follow-up interview is that you be still enrolled at the University of Southern California.

Both interviews will occur in person, and you and I can set up a time that is mutually convenient. We will meet, as we did before, in a private area on campus. It is anticipated that one session, lasting between 45-90 minutes, will be discussion style as we did before. The other session involves you showing me at least three posts that are important or impactful for you in any way. We will look at them on either your phone or laptop, or mine, and do so in-person. As with the previous sessions, you will have already given me permission to access the various social networking sites you use most frequently. While I am able to view these independently, the purpose of this particular session is for you to explain the significance of any particular posts, photos or comments that you feel are most relevant to our discussions and to the concept of representing yourself online.

Thanks so much for your time and I look forward to meeting again!

## **Appendix C - UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES STUDY INFORMATION SHEET**

*Selfhood Online: The manifestation of identity in online cultures.*

PI: Mayanna Framroze, B.A., MA. FS: Douglas Kellner, PhD. from the Education Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an undergraduate student at USC, are 18 years or older, and you utilize social media regularly. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

### **Why is this study being done?**

This study is being conducted to understand how individuals decide to portray themselves online, what is important to them as part of their online identity constructions, how they are influenced by others' reactions, and what meanings are derived from their representations of themselves online.

### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Be a part of a 45 - 90 minute in-person interview on the USC campus.
- Give the researcher access to your primary social networking sites for the duration of the study period, not to exceed one year.
- The types of questions that will be a part of the above include:
- How do participants construct their online identities? How do they decide what to portray and why.
- What meanings do they derive from these identity constructions?
- What do they believe about their online identities?
- What are their motives/objectives?
- How are their online representations influenced by others' reactions?
- How do they deal with the social demands regarding self-representations online?
- Do participants actively seek to curate a particular kind of self/narrative of self? Why?
- What is important to participants in terms of how they are perceived by others online? Why?

### **How long will I be in the research study?**

Participation will take a total of approximately 45-90 minutes for the interviews.

**Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts.

**Are there any potential benefits if I participate?**

You will not directly benefit from this research.

The results of the research may contribute to a greater understanding of contemporary life within new media culture.

**Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping the data in a secure location. All identifying information as part of the interviews will be changed using pseudonyms for the analysis and for the final report.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?**

- **The research team:**  
If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:  
Mayanna (Anne) Framroze at 213-675-1090 or [framroze@ucla.edu](mailto:framroze@ucla.edu)  
Douglas Kellner at [kellner@ucla.edu](mailto:kellner@ucla.edu).
- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**  
If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program  
11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694



## **Appendix D - UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES STUDY INFORMATION SHEET/ PAST PARTICIPANT**

*Selfhood Online: The manifestation of identity in online cultures.*

PI: Mayanna Framroze, B.A., MA. FS: Douglas Kellner, PhD. from the Education Department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are conducting a research study.

You were selected as a participant for this study because you are an undergraduate student at USC, are 18 years or older, utilize social media regularly and you participated in a previous study with the researcher whereby you discussed your social media practices. The previous study was aimed at understanding how individuals behave online and what is important to them as they construct their own identities online. You provided the researcher with access to your social media accounts and you consented to being interviewed by the researcher.

As with the previous study, your participation in this research study is voluntary.

### **Why is this study being done?**

This study is being conducted to understand how individuals decide to portray themselves online, what is important to them as part of their online identity constructions, how they are influenced by others' reactions, and what meanings are derived from their representations of themselves online.

### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Be a part of one 45-90 minute in-person interview, and one shorter session on the USC campus.
- Give the researcher access to your primary social networking sites for the duration of the study period, not to exceed one year.
- The types of questions that will be a part of the above include:
- How have your online representations changed over the past two years since we last spoke? Describe? Which platforms do you now use most?
- What meanings or significance do you derive from these identity constructions? Has this changed over the past two years, and how?
- What objectives do you have now with respect to your online identity representations? How has this changed over the past two years? Why?
- What is important to you today in terms of how you are perceived by others online? Why? How has this changed over the past two years?
- In general, how has the online landscape changed in terms of self-representation?

- Show me at least three examples from any of the online platforms you frequent that are most impactful for you in some way. Why were these most significant for you?
- Show me anything else from your online representations (from the platform of their choosing) and explain what you are trying to achieve via those representations.

**How long will I be in the research study?**

Participation will take a total of approximately 45-90 minutes for the first session, and considerably shorter for the second session.

**Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts.

**Are there any potential benefits if I participate?**

You will not directly benefit from this research.

The results of the research may contribute to a greater understanding of contemporary life within new media culture.

**Will I receive any payment for my follow-up interview(s)?**

You will not receive any payment for these interviews.

**Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping the data in a secure location. All identifying information as part of the interviews will be changed using pseudonyms for the analysis and for the final report.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

**Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?**

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

Mayanna (Anne) Framroze at 213-675-1090 or [framroze@ucla.edu](mailto:framroze@ucla.edu)

Douglas Kellner at [kellner@ucla.edu](mailto:kellner@ucla.edu).

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the OHRPP at (310) 825-7122 or write to:

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program

11000 Kinross Avenue, Suite 211, Box 951694

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694

## Appendix E – Participant Interview Questions

### **RQ 1: How do participants construct their online identities?**

- Let's start by you telling me which social networking sites (SNS) you are on primarily, and give me a sense of how much time daily you spend on each of those sites.
- Describe in any way you want your identity or online persona as it appears on those sites. What sorts of general comments can you make regarding how you choose to portray yourself via your profile, or even in your posts?
- How do you decide what to portray as part of your online identity?
- Are your online identities/portrayals different on various SNS and if so please explain how and why. (At this point, a review of their profiles on various sites would fit – refer to laptop display – and ask them to point out how they 'present' differently on different SNS.
- Do you find the fields (FB/Instagram, etc.) provides for you limiting in any way with respect to describing yourself or your identity?
- Do you feel the profile sections on certain SNS are valuable? Is this the place where you self-represent your identity or elsewhere? What about for sites that do not have profile pages?
- Which of the SNS that you use are better for self-disclosure? Which are not? How does this affect your decision in terms of what you share with others about yourself?
- How much of your “real” identity do you feel you are representing on FB (or any of the other SNS)? Why do you feel this way?
- If you had to describe the kind of identity you portray online, what would you say?
- How much do you purposefully alter your presence online and in what circumstances and why?

### **RQ 2: Why do participants present themselves as they do online?**

- Why do you think you present yourself in the ways you do on various SNS?
- What do you believe about your online identity/self?

- What aspects of your identity are most important for you to represent online? (Relational status, stressing your education, your aptitude for the arts, and so on.) Why?
- Do you have specific objectives or strategies with respect to your online self? What are those?
- What do you think your motivations are as related to those objectives generally?
- Do you feel you have been successful or not in meeting those objectives? Why or why not?
- How important is your online identity to your overall sense of self?
- What words would you use to describe this manifestation of your self online?
- Fill in the blanks to this sentence: The online self is a kind of \_\_\_\_\_ self because \_\_\_\_\_.
- Is it another part of your self? Or an extension?

**RQ 3: What benefits do they believe they derive from their online representations?**

- What value do you derive from your online self-representations?
- What meaning or value do you feel your online lived experiences bring to your life in general?
- What words would you use to describe the kinds of value you receive from your self-portrayals or activities online?
- Do you consider the public display of oneself as a kind of branding?
- How important to you is personal branding online? Why?
- How would you define your own personal brand online or off? Do the two connect, intersect, or are different? Explain?
- Do you see yourself as an influencer online? Why or why not? What's so great about being an influencer? Or not?

- How much do you care, if you really had to think about it, about what others think about you on SNS? How important is it?
- How do you modify your actions based specifically on the influence of others, whether as reactions to something you've posted, or for other reasons? How often do you find yourself modifying your actions in response to external influences?
- In general, do you feel others' comments and general responses influence how one's online identity is constructed, and then reconstructed? Why or why not? Any examples?
- In general, what do you think overall of others profiles on SNS? What do you feel most people are trying to do on SNS?

## **Appendix F – Past Participant Interview Questions**

### **General Questions**

- Tell me which online networking sites you are primarily on now?
- How has this changed from when we last spoke two years ago, and why?
- How do you feel you have changed as an individual in the past two years?
- How have your online representations of yourself changed? Please be specific.
- How has the amount of time you spend online changed, or has it?
- What has changed in terms of the online presentation of one's identity in general? Why?
- Do you feel these changes are positive, negative, or neutral and explain why?
- How would you characterize and explain the pervasive behaviors with respect to taking photos of oneself, tweeting about one's daily life or thoughts, using Snapchat filters, etc.?
- Why do you think people take so many photos of themselves? Why do you think you do?
- Do you think people feel they have to be 'visible' or 'present' or even 'recognized' online? Why?
- Following that line of thinking, where do you fit in? Do you want to gain some measure of fame or celebrity? Do you just want to be noticed? By whom – be specific in terms of the audiences you are interested in reaching.

### **Personal Identity Construction Online**

- How much of your "real" identity do you feel you are representing on any of these platforms today?
- If you had to describe the kind of identity you want to portray today, what would you say? How has this changed from two years ago?
- Do you feel any social demands to present yourself online in a certain way or in terms of frequency? Has this changed over the past two years? How? Why do you think that is so?

- Two years ago, you indicated you were mindful to varying degrees about the amount of likes and responses you received for your posts or pictures. How do you feel about that now? Do you do anything to generate more responses if you feel you want to see more?
- How do you see yourself in terms of being knowledgeable or savvy with respect to presenting yourself online? Do you feel you are average for your peers, above average or below average in this regard? Why? Provide examples.
- What trends have you seen in the past two years with respect to how others present themselves online?
- How much thought do you put into your online postings on average today versus two years ago, if that has changed at all?
- What is important to you now in terms of self-presentation online?
- What concerns you today about being online?
- Do you feel others are less, the same or more authentic in their self-representations than they were two years ago?

### **“Show-Me” Session Questions**

These questions are part of an interview session where the participant and I review examples they have selected to show me from their various social media accounts.

- Show me examples of a post (inclusive of photos if you wish) that was impactful for you in some way. Why was it impactful for you?
- Skim through with me your representations (for the platform(s) of their choosing) and explain what you are trying to achieve by showing me specific posts or photos.
- Show me examples of anything else you would like me to know that represent in some way your identity online.



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