The impact of self-selected identity on productive or perverse social capital in social network sites

Rozan O. Maghrabi, Richelle L. Oakley *, Hamid R. Nemati

Department of Information Systems and Supply Chain Management, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, USA

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A B S T R A C T

Social network sites can provide a person with the freedom to represent themselves in various ways, thus exhibiting multiple variations of their identity. Research states that an individual's identity is self-monitored depending on the contextual situation that they are in. The type of social capital that one derives from social network sites can be impacted by this self-monitoring ability. Current research has addressed how productive social capital can be gained in social network sites. However, limited research has addressed the issue of perverse social capital, especially in social network sites. We argue that social network sites are a particularly unique environment that can affect an individual's representation of their identity, thus increasing the likelihood of producing perverse social capital. We examine how technology affects an individual's selected self-identity, as measured through their self-monitoring ability, and how this altered behavior leads to productive or perverse social capital in social network sites.

1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNS) provide individuals with the freedom to represent themselves in various ways through highlighting or minimizing aspects of their identity (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Utz, 2010). In online environments, individuals exert greater control in the way their identities are represented as SNS "allow individuals to manage their online interactions more strategically" (Ellison et al., 2006). SNS such as Facebook and MySpace allow an individual to represent themselves, maintain connections with their family and friends, and create new connections with other individuals. An individual may use the SNS either to interact with people they already know offline or to meet new people. Moreover, these sites enable an individual to create a profile where they can freely craft their identity in any way that they prefer. This ability to manipulate a profile within SNS can lead to an individual exhibiting multiple variations of their identity. More recently, this ability has become engrained in many SNS where functionality has been introduced to send messages to specific communities within one's network (CITE). This self-monitored behavior affects one's relationships (Ellison et al., 2006) and can influence the benefits reaped from these relationships (Lin, 2002; Portes, 1998).

Self-monitoring activities are dependent upon the contextual situation that the individual is operating within. The contexts of SNS can vary from work-related sites (e.g., LinkedIn.com), to dating sites (e.g. Match.com), or to connecting with those with shared interests such as music or politics (e.g., MySpace.com). A single individual may use each of these sites to portray a particular identity and interact with others within the contextual boundaries of the site. For example, an individual may use LinkedIn to connect with others interested in similar business pursuits and therefore, in their profile, they only highlight professional and academic achievements. However, that same individual may use Facebook to connect with close friends and family and express personal, political, and religious beliefs that they would not necessarily share with those they connect with on LinkedIn.

The ultimate goal of forming these connections within SNS is that individuals can gain benefits as a result of their relationships with others (Lin, 2002; Portes, 1998). Connections that provide benefits to an individual, such as support, information, and ideas, are embedded in the social relationships within a network. Through strong and weak ties, the access to these benefits can be viewed as a social resource that is gained from being connected within the network (Johnson & Ross, 2009). Within SNS, a person has to form relationships with others, whether a strong bond or a weak connection, in order to enjoy the benefits of SNS. In other words, only through *social interactions* with others can one realize the benefits of social capital (Lin, 2002; Portes, 1998) within SNS. Individuals may alter their identities in order to maximize these benefits, yet there may also be consequences to this self-monitoring process.

Research has identified that there can be two forms of social capital produced within a social network: productive or perverse social capital (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Portes, 1998; Portes &

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: romaghra@uncg.edu (R.O. Maghrabi), rloakle3@uncg.edu (R.L. Oakley), hrnemati@uncg.edu (H.R. Nemati).

Landolt, 1996). While productive social capital is a useful resource that allows an individual to achieve various benefits, such as receiving favors or information diffusion, perverse social capital can have negative consequences (Portes & Landolt, 1996), such as constraining an individual's actions or choices (Claridge, 2004). To ascertain whether or not the social capital is productive or perverse, an examination is needed on the types of relationships within the social system. The relationships can be strong ties, which are bonding relationships, or weak ties, which are bridging relationships (Granovetter, 1973). The balance between these types of relationships within a SNS leads an individual to achieve either productive or perverse social capital.

Numerous studies have addressed the positive results of social capital within SNS such as strengthened community, increased sense of connectedness, and psychological well-being (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). However, research has yet to address the possibility of and the occurrence of the negative consequences that can result from identity variation within SNSs. More specifically, research has not examined the impact of an individual's self-monitoring abilities on the kinds of social capital that can be derived from a SNS. As individuals engage in self-monitoring of their SNS profile, there can be an unintended impact on the derived social capital from the SNS. It is essential to understand the "causal relationships that determine the realization of productive, or perverse, social capital" (Claridge, 2004). Prior research has been predicated upon the notion that individuals are using SNS to generate more relationships that can benefit the SNS user. However, there are consequences attached to the inherent ability to create alternative versions of oneself within SNS. We argue that SNS are a particularly unique environment that can affect an individual's representation of their identity. More specifically, we examine how technology affects an individual's selected self-identity, conceptually analyzed through their self-monitoring ability, and how this altered behavior leads to productive or perverse social capital in SNS.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the appropriateness of using self-monitoring abilities as a way to assess how individuals vary their self-representation by providing a focused literature review of applicable research on self-monitoring behaviors. Second, we define how social capital is generated within SNS then integrate and build upon extant literature on social capital in order to develop a conceptual understanding that addresses the aforementioned gap in research. Lastly, we examine how self-selected identity impacts the social capital available within SNS and discuss future research areas on the impact on self-selected identity on the types of social capital within SNS.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online self-selected identity

Research has highlighted the role of individual identities in social capital and behavior (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison et al., 2007; Kramer, 2006). An individual's identity allows one to understand how they would behave in a social setting and how they are connected to others (Kramer, 2006). Understanding how an individual identity representation is constructed is a complicated concept due to an individual's ability to possess multiple, co-occurring identities (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). These varied identities, which are strongly influenced by a variety of situational or contextual factors, can have an impact on the relationships that the individual has with others (Kramer, 2006). Consequently, the resources that an individual can access from these relationships are affected by these different self-representations. A person who wants to create new connections can manipulate their self-representation and

strategically emphasize some characteristics while deemphasizing others (Goffman, 1959). For example, a person entering a sports bar may represent themselves as being a fan of sports by discussing their former athletic endeavors, while not mentioning their love of classical music and opera – all in an attempt to 'fit in' with the present crowd. Research has highlighted similar types of self-monitoring capabilities in online environments. For example, people tend to portray an idealized version of themselves on dating websites by describing their weight as significantly less than the true amount (Ellison et al., 2006). To be clear, the purpose of this self-monitoring is not to deceive or trick the person reviewing the profile, but to portray oneself in a way that can maximize the benefits that can be gained from the relationship.

This form of self-representation management, or self-monitoring, "reflects the degree to which a person observes and controls their expressive behavior and self-presentation in accord with social cues" (O'Cass, 2000). SNS enhance an individual's self-monitoring abilities which allow the individual to connect with others in ways they may not have been able to otherwise (Ellison et al., 2007). Individuals shape their identity through their online profile and have control over how they represent themselves. This enhanced control over their self-representation allows individuals to manage their online connections more strategically. Utz (2010) stated that the opportunity that individuals have in how they can represent themselves in SNSs can impact their relationships. Depending on the strength of these relationships, individuals may be able to access various resources, or unintentionally limit these resources, due to the variation in their self-representation.

2.2. Social capital within social network sites

Social capital can be broadly defined as resources that are acquired through relationships, with varying degrees of strength, in a social network (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1988). An individual will access these resources through internal and direct relationships (strong ties) or external and indirect relationships (weak ties) within the social network (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2001). For example, research on social capital has found that ties with family and friends provide an individual with emotional support and is related to an increase in the individual's well-being (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). This dimension of social capital has been described by Putnam (2001) as *bonding*. Bonding is found in close emotional relationships and is shared between individuals with common socioeconomic characteristics (Putnam, 2001). Alternately, creating new relationships provides a source of non-redundant information and is described by Putnam (2001) as *bridging*. Bridging reflects dense social networks with numerous weak ties and is often associated with individuals who have similar interests or goals but different social backgrounds (Putnam, 2001). This concept of bonding and bridging is in line with the network view of social capital as described by Woolcock and Narayan (2000).

Research in SNSs has suggested that individuals use social networks sites to maintain pre-existing relationships or create new connections (Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007). For example, SNS can facilitate an individual's ability to maintain connections with their friends and families, make new friends, and create business connections. However, many individuals have connections in one SNS that span a varied number of social networks that an individual has accumulated over a lifetime. For example, many Facebook users have connections from their elementary, intermediate, high school, and collegiate years, family members, work associates, etc. Individuals that vary their identity in this type of online environment are impacting the relationships that they have with each of those individuals within the SNS. For