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# Social Media and Self: Influences on the Formation of Identity and Understanding of Self through Social Networking Sites

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Social Media and Self: Influences on the Formation of Identity and Understanding of  
Self through Social Networking Sites

by

Madison Ganda

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

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2014

**Social Media and Self: Influences on the Formation of Identity and  
Understanding of Self through Social Networking Sites**

**Madison Ganda**

**Portland State University, 2014**

## **Abstract**

Over the years, social networking sites have grown into a more modern way of socializing. The widespread use and increasing time spent on these sites cause users to create online self-presentations in order to participate. Using Goffman's dramaturgical theory, this study looked to explain the effects of feedback associated with online identities on social networking sites with offline identity development and presentation. An online Likert-scale survey was used gauge participant's feelings about the social networking sites they used. Analysis of the collected data used a regression model to explore possible links between feedback on posts online and individuals' internalization of that feedback into offline identities. Although no significant relationships were identified, the findings suggest directions for future research.

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## **I. Introduction**

In recent years social media has experienced widespread popularity within our society (Digital Market Ramblings 2014), starting from small personal web pages to full-blown mass communication networks where the user can give or find almost any information about themselves or others within minutes. These sites have gone from only being used by the computer-savvy, to being incredibly user friendly and spreading worldwide. While the popularity of social networking sites continues to grow, so does the user's time on the page, even to the point of having the sites available on their mobile phone to check while away from the computer (Pew Research Internet Project 2013). As the amount of time users spend on social networking sites continues to grow, their interactions with others offline tends to decrease meaning that most of their socializing and socialization occurs within the glow of a computer or phone screen (Pew Research Internet Project 2013). In this research, I will examine the influence of social networking sites on the formation of identity and understanding of self through the interactions and usage of various social networking sites; namely Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram.

One potential consequence of the individual's increased online interaction time is that the formation of identity and understanding of self is now affected, to a greater degree, through the popularity or feedback on certain aspects of the user's life that they are willing to share. The purpose of this research is to show how extensive use and time spent on these sites cause the user to form their identity and

understanding of self based on the feedback on their posts. This research will draw upon survey data from 300 people who use more than one social networking site. Specific data will include providing information about their uses, experiences and influences of their formation of identity and understanding of identity through the sites they use.

## **II. Literature Review**

This literature review will first provide backgrounds on the aforementioned social networking sites followed by an introduction to Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of self and finally, examine how Goffman's work informs current research in regards to the construction of self through the use of the Internet. The research that I will be conducting will focus primarily on Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram and the gratifications and identity validation users receive. While Facebook has been researched, Tumblr and Instagram are relatively new and have yet to be discussed within the creation of identity and understanding of self.

Tumblr is a blogging site (Tumblr 2014), which allows its users to express their personality and bare their true self while finding like-minded people to create communities online. The site allows for text posts (where users can discuss their feelings, thoughts, political and social issues or random bits of information they feel like sharing), photos (ranging from pictures of themselves or any other content they deem important to share), quotes, chats (pieces of conversation from their lives), links (for sharing important or interesting articles or information), audio (songs, sound clips or speeches that resonate with the user) and video (either from the

internet or created by the user). These different aspects of the site allow for the user to honestly share what they deem important to them while creating a community of “followers” and likewise “following” others to further understand what is important to them. Tumblr allows for the perspective of others to be integrated amongst other users through shared understanding and various points of view.

Instagram is a photo-sharing application (Instagram 2014) in which the user can share the world through their eyes to showcase what they find interesting or important. The majority of pictures range from mundane events, such as what the user is eating, reading or listening to, to the events attended by the user; parties, concerts, get togethers, etc. The main takeaway from Instagram is that it is an extension of the user, which can be seen as a window into their daily activities. It gives users a chance to see what others are doing and gives the options to “like” a photo or “comment” on the photo. I propose that these sites are virtual areas for interpersonal interaction and therefore serve as locations for the development of the self. This research will hopefully help to understand how users on these specific sites create an identity and understanding of self offline based on external validation and internalization of ideas measured by popularity of their posts.

This study focuses on an identified research gap in the literature concerning the relationship between social networking sites and user created identities. The importance of this research is due to the on-going usage of social networking sites and dramatic increase of users. Facebook has 1.19 billion monthly users, 874 million mobile users, and 728 million daily users as of October 2013 (Digital Marketing Ramblings 2014). Tumblr, a popular blogging site, has 216.3 million monthly

visitors and contains 109 million blogs as of May 2013 (Digital Marketing Ramblings 2014). Instagram, a photo-sharing social networking app has 150 million users as of September 2013 (Digital Marketing Ramblings 2014). While these sites continue to grow, the time spent using and socializing through these sites increases as well.

The theoretical framework for this study is Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory. The reason for this detailed focus point is the importance of Goffman's work for understanding individuals, both presenter and audience, within interactions. The articles used for the research will be broken down into sections discussing their relevant focus in relation to Goffman's work and their contribution to the study.

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) focuses on the importance of everyday, face-to-face interactions between people. To Goffman, personal interaction is based on performance and a relationship between actor and audience wherein there is an agreed upon definition of the situation (Goffman 1959:32). Goffman proposes that when an individual interacts with others, they are attempting to guide and create a certain image in which the other person sees them and attains knowledge about them (Goffman 1959:40). This guiding is an attempt to highlight positive ideas of self and desired impressions (Goffman 1959:44). The actors in the interaction are able to choose their own stage, props and costume for specific audiences (Goffman 1959:39). Within these interactions the role of audience and actor is interchangeable in that both people are simultaneously actor and audience and performing these roles accordingly (Goffman 1959:86). While Goffman proposed that interaction was a performance, the aforementioned part of the interaction is only the front stage aspect of this performance; he also puts forth

the idea of a back stage in which the individual has a private place where they can stop performing and rid themselves of their role or social identity and be their true self (Goffman 1959:129). These ideas about self being a presentation of a role rather than an innate characteristic have opened up the way in which sociologists look at personal interactions. Rather than individuals having a natural way of being, we can now see it as a routinized aspect of our every day lives that we are no longer aware of.

This theory of self being a performance can be understood with some support from aspects of behaviorism, some propositions of exchange theory and the social construction of reality. The relation to behaviorism (Skinner 1953) comes from the rewards individuals get from conforming to certain behaviors of the group, in which they are seen as a part of a group due to their performance of their role. The relation to exchange theory (Homans 1958) is similar in that the individual performs their role in a way that they are rewarded for adhering to the conventions of the group. The actions in an individual's performance can be based off the basic propositions of exchange theory as a way to understand which aspects of their performances work with specific audiences within the larger group. The relation to the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1966) aspect comes from the understanding/acceptance of cultural creations and the nature of the individual's environment that ultimately dictate the way in which the individual performs the role of themselves. Each situation that the individual finds himself or herself in, there is a different performance that they project as a way to adapt (Goffman 1959:43).

Goffman sees groups of people or individuals in a dichotomous way. In individual interactions, he sees people as both the actor and the audience, performing a role for the other as a way to portray a certain personality or ideal self (Goffman 1959:86). He sees groups of people as teams who all work together in staging a routine similar to that of actors in a play (Goffman 1959:84). The ways these teams operate are through reciprocal dependency in which each individual is responsible for keeping up their performance so as not to jeopardize the performances of the others (Goffman 1959:84). It is important to keep in mind that teams are not cliques or informal groups and team grouping is not in relation to organization or social structure. Teams are formed through relation to interactions in which there is a maintained definition of a situation (Goffman 1959:85).

The concepts put forth in Goffman's work, while meant for in-person interactions, are very useful in terms of understanding interactions online. The idea that people guide others and create certain images and desired impressions of self for others to attain knowledge about them, is similar to selective posting online. A user has the ability to post their interests, hobbies, books they have read, movies they have watched, blurbs or pictures of activities they engage in as a way to guide their audience into creating understandings of them. This allows users to perform a role and present themselves in a way they find most desirable and acceptable to others. Similarly, the user is also part of an audience and reacting to the posts of others and being guided into creating understandings of other users. This concept of both actor and audience connects with Goffman's discussion of teams, or people who work together to stage a routine. In an online context of social networking sites,

these teams can be understood as the people who the user interacts with regularly online. There is an aspect of dependency in which each member of the team upholds the performance of the others due to their understandings of the presentation of each member.

Goffman's discussion of the front stage and back stage applied to social networking sites creates an interesting situation and is a motivation of this study. While the user is creating this performance of themselves in order to shape how others see them, there is also the backstage or offline time where the user is no longer performing their role and can be their "true self". What this research is suggesting is that based on the positive feedback online, the user will take aspects of their popular posts and integrate them into this "true self" where they interact with others who have an already informed idea about them based on their online presentation, thus forming a new identity and understanding of self. From the work done by Goffman, I have identified two themes within the literature: impression management and social networking sites as an identity testing ground.

## **Impression Management**

Following the idea of the need to represent yourself during interactions, Enli and Thumim (2012) focus on the distinction between self-representation and presentation or formation of self with an emphasis on the idea that to fully understand social networking requires self-representation and socializing with others (Enli Thumim 2012:98). Enli and Thumin argue that there are choices in what aspects of us to represent and users of social networking sites decide how to

represent these aspects as a way to complement the work done through presentation and self-performance (Enli Thumim 2012:91/92). Thumim and Enli also suggest that social networking sites create a hybrid space that challenges the traditional contexts of online/offline socialization and public/private spheres. Within this discussion of public vs. private, there is an analysis of public communication and broadcasting on Facebook that changes the dynamics of who is producing and consuming content online (Enli and Thumim 2012:100). Another aspect of self-representation comes from the users creation of hierarchies and groups of who receives or sees the messages they post. Within this realm, there is analysis of popularity, which deems more friends online as a badge of status among younger Facebook users. In order to obtain this status, users must construct self-representations in order to participate and “employ a strategy of representation” to gain status (Enli and Thumim 2012:98).

Several terms and theories put forth in their article are linked to power dynamics within social networking. Some include: individual global self (Enli Thumim 2012:98) which is the user conforming to generic expectations of self-representation through images and statuses that represent themselves individually; dominant representation (Enli Thumim 2012:99) which pertains to profile pictures and issues of gender in how we view individuals and control of representation (Enli Thumim 2012:100) which states that our creation of ourselves is vulnerable to the portrayal and interpretation of us by others. The article concludes with a discussion that social networking requires a textual self-representation to describe us, select profile pictures or use certain symbols to represent ourselves. Ultimately, we cannot

escape self-representation because of our need to connect and socialize fitting the rapidly changing modes.

From the work of Enli and Thumim, the idea that in order to be a part of the online community you must socialize and through socializing, must create an online self-representation is a main point of the following research. The need for self-representation causes the user to pick and choose the best information to convey to their respective audience, which in turn can create a certain status for that user based on popularity. Taking this concept into mind, this attainment of online status created by the user is then incorporated into their offline identity to help create a new understanding of self based on the feedback from others on the self-represented self on social networking sites.

Tosun (2012) states that the main uses for Facebook include maintaining long-distance relationships, game playing/entertainment, photo-related activities, organizing social events, passive observations, establishing new friendships and initiating/terminating romantic relationships (Tosun 2012:1512). Tosun argues that expressing one's self on the Internet is a way to form close relationships with people that are met through social networking site and that users use Facebook as a social substitutes to create offline relationships and strengthen existing relationships (Tosun 2012:1512). After analyzing the data, Tosun concluded that Facebook is a buffer for those with issues articulating their thoughts and feelings in person and is used as a substitute for establishing relationships (Tosun 2012:1517).

The ideas within the Tosun article regarding Facebook as a social substitute to create relationships supports the theory within this research that more

socializing is occurring in the online sphere. By creating an online identity, which is used to create these friendships with others, the user is participating in the selective process of identity formation discussed in the aforementioned articles. When these relationships are then taken into an offline scenario, the user assumes the role of their online identity and performs the identity that their counterpart has come to know, accept and understand.

Skues, Williams and Wise (2012) focus on the effect of personality traits on the amount of usages for social networking. They argue that the user's personality changes the information selected to be presented or withheld from others (Skues Williams Wise 2012:2418). The study found that the type of personality a user has changes their ideas of impression management, their openness to connect with others and suggests that lonelier students compensate for their lack of offline relationships (Skues et al 2012:2418).

While their article focuses mainly on the effects of personality traits, the ideas of selective information sharing and representation resonate with the research being discussed. Depending on the user, the online identity formation can vary based on their personality. If the user feels as though they need to project a certain idea about themselves to others, they engage in such behavior to guide how they are viewed. Alternatively, if there is no such need to create an idea of identity for the audience, there is less projected identity, which in itself, also creates an idea and understanding of the user's identity.

Tosun (2010) focuses understanding of Internet use for interpersonal communication with an emphasis on whether the user's personality is an extension

of their face-to-face interactions or a substitute for their face-to-face communication (Tosun 2010:162). The article looks at the difference of introversion versus extroversion in the user's personal life as a means for users to substitute for or extend social interactions on the Internet (Tosun 2010:163). Tosun found that the main social motives for the Internet were maintaining long-distance friendships and supporting face-to-face interactions were correlated with extroversion (Tosun 2010:164). The study concluded that as introversion increases, so does the use of the Internet as a social substitute whereas, as extroversion increases, the Internet is seen as an extension of social interaction (Tosun 2010:165).

While this article concluded that increased introversion causes social networking to be used as a substitute while an increase in extroversion causes social networking to be seen as an extension, I propose that there may be a between the two. As introversion increases, the user seeks social networking to substitute those interpersonal interactions and based on the feedback, can create a more extroverted identity that in turn becomes an extension of this created identity. Essentially the user can turn their introversion into a form of extroversion through an identity formed online.

### **Social Networking as a testing ground**

Davis (2012), argues that social networking sites provide means of self-expression for users but by having these outlets of expression, creates an issue of balancing multiple selves and their respective audiences (Davis 2012). The use of social networking creates a space in which the user feels more free to express

themselves online and provides the user with chances to work through certain issues they might be dealing with in their daily lives (Davis 2012:643). The outlets of social networking allow the user to make changes to their self and identity online that they would not necessarily make offline due to confidence issues (Davis 2012:639). As Davis states within her article, some users might, “forget what they are trying to be” which leads to feelings of being unauthentic and possibly damaging to how the user sees themselves (Davis 2012:643). Davis also suggests the idea of “spheres of obligation” consisting of the self, interpersonal relations, online social norms, and broad community level values which all limit the multiplicity of the user and work to intertwine the user’s online and offline identities (Davis 2012:645).

In her conclusion, Davis stated that social networking allows for multiple personas and outlets for personal issues, creates a testing ground that is, “Practice for real life. Test being one person online, see how people react, then trying it in real life.” (Davis 2012:644). Although the use of social networking is mostly positive, Davis also discusses the possible issues with multiple personas and offline obligations and groups (Davis 2012:648).

From the Davis article, the idea of using social networking sites as a tool for identity practice aligns with the work being done and argued in this research thesis. The selective posting on social networking sites allows users to test these various forms of online self and based on the feedback given from the audience of the user, is then incorporated to create a new identity and thus understanding of who the user has become. By using social networking sites, the user has control over their

own identity formation and self-understanding and can choose how to present themselves offline based on the feedback of their online-tested identity.

Livingstone (2008) focuses on a youth-centered social networks that consists of self-constructed and peer related pages that are an integral means of managing identity, lifestyle and social relationships while at the same time developing and gaining confidence in an ego identity that is autonomous and socially valued (Livingstone 2008:398). Livingstone suggests that social networking creates a space for teens to be visible to peers where they can construct and experiment with a reflexive project of themselves (Livingstone 2008:399). These pages can be seen and understood as a place-marker rather than a self-portrait where peer positioning is more important than personal information that is provided in which the self is embedded into the peer group as known to and represented by others (Livingstone 2008:401). Questions in the interviews conducted discuss motivations for making a profile, readings of others' profile, social and personal meaning of contacts sustained online and their relations to offline friends.

The work done by Livingstone supports my own research in terms of seeking validation from the online community the user is engaging and participating within. The user has this space in social networks to work on their online identity and create an identity that falls within certain peer categories that are seen as popular or beneficial to a larger status structure. Through this reflective lens, the user can then look to others as a way of measuring whether or not their own online identity will garner the same positive attention and understanding and if in the case it does not, the user can change that identity presentation accordingly. This work to create

a satisfactory online identity is then transferred to their offline identity as a way to maintain their new garnered status amongst their peers.

Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe (2007) look at the trend from offline to online relationships and the formation of communities based on shared interests instead of shared geography (Ellison Steinfeld Lampe 2007:1144). The authors noted that a majority of heavy Facebook users rely on the site to maintain long-distance relationships rather than as a substitute for offline interactions with people nearby as a way to maintain social capital (bonds, opportunities, friendships) (Ellison et al 2007:1162). The research found that the average time spent on Facebook was 10-30 minutes with an average friend list of 150-200 people (Ellison et al 2007:1153). The main friend sources resulted in offline acquaintances, people who live nearby, classmates and high school friends with whom connections are kept. The study also found that there is a positive relationship between Facebook use and the creation of social capital (jobs, networking, etc) (Ellison et al 2007:1164).

While the findings of this article might not be generalizable on a larger scale, the idea that was incorporated into this thesis was that of communities that are formed due to shared interests. When the user finds the community that they are most aligned with, they then engage in socializing with others within that group. This participation involves aspects of socializing and self-representation and presentation that the user generates through the process of selective sharing mentioned in earlier articles. As a way to maintain membership within these online communities, the user works to formulate an identity that agrees with others within the group to create a stronger bond amongst them. This can be seen as a similar

activity as testing an identity online over time and based on feedback, creating an identity that is proven within a peer group.

This literature review identified the themes within Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach and connected them to the user created presentation of self within the sphere of social networking sites. Following that path, the articles that followed were divided into two groups influenced by Goffman's work and pertaining to impression management and using social networking sites as a testing ground for identity formation. From the articles, the most salient points were used to support my research.

### **III. Methodology/Research Questions and Hypothesis**

This research tries to answer two research questions: "Does the popularity of a post online cause a user to incorporate aspects of that post into their offline identity?" and, "How does the time spent on social networking sites cause the user to form their offline identity and understanding of self?" By studying social networking sites such as Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram, all of which allow users to have "friends"/"followers" and receive feedback on posts regarding personal expression, the research hopes to find data that will lead to an understanding of linkages between online and offline identity creation.

The hypothesis for this study is that users of social networking sites create online identities and based on positive feedback, internalize that identity and present it offline. The null hypothesis for this study is that positive feedback does

not have an effect on the user's internalization and offline presentation of their online created identity.

Support for this research hypothesis will be shown through a positive correlation between reflection and the variables "feel good", "interest", "time" and "age". These variables were chosen due to their influence in whether or not a user/participant would incorporate those popular aspects of their online self to their offline self.

## **Data Description**

### **Data:**

The data was collected through convenience and snowball sampling (About Sociology 2001) with a survey that was created in order to gauge users feelings towards social networking sites and the internalization of popular posts. By utilizing the Likert Scale, the participants are encouraged to answer in a way that reflects their personal experiences with the different social networking sites they use.

The target population for this survey was college students/millennial across America. The aim towards millennial (people born between 1980-1995) and college students is due to the time in which they grew up. For many, social networking sites were part of their socialization process and a part of their daily activities. This target population is familiarized with social networking sites and thus will provide the most accurate measurements for the study. The goal for this survey and study was between 200-300 respondents. The response rate for this survey was 41% (339 out

of 817) and the sample size used in the analysis is 300; excluding incomplete submissions.

The majority of the subjects were found through convenience sampling from my own group of “friends”/“followers” on the three respective social networking sites. From these groups, potential participants were asked to share the survey with their respective groups of “friends”/“followers” in order to collect a large, diverse sample that spans various geographic, economic and political demographics. The survey was sent out through three different outlets: a Facebook group, a Tumblr post and an Instagram post. From the URL attached in the initial post, potential participants were directed to the informed consent page and an explanation of the survey and study. Along with the informed consent and explanation, potential participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns regarding the survey/study and were responded to in real-time.

### **Demographics:**

To begin the data analyzing, it is important to look at the distribution of participants in the survey and their presence on the social networking sites being observed. 94% of participants use Facebook, 62.99% use Instagram, 38.81% use Tumblr and 28.96% use some other type of social networking site. In terms of demographics, this study consisted of 72.07% women, 24.93% men and 3% non-binary people. 58.10% of participants were white, 14.68% were multi-racial, 14.37% were Latino, 7.03% were Asian, 1.53% were African American and 4.28% were of another unspecified racial group. Regarding education, 30.15% were currently in or completed three years of college, 16.42% had graduated from college, 16.12% had

completed two years of college, 16.12% were high school graduates or had a GED equivalent, 12.24% were in their first year of college, 4.18% spent some time in graduate school, 1.19% had completed graduate school, 2.99% had a Masters degree and .6% received their Ph.D.

### **Measures:**

The variables of this study include time spent using social networking sites, the frequency of social networking site use, the gratification (joy/good feelings) based on the user's personal feelings caused by feedback on posts and the incorporation of popular posts into offline identity. This will be measured in a dichotomous logistic regression. The independent variables include the time spent using the sites, the frequency of use and the gratification feedback (the way a user's post getting positive attention). The dependent variable and variable of interest of this study is the incorporation of popular posts into offline identity. The mediating variable is the participant's age. The demographic control variables are gender, race, education level and marital status.

Independent variables include the questions and statements: "How much time do you spend daily on social networking sites?" and has four options coded 0 (1-3 hours), 1(4-6 hours), 2 (7-9 hours), 3(more than 9 hours). "If I get positive feedback on a personal post, I feel good about my interest in the subject", "I feel good about myself when I get a lot of notes on something I posted online." Coded 0 (strongly disagree), 1 (somewhat disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree), 4(somewhat agree), 5(strongly agree).

Dependent variables include the statements, “If I post something online that is well received, I feel confident discussing it with others offline.” “If I see a topic is being talked about on social networking sites, I will look into the topic.” “My posts on social networking sites are an accurate reflection of who I am.” Coded 0 (strongly disagree), 1 (somewhat disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (somewhat agree), 4 (agree), 5 (strongly agree). All are ordinal measures.

The mediating variable, age is coded 0 (18-24), 1 (25-34), 2 (35-44), 3 (45-54), 4 (55-64), 5 (65-74). The demographic control variables are: gender, coded 0 (female), 1 (male), 2 (non-binary/rather not respond). Race coded 0 (Latino), 1 (African American), 2 (Asian), 3 (Native American), 4 (Multi-racial), 5 (White), 6 (Other). Education level coded 0 (High School Graduate/G.E.D. equivalent), 1 (1 year of college), 2 (2 years of college), 3 (3 years of college), 4 (College graduate), 5 (some graduate school), 6 (graduated from graduate school), 7 (Masters degree), 8 (Higher). Relationship status coded 0 (single), 1 (dating), 2 (engaged), 3 (married), 4 (divorced). All are nominal measurements.

#### **IV. Results**

In this section, the data gathered from the survey will be shown in three respective tables and the results will be analyzed. The first table will illustrate the demographics and sample characteristics of the participants in the survey. The second will determine the means and standard deviations of online to offline personality by age. The final table will show the participant reflection of offline personality regressed on the variables Time, Interest, Good Feelings, Gender, Race,

Education Level, Relationship Status and Age. By utilizing the regression model, the significant relationships between the variables becomes apparent and will provide the basis for supporting the hypothesis of internalized online identity expressed offline based on positive feedback.

To reiterate, the research questions this study is looking to answer are: Does the popularity of a post online cause a user to incorporate aspects of that post into their offline identity?" and, "How does the time spent on social networking sites cause the user to form their offline identity and understanding of self?" Following these questions, the hypothesis that users of social networking sites create online identities and based on positive feedback, internalize that identity and present that formed identity offline will either be supported or rejected following the analyzing of the regression model.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Social Media and Self Results**

|                                  | Frequencies<br>(n) | Percentages<br>(%) | Mean | St. Dev. |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------|----------|
| <b>Reflection/Similarity(DV)</b> |                    |                    | 4.4  | 9.6      |
| Strongly Disagree                | 6                  | 2.0%               |      |          |
| Somewhat Disagree                | 20                 | 6.6%               |      |          |
| Disagree                         | 26                 | 8.6%               |      |          |
| Somewhat Agree                   | 86                 | 28.5%              |      |          |
| Agree                            | 97                 | 32.1%              |      |          |
| Strongly Agree                   | 64                 | 21.2%              |      |          |
|                                  |                    |                    |      |          |
| <b>Age (IV)</b>                  |                    |                    | 1.4  | 8.1      |
| 18-24                            | 166                | 55%                |      |          |
| 25-34                            | 74                 | 24.5%              |      |          |
| 35-44                            | 30                 | 9.9%               |      |          |
| 45+                              | 30                 | 9.3%               |      |          |
| <b>Time (IV)</b>                 |                    |                    | 1.4  | 9.8      |
| 1-3                              | 202                | 66.9%              |      |          |
| 4-6                              | 83                 | 27.5%              |      |          |
| 7-9                              | 10                 | 3.3%               |      |          |

|                       |     |       |     |     |
|-----------------------|-----|-------|-----|-----|
| 10+                   | 4   | 1.3%  |     |     |
| <b>Interest (IV)</b>  |     |       | 4.5 | 7.8 |
| Strongly Disagree     | 4   | 1.3%  |     |     |
| Somewhat Disagree     | 7   | 2.3%  |     |     |
| Disagree              | 19  | 6.3%  |     |     |
| Somewhat Agree        | 82  | 27.2% |     |     |
| Agree                 | 78  | 25.8% |     |     |
| Strongly Agree        | 110 | 36.4% |     |     |
| <b>Feel Good (IV)</b> |     |       | 4.4 | 7.8 |
| Strongly Disagree     | 5   | 1.7%  |     |     |
| Somewhat Disagree     | 11  | 3.6%  |     |     |
| Disagree              | 28  | 9.3%  |     |     |
| Somewhat Agree        | 70  | 23.2% |     |     |
| Agree                 | 88  | 29.1% |     |     |
| Strongly Agree        | 98  | 32.5% |     |     |
| Total (n)             | 300 |       |     |     |

\*% not adding up to 100% have missing values excluded in table.

Looking at the results of Table 1, in a study of 300 participants, 166 (55%) were between 18-24, 74 (24.5%) were between 25 and 34, 30 (9.9%) were between 35-44 and 30 (9.3%) were 45+ years old. In terms of time spent on social networking sites daily, 202 (66.9%) spent 1-3 hours, 88 (27.5%) spent 4-6 hours, 10 (3.3%) spent 7-9 hours, and 4 (1.3%) spent 10+ hours on social networking sites.

When asked if positive feedback on posts led the user to feel good about their interest in the subject, 110 participants (36.4%) strongly agreed, 78 (25.8%) agreed, 82 (27.2%) somewhat agreed, 19 (6.3%) disagreed, 7 (2.3%) somewhat disagreed and 4 (1.3%) strongly disagreed. When asked whether the participants feel good about themselves when something they post online is well received, 98 participants (32.5%) strongly agreed, 88 (29.1%) agreed, 70 (23.2%) somewhat agreed, 28 (9.3%) disagreed, 11 (3.6%) somewhat disagreed and 5 (1.7%) strongly disagreed. The main dependent variable, reflection, asked participants if they felt their posts on social networking sites were an accurate reflection of who they feel they are. 64 participants (21.2%) strongly agreed, 97 (32.1%) agreed, 86 (28.5%) somewhat agreed, 26 (8.6%) disagreed, 20 (6.6%) somewhat disagreed, 6 (2.0%) strongly disagreed. These characteristic results are mirrored within the means of Table 1. The mean for reflection is 4.4 which corresponds to the agree answer. The mean for age is 1.4 which corresponds to the 18-24 age range which had the most respondents. The average time spent on social networking sites is shown as 1.4 which is the 1-3 hours response that also had the most respondents. When looking at whether or not positive feedback made the user feel good about their interest on a subject, we see the mean is 4.5 which correlates to the agree/strongly agree categories. Looking at the statement, I feel good about myself when I get a lot of notes on something I posted online, the table shows a mean of 4.4 which is linked to the agree option.

**Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviations of Reflection/Similarity of Online to Offline Personality by Age**

| <b>Age</b>           | <b>Reflection</b> |                       |
|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
|                      | <b>Mean</b>       | <b>Std. Deviation</b> |
| 18-24 (n=166)        | 4.608             | 10.518                |
| 25-34 (n=74)         | 4.608             | 11.216                |
| 35-44 (n=30)         | 3.800             | .925                  |
| 45+ (n=28)           | 3.556             | 2.516                 |
| Missing (n=2)        | 3.00              | 1.414                 |
| <b>Total (n=300)</b> | 4.421             | 9.567                 |

The results of table 2, means and standard deviations of accurate reflection between online to offline personality by age show that within the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34, results are not normally distributed throughout respondent groups. This can be explained by the variance of individual responses, shown in the high standard deviations, between the disproportional amount of responses in those age groups compared to the 35-44 and 45+ groups. The age groups 18-24 and 25-33 make up 240 of the 300 participants who answered and thus have skewed the results. While there are larger numbers in the 18-33 ranges, the results for age groups 35-44 and 45+ can be read as being outliers within the data set. This interpretation of the data can be seen as valid due to the small sample within those

age groups outside of the target sampling population. While the numbers are much fewer than the 18-33 age groups, the respondents in the 35+ groups seem to have been enough to cause certain issues within the data analysis that may have created the problems with accuracy.

In analyzing the means of Table 2, we can see that within the age range of 18-24 the mean is 4.6 which is linked to the agree/strongly agree response. Within the 25-35 age range, the mean was 4.6 which is linked to the agree/strongly agree response. In the 35-44 age range, the mean is 3.8 which is linked to the somewhat agree/agree option. The 45+ group has a mean of 3.556. As seen in the data, there is a positive correlation and higher belief that among younger users their online personality and self is similar to their offline self.

**Table 3. Participant Reflection of offline personality regressed on Time, Interest, Good Feelings, Gender, Race, Education Level, Relationship Status and Age.**

|                     | <b>Model 1</b>     |                   |             | <b>Model 2</b>     |                   |             | <b>Model 3</b>     |                   |             |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|
|                     | <b>Coefficient</b> | <b>Std. Error</b> | <b>Sig.</b> | <b>Coefficient</b> | <b>Std. Error</b> | <b>Sig.</b> | <b>Coefficient</b> | <b>Std. Error</b> | <b>Sig.</b> |
| <b>Constant</b>     |                    |                   |             |                    |                   |             |                    |                   |             |
| <b>Time</b>         | -.024              | .057              | .677        | -.025              | .057              | .668        | -.025              | .057              | .670        |
| <b>Interest</b>     | .008               | .071              | .889        | .007               | .072              | .901        | .007               | .072              | .905        |
| <b>Feel Good</b>    | -.005              | .071              | .938        | -.005              | .071              | .933        | -.005              | .071              | .931        |
|                     |                    |                   |             |                    |                   |             |                    |                   |             |
| <b>Gender</b>       |                    |                   |             | -.009              | .098              | .873        | -.009              | .098              | .874        |
| <b>Race</b>         |                    |                   |             | -.023              | .045              | .679        | -.020              | .048              | .747        |
| <b>Education</b>    |                    |                   |             | .005               | .070              | .932        | .005               | .070              | .929        |
| <b>Relationship</b> |                    |                   |             | -.015              | .097              | .804        | -.014              | .097              | .809        |
|                     |                    |                   |             |                    |                   |             |                    |                   |             |
| <b>Age</b>          |                    |                   |             |                    |                   |             | -.010              | .073              | .874        |
| <b>R-Square</b>     | .009               |                   |             | .022               |                   |             | .026               |                   |             |

The results of the regression are based on the three models. The first is the regression involving the dependent variable, reflection, with time spent on the sites,

positive feedback leading to feeling good about personal interest in the subject and positive reception of posts making the users feel good about themselves. The second model includes the aforementioned variables along with demographic control variables such as gender, race, education and relationship status. Finally, the age of respondents was factored into the regression model.

As shown in Table 3, the negative coefficients in the variables age, education, race, gender time and users feeling good based on positive feedback show that these variables have a negative correlation with the dependent variable of offline/online reflection. As the variable age increases by one unit, the dependent variable reflection decreases .024 in model 1 and .025 in models 2 and 3. As interest increases by one unit, reflection increases .008 in model 1 and .007 in models 2 and 3. As the rate at which users feel good about themselves based on posts increases by one unit, reflection decreases by .005 in all three models.

Within the control variables, as gender increases by one unit, reflection decreases .009 in models 2 and 3. As race increases by one unit, reflection decreases .023 in model 2 and .020 in model 3. As education increases by one unit, reflection increases by .005 in model 2 and 3. As relationship status increases by one unit, reflection decreases by .015 in model 2 and .014 in model 3. Finally, as age increase by one unit, reflection decreases by .010.

While the regression model shows increases and decreases of the dependent variable the significance of the independent, control and mediating variables all show that there is little to no significance of the variables on whether or not the participants feel their online personality reflects their offline personality. This

would suggest that these variables are independent of one another and have little to no correlation. The first model containing the independent variables accounts for .9% decrease of variation regarding participant's reflection, model 2 accounts for 2.2% decreased variation and model 3 accounts for 2.6% decreased variation of reflection. These results suggest that the variables measured are not stable or adequate predictors of whether or not participants think their online personality is a reflection of their offline personality regardless of the correlation shown in Table 2.

## **V. Discussion**

Upon analyzing the results of table 3, the hypothesis that users of social networking sites create online identities and based on positive feedback, internalize that identity and present it offline, was not supported in that there was no correlation. As shown in the results section through the regression model, the independent variables and mediating variable had no significant impact on the whether or not the user feels there is a reflection between online and offline self. The results of Table 2 support the correlation between the target population and their thoughts on whether their online self was a reflection of their offline self that is shown to have no significance in the regression analysis of Table 3. Since this is the case, the null hypothesis is accepted in that there is no relation between measured variables based on research questions and hypothesis. While the results did not support the hypothesis that positive feedback on a person's online posts would lead to the user placing that aspect of their online presence into their offline identity, there was a positive correlation between the age of respondents and their online to

offline self reflection. Likewise, the results from the tables show that certain aspects of online activity are independent of each other regardless of their perceived connectedness and can be seen as such.

In regard to Goffman's (1959) work on self presentation, the sample characteristics in Table 1 show that a majority of the users agreed in some form that their online identity and offline identity reflected one another. Likewise, a majority of participants agreed to some degree that receiving "likes" on their posts made them feel good about themselves. From this, we can see that the online identity that a user presents is validated and is thus reflected and maintained offline. This would suggest that because the online presentation of self is popular amongst peers, the user continues this presentation offline as a way to convey this specific image of themselves to other audiences.

Goffman's (1959) idea of groups helping to maintain the individual's performance of self can be seen from the Table 1 variable "interest". This variable measured the participant's increased interest in a subject following positive feedback. A majority of participants agreed to some degree, which would suggest that the user's identity, as presented through their selected topic to share, is reinforced and responded to in a way that helps the user maintain and further present the identity associated with the topic.

The idea of impression management can also be linked to the Table 1 variable "feel good". As discussed in the section above, this validation of online identity causes the user to maintain this identity offline. By continuing this

presentation of identity, the user can guide the perceptions of them created online to a new offline audience.

In terms of using social networking sites as a testing ground, a majority of the participants agreed to some degree that receiving popular feedback on a post increased their interest in the subject. This would support the discussion that the user tests out certain aspects of an identity and based on the feedback of their audience, will either continue to engage that subject or test another topic.

## **VI. Conclusion, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

In this final chapter, the limitations of this study will be addressed along with a discussion of possible future research. While the null hypothesis was accepted and no significant relationships were found in this study, there are several limitations that might have contributed to this result. The limitations of this study were the addition of participants outside of the millennial age range, resulting in outliers and issues in analysis. If the sample had been limited to only people born from 1980-1995, there might have been different results, an example of this would be the positive relationship found in Table 2 that suggested a positive correlation between the respondent's age and their sense of online to offline reflection.

Similarly, the balance of gender within the study and incorporation of more male identified participants might have created a different result. While the gender of the participant wasn't really a factor in analysis, having a more balanced distribution might have been ideal in analyzing results.

Another limitation of this research was the implementation of an anonymous online survey, which might have led to respondents not answering fully or with their full attention/effort. The issue of an online survey, as suggested, is that there are many distractions that might cause the survey or responses to not be taken seriously by participants. The lack of incentive for participating is another factor of the online survey; since there is no payment or inherent reward, participants do not feel obligated to respond fully or take the time to answer questions honestly and thoughtfully. The respondent may also be answering the survey in the mindset of their perceived online self rather than in a neutral stance in which they would be able to best reflect on their online/offline activity and self.

A large limitation to this research was the way in which the data was collected. The survey was used to collect data which was valuable in itself but considering the type of information that was needed would have yielded more conclusive evidence had it been gathered through qualitative means such as in-person interviews. The use of qualitative methods instead of quantitative would have led to better understandings of participant responses and feelings about their understanding of self online and offline. Having such information would have led to better accuracy and validity within the results sections. While the survey does have validity in its own sense (variance within respondents across America), it did not allow for users to fully describe how they felt about their understanding of self within the areas of online and offline socializing. Similarly, the survey was a one-time survey that did not allow for further analysis of participants as a way to see how the positive feedback affected them over time or how their use of the social

networking sites might have changed. This would have allowed for a comparison of participant feelings over an extended period of time.

While the regression model in the research shows that there are no significant relationships between variables being measured, which would suggest that variables are independent of each other, the study does lead to areas for improvement for future research that could result in proving the hypothesis. The first improvement for future research would be substituting the online survey to gauge participants' feelings and instead use qualitative personal interviews and focus groups that might lead to support for the hypothesis and a better understanding of participants' feelings and experiences. These qualitative methods for gathering data would be administered over several months with the same participants as a way to measure changes in feelings and a reflection about their uses of social networking sites. Similarly, instead of grouping the social networking sites together, gathering data on individual sites at different phases of the interview process would lead to understanding how each site effects the users' formation of identity and understanding of self over time.

Another possible direction for future research would involve with the incorporation of additional theoretical models. For example, one possible new perspective might be Charles Cooley's idea of the looking glass self, which states that an individual's self-concept is shaped on the interpersonal interactions and perceptions of those interacting with the individual would further create an understanding of the effect of social networking sites on identity formation(Cooley 1902:152). Similarly, Robert Jay Lifton's (1971) "protean self" which discusses the

shifts in identity as a result of mass media, would help to create an understanding on how the formation of identity and understanding of self is an ever-changing process.

While the results of the regression show that there are no significant relationships between the variables, the data collected in Table 1 along with the proposed changes, would suggest that finding a positive correlation between the effect of social networking sites and the formation of identity and understanding of self is still possible.

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## **Appendix**

### **I. Informed Consent**

### **II. Survey Questions**

#### **I. Informed Consent**

**PURPOSE:** You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of social networking sites on creation of identity and understanding of self.

**PARTICIPANT SELECTION:** You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a part of the online community. This study will interview around 300 people ranging from ages 18 to 45+ years old.

**EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES:** If you decide to participate, you will need to answer the survey questionnaire, which will take only about less than 5 minutes and submit online.

**DISCOMFORT/RISKS:** Risks are less than minimal and no personal information will be revealed without the permission and consent of the participants. If there are discomforting questions, participants can skip the questions or withdraw this survey.

**BENEFITS:** This study will help better understanding the effects of social networking sites on the creation of identity and understanding of self.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study.

**COMPENSATION OR TREATMENT:** No compensation will be provided, as the data will be used to complete a research project.

**REFUSAL/WITHDRAWAL:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and do not have to answer any questions if you feel uncomfortable.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this research, you can contact Madison Ganda at [Madison.ganda@gmail.com](mailto:Madison.ganda@gmail.com). You may also contact Peter Collier, Ph.D., Professor, Sociology Department (project advisor) [collierp@pdx.edu](mailto:collierp@pdx.edu) for general inquires about this research project.

## II. Survey Questions

1. What is your age in years? \_\_\_\_ years old.

2. What is your sex?

|      |        |                    |  |
|------|--------|--------------------|--|
| Male | Female | Rather not respond |  |
|------|--------|--------------------|--|

3. What is your race?

|                  |                 |
|------------------|-----------------|
| Latino           | Native American |
| African American | Multi-racial    |
| White            | Other           |
| Asian            |                 |
|                  |                 |

4. What is your highest completed education level?

|                  |         |
|------------------|---------|
| High School/GED  | Masters |
| Some College     | Ph.D.   |
| College Graduate |         |

5. What is your relationship status?

|         |          |
|---------|----------|
| Single  | Married  |
| Dating  | Divorced |
| Engaged |          |

6. Do you use more than one social networking site?

|     |    |
|-----|----|
| Yes | No |
|-----|----|

If you reported yes above, please mark all the options that apply:

|           |        |
|-----------|--------|
| Facebook  | Tumblr |
| Instagram | Other  |

7) How much time do you spend daily on social networking sites?

|           |                   |
|-----------|-------------------|
| 1-3 hours | 7-9 hours         |
| 4-6 hours | More than 9 hours |

*Please answer the following questions about your on-line experiences:*

|                                                                                                  | Strongly Agree | Somewhat Agree | Agree | Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 8) I use social networking sites as a way to interact with other people.                         |                |                |       |          |                   |                   |
| 9) I use social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr on a daily basis.        |                |                |       |          |                   |                   |
| 10) If I get positive feedback on a personal post, I feel good about my interest in the subject. |                |                |       |          |                   |                   |
| 11) If I post something                                                                          |                |                |       |          |                   |                   |

|                                                                                                    |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| online that is well received, I feel confident discussing it with others offline.                  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12) I feel good about myself when I get a lot of notes on something I posted online.               |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13) If I see a topic is being talked about on social networking sites, I will look into the topic. |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14) My posts on social networking sites are an accurate reflection of who I am.                    |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15) Do you feel that your online personality is similar to your offline personality?               |  |  |  |  |  |  |

*Thank you for your participation.*

