Social networking as the production and consumption of a self

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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 2015[1]; 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 (DiMicco 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,

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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

traditions conceived of identity as social and variable. Gleason suggests the sociological path to current day concepts of identity started with symbolic interactionism originated by Cooley's (1902) *Human Nature and the Social Order* and later Mead's (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society*, both of which emphasized the central role of social interaction in the development of a self-concept.

Mead, in particular, theorized the social nature of self-concept by introducing a distinction between the "I" and the "Me" and their role in developing personal selfhood (Kolb, 1943). The "I" aspect of the self is a person's concern with trying to know themselves by observing their own behaviors as actions and being shaped by the feedback of that self-observation. On the other hand, the "Me" aspect of one's self, is shaped by what is learned through interactions with others and the environment (Mead, 1934).

Building upon Mead's work, Foote (1951) proposed role identification as the mechanism and motivation by which individuals gain a socially prescribed role, which was the ground work for role-identity models such as Gecas' (1982) structure and process streams, Scheibe's (1985) social roles, as well as McCall and Simmons (1978) and Stryker's (1980, 1987) development of the multiple-role frameworks of identity.

This sense of the multiplicity and multidimensionality of the self-concept or self-identity has led to the supposition that individuals are aware of their accessible or on-line self-concept (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Rhodewalt, 1986). The multitudes of selves that represent one's self-identity are not all available at the same time but rather are best understood as a shifting array of accessible selves (Aral & Walker, 2010). Two different, yet strongly related, branches of identity theory have developed (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The first is reflected in the work of Burke and colleagues (Burke & Stets, 1999; Stets & Burke, 2003), which focuses on the internal process of self-verification; the second is reflected in the work of Stryker (1980, 1987), which focuses on the linkages between social structures and identities.

To clarify the key terms of self and identity, we draw on Owens (2006: 206) who defines the self as "…an organized and interactive system of thoughts, feelings, identities, and motives that: (1) is born of self-reflexivity and language, (2) people attribute to themselves, and (3) characterize specific human beings." Identity, in turn, is a subset of the concept of self, based on one's relationships with others. Owens (2006: 207) draws on Michener and DeLamater (1999) in defining identity as "…categories people use to specify who they are and to locate themselves relative to other people."

Prus (1997), viewing community life as a mosaic that is continuously in the making, theorizes that the achievement of intersubjectivity is the primary enabling feature of human communities. As Blumer (1969) stresses, the self is an emergent, dynamic process that must be understood within a community, interacting with others, because a self only achieves its central existence in situated activity. Prus (1997) contrasts people's concerns, images, and actions as they apply to their physiological and their imagined selves, to the experience of other selves (such as the integrated, isolated, helping, being helped, entertaining, being entertained, influential, receptive, vulnerable, and resilient selves), which also have physical embodiment, but reveal other aspects of the human condition. In this way, Prus' (1997) theory of 'self', recognizes that there are a multitude of possible selves, without limiting the possibilities to predefined set.

The ability of SNS to enable the construction of multiple selves (albeit virtual) as part of one's emergent self-identity supports the value of a further investigation of how the construction of self-identity relates to the creation of UGC.

1.2. Self-identity on SNS

Turkle (1995) was the first to tie the concept of self-identity to the virtual world, demonstrating the ways in which online life affords us new opportunities to explore identity through mechanisms such as creating an avatar in a game or a virtual world. However, constructing a personal identity is much more complex than elaborating a series of online profiles. Rather it is a context-mediated activity in which social network users co-create the "context of communication" in which their narrative identities will be interpreted and understood (Durante, 2011).

Researchers have shown that on an SNS, individuals are able to construct their preferred online representation of their self-identity with more control (Davis, 2010), supporting the finding that personalities are related to online activities, particularly profile management and self-promotional behavior (Zhang & Leung, 2014). Researchers such as Ellison and Boyd support the claim that the creation of identity takes place on SNS (Boyd, 2010) as well as the idea that it involves the act of digital voyeurism (Boyd, 2011). Nie and Sundar (2013) found that the amount of information in users' Facebook profiles was positively related to the extent to which they felt their profile reflected their self-identity.

On SNS, people have to manage various ways of presenting themselves and their control is contested by others (Shirky, 2008). Thus, the reflexive acts of self-identity production can entail such things as replacing old pictures on social networking sites with 'more suitable' ones (Harper, Whitworth, & Page, 2012). Researchers have investigated the differences and interactions among self-generated, others-generated, and system-generated information and the implications this has on self-identity (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Utz, 2010). While the role of SNS in displaying one's self-identity and viewing other's self-identity is generally seen as positive, users are well aware that online self-presentations are misleading among both friends and acquaintances (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011). People tend to portray an idealized version of themselves on dating websites by describing their weight as significantly less than the true amount (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006a). This form of self-representation management "reflects the degree to which a person observes and controls their expressive behavior and self-presentation in accord with social cues" (O'Cass, 2000:398). Individuals shape their identity through their online profile, which gives them flexible control over how they represent themselves. This enhanced control over their self-representation allows individuals to manage their online connections more strategically (Maghrabi, Oakley, & Nemati, 2014).

Ellison and Boyd (2013) have also proposed that SNS profiles have changed over time, evolving from static portraits created by the profile owner to a more fluid collection of content co-created by profile owners, their Friends, and their actions. However, these are still described with static frameworks such as the accumulation of social capital (Ellison & Vitak, 2015).

2. Research methodology

We sampled user experiences of two SNS sites - Facebook and Friendster. One (Facebook) has had spectacular, viral growth while the other (Friendster) had some initial success and then faltered. Our thought was that users would reveal a difference in USG creation and consumption on the two sites. However, such differences were not observed, which suggested that the findings may hold across a range of sites and might apply to SNS in general, although that will require the study of further samples with a wider range of SNS types. In this paper, we report our analysis of the data on user experience and meaning making on the two sites together.

2.1. Friendster

Friendster, founded in 2002 (Schiffman, 2008), was developed as a safer, more effective way to meet new people by browsing user profiles and connecting to friends and friends of friends (Rivlin, 2006).[3] It aimed to help users rapidly expand their social networks. Friendster.com went live in March 2003 and was adopted by three million users within the first months (Piskorski & Hall, 2007). Friendster followed two strategies for service growth: enrolling new users through invitations and using a product feature that calculated four degrees of connection for every new user and reported those users to each user and asking them to be invited (Penenberg, 2009). This feature was known as the F-graph or friend-graph and was informed by small world theory (Milgram, 1967; Watts, 1999; Watts & Strogatz, 1998a; Watts & Strogatz, 1998b). As the popularity of Friendster increased, however, load times slowed down: at one point a Friendster page took as long as 40 sec to download (Rivlin, 2006). Ultimately, the limited scalability of the F-graph feature and the lack of multimedia capabilities counteracted Friendster's early success and their growth stalled (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007). It has continued to grow slowly, but mostly in Asia and in a vertical market of games (O'Neill, 2008). In 2009 it was acquired by MOL, a Malaysian company (Rao, 2009).

2.2. Facebook

Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook at Harvard University in 2004 with his college roommates and fellow computer science students (Facebook, 2009). The website's membership was initially limited to Harvard students as a version of Hot or Not (Tabak, 2004), but was soon expanded to other colleges, then high school students, and, finally in 2006, to anyone over the age over 13. Facebook demonstrated viral growth patterns and was ranked in 2009 as the most used social network worldwide by monthly active users (Compete, 2009) with over 955 million user by June 2012 (Facebook, 2012). In 2008, the fastest growing demographic was 25 +-year olds (Eldon, 2008), but by 2009 it was an age cohort of 35–54 year olds (Corbett, 2009) and by 2012 it was 45–54 year-olds.[4] Facebook's retention has been strong with 23% of users checking their accounts more than 5 times per day.[5] In addition, mechanisms to invite friends automatically offered by Facebook have led to significant fan out rates: the average user in Facebook currently has over 130 friends. Facebook has been fervent about its growth and has operated a growth team which receives specific attention from Zuckerberg and his top management team (Johns, 2012).

2.3. Methodology

We sought to reveal individuals' lived experience of SNS use and the meanings they attached to creating and sharing UGC on an SNS. To do so we conducted semi-structured interviews with users of Facebook and Friendster, in which subjects demonstrated and reflected upon their use of the site. We followed a phenomenological approach, describing the phenomenon of use as accurately as possible, refraining from any pre-given framework, and remaining true to the experience as described by each individual. According to Welman and Kruger (2001: 189) "the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved." Semi-structured interviews allowed for a degree of uniformity in the collection of data whilst careful probes of subject's answers preserved flexibility and provided opportunity for the emergence of novel contributions and reflection on their use behaviors. Our Institutional Review Board approved the interview protocol, which is shown in Appendix A, and we followed all expected security protocols for securing the data and ensuring anonymity for human subjects.

2.4. Sampling

We sought to develop a representative sample of typical users to strengthen analytic generalizability of user behaviors and their motivations. Subjects were also selected to reflect a range of frequency in typical use of their SNS and in the extent to

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[3] Its launch was significantly before that of MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other SNS.
[4] 55% of Americans 45–54 now have a profile on a SNS, http://www.socialnomics.net/2012/06/06/10-new-2012-social-media-stats-wow/
[5] According to http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/45-social-media-stats_b49582

Table 1
Interviewee sharing and usage.

Sharing	Heavy sharing		Light sharing	
Usage	H Use	L Use	H Use	L Use
Facebook	6	0	4	9
Friendster	3	0	2	5

Table 2
Interviewee demographics.

		Facebook (Jan 2010)	Interviewees (Spring 2010)
Gender	Male	42.6%	37.9%
	Female	54.3%	62.1%
	Unknown	3.1%	
Age	13–17	10.4%	0.0%
	18–24	25.3%	3.4%
	25–34	24.8%	27.6%
	35–54	29.0%	44.8%
	55+	9.5%	24.1%
	Unknown	1.0%	
Education	High school	13.40%	3.4%
	College	29.9%	44.8%
	Graduate	???	51.7%
	Unknown	56.70%	

which they shared content with others. The criteria for usage and sharing were adapted from statistics provided by Facebook estimating average on site use of 55 min per day per subscriber (Facebook, 2012). Subjects self-classified their use according to the amount of time they spent on the site, as well as how often they shared UGC and how much they interacted with other users' shared content. Our sample included heavy and light users and sharers as shown in Table 1.

Interview subjects were sought from first- and second-degree connections of the principal researcher's personal and professional networks. The user group consisted of 18 women and 11 men, aged 21 to 62 with education spanning high school to graduate school. All were US citizens or current US residents. Our primary sample consisted of 29 social network site users −19 Facebook subscribers and 10 members of Friendster (different individuals from the 19 Facebook subscribers). The reason for our selection of these interviewee demographics was that they were very similar to the demographics of Facebook in 2010, when we began the interviews (shown in Table 2). Our ratio of male to female matches very closely to that of Facebook's, while the population of our interviewees is just slightly older and more educated.

We followed theoretical sampling, which is a grounded theory technique of data collection and analysis for generating theory whereby according to Glaser (1978: 36) "the analyst concurrently collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal." Emergent themes and concepts were identified through theoretical sampling using a constant comparison technique, which begins coding and analysis of each interview as soon as it is conducted, and comparing the results of that interview with those collected earlier. We continued sampling until no new themes or concepts were identified in additional subjects' interview or demonstration of use, signaling theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006).

2.5. Data collection

All interviews, averaging approximately 60 min, were digitally recorded (with the permission of the respondent) and transcribed by a commercial transcription service, familiar with the data control requirements of human subject research.[6] The interviews were conducted in person (15) and telephonically (14). Notes were manually taken and a memorandum summarizing each interview was written immediately afterward. Each user was asked five questions, first to review their personal and professional backgrounds, then to recount their experiences with various social networks. Then we asked users to log into their SNS site and to narrate their usage of it. Whether the interview was conducted in person or telephonically, the interviewer did not watch the computer screen, as we wanted the interviewee to conduct their usage session in as normal of a setting as possible. We asked the interviewee to speak out loud during their SNS session, describing in detail their actions and thoughts during the session as is common in protocol analysis (Ericcson & Simon, 1993). During our pilot interviews (not included in the final sample) we observed that this was a good way to prime interviewees to produce and reflect faithfully on what they were doing on the site and why. In essence, this technique helped highlight the user's interpretive process of "the actual production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings" (Gephart, 2004:457). By observing and listening to the interviewee in person during an SNS session, or by listening to the interviewee's description of their actions over the telephone, taking notes, and recording the narration, we were thus able to tap into and richly describe a user's interactions on their networking site.

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[6] https://www.gmrtranscription.com/

2.6. Data analysis

Using constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) each interview was analyzed and compared to earlier ones as they were collected. To this end we immersed ourselves in the interpretation of our data by re-reading transcripts, listening to voice recordings, and analyzing other documentation. We met weekly to calibrate our emerging interpretations and to write memos. This involved testing for rival explanations, searching for contradictory evidence, and continuously refining the themes and analysis categories.

Shortly after each interview we listened to our recording of it and read the transcripts several times. We then conducted three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is that part of the analysis dealing with the labeling and categorizing of the subjects' statements. Data are initially broken down by asking simple questions such as what, where, how, when, how much, etc. Subsequently, data are compared and similar observations are grouped together, given the same conceptual label. During open coding we examined each transcript line by line to identify meaningful fragments of text; the fragments were labeled and cross-referenced with excerpts from prior transcripts. This process resulted in 534 coding labels.

Whereas open coding fractures the data into concepts and categories, axial coding puts those data back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its sub-categories (Pandit, 1996). Through cycles of coding, interpreting, and theorizing we next produced a set of themes grouped into 24 categories relating to user's continued use of the services, dominant service features deployed, whether use experiences were shared or recommended with others, and the presence of strong emotions or reactions that motivated individuals to use the SNS site. We identified thematic indicators through axial coding by defining the properties and dimensions of these emerging themes. This resulted in 20 final themes of user experience. The 20 distilled codes were further grouped into three major categories, shown in Table 3. The first category from the top contains statements that referred to the participants' self-identity. The second major category identifies those codes that reflect issues concerning the user's competency with the technology of the SNS platform and the social experience of using the site. The third major involved the characteristics, strengths, and limitations of the SNS technology itself. Admittedly, these categories and themes are overlapping and equivocal in some cases.

The category of concerns about socio-technical competencies and experiences has been studied before regarding participation on SNS (Berkelaar, Scacco, & Birdsell, 2015; Lambert, 2015; Micheli, 2016). The category of concerns about technology has also been studied exhaustively (Venkatesh, 2000; Venkatesh & Bala, 2008; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003) including concerns about the technology of SNS (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Kim, 2016; Shin, 2010; Wang & Kobsa, 2009). While the category of self-identity has been studied regarding SNS (e.g. Chandra, 2016; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Papacharissi, 2011) no study has identified self-identity in terms of these seven statements that, as we will show in the discussion section, align directly with four of the models of identified by Prus (1997) as intersubjective realities of self. These seven themes are discussed in detail below.

3. Creation and consumption of self

We observed above that SNS users engaged in seven self-identity related behaviors and experiences while creating and consuming UGC. In this section we define these seven behaviors, present illustrative quotes for each of them, and discuss how the literature on self and identity informs theorizing around these findings. We posit that the experience of constructing self during SNS use has similarities with associated processes in the face-to-face world and forms a key driver in keeping a user engaged with

Table 3
Emergent and selected themes of SNS user experience.

Num	Category	Theme
1	Creating and consuming self-identity	Being an exhibitionist
2		Being a voyeur
3		Expressing emotional intensity
4		Reputation management
5		Sharing humor and information
6		Living vicariously
7		Controlling diverse worlds
8	Concerns about socio-technical competencies and experiences	Prestige of connecting with a special person
9		Concerned about their lack of ability to use technology
10		Conforming to SNS etiquettes
11		Minimize isolation and feel connected.
12		Peer pressure to join
13		Self-perception influences adoption and usage.
14	Concerns about technology	Concerned about the security of private information
15		Continuum of intimacy using different technologies
16		Creepiness detracts from enjoyment
17		Concern about ease of use
18		Concern about performance of site
19		Evaluating technology usefulness
20		Using technology to sustain relationships

social networking sites. Moreover, the rapidity of interactions on SNS and the variety of ways they provide for reflecting upon and symbolically expressing a self enables a uniquely potent environment for users to participate in constructing a self. We also show that the types of expressions of self they portray coincide with four of Prus' (1997) models of the self. Finally, we show how these seven behaviors constitute a set of feedback loops that form a dynamic system, which maintains the process of constructing and consuming a self during the use of SNS. We define the seven behaviors that have emerged from the grounded theory analysis as a dynamic system of feedback loops that enable individuals to produce and consume selves on an SNS as follows.

4. Being an exhibitionist

A user is obsessed with representing themselves through positive displays of themselves, their experiences, and their life statuses (Munar, 2010).
Example Quotes:
"I love seeing if people responded to different things I've commented on, or commented myself about."
"We have a lot to say, and we think it's very important what we have to say, and we must say it, and there is a little bit of shock value, and a lot of honesty."
"When I do an update, I'm like, 'Who's gonna write something?' and if nobody writes something I'm sad."

5. Being a voyeur

A user's consumption of "revealing images of and information about others'… real and unguarded lives…not always for purposes of entertainment, but frequently at the expense of privacy." (Calvert, 2004:2).
Example Quotes:

"I just was totally passive and just watching.""I look at their friends and just kind of scroll through, and sometimes some people have more public stuff; and just out of curiosity I'll just kind of look. You know, sometimes you can kind of link from person to person to person.""I do enjoy going on and a little bit of stalking."

6. Expressing emotional intensity

A user manifesting strong emotions towards specific beliefs, events, comments or attitudes of others, or about one's own postings or comments.
Example quotes:

"Definitely, yeah. Like my friend's father who passed away, that's very emotional so I had to comment about that."

"So the funny thing is, it really hurt me, it hurt my feelings really bad inside, but I did not want to make a big deal to her. … I could tell the minute she said it she really felt guilty about it, but I didn't want her to…"

7. Reputation management

A user's activity that deals with presenting and refining the image by which she wants to be seen by others.
Example Quotes:

"…and so then I think ugh, I better be careful because I wouldn't really want all these people that I look on their thing to see I'm looking at their information."

"…it's really you and there's a reputation and accountability for what you say, is kind of   surprisingly powerful because so many people misuse the anonymous portion of the internet…"

8. Sharing humor and information

A user's excitement about sharing amusing or informative material with others and how this acts as a mechanism for building and displaying identity.
Example quotes:

"And everybody in the video was dancing to this song with their pink gloves and I loved it. And the janitor was sweeping the floor and the music was going and the surgeons were doing a dance - it was just really cute…I clicked on it somewhere and it went to my Facebook. It went to my page."

"Usually they're silly. They're definitely silly. I ran across one people.com article about this one actress Tilda Swinton saying that she'd want to play Conan O'Brien in a movie, and I thought it was really funny so I put it up there."

9. Living vicariously

Users watching "how other individuals live rather than experiencing life for ourselves," (Kendall, 2005:230).
Example Quotes:

"I have a son and daughter who live in Chicago and I have a daughter in New York City. And I talk to them all the time. … But it's one thing, talking to them and hearing about them, It's another thing seeing pictures. Or they go on their vacation, and I get to see their fun time that they're telling me about in pictures."

"Like one of my friends posted a video of her babies, so that was fun. The baby is in Lexington, so I wouldn't usually get to see her; but now that I can see videos of her really easily, that's really nice."

10. Controlling diverse worlds

A user's ability to engage different segments of her life with multiple identities and present a different 'face' towards different social worlds.
Example Quotes:

"and in fact, there is one person from high school that I don't know and I feel that I probably need to remove that one just because sometimes I'll get things like little gifts from him and I don't know if he's sending that to everybody or just me.

"Well, maybe just going back to what I said about if I feel annoying, or if people, things just kind of invade my space that I'm not in the mood for."

The overriding narrative we interpret from this analysis is the pivotal role of building, consuming, projecting, fragmenting, and polishing a self in the 'mosaic' of digitally mediated social worlds. One reason for the prominent role of the self in driving the creation and use of UGC is the new dynamics of identity formation and the 'splintering' of the self (Giddens, 1991). This change is also reflected in growing research on identity: over the past two decades a confluence of empirical, theoretical, and methodological issues (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997) has brought about a resurgence of interest in self and identity (Whittaker, 1992). Indeed, the concept of self-identity as reflected in many of the observed user behaviors, aligns well with McCall and Simmons (1978) and Stryker's (1980, 1987) concept of multiple-role models of identity (see also Giddens, 1991). In fact, a multi-role identity model is also now being amplified by 'identity technologies' afforded by SNSs where users can view themselves as staged actors, scripting multiple social roles in multiple social worlds (Conner & Armitage, 1998).

The increase in UGC on SNS can be read as the achievement of greater levels of inter-subjectivity within social networks. Returning to Mead's foundational idea of the construction of a self as a social process, she emphasized the crucial role of developing the sense of a "generalized other" to the process of an individual's constructing a self. Our study suggests that use of SNSs enhances the process of becoming aware of a generalized other through voyeurism and managing reputations. In short, digital 'identity' technologies enable constant recording and presentation of people's daily experiences and expressing (multiple) selves (Koskela, 2002). The growth of UGC enabled by an SNS also increases the range and frequency of exchanges, which either reveal facets of "I" to a growing number of "Others", or allow "I" to see "Other" in new ways. As a result, the nature of UGC is vastly different from the producer centered content in traditional media (Jones, 2010): it reflects the user's widening experiences of the 'digital presence' of self and the need to reflectively manage this presence as a multi-faceted identity project. Our research indicates how the self is kept 'under construction' through constant interactions with multiple and perhaps generalized others.

As defined above, identity is a relational construct that helps keep the social order continuously in the making (Prus, 1997), and emerges in everyday situations through symbolic interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). The 'self' is not unitary, because situated activities and interactions are manifold. Therefore, multiplicity and multi-dimensionality mark contemporary identity, inviting a recognition of the variety of 'accessible' or 'on-line' self-concepts (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Rhodewalt, 1986). These multitudes of selves are not all available at the same time (Aral & Walker, 2010). Our SNS user subjects reported how they related to their different selves at different times – in one story, an interviewee, the mother of a grown daughter, was sharing fun (dance videos) with her friends and in another she was living vicariously (pictures of a party) through her daughter.

Through UGC, SNS users become both the subjects and objects of constant gaze – visible all the time, watching and being watched. They have to adapt to multiple roles in 'virtual' exchanges producing multi-dimensional virtual identities dressed in many shapes depending on the context and means of communication (Munar, 2010). In our study, no single virtual identity or

particular way in which social networking sites contribute to identity building was detected. Instead, creation of UGC and associated projects of identity construction came in diverse forms and were being constantly re-constructed through multiple interactions and discovery of new services whereby users could generate collages of multiple, fluid, and complex expressions of self and others (Munar, 2010). Our study shows that this had progressed so far that many users created totally new virtual identities. Indeed, already in 2009, Zuckerberg discussed the possibility of eventually giving each user the ability to have a different Facebook personality for each Facebook friendship (Hempel & Kowitt, 2009). However, this can face a fallback as Facebook has come under recent scrutiny for its ever-changing privacy rules, causing some users to delete their accounts (Lafferty, 2014).

We find Prus' (1997) theory of 'self', which we discussed in the self-identity section of this paper, particularly apposite for explaining the content and nature of multiple selves that drive the creation of UGC, acknowledges user's concerns, images, and actions as they apply to the physiological self. It also observes other selves including those of ownership, proficient, accomplished, relational, integrated, isolated, helping, receiving assistance, entertaining, entertained, influential, receptive, vulnerable, and being resilient. These selves normally 'overlap' with a person's physical embodiment. While such constraints do not hold in virtual worlds we can use his theory to review how four of Prus' 'model' selves – underlined entertained & entertaining, imaged, relational, and integrated selves – appear to be the most apropos to account for our observed use of SNS.

To understand how user behaviors related to those four selves, Table 4 maps the seven observed SNS user behaviors from Table 3 to the four concepts of self. This was accomplished by taking coded user quotes used in identifying the seven user behaviors and matching them to similar concepts used by Prus to describe each of the four selves. For example, Prus described the relational self as having the desire for openness and affiliation. An example of a user quote that was coded for living vicariously which mapped to the relational self was "What have I done on Facebook? I've like opened myself to the world." We will next review each of these four selves and related behaviors in detail.

As reported by Prus (1997) people attempt to foster consequential *self-image* through ownership, expertise, and associated relationships. They articulate an imaged self by such activities as establishing proficiencies in using technologies, sharing flattering photographs of themselves, and providing updates of interesting activities in which they are participating. The behaviors for developing and sustaining the imaged self as witnessed through the interviews included the establishment of reputation management and the expressing of emotional intensity.

The *relational self* is defined as the desire for and the openness to affiliation (Prus, 1997). Accordingly, SNS, which allow the selection of others as friends and the strengthening of ties, can foster specific forms of affinity. Yoels and Clair (1995) claim that such affiliations can be further fostered by the use of humor when managed according to prevailing social norms and etiquettes (Bjorklund, 1985). Indeed, we observed how interviewees shared humorous videos, pictures, or status updates while the receivers described these as opportunities to connect more closely by feeling they were participating in the events pictured. The social processes associated with the relational self include exchanging interesting material on the SNS site and living vicariously.

The roles of *the entertained and entertainer* are interlinked by mutuality of interaction. Yet, in some cases people choose exclusively the performer or audience roles in which case there is not an expectation of reciprocity (Prus, 1997). We likewise observed that the idea of voyeuristic and exhibitionistic behaviors related strongly to the entertained and entertaining self, respectively. The entertaining self develops a 'voice' based upon the audience's interest and often faces difficulties in knowing which interests will resonate with the audience, and which ones will upset them. The entertained self will seek out an entertainer's voice, revisiting enough to consume the entertainment, or losing interest and stop visiting. A majority of Facebook users indicated that they had either enjoyed viewing personal information or pictures of their friends 'voyeuristically', or had participated in 'showing off' by purposefully sharing evocative content about themselves. Thus, the motivations underlying a user's behaviors were both exhibitionistic (Munar, 2010) and voyeuristic (Calvert, 2004). They reflected a need to build an entertaining self or to be entertained. Users demonstrating exhibitionism would upload pictures of themselves, post comments on their experiences, and update their life statuses, and be entertained by this process in the hope that others will view the content and be entertained. Likewise, motivations for voyeurism are multiple, such as parents wanting to follow their children's lives (parental role). With the advent of smart phones there is also a constant blurring of the family–work boundaries (Schlosser, 2002). Friends are keeping informed of each other's activities (friend role) and are finding out what one's first love is doing now (imaged role), or keeping updated on the activities of their colleagues (professional peer role) (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2010). The entertained self-drives much of the voyeurism, in that users received joy from knowing what others are doing. And, there is a positive feedback loop here: the more content that is revealed by a self-loving exhibitionist in the entertainer role, the more carefully it is followed by a content

Table 4
Dimensions of self and SNS use behaviors.

Self	Social process
Entertained & entertaining	Being an exhibitionist
	Being a voyeur
Imaged	Expressing emotional intensity
	Reputation management
Relational	Sharing humor and information
	Living vicariously
Integrated	Controlling diverse worlds

hungry voyeur in the entertained role. This is one form of a virtuous cycle of growth that encourages the continued creation and consumption of UGC.

The presence of different social worlds requires control and management of one's presentation in those worlds so that they can coexist for the self but yet their roles and logics can be kept separate. As with the development of the relational self, the social process of controlling diverse worlds becomes important to the development of the *integrated self*, who is subject to norms and etiquettes. When social worlds are balanced users are more comfortable creating UGC and sharing personal anecdotes, which fosters usage of the SNS and user retention.

If we analyze the presence of and interactions between these different dimensions of self during SNS use, we observe that they form positive feedback loops that act as a self-reinforcing mechanism for identity production and consumption. We observed two chained loops of mutually reinforcing, recursive relationships between the seven user behaviors and the continuous process of "self" production and consumption. These seven behaviors were divided into two separate groups – one reinforcing the behavior of being an exhibitionist (production of self) and the other demonstrating the behavior of being a voyeur (consumption of self). In this way, the behaviors formed boundaries in that they did not all interact.

As depicted in Fig. 1, these loops do not have a fixed beginning or end: any of the seven behaviors associated with self during the use of a SNS, once stimulated through some kind of "identity work" (Prus, 1997), can set off a process of continued, expansive identity production and consumption. Users can initially engage an SNS with any random social interaction and will then begin to gain experience with the elements of the presentation or consumption of self (Goffman, 1959). For example, an SNS user can hear a funny joke and they can approach this as an occasion for reputation management in that, if they share it on the SNS, it will make them appear funny or 'hip', bolstering their identity in a manner that pleases them. The desire to manage their reputation moderates which jokes they will share (e.g. not racial or gender related jokes). The act of posting the joke is exhibitionist and encourages users to express emotional intensity i.e. "LOL" as in laugh-out-loud, or anger, if they feel a target of the joke, or believe the joke is offensive. This Production of Self cycle can continue indefinitely as long as users continue to participate in exhibitionistic activities necessitating reputation management moderated by exchanging interesting material or providing occasions for expressing emotional intensity.

Acts of exhibitionism, such as posting the joke, affords the opportunity for an act of voyeurism in reading the joke and thereby peeking into the poster's inner world. This enables the voyeur to live vicariously in the exhibitionist' life and sense of humor for a few minutes, as if the user was part of the more intimate social network with whom the exhibitionist shares such jokes in person. This, in turn, increases the need to feel in control of diverse worlds (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) and further stimulates the feedback loop. The Consumption cycle can also continue indefinitely, as long as there is UGC to be consumed, and as long as the voyeur can satisfy her need to control the diverse worlds that are part of her SNS. When this is the case, it moderates the desire to live vicariously and satisfies the voyeuristic desire. The cycles of a Production of Self and Consumption of Self can continue at different paces, independently, but they must be connected via exhibitionistic and voyeuristic acts that trigger the posting and reading of UGC and thus stimulate the other cycle.

The four Prus' selves - entertained & entertaining, imaged, relational, and integrated - that we identified as matching the seven behaviors can be laid overtop of these loops to produce an even richer depiction of the creation and consumption of the self. For instance, the imaged self is largely contained within the Production of Self cycle while the relational self spans both cycles. The
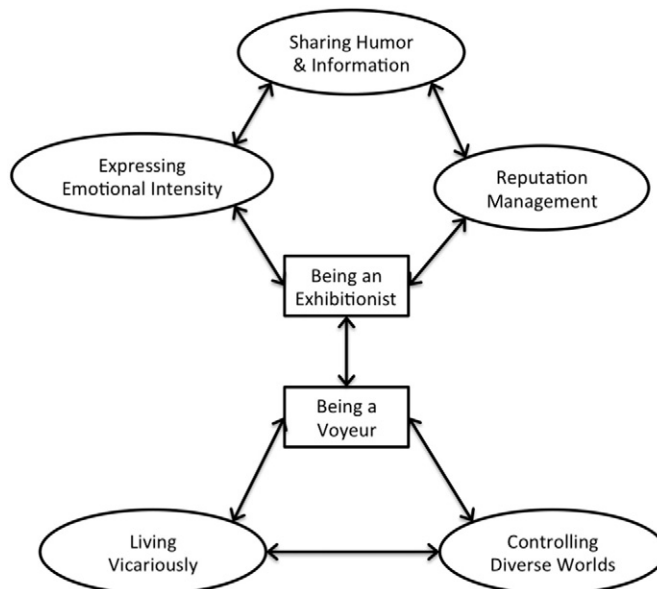

Fig. 1. Production and consumption of self.

establishment of these cycles is important as they depict the recursive nature of creating and consuming self-identity as well as how the consumption and generation of self-identity are interrelated.

11. Conclusion

Past studies have mainly examined SNSs as a venue for expanding social networks and increasing bridging of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006b) or for strengthening existing relationships and increasing bonding social capital (Tiwana & Bush, 2005). Other research, in contrast, suggests that neither bonding nor bridging social capital significantly predicts positive responses to requests for favors during SNS use (Ledbetter, 2009). Specifically, it shows that individuals with higher perceived levels of bonding social capital are not more likely to use an SNS (Ledbetter et al., 2011). Therefore, we continued to look for another explanation for participation on a SNS.

Lampel and Bhalla (2007), discovered that information related gift giving via UGC sharing was strongly driven by status seeking. Moreover, such status sentiments are likely to sustain SNS use. Panek et al.'s (2013) findings suggest further that students posting content on SNS was associated with an exhibitionistic component of their narcissistic behavior. Nie and Sundar (2013) identified that self-presentation is a major preoccupation during SNS use, where user self-esteem affects the user's sense of agency and guides her self-monitoring tendencies. No study within this stream of research focusing on personal level motivations driving SNS use, however, has focused on the user's meaning-making that underlies processes of identity production and consumption. In this regard our research extends the body of knowledge that focuses on presenting the self and building identity during SNS use. It reveals that sharing UGC is a paragon example of symbolic interactionism and involves constant symbolic production and consumption of the self. Our findings suggest that SNS use offers new affordances for creating cycles of identity construction and consumption, which feed on each other and are especially driven by mutually reinforcing acts of exhibitionism and voyeurism. Exhibitionistic users create UGC through specific affordances available at the SNS while voyeuristic users consume the UGC by viewing and commenting on it through another set of affordances. These behaviors feed off of each other in that the consumption of new UGC prompts other users to comment, (an exhibitionistic act) creating new UGC (an exhibitionistic act), which encourages the original creator of the UGC to create more via new posts (another exhibitionistic act).

Through our grounded analysis we also conclude that the construction and maintenance of one's self-identity undergirds much of the sharing of UGC. Indeed, SNS users learn over time to participate in a extending range of behaviors related to projecting their identity and sense of self, such as managing reputations, living vicariously, SNS network activity, exhibiting voyeurism, exhibiting exhibitionism, controlling diverse worlds, and expressing emotional intensity. We also conclude that these behaviors can be mapped onto four 'selves' identified in recent self-identity theories. In this regard our analysis provides new avenues to investigate user motivations for creating UGC and to understand why users are prone to reveal intimate details about their personal lives. Additionally, we came to see the recursive process of identity production and consumption as a potent driver of SNS growth. The production and consumption of users' selves and identity form positive feedback relations, which drive the rapid, "viral" growth of an SNS by motivating users to continue to return to the site to create their selves over and over again and/or consume other's selves.

The foundational theory underlying our analysis is the idea of a self – dating back as early as James (1890) and Calkins (1900). Along with symbols, meanings, and related interactions, the self forms the foundational concept of symbolic interactionism. The essential feature of the self is reflexivity, which enables humans to act towards themselves as objects and to reflect upon, argue with, and evaluate themselves. Reflexivity includes a generalized ability to engage in role-taking, which enables an individual to take multiple roles and see their multiple selves from the perspective of others, thereby forming richer conceptions of themselves. In the development of the self, two types of *others* are critical: the *significant other*, or persons important to the individual, and the *generalized other*, or persons participating in organized systems of roles (e.g., a baseball team). These others are used as points of reference from which to view the self (Cerulo, 1997; Rise, Sheeran, & Hukkelberg, 2010).

Our study adds also to a long tradition of symbolic interactionism by suggesting that the new level of creation and consumption of UGC on SNS, in fact, amplifies the awareness of one's selves through new and enriched ways of interacting with generalized others. Creating and sharing new forms of UGC on Facebook through likes, life histories, or pictures (selfies) is a vivid example of this process whereby generalized others are seen as voyeurs or as those living vicariously, or as those consuming the UGC of exhibitionists or as those SNS network activity or as those managing their reputations. Before the advent of SNS, many of these exhibitionistic behaviors would have only been seen by the significant others in one's life. SNS afford individuals the opportunity to participate in exhibitionism to a much broader audience, thus amplifying its effects on the production and consumption of the self.

Stryker (1980) proposes that commitments to various roles of the self provides motivated action for constructing self-identities to the extent that individuals who are committed to a particular role will be motivated to act accordingly, in order to maintain and protect their self-identity. The roles of self-identity formed in early childhood, such as gender and familial identities are some of the most important. However, individuals assume new roles as they live their lives and these new roles offer new and sometimes reinforce or challenge existing self-identities. Given the frequency and range of exchanges of UGC and resulting diversity of interactions, users' self-identities can be expected to increase in number and will be produced and consumed with multiple generalized others. Creating and consuming UCG on a SNS are significant additions to the range of social behaviors that enable our understanding of a self and of role-based self-identities we can now produce and consume in unprecedented scale through digitally mediated interactions. There are certainly issues with SNS network activity in terms of managing diverse worlds in professional situations such as when someone you friend is also a work colleague. Despite these challenges companies are encouraging

the use of SNS activity for such diverse tasks as recruitment (Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, & Budden, 2010), branding (Wolf, Sims, & Yang, 2015) and talent management (Kaur, Sharma, Kaur, & Sharma, 2015).

From both a research and practitioner perspective, our findings should be of keen interest to individuals interested in the motivations to use SNS for creating and consuming UGC. Nonetheless, because this is a theory generating, exploratory study, our findings are suggestive, not conclusive. We propose that future research on SNS should explore a broader sample of social media and analyze more deeply the dynamics of symbolic interaction and related processes of identity construction and consumption. We acknowledge limitations within our research including that Facebook has added significant amounts of functionality since the interviews for this research were conducted but given that the focus of our research was neither feature nor function based but instead rested on the consumption and generation of UGC as a reflection of the users' self-identity, this is not likely to significantly change our findings. We believe that the intricacies of constructing one's self-identities influence the creation of UGC is fascinating and worthy of future research pursuits.

Appendix A. Interview Protocol and Questions for Users of Facebook/Friendster

Step 1: Introduction and Explanation.

Introduction (Interviewer): "Hi (name). I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. If you will allow me, I'd like to go over a few things before we begin."

Purpose and Format for the Interview (Interviewer): "The purpose of this interview is to find out about how people communicate with others. I'm going to ask you a series of questions asking you to describe your experiences around communicating with other individuals."

Confidentiality (Interviewer): "Everything you share with me in this interview will be kept in strictest of confidence, and your comments will be transcribed anonymously – omitting your name as well as anyone else you refer to in the interview. Your responses will be included with all the other interviews I conduct."

Audio Taping (Interviewer): "To help me capture your responses without being overly distracted by talking notes, I would like to audio tape our conversation with your permission. Again, your responses will be kept confidential, however, if there is something you would like to share off the record, or not have recorded, please let me know and I will be happy to turn off the recorder."

Step 2: Opening Icebreaker Questions.

Interviewer:

1) "I'd like to start by learning about you. Tell me about yourself – who you are, your background, your family, what you do, etc."
   Probing:
   a. "What is your age?"
   b. "Did you attend college or graduate school?"
   c. "Do you use the internet daily?"

Step 3: Key Criteria Questions.

Interviewer:

1) "Tell me about your social networking experiences in general i.e. Church, clubs, sports teams etc."
   Probing:

 a. "What did you use before online communities?"
 b. "How many social networking communities do you belong to?"
 c. "What have been your experiences with social networking communities?"

2) "Can you tell about a typical day using technology to communicate?"
   Probing:

 a. "Is this the same for weekdays and weekends?"
 b. "What social networking sites do you use?"

3) "Can you demonstrate on the computer and talk me through how you typically use Facebook/Friendster?"
   Probing:

 a. How do you Use it?
 b. What did you last share?
 c. Who did you first/last connected with?
 d. What was the most positive experience?
 e. What was the most negative experience?
 f. Who has been the most interesting reconnection?

4) "Please tell me about the first time you used Facebook/Friendster?
   Probing:

 a. "Were you invited by someone to join the site?"

b. "Did you know about the site before?"
c. "What was your first emotion about the site?"
d. "Did you connect to people right away?"
e. "Did you invite others to join right away?"
f. "Did you share information or updates right away?"

5) "Do you use any other social networking site like LinkedIn or Twitter?"

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