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Digital Identity Formation: How Social Networking Sites Affect Real World Authenticity

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DIGITAL IDENTITY FORMATION: HOW SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AFFECT
REAL WORLD AUTHENTICITY

by

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B.A. May 2012, Old Dominion University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of


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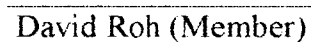
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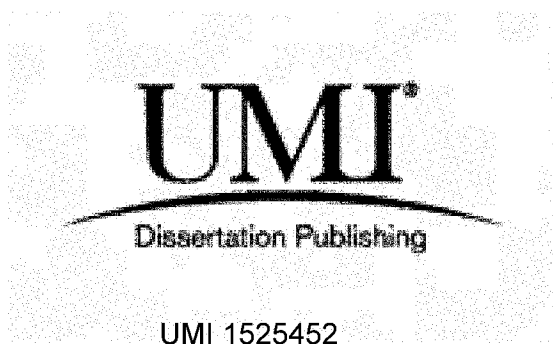
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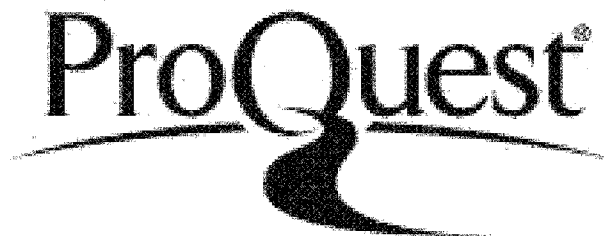
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ABSTRACT

DIGITAL IDENTITY FORMATION: HOW SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AFFECT REAL WORLD AUTHENTICITY

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the application of Heidegger's authenticity to online identity formation. This paper will attempt to determine if there is any way in which an authentic identity can be created, either online or offline, by using social networking sites. It will examine the positive and negative consequences of social networking sites to determine if these sites can help to contribute to our overall being, or determine if these sites serve only as a dangerous distraction to an authentic personal identity.

To do this, this paper will analyze Heidegger's philosophy to see if it is possible for his philosophy, which was written pre-SNS, to be applicable to identity formation online. If so, then we shall explore how we form our identities both online and offline. By looking at selected philosophical and sociological works, we will determine what it means to form a personal identity in the offline world. We will look at the effects of public and private sphere convergence, over sharing online, online data commodification, and normative online culture to determine how the self is created and formed online. We will then determine if this online self has the ability to share any personal growth acquired through online interactions to the offline self and thereby allowing for a way to form an authentic self offline using online social networking.

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CHAPTER I

SOCIAL NETWORKS PERVAIDING OUR LIVES

Social networking sites (SNS) have changed the structure of our society. We have progressed from an offline society to an extremely online one. As of 2011, “upward of 750 million people—approaching a tenth of the world’s population—are sharing their identities, relationships, thoughts, photos, actions, likes, and lives on Facebook alone.”¹ We communicate with friends, family, coworkers, and peers through multiple social networking sites by posting status updates and photos on sites like Facebook and Instagram. We instantly update our followers with the random and mundane details of our lives through our tweets. We can buy, sell, and trade just about everything on sites like Etsy and Craigslist. We perform and carry out all of these activities for multiple reasons, whether those reasons are peer pressure, career progression, fun, or something in between; in performing all of these activities we form and flesh out online identities. Our online identities are wide and extensive covering everything from our personal updates to our commercial desires.

The majority of what we do and experience helps to form us as individuals, and this means that all of our online interactions help to shape our personal online identity. The majority of the performances and activities that we participate in on a daily basis helps to define who we are as a person and individual because they cause us to make choices about who we are, where we are going, and what we want not only within that certain point of time, but during some of these performances we make choices that effect

¹ Jeff Jarvis, *Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 115.

our lives overall. We use these activities in our offline lives to discover who we are as a person and to come closer with our social groups. Then by doing all of these things we can, hopefully, come to grips with our finite lives on this planet and be content with our lives when our time comes to an end.

What is the role that our online identities play in this authentic growth lifestyles? If we are able to grow to a contented place offline is it possible to grow thanks to being online? Do these social networking sites help us to become more authentic in our offline lives by allowing for us to become more comfortable with who we are publicly and thereby allowing for us to make decisions within our lives that are authentic, or does it distract us to the point of inauthenticity by causing us to fall more in line with the other by joining more groups online?

Social networking sites have become deeply engrained in our lives and within our culture. The ability to access our online profiles from the privacy of our homes or through the use of our mobile devices has given us more chances to become absorbed within SNS. We can update our social circles on what is happening to us every hour, minute, and second if we wish. Some of us become so enveloped within our online profiles and communities that we are constantly being exposed to new issues and topics within our culture daily.

Social networking sites allow for popular culture to be brought to us while we are away from our televisions and living rooms. We can now access popular culture from our bedrooms, the bathroom, a park, a classroom, restaurants, and so much more by using our tablets, cell phones, and lap tops. It has started to give us almost instantaneous recognition and application of popular culture. Events within our lives and culture are

recorded, broadcast and then critiqued online. Moments that used to be viewed by only a few, i.e. those actually there, can now be shared with everyone over social networking sites. Moments of embarrassment, vulgarity, humor, inspiration, etc are captured and shared on SNS.

As an example, one of these moments is the night of the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. That night my Twitter and Facebook feeds exploded with news of Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke's, now infamous, "Blurred Lines" dance. The dance consisted of Miley in an overly tight spandex swimsuit with a bear face on the front. She proceeded to sing and dance on stage with a group of back up dancers, all dressed in teddy bear costumes, while Miley objectified their bodies in a sexual manner through an assortment of grinding, smacking and groping their bodies, and the simulation of rim jobs. This was followed up by Robin Thicke walking onto the stage performing "Blurred Lines" while Miley proceeded to grind upon him making lewd gestures with her hands and tongue while he sang the lines "You know you want it."²

Within minutes my feeds exploded with comments of mockery and disgust at the performance. Over the next few days pictures, memes, and videos mocking the dance appeared online and within my feed, shared by my friends. The online discussion of this event was just as popular and trending on my feeds as the discussion of the Syrian chemical attacks that were carried out in the weeks surrounding the performance. The "Blurred Lines" performance remained a constant conversation piece and reference within my feed for about a week until the next batch of cultural events made their debut online.

² Robin Thicke, "Robin Thicke Lyrics – Blurred Lines – A – Z Lyrics," *A – Z Lyrics*, accessed February 7, 2014, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/robinthicke/blurredlines.html>.

Social networking sites allow for us to use a cycle of observance and participation when exposed to these cultural events. Some of these events, like the primary one listed above, are playful while others are quite serious and heartfelt, i.e. the Syrian chemical attacks. Events such as the singing of “Blurred Lines,” the Syrian attacks, the Boston marathon bombing, the meteor crashing in Russia, the end of television shows like *Breaking Bad*, the racist comments against the Indian Miss America, and so much more are all included in this cycle. We both actively and passively participate in the spread of these events and easily move from one to the next.

When people are exposed to and share events online it is then through access of social networking sites that others who did not view the event are exposed. From there the popularity of the event spreads and spreads through the application of humor and criticism. While moments of cultural shock and awe tend to bring us together as a people, as seen with Syria or the Boston massacre, many of the popular culture events surrounding entertainment are belittled and made fun of.³ A kind of collective cultural bullying is formed online around these pop culture events, almost to the point where we do not realize how much we have ridiculed these people while enjoying the entertainment that they have brought us at their own expense. It is not until the next pop culture event comes along that our attention is turned onto something new. Anyone who has been exposed to one of these events will have participated within it, whether that is through the active participation of sharing or commenting or passively through simply observing it. It is through this way that social networking sites help to propagate popular culture.

³ Dan Gilgoff and Jane J. Lee, “Social Media Shapes Boston Bombing Response,” *National Geographic*, Published April 15, 2013, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/13/130415-boston-marathon-bombings-terrorism-social-media-twitter-facebook/>.

Social networking sites have even moved beyond simply propagating popular culture and have become a part of popular culture itself. Sites like Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Youtube have begun to be referenced, utilized, and mocked within television, movies, and literature. For example, in the very first episode of the show "The Big Bang Theory" one of the main characters, Sheldon, is arguing with his roommate, Leonard, about the fact that they do not have to be social to their new neighbor in a physical and offline aspect. Sheldon claims that he is already social with others through the application of social networking sites. He says, "I have a very wide circle. I have 212 friends on Myspace," and the beauty of this, he claims, is that he has never has to physically meet even one of them.⁴

This demonstrates how social networking sites have become such a large part of our culture that they can be readily joked about and the general audience will know what the cultural reference means. SNS have pervaded our culture in a way that we know what these sites are and how they function without really needing to think about it. The sites themselves can be mocked in a satirical fashion to where the majority of the audience will understand the joke.⁵ This example from "The Big Bang Theory" refers to social networking sites in a way that the audience must be familiar with the sites to understand the joke. This is not unique to televisions or sitcoms. Media like comic books and movies also expect the audience to be familiar with social networking, at least to the degree that they are familiar with online vernacular and tropes, such as "poking," having

⁴ "Pilot." *The Big Bang Theory*, first broadcast September 24, 2007 by CBS, Directed by James Burrows and written by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady.

⁵ Examples of this in other mediums are easily found in comics, movies, and video games. Games like "Deadpool" or "Spider-Man: Web of Shadows", television shows like "IT Crowd", "Big Bang Theory", and "How I Met Your Mother" use references to social networking to progress the story. They even change the names to things like "MyFace" (Spider-Man: Web of Shadows) or "Chitter" (IT Crowd Season 4 Episode 4) demonstrating that audience can be expected to understand that they are social networking sites without designating to the audience that they are.

“friends/followers,” or saying “First” in a comment thread. Without the appropriate knowledge of how social networks function, these references would be lost on the audience. The effects of this pervasion of social networking sites within popular culture will be explored later on, but for now it is simply important that we see that our lives are immersed within social networking sites.

The purpose of this paper is to determine if it is possible for social networking sites to lend a helping hand in authenticity. We have already seen how ingrained within our lives SNS has become. We will examine to what depth SNS has not only affected our culture but our personal identities. We will examine whether people are able to build more truthful identities by utilizing SNS, and determine if it is possible that this could allow for us to make more authentic choices in our offline lives. However, before we are able to attempt to answer this we must look at some background theory and how it pertains to SNS.

The first thing that we shall examine is the relationship of the public and private spheres with our culture. We will analyze how the convergence of these spheres has affected us in the offline world through online media. It will be the purpose of this section to demonstrate how the public and private are integral parts of social networking sites. This is integral to examine as when we look at how our identities are built within SNS we must see that it is the interplay of public and private that helps shape our choices. We will demonstrate how the public cannot exist without the private and that even though we appear to be more public than ever we are still able to control what we keep private; despite the fears of many privacy advocates.

Secondly, we will look at Heidegger's philosophy to define what he means with authenticity. We will examine how Dasein views itself as a Being-in-the-World, allowing for us to then look at Heidegger's ideas of angst and Being-towards-death. Following this we will examine the 'they' and how all of this leads to the choices that Dasein will have to make within its life in its efforts to become authentic. Following this we will analyze Heidegger's ideas on technology. It is important for us to examine all of this, from Dasein to his ideas on technology, as his idea of authenticity and how it applies to technology is one of the central themes in our argument. By examining Heidegger's views and definitions we can see how they are currently applicable to SNS. It will also allow for us to then apply these ideas to identity formation both online and offline.

Thirdly, we will look at how we form our online self or identity. The kinds of performances that we take part in will be analyzed here through both an online and offline frame of mind. We will look at the similarities and difference in both kinds of performances in the hopes of determining whether or not they provide us with the same kinds of interactions. We will also look at the kinds of information we choose to publicly reveal about ourselves in the creation and participation of an online profile. This will allow for us to define what it means to have a formed identity versus a built identity. This distinction is important for us to analyze as they interact with the idea of authenticity differently. The former may hinder it while the latter may allow for it to become more of a reality.

Within the fourth section we will examine how sharing and liking in online communities has created a way that allows for popular culture to evolve and flourish as well as how it causes us to become caught up in the popular culture whirlwind. We will

analyze the different kinds of liking and sharing that takes place within online communities through the actions of retweeting, using hash tags, audience participation with television through Twitter, and fan pages. We will examine how all of this sharing allows for introspection at the risk of allowing ourselves to become commodified and sold back to ourselves. This will allow for us to analyze and determine if this participation in these online communities allow for any addition introspection and acceptance of what we enjoy that might not have been available to us within a purely offline community.

Finally we will look to see whether or not we are able to live an authentic life through social media. We will examine how everything we have looked at so far has created a normative online culture within which we can be more truthful versions of our selves. We will examine how this normative culture not only allows for the chance of acting more truthfully but actually encourages it through constant positive reinforcement. This will allow for us to examine how the growing ability to be more truthful and public in an online setting can be reflected upon our offline selves. We will examine whether this allows for us to become more authentic since by becoming more truthful publicly we should be able to make choices that are more authentic to our individual being.

CHAPTER II

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES WITH SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networking sites have allowed for more frequent as well as a greater variety of connections among individuals. We are able to enter into each other's lives in ways that we used to think would not be possible through constant Twitter updates, photo sharing, and reposting of humorous pictures or stories. My Twitter followers might not care that I talk about wanting tacos for lunch every day, but they will see all of these posts. All of my updates about what I am doing, who I am doing it with, my complaints, and my attempts at humor are all open for my followers and friends to see. Aspects of our lives that used to be shared with only a select few from our private sphere have begun to be shared with many more people within our public spheres, granted even this public sphere is typically more private than full open disclosure. The reason for this is that social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are "built on sharing. It is enabling and exploiting our explosive desire to connect with one another. And it is causing us to ask—as individuals and societies—what should be private and what should be public and why."¹

THE EVOLUTION OF THE SOCIAL SPHERES

To begin looking at public and private we should examine how the ideas of these spheres and spaces have evolved over time into what they have become now. When talking about the public and private one must be very clear in the aspects and degree to which you talk about them. The public and private can exist on the largest and smallest

¹ Jarvis, *Public Parts*. 2.

scale within the most important and even the most mundane of interactions. Habermas writes,

The usage of words 'public' and 'public sphere' betrays a multiplicity of concurrent meanings. Their origins go back to various historical phases and, when applied synchronically to the conditions of a bourgeois society that is industrially advanced and constituted as a social-welfare state, they fuse into a clouded amalgam.²

To continue our search into SNS we must first define what we mean by public and private. The public is that in which everyone is allowed to participate. It is open for the world to see and participate within. The private, on the other hand, is that which is personal and only allows for a limited amount of individuals to see and participate. The degrees in which we will be talking about public and private are typically able to be controlled by the users of SNS thereby allowing the users to control who can and cannot participate with their profiles.

The public and private spheres are very closely related and have a very fine line between them, but it was not always such a fine line. Habermas spends a great deal of time outlining the evolution of the public and private spheres. He describes how in Greek society the public sphere used to be that which the people participated in for the good of the nation. It was something that was seen as a duty. The public sphere was the area for governmental discourse, and the private was the personal, i.e. the home.

A public space is not closed off to any one individual or group but is open to everyone. Public buildings, streets, grocery stores etc. are all examples of public spaces. However, as stated earlier, it is a very fine line between public and private. If, for example, you interact with a friend in their home this would constitute a private space

² Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989), 1.

and this means that there will be no one involved or interacting within that space that was not allowed by the owner of the space unlike a shopping mall or bookstore. If you and your friend are having a private conversation in one of these aforementioned locations then it would be within a public space and would allow for an outside individual to interject into the conversation.

According to Habermas, as our society evolved the shape of the public and private spheres changed. The public sphere became that which was involved with the courts and the government while the private was that concerned with the home and commodities. These spaces changed and evolved to allow for a more public discourse. The public no longer engulfed everything governmental. It was a place of social interaction. Habermas writes,

‘Private’ designated the exclusion from the sphere of the state apparatus; for ‘public’ referred to the state that in the meantime had developed, under absolutism, into an entity having an objective existence over against the person of the ruler. The public... was the ‘public authority’... in contrast to everything ‘private’.³

One element of this evolution is that of public discourse found within the literary salon or coffee house. These locations were areas in which the people could publicly communicate with each other about whatever they pleased, often political and literary critiques. These areas allowed for a public location that helped to facilitate private discussions about public affairs. Within these areas the people were able to converse, analyze, and attempt to change the current public discourse. These were public spaces where businesses, communities, and revolutions were started.

The people would use these public spaces to instigate change through rational and critical discussion in the hopes of having more control over what they consider to be

³ Ibid., 11.

public and private. They wanted to limit governmental control over their lives, and thereby create a more private life for themselves. A life in which they can control what goes into the public's view and what the government can control within their lives. Over time the popularity of these locations shifted and changed, but the function that they served just moved along with the people. Governmental public, as seen originally in Greece, became extremely limited. The public became a social sphere for any kind of open discourse, ranging from political discourse to discourse relating to ones hobbies. Public forums, newspapers, television, and now social networking sites have all allowed for the kind of public discussion found within these old salons and coffee houses. The private sphere expanded outward from the home and into public spaces, but the idea that they maintained an air of selectivity with the audience remained.

This growth and evolution that Habermas outlined is important for us to recognize if only for the realization that these spheres have never been linked to a solid definition. Instead, they have changed constantly throughout the course of human history. They started as being linked between that which was governmental and that which was not governmental. Eventually they would change to the relationship we have with them now where the public is seen more as open information/knowledge and private is that which is personal. This evolution was created by the growth of technology and societal rights, but at its core the relationship between public and private has been a binary one summed up with two words: social and individual.

THE CONVERGENCE OF THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

The public and private spheres can be said to be able to be broken down into public and private spaces. When talking in such a way, the sphere tends to encapsulate an area of the public/private that furthers society and societal discussion. Public and private space, on the other hand, is different. When talking about space we are talking about a location or means through which individuals can participate within the public or private sphere. Papacharissi writes,

Scholarly examinations of the Internet as a public sphere all point to the conclusion that online digital technologies create a public space, but do not inevitably create a public sphere. Research so far has shown that *access* to information, *reciprocity* of communication, and *commercialization* are three primary conditions that prohibit the transition from public space to public sphere. A new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere, in that a virtual space simply enhances discussion; a virtual sphere should enhance democracy.⁴

So, a public/private space does not mean that we are participating within a public/private sphere. This would only come around, according to Papacharissi, if the space is able to further democracy or society. This would constitute a public/private sphere.

Public and private spaces and spheres interact with each other but they are not the same. The two cannot exist without each other. They have a binary relationship.

Papacharissi writes,

The private sphere has been understood in the past as complementary or opposite to the public sphere. Usually associated with the family or the home, the private sphere serves to enforce a conventional and binary opposition between public and private.⁵

The two are part of our lives and influence us both equally. The decisions we make every day on what knowledge to make public and what to keep private is a dance that we

⁴ Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

perform all throughout the day, and we will return to this metaphor in just a moment.

These interactions shape our lives. “Public and private boundaries define how individuals organize their everyday ecologies and relate to others, and have been the subject of considerable philosophical thought.”⁶

However, through the invention and growth of technology the line between public and private has become blurred. The two spaces have gone through a kind of convergence in which technology has made them more connected and harder to separate.

Pappacharissi writes that this

technological convergence refers to the interconnectedness afforded through networked capabilities of information technologies and is relevant to various levels of interaction involving individuals, organizations, businesses, groups, and greater social configurations...at the micro level, individuals experience convergence in their social relations with families, circles of friends, and acquaintances.⁷

For example, what to tell one friend and what not to tell to another is a combination of public and private interactions. All of this information is something that we originally keep private and yet could be seen as public within a limited group. If one friend knows a secret and another does not then the friend whom I have told has become part of the public group within this private interaction. However, anyone this friend tells the secret to has now become a part of the public group as well.

Another example is how much information I tell my mother about the party I went to last night. This is a public/private interaction in which the degree of shared information within a public group differs from the example above and the information could be shared outside of your control. Everyone at the party is involved within the public/private sphere and the situations of the party are public to everyone involved. However, after we

⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁷ Ibid., 61.

leave the party do the night's events remain private or are they allowed to be shared in public? Some people will undoubtedly go out and talk about the party to everyone within their social circle, and others will go out and tell no one for a want to keep the night's events a secret. Therefore, to some the party was private but to others the party was public. It is a very fine distinction between whether it is public or private. Those who kept the party private will be surprised when the events of the night become public thanks to their talkative friends.

However, thanks to social networking sites the line between public and private has become even more blurred. Our talkative friends can post news about the party to their Facebook and Twitter accounts from the party. They can upload pictures of the night and the events within from their phones without you ever knowing. The technology connected with SNS has allowed for the private to become public that much easier. Technology has allowed for the two spaces to become more a part of each other than ever before. Papacharissi writes that,

Online technologies afford us spaces, public and private, rather than a public sphere. These spaces accommodate a new kind of publicity and privacy, constructed via the amalgamation of private and public interests. Whereas in the past public had been used to demarcate the end of private, and private signaled a departure from public, the terms no longer imply such opposition, especially in terms of how they are architecturally employed for the construction of place. Spaces presented by convergent technologies are hybrid public and private spaces.⁸

THE FAN DANCE ON THE FRONT AND BACK STAGE

This convergence is one that we participate within every day, and most of us do not realize it. The balance that public and private now exists within online is one that

⁸ Ibid., 127-128.

users must figure out. When these social networking sites first came about many people feared and believed that by using them we would completely lose the private aspects of our lives. This is simply not the case. As we have mentioned before, the relationship between the public and the private is a binary one. One cannot exist without the other.

Earlier I mentioned how the balance between public and private is similar to a dance that we perform throughout the day. Evidence of this can be located in an article by Nathan Jurgenson and PJ Rey. They write,

While the common, simple, story is that publicity comes at the expense of privacy, we provide a counter-narrative that demonstrates the dialectical relationship, where privacy and publicity are deeply intertwined mutually reinforcing, and perhaps both increasing as digital information grows more ubiquitous. And, we believe that this interplay between the revelation and concealment is, at least partially, responsible for the seductive quality of social media... The growing moral panic over the belief that the publicity afforded by all our new digital platforms and devices signals the death of privacy as we know it rests on a simple, but seldom acknowledged, assumption about the nature of the relationship between privacy and publicity: the two concepts are polar opposites and must come at the expense of another.⁹

They want to argue the very point we've been getting at all along, that public and private are necessary for each other.

Within their article they discuss how a burlesque dance uses seductive and tempting nature of dance to reveal something sexual to captures the audience's attention. They liken this to the way in which social media seduces us by promising to reveal private aspects of our friends, but in reality, in both the dance and online media, very little is actually revealed. "The fan dance (and the tradition of burlesque dancing more broadly) is defined by a cyclical interplay between reveal and conceal."¹⁰

⁹ Nathan Jurgenson and PJ Rey, "The Fan Dance: How Privacy Thrives a Political Economy of Psychic Life." in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives*, ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch. (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 62-63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

They proceed to use the terms obscenity and seduction from Jean Baudrillard to demonstrate that the dancer chooses what to reveal and what to keep secret. They write,

For Baudrillard, 'obscenity' is the drive to reveal all and expose things in full, whereas 'seduction' is the process of strategically withholding, creating magical and enchanted interest... In Baudrillard's vocabulary, the fan-dance is a seductive scene (as opposed) to obscene because each motion of the fan simultaneously reveals and conceals aspects of the body.¹¹

This means that it is the seduction of revelation that really captures the audience. The seduction also helps to conceal anything that the dancer does not want them to see. By using the seduction of revealing their body the dancer can choose what to reveal and what to conceal.

This idea of performative revelation and concealment can be found in the work of Erving Goffman, whom Jurgenson and Rey move on to next as well. Goffman is known for his sociological analysis of what it means to reveal and conceal your identity to others. Goffman believed that we perform in certain ways to impress the people we meet. This allows for us to give off a desired impression about ourselves because it is these impressions that allow for us to form our personal identities with the help of others.¹² Goffman believed that, much like the fan dance, we have an act of revealing ourselves to other people and concealing ourselves. These were found in what Goffman describes as the front stage and backstage.

In regards to the front stage Goffman writes,

I have been using the term 'performance' to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence

¹¹ Ibid., 64.

¹² This can primarily be found in Goffman's *The Presentation of Everyday Self*. In it he describes the importance of first impressions, the front and back stage, and how we manage the roles we've created for ourselves within regional and cultural settings. His work here will come into play later on when we talk about the creation of the self within social networking as that can be seen as an online performance much in the way that Goffman discusses actual performance when we meet someone.

before a particular set of observances and which has some influence on the observers. It will be convenient to label as 'front' that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance.¹³

This means that when we perform or interact with others publicly we are doing so from the front stage. The front stage is where we perform in front of an audience so that we can form our impressions and identities. The backstage, however, is different in that it is where the actor does not perform. It is where the actor reveals the motives and reasons for the choices in the performances. The backstage is typically a private area where the audience consists of those that we are closest with.

Both the fan dance and the idea of a performative front stage and back stage are applicable to social networking sites. Similar to the fan dance, social networking allows for us to decide what information is revealed. However, there are limitations to the information we can control due to limitations in online interfaces. Using SNS we can choose a large amount of the aspects of our lives that we want public. Through constant status updates, photo uploads, and tweets we make *certain* aspects of our lives public. However, this is not everything. We only tempt our friends and followers with the idea that they will learn everything about us through a seductive online fan dance.

Similarly, the front stage is what we perform for our friends and followers to see. By posting certain images and statuses I can influence my friends to have a certain belief about me. I can make them think I'm smarter, more dangerous, funnier, or dumber than I really am. Are there aspects of ourselves that slip through the cracks as we switch from fan to fan or walk from the back stage to the front stage? Surely, but this is what entices

¹³ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959), 22.

our friends and followers; it is the elements of truth that seep through the cracks. They want to know who we are, or who we claim to be, and by seductively revealing only certain elements of ourselves online we begin to create an online identity for ourselves.

So, if we are the ones who decide what to reveal and how to act on the front stage of social networking then why are some people afraid that privacy will completely disappear? If we know that public and private are a binary relationship why are some people terrified that the more evident public will completely wipe out the private, thereby leaving us completely raw and exposed for the entire world to see?

THE FEAR OF PUBLICNESS RUN AMOK

As we have just seen, the balance between public and private is a very delicate one, and this has led to many people who do not understand social networking to fear the kinds of way in which our private lives could be put out there into the public space. In his book *Public Parts*, Jeff Jarvis defines privacy advocates as those who would warn us about the imminent danger of social media and sharing. He writes,

These privacy advocates swarm in the media every time a new online service entices us to share something about ourselves. They say we should fear the companies and technologies that use the bait of free content and services, improved social lives, personalization, and increased relevance to get to open up. They fret about government... Privacy advocates worry for our young people, who they fear are saying too much. Bad things could happen, they warn. But then, bad things always could.¹⁴

It is these people who spread the fear to others who do not know much about social media, and this ends up perpetuating false information and irrational fears about new technology.

¹⁴ Jarvis, *Public Parts*, 3.

Through my own experiences I am familiar with people experiencing these kinds of fears. My fiancé's neighbors are these kinds of privacy advocates. At a summer cookout I was talking to them about social networking and how my studies were leading me to study it. Her neighbors proceeded to begin joking and laughing about the fact that they would never use social media. They talked about how coworkers of theirs used social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, and they themselves would never use these sites because they did not want their personal information out there for the entire world to see. They believed that by signing up for these sites everything they did would be recorded for everyone to see.

Now while it is true that without using the proper privacy settings the things that they posted would be available for everyone to see. Most of these sites, like Facebook, walk you through a tutorial of their privacy settings so that you can control who sees what. Even sites like Twitter make it so that if you do not want people seeing your posts then they will not be able to. My fiancé's neighbors, to no fault of their own, do not realize the fan dance that exists within social networking. They are stuck in a mindset where public and private are a pure binary relationship, and not an intermingling convergence. Despite being told that they could control the flow of information they still held onto the belief that a social networking profile would destroy any and all of their privacy. They, and many of the privacy advocates, fail to see the interplay of the public and private. They fear for their children believing that none of them will be able to get good jobs if allowed to share their information online or that they will be tracked by the government more so than they probably already are.

While it is understandable to have some of these fears, most are not necessarily needed in the degree to which they exist, i.e. the fear that their children are putting out more information than they should be. Children in today's society are used to these SNS, and it is because of this that they are most likely knowledgeable about how these sites work, as well as how to protect their information. Jarvis writes,

Young people live in that public future... They interact in public. That is how they share and connect with one another, how they build their reputations, careers, and brands. They are savvy about the benefits and risks and...are learning to act accordingly, protecting their privacy with more skill and intelligence than we assume.¹⁵

It is understandable to have a little bit of apprehension when it comes to new technology, but without attempting to understand it we are just fearing it for no reason. Many of our younger generations who have grown up with these technologies welcome them with open arms. They believe that they understand how to control and use these sites and technologies. While some of them might be overconfident in their abilities to control SNS at least they are giving the technologies the chance. They understand the risks and benefits of using SNS and therefore many of them are wary of what to post or share.

My own mother was slightly afraid of sites like Facebook when my sister and I started using it, although not to the degree of my fiancé's neighbors. She did not understand what we were doing on these sites. She believed that we were spilling our guts and giving the world full disclosure of our personal affairs. However, then my mother had to get a Facebook account for her job. They were insisting that the business have its own Facebook and recommended that the employees have Facebook profiles themselves. This would help the company to seem more personable to the clients. So, my mother created a Facebook profile for herself.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

Over the next few weeks she would come to me or my sister with questions about how to do this or that, and she would ask us how to set certain privacy settings. She was exposed to the converged interplay of the public and private within SNS. She learned that the two were aspects of each other and they existed together. She eventually warmed up to Facebook, and she has since grown to take a liking to the site. Her once misplaced distrust of the site was gone now that she knew how to operate it. Through learning how the site functioned, her binary definition of public and private was changed. She could clearly see that while some aspects of our lives are more public these are typically the aspects that we choose to make public.

Within social networking sites we have created a fine line between what is public and private. We are more exposed than ever before, but this exposure is at our own choosing. We choose what aspects of ourselves to reveal to the world by performing on the digital front stage. We still maintain our privacy, and we understand better what it means to be private about something. Jarvis writes that “we are each more aware of our privacy than we used to be. As a result we’re more likely to protect ourselves... We appreciate privacy because it’s harder to keep.”¹⁶ I feel that he is correct about this idea that we now appreciate our privacy even more than we did before. In knowing that a large part of our lives are now open to public eyes, we are more aware of what is kept private. This means that what we keep private is something very close to us, whether that means it is emotional, embarrassing, or something else entirely depends on the situation yet is only for us to know. The implications that this will have on our authenticity is still yet to be seen, but first we must take a look at Heidegger’s philosophy and define what it means to be authentic.

¹⁶ Ibid., 102.

CHAPTER III

AUTHENTICITY AND ENFRAMING IN SOCIAL NETWORKING

Having looked at the ways in which the public and private are shaped by social networking sites the next thing for us to examine is Heidegger's philosophy, and for us to examine his idea on authenticity to determine whether or not such a concept could be applied to social media. We will examine how Heidegger's views on authenticity can be applied to social media identity, and in doing so how technology could be used to create inauthentic existence while asking the question of whether technology could be used to create an authentic identity. We will look at Heidegger's question of being as well as his ideas of Dasein, the nothing, and authenticity. All of this will be done so that we can then have a firm grasp on what it means to be authentic in relation to pre- and post-modern technology, and we can see if we are able to gain authenticity from using social networking sites. This will allow for us to later examine if we are able to gain the tools necessary for furthered authenticity in the offline world.

THE QUESTION, DASEIN, THE "THEY", AND AUTHENTICITY

Heidegger believed that Being was the most important aspect of philosophy and that attempting to answer the question of what it means "to be" was the purpose of philosophy. However, he felt that this question was lost in many contemporary philosophical pursuits. He writes,

This question has today been forgotten—although our time considers itself progressive in again affirming 'metaphysics'... But the question touched upon here is hardly an arbitrary one. It sustained the avid research of Plato and Aristotle but from then on ceased to be heard *as a thematic question of actual investigation*.

What these two thinkers gained has been preserved in various distorted and ‘camouflaged’ forms down to Hegel’s *logic*. And what then was wrested from phenomena by the highest exertion of thinking, albeit in fragments and first beginnings, has long since been trivialized.¹

Heidegger felt that philosophy had broken away from its roots. Philosophy was no longer concerned with the question of the meaning of being, but had moved on to other things assuming that the question of what it means “to be” had been answered or was not important enough to require discussion. Heidegger was not content with this, and he felt that to answer the question was the first thing anyone should do before beginning to understand anything else about beings.

For Heidegger, philosophy was supposed to be a lived act, as normal and everyday life is the start of philosophy. To properly answer the question, one must live life and gather experiences. They must experience life, make choices, and truly experience what it means “to be.” This is why Heidegger created the idea of Dasein, the central figure of his philosophy.

Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being that Being is an issue for it... *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being.* Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it *is* ontological.²

To put it simply, Dasein is a being that is aware of its Being.

Heidegger writes that “Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up in them already.”³ Dasein experiences the world as a part of Being. Dasein is a mode of what Heidegger

¹ Martin Heidegger, “Being and Time,” in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 41-42.

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper, 1962), 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

calls “being-in-the-world.” This means that Dasein is fully involved with the things and people within its world. It experiences them, lives with them, and seeks to understand them. Being-in-the-world allows us to “have a place in a meaningful whole where we deal with other things and people.”⁴ Our families and friends make up our world. As Dasein, we understand that we exist with them and could never have existed without them. Our world helped to shape our beliefs, and it has led us to the point where we understand we are a part of Being because of our world. We are able to understand that we exist in a world with others, and that if something had changed then it could be possible that we might never have existed in the first place.

Heidegger explores this idea with a concept called the nothing. The nothing is the idea of nonexistence. If you are not a part of Being then you are part of the nothing. He writes that Dasein is a being that recognizes its own existence and therefore must also recognize that there is the chance that we could never have come to be. Heidegger designates that if we are not a part of Being then we would exist within “the nothing.” The nothing is what takes the place of Being when there is no Being. “The nothing is the complete negation of the totality of beings.”⁵ When nothing exists then there is only the nothing; there is no Being.

Dasein comes to recognize this through its being-in-the-world. Since Dasein is invested in the world then Dasein begins to care for other things, creatures, and people that make up its world. This care has two different aspects for Dasein. In the positive aspect, care allows for Dasein to love other beings. However, in the negative aspect care

⁴ Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999), 46.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, “What Is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 98.

causes Dasein to worry. Dasein worries about the things and people that it cares about, and Dasein is filled with angst over the idea of losing them.

This care, in its negative capacity, is what reveals the nothing to Dasein by creating this anxiety. Heidegger writes that “anxiety reveals the nothing... Anxiety robs us of speech. Because beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round, in the face of anxiety all utterance of the ‘is’ falls silent.”⁶ The anxiety of Dasein is what reveals to it the nothing, and in doing so the anxiety also reveals the limitations of Dasein to itself. Dasein learns from its anxieties that life is finite and that one day Dasein, and everything it cares about, will die. This is what Heidegger calls being-towards-death. Heidegger writes,

The nothing reveals itself in anxiety—but not as a being. Just as little is it given as an object. Anxiety is no kind of grasping of the nothing. All the same, the nothing reveals itself in and through anxiety, although, to repeat, not in such a way that the nothing becomes manifest in our malaise quite apart from beings as a whole. Rather, we said that in the anxiety the nothing is encountered at one with beings as a whole... the nothing makes itself known with beings and in beings expressly as a slipping away of the whole.⁷

Dasein is given anxiety through this knowledge of death in conjunction with its caring about the world. The fear that Dasein will pass from existence due to its finitude and thus taking it away from what it cares about, i.e. other beings, fills Dasein with angst.

Angst is so powerful that it can cripple Dasein. As human beings, we have come to points in our lives where we are met with horrible tragedies. The death of a parent, a friend, or even a pet reveals the finitude of being to us. Tragedies such as the 9/11 terror attacks, Columbine, or the Sandy Hook shooting fill us with angst. We are shown how the people we care about could be taken away from us at a moment’s notice. This angst

⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁷ Ibid., 102.

thrusts Dasein into the nothing, but it is because of the nothing that we are repelled back into Being.

“The nothing does not attract; it is essentially repelling.”⁸ The very nature of the nothing is to repel us back into being. The nothing shows us what it means to be finite, and what it would mean not to exist. If there was no way of being repelled from this angst then many of us would be completely emotionally crippled by the knowledge of death.

Heidegger writes,

This wholly repelling gesture towards beings that are in retreat as a whole, which is the action of the nothing that oppresses Dasein in anxiety, is the essence of the nothing: nihilation. It is neither an annihilation of beings nor does it spring from a negation. Nihilation will not submit to calculation in terms of annihilation and negation. The nothing itself nihilates.⁹

This means that the nothing gets rid of itself; we are so invested within the world that when the nothing is revealed to us through anxiety we push our way back to the world. We attempt to not allow ourselves to be crippled by the angst because we care about the world. The positive aspect of care causes us to return from being thrown into the nothing. This is because we know that since our time is finite we cannot waste it by being frozen by fear. Heidegger writes that “[by] holding itself out into the nothing, Dasein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This being beyond beings we call ‘transcendence.’”¹⁰ Dasein desires to carry on after being thrust into the nothing because of the amazement that there is even anything at all. By knowing the nothing Dasein is able to live its life despite the angst that accompanies it.

This is part of what makes Dasein special in Heidegger’s philosophy. All animals die, but only Dasein is aware of its mortality. A mature human being qualifies as Dasein

⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁹ Ibid., 103.

¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

because she is aware of her own finitude. Dasein is a being who understands that it exists and that one day it will die. It will cease to exist and join the nothing. However, this is what gives Dasein's existence meaning and purpose. One of the reasons that life is meaningful to Dasein is because there is an end to it, i.e. there is death. It is this limited aspect of existence that allows for us to care about being in the world.

The knowledge that existence is finite is important to the being of Dasein. This is due to the fact that Dasein has the ability to either live what Heidegger calls an authentic or inauthentic life. An authentic life is one in which Dasein lives with the complete knowledge that it will one day die, and in accepting this knowledge makes choices based off of the idea that these choices will be its own. "Authentic existence involves facing up to mortality—not by worrying about when demise will come, but by accepting the finitude of one's possibilities and choosing in the light of this finitude."¹¹ However, simply evaluating ones choices based off of the idea of death is not going to allow for Dasein to be authentic. Dasein must look at its past and make choices that progress itself towards a future of its own desire. However, before Dasein can make choices that reflect its own being Dasein must break away from the "they." Polt describes the "they" as being better translated from the German *das Man* to "the Anyone."¹² Polt writes,

I normally behave and understand my world just as anyone would. For example, in selecting my clothes, I take care not to look unfashionable—I consult my own sense of style and propriety. But this sense of style is really not 'my own'. It is simply how *one* dresses, how *they* dress in my community—I *am* the 'they'.¹³

The "they" is "the entity that creates, maintains, and demands conformity to social norms. It is everywhere; it presents its own answers to each of life's judgments and decisions,

¹¹ Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

thus relieving Dasein from responsibility; it allows Dasein to be conformity dissolved into a collective being; it prescribes Dasein's everyday way of Being."¹⁴

So how is it that Dasein can break away from the "they" and make its own choices? Dasein can only do this by making choices with the knowledge that its existence is finite. Heidegger writes,

Being-towards-death is the anticipation of a potentiality-for-Being of that entity whose kind of Being is anticipation itself. . . . Anticipation turns out to be the possibility of understanding one's *ownmost* and uttermost potentiality-for-Being—that is to say, the possibility of authentic existence. . . . Death is Dasein's *ownmost* possibility. Being towards this possibility discloses to Dasein its *ownmost* potentiality-for-Being, in which its very Being is the issue. Here it can become manifest to Dasein that in this distinctive possibility of its own self, it has been wrenched away from the 'they'. This means that in anticipation any Dasein can have wrenched itself away from the 'they' already.¹⁵

By making choices with the idea and anticipation of death in its mind, Dasein will be inclined to make choices that reflect what Dasein truly wants out of its existence. Dasein will not bend to the will of the "they" but will take what the "they" has contributed to its world-view already and make a choice that is truly authentic.

This is important because to live authentically Dasein has to realize that because of its finitude it only has one existence to achieve its goals. This means that Dasein will have to make hard choices within its existence that best suit what it desires. Polt describes this by saying, "I am *responsible* because on the *foundation* of my past, I project possibilities that are *not* other possibilities. . . . That is, I cannot be everything at once, but am forced to choose an approach to the world that excludes other approaches."¹⁶ We can only choose one option at a time. In life I may be faced with a choice of what college to

¹⁴ Taylor M. Dix, "Heidegger and Peer Pressure: Falling, Inauthenticity, and Authenticity," *Aporia* Vol. 14, Issue 1. (2004): 33.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 307 (H263).

¹⁶ Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 89.

continue studying at, or whether to take a job that could relocate me. My entire family could be pushing me to go one direction and I could desire to go the other. By evaluating my past and examining where I want to go in the future I can figure out which option is the one that *I* want to choose. This would be an authentic choice. I have to pick one and live with it for the rest of my existence. Heidegger says that “freedom...*is* only in the choice of one possibility—that is, in tolerating one’s not having chosen the others and one’s not being able to choose them.”¹⁷

In the simplest terms, we can only live an authentic life by looking at our past to evaluate and examine where we come from and where we want to go in life; doing this will allow for us to make a choice that is best for our own Being. “Taking responsibility for the world into which one has been involuntarily thrown, and making the most of it, constitutes authentic existence. Dasein’s life is thus determined by how it reacts to its primordial fallen state, and its legacy is a function of the choices made in this life.”¹⁸ This is what it means for Dasein to be authentic.

TECHNOLOGY AS REVEALING AND HUMANS AS RESOURCES

Heidegger’s philosophy on technology is the link to connecting authenticity to social networking sites. So, before we can move on and examine whether social networks allow for more authentic choices, we must examine Heidegger’s thoughts on technology as well as both the positive and negative consequences that technology has on authenticity. Heidegger felt technology was a way of revealing truth to man. He writes that “technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 331 (H285).

¹⁸ Dix, *Heidegger and Peer Pressure*, 40.

where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alētheia*, truth, happens.”¹⁹ It reveals aspects of being that we could not see before as it allows for us to look at the world in a way that is transformable so that we can reveal the truth about it.

Heidegger uses the example of a hydroelectric plant being built on the Rhine.²⁰ In this example Heidegger describes what occurs to the river as the plant is built upon it to harness its current. The Rhine is dammed up so that the water must flow through the plant. The Rhine is physically no longer what it used to be. However, something else has changed. Before, we would simply use technology to build a bridge over the river. The river was revealed as an obstacle, as something beautiful, and as an adversary to be conquered. With modern technology, however, we are able to completely manipulate the river and change it into a resource for our use. Hydro-electric dams allow for us to harness and sell the water as a resource as we use it to create power, which can also be sold as a resource. On the other hand, a pre-modern dam is one that allowed for people to harness nature for survival and create settlements, as well as to create saleable resources.

Our view of the river is no longer the same as it used to be due to modern technology. We view it more as a source of power and less as a part of the landscaping. It is now, primarily, a resource and not really considered a thing of beauty, save by the tourists. However, even through tourism, the river is made a saleable resource to the industry. They charge people to sell the beauty or take a piece of it home with a souvenir. Heidegger writes,

the revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of *poiēsis*. The revealing that rules in modern

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 319.

²⁰ To read Heidegger's example in full look at *Question Concerning Technology* page 321.

technology is a challenging... which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.²¹

In doing so we create a “standing-reserve”, in which nature has been turned into resources for us to use. These resources are “ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing.”²² Things that are considered to be “standing-reserve” are waiting for our use, manipulation, and control.

However, the idea that something can become standing reserve is a dangerous one. We no longer look for new aspects of being. Mankind then becomes lazy and truth no longer becomes revealed. Instead, “technology reveals beings as resources available for our use: they present themselves as ‘standing-reserve’, or to put it more graphically, as one big gas station.”²³ Heidegger feared that we would let modern technology get out of hand. He writes,

This danger attests itself to us in two ways. As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve. Meanwhile, man, precisely threatened, exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth.²⁴

Heidegger feared that modern technology would cause us to believe that we are in charge of the world; that we rule the world instead of existing as a being-in-the-world. This would cause for us to live life inauthentically as we would no longer be able to view ourselves as beings meant to figure out what it means “to be.” We become contented and no longer search for the truth of being. Instead, as rulers, we would become confident in

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Question Concerning Technology*, 320.

²² *Ibid.*, 322.

²³ Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 171.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Question Concerning Technology*, 332.

our knowledge and technology, believing that we have nothing else to reveal about the world because we have already conquered it. If kept unchecked technology could even make it so that human beings are considered resources instead of people because they are needed to operate technology. This is a negative effect of technology that would cause us to live inauthentically.

However, one element of Heidegger's philosophy on technology that we have yet to examine is his idea of enframing. We touched upon it briefly earlier when we talked about how technology causes us to see the world differently. Enframing can best be described by looking at a foot-note found on page 19 of a translated version of *The Question Concerning Technology* by William Lovitt. It reads,

The translation 'Enframing' for *Ge-stell* is intended to suggest, through the use of the prefix 'en-', something of the active meaning that Heidegger here gives to the German word. While following the discussion that now ensues, in which Enframing assumes a central role, the reader should be careful not to interpret the word as though it simply meant a framework of some sort. Instead he should constantly remember that Enframing is fundamentally a calling-forth. It is a 'challenging claim,' a demanding summons, that 'gathers' so as to reveal. This claim *enframes* in that it assembles and orders. It puts into a framework or configuration everything that it summons forth, through an ordering for use that it is forever restructuring anew.²⁵

Enframing as seen with the example of the Rhine above is easy to see how it applies.

Before the modern technology came along we looked at the river as a river. It was a source of life, beauty, power, and nature. It was part of our home and part of our community. We did not seek to control it but to live with it. The river had many different definitions and meanings to us. However, enframing causes the river to become ordered and revealed within our lives as a source of power and nothing more. We apply the

²⁵ William Lovitt, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977).
http://ssbothwell.com/documents/ebooksclub.org__The_Question_Concerning_Technology_and_Other_Essays.pdf.

technology of a power plant to the river and through enframing it is *revealed* to be power. From then on we have a hard time looking at it in any other way. The enframing of the river has made its purpose known and placed the river within our standing reserve.

The convenience of technology is another way in which we can become inauthentic. When technology makes our lives easier the struggles that we go through on a daily basis that might make us consider our finitude are removed from our perception. Technology allows for us to live easier lives, and this ability to live life more easily takes away the threat of danger that might throw us into the nothing and remind us of our finitude. For example, the progression of medicine in health services or safety features in cars allows for us to feel safe within the world. It removes the sense of danger from our perception and can remove the reminder of our finitude. However, when we have a near death experience or a moment where we become very ill, we are, again, held out into the nothing and reminded of our finitude. However, how does this apply to people in a social networking scenario?

Enframing can apply to social networking in a number of ways. Many people realize that by using social networking sites, and even just a web browser in general, they provide companies with a way to sell their information and make them into commodities. In this way everyone is already some form of standing reserve to the people running the corporations. However, to each other as users one of the way in which we can begin enframing on a social level is through the desire to build up social capital or our own reputations. In our desire to increase these things, we can begin to look at other users as a form of online standing reserve. For example, on Twitter one is judged for how many Twitter followers they have. The more followers that person has then the more popular

their page is on the site. A Twitter user could then be concerned with nothing but gaining more users. This means they would no longer see other users as people to be interacted with on a social and personal level, but instead would view them as numbers to be added to a list.

I run a Facebook page that shares funny photos and news about movies, videogames, anime, books, and music. I post new material on this site, and its respective Tumblr, every day in the hopes of getting more likes, shares, and reblogs. I look at the statistics for my pages almost every day. I want more followers on my pages and am doing my best to gather them; however, in doing so I have alienated myself from the other users. I have begun enframing them. Unfortunately, they are no longer users. They have become a standing reserve that when used will like and share my post thereby spreading my content and gaining me more followers. I have alienated myself from the people I attempted to form a community around. In this way I have begun to act inauthentically through my online identity by making these people into a resource, and by not focusing on the real reason that I started this page, i.e. to befriend people with similar popular culture interests.

RELATION TO SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND INAUTHENTIC DISTRACTIONS

Social networking sites provide another personal form of revealing and concealing. Looking back on the discussion of public and private above we can see how the public and private coexist in a delicate balance. As opposed to pre-SNS, we have the power to control a large amount of what we want to reveal publicly and conceal that

which we want to remain private. In doing so, we allow for certain people to see what we enjoy and what we think about ourselves and the world. We create our own online world for us to participate in. Connecting this with Heidegger's philosophy we can see how social networking sites act as the world platform for our online selves to participate within. We can look at ourselves as beings-in-the-world both online and offline. We have seen how some actions, such as turning other users into standing reserve, could allow for us to act inauthentically. Inauthenticity is acting in accordance with the "they" and not attempting to be our true self. It is not taking into consideration that our time with existence is finite and that we need to make every choice count. We have seen how hunting for users as standing reserve can make us forget about why we are doing something, thereby alienating us from our choice and the purpose it serves for us personally, and we can see how that would be considered inauthentic.

Another way that social networking sites cause us to be inauthentic is through what Heidegger calls idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. The three of these are characteristic of falling. Falling can be defined rather nicely in this excerpt from Taylor Dix. He writes,

Before advancing any further, a distinction must be made between Heidegger's two approaches on falling. Scholars generally recognize two forms of falling within Heidegger's writings: structural and psychological. The former is Heidegger's term for showing how Dasein (Heidegger's ontological label for man) is naturally drawn away from its inherent sense of what it truly is. The latter can be interpreted as a 'turning away,' the result of Dasein's temptation to ignore the facts that it has to create its own lifestyle and that its world is entirely contingent and groundless.²⁶

So, falling is a state in which we turn away or are distracted from analyzing what it means to be and from being authentic. It is when we ignore the exploration of analysis

²⁶ Dix, *Heidegger and Peer Pressure*, 32-33.

and instead simply accept things for the way they appear; when we take other people words for thing instead of looking into it and deciding for ourselves.

As previously mentioned, falling has three main components. These are idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. Dix helps to define these terms when he writes,

Idle talk refers to the fallen manner in which Dasein communicates with others and through which it betrays a specific interpretation of the world... Idle talk deceives Dasein into believing that it can have a legitimate understanding of everything without having first to put forth an effort to appropriate it.²⁷

Dix also goes on to define curiosity and ambiguity by writing,

Curiosity causes Dasein to leap continually from one worldly object to the next, no sooner discovering something before consigning it to the past and moving on to the next object that catches its fancy... Ambiguity is thus defined as not discerning between that which is genuine and that which is not.²⁸

All of these can be attributed to a form of laziness and uncaring thought process about the world that surrounds us. By succumbing to these three characteristics of falling we are acting as though we are disinterested with the world in which we exist because we do not want to examine it for ourselves, either that or it is the idea that we are comfortable enough to believe the “they” to the point where we find inquiry into the world irrelevant.

This easily applies to online activities and social media as those are often ways of distraction and easy answers. When it comes to idle talk we simply need look at Google, and online forums. Whenever we do not know something or have a question what is the first thing someone tells you? They say, “Google it.” Often we are given answers in ways that are separated from the context of the situation. We are given plain facts that tend to

²⁷ Ibid., 34-35.

²⁸ Ibid., 36.

leave out the finer details of a situation or answer, as well as we lose the chance for physical interpersonal discourse.

We just need to Google the answer, and it is true that we can find answers online that are very intelligible. However, there are other moments in which the answers we receive are incorrect, but they are taken to be the truth because we found it online.²⁹ Sometimes we proceed to forums, which could probably be considered gaining the knowledge from someone else and then we would enter into ambiguity, and we ask the forums for an answer to something they should know. We expect the internet to have the correct answer for us, and we often accept what the internet has to say. Idle talk expands to SNS because we are exposed to aspects of people's lives and we accept what these people are posting as though we have a window into their lives. We believe that we know and understand everything that is going on within their lives because they posted an update or a picture of their children. This is not the case. We are creating a false sense of knowledge when we do this.

Curiosity is also able to be seen within social networking. The entire premise of Twitter is constant updates all the time from our friends, family, and pop culture icons. It is constantly updating and changing. The "news feed" on Facebook and the "wall" on Tumblr function in much the same way. We can scroll through countless stories and images without even realizing it. We scroll looking for newer and newer content. On these feeds we find something humorous or entertaining and spend a few moments to a

²⁹ Sites like wikis can be edited by anyone who feels like it. So, while these sites are moderated, there are moments in which someone who posts the wrong knowledge out of ignorance can be post to these wikis without the moderators finding it for some time. This means that there are moments when an observer could look up incorrect information without the observer knowing. Then there are sites like "ask.com" or "yahoo answers" where the user posts a question and waits for other users to answers, similar to a forum, the other users can post incorrect answers just for the fun of it.

few minutes with it. After that, it is onto something new. Such a relationship with social networking sites is not good for us when performed constantly. Doing so will only allow for us to become disinterested in the world around us. No longer will we search for answers on our own by going out into the world and attempting to examine it. Sure, there will always be scholars and those who seek to know the truth, but no longer will the average person be motivated to question and dissect what makes the world tick; not when they can “Google it.”

Similarly, there are moments in which people will no longer have the attention span to stay on one web page. An article found on the Guardian website suggests that internet users need to have the website grab their attention within the first few seconds; otherwise the users will jump over to another site. Sites have to keep their information clear, concise, and entertaining. This is another example of curiosity, and doing so, again, leads to inauthenticity. Furthermore, if we attempt to build an identity online, as we will discuss in later sections, then jumping from web page to web page without absorbing the information or becoming a part of the community prevents us from doing so.³⁰

Admittedly, I am playing a bit of the devil’s advocate here by claiming that people will no longer be motivated to go out and explore the world, and that they will no longer hunt for the answers themselves. Such is not the case in a normative sense. Of course there will be cause and motivation for discourse in the real and physical sense, but that is because some things cannot be experience or learned over social networking or the internet. Things like love, the rush of adrenaline, the use of the senses on certain stimuli,

³⁰ Rob Weatherhead, “Say It Quick. Say It Well – The Attention Span of a Modern Internet Consumer,” *The Guardian*, Published March 19, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2012/mar/19/attention-span-internet-consumer>.

etc, all of these are things that must be experienced in person. However, it is important to make the distinction that it is possible, and likely probable, that some people do become completely invested within social networking sites to the point where they no longer have the urge to go out and experience the world. These people, in the Heideggerian sense, have fallen. They are no longer concerned with the question of what it means “to be” and they have accepted the world for what it is. They no longer want to make their life their own through choices that recognize their time is finite, instead they exist for and within social networking. They exist to be with the “they”.

We have examined how Heidegger’s philosophy creates a situation in which social media sites would make us inauthentic beings. By using social media we become distracted and disconnected from our original desires. Through social media networking, we no longer look for our own answers and embrace the online “they,” and we begin to view other people as resources, or standing reserve. We have also examined what it means to experience “falling” within social networking. We find ourselves constantly relying on social networks for answers and endless entertainment causing us to become distracted and disinterested with the immediate world around us. This has only helped to make us more inauthentic. However, does this mean that all identity formation found on social networking sites lead us to inauthenticity? Or, is it possible that social networking sites could still allow for introspection into our personal identity and being to the point where we can make more authentic choices?

Heidegger’s philosophy was written decades before the first online social communities came around, and as such was written with physical, real world, technology in mind. These writings demonstrated a fear that technology would make us inauthentic

and was viewed from a physical perspective. The fact that we can now interact digitally through online social networking sites opens up new doors and elements of technology. While certain fears of technology that Heidegger held, as seen above, can be easily transferred to SNS, there are other elements of online technology that can allow us to make more authentic choices. To examine these elements and see how they affect online identity formation, we will have to examine two aspects of social networking sites, the construction of a digital identity and knowledge/culture sharing within online communities. By looking at these we can examine the ways in which social networks can allow for introspection, as well as determine whether they allow for a reinforcement of the authentic through online interactions.

CHAPTER IV

ONLINE IDENTITY AND PERFORMATIVITY

The analysis of who we are and what makes us human and what makes us unique as individuals has been a constant focus of philosophy and sociology. How it is formed, how it influences us, and whether or not we have a say in how it influences us have all been questions surrounding identity. Yet, there is a new aspect of identity that just complicates the situation even more, that of online identity. We are now just beginning to grasp how online identity can impact our lives, and how such an identity can even have both positive and negative effects on who we are and how we function in our everyday lives. Within this section we will examine the idea of performativity and the front stage/back stage as described by Erving Goffman allowing for us to then discuss online identity as demonstrated through current social networking sites. We will also examine Sherry Turkle's analysis of online MUD culture and how these helped to shape personal identity and note their evolution into current SNS allowing for performativity, as demonstrated by Goffman, to exist in our online identities. By doing this, we will see how Heidegger's philosophy and the public and private spheres contribute to the formation of our online identities, and how this opens us to the possibility of being more authentic in the offline world.

WHO AND WHAT WITHIN THE WORLD

Identity is considered to be who we are. It is a part of our self and many people consider it to be something that is formed over time throughout our lives. The self, or

personal identity, is the broader definition that most people are talking about when they use the term identity. We will be looking at this broader idea of personal, or self, identity as opposed to these more specific aspects which play a part in helping to form the personal identity. Pembecioğlu writes,

Weinreich gives the definition ‘A person’s identity is defined as the totality of one’s self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future.’¹

Therefore, the self is a construction of how one views him/her self in the past and the future. A person’s identity is shaped by past experiences and their desires for the future. This indicates that a person’s community, family, friends, and actions, past and present, shape that individuals future. These different external and internal factors help to create different aspects of a person’s identity. Some of these aspects were formed and some of them were built. The difference is that “the ‘formation’ of the identity and ‘building’ an identity refer to two different processes. Formation is rather referred to the natural process where the action of building could be seen as the conscious and planned efforts of the self or the others.”²

This means that the aspects of self that we have no say in, that we were exposed to and influenced us, helped to form our identities. Things such as our communities and families have helped to form our personal identity. They taught us right from wrong, as well as certain social customs that we are to live by so that we do not act inappropriately. All of these aspects of our identity were formed with no say by us. This is what Heidegger meant by thrownness. We are thrown into our society with no ability to

¹ Nilüfer Pembecioğlu, “Building Identities: Living in the Hybrid Society,” *The Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies*, Year 4, No. 6: 47.

² Ibid., 47.

choose. As such, we are raised in a culture that was not of our own choosing. This indicates that certain portions of our past are formed for us with little to no say of our own.

Heidegger believed that Dasein was a being that must be involved in its world. Dasein was a being that recognized itself as being-in-the-world. Dasein was involved and shaped by its world and environment. We exist within neighborhoods and cities that shape our beliefs and discourses. We are formed from the time we are born to fit into this culture. Pembecioğlu writes,

Individuals are always looking for groups to belong to, with which they can identify, feel connected to and thus gain a sense of security within a concrete community. On the other hand, identity also means standing out: being different, a unique individual. So the search for identity connects and divides at the same time.³

We grow up in a world with other people and because of this are formed by these people. Even after we are able to question who we are and where we stand within existence, similar to Dasein coming to recognize that it exists within the world, we attempt to make our identities so that they continue to fit within communities. We simply look to be accepted while we search for who we are. Pembecioğlu continues that

the self grows up bit by bit with the help of the other. The other helps the self to add new circles to its original self. In this sense nobody is unique. The things, qualities, habits, etc. are all considered, shaped and placed again regarding the value of the self in contrast to the other.⁴

We are born and raised to recognize ourselves are part of a culture, as part of a group. We strive to look at each other as other human beings with individual identities that make up our culture. Stated above, this is similar to Dasein. Dasein is meant to recognize itself as part of the world. This world is formed by the “they” that exists with

³ Ibid., 53-54.

⁴ Ibid., 54.

Dasein. To take Dasein out of the world or to isolate it from the “they” would hinder Dasein’s very being. Dasein is meant to analyze and examine the world from the perspective of one who experiences it among others. To take that away would take away the very essence of Dasein. It would destroy any chance at understanding ourselves, the world, or authenticity.

In an article by Ignacio Arriagada, Arriagada attempt to demonstrate that the space in which we find ourselves living is necessary for our formation and/or construction of identity. He takes Heidegger’s account of being-in-the-world and Charles Taylor’s ideas on the background to demonstrate that we are influenced by the world around us whether we realize it or not. Arriagada writes,

To imagine human life outside and separate from the world would require us to rethink our understanding of what it means to be a human person. In effect, we would no longer be talking about a human life-form, we would no longer be talking about *dwellers*. We would be talking about a distinct life-form, about some abstract entity that exists outside of the world and looks *into it*, or as Heidegger said, *faces it*.⁵

Arriagada continues by arguing that Taylor’s idea of background instills within us certain contexts that we cannot ever separate ourselves from. This is similar to Heidegger’s idea of the “they” in that we cannot truly escape the “they.” As demonstrated above, we are shaped by our world and are therefore shaped by the “they.” These create backgrounds within our modes of thinking in which when we make a decision we are influenced by the background. Any attempt to get rid of or act outside of this background is futile. Arriagada argues,

With no framework, it follows that questions on morality, meaning and personal identity would be questions issued in a sort of void and we would be unable to know where to even start looking for answers. This is why such essential and

⁵ Ignacio Moya Arriagada, "The Primacy Of Space In Heidegger And Taylor: Towards A Unified Account Of Personal Identity." *Appraisal* Volume 7, Issue 4. (2009): 21.

fundamental questions about personal identity are always dependent on the presence of a *background* from which we can draw out the meaning of the questions themselves. The mere possibility of *asking* and finding an answer to the question of personal identity presupposes that we exist within a determined context. Existing within that context is what makes it possible for us to ask and answer the question in a meaningful way... In other words, to answer *who* I am I must first know *where* I stand—where I stand in history *and* in physical space.⁶

To begin building our identity, instead of having it formed for us, we must start by recognizing that we are part of the world and that the world is a part of ourselves. We must recognize that it has shaped up and only then can we begin to stop it from forming us and allow ourselves to build who we are. This is a function of being that is unique to Dasein.

As mentioned above, Dasein recognizes itself as a being-in-the-world, as well as recognizes that its time in existence is finite. It is due to this recognition of finitude that Dasein can make choices regarding its own being, and Dasein can choose what to do with its finite existence. To make choices recognizing the finite aspects of being is, as previously demonstrated, what it means to be authentic. Authenticity depends upon Dasein making choices that work towards a future of Dasein's will. A future that is built upon choices that Dasein did not choose or care about is an inauthentic existence. This would form Dasein into an inauthentic being as opposed to allowing Dasein to build itself into an authentic one.

As Dasein we are able to build our identities, and we have to come to the realization that certain aspects of our self are formed by the world in which we were born into. As has been demonstrated, we are shaped and formed by those around us but in the earlier parts of our existence this is not our fault or doing. We are unable to make choices about our being until we reach a level of maturity to recognize that we exist in the world

⁶ Arriagada, *The Primacy of Space In Heidegger and Taylor*, 22.

and that we will die. It is only when we recognize our finitude and that we are beings within the world that the decisions we make can be authentic. This is when we are able to truly begin building our identities, rather than having them formed, because our desire to be authentic is unique to each individual's life and goals. This means that the identity society would form for us is not one that we would wish to build authentically.

The ability to build an authentic identity has always been present for Dasein and with the creation of SNS we are given more tools to better grasp of what we desire. This is something that SNS continues to help with as it becomes integrated into our lives. SNS allow for us to build identities with what has already been formed for us. We are given the opportunity to change and shape ourselves as we see fit. This is more important for our overall argument and we will spend more time looking at how we construct our online identity. From here we will move on to examining Goffman's arguments about performativity and how this relates to offline and online identity construction.

GOFFMAN AND PERFORMATIVITY

Building an identity is not a simple process, but it is one that many of us do every day of our lives. Many of the choices that we make on a daily basis helps us to build onto our identity. From what clothes to wear, what books to read, what movies to watch, and what paths to take in our careers and schooling we are constantly building onto our identities.

Erving Goffman, in his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, examines how we interact with each other, and in doing so he argues that we put on performances to draw out certain reactions from people. Goffman argues that we all put

on performances in attempts to influence people into thinking certain things about us. Performing certain ways around other people is how we build our identities. By performing we make choices about how we want to act and appear to others.

Our appearance is extremely important, according to Goffman, as this is many people's first impression of us, and this is followed up by our first physical and verbal interactions with them. Goffman writes,

The individual's initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretenses of being other things. As the interaction among the participants progresses, additions and modifications in this initial informational state will of course occur, but it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up from, the initial positions taken by the several participants. It would seem that an individual can more easily make a choice as to what line of treatment to demand from and extend to the others present at the beginning of an encounter than he can alter the line of treatment that is being pursued once the interaction is underway.⁷

The first impression is what sets the stage for all other interactions and performances. How we project and carry ourselves into the world is the foundation of the identity that we build for ourselves. From this foundation we build upon our identity through continued interaction with others. We attempt to determine how to appear to them and how to act in certain situations with them, and this is greatly influenced by the stage set with the first impression. Goffman gives an example in a long excerpt from William Samson's *A Contest of Ladies*.⁸

The excerpt talks about a man named Preedy who is on vacation at a beach hotel in Spain. No one here knows Preedy, and they have no idea what kind of person he is. This is the perfect opportunity for Preedy to attempt to build a new identity for himself as all of these people will be having their very first impressions of him there on the beach.

⁷ Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 10-11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

To do this he consciously made decisions about how he would act at the beach. He decided that he would act as though he wasn't concerned about anyone else at the beach, making eye contact but attempting to look off in the distance or spaced out. He also decided that he would attempt to make the people at the beach think that he was learned and daring but not too full of himself by reading a Spanish translation of Homer. Preedy also decided that he had two choices to make about the water at the beach depending on which image he wanted to give off. He could either run head first into the water embracing it with everything he had and swimming out a good distance before turning and paddling water; thereby demonstrating that he was accustomed to the beach and an admirable swimmer. Or Preedy could nonchalantly walk up to the water and let it envelop his feet without so much as giving a sign that he noticed. This would give off the impression that the presence of the water made no difference to him. He portrays himself as completely indifferent.

All of these things the Preedy is doing are performances, and these kinds of performances are ones that we all take part in whether we realize it or not. As mentioned above, the clothes that we wear, the culture we participate within, and the actions that we do are all performances that give off a sense of who we are. According to Goffman, we use these performances to our advantage so that we can project the kind of image that we want. This is a way for us to get people to think of us in ways that we normally may or may not think of ourselves. These performances serve the function of convincing people we really are the way that we say, whether it be true, a farce, or a idealized dream.

Goffman claims that we are able to do this because all of our performances exist within a front and backstage, which we mentioned briefly in the above discussion of the “fan dance.” He writes,

It will be convenient to label as ‘front’ that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance.⁹

The front stage is the area that everyone can see. This is where the performance takes place. People make assumptions and perceptions about the backstage based off of the performance on the front. The backstage is what is private, and it is where all of the private motivations and personality maintenance are performed. It is what the audience cannot see during your performance. It is where all of your motivations and aspirations are hidden. It is the interplay between the front and back, or public and private, that pushes the allure of mystery in a performance. If the audience is intrigued into why you are acting the way you are then they will be more inclined to believe you and stay interested. After you give them peeks into the backstage, i.e. at motivations for the performance, then they will inform you if your performance was believable or not. However, the audience never gets a full glimpse at the backstage. There are always aspects of it hidden, otherwise everything would be within the front and then the dichotomy would no longer exist.

The performance that we put on in the front stage is seen as a kind of character. This character is one that we have to pretend to be. It is one that we have to put on like a show. Essentially we have to think and act as though we are that character to keep the

⁹ Ibid., 22.

performance alive and going, and this means we have to don that character's persona like a mask. Goffman gives a quote from Robert Park as such,

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves... In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons.¹⁰

This demonstrates that in many cases the mask that we don in a performance in us attempting to perform an identity we wish we were. This identity is a more idealized version of our current self and we perform it in the attempts to strive for it. If we can get other people to believe that we are our idealized self then aren't we? If our identity is something that we build and others agree is the truth then isn't the performance that we get people to believe the identity that we actually are?

This truly does depend on what kind of persona we are attempting to integrate into our identity. For example, if I am attempting to convince people that I am a doctor without having gone to medical school and I can convince the people around me that I am a doctor I am still not a doctor. Just because I can perform it does not make it so, but it does demonstrate something about me. If I am willing to put so much effort into being a doctor then this version of myself might be a version of myself that I wish that I was, i.e. idealized; however, it is not who I am. It is a misleading performance. The mask that I put on in a performance allows for me to look better at the possible versions of myself that I might strive to be. It allows me to get a better grasp on the kind of identity that I

¹⁰ Ibid., 19-20.

want to build and thereby I am able to make the necessary moves to make this character a real part of my persona.

As stated above, the character that we perform can be one that we are attempting to mislead people into believing, or it could be a real way in which we attempt to portray ourselves because that is how we wish we were, i.e. this is our ideal self. Goffman writes,

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited... Let us now turn from the individual as character performed to the individual as performer. He has a capacity to learn, this being exercised in the task of training for a part. He is given to having fantasies and dreams, some that pleasurably unfold a triumphant performance, others full of anxiety and dread that nervously deal with vital discrediting in a public front region. He often manifests a gregarious desire for teammates and audiences, a tactful considerateness for their concerns; and he has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure... These attributes of the individual *qua* performer are not merely a depicted effect of particular performances; they are psychological in nature, and yet they seem to arise out of intimate interaction with the contingencies of staging performances.¹¹

When we begin performing a character and don the mask for the first time we might have multiple reasons for doing so. However, it is not the character that changes over time and it is not the character that causes any real change within us or our identity. As demonstrated with the doctor example, playing the character of a doctor does not make one a doctor. However, if the individual takes the performance itself seriously then there is a chance for change. There is a chance that the mask we have donned will influence a change within us. By taking the performance seriously as a performer we fully give ourselves to it and we attempt to bridge the gaps so that we are believable. Doing so requires for us to commit ourselves and we begin living in a performance of that role. We

¹¹ Ibid., 252-254.

are moved by the emotions and internal aspects of the performance to make a change to our identity and in doing so our idealized self begins to take shape within us psychologically becoming a part of our persona.

We can see how these performances continue on in the virtual realm in our exploration of MUDs and online culture within the next section as well as view how the past representations that we make of ourselves online continue to influence us in the future in a way that is similar to how we function in the offline world.

MUDS AND SNS REPRESENTATION OF SELF

Today we have social networking sites like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter to perform on. These SNS allow for us to perform online with virtual representations of our actual selves. However, in the early online world things such as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) allowed for individuals to put on a new persona and thereby perform as a completely different person.¹² While the media through which our online performances have changed the psychological effects that we can see demonstrated on MUDs are still present on SNS today.

In her 1995 book, *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle takes us into what it would be like living our lives and forming our identities with the help of online communities called MUDs. MUDs were text based online communities that could be accessed by a large number of people anywhere in the world provided they had access to a computer and the internet. To use MUDs a user would create a character giving them a gender, name, description, and unique personality. The player would then interact with others and live

¹² Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 11.

within this virtual world through the use of text based descriptions and dialog. MUDs also allowed for a great deal of self expression, similar to SNS. Within a MUD you could design your character as you wanted as well as customize a room or home within the MUD to your liking. It became an extension of your personality.

It is easy to see the connection between these past online communities to current social networking sites. On sites like Facebook and Twitter we create profiles using virtual representations of our real offline selves. We maintain performances and create a story using status updates and photo uploads, but we will get to this later. First we will look at MUDs as described by Turkle, and examine her argument that these virtual communities allowed for performances that led to real personal growth within the offline individuals.

Turkle quotes a woman she interviewed as saying,

I didn't exactly lie to him about anything specific, but I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I'm just hoping that face-to-face I can find a way to spend some time being the online me.¹³

This desire to be more like the online self, the self that she is performing as, is akin to the argument given by Goffman. This woman wishes that the internal aspects of the character she performs as could become who she is in the offline world. This performance is a way for her to demonstrate and get to know her ideal self. The idea of Goffman's front and backstage has been transferred to the online realm in which the front and backstage take a slightly different layer. The front becomes the virtual performance that the person is giving and the backstage becomes the real person behind the character. Turkle writes that "the internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the

¹³ Ibid., 179.

constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create.”¹⁴ Online and virtual realities and interactions have become areas in which we can perform and play to discover who we are and to better build our offline identities. But, how is this the case?

Turkle goes on to liken this to performativity herself. She believes that MUDs and other online sites like them allow for players to express aspects of themselves that they weren’t able to before. They can attempt to be who they wish they were and in doing so they could possibly become that way in the offline world once they’ve gained enough confidence in the online world. She writes that,

As in acting, the explicit task is to construct a viable mask or persona. Yet on MUDs, that person can be as close to your real self as you choose, so MUDs have much in common with psychodrama. And since many people simply choose to play aspects of themselves, MUDs can also seem like real life...A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity...In real life, this woman sees her world as too narrow to allow her to manifest certain aspects of the person she feels herself to be. Creating screen personae is thus an opportunity for self-expression, leading to her feeling more like her true self when decked out in an array of virtual masks.¹⁵

After making this distinction, Turkle goes on to record several cases in which people used MUDs to create characters that contained personality traits that they themselves wished they had, and in which these people were able to gain something from it that helped them to build stronger identity more towards the one they idealized for themselves.

One case that Turkle talks about is that of a man named Matthew who used MUDs to deal with some parental issues that he was having in his life.¹⁶ Matthew was

¹⁴ Ibid., 180.

¹⁵ Ibid., 184-185.

¹⁶ Ibid., 190-192.

raised in a family where his father was not around much and as such he became a huge help and confidant to his mother. This caused him to act the same way in any personal relationships that he had in the future. After his behavior as a caregiver was received as pushy and overbearing to one of his ex-girlfriends Matthew decided to attempt playing a MUD. He used this MUD to become the type of leader and helper that he had always wished his father has been, as well as he used it to become a more rounded person after his breakup with the girlfriend mentioned above. Playing the MUD gave Matthew the closure and emotional progression that he had not been able to achieve in the offline world. He was then able to use this progression to better his offline self and build onto his offline identity.

Another of these cases is about a girl named Ava.¹⁷ Ava was a graduate student who a few years prior had been in a horrible accident that had cost her her right leg. Ava used MUDs to help herself cope and learn to accept her new lifestyle. She created a character who also had only one leg and found the online community to be extremely helpful to her character. They would go out of their way to help her character progress in the game despite the handicap. She even was able to find herself forming romantic relationships with others online in a way that helped her to make steps in accepting her missing limb in the offline world. Turkle writes,

Virtual reality gave Ava choices. She could have tried being one of this MUD's many FabulousHotBabes. If so, she might have never felt safe leaving the anonymity of the virtual world. But instead she was able to reimagine herself not as whole but as whole-in-her-incompleteness. Each of us in our own way is incomplete. Virtual spaces may provide the safety for us to expose what we are missing so that we can begin to accept ourselves as we are.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 263-264.

¹⁸ Ibid., 263.

In both of these cases, we see how the person was able to create a persona for themselves that reflected their offline self or who they wish they could be in the offline world. Both people were able to gain what they needed from the situation. In Matthew's case, he was able to gain closure on two different relationships that he felt left him unsatisfied or missing a part of himself. In the case of his father he was able to get the closure needed from never having a strong and helpful father figure around by role-playing one himself. In the case of his ex-girlfriend, he was able to gain closure and move on so that he could become a closer boyfriend in the future. However, in the case of Ava, she was able to come to grips with her physical disability by learning to deal with it psychologically in MUDs. This allowed her to better deal with it in the offline world when situations arose.

Social networking sites are, admittedly, different than MUDs. As talked about above, MUDs allow you to create a character with which to play and this character does not have to be any representation of your real self. People with whom you interact with on MUDs may never know who you actually are in the offline world. You could play as a man, a woman, or anything else. However, on SNS you are a virtual representation of your real self. There is no opportunity to switch genders or race or lie about your appearance, although I'm sure people have tried. Instead, in SNS your 'friends' or 'followers' get to know you as you exist in the offline world. However, this does not stop the performative abilities of SNS. SNS still allow for a great deal of performativity the stage has simply changed. Instead of performing in a fictional world with a character that you created you are returning to Goffman's roots and performing as yourself in the real world but through a virtual medium.

The performative aspects of SNS are still similar to the MUDs in that you can control everything that you post and do on them. To an extent you can control the impressions that the circles you are involved in experience through your performances. In this way you can shape, or build, your online identity as you see fit. However, the more or less alluring aspect of SNS, depending on how you look at it, is that people now know who you actually are. This means that there is already an offline impression of who you are that follows you online.

As we saw with Goffman, the first impression helps to lay the foundations for all the other interactions that you have with people. Since, presumably, most of the people who will 'friend' or 'follow' you on SNS are people who know you offline you are most likely unable to create a brand new identity for your SNS. Instead, you start off with your current offline identity forming the backbone of your online identity. Using SNS, you can still discover new aspects of yourself for building onto your identity similar to the way it occurred in MUDs, but we will return to this idea in the next section when we look at groups and fan pages; first I want to quickly examine the idea that SNS could possibly limit us by causing us to be stuck in a constant present.

In their article on social networking sites Harper, Whitworth, and Page argue that social networking sites have become a place of constant updates and a constant present. According to them the presentation of the past in an ever updating site like Facebook or Twitter can be jarring or damaging to the individual and the identity that they are attempting to create. They write,

Pictures taken when people were larking about at university are discovered by potential employers and referred to when interviews are undertaken. Thus who a person *was* is used to constrain and judge them in the current time, *now*.¹⁹

They are arguing that past updates to SNS can be harmful to a person's future possibilities, and this is true. There are instances in which employers attempt to look at past photos and statuses to gain an idea of the identity of a potential employee before hiring them. However, this is nothing new. Before SNS, employers would hold meetings with potential employees at bars to see how well they could handle the social situation. They would judge them based up how well they interacted with one another, how they treated the servers, and how well they could handle their alcohol. While it is a well noted risk among SNS and its users this does not deter many from using the sites and its features. People are more careful about what they post and are sure to have their privacy setting appropriately set if they are truly worried. The authors continue by saying that "what they were cannot be adjusted; what they will be cannot be controlled; what they are 'now' seems to dictate all the prismatic effects on selfhood that Facebook enables."²⁰

The idea that the past is completely unwanted and invasive on SNS is an interesting concept. The authors argue that these sites are designed with the ever changing present in mind. They describe the sites as being designed with all the new content being posted right to the top of the web page so that it is always there for you to see.²¹ They argue that when the past is brought to our attention on SNS, whether through old photos or statuses, it is unwanted and could be damaging to the construction of identity. They argue,

¹⁹ Harper, Richard, Eryn Whitworth, and Ruth Page. "Fixity: Identity, Time and Duree on Facebook - Microsoft Research," *Microsoft Research* (2012): 3, accessed October 2, 2013. <<http://research.microsoft.com/apps/pubs/default.aspx?id=169221>>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

This content, its enactment, its articulation as the negotiated object of discourse between the connecting points of Facebook, has consequences for the performance of identity. Content from the past yanks an individual back to an earlier time, of course, but as it does so, it allows the articulation of an earlier self. But what we see above [an example about old photos surfacing on our Facebook timelines] is that there appears to be little opportunity for such historicizing of the self; all there is, or rather what is privileged, is a singular self that is the one in the here and now.²²

They then continue on by arguing that SNS do not offer any real ability at a structured narrative of self. They write that,

The tidbits offered on Facebook cannot do this; all they afford are details, pointers, parts. If a concern with theories of identity is that they over-theorise and rush to abstraction, hypothesize as we put it alluding to Hegel, then these faults are all the more valid when details is all that is available to the individual. Facebook affords little more... Things that happened that might allow users to assert some inner soul or, for that matter, actions that were valued by the connections that might define a person relational are all immaterial if they are historical. One if only as good as one's last posting.²³

The argument that this is unable to help with construction of identity because SNS only offers a fleeting moment of words or that these moments are but tidbits of information is to miss the point of how these performances function. Firstly, the authors argue that SNS sites like Facebook and Twitter only give us tidbits of information into the past. They claim that such tidbits are mere details and points within our lives that are hardly enough to form a narrative. This is true. Some SNS sites do only offer us tidbits of information into our lives. They allow for us to highlight certain moments and events that we felt were memorable enough to post. I believe that this is enough for us to form a narrative, provided the SNS is used enough. 'Friends' and 'followers' that I have gathered on Facebook and Twitter, for example, will constantly see new updates about my daily events. I post quite often throughout the day, and I do not mind sharing all of

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Ibid., 16-17.

the nitty gritty details when certain moments of my life are either annoying, exciting, or just plain weird. However, many of these people are able to put a story together concerning many aspects of my life because of the amount of detail I have given them. What they are not given many of them are able to infer based off of what they know about me. My cousins in Oregon know a lot more about the progress of my thesis than some of my friends whom I see daily because my cousins always like or comment on my posts about my thesis. They have gained a narrative about me that has been formed through my online performance using SNS, and just because it was given in plot points does not mean they have lost any of its importance to my construction of identity.

From here the authors build onto the idea of tidbit information being transmitted over SNS to argue that the kind of performative change that would take place on SNS is only valuable if there is some form of easily accessible record of it, which Facebook and Twitter does not allow. They argue that despite the fact that our posts are just like tidbits of what occurred on a certain date, if we wanted to access the past through these posts we could not as Facebook makes it difficult to find past posts. This means that SNS further prevent the construction of identity because it attempts to cut us off from the past and keep us fixed in a state of the present. While I will admit that finding past posts on Facebook is difficult this does not entirely negate Facebook's ability to help us construct identity. This is because, to me, the post is not nearly as important to the past as it was when it was posted.

The past is always important, and past posts are not different, because these are what has help us to construct and build our identities to the point we are at in the present. Sure there will be stumbles along the way and some past posts are embarrassing evidence

of that, but to hide from these posts is a fool's errand. When confronted by past posts there will undoubtedly be positive and negative effects, but it is impossible to fully hide from the past. To attempt to hide from what made you who you are is to attempt to deny a current part of yourself, and while it is true that not everything in the past has any immediate bearing on the present, whether that be because it has been so long ago or we have turned from that path of construction, does not mean that it is not important.

The reason the post at that present moment is most important is because that is the event that forms our memory and experience of the situation. It is what happens at that present time that helps us to grow and change. The way that people react to our posts or performances in the present, when it is relevant, is what will cause us to build our identities in a certain way. Also, before the invention of SNS the past was not ever really accessible to us save through memory, picture, or word of mouth. This meant that all that currently mattered was the present unless the past managed to find its way to the present through one of these vehicles. SNS allows for the past to be constantly accessible not only to ourselves but to others. This allows for others to get a better sense of where we come from and allows them to frame a better idea of our story within their minds. It also allows for us to access the past so that we are better reminded of where we came from so that we can better assess where it is we want to go in to future.²⁴

²⁴ I suggest looking at the work by D.E. Wittkower if you are interested in how our performances further influence our online identities. A lot of what was covered over the past two sections is explored further and in more depth within his work. It is a great piece about the performances we put in online. While not expressly used here, it is a great piece for further research when talking about Goffman and Turkle.

PERFORMANCE IN ONLINE GROUPS AND OVER SHARING

Performativity has allowed for us to build our own online identities, our own form of virtual self expression. In the past building a personal identity was a very private matter that existed much within the private sphere. A person would need to express their likes and personal concerns to those closest around them so as to not to come into too much conflict with society. Only at certain moments when it was of such importance to contradict society were people validated in doing so. Otherwise, a person who stood out individually, within the public sphere that is, was often looked down upon and ostracized.

However, with the growth and pervasion of social networking sites into our lives this has changed. With a large, and ever growing, number of people involved in social networking it becomes easier for people to express their individuality in a more public realm. Pembecioğlu writes,

Apart from individual cases, the crucial thing is that, almost everyone in the society is forced to be involved with such a process of ‘building identities’. The virtual world has many different levels and at each level the individual could build a different identity. Even if some of these identities were false, the point is that the same individual could have many different and contradictory reflections, and each one in the society as to experience such a process. This brings together the hybridization of a given society and all the societies. The hybridization gives way to include concepts and values once rejected and enlarges the ‘self’ as to cover the ‘other’ as well.²⁵

Through these virtual worlds and sites we are able to build an identity similar to or in extension of our offline one.

Above we looked at how personal identity is something that should be built. An individual should attempt to build an identity that they are happy with. As Dasein, we are finite and should strive to make choices with this knowledge in mind so that we can be authentic. To build a better identity we should attempt to do so authentically. If we do not

²⁵ Pembecioğlu, *Building Identities*, 56.

build an identity with our finitude in mind then we run the risk that the identity we are attempting to build will actually be formed by society and the other.

We looked at how MUDs acted as an early online performative social interaction. As online technology has grown with the birth of SNS we have shed the creative, yet more imagined, online personae for a representation of our offline personae. However, the interactions and performances remain the same. We give people insight into our daily lives in an almost story like fashion through the sharing of statuses and photos. We create an online narrative and performance with our real identities, albeit probably performed in an idealized manner that is influenced by our past and hopes for the future. It is this recognition that we are performing in a way that is influenced by our past decisions and with a drive towards our future goals that allows for us to even argue that we can strive for an authentic identity.

With current SNS we have created virtual representations of our offline selves as opposed to the characters created within a MUD. However, the virtual representation of our offline selves can still be seen as a character through which we are performing. On SNS we are able to control who can and cannot see what we post. Our status updates, photo uploads, and shared media function as performances in which we can control the audience that views them. We are able to build our identities how we see fit, but are also able to decide who is allowed to participate with us. In being able to choose who can participate with us, we are able to open ourselves up more to groups who are likely to share common interests with us. We then become more confident and affirmed in our interests while using SNS due to the fact that we begin to see others within SNS like them as well. We no longer feel alone but as part of a group with which we can share

more personal aspects of ourselves. This is viewed through groups and liking pages or posts.

Having examined SNS's ability to relate to us on a psychological level we can now look at how we are affected by publicly sharing online within the next section. Here we will examine how SNS take our data and sell it back to us in an effort to make money. By doing so we will see how our willingness to give data publicly within a SNS allows for us to be categorized by the SNS, and how this actually contributes to us learning more about ourselves.

CHAPTER V

DISCLOSURE AND COMMODIFICATION OF SELF

When it comes to social networking sites we must all create personal online profiles, digital representations of our offline selves. As we saw within the last section, sites like MUDs allow for us to create online personae that reflect certain aspects of our offline selves. These early forms of social networking allowed for people to learn new aspects of their personalities and grow psychologically from the comfort of their own home. Individuals were allowed to participate and grow from a safe and anonymous position. However, as social networking has evolved we have moved from an anonymous representation to a real world reflection of ourselves being created in an online space. This has lead to a more intimate feeling culture online, one in which we are able to like and share as we please.

On sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr we are able to like pages (including movies, music, games, shows, etc.), people, and groups that reflect our offline interests. We are able to interact and participate actively in larger amounts of communities than we did before. We are able to see who our friends like and what groups and online communities they participate within. This, in turn, will begin to effect how we participate within online culture in both positive and negative ways. This openness of our online identities, far greater than what was previously seen within MUD culture, has led to the privacy fears that we discussed earlier in the paper, as well as opens us up to be viewed as digital commodities. Through examining these privacy fears and the commodification of our personal data online, we will see how each of them contributes to the construction

of our personal identities in a way that allows for us, as users, to become more truthful with who we are publicly, i.e. moving the back stage to a controlled front stage.

SELF DISCLOSURE AND PRIVACY SETTINGS

Social networking sites have really begun to push our private lives into the public online world. We have seen how front and back stage relationships began to become more complicated with the use of MUDs, and they have only gotten more so with the use of our online personae. We are now motivated to share more and more about ourselves with our online communities than we ever did before in our offline communities. Sites like Facebook ask for our hometowns, educational history, work history, the movies we have seen, the books we have read, places we have traveled, political affiliations, religious beliefs, and so on. In creating an online identity that reflects our offline identity we are asked to disclose much more information to our communities. Information that may have been private before, such as religion or political affiliation, are now asked of us openly. We do not have to disclose any information that we wish to keep private but it is almost expected of us. When we do not provide Facebook with certain information, thereby leaving that area blank on our profile, the site constantly attempts to remind you that it has not been filled out. The site tells you that your page is not complete and attempts to get you to disclose more information. However, you can simply ignore the sites reminders if that information is something that you wish to keep private.

Other sites like Twitter simply ask for your name and town or city in which you reside, much less information than Facebook. However, when signing up to Twitter it asks you to begin following pages or accounts of people and products that you enjoy.

This is another form of self-disclosure that is important to sites like Facebook and Twitter, but we will touch on this more momentarily. This new form of self-disclosure is much more prominent than it was before online social networking. Walton and Rice write,

Self-disclosure, or the act of making new or secret information about yourself known to others, has been a focus of social science study since the 1960's. When Jouard (1971) introduced the concept of self-disclosure he loosely defined it as 'the act of making yourself manifest, showing yourself so others can perceive you'... In 1973, Cozby conceptualized self-disclosure as personal information verbally communicated to another person, including descriptive information... and evaluative information... that would not otherwise be easily known or discovered. By this standard, all communication includes some level of self-disclosure, be it between strangers or intimate friends.¹

When this idea is applied to social networking sites it is easy to see how self-disclosure plays a large part of the process and activity. As mentioned, a lot of information is already asked of us when we sign up to these sites and create our profiles. There is always the option to lie about the information that you provide, but that would appear to negate the point of signing up in the first place as most people sign up with the aims of connecting with current friends/family or reconnecting with old friends. Thus, lying on the profile would appear to be of no use to the user as they would be interacting with people who know them on varying private levels.

It is when we as users invite people with whom we have less of a personal relationship or no personal relationship at all that the self-disclosure we have provided could become a problem. Walton and Rice write,

Disclosure is both private and collective, with potential positive and negative consequences for self and others. Once disclosed, information becomes collectively owned and thus subject to multiple sources of coordination and

¹ S. Courtney Walton and Ronald E. Rice, "Mediated Disclosure on Twitter: The Roles of Gender and Identity in Boundary Impermeability, Valance, Disclosure, and Stage," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, (2013): 1465.

control. Typically people adjust the amount and content of self-disclosure according to whether they are frontstage (public self) or backstage (private self) context—that is, they attempt to manage *the permeability of their privacy boundaries*.²

The boundaries that exist between the front and back stages are what have allowed us to maintain the face-to-face relationships that we are accustomed to in the offline world. However, as online relationships and identities have started taking a more prominent role within our society then it is important to see that these boundaries are becoming blurred. This more open and accessible role of self-disclosure has both positive and negative aspects. It has led to the fears over public and private sharing that we discussed in the first chapter, specifically when it comes to children and teens, and it has allowed for users to construct better identities for themselves, as was the case with MUDS.

In a study that she conducted, Kerry Mallan attempts to analyze how the youth weigh the risks and benefits of online social networking. She wants to analyze how much the youth know about what they are doing and if they ever knowingly put themselves at risk, as well as how much their usage of SNS helps them to construct their identities.

Mallan writes that

In the popular imagination, young people's involvement in social networking sites (SNS) such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, and Friendster has come to be inextricably connected to an emotional state of threat, vulnerability, or loss. This perception is reinforced by media reports of sexual harassment, dangers of drugs and alcohol, terrorism, online predators, school yard bullying, disease, and so forth. The result is that many adults may come to see young people as being at risk, reduced to 'one who can be hurt'.³

So, while these threats are indeed real there is a certain mentality built around it in the fear that the children we know could become victims. This is not to say that everyone

² Ibid., 1466.

³Kerry Mallan, "Look at Me! Look at Me! Self Representation and Self-Exposure Through Online Networks," *Digital Culture & Education*, (2009): 51.

who worries about online interactions is ungrounded in their fears. The reasons we fear things like harassment, predators, bullying, etc. is because they do exist. So, these fears are not ungrounded. Granted, there is typically an assumption that children are more vulnerable than adults online because they are so young. However, children are smarter than many people give them credit for when it comes to SNS as they have grown up exposed to this online world.

The students in Mallan's study, all of them high school age, believed that they had complete control over their privacy settings and their posts. They argued that they could interact with anyone that they desired and ignore, unfriend, or block anyone who was acting creepy, annoying, or was just someone they no longer wanted to deal with. They claimed that they had heard all of the warnings before about SNS and chat rooms from parents, peers, and school assemblies.⁴ For these students, the dangers of participating in online communities were known and very real to them. These dangers had been told to them many times over from concerned adults. The students knew how the sites worked, how to manipulate the sites in a way that they felt comfortable, and they knew what information was appropriate or not to disclose.

In this way, self-disclosure has become sort of a balancing act. As users, we have to decide what is appropriate, inappropriate, safe, and unsafe to disclose. We are always walking that line between public and private. However, this balancing act that we are performing within online SNS is given a bit of relief due to the fact that we choose, for the most part, who is within our immediate online community. Granted, we cannot choose who participates within groups or pages that we have liked or followed online, but when it comes to interacting with our personal online profile we are able to decide who

⁴ Ibid., 60.

can participate. For a large number of SNS users the communities that we create are ones in which we have selected those around us allowing for the fear of who sees what we disclose to be less severe. Thanks to privacy settings and the ability to deny or block friend requests we can build our online world to a certain degree. Jodi Dean says,

Social networks like MySpace and Facebook deploy a similar fantasy—one can share one’s life with one’s friends without repercussion. On the one hand, because one has specifically friended those in one’s network, one can rest assured that one’s secrets are safe. *If you can’t trust your friends, who can you trust?* On the other, the drive to grow one’s network (*Look! I’m somebody! I’ve got thousands of friends—they like me; they really like me!*), to friend people with whom one works, people from different parts of one’s life, belies the illusion of control over one’s personal information.⁵

However, this does not mean that people outside of our circles can never see what we have posted online. If our privacy settings are set to default then, typically, the entire world is welcomed to view whatever information we have chosen to share.

Normally, if we have changed the privacy settings we tend to assume that we are safe and our information will stay exactly where we desire. This is not necessarily true either. There are logistical loop holes within the code that we do not often think about as users. These instances primarily revolve around a ‘friend’ or ‘follower’ having the ability to share something we post. For example, if a Facebook user has their profile set so that only their friends can see a post or picture then it is that only their ‘friends’ can see that post or picture. But if a ‘friend’ of the user decides to share this post or picture then anyone who is within the community that this ‘friend’ maintains will be allowed to view the post or picture. This means that if they have their privacy settings set so that their posts are open to everyone then whatever they share from the first user will be available

⁵ Jodi Dean. *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 65.

for all the world to see, and all the while Facebook will still have the original user listed as the source of the post or picture with a link back to their profile page.

This idea that we are required to disclose personal information on SNS can be a frightening one, and harkens back to the fears of my neighbors and mother back in chapter one. This requirement of disclosure is frightening to those who are new to the SNS, and they possibly do not know how to use the site properly. However, most of the information that we are required to disclose is information that is typically found within the public realm before getting onto SNS. It is the information that we would be afraid to share in a face-to-face interaction, but are able to share in an online setting that is more tricky and dangerous to our public image.

These private bits of backstage information that we feel comfortable to share online are allowed to make the transition over the boundary and into the front stage. It is the now openly public sharing of our likes/hobbies, ideas, and views that could either potentially create conflict for us and our identity formation or could help create our identity form in ways we never experienced before.

This is the kind of information that we choose to disclose to individuals that we feel comfortable with, and is where the privacy settings of SNS come in handy. Some people are still weary in their online disclosure and would rather share it with a selected circle of 'friends' online rather than give everyone immediate access, and it is within this aspect of self-disclosure that there is the idea that these sites will mess up from time to time and our information will be shared in ways that we did not intend. The failure of privacy settings could allow for potential or current employers to see comments that could be considered offensive or abrasive to the image of the business. Friends in one of

your circles on Facebook could be exposed to posts from another of your circles and this could lead to a stressful and potentially unfriendly argument.

All of these aspects of self-disclosure are potentially risky, but they all contain some sort of benefit. The question the user has to ask themselves is whether the potential risk of an audience that was not our choosing being shared our disclosures, possibly leading to stress and conflict amongst peers or the work place, is worth the benefit of online communities, potential online to future offline intimacy and friendships, reinforcing and rekindling of former relationships (platonic or not), and potential help in identity formation.

ONLINE COMMODIFICATION OF SELF

The truth is that social networking sites want us to share as much as possible with them and with our communities. The more we share the happier they are as a company which is something that, as it appears to me, a lot of users forget. In an article by Ippolita and Mancinelli, they argue that the freedom we have in online SNS is not really all that free. Instead it is a false freedom that is controlled by the companies owning the sites in an attempt to monitor our sharing and gather data on our likes and dislikes. They write,

The business model of Google, Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter consists of exploiting users' personal data for profit. Private lives become commodities, and personal identities are put into circulation on global markets. The data gathered from concrete bodies—people's lives, movements, relationships, and interactions—can be fed to the market.⁶

⁶ Ippolita and Tiziana Mancinelli. "The Facebook Aquarium: Freedom in a Profile," in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives*, ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 160.

This is why there are so many opportunities to share. From linked tabs on web pages to like, share, retweet, and reblog buttons on the actual SNS sites themselves we can see that sharing is key to their making a profit.

In her article about sharing rhetoric Jenny Kennedy describes how social networking sites create this image and rhetoric that sharing is important for building communities and building personal identity. However, she argues that this is simply an image that the companies who own the sites have created. She writes,

Social media platforms explicitly and strategically position sharing within a culture of participation, they position themselves as enabling this sharing for the purpose of community development, engagement, and creativity.⁷

This, she argues, is all for the purpose of data collection. The purpose of which is to collect the data so that they can get companies to advertise and buy ad space on their pages aimed directly at the user's personal likes and interests.

By aiming at the user's likes and interests the SNS are able to build a profile on each user that contains up to the moment information on what that user is interested in. All of the movies, celebrities, videogames, television shows, etc. that a user follows, talks about in a status, posts pictures of, or gives a "like" to are all recorded by the SNS. Ludovico and Cirio write,

So an intimate involvement and (endless) questioning of our online identity (often literally juxtaposing with our physical one) is perpetrated in the social networking game. But social network platforms are not public organizations designed to help support social problems but private corporations. Their mission is not to help people create better social relationships or to help them improve their self-positioning. Their mission is to make money.⁸

⁷ Jenny Kennedy, "Rhetorics of Sharing," in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives*, ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 132.

⁸ Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio, "Face-to-Facebook. Smiling in the Eternal Party," in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives*, ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013. 254-58), 255.

The best way for them to make money is for them to create an atmosphere that facilitates large amounts of sharing so that this data can be used to sell ad space. Other companies will gladly spend the money on advertising space if they believe that you are a user who is willing to possibly buy their product, and their evidence that you like their product is supported by the data collected from the SNS.

For example, on my Facebook page I have “liked” pages involving multiple videogame series, such as Final Fantasy or The Legend of Zelda, and television shows like Adventure Time. I have posted statuses about these things, and I have liked posts from other people about these topics. Facebook gathered data from these actions that indicated to them that I would probably be willing to buy something Final Fantasy, Legend of Zelda, or Adventure Time related. Eventually, I began getting ads on the right side of my Facebook timeline, just below “Suggested Pages” and “People You May Know” section. These ads included shirts from sites like teefury.com which contained mash ups of at least two of my likes. On one occasion they advertised to me a shirt that was a mash up of Final Fantasy and Adventure Time, and on another it was a mash up of The Legend of Zelda and Adventure Time. I do have to admit that these shirts grabbed my interest, and I was more than a little tempted to buy them. The data collection and advertising that Facebook had done with teefury.com had been extremely effective, and it almost caused me to buy something from one of Facebook’s sponsors.

Facebook, and other SNS, are extremely effective in fashioning an ad profile specifically for each user. The reason for this is that most SNS only allow for positive and affirmative interactions between users. There are ‘like’ and ‘favorite’ buttons for

posts, but there are no 'dislike' buttons readily available on most of the sites. Mercedes Bunz writes,

I like. You like. He likes. She likes. We like, and we like a lot. Three billion two hundred million of mostly likes but also comments have been generated by users daily in the first quarter of 2012 according to Facebook. The counterpart of an 'I dislike' or Hate button is neither existing nor is it planned. An efficient trick: Facebook barely needs to discipline its users, instead it rather designs their actions, and these are positive. It is not that there can't be a disagreement on Facebook. It is only that its utterance is made more elaborate as it needs to be declared in the comments.⁹

The omission of a 'dislike' button allows for Facebook to only collect data on what its users enjoy. As Bunz said, the only real place for any disagreement to occur is within the comments. This makes the process of disagreeing with someone online a much more personal and active process. When a user goes to 'like' or 'favorite' something it is active but almost to a passive level. The user while scrolling through their feed sees something that makes them laugh and so they click the 'like' button before continuing on down their feed. The act of 'liking' something is almost reflexive in some cases. A comment, on the other hand, requires that the user think and type up their comment before clicking the button to submit it. In this way, commenting to show your dislike is a far more active process. Rather, users will simply skip over or ignore something that they don't like on SNS. If they simply ignore what they do not like then it will go away as they continue scrolling or as new posts make their way to the top of the feed.

SNS are designed to promote sharing, and by creating a space in which affirmation is easy and an almost passive participation for the user then that becomes the preferred method of interaction. This means that the amount of negative discourse that

⁹ Mercedes Bunz, "As You Like It: Critique in the Era of an Affirmative Discourse," in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives*, ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 138.

one is likely to find on their posts is very low and quite rare. This allows for a user to receive mainly positive feedback on the things that they share with their online communities, and this can have a very positive effect for online identity construction.

This affirmative marketing strategy appears to be a generally positive and reciprocal relationship between users and SNS. While the corporations look at the users as data to be collected and sold, in a way that is very similar to Heidegger's enframing with technology, we use the sites to build our own personal communities, rekindle and build relationships and personal bonds, and form/express our personal identity. To use SNS for free in these aspects are the exact reasons that many of us signed up in the first place, and it was offered to us seemingly for free.

This is another instance in which users must weigh the risks and benefits of the situation. For many of us, the benefit of building these kinds of communities far outweigh the risks of our hobbies and interests winding up in the hands of merchandisers. Granted, there are instances that we will not get into here in which this data, as argued by Jenny Kennedy, could wind up in the hands of the state or state controlled enforcement groups, as seen in moments like Arab Spring. However, this again boils down to a benefit and risk calculation that the user must figure out themselves.

In hoping to answer our question as to whether or not building and utilizing an online identity can help us become more authentic I suggest looking at this quote from Ludovico and Cirio. They write,

The answer to the fundamental identity question, 'who am I?', can be given only in relation to the others that we interact with (friends, family, work colleagues, and so on.) And the answer to this question seems clearer after we take a look at our list of social network friends.¹⁰

¹⁰ Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio, *Face-to-Facebook*, 255.

Looking at and through our communities allows us a special kind of insight into who we are. The old idea that we are defined by the company we keep is still true on social networking sites. By looking at those around us and our interactions with them we are better able to see who we are, and in a space that is so centered around sharing the information that we are willing or ashamed to share reveals to us aspects of our true self.

We have seen how by using SNS we become a part of online enframing and standing-reserve to the companies that control the sites. We have demonstrated how in their efforts to make us a commodity they have actually given us a new tool through which to perceive and judge ourselves. We are more willing to admit publicly what we enjoy in private due to this commodification. It appears to us as though what we enjoy is popular as well as these sites notify us of friends who also enjoy these things too. This allows for us to become more open and truthful about what we enjoy, and could possibly translate to making us more truthful offline, which could then lead to us making more authentic choices. We will examine this in the next section where we will see how we use our online profiles, even those given to us by SNS in their efforts to commodify our data, to identify, categorize, and define ourselves into popular subcultures and roles; thereby allowing for us to become more truthful and possibly authentic beings.

CHAPTER VI

NORMALIZED ONLINE CULTURE AND AUTHENTICITY OF SELF

We have examined how our offline lives has been affected and influenced through the use of social networking sites. The massive appeal of online SNS is that we are given the opportunity to create our own identities for the betterment of our own being. Using social networking sites allows for us to construct our own personal identities rather than have them formed for us by the “they.” We have more say in who we are because we are allowed to share what we want and interact with who we want. As users, we are able to participate in any online culture that we have access to through either payment of a monthly subscription fee or payment of our personal data. In the latter aspect mentioned, we can see how Heidegger’s fear of enframing has affected us as we are viewed as human resources that are used and marketed to other corporations to make a profit. These fears are not ungrounded. Books like *Feed* by M.T. Anderson express these fears immensely well by showing how users of online social networking sites can become lost and distracted by the ever connected online world. Users can become obsessed with the constant now, as discussed earlier as well as in the book, and users can become bombarded with advertisements. However, there is a typically unspoken of benefit to this data collection in that when they attempt to sell us products they are revealing to us, rather unintentionally, aspects of ourselves that we may or may not have known about.

We are shown likes and interests that we enjoy and could possibly enjoy in their attempts to sell us products. This is done through their successful efforts to sell, or at least raise interest in the product, with other people who also participating within that

community. These communities are typically made up of like minded individuals who participate with each other to share publicly their interest in an item or person from popular culture. These communities help greatly when it comes to the ability to construct identities as it allows for the creation of roles that we use to define ourselves. This ability to begin identifying ourselves as a certain kind of societal role or archetype allows us to further express and reveal ourselves through the implementations of participation and tags. However, the ways in which we identify ourselves through tags or likes allows for us to build onto our identities in a way that can lead us to being more authentic in the offline world.

IDENTITY THROUGH TAGS AND SIGNATURES

As users of SNS who are attempting to construct an identity we are also attempting to reveal ourselves through online performances so that we might be seen and further revealed through our audience. This requires that we attempt to fight for recognition. In her article about the use of tags to create online signatures Gina Schlesselman-Tarango argues that our fighting for recognition allows us to define new roles for ourselves. She writes,

Social network users, through the creation of identity-based tags-or what can be understood as ‘searchable signatures’-are able to assert and perform online selves and are thus able to demand, or struggle for, recognition within a larger social framework.¹

The desire to create an online identity leads us to perform online as well. We will like and share certain things to allow for us to maintain a certain image. We want to appear a certain way to everyone who views it. This is one of the byproducts of identity

¹ Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, “Searchable Signatures: Context and the Struggle for Recognition,” *Information Technologies and Libraries*, September 2013, 5.

construction; our attempt to create a certain performance so that we might project a specific image and thus be seen as having a certain role for our identity.

These performances and the desire to portray certain roles are the same as when Goffman defined them for his frontstage and backstage. Our audience will view our online performances and attribute them to the identity that we are constructing. We are defined through our social interactions with people. This is seen in Goffman's philosophy as the audience are interpreters of our performances, as well as in Heidegger's philosophy when he talks about the "they." He argues that no matter how hard we attempt to break away from the "they" we will always be defined through it because without the "they" there would be no one for use to perform or interact with. We need the "they" to define us. Schlesselman-Tarango writes,

In an account of the online self, Hongladarom summarizes this position, noting that both offline and virtual identities are constructed in social environments. For Hongladarom, these identities are not different in essence because 'what it is to be a person...is constituted by external factors.' The online world as an external factor has the ability to affirm one's existence, regardless of whether that existence is physical or virtual. In sum, it is the social other and not a material existence that is the authenticating factor in identity formation.²

How our audience sees us is extremely important. We accomplish this through posts, as mentioned earlier. However, there is also the ability to use tags that allows for more specific performances. Tags allow for us to define ourselves to the audience while also providing a picture or status that lends itself to the performance. We, essentially, tell our audience outright how to view our performance.

The use of tags allows for us to label ourselves, even if we are not in the picture. Writing things like *#nerd*, *#trekkie*, or *#proudaunt* allows for us to add a culturally predetermined definition upon our performance. For example, if I take a picture of myself

² Ibid., 6.

at the movie premier of the new Lord of the Rings movie and then tag it with *#nerd* and *#hobbitlover* then I have created a performance that attempts to tell the audience what to think. By posting the picture I am already performing my love for movies and Lord of the Rings. However, by adding those two tags I am also attempting to influence my audience into perceiving me as a nerd and a person who loves Lord of the Rings, or possibly just hobbits, more than the average viewer.

Schlesselman-Tarango describes a picture with multiple children that was posted to a user's Instagram profile. The user is nowhere in the picture, but the picture can still be seen as a performance of the user. While the user cannot be seen within the photo physically performing, the tags that are associated with the picture help to group the user with a predetermined social role and archetype. The user specifically tags herself as *#proudaunt*. This association influences how we will view the user. Schlesselman-Tarango writes,

This tag, then, functions to further identify the user who created or shared the photograph and does not describe the content of the image at hand. A search of the same tag, *#proudaunt*, demonstrates that this user is not alone in identifying as such; in November 2012, this search returned 40,202 images with the same tag and more than 58,000 images with tags derived from the same phrase... This type of user-generated tag—one that identifies the creator or sharer of the photograph yet is not necessarily meant to describe the content of the image—can be understood as a searchable signature.³

The use of tags to help influence the perception of my performance only works so well due to the fact that I am aligning myself with already defined roles within the culture. By tagging myself as *#nerd* I am claiming to be a part of this cultural community. I have created a signature and a role to further define myself and build an identity that is more attuned to the one I desire.

³ Ibid., 11.

NORMATIVE ONLINE CULTURE

Through creating these online signatures on sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram we have begun to label ourselves into cultural groups, and even more than that we have admitted that we identify ourselves with these groups in essentially public forums. Due to the relative public nature of SNS, most of what we identify ourselves with through these signatures are available for others to see. On the reverse side of this, this means that we are also able to see the roles that others have determined help to best define them and their identities. Schlesselman-Tarango writes,

...the user is able to perform his or her online identity to passerby and effectively struggle to be recognized as a unique individual or as a member of a social group. These performances, which could be deemed narcissistic in nature, can alternatively be read as healthy attempts to self-actualize and connect to larger society...In effect, searchable signatures allow users to be recognized as social addresses of like-minded others. Positioning oneself within a group must be understood as a struggle for recognition, for to imagine oneself as part of the social fabric is also to see oneself as valuable.⁴

The ability to view ourselves as a part of a community is extremely valuable to identity construction. As we have seen, viewing ourselves as part of a society or culture is necessary for identity construction. By using these signatures to link ourselves to certain cultural roles we open ourselves to begin interacting with individuals who enjoy and think similarly to us. This allows for us to become more comfortable with who we are as individuals as well as those around us. We do not have to shy away from admitting publicly to the things that we like around people who think differently because we know that we are not alone because of our online interactions. All of the identity construction in online settings as well as the use of online signatures allow for us to begin participating within online and offline cultures that we might not have found ourselves in before. We

⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

find ourselves within new social communities and we can begin to be less frightened in admitting the different aspects of popular culture that we enjoy within these social communities due to the realization that we are not alone in enjoying what we individually enjoy. Almost everyone who participates in SNS will participate, actively or passively, in online communities dedicated to the elements of popular culture that they enjoy.

Social networking sites have provided for a forum for people to share their opinions and even ask questions about this culture. Users who before might never have admitted to liking superheroes (for the sake of this example we'll use Batman), whether out of fear or just keeping the knowledge more private than public, are now willing to publish this information publicly.

Say that a user likes a page dedicated to the newest Batman movie. Their friends and followers, other users who like the page, or even users who just look at the page can see that this person likes that Batman movie. The statuses that they post about how much they enjoyed the movie or that they preferred the Michael Keaton incarnation better shows that they are involved within this Batman subculture of the community at least to a small degree. Participation within the online culture can vary from person to person. Some users will be very active in their participation. They will post photos and memes relating to not only the Batman movie but to the Batman comics. A user who simply likes a page or posts one thing about an item is participating in a more passive way than someone who is actively posting new statuses or photos connected to the online community.

So, it can be seen in the previous example that some participation appears to be more active despite is ability to truly be passive, i.e. simply liking a page or a single

status, but in appearing active it gives those who would actively participate in private the courage to actively participate in public. This means that even passive performances will give strength to those who truthfully and actively participate within those cultures. In this way, online communities have allowed for popular culture to become normalized. We are not as afraid as we once were to admit when we are a *#nerd*, *#prouduncle*, *#trekkie*, etc. because society has embraced a love for our ability to share and be open about our likes.

Since we have the ability to more openly and actively participate publicly in communities that we feel more comfortable in, we are given more opportunities to construct better identities for ourselves. We are able to admit more openly, both to ourselves and to each other, the activities and aspects of popular culture that we enjoy by doing so in a non-threatening forum. Since SNS audiences are typically handpicked by us, such as with Facebook's friending or using privacy controls to determine who follows us, we can create a public that is almost private for us to share with. After gaining confidence and establishing elements of an online identity using SNS we begin to branch out with how open we are online as well as offline.

As we saw with the MUD studies that Turkle performed, using these online SNS can have a positive psychological effect on us as users. The user becomes more comfortable with who they are in both the offline and online communities. A user is able to become emotionally connected with the communities that they become apart of, and as such they are able to use these communities to deal with psychological and emotional issues that are troubling them in the offline world. By being surrounded by a community of many like-minded individuals, or even just individuals that one feels close to, the user is able to reach out and communicate easier with those who might be willing or able to

help them through an issue. The desire to constantly share allows for many users to feel more comfortable with opening up to those within their communities and should hopefully allow for the users to discuss what they are going through with someone via private chat or direct messaging. Some users are so willing to share what they are going through that they are willing to post their problems in open status updates. While this might appear to some as over sharing of personal data or issues others will see it as a cry for help. Those who think the latter are likely to open lines of communication with the user who shared, especially if they have gone through a similar situation or feel close to the user because they have been entrusted with such personal information.

Through the ability to shape and form our online identity using performances of posts and tags, as well as through online community interaction with like-minded individuals, we are able to become more comfortable with who we are and the identity that we are building. Many users find themselves disclosing great deals of personal information with the online communities that they have formed on SNS. They share photos of activities and loved ones. They share life events such as graduations, weddings, engagements, etc. Many users end up becoming comfortable enough with their online community of friends and followers that the amount of information that they are allowed to share publicly with this private circle grows to the point of almost full disclosure. While these users might not post every little detail of their lives, they are willing to post a great deal of personal and nonpersonal information. This information acts as a performance of the identity that they user currently maintains and wishes to construct further through the eyes of their audience.

This constant and detailed exposure of information to an audience consisting of those we regularly interact with offline, as well as a great deal of those we do not, allows for us to see ourselves through the lens of another that is willing to judge and perceive us in many different lights. We are not simply being viewed by those who are closest to us in our private sphere or those who may happen to see us within our daily public sphere. We are now being viewed by new friends and old, acquaintances, family members, and work colleagues on a daily basis.

While we surround ourselves with communities that share similar interests we are also being viewed by those we have allowed within our publicly private SNS sphere. This allowance enables us to share private aspects of ourselves publicly with those we probably would not have shared them with before as we are attempting to define ourselves as such online. This should allow for us, as users of SNS, to become more truthful with who we are as individuals because we are more openly sharing, as well as admitting, what we like and what we want. We are not as likely to hide our interests in a culture where the normative expectation is that everyone can share what they enjoy because those who enjoy similar things will positively reinforce you with likes and comments; while those who do not enjoy these things simply do not comment on the matter but still use the information to perceive the identity of the other user.

AUTHENTICITY FURTHERED THROUGH ONLINE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

SNS are a window into our lives, using them opens up new ways for our lives to be exposed publicly. It allows for new front stage performances that we can alter at a moment's notice. We've seen how there are privacy advocates who argue that SNS

leaves our lives too open and exposed. They fear that our lives will be hindered or manipulated by this overly public relationship.

While there are some instances where SNS might harm us, i.e. an old photo or status popping up at an inopportune moment, this is nothing new. Nor is it new for companies to attempt to gather and sell our data. However, through careful maintenance of our SNS with privacy settings, and an awareness of the commodification of our data, we can construct better identities for ourselves. We are revealed aspects of ourselves through the company's attempts to sell us products, and because of this we are given the tools to see for ourselves what we enjoy through their lens.

This knowledge and the application of *#signatures* allows for us to define and place ourselves within popular subcultures. Some people might argue that joining these subcultures as a result of corporate suggestion might place us within the they. However, if we are attempting to build our identity then we would only join subcultures that we feel we are truthfully a part of due to our wants and likes rather than peer pressure.

Through the idea that we are able to use SNS to construct a more truthful identity for ourselves online we can begin to look at how online SNS might allow for us to become more authentic in the offline world. By becoming more truthful with who we are offline, we are better able to analyze what we want out of our lives. We are better able to judge and analyze what it is that *we* want as opposed to what the "they" wants. Heidegger believed that for us to make authentic choices then we had to do so by breaking away from the "they." While it is impossible to completely break away from the "they," as the "they" have shaped our thought processes since we were children, it is possible to use the "they" to assist in making our authentic choices.

By using SNS we are able to use the “they” as an audience through which to perceive us. This perception allows for us to personally better understand who we are as being an individual requires that there are others by which to judge yourself. The performances that we give to an online social “they” that we have personally constructed of those we are similarly and differently minded allows for us to expose ourselves in a forum where we will be judged from many different angles. The ability to expose ourselves in such a public yet private forum lends to us being able to know more truthfully who we are as individuals.

This more truthful knowledge of the identity that we have attempted to and continue to construct, and the joining of subcultures, allows for us to make authentic choices within our lives, provided that we remember that we are finite beings. For us to be authentic Heidegger argued that we must make choices that are authentic, and these authentic choices are only made when we make them from the knowledge that our time is finite. This allows for us to make choices that contribute to our overall goals for our finite existence.

It is possible that we could be seen as fallen beings with our use of SNS and fandom communities. The joining of these communities does pose a potential threat to authenticity. By becoming overly obsessed or distracted by online communities we could lose our chance to be authentic. However, this has always been true.

Individuals have always run the risk of becoming lost within cultural communities. The key is to not lose sight of one’s finite goals. As we saw with the MUDs, users can either grow or become hindered within these communities. To be a part of the former, and to be authentic offline, one has to maintain the pursuit of their finite

goals while using online communities to gain the confidence to truthfully pursue these goals.

By having an offline identity that is more truthful to who we are privately, we are less likely to shy away from what we really want due to the judgments of the “they” because a large part of our “they” is already familiar with our online identity. Those who are not familiar with our online identity may still judge us, but the support users receive from their online community can be enough to allow for them to continue performing in a way that is truthful to their being. Through our online interactions, we are allowed the opportunity to be more truthful with ourselves and those around us as to who we are and want to be. This allows for the choices that we make as Dasein to be better attuned to what we want in our finite existence as we are less likely to be held back by the “they” through our open and public disclosure of who we are privately.

Through using SNS we are better able to decide what it is that we want through our finitude and then we are able to actually go out and attain it because we are less likely to be afraid of how the other will react. In this way SNS has allowed for us to make more authentic choices because the ramifications of a “they” that will judge us negatively has either been removed or negated through the acceptance we find within online communities. This ability of SNS to allow for us to share who we are to the level that we can then do this comfortably in the offline world is one of online social networking site’s largest benefits.

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Memberships & Affiliations:

- Member of Old Dominion Philosophy Club
- Member of International Thespian Society

Published Works:

- Two Chapters Pending Publication in "Adventure Time and Philosophy" – The first chapter is about the ethical theories of Aquinas, Kant, and John Stuart Mill in connection with the doctrine of double effect. The second is about the possibility of multiple worlds and realities by looking at the philosophy of Leibniz.