

**Exploring the Impact of Social Networking Sites on the Construction
and Performance of Identity Online**

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) provide an internet based platform for individuals to develop an online identity whereby their identity construction expresses and explores different aspects of the self. The individual SNS user, the internet site and the audience of the user's online profile all participate in the formation of the user's identity. There is a disagreement, however, within the literature about the extent to which online identity differs from offline identity. While existing studies have examined identity performance and SNSs, few studies have focused on the SNS users' own perspectives of their online identities. This research aims to fill this gap and asks: what is the impact of SNSs on the construction and performance of identity online?

A qualitative research design and an interpretive-constructivist approach informed the research. Qualitative data (through one-on-one interviews) was collected through in-depth interviews with adult SNS users. This research was informed by the combination of two primary theoretical frameworks: Erving Goffman's conception of the self and Michel Foucault's notion of the panopticon and governmentality. These frameworks come together to provide an understanding of the performance of identity online and the ways in which that performance is influenced by other users and the online environment.

The findings indicate: SNS users' online behaviour is highly influenced by their online audience; SNS users construct an ideal online identity that is a reflection of the audience and the embedded values of the sites themselves; and SNS users in this study report feelings of envy and inadequacy compared to the lives of their online peers. An SNS user engages in a reflexive process whereby they portray certain aspects of themselves, while concealing others. This research indicates that social networking sites act as a *front stage* (Goffman) for users to perform

their ideal selves. In addition, users are aware that they are being watched at all times by their online audience and the awareness of this surveillance has resulted in the users becoming *responsibilized, constructed* citizens (Foucault).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The development and widespread use of social networking sites has transformed the way people communicate and present themselves online. Social networking sites have evolved over the last two decades to include novel features and functions that provide users with new ways to connect with one another as well as expanded opportunities to create and portray an online identity. Social networking sites are becoming ubiquitous in modern life. As the digital divide slowly begins to diminish, they are being used by an ever-increasing number of people regardless of age, profession, socio-economic status and even country of residence. In the contemporary context, we must understand social networking sites and the way in which people use them to truly make sense of our world.

Social networking sites provide sociologists with a variety of research opportunities at both the micro and macro level. Concepts such as social interaction, agency, and social systems and structures are all helpful to explore social networking sites as these concepts are embedded in site design and execution. As social networking sites are a relatively new and burgeoning phenomenon that has evolved exponentially over the past ten years, there are myriad opportunities for exciting and important research. To date, a considerable number of research studies have been conducted to better understand social networking sites and the concept of identity and presentation of self. These concepts have been studied in many different ways. Some researchers have conducted content analyses on social networking accounts to draw conclusions about online behaviours (see, e.g., Uimonen, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), while others have used survey methods to understand online behaviours to attempt to

uncover motivations and explanations regarding the way in which the social networking site was being used (see, e.g., Barker, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010).

However, there is a gap in the literature with respect to research focused on the participants' own words. I also argue that the existing literature does not go far enough into exploring the ways in which our use of social networking sites contributes to our understandings of identity, our exploration of self and how social networking sites act as technologies of social control. I aim to address these shortfalls in the existing literature by utilizing a unique methodology and by applying my interpretation of two theoretical frameworks. Rather than drawing conclusions based on survey answers or what I observed in a profile, I wanted to bring to light how social networking site users perceive the way that they navigate the sites to construct their online identity. I wondered what impact the audience and the sites themselves had on the formation of online identities from the direct perspective of the user. Most importantly, I wanted to understand why social networking site users choose to present themselves the way they do online. By conducting in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 14 active social networking site users, I examined the perspectives of the users to gain insight into how they engage with social networking sites to develop their online identity. I draw on Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) to explain the ways in which users construct and perform identity as well as explore some of the motivating factors behind certain online behaviours.

1.1 An Introduction to Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNSs) can be exemplified by popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat and have implemented a wide variety of technical features.

While each has a somewhat different platform, their common feature is an individual profile displaying a list of fellow users of the system that the individual is acquainted with in some way (boyd & Ellison, 2007). When a user registers with an SNS, they are asked to create a profile by identifying several personal characteristics, such as their age, gender, location, and interests. After joining an SNS, users are asked to connect with other users with whom they have a relationship, or the system can generate suggested connections for the user. The label for these relationships differs depending on the site (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

1.1.1 A Brief History

SNSs originated in the late 1990s with sites such as Classmates.com and SixDegrees.com (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Classmates allowed users to locate and connect with long-lost high school friends and SixDegrees further expanded that technology, allowing users to create profiles to display personal characteristics (“The History of Social Networking”, 2016). While SixDegrees did not find much widespread success, Classmates still boasts 57 million active accounts (“The History of Social Networking”, 2016). SNSs gained momentum when sites such as Friendster and Myspace launched in 2003 (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The premise of these sites was similar to those before them – connecting online with people you already know offline. LinkedIn also launched in 2003 but offered a different approach, allowing users to connect with other professionals in their industry. Facebook opened to the general public in 2006 and had more than 50 million users the following year (“The History of Social Networking”, 2016).

1.1.2 Social Networking Sites Today

Facebook is currently the most widely used SNS, with more than 1.3 billion active users (“The History of Social Networking”, 2016). Facebook allows its registered users to create a *profile*, which is a platform featuring a variety of mechanisms on which the user can express details of his or her life (Facebook, 2016). Users can search for *friends* to connect with and, if they choose, can set their privacy settings so that only their *friends* can see what they upload to their profile. Facebook also generates *people you may know* and suggests possible new *friends* for the user to connect with. Facebook asks users, *What’s on your mind?* and encourages them to *update their status* by posting thoughts, pictures, or general musings. Users can post messages to other users’ profiles, as well as *like* and comment on other users’ activity. Users can also create *pages* for almost anything, such as businesses, organizations, social causes, bands, television shows, or restaurants and can *like* these pages to show their support for them (Facebook, 2016).

LinkedIn is the world’s largest professional network, boasting 300 million users (LinkedIn, 2016). LinkedIn’s users create profiles focusing on their academic and professional achievements and connect to other users. The purpose of the site is to “connect the world’s professionals to make them more productive and successful” (LinkedIn, 2016). Users can invite anyone to connect, whether that person has a LinkedIn profile or not. Users can also search for jobs or business opportunities, and recommend similar things to their connections. Users can *like* other’s postings as well as *endorse* a fellow connection for a skill with just a click of the mouse.

Twitter is an SNS designed to let people post short, 140-character text updates or *tweets* to a network of other users (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Twitter users choose other Twitter accounts to *follow*, and they post either to their own group of *followers* or to the entire Twitter

population, depending on their privacy settings. Users can also follow any account that is public, such as a celebrity, news organization, or business, but must request permission to follow any account that is set to private by the user. Twitter asks users, *What are you doing?* to prompt their tweets, “creating a constantly updated timeline, or stream, of short messages that range from humor and musings on life to links and breaking news” (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 3).

Instagram and Snapchat are services that involve sharing public and private images, respectively. Tinder is a location-based matchmaking system and Vine allows users to share six-second videos with other users. SNSs are constantly evolving, and new sites with new purposes and platforms are quickly gaining more and more users. A person looking to make a connection of almost any kind can do so online using a social networking site.

A total of 2.31 billion people worldwide use social networking sites, representing 31 percent of the total population (Kemp, 2015). North America has the highest percentage of active social networking site users, at 59 percent of the total population; 58 percent or 21 million Canadians are active social network users. The average Canadian user spends 1.4 hours per day using SNSs. The number of active users continues to grow each year; indeed, the total number of active social network users worldwide increased by 12 percent between January 2014 and January 2015 alone (Kemp, 2015). The largest increase occurred 10 years ago, when between February 2005 and August 2006 the use of social networking sites among young adult Internet users aged 18 to 29 jumped from 9 to 49 percent (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016). Older users were only a few years behind, with the greatest increase in users 30 years and older occurring between 2008 and 2009.

1.2 Research Goals and Questions

Modern Western life is becoming increasingly technologized, meaning everyday activities are becoming more digitized (Sauter, 2014). The popularity and high usage rates of social networking sites suggest that they are significant and powerful as a relational and social tool for users (Bryant, Marmo, & Ramirez, 2011). The goal of this research is to gain insight and understanding into the ways in which SNS users present themselves and the motivations behind their online behaviours. More specifically, this research asks the following key research question: what impact do social networking sites have on the construction and performance of identity online? Sub-questions include: 1) How do SNS users construct their online identity?; 2) Do SNS users believe their online identity is different from their offline identity?; 3) How does the audience affect identity construction?; and 4) How does an altered online identity effect the SNS user and what implications does this have for self-presentation and an understanding of the self?

A qualitative research design was chosen to address the research questions. The data to inform this study were collected through 14 one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with active SNS users in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. While SNS sites are used globally, this research focused on the Western user, reflecting specifically on literature studying Canadian and American SNS users. The interviews were analyzed using an inductive-constructivist approach, and a thematic analysis was conducted to reveal and develop three key themes and five subthemes. The findings provide knowledge and understanding of the motivations behind certain SNS user behaviours.

This research contributes to the existing literature by providing a more comprehensive insight into identity construction and performance online. Social networking sites are, at their core, built on human interaction. As social networking sites are continuing to grow in their

popularity among an increasingly diverse group of users, it is vital that sociologists continue to study the ways in which the sites are being used. A deeper understanding of the ways in which SNS users engage with the sites is critical for the users themselves, so they can make sense of their own behaviour but also become aware of the intentions and potential manipulations of other users; for the site designers, so they can continue to create content that will grow and evolve and meet the needs of the users; and for businesses and organizations, who use the sites to communicate and conduct business with their customers and clients.

1.3 Chapter Outline

This introductory chapter has provided background information on the topic and has identified the purpose and objectives of the research. In Chapter Two, I examine some of the existing literature on social networking sites. Previous work has studied the concept of the audience, explored identity creation and performance online, and examined the effects of viewing an altered online identity. In Chapter Two, I also introduce the theoretical frameworks that shaped the analysis, including Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975). I summarize these frameworks and show how these theories can be used to explain online behaviours.

In Chapter Three, I discuss my methodology, specifically the approach to the research, the qualitative research design, the approach to participant recruitment, and a summary of the participants of the study. I also describe how the collected data were analyzed. Chapter Three concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations of this study.

In Chapter Four, I present a detailed explanation of the findings of my research. Three major themes developed: 1) Props for Performance; 2) The Audience; and 3) The Ideal Online

Identity. Each theme (and sub-themes therein) explores the perspectives of the participants as their words address the research questions posed above.

In Chapter Five I present a discussion of the theoretical connections drawn from Goffman and Foucault. Finally, Chapter Six offers conclusions, an explanation of limitations, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an introduction to the existing literature on social networking sites and identity. While there is myriad literature on the subject, this review focuses on three key concepts: the audience, the construction of identity online, and the impact of the altered online identity. These three concepts are identified in my research questions and are discussed in my findings.

2.1 Identifying the Audience

One trait that all social networking sites share is that their users have an audience. The audience can be public or private, depending on the user's desired privacy settings. This means that the user can decide whether to share their post with a select number of preapproved SNS users, or they can decide to give everyone on the site access to their online profile. The true audience, meaning those who actually view and read the user's post, is not as important in the mind of the user as the imagined audience (Cingel & Krccmar, 2014). Imaginary audience is the belief that others are looking at and thinking about you at almost all times (Cingel & Krccmar, 2014). Marwick & boyd (2010) note that "participants have a sense of audience in every mediated conversation... [t]his audience is often imagined and constructed by an individual in order to present themselves appropriately" (p. 2). When a user posts online, he or she knows the potential for other users to view that post; but, unless another user interacts with the post in some way (by liking it or commenting on it), it is impossible on most sites for the user to know who has viewed their post. The imaginary audience represents the possibility of the post being viewed and forms the basis of decision-making about what to post. A user is fully aware that

their audience may view what they post on an SNS; as such, one must assume that the user considers this audience when deciding what to post.

Some writers have argued that the social networking site itself can dictate to a user regarding who forms the appropriate audience. Kimmons (2014), for example, noted that SNSs are not value-free zones where users are able to present themselves any way they like, and we should therefore recognize that the sites “structure the way people communicate through them, thereby eliciting certain types of information and ignoring others” (p. 95). Facebook will reward those users who share frequently on the site by improving the user’s visibility on other users’ feeds. If a user is inactive on Facebook, the site will encourage that user’s friends to get the user to participate. Facebook and Twitter send prompting emails that suggest new friends for the user to add or update the user regarding what their followers have been posting lately. The mechanisms of the sites also influence how users engage with them. Instagram only allows users to post photos with captions and like and comment on other users’ photos. Although it does happen, it is more difficult and awkward to attempt to have a conversation with another user using Instagram. Twitter, on the other hand, allows users to post a short message to which other users can respond. Therefore, it makes sense that an exchange of words between two users would be more likely to occur on Twitter. Twitter posts, however, are limited to 140 characters. Therefore, if a user wanted to post a longer or more detailed message, he or she would be more likely to do so on a site such as Facebook that allows users to send messages similar to e-mails back and forth. LinkedIn has clear embedded values of promoting the professional traits of a user and encourages the user to share their résumé and make professional connections (Kimmons, 2014). Tinder has clear embedded values of creating immediate romantic connections between users, encouraging them to connect with others within a certain radius

based on selected pictures. Each social networking site is designed for a specific purpose and is not necessarily conducive to any form of social interaction. A user can attempt to make a connection with another user even if such action is not encouraged by the site, e.g., a romantic connection on LinkedIn or a professional connection on Tinder. However, in doing so the user would be subverting the intention of the site. As a result, the user may face rejection or embarrassment. Each site encourages its users to connect with each other in specific ways using different mechanisms and, as such, influences the way users interact.

A user may have a different audience for each SNS he or she uses, and that audience may be dictated or influenced by the site itself. Ultimately, the user is responsible for creating his or her audience; however, the embedded values of the site can influence or suggest an audience for the user by encouraging them to utilize the site the way it was designed, for example making professional connections on LinkedIn. As a conscious effort is behind the selection of the audience, so too is a conscious effort behind deciding what information that audience is privy to. The user's actions, posts, and displayed traits on an SNS are fluid and shaped by the context of the site, especially in the way the site influences the creation of the audience (Kimmons, 2014).

The above is important because it shows how identity performance is heavily influenced by the audience. It is important to recognize how identity can change with different audiences and how the existence of an audience is acknowledged by the SNS user. In the following section, I will further explore how identity is constructed online.

2.2 Exploring Identity Construction

Identity as a concept can be difficult to define. As Kristy Young (2013) noted, much of the research into SNSs has focused on social identity, as attributed to Goffman (1959). Young

argues that social identity “develops from social constructionism, whereby identity is being permanently constructed through limitless contact with people and social experiences which reinforce existing perceptions of identity or enable exploration of new facets of oneself” (p. 3).

The past several years have seen a substantial increase in literature investigating the various motives for using SNSs as a way to identify the self, and to connect the self with others (see, e.g., Hum et al., 2013; Uimonen, 2013; van Dijck, 2013; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014).

Social networking sites provide a platform for identity construction where different aspects of the self may be explored and expressed (Labrecque et al., 2011). Facebook, for example, asks, *What’s on your mind?* and incites users to publicly reflect on their personal experiences (Sauter, 2014). Facebook allows users to express their identity through photographs, wall postings, social interactions, and *liking* or becoming a *fan* of a page. As Young (2013) noted, the use of the Internet to explore one’s identity is not a new concept; however, what is unique is the “immediacy of online social network communications and the interactive nature of online social networking profiles which are constructed, not by the individual alone, but through the contributions made by his/her online ‘friends’” (p. 10). Users may use multiple sites, each catering to a desire to express a different side of themselves. However the user chooses to express him or herself, they have tools at their disposal to create the version that is to be conveyed to the audience. The user deliberately selects what to post on Facebook. They choose what personal information to reveal about themselves, what photographs to post, and how much of their day-to-day lives they want to make available to their audience. By choosing what to share and what to keep private, the SNS user creates a constructed identity for his or her audience. As Uimonen (2013) noted, “in performing our identities, we reveal ourselves to us and

others, and through this process we also construct ourselves and our social worlds” (p. 122-123). Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) concept of social identity, it is through the performance of identity that individuals convey to their audience, whether it be their peers, family, coworkers, or social networking audience, who they are within the context of that environment.

The SNS user and the site itself both participate in the formation of the user’s identity; however, some writers disagree about the extent to which this online identity can differ from the user’s offline identity. Pearson (2009) argues that SNS users can claim to be virtually any person they choose by deliberately putting forth identity cues or claims that either resemble or wildly differ from reality. Other writers, however, claim that Facebook in particular does not allow for total anonymity. Zhao and colleagues (2008) called Facebook a “nonymous site” (p. 1819), meaning the opposite of anonymous. Facebook insists that the user identify personal characteristics upon signing up for the site, such as the user’s name, location, and affiliations. It also prompts the user to add more information over time and prompts the audience to ask the user for more information. Zhao et al. (2008) argue that the foundation of Facebook is also heavily rooted in what they call “anchored relationships” (p. 1819). These are offline relationships that can range from family members to acquaintances. Because Facebook encourages connecting online with these anchored relationships, it also encourages users to bring aspects of their offline lives onto their account, thus not allowing for total anonymity.

In contrast, websites such as Reddit allow users to post content such as news stories or questions on its main page or subpages, acting more like a forum. While users can interact with each other through comments on posts, socialization is not the intended purpose. Creating a Reddit account is free and users do not have to create profiles or even enter an email address. Users can create any username they choose and can share as much or as little information with

their fellow users as they want. As a result, sites such as Reddit are much easier to explore with an alternate persona than sites such as Facebook that encourage users to share more information about themselves. The nonymous nature of some social networking sites and the way that this affects what users are posting illustrates how important the audience is to the construction and performance of identity online. When sites are nonymous, users are more restricted in what they are able to post. When sites are anonymous, users are free to explore versions of their identity without fear of reaction from their peers.

SNS users have a variety of tools that can be used to display their identity. Users consciously choose what to reveal about themselves online and what to keep hidden. Because of this, the online identity is a deliberately constructed identity. Social networking sites themselves also contribute to the formation of identity, as the sites have embedded values that are impressed upon the user. The nonymous nature of some social networking sites limits the user's ability to present an online identity that is different from his or her offline identity. In the next section, we will see that users may not stray too far from their offline identity online but, in choosing what to post and what to keep hidden, they display a more positive identity online.

2.3 The Effects of Viewing An Altered Online Identity

Social networking sites were created with the intention of bringing users together, allowing them to communicate with anyone they can find online. SNSs provide a space for users to explore and express themselves (Labrecque et al., 2011). SNS use can improve a user's social capital, particularly for those who otherwise have difficulties forming and maintaining social ties in more traditional ways (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). SNSs also allow for information sharing; users can stay in touch with friends and family by sharing important life events online

and can also share news events and their opinions about such events (Chandrasekaran & Kanagavel, 2014). Some writers have suggested, however, that the increased use of SNSs can also impose negative effects on the user.

Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja, & Buxmann (2013) studied users' negative feelings that occurred as a result of following others on Facebook. The most commonly identified negative feeling was envy and the top reasons for that envy were the other users' travel and leisure time, social relationships, and general success and happiness. The feelings of envy had a negative effect on the participants' overall reporting of life satisfaction. Jordan et al. (2011) argue that while people can observe their own experiences and emotions across all settings, they can only observe the experiences and emotions of others in social settings. Not only do people tend to experience more positive emotions than negative emotions in social settings (Jordan et al., 2011), they also tend to suppress negative emotions more than positive emotions in social settings (Gross, Richards, & John, 2006). Because SNSs are a social setting, it would then make sense that SNS users would also suppress negative emotions online. People assume that because others look happy and content in public, they are the same way in their private life as well (Jordan et al., 2011). Jordan and colleagues (2011) found that participants reported hiding their negative emotions more than their positive emotions and overestimated positive emotions and underestimated negative emotions in others. Also, as predicted, they found that participants who overestimated the positive experiences and underestimated the negative experiences of others had lower measured life satisfaction scores. When a user sees an online friend posting pictures of a vacation, a post about a new promotion at work, or an updated status to reveal that he/she is in a relationship, the user may feel envious or inadequate in comparison. What the user may not

realize, however, is that this other user is suppressing negative emotions and experiences online and, as a result, looks much happier and successful than may really be the case.

2.4 Summary of the Literature

The literature explored above highlights some key concepts regarding social networking sites and identity. The audience plays an important role in the performance of identity. Identity construction online is also impacted by the sites themselves. SNS users portray a more positive identity online and this impacts how users feel about themselves while they are viewing other profiles. However, what I believe this literature fails to adequately do is attempt to provide an understanding, rationale, or motivation for these behaviours. Alexander Jordan and colleagues (2011), for example, used a survey to collect their data and drew conclusions from participants' answers to their questions. By not speaking directly with their participants, they failed to ask or answer the questions such as, "What does this mean to the participants?". My research aims to fill this gap by focusing on the perspective of the participant and applying two unique theoretical frameworks. I seek to answer many of the questions identified in the literature review but, using my methodology, also explore how SNS users feel about these concepts. By employing the work of Goffman (1959) and Foucault (1975) and their primary concepts of the performance of self and governmentality, I am able to explore these concepts in a new way and gain a deeper understanding of the behaviours exhibited on social networking sites.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This thesis draws on two main theoretical frameworks: Erving Goffman's work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and Michel Foucault's (1975) work on governmentality and power. Each framework brings a distinct view of online behaviours and together they offer a detailed understanding of the performance of identity online. Goffman's concept of the performance of identity is used to explain the behaviour that is occurring, and Foucault's notion of governmentality is used to provide an understanding of why such behaviour occurs.

2.5.1 Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

Goffman's work is being used in some of the very critical, relevant, and new literature on social networking sites (see, e.g., Davis, 2011; Uimonen, 2013; Labrecque et al., 2011; van Dijck, 2013; Farquhar, 2012; Wittkower, 2014). Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, as presented in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), compared the different ways people act in various social settings to theatrical performances. He argued that when two people come in contact with one another, one individual will attempt to create a certain impression of him or herself to the other by altering, suppressing, or putting forth various characteristics. Individuals act in different ways based on what they deem appropriate within a given circumstance or situation, and suppress characteristics that contradict their idealized self. Goffman differentiated between the *front stage*, where individuals are in front of an audience and presenting a skewed version of themselves to instill the desired impression to their audience, and the *back stage*, where individuals are alone or in a private space where they can truly be themselves (1959).

Goffman noted that the performer might be aware that he or she is presenting an altered or untrue version of him or herself, and he refers to this individual as the *cynic* (1959). However, some individuals are not aware that they behave or represent themselves differently in front of an audience, and they become fully taken in by their own act. Goffman proposed that people have different versions of themselves that they display based on their audience or with whom they may be interacting. For example, one may act or speak in a certain way to one's friends but very differently to one's family.

The advent of SNSs such as Twitter and Facebook has created a new version of self – the online self. Existing literature suggests that users of SNSs have online identities that differ in some ways from the versions of themselves they portray to the people they come in contact with in their daily lives, such as friends, family, and co-workers (Davis, 2011). The websites act as barriers between the true self and the self that is propelled into the public realm. The individual is not required to update his or her friends and followers with every detail of his or her life. A conscious decision is made about what to share and what to keep private. By selecting what to share with the audience, an SNS user engages in a reflexive process whereby they portray certain aspects of themselves while concealing others; this process can be perceived as impression management (Uimonen, 2013). The SNS itself also acts as a *front stage* for the individual to portray the version of the self that he or she wishes the audience to see. When performing his or her identity online, the SNS user has a variety of tools at their disposal, depending on the site, such as photographs, written comments, external content shared through the site, and shared personal information. These tools are akin to the wardrobe and props of Goffman's theatrical metaphor (Labrecque et al., 2011).

I argue Goffman's (1959) theory falls short of truly explaining the existence of online identities because he attributes the existence of the various versions of the self to the individual attempting to avoid embarrassment or embarrassing others. Goffman's work provides a thorough understanding of human interaction. However, it does not explain the underlying causes for the behavior; it merely analyzes the context. The goal of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of why SNS users behave the way they do online. Goffman argues that individuals attempt to come across a certain way to adhere to social norms so as to avoid creating an uncomfortable situation for any of the actors. This does not tell us enough about the motivations behind impression management. I argue more examination is needed with respect to why some individuals feel the need to represent themselves differently in various situational contexts. In this instance, Foucault's (1975) theory of governmentality complements Goffman's work to offer a more complete understanding of online identities.

2.5.2 Foucault's Discipline and Punish

Much of Foucault's work examines various discourses including governmentality and power. *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and later lectures on governmentality (1993) are perhaps the most useful of Foucault's work for understanding online identities. Of particular note are Foucault's concepts of power diffusion and self-regulation, his notion of power as normalizing and disciplinary, and the impact of power on discourse and the disciplinary individual.

Foucault (1975) used the panopticon as a metaphor for disciplinary societies. The panopticon is a central cylindrical structure that houses prison guards who can look out into the inward facing cells. The panopticon creates a possibility for constant observation. The prisoners do not know if or when they are being watched but the potential of being watched "tends to

normalize human activity and create a self-induced complicity with the rules” (Boyns, 2007, p. 393). The panopticon never intervenes; its power is exercised from a distance and without interaction between the watcher and the observed (Foucault, 1975). The panopticon demonstrates how power can be exercised over individuals to such an extent that individuals comply with the rules simply through surveillance alone. Individuals may no longer feel the anxiety of being watched because they have internalized it to such an extent that it becomes part of who they are and the basis for why they act the way they do.

Foucault defined government as a term that ranges from governing the self to governing others. Foucault (1993) argued that governing does not mean to “force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself” (p. 203-204). It is no longer necessary for social structures or specific institutions to exercise power over the individual. According to Foucault, successful forms of government function not only by governing behavior but also by governing individuals to regulate themselves. Boyns (2007) argued that Foucault believed power has become destructured and individualized, and that it now free-floats within society in multiple manifestations. One of these manifestations is self-surveillance; we internalize forms of power so we know without ever being told how we should act and what we should think. When we are watching ourselves and being watched by others, we act in such a way that we feel is appropriate and moral. Being watched has become normalized. While we have become aware that we are constantly being watched, we have also been watching others, as surveillance is becoming lateral. It is through measures of surveillance, and not only being watched but also being constructed as the watcher, that we have come to be responsabilized individuals.

Several authors have used a Foucauldian lens while engaging with the subject of social networking sites. Albrechtslund (2008) elaborates on Foucault's notions of surveillance, agreeing that we have moved from a top-down surveillance system to more lateral surveillance. He argues that peer-to-peer monitoring has "made us spies in a disciplinary society" (p. 12) and that surveillance has become a mutual practice. Albrechtslund further suggests that we have entered into participatory surveillance, which he describes as "user empowerment and the building of subjectivity and the understanding of online social networking as a sharing practice instead of an information trade" (p. 16). By revealing aspects of their personal lives, people claim "copyright" to their own lives and engage in the self-construction of identity (Albrechtslund, 2008). When individuals post comments on social media sites, they are inviting others to watch them and form opinions about the comments that they have made. Because SNSs have become environments of open dialogue, this surveillance has become lateral, and individuals can simultaneously be the watcher and the watched. The same individuals whose comments we are reading and passing judgment on are the audience for our own expressions.

In his critique of Foucault, Mathiesen (1997) argues that modern mass media has allowed for a reversal of the panopticon, from where the few saw the many to where the many now see the few or the many. Mathiesen describes this as "synopticism" (p. 219) and argues that we have transformed into a viewer society, where citizens have transitioned from being watched to being the watchers. We no longer have a powerful entity or institution to which we are accountable; we now act as being accountable to one another. This shift in power is largely attributed to the advent of new forms of media.

The popularity of SNSs means that much more of what was once a person's private life is taking place in the public sphere. Users of websites such as Twitter and Facebook are updating

their friends and followers of their various statuses, which allows their audience to watch them. These users are aware of this watching as they participate in themselves, and this means that they are (consciously or unconsciously) carefully selecting the messages they wish to portray to their audience.

2.6 Summary

The works of Goffman (1959) and Foucault (1993) provide appropriate theoretical frameworks for the examination of online identities and behaviours. The two frameworks are certainly distinct, however they complement one another to provide a comprehensive understanding of identity performance. Goffman's theory explains what Foucault's does not and vice versa. Goffman shows us how impression management occurs in social settings and defines the front stage and back stage as different environments in which the individual can portray different aspects of his or her identity. Goffman contextualizes and explains the behaviours that are occurring in a social exchange. While Foucault's work pays less attention to the exchange, his work goes deeper to explain why people behave the way they do during these exchanges. Foucault demonstrates the importance of surveillance in governing individuals and normalizing behaviour. We know that individuals act a certain way when they believe they are being watched and, rather than requiring external governance, individuals now govern themselves. I intend to apply these theoretical frameworks to the research findings and the discussion of online identity construction and performance. These frameworks will serve to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which SNS users present themselves online as well as the motivations behind their online behaviours.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Researchers have employed many different and unique approaches for studying identities on SNSs. For example, Facebook profile pictures have been used to explore cultural identities (Uimonen, 2013); diaries of online identities have been used to explore the influence of SNSs on identity and friendship (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009); and online surveys have been used to understand collective self-esteem (Baker, 2012). While existing studies have examined identity performance and SNSs (also see, e.g., Back et al., 2010; Hum et al., 2011), few studies have focused on the SNS users' own perspectives of their online identities or have attempted to explain the behaviour using sociological theories. This research utilizes an inductive-constructivist methodological approach and a qualitative research design in an attempt to fill the gap in the research.

In this chapter, I discuss the research purpose, design, and process, including: a) the approach to the research; b) the qualitative design; c) the recruitment strategy and collection of the data; and d) the analysis of the data. I include a brief overview of ethical considerations, and a discussion of the appropriateness of the research design.

3.1 Inductive-Constructivist Approach

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into online behaviours. My research question seeks to identify the impact of social networking sites on the construction and performance of identity from the perspective of the user. This question is best answered using qualitative research that draws on an inductive-constructivist approach.

Inductive reasoning is a process that moves from the bottom up, or from “a specific observation to empirical generalizations to theories” (Singleton & Straits, 2010, p. 33). An inductive approach will begin with an observation that is then noted to be a pattern. From this pattern will come a hypothesis, followed by a theory to explain what has been observed (Babbie, 2008). An inductive approach places importance on the initial observations and allows the research to unfold around it and to give meaning to the patterns identified by the researcher. The primary purpose of an inductive approach is “to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2016, p. 238). This approach is fitting of the research because it allows the initial behaviour noted by the researcher to form the basis of the research. The literature review substantiates the observation and establishes a pattern to be studied. Finally, the theoretical framework gives meaning to the pattern and provides an understanding of the behaviour.

In a constructivist approach, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is reshaped during the research process and the role of the researcher as author is brought to the forefront (Mills et. al, 2006). The researcher plays a central role in shaping both the data collection process and the findings. In this approach, “the researcher and researched co-construct the data – data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 402). The researcher’s perspectives are acknowledged, as what the researcher takes away from the data is shaped in part by the researcher’s previous perspectives (Charmaz, 2008). This type of approach is appropriate because the aim is to understand the perspectives of the participants on their own SNS use and identity and the meaning they give to this inquiry. This approach gives a voice to the perspectives and experiences of both the participants and researcher.

The inductive and constructivist approaches complement one another and combine to provide a fitting methodological approach for this research. This approach keeps the observed behaviour and experiences of the participant at the forefront while allowing for the literature review to provide context and the theories to provide understanding and meaning. It also allows for the consideration and input of the researcher's perspectives in making the initial observation, identifying the pattern and developing the findings.

3.2 Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research applies an inductive style and is used to understand or explore the meanings individuals ascribe to social phenomena (Creswell, 2014). The focus of this study was on the perspective of the participant, and so a qualitative approach was employed. Specifically, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews were conducted with individuals who are currently active on at least one social media website. Face-to-face interviews have proven to provide more complete answers than telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews also provide a greater opportunity for the interviewer to establish trust and rapport with a respondent (Singleton & Straits, 2010). While an interview guide (see Appendix A) was designed and consistently used, the interviews had an informal, semi-structured format and participants were encouraged to share whatever thoughts they had on the subject matter, regardless of the questions being asked. A semi-structured interview has specific objectives, but the researcher is permitted some freedom to adapt the interview to capitalize on participant experiences or insights (Singleton & Straights, 2010). This was an important aspect of the research design because each participant had a distinctive experience with SNSs: they used different sites, for different reasons, and each had a unique perspective that needed to be explored.

3.2.1 Participant Recruitment

A total of fifteen participants were recruited for this research. Sampling for qualitative studies is often purposive and participants are selected because they are likely to generate data that are useful for the project. The participants for this research were recruited using purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling. The choice to use these three methods was deliberate but there was a different rationale for each. For the purposive method, a posting on the PAWS Bulletin Board (see Appendix B) advertised the study and invited interested persons to contact me for more information or to participate. The PAWS Bulletin Board can be accessed by anyone who uses a University of Saskatchewan email address. The goal was not to recruit only students, but it was likely that the respondents to the posting would be primarily students. I did, however, receive inquiries from two participants through the posting who were not students and three other non-students were recruited using other methods. Anyone who saw the PAWS posting clearly had access to the Internet and a majority of young people with Internet access are also SNS users. I therefore deduced that recruitment via the PAWS posting would reach an appropriate target audience for this research. I decided to use snowball sampling once the interviews were underway as a few of the participants were very enthusiastic about the research and told me they had friends they thought would be interested in participating as well. I was contacted by four individuals who were referred to the study by previous participants; however, I ended up only conducting interviews with two of them. My decision to use convenience sampling was made prior to the data collection process. In developing the plan for the data analysis, two individuals I was already acquainted with expressed interest in participating before I began the recruitment process. Both were enthusiastic about the research and I felt they would provide valuable data.

The three sampling methods used proved to be effective in recruiting participants for this research.

The only two inclusion criteria for participants were that they be currently active on at least one social networking site and that they be at least 18 years old. Because the goal of the research is to understand the way SNS users present and perceive their online identity, it was not necessary for me to speak to those who are not SNS users. Children under the age of 18 were also deliberately excluded. Many social networking sites place restrictions on minors. Facebook, for example, protects minors' sensitive information such as contact information and school from public searches and has designed features to limit minors' interactions with strangers (Facebook, 2016). Eighty-four percent of parents also report monitoring or restricting their child(ren)'s use of social networking sites in some way (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016). While most children under the age of 18 are active users of social networking sites ("The History of Social Networking", 2016), an argument could be made regarding limitations in the way they can use the sites, imposed by both their parents and the sites themselves. As such, children are not free to explore and portray their identity in the same way as adults. It would therefore not be appropriate to analyze the behaviours of children and adults in the same study. As the majority of the literature reviewed for this project focused on SNS use by adults, I chose to exclude those under 18 from the study.

In total, eleven of the participants were recruited via the PAWS Bulletin Board. The post advertised the study and criteria for participation and I received many responses from interested parties immediately after it was posted. A few responders opted out of participating once they learned that the study was voluntary and they would not be compensated for their time. Arranging interviews with other responders proved difficult and they either stopped replying or

stated that they could not find the time to meet. Two participants were referred to the study by other participants. Although pseudonyms are used in the transcriptions, I had to inform these two participants and the participants who referred them that it was possible they would be able to identify one another in quotations used in the research. The referred participants were informed of this prior to the interview beginning, and had no problem continuing with any of the questions. The referring participants were informed after the interview with the referred participant occurred, and they both chose not to omit or alter any of the statements made in their interviews. All communication with participants was conducted via email. Each participant chose a pseudonym prior to beginning their interview, which was used in the transcript and throughout data analysis. Thirteen participants I interviewed chose to meet with me on campus in the group study rooms on the ground floor of the Murray Library. I pre-booked these rooms for each interview, as they provided a setting that was private, with a closed door that allowed for a high degree of confidentiality. The other two participants, both of whom were known to me prior to the study, met with me at my home. This again was a private setting, with just the participant and I present.

Fifteen interviews were conducted. Although I continued to receive a range of responses in terms of basic characteristics and levels and types of use of SNSs from each participant, I decided to stop scheduling interviews after fifteen because I believe I had collected data that addressed the questions I wanted to answer. I was beginning to receive similar responses to many of the questions I was asking. The research questions appeared to be answered in the fifteen interviews because the sentiments strongly echoed one another. I did not anticipate uncovering any glaringly contradictory statements from any further interviews.

3.2.2 Data Collection

The interview process began with the participant filling out a demographic form, which asked for their chosen pseudonym, age, gender, and occupation (see Appendix C). The interview guide asked a few general questions about the participant's SNS use, including which sites they used, how often, and for what purpose. The interview guide also sought a more in-depth analysis of the participant's SNS use, including questions about their specific online behaviours and experiences. The initial goal of the interviews was to assess whether each participant believed their online identity was different in some way than their offline identity; however, as the interviews progressed both the interviewer and the participants identified new themes on the subject worth exploring.

During the interviews, participants were asked to log in to the SNS account they identified using the most and were asked specific questions about various postings and activity on their profile. My use of visual SNS posts follows the *think-aloud method* originally developed by Ericsson & Simon (1993) but more recently used by Young (2013). Think-aloud data refers to participant comments made throughout the engagement with an activity, rather than only at selected points during the activity (Young, 2005). Young noted some advantages of using the think-aloud method are a reduction in problems associated with memory failure trying to recall an event or action and producing more reliable results than if asked to report on a hypothetical situation (Young, 2005). Young (2013) utilized qualitative interviews alongside Facebook profile viewing. She interviewed 18 active Facebook users along with verbal protocols "where each participant viewed their profile while talking aloud to the researcher about its construction and contents" (p. 4). The goal of Young's research was to "give a voice to active Facebook users and provide insights into the decisions that underpin their use of the Facebook

site” (p. 4). Young explored the tools used by participants to create an online identity, such as status updates, photographs, and groups and pages. Similarly, my research involved a simultaneous exploration of the participant’s SNS accounts while conducting each interview. During my interviews, I asked specific questions about various postings and activity on their profile while we viewed the page together. This allowed the participants to explain exact posts rather than generalize behaviours or draw conclusions about certain things from memory. It also allowed the research to focus on the voice of the participant and provided insight into the decisions behind what they were posting.

The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes. During the recruitment process, participants were informed that the interview would take roughly 45 minutes and, prior to beginning the interview, participants were told to share as much or as little information as they would like and to not feel as though they were restricted to discussing any particular issue or answering a specific set of questions. Each interview was audio recorded, and participants were told that we could stop recording at any time. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to fill out a transcript release form and indicate whether they would like to review the transcript of the interview once it was completed (see Appendices C & D). Only four of the fifteen participants chose to review their transcripts.

As another layer of data collection, I took extensive field notes during the interviews to record other information about the participant that would not have been captured through the audio recording, such as gestures indicating a comment was sarcastic or that a pause before an answer was pensive or apprehensive. The field notes also consisted of probing questions I wanted to ask the participant at a later stage of the interview, based on a response that was given, as well as questions that I wanted to add to my interview guide based on a potential new theme

that was uncovered during an interview. I made notes during the interviews about themes that I wanted to investigate further and would likely analyze once data collection was complete. Interviews were transcribed within two to three days from when they took place, and the transcripts were immediately sent via email to the four participants who requested them for review. Three of the participants did not wish to make any alterations to their transcript and sent the signed Transcript Release Forms back immediately via email. The fourth participant did not respond to my emails requesting review of their transcript and was subsequently eliminated from the dataset. As such, the final dataset included field notes and interviews with fourteen participants.

Once all participants consented to their transcripts being used for the research, I began reading through the transcripts line by line alongside my notes from the interviews. I decided several topics that had been identified and discussed by the participants were relevant themes for further analysis. Each participant and their transcript were then entered into NVivo for further coding and analysis, as described below.

3.2.3 Discussion of Research Design

A qualitative approach was found to be suitable and useful for studying SNS users' perspectives of identity online. Semi-structured interviews allowed to me hear the experiences and perspectives directly from the participants, in their own words. Participants were able to identify what was relevant and important to them in their experiences online, without being directed by a rigid interview guide. The method allowed me as a researcher to explore new topics and ideas as they emerged, rather than fixating on a pre-existing notion of what would be

discovered in the interviews. This approach resulted in uncovering more and different themes than were originally intended.

The participants responded positively to the interviews. All seemed comfortable during the process and none seemed reluctant to share with me. Some interviews resulted in the discussion of deeply personal matters; I believe the assurance of anonymity as well as the private and secure locations of the interviews allowed the participants to feel as though they could open up. Two participants referred additional participants to the study, which shows that they thought the interview was a worthwhile use of their time. I received very kind emails when following up with participants after the interviews, and all said they enjoyed taking part and were looking forward to reading the final thesis when it was available.

3.3 Data Analysis

To properly analyze the data, I performed a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method fits appropriately with the constructivist grounded approach because it also acknowledges the active role of the researcher. When researchers simplify data analysis by reporting that themes ‘emerged’ or were ‘discovered’, they deny the role the researcher plays in identifying patterns and themes, selecting which patterns are of interest and which to report to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic analysis allows the researcher to decide how the data will be formulated into themes and to decide what will be reported. A theme may be presented many times by many participants or it may only appear in a small amount of data, so the researcher’s judgment is necessary; the researcher must decide the criteria for what will constitute a theme and whether the development of a particular theme will be key to the overall

research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The “‘keyness’ of a theme... [refers to] whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p. 10). For the purposes of this research, I decided that a key theme must be one that addresses one of the research question or sub-questions. It was also relevant to explore data that related to the literature review, whether participants were confirming or refuting what had been claimed in previous work. These parameters formed the basis of the thematic analysis.

The thematic analysis began during the interview process. Because the interviews were only guided by an open-ended questionnaire and there was no rigid line of questioning, I was able to examine what I believed to be key discussions with the participants as they arose. For example, if a participant made a comment that referenced previous literature or provided insight into a research question then I would explore the topic further in dialogue with them.

Once the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed, I imported them into NVivo software so they could be coded. Although I only used the software at its most basic level, it was a very helpful tool to identify key topics and ideas, keep my work organized, and eventually transform the data into relevant themes. After importing the interviews, I reviewed my field notes to remind myself of key themes I noted as recurring, intriguing, or worth investigating. I then began reading through each interview in NVivo, line by line. When I came across a noteworthy passage – one that confirmed or refuted the previous literature or one that provided insight into a research question – I coded it accordingly.

Throughout this process I was cognizant of my preconceptions, including the initial inferences I drew after reviewing the field notes and the pre-determined areas of interest I wanted to explore. To maintain a focus on the voice and perspective of the participant, I was vigilant in reading each passage carefully so as to not misconstrue the meaning of each

quotation. I referred back again to my field notes, which identified body language and other non-verbal cues to help decipher meaning. In some instances, I also listened to the audio recording of the interview a second time to pick up on tone and inflections in the participant's voice to further understand the true intention of a comment.

The first round of analysis resulted in eight categories of nodes, which represented key, recurring topics commented on or addressed by the participants. I reread the passages that had been coded at each node and developed three relevant themes. I then categorized the nodes into themes and read through the interviews a final time to ensure I had not missed any important comments or any other potential themes.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Careful attention was paid to the research design and data collection process to ensure minimal risk to participants. This study received approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on June 15th, 2015. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were not compensated for their participation. Guidelines were followed in terms of confidentiality and informed consent (see Appendix F – Consent Forms). I was the only person to make contact with the participants and arrangements for interviews were made via email. The participants' email addresses were never stored. When a participant expressed interest in the study, he or she then received an information sheet that detailed the purpose of the study, the possible risks to participants, the measures that would be taken to ensure confidentiality, and the intentions for the dissemination of the data (see Appendix G). After agreeing to participate and prior to the interview, each participant was asked to sign a consent form. During the audio recording of the interview, the participant was never referred to

by name. After the interview, the participant was only referred to by the chosen pseudonym to ensure anonymity with respect to anyone reviewing the data. I stored the audio recordings of the interviews on a password protected Smartphone and stored the transcribed interviews on a password protected computer.

3.5 Summary and Reflection

As noted, an inductive-constructivist approach acknowledges the role of the researcher throughout the data collection process (Mills et al., 2006). As I reflected on the data collection, I was reminded of how my perspective and experiences informed the study. Because I am familiar with SNSs and have used a few of them, I likely communicated with participants about SNSs in a different manner than would a non-user. Certain behaviours and phrases were assumed to be understood without explanation required. For example, several of the participants made reference to *Facebook creeping*, which I understood immediately to mean a form of mild online stalking whereby one user looks in on another's profile to gain information without revealing that he or she is doing so. I have used this term conversationally with fellow SNS users and thus did not require participants to explain what this term meant. An interviewer who had never heard this term before may have asked participants to define it and may have had a different understanding of what this behaviour entails. I believe my knowledge of social networking sites, behaviours, and terminology allowed me to reach a deeper level of communication with the participants. Because I understood many of their experiences, our conversations were more informal and less questioning. We were able to discuss with an unspoken agreement that we understood one another without having to question, quantify, and define every statement that was made.

I was also aware of my preconceived notions about SNS behaviours as I was conducting the interviews and analyzing the data. For example, I have seen other users exaggerate or falsify behaviours online. In my personal experience, I believe this to be a somewhat common practice among many users. When I asked participants whether they had these experiences or felt like this was occurring, I had to be extremely careful not to reveal my biases or ask questions in a leading way. For example, I knew I could not ask, “Do you think this person is being honest about what they posted here?” I tried to frame my questions in more general terms, asking instead, “What do you think of this profile?” At times this kind of questioning required more follow up (for example, “What do you mean?”) but it was necessary to maintain the integrity of the interview. The most integral component of the data was the participants’ words – their phrasing and expressions of how they felt. I knew I could not compromise their words by imposing my feelings about a subject or interpreting an answer in a way that would confirm my beliefs.

The methodological process described was most appropriate for this qualitative research. The most important aspect of the research goals was to focus on the perspective of the participants. This could only be achieved by conducting face-to-face interviews. The consideration paid to ethical protocols allowed the participants to feel secure in sharing their opinions with me and allowing me insight into their online world. An inductive-constructivist approach affirmed the importance of the voice of the participant while still allowing for my perspectives as a researcher to be acknowledged. The importance of the voice of the participant was reaffirmed in my careful analysis of interview transcripts, as I was cautious not to draw incorrect conclusions about any statements and took the steps necessary to be sure I understand the true intention of each statement.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

As mentioned, the experiences and insights of fourteen participants provided the data for this study. Only three of the participants were male, which could have been a limitation, if the experiences of male and female participants had been notably different. However after completing the interviews, I found that gender and the differences in experiences online between genders did not appear as a theme identified or explored by any of the participants. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest was 33. Six of the participants were undergraduate students, three were graduate students, and five were working professionals. The participants are each referred to below by their chosen pseudonym. This section will provide an introduction to each participant, including their age, gender, and occupation as well as general characteristics of their use of the identified SNSs.

The first participant interviewed was Claire. Claire is a 25-year-old female working professional. Claire is an avid user of social networking sites and has been for many years. She uses Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat a few times each day and has used each site since they started becoming popular among her peers. Claire identified using Instagram the most, both in terms of posting and spending time viewing others' posts. Her main reason for using Facebook is to "stay in the loop", and she said she felt as though there was really no point to Instagram.

Kelly is a 20-year-old female undergraduate student. Kelly was very eager to participate in the study as she said she finds the "social media world quite fascinating". Kelly uses Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest. She also mentioned that she used to have an Instagram account, but she had recently deleted it. She has used Facebook the longest, for approximately 5 years. Kelly had also deleted her Facebook account just after she had graduated from high school, and reactivated it about a month prior to the interview. Kelly had noticed a

difference in the way she uses Facebook now; she used to post much more personal information on her profile but now she uses the site more for reading and sharing external content.

Spencer is a 24-year-old female undergraduate student who is also self-employed. Spencer mainly uses Facebook and Instagram, but also has a Twitter account. She uses Facebook and Instagram multiple times daily, both for posting and viewing others' posts. She originally set up a Twitter account as a way of promoting her business and networking, but she did not find it more beneficial than the other sites she was using. Spencer uses Instagram to post photos and follow other users who have similar interests and she uses Facebook primarily for sharing and reading external content.

Mackenzie is a 20-year-old female undergraduate student. Mackenzie has used Facebook and Twitter for approximately 8 years and has used Tumblr and Instagram for a few years. She started using Facebook "because everybody had it", and created profiles for each of the other sites because her friends were using them as well. She uses Facebook and Instagram multiple times a day, mostly for checking on other users' profiles or "scrolling through it just for something to do."

Jacqueline is a 29-year-old female working professional. Jacqueline has used Facebook since it first became popular among her peers (approximately in 2008), Twitter for about 6 years, and FetLife, which is a site similar to Facebook but with a focus on fetishes, for about 4 years. Jacqueline uses Twitter mostly as a news source, to see what is happening in her city, and also to follow feminist Tweeters. She uses Facebook mostly to connect with people she already knows and she uses FetLife to connect with users who have a shared interest in the topics she posts on the site.

Angelina is a 27-year-old female graduate student. Angelina was very interested in participating in the study; however, she admitted in our early emails that she was not very active on SNSs. The only site she uses is Facebook, and she checks it at least once a day but does not post very often. Angelina started using Facebook in 2006 when she first moved into residence on campus because everyone else had it. Now she uses it to stay in touch with people she knows in real life and also to feed her curiosity about people she has lost touch with over the years.

Cat is a 25-year-old female undergraduate student. She is currently active on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat and logs into each of them at least once a day. Cat uses Facebook mostly for announcements related to her program at school and events. She uses Snapchat and Instagram to share pictures with her close friends.

Jake is a 21-year-old male undergraduate student. He uses Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, and Reddit. Jake uses Flickr, which is a photo posting site similar to Instagram, and Reddit the most, checking both sites at least once a day. He uses Facebook and Instagram to keep in touch with his friends, Flickr to manage all of his photos (as he is an amateur photographer), and Reddit to get information about a wide range of subjects. He spends more time posting content on Flickr but spends more time reading content or posting comments on Reddit.

Mo is an 18-year-old female undergraduate student. She uses Snapchat and Pinterest but spends the majority of her online time on Facebook. She has used Facebook for 6 or 7 years and uses it every day, multiple times a day. Mo used to communicate with her friends through Facebook but said she mostly does that via texting now, so Facebook has now become something she uses to waste time or to see what other people are up to.

Cara is a 33-year-old graduate student. She uses Facebook and two different chatting programs called Telegram and Viber. She uses Facebook the most, checking in several times a

day. Cara is new to Canada, coming from a country where SNS use is also popular among her peers and uses the site as a way of staying in touch with her friends and family back home. Aside from using the site for communication, Cara posts clips and articles about things in which she is interested, such as music and theatrical performances.

Kate is a 31-year-old female working professional. She uses Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, but uses Twitter the most and spends about 3 to 4 hours per day logged on to the site. Kate uses Facebook primarily to keep in touch with family members and does not post very often on it. She used to post quite often on Twitter but she recently made changes to the list of Tweeters she follows and now follows more “real thinker types”. She feels the need to talk less, so she spends more time reading what others have posted.

Alex is a 22-year-old male working professional. He uses Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat and has used all three since they started becoming popular with his friends. He checks all three sites multiple times a day but probably spends the most time on Instagram. He uses Snapchat to send funny pictures and videos to his close friends. He uses Facebook and Instagram to post pictures of things he is doing or things in which he is interested.

Emma is a 25-year-old female graduate student. She has previously used Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter but the only site she is currently active on is Instagram. She has used Instagram for about two years and checks it multiple times a day. She does not post very often and is a self-described *lurker* (someone who reads information but does not post or participate in the communication). She uses Instagram to follow accounts in which she is interested, such as musicians, comedians, and news blogs, as well as keep up with what is going on in her friends’ lives.

The final participant is Hank. Hank is a 26-year-old male working professional. He has used Facebook for eight years (since high school) and has used Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn for a few years. He uses Instagram and Snapchat daily, LinkedIn about twice a week, and Facebook about once a week. The only SNS on which Hank posts actively is Snapchat. He uses Instagram to post occasional photos of things he is doing and to see what his friends are posting. He uses Facebook mostly for events and uses LinkedIn to make business connections and to read business news.

The participants, while different in many ways, shared many similarities. The most common sites used are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Other sites used are Pinterest, LinkedIn, Reddit, FetLife, Viber, Telegram, Flickr, and Tumblr. The most common reasons for using the sites were to connect or stay connected to friends and family and to receive information comprising both news and information from the users' social circles. All participants reported using at least one site daily and most spend more time reading content than posting content. Each participant provided a unique perspective and offered interesting and valuable insights regarding their firsthand experiences while engaging with SNSs.

4.1 Introduction to Findings

The goal of the research was to explore and gain insight into the way SNS users perform and perceive their online identity. Interestingly, most of the participants at the beginning of the interviews claimed they had not reflected often or at all on the performance of their identity online. All of the participants used an SNS at least once a day; however, many seemed to regard it as a routine, everyday activity that did not require a lot of thought or introspection. Mo, for example, said her main reason for using SNSs is to fill her time when she is bored. When asked

what she would miss most about her Facebook account if she was to delete it, she said that she would have to find another way to fill her time. This sentiment was echoed by many of the participants. While SNS technology is quite new and allows us to do things that were inconceivable even 10 years ago, it has become so commonplace and standard in many people's lives that the participants did not view their experiences online as profound in any way. What I did discover, however, was that the participants were making choices when it came to every aspect of their online behaviour. Some of these choices were deliberate, even concerted, and some were subconscious; however, all led to a carefully constructed SNS profile. Analyzing the findings through the lenses of Goffman and Foucault's theoretical frameworks gives meaning to the experiences of the participants. The theories provide a deeper understanding of the participants' behaviour and offer a rationale to why the behaviours occur.

Three themes and five sub-themes related to the construction of identity online were identified. The first theme is Props for Performance. The second theme is Construction of Identity with Consideration of Audience and features two subthemes: The Importance of Anonymity and The User as a Watcher. The third theme is The Ideal Online Identity and features three subthemes: Avoiding Negativity, The Screen, and The Impact of Positivity Online.

4.2 Theme: Props for Performance

Part way through each interview, usually when the participant referenced something he or she had posted online or when the participant talked about the site they used most frequently, I asked them to log in to one of the SNS accounts they used most often. This is when the use of the think-aloud method, as utilized by Young (2013), began. For most participants, the site they identified using most often was Facebook, although a few showed me their Instagram or Twitter

pages and one participant showed me his Flickr account. As we scrolled through their profile, I asked each participant probing questions such as “Why did you choose to post this picture?” or “What do you think this profile picture says about you?” This think-aloud method and the ability to view the profile firsthand were instrumental in my understanding of how the participant constructed his or her profile.

This method highlighted the tools the participants were using to express themselves online. Photo sharing was the most common activity on all of the sites I examined with the participants. Photos were used to show activities the participant was doing, especially travelling or socializing with friends, but many participants posted photos of just themselves, taken by themselves, called *selfies*. I asked each of the participants to reflect on what they thought the images they were sharing were conveying to their audience. Kelly, for example, said, “All of my profile pictures are of me, so I maybe look a bit conceited.” Hank said he thought he came across on his Instagram account as a positive, funny, adventurous, social person who does a lot of fun things and parties a lot. Cara posted a lot of news articles, videos, pictures, and posts about books she was reading and theatre performances she had attended. After reviewing her posts, Cara thought her page made her look pretentious, as if she was bragging about her intelligence through these posts. She had posted a list of books she read on her Facebook page and pondered how that made her come across to her viewers. Cara said she thought her family back home might say, “okay, so what, you read 50 books. Are you proud of it or something? What do we do with that information?”, as if it was not worth posting except to make others think that she was well-read.

Social networking sites also display the user’s audience, with some limitations based on whether the account is public or private. Facebook shows how many *friends* the user has while

Twitter and Instagram show how many accounts the user is *following* and how many *followers* the user has. While most participants did not view the number of other users in their audience as important, a few participants did comment on what that number may convey to others. Kelly, for example, said “I have 500 friends [on Facebook]. I don’t know 500 people, but it would look like I have a lot of friends on here.” Kelly’s profile creates the appearance of a larger social circle online than she has offline.

Facebook allows users to identify music, movies, and books they enjoy as well as *like* certain pages that represent businesses, organizations, causes, or events. This tool was not actively utilized by the participants that I spoke with. In fact, many of the participants stated that they had not updated this part of their profile since they joined Facebook. When reflecting on her profile, Spencer said:

If you look at the movies and music part, I would probably see this as more of a juvenile profile, but that’s also because I know I posted those things when I first joined Facebook. And none of that has really changed.

One of the relatively newer Facebook features is the sharing of external content, and this has become very popular among users. Many of the profiles I viewed had links to videos, news articles, songs, recipes, and funny pictures or clips. The sharing of external content is another way that the user can express themselves by showing their audience what they are interested in or what is important to them.

Using the think-aloud method, I was able to analyze profiles and posts alongside each participant. This allowed me to identify the tools used to create a profile of the SNS user. This method proved to be invaluable and also revealed the weaknesses of other studies that implored different methodologies. For example, in van Dijck’s (2013) study, he compared the way the

platforms of Facebook and LinkedIn cater to different types of self-expression, communication, and self-promotion. He examined the two sites to explore how the platform interfaces shape identity. This research provided valuable information about how social networking sites structure the way users present themselves online. However, it did not account for the choice that users have in the way they present themselves. The think-aloud method allowed me to question the participants' choices and more fully understand how they constructed their profiles. Every aspect of the profile – the displayed number of friends, the profile photo chosen, the personal information posted, and each piece of content shared – forms the online image of the SNS user that is portrayed to his or her audience.

Reflecting on Goffman's work, this theme demonstrates how SNS users perform their identity on the front stage, the social networking site. The tools utilized by the participants can be described using Goffman's theatrical metaphor as props for the performance of identity. The online mechanisms that are used to create a profile are like an actor's wardrobe and props that are used to convey a character to the audience.

4.3 Theme: Construction of Identity with Consideration of Audience

One of the questions I hoped to answer in this research was how the audience affected online identity construction. The interview guide was designed with questions meant to encourage the participant to consider who they are online and how this persona may differ from the way they present themselves offline. For example, I asked the participants to describe the person they saw on their profile page, as if they were an outsider viewing the page. The participant would identify a post and describe the impression it left on them. I then asked how

these identified traits compared to the traits and behaviours the participant felt he or she exhibited offline.

Most participants said they felt they were the same person online and offline, with a few minor variations that were different for different users. Some users said they came across as funnier or smarter online than in person because they were able to consider their words more carefully when they were typing as opposed to speaking to someone directly. Mackenzie, for example, posted and commented a lot about social issues on her Facebook account, so the impression one would get by viewing her page is that she is someone who is very engaged in these issues and likely spends time volunteering or raising awareness for various causes. While Mackenzie does care about these issues, she does not spend much time or energy on them offline:

I'd like to think I do care about a lot of social issues. I don't really know how to do anything about it though and so like social media, at least getting awareness out is like my best way of doing things.

When I asked the participants why there were slight variations in the way they acted or portrayed themselves, each participant gave the same answer: they tailor their online behaviours to their online audience. Each participant said they engaged or did not engage in certain behaviours online because they were aware of who was in their audience and who would be privy to the activity on their SNS. Cat for example, said:

...it's that whole idea that you're always being watched. And when people feel like they're being watched, they always act different.

The participants all deliberately chose their audience – some chose to keep their accounts totally public and therefore open for anyone to see, and some employed privacy settings that

would allow them to grant or deny access to each user who requested it. Those users who had a private profile selected each member of their audience intentionally.

Every participant said that they considered who would view their post before they posted it. Angelina, for example, has her Facebook profile set to completely private, meaning she has to approve each person who requests to be her friend and only then can they view any part of her profile. Even with these security settings, Angelina said she will not post anything on her profile that she would not want a potential employer to see. Cat echoed this sentiment, recalling that her College got an informal warning about social media activity from their Dean at the beginning of the school year. Cat said they were told:

...a lot of our workplaces are going to be electronic by the time we graduate, we have to be really cautious of how many people can find us through that... just know that it's not necessarily as private as you think it is.

Kate was working for Elections Canada at the time of our interview, so while she said she is normally very politically vocal on her Twitter account, she was making an attempt to appear more bipartisan and professional.

Aside from potential employers, some participants admitted they behaved a certain way online to create a certain impression with respect to an ex-partner. Claire said:

I had [my ex] on Facebook and Instagram so I would post pictures where I looked super good or if I was with another guy. So it was like 'look at how wonderful I'm doing, look at how good I look', when I was actually probably eating a tub of ice cream while I was posting it.

Kelly was followed on Instagram by both her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend and noted that, because of this, she would only post very flattering pictures of herself on the site.

Family members were another commonly identified group that influenced what participants posted. As Cat said, “my mom’s on Facebook recently, so that has changed a lot of, not necessarily what I post because I’m fairly open with her but the language I use to post it.” Spencer noted that Facebook is becoming more popular among an older generation and she has noticed a lot of family members have started accounts. She said:

I do have a lot of family members on Facebook in particular. And half the time I start writing something and I think, okay if my mom sees this or my dad sees this, what are they going to say.

The idea of censorship of self based on one’s audience caused some participants to deny online friendships with people in their offline lives, including family. Angelina said she recently denied her uncle’s request to be her friend on Facebook and she is hoping that he does not realize that. Angelina said she felt as though she was already censoring herself so much on Facebook because of the other family members that she has as friends, and she did not want her uncle reporting her online activity to her parents.

The audience did prove to be a source of frustration for some users who felt stifled by their watchers. Kate explained how complicated self-censorship can be, deciding on spontaneous versus professional appearances:

I have a list of people who follow me that I’m kind of impressed by or proud of so I try to keep kind of cognizant of that list when I’m tweeting. Although not always because sometimes when I think about everybody that could be reading it I could lose some of the spontaneity of it and playfulness of it that I really like and that I think people really respond to. And then I get angry at myself because an outlet has been denied to me and I can’t express myself as much as I like. So I go back and forth from being like,

professional is not really the right word, but maybe the closest word, to being more like playful and irreverent I guess.

Overall, the participants were always mindful of who was reading their online posts. The knowledge of the audience's presence altered what they posted. It detracted from certain behaviours, especially swearing and posting photos showing parties or drugs and alcohol. While some participants used privacy setting to restrict access to a certain group of people, even those participants with the most private profiles admitted they had concerns at times about who was viewing their profile. These findings reflect what has been noted in the literature, particularly by Marwick & boyd (2010), who argue that SNS users are aware of their audience and consider that audience when they post.

This theme demonstrates how participants monitored and controlled their behaviour as a result of being watched, similar to how the prisoners responded in Foucault's panopticon metaphor. The prisoners never knew when the guards were gazing into their cells but they knew that being watched was always a possibility. The threat of being watched resulted in the prisoners monitoring their own behaviour and complying with the rules. Similarly, SNS users do not know who specifically will view their post or when. The potential of an audience member viewing the post is what causes the user to reflect on what they are posting to ensure it is appropriate in the eyes of the audience.

4.3.1 Sub-theme: The Importance of Anonymity

Some participants noted that the SNSs they use are not anonymous, and they therefore cannot stray from their offline self when they are online. Emma, for example, said, "all of my Facebook friends know me in real life. If I say or do something on my Facebook page that is a

lie, or isn't really me or is different from the way I really act, all of these people are going to call me out on it." Most SNSs are heavily anchored in offline relationships. While users can follow anyone online, including politicians and celebrities, the audiences of the users I talked to were only comprised of people that the user knew in some way offline. The participants that I interviewed used their real names and real photographs of themselves on their SNS accounts. Because they are representing their offline self on their SNS profile, the participants said that there is little room for exaggeration or falsification.

One exception to using real names and true identities online was online dating sites, where this behavior was noted to be more common. None of the participants I interviewed identified using dating websites. However, Emma explains:

People lie or stretch the truth way more on dating sites. My friend is on Tinder and she's gone out with guys she met [on Tinder] a few times. One time the guy [she met] looked nothing like his profile picture, he had obviously used a really old picture from when he was in better shape physically, or maybe it wasn't even him in the picture, I don't know. And another time the guy's profile said he was a teacher. But on the date she found out he was actually unemployed but had worked as a substitute [educational assistant] a few years ago.

Emma said the purpose of a dating website is to meet someone new and, because this person does not know you, he or she does not have any preconceived notions of who you are. Therefore, there is more motivation to come across a certain way and more freedom to explore and present different versions of the self. On a site such as Facebook, however, most, if not all, of a user's friends know the user in some way offline. As such, other users in the audience would know if a user were to misrepresent him or herself.

Another site where users do not need to disclose their real identity is Reddit. Jake was the only participant who mentioned using Reddit. Reddit is more of a blog than a social networking site because it is primarily used for content sharing, especially for news stories. However, it does allow for social interaction among its users. Users can post comments to one another and start threads on any topic, for example asking advice on a personal issue. Jake said that he is more opinionated on Reddit than he is on Facebook or even offline because Reddit is anonymous – he does not use his real name and none of the other users on Reddit know who he is offline. Jake said he felt more comfortable sharing his opinions knowing that he is anonymous, and no one from his real life can associate him with those opinions.

While SNS users admit to altering their image online, they are somewhat limited in their ability to do so due to the nonymous nature of most social networking sites. Many SNSs such as Facebook have embedded values of connecting users with those they know offline. Sites such as Facebook and Instagram suggest new users to connect with based on the users' existing friend database. Because the participants in this research are connecting online with people they know offline, they are not able to portray extremely different versions of themselves online. This confirms what was noted by Zhao et al. (2008), who argue that Facebook in particular is a nonymous site. While SNS users can connect with anyone online, the participants in this study noted that their online audience is mostly, if not entirely, comprised of individuals they are acquainted with someway offline.

4.3.2 Sub-theme: The User as a Watcher

While describing the ways in which they use SNSs, most participants construed themselves as watchers. The participants were all very much aware of who their audience was and who was watching them online, and were also aware that they too are an audience for others' online activities.

When asked for what purpose they used each SNS, most participants noted that Facebook and Instagram were used to keep up with what their friends were doing. Claire, for example, said, "I'm kind of a nosy person so I like knowing what's going on with everybody." Many participants stated they wanted to "stay in the loop" and that Instagram and Facebook were helpful for doing so. Mackenzie said, "I know Facebook is used by a lot of people to just like 'Facebook creep'. That's how I found one of my roommates, every time I get applications for my place, I'll look them up on Facebook."

When asked whether they spend more time posting content or viewing content posted by others, every participant said they spent more time viewing content posted by others. In fact, some participants who spent hours on SNSs a day admitted they rarely posted anything. The act of reading other SNS activity without posting is called *lurking*. *Lurking* is how the participants spent the majority of their SNS time and it also seemed to make the participants more aware of the fact that other users are also *lurkers*.

Admitting and understanding that they are an audience of others' SNS activity further reinforced to the participants that they are being watched online by others. Emma said, "I guess if I think about it, I'm creeping on other people so I have to assume that other people are creeping on me too." Claire said that when she used to add someone new on Facebook or Instagram, she would scroll through their current feed immediately to see what they had been

posting. She said when she caught herself doing that, she wondered if other users do the same thing to her when they add her. Now when Claire becomes friends with someone new on a social networking site, rather than looking at their profile, she looks at her own. She said:

If an ex started following me all of a sudden I would like go back and look through my pictures and see if I thought I looked cute or if he would think I look cute. If an old friend I hadn't seen in a long time started following me I'd look back and see like how do I look? How would this person think I'm doing now?

Here, she is assuming that the new friend will view her profile and she wants to see how she comes across to this new friend.

Lurking is common online behaviour of SNS users. The participants all reported spending more time viewing content posted by other users than posting content themselves. By acknowledging their role as a watcher, the participants are further aware of being watched by others. This demonstrates how surveillance on SNSs is lateral and mutual. Rather than a top-down or even bottom-up approach to surveillance, SNSs feature no hierarchy when it comes to watching. All users are being watched and all users are watching others.

4.4 Theme: The Ideal Online Identity

Throughout the interviews, participants identified behaviours and characteristics that they exhibit online more often than they do offline. I asked the participants in what ways were they different online than offline as well as whether they believe that their friends or the people they follow online are honest about who they are online. Many participants said posts are honest but deceptive through omission. Angelina, for example, said,

I actually believe that they're honest, I don't believe that they've made any of it up. But I do think that they are more one dimensional in posting things they want others to see and hiding everything else.

All of the participants admitted they attempted to appear in a more positive light online by only posting things that make them look happy, smart, successful, or whatever positive trait was important to them. Alex described how his SNS profiles are carefully constructed:

It's not like I'm lying about who I am, I'm just choosing to show certain things. And the stuff I choose to show, I guess that's how I portray myself to people and that's how someone would form an opinion about me.

Alex further stated that online impression management is a normal behaviour:

Anyone who says they don't try to look a certain way online is lying to you. Social media is an opportunity to come across any way you want... Nobody posts the negative stuff, I'm not going to take a picture of my bank account balance that shows \$32 in it, instead I'm going to take a picture of my new truck so people think I'm doing well and I'm successful... Everyone does it. I don't think that it's necessarily being dishonest but it's showing one side, the best side, the side that you think makes you look the best.

I asked each participant how they think an outsider or watcher would view them based solely on what is shown on their account. Claire said:

[They would think that] I do a lot of cool things, which I don't really but that's what it looks like. I hope it portrays me as a fun girl, someone people would want to hang out with.

Kate commented on how Twitter allowed her to convey the version of herself she wanted her audience to see. She said:

People think I'm a lot funnier [online] than I am [offline]. I'm not entirely unfunny I hope but the thing about Twitter is that you don't see the 20 minutes I spent trying to put something together. It looks instantaneous, you don't see me sitting there trying to think of the best way to say something. I think people think I'm more patient than I am too. Twitter helps me hide a lot of my non-verbal cues. It's quite hard for me to lie in person, my gestures give it away. When I'm angry too it's very hard for me to hide that in a one-to-one conversation. But Twitter helps me to appear a little bit more considered.

The participants mentioned things they had done to attempt to appear a certain way. For example, Kelly described how to take the perfect selfie:

For taking a selfie it would have to be perfect lighting, a slightly up angle, I never full smiled because no one likes their full smile, my hair would always be perfect and I would put filters on it that were like neutral or black and white and captions were always like obscure song lyrics, but I think that's dying off. And other photos I used were from photo shoots I had done and those tended to get more likes so I used those more often. Everything you'd expect from a typical selfie.

Cara talked about behaviour she has noticed in many of her former classmates who have moved away for school. She said:

We don't have any of the brands in Iran like Starbucks, KFC, McDonald's because they're all US companies and not in good terms with Iran. And I had a friend who went to study in Malaysia, not even that much of an advancement you know, another underdeveloped country. But the first thing she posted on Facebook was Starbucks. It was very interesting to me how suppressed you feel that once we get the cup we post it online. Everybody back home says wow, you got the cup.

The majority of the participants were aware that their audience would be making judgments about them based on what they viewed on their SNS profile. Because of this, the participants made an effort to only post things they felt would earn them a positive judgment from their audience.

Participants noted that the sites themselves foster positivity. For example, Hank discussed that the only interaction you can have with someone's post on Facebook is to *like* it. On Instagram, *liking* a photo is marked with a red heart. On Twitter, when you *retweet* something, it shows that you like it or agree with it. There are no mechanisms on SNSs described by participants in this research that are inherently negative, such as a thumbs down symbol; therefore, posting something negative online is usually met with another user who will either argue the point or sympathize with it, or with no response at all. Sharing pictures is one of the most common activities on SNSs, and most people's natural inclination is to smile when they are being photographed. As such, according to the participants, even personal content being shared is primarily positive. Hank also noted that SNSs have led to increased competition in the way people post about their successes:

People want others to think they're in a better situation than other people, that they have the best life. Everyone always has to one-up the next person. They want people to see all the cool things they're doing. It's basically just subtly boasting. And this comes across easier when you can just post pictures, rather than posting a status on Facebook. When you post just a written status it comes across as much more of a brag. When you post a picture of yourself doing something cool, you're bragging, but it doesn't come across as quite as arrogant, maybe.

Each participant had different motivations and different goals for the way they wanted to

be watched or viewed. For example, Cara said:

[I]t's embarrassing to say but I want to post things that show me as an intellectual and an enlightened person. The looks don't matter so much but I want to appear, you know, smart. I want to look more well-read.

This sentiment of the physical image being less important was not echoed by any of the other participants. In fact, most participants commented that they did their best to appear attractive in all of the pictures they posted of themselves. Alex noted:

I won't post anything unflattering. Maybe that's weird to say as a guy. But like, I'm into fitness and I like to think I'm a decent looking guy. I wouldn't post a picture of myself if it looked like I had a big gut or something.

Some participants indicated that if a friend posted an unflattering photograph of them, they would ask that friend to take the image down. Mo said:

I'm a goofy person and I have a good sense of humour so I don't mind posting a funny picture here or there but for the post part, like everybody, I would rather have an attractive photo of me posted. I have had photos that were like goofy or unattractive posted of me and I've gone to the person and asked them to take it down or asked them to ask me if they can post it next time.

Indeed, the watchers are everywhere, including the friends of the first friend and perhaps even those the user does not know.

When I asked why it was important to appear a certain way – be it more attractive, successful, et cetera – to their followers, the participants had different answers but all generally agreed they wanted their followers to think they were happy and successful. The participants posted certain photos and statements to try to achieve this. Emma explained:

People want their followers to think highly of them. I don't want my ex scrolling through my Instagram thinking, wow, so glad I broke up with her, she looks miserable... When something good happens to me, or I'm out having fun or doing something exciting, only a small number of people know about that. It's the people that I'm with and the people I'm able to tell in person. But like I said, I have a pretty small group of people that I talk to on a regular basis. Social media allows you to broadcast your good moments to everyone. I want to share that happy time in my life with as many people as I can and yeah, I want to brag about it a little bit. If I'm looking at my Instagram page, I would say every single post was chosen because I wanted to appear a certain way. I want to look happy, smart and successful and I want to look like I have some really great people in my life and I do some fun and exciting things. So my pictures consist of me smiling with my friends, studying or reading, travelling and going to concerts. If I were to introduce myself to someone new, those would be the things I would want them to know about me.

In summary, the participants limited what they posted on their SNSs to content that made them look happy, successful, well-travelled, or any number of other positive attributes that they believe are important. These values have been determined by the SNS community and reaffirmed by the users using the mechanisms of the sites. In order to emulate the ideal online identity, a user must adopt or at least imitate the values of the SNS community. This is one of the ways the site governs and exercises control over the user. Without being explicitly told how to behave, the user can clearly identify what behaviours are acceptable within the SNS community. The user is being watched by the audience and as such, is forced to comply and engage in behaviour that will earn a favourable judgement.

4.4.1 Sub-theme: Avoiding Negativity

All of the participants said they make an effort to only post positive things online. Additionally, some of the participants indicated that users who post negative things on their SNS profiles are not viewed favourably by most SNS users. The participants noted that appearing positive online is typical for most users and that not many post negative sentiments. Claire said, “you get the odd person who is like ‘oh my day was so bad’, or whatever but even that is probably just for attention.” Angelina echoed this observation, saying that she felt as though her Facebook friends who post negative things do so in hopes of getting attention and sympathy. Several participants indicated that those users who post negative pictures or comments have ulterior motives. For example, when scrolling through her Instagram feed, Emma noted one particular picture of a desk covered in books. She said:

I posted this picture because I wanted everyone to know that I was in a graduate program. It’s kind of a negative picture I guess. Like I’m saying that I’m so stressed and tired of studying so hard but I’m proud of the fact that I’m in my program and I want people to know that about me and think that I’m smart and serious about my studies.

Jacqueline also indicated that those who appear negative online are usually judged as attention-seeking. However, Jacqueline also noted that SNSs are not very good spaces for airing one’s negative thoughts. She said she felt like having a pointed conversation with a friend about something that is troubling her is not only more appropriate but leads to a more desired reaction of support and feedback than posting that trouble online would receive. Jacqueline noted that “there is a lot in terms of intimacy that just doesn’t translate” from face-to-face interactions to online interactions, and that online interactions are better suited for more positive topics.

Participants noted the importance of appearing in a positive light online; however,

equally important was avoiding negative postings of any kind. Those users who post negative content are viewed unfavourably by fellow SNS users. Users are mindful of what posts are deemed appropriate by other users and act accordingly.

4.4.2 Sub-theme: The Screen

While discussing the importance of appearing positively to the SNS audience, some participants mentioned that this is easier to do online than in person because of the physical separation from the audience. SNS users are separated from their audience by a screen, which allows them to better control what their audience can access. This further demonstrates the ways in which the online world resembles the front stage, as defined by Goffman (1959). Claire described the way a user can hide certain emotions or personality traits online. She said that when a person is out in public, like at a bar for example, and is having a really bad day or is in a bad mood, they are not able to hide it the same way they would be able to online. Claire indicates that, in real life:

You can say as many positive things as you want or you can act as positive as you want but people can actually see you. So unless you're a great actress, they're probably going to pick up on the fact that you're not doing so good. Whereas if you're hiding behind a screen, you can come across any way you want. It's way easier.

The screen is a prop that enables SNS users to be better actors and present a more controlled version of themselves on the front stage by physically separating them from their audience. Similarly, the screen also enables SNS users to be better watchers. The physical separation allows users to watch more freely and without scrutiny. Cat described this behaviour:

[W]ith social media I think you're being watched more because people can do it in the secrecy of their house. They can openly judge you. They can zoom in on photos and look at whether you have arm fat. You have more opportunity to be more scrutinized through social media than you do in person. Because if someone's staring at you while you're in a restaurant, you have the right to go up to them and be like, "Can I help you?" whereas on social media, you don't necessarily know that they're looking at you.

The screen separating the user from his or her audience makes it easier for the user to carefully construct a persona or mood and come across in a desired manner to the audience. The screen is another tool at the user's disposal that aids in the separation of the front stage and the back stage.

4.4.3 Sub-theme: The Impact of Online Positivity

SNS users carefully construct their profiles in an attempt to make themselves appear a certain way to their audience. Based on the experiences of the participants in this research, the majority of SNS users attempt to make themselves appear happier and more successful to their friends and followers than may truly be the case. I wondered what the impact of this behaviour was on the SNS user. I asked the participants to describe some of the feelings they had when scrolling through their news feed or viewing their friends' profiles. Two common feelings were identified: jealousy and inadequacy.

Many of the participants admitted they felt jealous and unaccomplished when viewing others' SNS accounts. Cat said,

...the one thing that gets to me all the time is travelling. Because I have given up my travel life for my school life, and it's a struggle daily. But I already feel bad about that without social media and I think social media just enhances it.

Posting photos of trips and vacations is very common according to the participants. Cat even said that she would avoid going on Facebook at times to save herself from the jealous feelings. Alex said he most often feels jealous when his friends post photos of themselves and their partners, because he has been single for a few years and is having a hard time finding a girlfriend. Alex said he feels jealous when he sees these photos even if he knows the couple really well offline and knows that they fight a lot or they are not really that happy together. Angelina's jealousy stems from seeing the accomplishments of her friends on Facebook.

Angelina states that:

If I see people that are very successful and at one point we were on the same page and it's like, you've changed so much, you've accomplished so much and it makes me feel like I haven't accomplished much.

Angelina identified feeling as though she did not measure up to the profiles of her online friends. Through regular SNS use, Angelina has learned what the ideal online identity is. She sees her online friends emulating that identity and, because her real life does not compare with these idealized versions of self, she feels inadequate.

The participants acknowledged that they were aware that the profiles they were viewing were also likely carefully constructed, and that the majority of their friends were also attempting to appear more positively than perhaps is true on their SNS accounts. Hank admitted:

My assumption would be that people are exaggerating, but I wouldn't know for sure unless I knew that person really well in real life... I think for the most part, I know people are posting more good stuff than bad stuff. It's just not something I really think about when I'm scrolling through my feed.

Angelina said she usually does not think about the fact that the other user could be exaggerating

or only showing the positive aspects of their life. She said the only time it enters her mind is if she sees a post that she knows for certain is an exaggeration, like a heavily edited photo. Alex said that when reflecting on the posts of others, he knows that they are “carefully constructed”; however, it is not something that he is conscious of while he is actually viewing the posts:

I guess if I think critically about it I know that other people are [trying to make themselves look better] too. But I’m not thinking critically when I’m on Instagram. If I see a picture of something someone’s doing, I don’t sit there and think, cool he’s in Europe right now but he’ll probably be in debt for the next year to pay for that trip. I just look at the picture and feel jealous that I’m not in Europe. Social media is something I look at when I’m bored, I’m not doing a whole lot of thinking while I’m looking at it.

The posting of positive content and avoidance of negative postings affects the feelings SNS users have when viewing their feed. The most common feelings noted were participants feeling jealous of their online friends’ relationships and vacations and participants feeling unaccomplished compared to their online friends when it came to education and careers.

Overall, the Ideal Online Identity theme and the sub-themes that developed within it confirm what was noted by Jordan et al. (2011), Krasnova et al. (2013), and Gross et al. (2006). Social networking site users exaggerate or highlight the positive attributes of their lives online while concealing or downplaying the negative attributes. This is common practice and generally acceptable behaviour among SNS users. As a result, SNS users are exposed to profiles that were created to earn a favourable judgment from the audience. When users believe that their online friends are happier and more successful than they are, they feel jealous and inadequate in comparison.

4.5 Summary of Findings

The findings from this study confirm what I noted in the literature review. In short, participants make deliberate or subconscious choices about every aspect of their online behaviour and these choices lead to carefully constructed SNS profiles. SNS users consciously select an audience and are aware that they are being watched online by this audience (Marwick and boyd, 2010). Ultimately, the user is responsible for creating his or her audience; however, the embedded values of the site can influence or suggest an audience for the user by encouraging them to utilize the site in the way it was intended (Zhao et al., 2008). A conscious effort is behind the selection of the audience and deciding what to show the audience. The user's actions on an SNS are fluid and shaped by the context of the site, especially by the way the site influences the creation of the audience. SNS users are under constant surveillance from their online audience and they therefore present a more positive version of themselves online to comply with the expectations of their online community. As a result of the skewed representation of online identities, SNS users report feelings of jealousy and inadequacy.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the current literature by providing the perspective of the SNS user and an understanding of why certain behaviours occur. By speaking directly with SNS users, this research provided a voice to the online behaviours. I was able to understand participant experiences and feelings about the way they represent themselves. The participants I interviewed revealed that their SNS profiles and online behaviours do not always represent their full identity. When examining their profile pages, many of the participants noted that certain posts were exaggerated in some way to reflect a more positive version of the user. For this reason, studies that rely on an analysis of SNS activity without an accompanying interview with the profile's owner are limited in what they can report about the construction and development of identity. Also, in utilizing the think-aloud method, I was able to play a more active role as a researcher. While the participant and I were viewing their profile, I was able to select posts that I thought were interesting or noteworthy and initiate discussions about those posts. The think-aloud method also enhanced the validity of the data as participants were speaking directly about posts they had actually made, rather than recalling activities from memory.

Several of the original research sub-questions were answered. The first sub-question was, "How do SNS users construct their identity online?" This research revealed that SNSs shape the way in which the user portrays him or herself online. Photos are used on almost all SNSs to reveal the user's identity to the audience. Facebook allows for a more in-depth portrayal of identity through a variety of mediums. Users can post photos, videos, text submissions, and external content while also identifying their interests by *liking* various pages. The second sub-question was, "Do SNS users believe their online identity is different from their offline identity?" This research has demonstrated that users are aware of the small differences in

their online and offline identities. Participants identified putting forth a more positive version of themselves online. The third sub-question was, “How does the audience affect identity construction?” This was answered by exploring the reasons behind why users present an altered version of themselves online. The presence and watchful eye of the audience greatly impacts the construction of identity online. Participants reported engaging and not engaging in certain behaviours specifically because they were aware of who would see them. The fourth sub-question was, “How does an altered online identity affect the SNS user and what implications does this have for self-presentation and an understanding of the self?” The research demonstrated that SNS users experience feelings of jealousy and inadequacy as a result of being subject to an idealized online identity. However, the impact of this on SNS users and SNS communities has not been adequately addressed in the literature review or uncovered through this research. A deeper reflection of the theoretical frameworks used in this research may provide some insight. In the following section, I draw on the theoretical frameworks of Goffman (1959) and Foucault (1975) to further explore the themes of identity performance and the ideal citizen as developed in the research.

5.1 Identity Performance

While reviewing existing literature on identity construction on social networking sites, I noticed that what was missing from other work was an explanation or rationalization of the motivations for the behaviour and, consequentially, an understanding of how the use of social networking sites has impacted the way we make sense of how people construct their online identities. The previous literature has used different methods to explore online identity. However, it has not offered an understanding of why users portray themselves the way they do

online nor has it adequately explored the way online identities are controlled and expressed within the confines of a strict watchful eye.

The analysis of online identity construction and performance deepens with consideration of Goffman's (1959) work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and Foucault's (1975) work in *Discipline and Punish*. Applying the lens of Goffman allows us to understand how the websites act as barriers between the true self and the self that is propelled into the public realm. Impression management occurs in all social settings and is a critical component of social relations on SNSs (boyd and Ellison, 2007). My application of Goffman's work contextualizes impression management in social networking sites, demonstrating the site as the front stage on which to perform the users' online identity.

Goffman's theatrical metaphor for social interactions tells us that individuals act a certain way in a social setting to attempt to create a desired impression on the other person. In social interactions, all actors agree upon the appropriate way to behave and everyone has the same expectation of what is acceptable. There is an implicit understanding amongst all involved that defines what behaviour is suitable for the given situation. These understandings are also defined by societal norms that dictate the appropriate way to behave in certain situations. In a social interaction, performers will offer an impression that is idealized, meaning the ideal behaviour implicitly agreed upon by all individuals within the interaction. Non-ideal behaviours are hidden or avoided and performed only on the back stage. The roles that actors play in social interactions are prescribed to them by society and other actors in the interaction.

Interaction on a social networking site is similar to any other social interaction. Users perform the appropriate version of themselves on the online front stage, while keeping undesirable character traits hidden on the back stage. Users engage in impression management

when posting online because they make a conscious choice about what to post and what to keep private. The version of the self presented on the front stage is constructed in consideration of the other actors. This version is the role that the user plays within the context of the interaction, taking into account the site itself, what the appropriate behaviour is on that site, and the audience.

The participants in this research acknowledged the differences between the performance of their identity online and offline, or front stage and back stage. Claire, for example, acknowledged that her Instagram identity is not an accurate reflection of reality. When describing the person she saw on her Instagram account, Claire said it looks as though the person does a lot of exciting things, but that is not true. Mackenzie appears online to be engaged in political and social issues by posting and commenting on news articles but she acknowledged she does not spend time on these issues outside of social networking sites. Kelly acknowledged that she appeared more popular online as she has 500 friends on Facebook but admitted she does not know that many people offline. However, it is important to note that the line between the front stage and the back stage is not always clear and can often times be blurred. In order to keep up the online persona, a user must do things offline that can be posted online to create the appearance of the ideal online identity. For example, if a user wants to appear well-traveled or adventurous online, he or she would have to take a trip so that a photo or a story about the trip could be posted online in order to create that impression. In this way, the online identity would present itself offline. A user also does not have to be on either the front stage or the back stage. There are times when a user can be mostly on the front stage, but revealing small pieces of the back stage self depending on the situation. For example, a user could be chatting with a close friend on Facebook messenger, maintaining the online identity but feeling more comfortable to

reveal more of the offline identity due to the nature of the relationship and the privacy of this specific SNS environment. Switching from the front stage to the back stage is not as simple as logging off of the SNS. It is much more fluid and in many ways the online self can present itself in the offline self and vice versa. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the social construction of online identities may also shape our offline identities. If the self is a social construct, we must ask how much we are shaped by the social media we are constructing.

Many of the participants admitted to using photos to attempt to appear a certain way. Alex said he would not post an unflattering photo of himself because his appearance is important to him and Kelly said she would only post flattering photos of herself because she knew she was being followed by her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend. Claire echoed that statement saying that she posted attractive photos of herself in an attempt to make an ex jealous, when in reality she was likely not feeling attractive at the time. SNS users can post cropped photos taken at flattering angles with good lighting to appear more attractive. We know from Goffman's work that people engage in impression management and have multiple versions of themselves that they present in different situations or to different audiences. The screen and the physical separation between the SNS user and the audience allow for impression management to be easier to perform online than in-person.

The individual is not required to update their friends and followers with every detail of their life. A conscious decision is made about what to post online; in selecting what to share with the audience and what to keep private, the user engages in a process of impression management. This was evident in many of the participants' remarks. Alex, for example, described how he consciously chooses what to post and what to keep private in an attempt to control the impression he creates on his audience. Alex said he does not feel as though he is

being inauthentic, but that he chooses to post only those things that will earn him a favourable judgment. Because his audience is only exposed to one side of Alex, they are likely to assume that what they see of him is representative of who he is. In other words, because Alex chooses not to post information about his financial hardships online, his audience would have no reason to believe he is experiencing such things. It is in this way that Alex engages in impression management. Hank noted how easy the photo sharing component of social networking sites makes impression management. Hank believes that most users would be less likely to post a text status about a positive moment in their life because it could come across as being boastful. A shared photo on the other hand is more likely to be viewed by the audience as the poster wishing to share the experience with others.

Participants described how they engage in impression management and how their actions online are strongly influenced by the audience. This demonstrates how the online self cannot be constructed autonomously. The construction and performance of identity involves input and consideration of outside factors. Users are not free to be whomever they choose online. Instead, their online identity must reflect the norms and values identified as acceptable and good by their fellow users. Because of this, SNS users need to be cognizant of the fact that the profile of a fellow SNS user they view online was controlled and influenced by the audience. The identity performed online is a constructed version of identity, appropriate for the setting and the audience. In online interactions, the user is portraying an identity that is a reflection of expectations and norms.

This leads to questions of authenticity. How confident can SNS users be that the identity presented online is an accurate depiction of the individual? How much of what is seen online is a constructed identity? The participants of this research all believe they represent themselves

accurately online but acknowledge that various factors can heavily influence what they post. If a user suppresses certain personality characteristics and exaggerates others in order to appear a certain way online, how authentic is the resulting identity? The participants of this research admitted that, upon reflection, they knew that much of what they saw their online peers posting was a representation of only the positive attributes of that user. However, the participants acknowledged that this was not something they actively thought about when they were actually viewing the profiles. It is important for users to be conscious and critical of what they view online. Users must question the authenticity of what they view and recognize that the content they view on social networking sites is constructed to reflect the appropriate norms within the context of the site.

Goffman's theoretical framework as presented in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) provides an understanding of how SNS users differentiate the online and offline versions of themselves. What remains unanswered by the application of this theoretical framework is why SNS users feel as though they need to present a different version of themselves online. In the next section, I will use a Foucauldian lens to explore how social networking sites act as a mechanism of governance to control and shape online identities.

5.2 The Ideal Citizen

A consideration of Foucault's work strengthens the understanding of online identity performance. Foucault (1975) used the panopticon as a metaphor for disciplinary societies. The idea of being watched causes individuals to govern themselves and behave appropriately without discipline or enforcement from an outside agency. Foucault's definition of governmentality as the 'conduct of conduct' demonstrates how a person's behaviour is shaped according to accepted

norms (Dean, 2010). Rather than being governed by government to behave in a certain way, society creates and reinforces the importance of social norms to which individuals have a responsibility to adhere. Governmentality rejects the notion of formal or institutional governance and instead reiterates the importance of everyday techniques through which individuals are expected to organize themselves as a condition of their citizenship (Oulette & Hay, 2008). Surveillance has evolved from government surveillance to surveillance of one another and then again to self-surveillance. The increase of surveillance has transformed us into a disciplinary society.

Implicit rules or norms govern online behaviour. These are first created by the sites and then further developed and implemented by the users. A social networking site defines the purpose and objective of its use to its users, for example to be social, connect, and to share life events with others. These behaviours are encouraged and rewarded by the site so users are, in a sense, informed how they are to behave. Subsequent use of the site by the users implements those values, and can then further develop new values as well. Users identify appropriate and desired behaviour and show their approval by *liking*, *sharing*, or *retweeting*. These behaviours are then defined as proper and preferred, and users who exhibit these behaviours are viewed favourably by their audience. While users may not be explicitly conscious of these norms and rules, they have internalized the notions of what is normal and appropriate online behaviour to such an extent that these notions become the basis for the user's identity. This demonstrates how the social networking site acts as a mechanism of social control. The site controls the user's presentation of self by identifying and defining what is appropriate on the site. To conform to the site's values, users must censor themselves and present a version of self that is appropriate according to the site.

Social networking sites have increased the amount of surveillance that occurs in a user's life. Much more of what was once a user's private life is occurring in a public setting (the SNS) and is therefore subject to surveillance. SNS users are aware of this surveillance and invite it into their lives, as they are posting voluntarily for their audience. The participants in this research commented on their feelings about being watched and how it influences the way they act online. Cat, for example, said that when people are being watched, they act differently than they would in private. Cat further argued that, on social networking sites in particular, it is easier and more comfortable for users to watch others because they can do so in private without the other user knowing they are watching them. The participants also acknowledged that they watch others online. Most participants identified using social networking sites so they can stay informed with what is happening in their friends' and family's lives and they identified lurking as a common online activity. The participants in this research were not ashamed to admit that they engaged in watching behaviour. They also did not seem to take issue with the fact that they were being watched. They acknowledged that this behaviour exists; some said they felt stifled and limited in their ability present themselves but, overall, this did not seem to be a source of stress, anger, or frustration. This demonstrates how watching and being watched has become normalized and accepted online. The fact that participants accept being watched and engage in watching themselves shows how they have internalized the surveillance to such an extent that they do not even question it. In short, it has become an accepted part of their everyday life.

The importance and awareness of the audience came up repeatedly in each interview. SNS users know they are being watched and, as such, govern their behaviour online and act in a way they feel is appropriate. Family was an important audience to consider. Cat noted that her mom had recently joined Facebook and she found herself choosing her language more carefully

when posting. Angelina ignored a friend request from her uncle because she did not want him to report her Facebook activity back to her parents. Participants also noted that they either set their profile to private or avoided posting certain things because they were concerned about potential employers viewing their online activity. Kate said she began censoring herself more when she started volunteering for an upcoming municipal election so she would appear more bipartisan to her followers. Participants were constantly aware of their audience and would consider it in every post they made. When Spencer posts online, she considers that her parents may view it and asks herself, “what would they say about this?”

The participants sought favourable judgment from their audience in all of their postings. It was clear that the participants not only wanted to feel accepted by their online peers but wanted their peers to view them positively. As Emma said, “people want their followers to think highly of them”. Some participants identified wanting to appear intelligent and successful to their online friends. For others, it was important to appear physically attractive. Some participants felt it was important to share their activities, social outings, and vacations to attempt to appear fun, popular, adventurous, or well-travelled. The participants also acknowledged that exaggerating or attempting to appear in a more positive light is a common practice. As Alex said, “anyone who says they don’t try to look a certain way online is lying to you.” While the participants said this was not something they thought of often when they were viewing other users’ pages, upon reflection they did acknowledge that most, if not all, of their peers did exaggerate or only post positive things online. The participants noted that presenting an altered online identity is normal and accepted. It is not considered deviant activity to exaggerate or engage in impression management online. The awareness and consideration of the audience demonstrates how SNS users are further controlled on social networking sites. In acknowledging

that they are being watched and understanding that the version of themselves they are portraying online is a reflection of their audience, the participants are demonstrating that they are responsabilized, constructed citizens.

The surveillance that occurs online causes SNS users to regulate themselves and alter the way they present themselves to their online audience. Through their use of social networking sites and their interactions with other users, SNS users have a new understanding of what it means to see and to be seen. The technology of social control means that SNS use affects the way we make sense of our world and our behaviour. SNS users do not have the ability to put forward any version of themselves they choose. They must express themselves appropriately, within the confines of what has been determined acceptable by their SNS community. The values of social networking sites are socially prescribed by the sites and the community. SNS users who wish to earn or maintain a favourable judgement from their audience must abandon their personal values and adopt the appropriate values identified online. In this way, the social networking site acts as a mechanism of governance and control and its users are similar to the prisoners in Foucault's panopticon. They are aware of the watchful eyes of others and they are governed to take on the prescribed values of the social networking site, to abide by what is expected of them, and to emulate the ideal citizen.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Social networking sites are new and exciting technologies that are changing the way people communicate. However, it is important to recognize that these sites have also changed the way SNS users present themselves a new form of identity – the online identity – has been created. Social networking sites offer a new opportunity for social control to be exercised through lateral surveillance of SNS users.

6.1 Summary of Research and Findings

Extensive literature on social networking sites exists. However, SNSs are still relatively new phenomena and are constantly changing, and so there are many opportunities for further research. The literature to date has not paid enough attention to the voice of the SNS user. The research in this thesis had a goal of gaining insight into online behaviours from the perspective of the SNS user while utilizing two unique theoretical frameworks.

Fourteen face-to-face interviews were conducted with active SNS users. Eight themes and sub-themes emerged from the data analysis: Props for Performance; The Construction of Identity with Consideration of Audience (The Importance of Anonymity; The User as a Watcher); and The Ideal Online Identity (Avoiding Negativity; The Screen; The Impact of Positivity Online). Each theme revealed significant aspects of online behaviours and identities. The think-aloud method identified the tools used by SNS users to portray their identity to their online friends. Various features of each site help the user create a version of him or herself to display to the online audience. SNS users are aware that they are being watched by an audience and this affects what they post. Users consider who will see their posts and accordingly engage

in or avoid certain online behaviours. The anonymous nature of many SNSs does not allow users to stray from their offline identities, because the sites are heavily anchored in offline relationships. A user can exaggerate or focus only on the positives, but he or she will not post statements online that an online friend would be able to identify as false because they also know the user offline. SNS users spend more time viewing content posted by other users than posting their own content. Lurking is a common online behaviour and the awareness of the user as a watcher further reinforces the users' knowledge that they are being watched.

The ideal online identity is a positive version of the self and a reflection of what the audience determines to be acceptable. SNS users avoid posting negative sentiments online and instead post items that they believe will garner favourable judgments from their audience. The screen enables users to portray an altered version of themselves and it also enables the user to engage in watching behaviour. When users post positive content and avoid posting negative content, it creates the impression to fellow users that they have a more idealized life than they may indeed have. As such, SNS users report feelings of jealousy and inadequacy when viewing the profiles of others. Through surveillance and self-regulation, the ideal citizen is constructed and defined by the social networking site and the online community.

6.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As noted earlier, one major limitation of this research was the sample of participants. My choice of recruitment methods limited my sample to mostly students or recent graduates. My participants had many similarities: all were post-secondary educated or becoming educated; all resided in Saskatoon; most were in their twenties; and most were women. Future research could address these limitations and, while aiming for a more representative sample, could also take a

comparative approach to similar research questions. An appropriate next step in the research would be to compare the online experiences and behaviours of different demographic groups, for example ages, genders, or geographical locations. The findings in this research can only be understood to apply to this small demographic. A larger and more far-reaching sample would allow for generalized statements to be made about SNS behaviour.

My discussion of the implications of the ideal online identity offered just a brief glimpse into the effects that social networking sites can have on a user. There is certainly more work that can be done. The question of how this could change the future of online activity remains. One topic that needs to be further explored is the online countercultures that subvert the ideal online identity. *Internet trolls* and those users who purposefully post in opposition of accepted norms comprise only a very small minority of total users. I suspect, however, that these sentiments will grow in an attempt to call attention to authenticity and the implications of idealized presentations of self online. Future research could examine these countercultures and look at the effects of subversive behaviour and their ability to defy the social control exercised online.

Another interesting potential topic for further research is online marketing using social networking. Advertisers are beginning to use celebrities and social networking users who have large followings to sell their products, turning these SNS users into brand ambassadors or paid social posters. There are regulations imposed by the governing bodies like the Federal Trade Commission and Advertising Standards Canada that stipulate a post must state somehow state that it is sponsored. Brand ambassadors are clever, however, to ensure that the post looks less like an explicit magazine ad and more like a testimonial whereby the brand ambassador uses the product, believes in it, and simply has to share it with their large following. Little is known about the effectiveness of these marketing campaigns, but they are becoming increasingly

popular. Future research could examine SNS users' perceptions of these campaigns and whether users question the authenticity of brand ambassador claims. It would also be interesting to hear from the SNS users acting as brand ambassadors to understand how they navigate the multiplicity of their personas and how they feel about the way they are representing themselves online.

The possibility for further research into online identities and their implications is vast. This work has offered just a small glimpse into understanding how users navigate social networking sites to construct and perform their identity online. While there is no universal ideal online identity for all users, what I learned from the literature review and was further confirmed in my research is that an online identity is a more positive reflection of the self than reality and the ideal online identity is dictated by the site and the audience. Through the awareness of surveillance and the internalization of this surveillance (to become self-surveillance), social networking sites act as a mechanism of governance that shapes and constructs the ideal online identity.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Student researcher will introduce the purpose of the study: The purpose of this interview is to discuss your use of social networking sites and online identities. Through this research, we hope to gain an understanding of the way users perceive themselves and their identity on social networking sites. This interview is open ended, so feel free to add any thoughts on social networking sites at any point during the interview. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project.

*The student researcher will explain the purpose for the digital tape recording: The purpose of tape recording is to make sure that we are as accurate as we can be. She will stress how important their words are. She will discuss the consent forms in detail.

*If the participant is reluctant to tape, she will let them know that we can start taping and if it bothers them we can stop the tape recording at any time. She will also let them know that they may withdraw from the study at any time, until September 15th, 2015.

*The participant will be asked to introduce themselves.

*Basic demographic questions will be asked. The student researcher will, for example, record the name, age and occupation of the respondent and will discuss the pseudonym to be used in the transcription of the interview. The respondent will be given a choice to determine their own pseudonym. The researcher will now ask the participant to open the participant's SNS account(s) on the laptop provided.

SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONS:

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1) The first set of questions is regarding your general use of social networking sites and your audience.

1.1 What social networking sites do you use?

1.2 How long have you used each site?

1.3 How often do you use each site?

1.4 What is your main reason for using each site?

a) Did you want to connect with others, share your feelings, etc.?

b) Do your reasons for using them differ between sites?

1.5 What prompts you to post something on (site participant has identified using)?

b) Do you have different reasons for posting something on another site?

1.5 What kind of things will you not post on SNSs?

a) Why?

1.6 What are your privacy settings on each SNS you use?

a) How did you decide on these privacy settings?

1.7 Who are your friends on each SNS you use?

a) If you have privacy settings, why did you choose to allow these people to follow you?

- b) Do you have friends who are strictly ‘online friends’ – with whom you don’t associate with in the ‘real world’?
- 1.8 Do you think about who will read your posts?
- a) How does this influence what you decide to post?
 - b) Do you have a specific person or group of people in mind when you post certain things?

2) The second set of questions is about online identity.

Being defined are:

- a) How the self is portrayed in profiles and postings;
- b) An understanding of how you construct personal identities or ways of communicating yourself to others online; (rather than a complicated understanding of your own identity).

The assumption is that social networking sites enable people to construct at least a part of their own identities online and that this may be different from other environments in which they express identity. Online identities have different social constraints than other versions of identity.

2.3 To what extent do you think your friends or the people you follow are honest about who they are and what they are doing when they post things on their SNS?

- a) Why or why not?

2.4 To what extent do you feel like you portray yourself the same way on SNS as you do in person?

- a) Have you ever exaggerated or falsified something you have posted on a SNS? Explain.
- b) Why or why not?
- c) Can you think of postings you’ve made on SNSs that are contradictory in some way to things you’ve said or done in ‘real life’?
- d) Do you behave differently or post different things on different SNSs?

2.5 To what extent do you feel there are pressures for SNS users to behave or come across a certain way online?

- a) Do you feel those pressures?

2.6 What does it mean to you to be authentic on SNSs?

3) The third set of questions are about your specific use of social networking sites and how these are related to identity.

Note: The researcher will note the tools the participant has used on his or her social networking account(s) such as photos, wall postings and page ‘likes’. The researcher will ask the participant questions about specific postings the participant made, such as:

- 3.1 Why did you post this?
- 3.2 Who did you imagine reading this post?
- 3.3 Of all of these posts, which do you feel represent you the most?
 - a) Why?

The researcher will now close the social networking sites.

4) In closing:

4.1 Do you have any other questions or comments about social networking sites?

4.2 Do you know anyone who may be interested in participating in this study?

Those are all the questions I have. Thank you very much for participating.

APPENDIX B: PAWS BULLETIN BOARD ANNOUNCEMENT

Calling all Facebookers, Instagrammers and Tweeters! Participants Needed for a Social Networking Study

An invitation to participate in research about your use of social networking sites.

We are seeking:

- ✓ Adults between 18 and 45 years
- ✓ Currently active on at least one social networking site
- ✓ Who are willing to discuss their own social networking use

Why?

To learn from your own words, social networking postings and experiences, with the hope that the information gained will increase knowledge social networking sites and online identities.

If you (or someone you know) would like more information or would like to participate, please contact:

Vanessa Hildebrand: vrh073@mail.usask.ca

*You are under no obligation to participate if you email.

*This research has received ethics clearance by the University of Saskatchewan

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT DATA FORM

The following information will be viewed solely by the researcher and will be used for descriptive and comparative purposes in the data collection process only. Please answer only the questions you are comfortable with.

Name:

Chosen pseudonym:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:
(if student - department, major and year of study):

APPENDIX D: TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

I, _____, have been offered the opportunity to review the complete transcript of the interview in the study **Exploring the Impact of Social Networking Sites on the Construction and Performance of Identity Online**.

_____ I would like to review the transcript. If I choose to review the transcript, I will have the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I am aware that I will be asked to sign a transcript release if I choose to review the transcript.

If you choose to review your transcript, please indicate the preferred contact information that you would like the researcher to use:

_____ I do not wish to review the transcript.

I have received a copy of this form for my own records.

Participant

Date

Researcher

Date

APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

I, _____ have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with the researcher. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Vanessa Hildebrand to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this data/transcript release form for my own records.

Participant

Date

Researcher

Date

APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Exploring the Impact of Social Networking Sites on the Construction and Performance of Identity Online

Researcher: Vanessa Hildebrand, Graduate Student, Department of Sociology, University of Saskatchewan, (306) 280-3249, vrh073@mail.usask.ca

Supervisors: Carolyn Brooks, Department of Sociology
carolyn.brooks@usask.ca
Jennifer Poudrier, Department of Sociology
jennifer.poudrier@usask.ca

Purpose and procedure: You are invited to participate in a study on the construction and performance of identity on Social Networking Sites (SNS). You must be between 18 and 45 years of age and active on at least one social networking site to participate in this study. The purpose of this research is to seek to understand the impact of Facebook on identity construction and performance. Approximately 20 participants will be interviewed for the study. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher for a one-on-one interview. The interview may take up to one hour. You will be asked questions about your use of SNSs, your behaviours on the site and your perception of your online identities on each site. During the interview you will also be asked to log in to your social networking accounts and reflect on various postings made on the accounts.

Potential risks and benefits:

There is little risk associated with participation in this study. During the interview, you will be asked whether you ever falsify or exaggerate online, and these questions could lead to potential embarrassment on the part of the participant. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and participants can choose to not answer any question(s) they do not want to answer. The data collected during the study will remain completely confidential. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure complete anonymity in the final draft of the thesis. The data collected in this study will aid the researcher in the completion of the thesis.

Confidentiality:

Interview recordings and transcripts will be safely stored by the researcher and will only be accessed by the researchers and supervisors of this project. All participants will have the opportunity to review their transcript before it is included in the thesis. Information collected during this study will be presented at the Sociology 990 seminar as well as at the thesis defense.

Right to Withdraw:

Participants will have a right to withdraw from the study at any point up until June 30th, 2015, when the data collection of this project will be complete.

Questions:

Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the researcher or supervisors at the phone numbers or email addresses provided above. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on June 15th, 2015. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (966-306-2975). Out of town participants may call toll free (888-966-2975).

Consent to Participate:

My signature below indicates that I have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

| | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| <i>Name of Participant</i> | <i>Signature</i> | <i>Date</i> |
| | | |
| _____ | _____ | |
| <i>Researcher's Signature</i> | <i>Date</i> | |

APPENDIX G: INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a study on the construction and performance of identity on Social Networking Sites (SNS). You must be between 18 and 45 years of age and active on at least one social networking site to participate in this study. This is an exploratory study to understand the impact of SNSs on identity construction and performance. The goal of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how users engage with SNSs to express their identity online.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher for a one-on-one interview. You will be asked questions about your use of social networking sites, your behaviours on the sites and your perception of your online identities on each site. During the interview you will also be asked to log in to your social networking accounts and reflect on various postings made on the accounts.

Possible risks and benefits:

There is little risk associated with participation in this study. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. The data collected during the study will remain completely confidential and will be used for the completion of the student researcher's thesis project and may be presented at academic presentations and conferences or in academic journals. Participants will have a right to withdraw from the study at any point up until June 30th, 2015, when the data collection will be complete. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure complete anonymity in the final draft of the thesis.

Dissemination and Confidentiality:

The interview tapes and transcripts will be used to understand online identity amongst young adults. Interview recordings and transcripts will be safely stored by the student researcher on a password protected computer and will only be accessed by the researchers, student researcher, and committee members of this project. All participants will have the opportunity to review their transcript before it is included in the thesis if they choose to do so. We intend to share the information through the development of a Sociology Masters thesis and may publish information from the study in books, journals, as well as share parts of the information at presentations and conferences.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on June 15th, 2015. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (966-306-2975). Out of town participants may call toll free (888-966-2975).

To participate in this study, please contact the researcher, Vanessa Hildebrand, at (306) 280-6349 or vrh073@mail.usask.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation!