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Social networking as the production and consumption of a self

Michael Fisher*, Richard Boland Jr., Kalle Lyytinen

Case Western Reserve University, United States

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ABSTRACT

The ubiquitous use of social networking sites (SNS) has resulted in the blurring of individual's private and professional social worlds. As the use of SNS in the workplace grows, it has been studied along a number of dimensions such as its impact on boundary spanning, the advancement of careers, and campaigning for projects. Earlier research on the personal use of SNS has explored user motivations and benefits of participating in SNS including social capital, status seeking, narcissism, self-esteem, and professional identity. However, these studies attempt to describe with static frameworks what we discover to be a dynamic, cyclical process of creation and consumption of self-identity. We conducted a qualitative research study using a grounded theory approach with semi-structured interviews of SNS users, discovering that the creation and consumption of user generated content (UGC) are symbolic interactions, which recursively produce and consume the users' self-identities on SNS. This cyclical framework for explaining the role of self-identity on SNS is a novel finding with broad implications for understanding the use of SNS, especially in the workplace.

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Social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn, provide a platform for exchanging User Generated Content (UGC) that helps users expand, intensify, and deploy their social networks (Liccardi et al., 2007). Over the last decade, the use of such platforms has grown at an exponential rate: Facebook, launched in 2004, had over 1.59 billion monthly active users by the end of 2015¹; every day, Facebook users uploaded over 300 million photos and shared 1 billion pieces of content.² As a consequence, social networking has become omnipresent (Agarwal, Gupta, & Kraut, 2008) and deeply influences how we work, play, share information, socialize, and entertain ourselves (Breslin & Decker, 2007).

Although previous studies have shown that up to 25% of businesses blocked employee access to social networking websites (Brodkin, 2008), recent studies suggest that access to SNS may increase employee productivity. Because the growing use of SNS tends to blur ones personal and professional boundaries (Coker, 2011), SNS increasingly offers an integral way for organizational actors to stay in contact, maintain awareness of colleagues and build relationships (DiMico et al., 2008; Wang & Kobsa, 2009). Indeed, people's online reputation, referred to as "the information available increasingly in public or semi-public online digital formats" is being scrutinized by potential employers (Kotamraju, Allouch, & van Wingerden, n.d.). Indeed, within some 'professional' SNS - such as LinkedIn - creating these comprehensive digital profiles has become effortless and forms a key aspect of a person's online reputation (Yang, 2015), which enables others to make judgments and develop expectations about them (Farmer & Glass, 2010). In sales and marketing, LinkedIn is often used to initiate customer contact, to recruit new employees,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mtf2@case.edu (M. Fisher).

¹ According to <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

² According to <http://zephoria.com/social-media/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/>

to participate in professional groups, to stay in touch with past colleagues, and to follow technical news (Zhang, De Choudhury, & Grudin, 2014).

The use of social media takes place simultaneously across both private and public domains, thus blending an individual's private and professional worlds. Yet, so far, the use of social media in the workplace has been mostly studied along specific, isolated organizational dimensions including the impact of SNS use on boundary spanning and social capital (Chang, 2015), on careers and project campaigning (DiMicco et al., 2008), on knowledge transparency and the rate of innovation (Leonardi, 2015), and on the creation of online personas (Fieseler, Meckel, & Ranzini, 2015). SNS use has also been shown to allow employees to better understand other workers (DiMicco, Geyer, Millen, Dugan, & Brownholtz, 2009) and to make it possible to feel increased personal closeness among employees (Wu, DiMicco, & Millen, 2010). All these findings suggest that the border between personal and professional uses of SNS is low and will result in increasingly complex use patterns and related social processes that will influence both a person's professional and private lives (Skeels & Grudin, 2009).

In this study we seek to expand our understanding of the dynamic process of creating and consuming UGC. Our work builds upon earlier research that has explored motivations and benefits of using SNS, including social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), status seeking (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007), narcissism (Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013), self-esteem (Nie & Sundar, 2013) and professional identity (Gilpin, 2011). However, these studies use unidirectional models to describe what we discover to be a dynamic, cyclical process. Several studies have observed the close connection of SNS use to user's (self)-identity (e.g. Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2007; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), and have focused on the impacts of SNS use on one's self-identity. For example, Walther et al. (2008) – in line with Goffman's (1959) argument that all social interactions are fundamentally about the presentation of the self – showed that the content of a user's friends' profiles on Facebook affect how others perceive that user. Others have found that the practices of identity construction differ significantly between transparent and anonymous SNSs (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). These studies are insightful, but they assume that self-identity is already established and they describe how it is affected by some exogenous factor, i.e. anonymity, friends' profiles, social capital, etc. These studies do not explain the dynamic, cyclical process of ongoing user interaction, through which identities are created and consumed that our study has revealed.

We conducted a qualitative study of SNS users recording interviews with them about their experience of using their SNS site, and also recording them as they spoke out loud while they engaged in a typical SNS session with the aim of generating theory (Suddaby, 2006). We expected that such an exploratory, qualitative approach would help surface narratives of user experience that would enable us to formulate plausible theories of the meanings users attach to their engagement with an SNS (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As described by Strauss and Corbin (1990:12), the grounded theory approach "...allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture." Suddaby (2006:634) stipulates that a grounded theory approach is more appropriate to use "when you want to make knowledge claims about how individuals interpret reality" and thus our interest in individuals' interpretation of SNS was ideally suited for this approach.

We interviewed 29 users about their use experience on an SNS site – either Facebook or Friendster. We chose these two sites, because they displayed dramatically disparate growth dynamics. We conjectured that user experiences would be different and accordingly, the meanings they attached to their SNS use would be different, which would provide an opportunity to understand and compare differences in meanings associated with different types of SNS. Our coding and analysis of the transcripts from those interviews and verbal protocols revealed the dynamic and cyclical pattern we report below. Each post (creation of UGC) is a small exhibit of the poster's self-identity. Each view (consumption of UGC) is an acknowledgement or consumption of a user's self-identity. Each 'like' or comment (creation of UGC) is another small exhibit of a user's self-identity, i.e. are you the type of person who likes articles or status updates such as this? This very dynamic and cyclical process has yet to be described with anything more than unidirectional models that trace the effects of SNS use on isolated variables. We discovered no significant differences in the experience of creating and consuming UGC on the Facebook and Friendster sites. Instead, we observed that using either site is a vivid symbolic interaction involving constant production and consumption of one's self-identity. This is a novel finding with broad implications for understanding the use of SNS, especially in the workplace.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we begin with a brief overview of the concept of self and identity. We continue by reporting the methods used to sample subjects, conduct interviews, and analyze data. In the findings section, we report how our analysis and interpretation revealed the cyclical nature of creating and consuming self-identity through the creation and consumption of UGC. We conclude by discussing implications and identifying opportunities for future research.

1. Prior research

1.1. Self-identity

Ashmore and Jussim (1997) suggest that self-identity theory owes its origin to William James' (1890) classic treatise 'The Principles of Psychology' and his student Calkins' (1900) paper "Psychology as science of selves" which identified the consciousness of self. James (1890) conceived of the "empirical self" as consisting of material, social, and spiritual aspects. The multiplicity of the social self is reflected in his oft-cited statement that an individual "has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him" (James, 1890:294).

In psychology, Erikson (1950) proposed an ego-identity developed in adolescence, which Gleason (1983) argues was the groundwork for psychologists to view identity as internal to the person and persisting through time, whereas sociological

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