Virtual Subjectivity on Social Networking Sites: Transforming the Politics of Self-
Surveillance
by

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B.A., Queen's University, 2011

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Social networking sites (SNSs) are designed to cure loneliness and fill a void left by the lack of face-to-face communication in this digital age. Given the rapid growth rate and extensive popularity of social networking sites, my research aims to investigate the validity of widespread claims indicating that members of the millennial generation who have grown up on SNSs are increasingly narcissistic and self-obsessed because of their involvement on these sites. To address these claims, I turn to key insights borrowed from computer sciences and social psychology, inspired by the exemplary work of Sherry Turkle and ideas from Michel Foucault. I find that the digital subject is caught in a vicious circle of narcissistic attachment and panic insecurity, driven to constant self-surveillance and examination in a digital form of the modern panopticon where cybercitizens can be left feeling alienated and alone despite continuous connection to others online.

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction: Living in a Digital Social Landscape
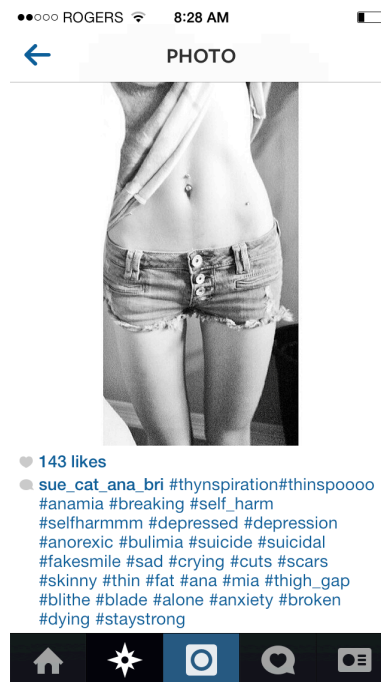
Figure 1: #thigh_gap[1]

I wasn't looking for anything.

But I wasn't ready for what I found.

The girl in the photo was faceless. A monochrome filter shaded the lines of her flat, perfectly toned stomach; the sharp edges of her rib cage peeked out from underneath a baggy T-shirt pulled up to expose her ab muscles. She wore tiny, low-waisted jean shorts that nipped in at the hipbones, showing off her long skinny legs that looked to stretch for miles as she stood, frozen, with her knees close together, thighs not touching.

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[1] Instagram screen shot captured February 16, 2014.

"OMG she's perfff…" I read below.

"My dream body…" said the next comment.

"Why can't I look like that", lamented the next user.

"THIGH GAP!!!!" exclaimed another.

The hashtags under the photo included: #thigh_gap thin #anorexic #sad #self_harm #ana #mia #skinny #suicidal #alone.

143 likes. 106 comments. Hundreds of followers gushing about the rake-thin glamazon in the picture, hating themselves for the reflection they did not see. This troubling image is just one of millions circulating as part of a popular 'thinspo' movement, which encourages thinness through strict self-discipline and disordered eating behaviours.[2] A darker side of the internet once exclusive to "a secret community of body obsessives and self-starvers", thinspo content has spread from private websites and blogs to the mainstream in recent years through social networking sites like Instagram and Pinterest (Stroud, 2012: 20).

In 2013, more than two billion people are connected online (Lee, 2013: 13). Humans have become virtual beings. The threat of interrupted communication looms large— a paralyzing threat made ever more evident in the inescapable urge to be logged on. Some indicate that there is a heightened sense of intimate connection to digital tools. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ever-increasing attachment—and in some cases,

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[2] Thinspo- short for thinspiration, or, thin inspiration; a pro-anorexia movement based on an obsession with thinness that encourages starvation, fasting and other forms of self-discipline.

addiction— to communicative devices. For the privileged masses who have access to these tools, to be torn away from smartphones, laptops, tablets, or other technological devices is to become devastatingly disconnected, silent, alone, severed from that which forms a constitutive part of their very digital being.

Over the course of the last decade, a new era of the web has emerged— a mobile era. Free from the requirement of a desktop computer, mobile users are no longer tethered to a bulky object by a mess of cords and cables (Turkle, 2011: xii). Social networking sites, apps, and virtual entertainment can be with them all the time. With smartphones, users also move into a more social era, into what Mark Zuckerberg calls a more "open and connected" web introducing a whole new level of excitement and creepiness into an already complex digital landscape (cited in Contreras, 2013: 14). In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle (2011) demonstrates how human relationships with computers have evolved from one-on-one person with machine contact to the utilization of computers to create networks of relationships with "a dazzling breadth of connection" (xi). While the earlier web available to the privileged masses was "an individual experience made up of whatever we clicked on", the web today can be personalized and tailored to individuals who "have opted to reveal their true identities as they interact with the world around them" (Contreras, 2013: 14).

An integral part of this open web is the use of hugely popular social networking sites (SNSs) such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram (IG) and Pinterest. As Esteban Contreras (2013) indicates in his book *Social State: Thoughts, Stats and Stories about the State of Social Media*, the use of social media now represents the number one activity online (24). Social networking sites are transitory and global in reach, though still

exclusive to those privileged with access to the Internet. As such, the findings of this research can only be taken as applicable to particular types of societies in particular parts of the world. Currently estimating more than 200 million monthly active users, Twitter has become a worldwide distribution machine, an information matrix through which millions of ideas and word bytes flutter by each millisecond. With an almost unfathomable 1.06 billion monthly active users, Facebook functions as a multi-faceted connectivity tool— a social calendar, a virtual scrapbook, and a platform for political or personal expression collapsed into one user-friendly interface. Still behind Twitter but expanding rapidly at 100 million current users, Instagram can be seen as a photo album made public, even gone viral in some cases. With approximately 12 million active users, Pinterest is like an intensely visual, amazingly addictive eternal magazine and real-time scrapbook (Contreras, 2013: 229). Each of these social networking sites (SNSs) appears to be a window, a peephole into the lives of individual users.

The rapid rate of growth in active membership on social networking sites is astounding. In March 2007, approximately five hundred million Internet users were active on social networking sites worldwide, with a total six percent of their online time spent on SNSs (Contreras, 2013: 43). In June 2013, a whopping 1.47 billion people worldwide use social networking sites—nearly one in every four people— spending one out of every five online minutes on a social networking site (eMarketer, 2013).[3] There are a number of competing definitions for what constitutes a social networking site in the range of interdisciplinary research available on this subject. Goodings, Locke, et al.

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[3] eMarketer™ is a leading research firm which provides data on marketing in a digital world (http://www.emarketer.com/).

(2007) use the term social networking technology as a "generic name used for a range of Internet based techniques for communicating online" (463). Contributing authors to the *Social Science Computer Review* Sun and Wu (2013) define social networking sites as "a forum in which individual media preferences, friendship, romantic relationships, and ideology can converge and be displayed at the same time" (419). This thesis will accept the widely referenced and comprehensive definition provided by Boyd and Ellison (2008), which defines social networking sites by outlining key qualifying characteristics: "web-based services that allow users to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (2).

To understand how social networking sites are affecting virtual subjectivity, I begin by identifying and outlining key characteristics of Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest—three of the most popular image-based social networking sites amongst female users aged 15-24. These sites are all largely visual in nature, allow users to like and comment on photos, and tend to remain grounded in biographical profiles that are expected to represent 'real life' (RL) reflections of the user. This work does not explore digital worlds such as Second Life or multiplayer "pay-to-play" games like World of Warcraft where users create avatars that may or may not be based on their own offline qualities or characteristics.

Social Networking Site	Users
Facebook	1 billion monthly active users
YouTube	800 million monthly visitors
Google+	500 million monthly active users
Twitter	200 million monthly active users
Sina Weibo	368 million registered users
Instagram	100 million users
Pinterest	12 million monthly active users

Figure 2: Social Media Site Membership in 2013

Facebook

Falling second only to Google, Facebook tops the list of the most frequently visited Internet sites around the world (Ryan and Xenos, 2011: 1658). At the moment, more than half a billion people check their Facebook accounts every single day. In his book *Facebook Nation: Total Information Awareness*, Newton Lee (2013) indicates that if Facebook were a nation in 2012, it would be the third largest country in the world—just after China and India— with a whopping 955 million citizens (32). Since its humble beginning as a project at Harvard University, Facebook has enabled over 1.3 trillion likes, 219 billion photos and 17 billion location-tagged posts (Contreras, 2013: 80). Facebook now functions as "a large-scale consumer identity provider (IdP) that allows users to access multiple websites with a single login" (Lee, 2013: 32). The median age of Facebook users is 22, with an average of 334 friends (Lee, 2013: 14).

Facebook is the social networking site that "brought identity to the web", irreversibly changing the way we relate to one another online (Contreras, 2013: 430).

Before Facebook, the web was relatively anonymous. On chat forums and instant
messaging services like MSN or AOL, users often chose to come up with screen names to
use in their online interactions. Facebook introduced people to the profile picture, giving
"life to the web, humanizing it, and making it relatable" (Contreras, 2013: 35). Inherently
bound to users' offline identities, Facebook profiles offer up personal information like
city of residence, birth date, group memberships, photo collections, hobbies, interests,
and names of friends or family members. This voluntary provision of personal
information makes Facebook "the most massive and accurate database of personal
records in history" (Contreras, 2013: 99). As Lee (2013) aptly indicates, users' Facebook
profiles are often far more revealing than their real passports in this age of
cybercitizenship (32).

Instagram

Instagram is the picture-perfect success story of what tech start-up dreams are made of.
Over the course of two short years, a tiny team of six managed to turn the simple mobile
app into a one billion dollar company acquired by Facebook in 2012 but allowed to keep
its independence (Contreras, 2013: 114). In 2011, Instagram was awarded iPhone App of
the Year due in part to its simplicity and ease of use compared to other overly
complicated apps on the market. In August 2012, Instagram surpassed Twitter in terms of
time spent by average daily visitors, with Twitter users spending an average of 2:27 and

Instagram users spending an average of 4:31, according to comScore.[4] In September

2013, Instagram reached 150 million users and 5 billion photos (comScore, 2013).

       Instagram's name comes from two old technologies: *instant cameras* and

telegram (Contreras, 2013: 110). A crossbreed between Facebook and Twitter in terms of

format, the photo editing app "enables sharing and comments on friends' pictures as well

as allows people to follow other users" (Lee, 2013: 52). A user profile page on Instagram

includes a short bio section with one profile picture and otherwise looks like a Facebook

photo album, offering captions underneath each photo but no text-based status updates.

With a relatively simple user interface, retro app logo and diverse range of filters "that

erase the chores of making a simple photo look extraordinary," Instagram means that

users no longer have to capture photos on a memory card then load them onto their

computer to upload to Facebook (Mullally, 2012: 3). Just as digital photography has done

away with the physical photo album, photo-sharing apps like Instagram have created a

new genre of photography (Mullally, 2012: 3). Contreras (2013) indicates that Instagram

will become more than a photo-editing app in upcoming years, as "we can expect the

network to become a vehicle through which we will experience major global events, from

riots at the World Series to war" (131).

Pinterest

Pinterest, sometimes called "The World's Visually Social Pinboard", is significantly

more popular amongst women with approximately 70-97 percent of users being female

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[4] comScore is an internet technology company that measures what people do as they navigate the digital world and turns that information into analytics for their clients.

(Contreras, 2013: 223). With more than 70 million users worldwide, traffic on this app grew by 125 percent in 2013.[5] Ben Silbermann, CEO of Pinterest, said that the company's mission is to "connect people all over the world through common interest" (Contreras, 2013: 232). On this social networking site, users create profile pages which consist of a username and short biographic blurb followed by a collection of 'boards'. Each board has a title and includes an assortment of thumbnail pictures with links to the sites where these pictures or 'pins' originated. Unlike on Instagram, most of the content shared on Pinterest is not original. In this way, Pinterest boards function in a similar way to web maps, dotted with pins of photo-content which link to places of origination that are often blogs or personal web pages. Rather than focusing on creation, this app is makes curation cool, transforming the social media universe into a more visually aesthetic one.

Looking at Pinterest pages can be like catching a glimpse into users' dream worlds— people post the beautiful, the inspirational, and the motivational things they hope to one day acquire or achieve. People post pins that they find on other boards, carefully sorting these bits of content into categories they create for themselves reminiscent of a hunter-gatherer habit of collecting and storing things for later. These virtual vision boards set user expectations very high. Popular Pinterest boards show themes like "My Dream Wedding", "Recipes To Try", "Kids Rooms", "DIY Ideas" and "Places to Go". The grid design of Pinterest has been the inspiration of many websites, from Etsy to Storify (Contreras, 2013: 244).

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[5] Found on scoop.it: "30 Reasons Why Pinterest Will Rule Social Media in 2014" Omnicore (Optimizing Digital Marketing).

A Grain of Sand in the Digital Universe

While social networking site usership varies considerably across different demographics and around the world, the Pew Research Center's *Internet & American Life Project Spring Tracking Survey (April 17-May 19, 2013)* indicates that 15-24 years olds are the most highly-engaged group, spending an average of eight total hours on SNSs per month (Pew Research Center, 2013). Across a range of different social networking sites, usership also tends to be approximately 75 percent women (Contreras, 2013: 47). On all social networking sites, there seems to be an obsession with users wanting to let the world know about them. In recent years, Una Mullally (2012) suggests that this obsession has evolved from "I'm here," to "I'm here and this is what I'm saying," to "I'm here and this is what I'm seeing" (3). As Roy Sekoff, founding editor of The Huffington Post states, "People don't want to be talked to, they want to be talked with" (Lee, 2013: 15).

There is a wealth of research on how social networking sites can function as a form of surveillance that breaches user privacy rights. The New Transparency[6] project is an ongoing multi-institutional, cross-disciplinary effort to address some of the contributing factors, underlying infrastructures, and social consequences of modern surveillance concerns. Other common liberal discussions define social networking sites as instruments of democratization, indicating that they can be used to disseminate information and engage a citizenry as part of the mission to bring freedom to nondemocratic countries. The Arab Spring is cited as an example of this in recent literature (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Allagui & Kuebler, 2011).

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[6] The New Transparency: Surveillance and Sorting is an MCRI project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada that aims to make visible the identities of individuals, workings of institutions and flows of information in ways never before seen before.

Whether the internet can truly provide the free and open forums required for democratic debate is a contentious topic that will not be explored here. This work acknowledges that social networking site users sacrifice a certain degree of their privacy—even if it is much more than they realize— when they sign on to accounts and provide personal information.

The questions I pose pertain instead to how social networking sites are changing the way users construct their own self-image and relate to one another in a socialization of the self that is constantly mediated through virtual connectivity. This is an ambitious project both empirically and philosophically. The findings of this thesis seek to unpack the meaning and relevance of research collected from across a range of disciplines that use ethnographic data, participant observation, and qualitative interviews. Much of the existing research on social networking sites comes from the fields of social psychology and computer sciences. Empirical studies from these fields present conclusions drawn from case studies that involve a limited number of participants and are conducted to contribute to a larger overall dataset. These studies use psychoanalytic language that makes assumptions about the normal and the pathological, the influence of which must be acknowledged in this work.

My approach is deeply rooted in Western language of subjectivity, in key insights borrowed from social psychology, and in the exemplary work of Sherry Turkle inspired by ideas from Michel Foucault. With deep roots in social psychology, this project is also a contemporary study of the subject, an exploration of the impact of digital technologies, and an attempt to reconcile diverse approaches from a multi-disciplinary empirical field complicated by an abundance of overdeterministic theory that is inadequate to the

complexity of the topic. Expressing my judgment on what is interesting and important, the strength of my interdisciplinary approach is the synthesis of diverse languages; paradoxically, the weakness of my approach is that in adopting such diverse languages, the framework of analysis becomes limited and there is a loss of the depth in some of those languages. In this research, I do not offer a precise clinical diagnosis, provide a clear positivistic analysis, or produce any kind of grand social theory. Instead, I present an exploratory work that gives a reading of an empirical field that is somewhere in between, identifying a new modality and intensification of an already ongoing dynamic within modern subjectivity.

One common thread that runs through existing research is the claim that members of the millennial generation who grew up on social networking sites are increasingly egocentric and narcissistic. I find that while SNS users do appear to be more narcissistic, this is symptomatic of a larger problem. The narcissism of the self is not a novel concept. On social networking sites, the paradox of modern subjectivity is being transformed in the intensification of an existing dynamic that pushes to the extreme the problematic notion of subjectivity. Precisely what it means to speak about subjectivity has been contested for a very long time. Social networking sites present a new modality for the problematic notion of subjectivity, which in the very beginning affirms the unnatural character of modern subjects, not just the 'Romantic subject' or subjectivization of subjectivity but the loss of the objectivization necessary for a healthy subjectivity. In inventing the modern subject, the subject is cut off from the world.

While clearly related to contemporary technologies, the problem is not contemporary. The paradox of self and other has deep roots. Social network technologies

enhance an already ongoing dynamic within modern subjectivity that itself requires narcissism. There is a double narcissism at work here. While the solipsistic subject holds that the self is the only existent thing and knowledge of others or anything outside of itself is unsure, the digital subject also separates itself from nature and the unknowable through technology. In this second form of narcissism, the body belongs to nature but the digital self does not, the digital self belongs to technology; it is a by-product of technology that comes to life within the story of technology. The digital self cannot exist without technology— it is structured to need constant connection, necessarily fears privacy, and must circulate to demonstrate its existence to others because disconnecting is death. Social networking sites make visible the degree to which modern subjectivity gives rise to a kind of narcissism within a narcissism. The more one is a citizen, the less they are a human; the more one is into him or herself, the less they are part of the world. But this form of narcissism also occurs in a context— a set of technological, social, economic, and cultural drivers allow it to come to fruition and operate as its condition of possibility. In a network of different pathologies amplified by social networking technologies, narcissism is one reinforcing strand of a web that can move and contaminate other strands.

In my research, I indicate that SNSs are not the cause of intensifying narcissism and deteriorating social skills but the new modality, one dimension of a neoliberal capitalist system that is deeply narcissistic by nature. Social networking sites are inherently egoistic in their structure. Users create personalized profile pages on the basis of self-agency and the digital self appears to be in a voluntaristic position. But SNS users are involved in a deeply dialectical process. Social networking sites provide a framework

within which subjectivities are constituted. I find that the digital subject is caught in a vicious circle of narcissistic attachment and panic insecurity, living in a digital form of the modern panopticon where self-surveillance is necessary for existence. The subject always has to negotiate phenomena outside itself but in this case may be is susceptible to information overload. On social networking sites, users are overwhelmed by an urge to constantly compare themselves to others. The more these users look at each other's content, the more insecure they can become, the more they feel the need to boast and portray themselves in an equally positive light. Their own insecurities are making them more self-obsessed. When SNS users compare their own lives with the idealized and glorified accounts of others, they are overcome with a sense of unfulfilled desire. Suddenly, their everyday existence seems empty. Struggling to interpret the complex pathologies at work, the digital subject may be left feeling severed from the world.

To understand how SNS users can be at once more narcissistic and yet also more insecure than they were before signing in, in Chapter One I look at how users develop a phantasmatic sense of self through ongoing online identity play and carefully managed representations that can encourage positive perceptions of self-worth and narcissistic tendencies in young users. In Chapter Two, I explore how social networking sites are changing the way users see themselves and the world, as the digital subject tends to calculate self-worth by constantly comparing itself to the distorted displays of others. This can lead to disappointment in a world where the private has become public, users have a notoriously short attention span, and people are becoming increasingly 'alone together'. In Chapter Three, I question why users turn to social networking sites in a world where cybercitizens are always watching one another in a modern form of

Foucault's panopticon and attention capital may be eclipsing social capital. Identifying that the digital subject seeks acceptance and belonging in virtual communities, I indicate that while there is a lack of emotional depth, empathy and social responsibility on SNSs, users can still find a platform for rearticulatory subversive practices. In Chapter Four, I apply my observations to a specific case study, employing a Foucauldian lens to observe the effects that participation on social networking sites can have in young women aged 15-24 who use these sites to constantly compare themselves to unrealistic and ultimately unhealthy standards set by waif-like runway models and perfectly toned female bodies. Exploring how this might affect ideas of self-worth and self-perception, I find that SNSs create a virtual space where Foucauldian processes of examination, normalization, and self-surveillance can contribute to the development of body image issues and eating disorders amongst young female users. Reflecting on the research of cyberoptimists, I question whether virtual anti-ED communities can function as a source of support and place for subversive, rearticulatory practices in the example of a #FitFam community on Instagram. Finally, I summarize my arguments and look to the future of social networking sites as the latest development in human communication.

Chapter 1: Transforming Virtual Subjectivity

In this virtually mediated world, users seem to turn to social networking sites (SNSs) in search of connection, entertainment, interaction, and acceptance. Creating personal profiles and posting content about their lives, they can accumulate friends, amuse themselves, keep in contact with acquaintances and receive encouragement in their day-to-day activities. Existing research on virtual identity formation via social networking sites is conflicting. Some studies suggest that positive online self-presentations can contribute to higher self-esteem amongst users while other research shows that unrealistic, exaggerated self-identifications can encourage narcissistic tendencies (Gentile, Twenge, et al. 2013; Mehdizadeh, 2010). These contrasting hypotheses shed light upon the conflicted nature of phantasmatic identity as at once psychological and social, objective and material, neither a conceptual nor embodied concept but both (Harrell, 2010). This chapter explores how social networking sites are affecting the way users develop virtual subjectivity a phantasmatic sense of self through image-crafting, identity play, and positive self-perceptions that can result in overly optimistic depictions and encourage narcissistic tendencies amongst young users.

1.1 Finding Foucault in Virtual Subjectivity

To understand the application of Michel Foucault in this project, it is necessary to explore his conception of subjectivity. Foucault proposes that individuals internalize the disciplinary regime to which they are subject through persistent self-monitoring and self-regulation based upon "the 'acceptable' limits of behaviour" in a society (Gordon, 1999:

399). These limits are established through the formation of discourse, as well as surveillance techniques of examination and normalization (Gordon, 1999: 399). Discipline is not administered through force but by a calculated gaze (Foucault, 1975). As Vaz and Bruno (2003) indicate, coextensive practices of examination and normalization are crucial to understanding the Foucauldian notion of subjectivity because "any practice of surveillance entails self-surveillance as its historical counterpart and it is this simultaneity that accounts for the acceptance and legitimization of power relations" (273).

While examination "establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them", normalization is a form of self-surveillance that imposes homogeneity on the subject by "demarcating normal and 'respectable'" behaviour in society, as according to projected norms (Gordon, 1999: 399). Virtual disciplinary practices "subject bodily activities to a process of constant surveillance and examination that enables a continuous and pervasive control of individual conduct" (Foucault, 1975: 102). Certain norms, categories and identifications of the self are encouraged to the exclusion of those that are prohibited, disavowed, not allowed to come into presence. On 'nonymous' social networking sites like Facebook where user identities are more closely tied to their offline identity by profile pictures and biographical information, "the choices individuals make in crafting a digital body highlight the self-monitoring that Foucault describes" (Boyd, 2007: 129). On Facebook, for example, individuals are careful not to post status updates too frequently or share things that might be TMI (too much information) for fear of seeming desperate or lonely to their Friends who are always watching and judging. On Instagram, users constantly try to portray

themselves in a positive light, posting pictures of them doing things that are considered normal— acting according to projected norms. A typical Instagram account is filled with mundane photos of sunsets, food, cute pets and 'selfies' made more attractive with photo editing effects. A popular CollegeHumor parody titled "Look at this Instagram (Nickelback Parody)" even went viral because it so accurately mocked the app's ability to transform life's simple moments into 'masterpieces' by applying a filter and some blur (Contreras, 2013: 835). In the social networking world, every choice you make matters. From your listed hobbies and interests to which Facebook groups you join and who you accept as Friends, each tidbit of information adds to the virtual picture you paint of yourself and share with others. As Turkle (2011) says, "Everything is a token, a marker for who you are" (184). In front of a screen, "you have a chance to write yourself into the person you want to be and to imagine others as you wish them to be" (Turkle, 2011: 188). But everything that is put up may also be judged, and any behaviour that seems out of the ordinary will be noticed.

Acceptable behavioural norms are based on divisive labels and attributes deemed normal or given in a society through "the standards of the existing social practices" (Gordon, 1999: 400). These divisive labels create identity classifications that "make human beings into objects by giving them identities to which a set of categories are attached" (Gordon, 1999: 400). When people create profiles on social networking sites and develop their digital subjectivity, they often describe feeling a heightened sense of power— users have the virtual world at their fingertips; they are able to write, edit, and delete aspects of their identity as they please (Turkle, 2011: 180). In these highly controlled environments, users have "complete power over self-presentation on Web

pages, unlike most other social contexts" (Vazire and Gosling, 2004). More than ever before, individuals can form and shape their identity "by withholding information, hiding undesirable physical features, and role-playing" (Mehdizadeh, 2010: 357). Users become the authors of their own virtual story. They are able to carefully articulate the pages of their book to truly reflect what they believe is their 'innermost selves'. As Harrell (2010) aptly indicates, however, forms of digital connectivity tend to "implement and reify (often incorrect) stigmatizing identity classification models". Although the acceptable limits of social behaviour can be tested on SNSs, users still seem to adhere to implicit virtual limits set by self-regulating cyber citizens.

In virtually mediated representations, users construct what they perceive to be desirable online identities, identities which may include elements of both fact and fantasy. As Sun and Wu (2012) note, "SNS users have more control over their self-presentational behaviors than in face-to-face communications… they have the opportunity to think about what aspects of their personalities should be presented or which photos convey their best images" (420). Turkle (2011) suggests that on social networking sites "you make your own page, your own place" and when you are there, you are by definition "where you belong, among officially friended friends" (157). In this place, users feel safe. They can delete undesirable photos or comments; they can block undesirable people. They are in control. This is not necessarily so offline when they talk to someone on the phone or face-to-face. On social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, users can create and preserve what they consider to be a desirable digital identity deemed both normal and acceptable in a new regime of near constant self-surveillance that takes place both on and offline.

1.2 What is This New 'Self'? Phantasmatic Identity Formation on SNSs

Portraying themselves in a positive light is possible because users are free to create their own personal profiles; one gets to "type oneself into being" and construct their own digital identity (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 211). If social networking sites function as a place for identity play and experimentation, then the concept of identity itself must be reconfigured. Theorists define digital identity broadly as "the construction and maintenance of a particular version or versions of one's character, interests and values" (Goodings, Locke, et al. 2007: 464). Existing literature on virtual subjectivity is divided. Some accounts indicate that users have two separate identities— their online projected, performed identity and their offline physical, 'real' identity— because people put on facades when they meet each other online. These accounts indicate that rather than revealing their 'true' selves, users create alter egos in the virtual world to hide their real personalities (Lee, 2013: 187). Others argue that in this digital age, the online and offline have become inseparably intertwined— it is impossible to separate the virtual from the physical 'real'.[7] More closely aligned with the latter camp, Turkle (2011) suggests that social media users experience an erosion of boundaries between the virtual and the 'real' as views of the self become less unitary and more protean (Turkle, 2011: xi).

Turkle (2011) explains how communicative devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of self, one that is "split between the screen and the physical real, wired into the existence of technology" (16). She suggests that this new self exists as

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[7] Donna Haraway (1991), "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge).

a mash-up of what you have on- and offline, which she refers to as an individual's "life-mix" because users have moved from multi-tasking to multi-lifing (Turkle, 2011: 161). Referencing the idea of the protean self introduced by Robert Jay Lifton, she indicates that the self is fluid and many-sided, emphasizing multiple aspects of connection and reinvention, able to embrace and modify different ideas and ideologies (Turkle, 2011: 179). In explaining the concept of identity online, Turkle (2011) states, "when identity is multiple... people feel 'whole' not because they are *one* but because the relationships among aspects of self are fluid and undefensive... we feel 'ourselves' if we can move easily among our many aspects of self" (194). Offering a similar perspective, Butler (1993) explains phantasmatic identity formation as a staging of events— a process that belongs to the imaginary in which identity is never finally achieved but remains an ongoing effort at "alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation" (105). Fox Harrell (2010) deepens the idea of co-constituted identity in his innovative work on digital media and computer coding, demonstrating how phantasmatic identities are comprised cognitively and materially on social networking sites. Authors from this camp indicate that one should not attempt to separate the virtual from the 'physical real' because we live in a world where the two kinds of identity are actually blended, fused into a phantasmatic digital being whose lines are fluid, boundaries are permeable. A distinction between 'online' and 'offline' identity can no longer be made. The two are inseparably intertwined in the idealized real that is identity in this postmodern era (Haraway, 1991). Blending the virtual with the 'real' is part of an ongoing process.

1.3 Virtual Self-Presentation and Identity Play

Contreras (2013) indicates: "We are creating versions of ourselves on digital galaxies that when inspected holistically show a reflection of our innermost selves" (36). The digital subject is shattered, fractured into multiple substantive parts that together make up a whole. Based upon ideas about what one is expected to be and the self-illustrations of other users, individuals offer up personal facts and attempt to self-identify with like-minded others. In a paper on Facebook and MySpace in the November-December 2008 issue of the *Journal of Applied Science*, UCLA Professor Patricia Greenfield and researcher Adriana Manago indicate, "You can manifest your ideal self [on these sites]… you can manifest who you want to be and then try to grow into that" (6). These authors suggest that while we are always engaging in self-presentation, social networking sites take this to a whole new level. SNSs allow you to change what you look like, photoshop your face, and "intensify the ability to present yourself in a positive light and explore different aspects of your personality and how you present yourself" (Lee, 2013: 150). On 'nonymous' Web sites like Facebook, users make public 'identity statements' that they might not normally make offline (Mehdizadeh, 2010: 358). These statements can take both explicit (ex. autobiographic descriptions) and implicit (ex. photos) forms, ultimately enabling people to stage a public display of their hoped-for possible selves (Mehdizadeh, 2010: 358).

Social networking sites can also be a place for users to engage in identity experimentation. As Lee (2013) indicates, "people put up something that they would like to become—not completely different from who they are but maybe a little different—and the more it gets reflected off of others, the more it may be integrated into their sense of

self as they share words and photos with so many people" (150). Users can "try on different things, possible identities, and explore in a way that is common for emerging adulthood… it becomes psychologically real" (Lee, 2013: 150). Some individuals use Instagram to craft their identity by treating the app like a virtual diary, posting everyday pictures of themselves and their activities that they might not bother to share on other social media sites because what they are doing is "just normal everyday stuff" (Laidler, 2014). Others use Instagram as a place to engage in wishful identity experimentation. In a virtual world where users can choose which content to share, Instagram functions as a world of dreams— of IG inspiration. Some people create profiles that feature photos not taken themselves but collected from other users and the Internet. Foodies post snapshots of 'foodporn' or the various culinary creations they salivate over; fashionistas post photos of their OOTD (outfit of the day). These 'IGspiration' profiles reflect idealized identities built around dreams and desire. Pinterest exemplifies this idealized identity-crafting even more. The site is a fantasy-land fueled by lust where users repin photos and ideas found by others, cultivating and curating a particular portrayal of themselves that they want others to see. Little is actually produced or created on these accounts. Users tend to follow others who share similar posts and interests, posting and reposting the same content that perpetuates particular norms of accepted behaviour.

Turkle (2011) indicates that even when we use social networking sites to be "ourselves", we often allow our online performances to take on lives of their own, sometimes as "our better selves" (160). These accidental expressions can become defining features of the digital subject if the bodily self begins to conform to constructed identifications. Exploring this idea in her work, Turkle (2011) finds that young users

employ SNSs as a safe space to try on different versions of themselves and carefully

adjust these adaptations based on the reactions they receive from others (192). She

believes that the age of identity construction on social networking sites is thirteen to

eighteen— the years of profile writing (Turkle, 2011: 182). For these users, "online life is

practice to make the rest of life better" (Turkle, 2011: 193). Gardner and Davis (2013)

see this form of identity experimentation as an "act of public performance that forms part

of a teen's carefully crafted online persona" (5). While the Internet offers space for what

Turkle (2011) calls 'constructive identity play', she worries that "it is not so easy to

experiment when all rehearsals are archived" (273). Actions on social networking sites

are often premeditated, pandering to a particular audience and designed to make

followers see a user in a certain way. As Turkle (2013) indicates, in their search for

'company', users are often exhausted by "the pressures of performance" (280). These

pressures of performance encourage users to act according to accepted norms and labels

for fear of being marked as different under constant observation.

1.4 Positive Self-Perception and Social Self-Esteem

The constant pressure to perform in socially acceptable ways encourages SNS users to

craft profiles that show off the very best version of themselves, filtering out anything that

makes them feel bad and creating an image that portrays them "in a very positive light

with no blemishes" (Toma and Hancock, 2013: 322). In this way, the digital self is a form

of identity that is narcissistic by structure; it cannot be anything else but narcissistic.

Perhaps this is why researchers at Cornell University found that study participants shown

their own Facebook profile pages experienced a boost in self-esteem and 'feel-good

effect' (Malone, 2011). When users create virtual identities that portray them in a positive light—likely conforming to certain identity categories and expectations— they receive praise from others and are pleased with the reflection they see.

Toma and Hancock (2013) suggest that sites like Facebook can satisfy a fundamental need for self-worth through self-affirmation, emphasizing and "bringing to awareness essential aspects of the self-concept, such as values, meaningful relationships, and cherished personal characteristics" (322). Gonzales and Hancock (2011) study the impact that Facebook can have on 'social self-esteem', defined as "perceptions of one's physical appearance, close relationships, and romantic appeal" (79). Facebook was found to have particularly positive benefits for individuals with low self-esteem (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011: 79). This may be because the built-in network of friends can offer constant and immediate encouragement to the user. As Courtney Prior (2014) of *My Yoga Online* indicates, "most status comments are positive… the few that are negative seem like they are just fishing for some sort of support". In these cases, users seem to be crying out for comfort and attention from others online. Perhaps this is because "when we make ourselves vulnerable, we expect to be nurtured" (Turkle, 2011: 235). When people post troubling content, they often receive an immediate outpouring of support from their online 'friends'. These users receive the quick boost of social self-esteem they seek and are reminded that people out there care about them. The cycle of narcissistic attachment deepens as the need for connection is temporarily satisfied.

Some users even seem to engage in a process of fishing for 'likes', purposefully leaving nice comments on other peoples' photos and posts, planting seeds for reciprocal positive reinforcement. Young girls often do this by liking each other's Facebook profile

photos and posting comments about how good they look, hoping that their friend will return the favour when they put up a new profile picture. Nobody wants to put up a profile picture and receive zero likes or comments. The narcissistic digital self deflates and panic insecurity sets in. Instagram functions in a similar supportive way. Contreras (2013) suggests that the app takes "instantaneous approval to a whole new level with the double-tap… who needs tiny little text buttons when you can kinesthetically connect with what you like on a screen?" (111). When users double-tap the screen to 'like' a photo on Instagram, a tiny heart flickers "to remind you that all is well in the world" (Contreras, 2013: 111). It is a simple, satisfying affirmation of their approval.

Some users worry that their carefully constructed performances online might not demonstrate enough "authenticity" (Turkle, 2011: 273). Overly positive presentations can seem 'fake' or forced. How much is one able to embellish their appearance on social networking sites before an exaggeration becomes a lie? Contreras (2013) contends that social media has made it possible for us to show off the very best of ourselves but prevented us from lying about whom we truly are (35). Back, Stopfer, et al. (2010) conducted a study to determine whether social networking sites convey 'accurate' impressions of profile owners. Disputing the claim that SNS users create idealized versions of themselves, these authors correlated data from Facebook and the German equivalent StudiVZ to test the "idealized virtual-identity hypothesis" against the "extended real-life hypothesis" (372). Their research results were more consistent with the latter approach, the extended real-life hypothesis, which suggests that individuals use SNSs as an extension of their 'real' offline personalities (372). This study suggests that the identities presented in user profiles are "socially desirable, but not unrealistic,"

reflecting the selves that users wished to perform (Gentile, Twenge, et al., 2012: 1929).

Gentile, Twenge, et al. (2012) similarly found that "self-presentations tend to be selective

and carefully managed, but not false" (1929). The self-presentations in profiles are real,

reflective of a digital subject made possible by but also existing beyond the confines of

social network culture.

1.5 Tendency Towards Narcissism

Some worry that the carefully managed self-presentations on social networking sites

might contribute to a kind of self-centered individualism that runs deep in contemporary

Western society where self-centered, egoistic users are able to constantly obsess over

their virtual appearances (Cox, 2014). In a digital world where self-presentations can be

stretched and exaggerations are accepted as the norm, Lee (2013) worries that people

have begun to sculpt themselves "in a more extreme way… in the arena of identity

formation, this makes people more individualistic and more narcissistic" (150). In much

of the research produced on social networking sites in the last few years, "frequent social

media use has been seen as a sign of narcissism" (Contreras, 2013: 421). Social

networking sites are said to contribute to narcissistic forms of identity formation by

providing individuals with an avenue "through which to garner attention from others,

express their identity, and reinforce their self-concept" (Gentile, Twenge, et al., 2012:

1930). In one article on this topic, Buffardi and Campbell (2008) suggest that social

networking sites "offer a gateway for self-promotion via self-descriptions, vanity via

photos, and large numbers of shallow relationships (friends are counted—sometimes

reaching the thousands—and in some cases ranked), each of which is potentially linked to

trait narcissism" (1303). The very structure of social networking sites can be conducive to individualistic behaviour; users are expected to create profile pages all about themselves and their everyday activities. The next section of this paper explores participation on social networking sites can increase narcissistic tendencies by allowing users to create inflated self-constructions based on exaggerated positive attributes, providing an arena for constant attention and affirmation, and allowing users to accumulate large quantities of weak ties in the form of loosely defined SNS 'friends'.

In a study questioning the causal link between Facebook and narcissism, Lynne Kelly of the University of Hartford suggests that "the frequency of Facebook use [is] not evidence of narcissism but a sign of openness and a lack of concern about privacy" (Contreras, 2013: 422). Another study indicates that if narcissistic individuals use SNSs for self-promotion and gathering more friends or page views, perhaps it is the potential to acquire 'friends' and receive praise that increases narcissistic traits or characteristics (Gentile, Twenge, et al., 2012: 1932). The direction of causation is not clear. Gentile, Twenge, et. al. (2012) suggest that because narcissists have more friends on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, then the average person on MySpace or Facebook is connected to more narcissistic people on these SNSs than they are in their offline lives (1932). For this reason, these authors indicate that SNSs may be shaped by personalities that tend more toward narcissism than the expected average (Gentile, Twenge, et al., 2012: 1932).

A number of studies exploring the social psychology of SNSs apply the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) developed by Raskin and Terry (1988)— an analytical ranking system that includes a variety of heterogeneous traits such as "a grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness", "an inability to tolerate criticism",

and "entitlement or the expectation of special favours without assuming reciprocal responsibilities" (Carpenter, 2011: 482). While this categorical ranking inventory may be over-generalized, it is helpful in identifying SNS user behaviour trends that may give direction for future research. It is important to note that this thesis is not attempting to analyze social media use of people with the severe personality disorder measured by the narcissistic personality inventory (NPI) and known as 'narcissistic personality disorder.' Narcissistic individuals usually show signs of two common behaviours: grandiose exhibition (GE) and entitlement/exploitativeness (EE). GE refers to people who love to be the center of attention whereas EE indicates "how far people will go to get the respect and attention that they think they deserve" (Lee, 2013: 24). On social networking sites, individuals displaying signs of GE will constantly seek attention from others, purposefully posting boastful content or photos in an attempt to earn praise. Analyzing data with the NPI, Christopher Carpenter from Western Illinois University concludes that "Facebook gives those with narcissistic tendencies the opportunity to exploit the site to get the feedback they need and become the center of attention" (Lee, 2013: 24). While most SNS users are guilty of attention-seeking behaviour at some point due to the individualistic nature of these sites where users are expected to post content about themselves, narcissistic users exhibiting GE will *constantly* need to be the center of attention at the expense of everything else. Those who are high in EE similarly demand social support but fail to provide it to others, believing that friends and followers should support them when they are distressed even though they feel no duty to reciprocate (Carpenter, 2011: 483). These narcissistic individuals are likely to use SNSs to see what

others are saying about them and will aggressively retaliate if any negative comments are made.

Research on SNSs tends to define narcissism as being "associated with positive and inflated self-views of agentic traits like intelligence, power, and physical attractiveness" (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008: 1304). Narcissists are expected to have moderately high self-esteem and "an overall positive evaluation of the self" (Gentile, Twenge, et al., 2012: 1930). Outlining the behaviour patterns of narcissistic individuals, studies show that these individuals "are boastful and eager to talk about themselves", "gain esteem from public glory", and "enjoy looking at themselves on videotape and in the mirror" (Buss and Chiodo, 1991; Wallace and Baumeister, 2002; Robins and John, 1997). Social networking sites are thought to present opportunities for self-promotion (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008: 1304). An influencing factor in this is the way that social networking sites encourage users to engage in conversation and comment on each others' posted content. Narcissistically inclined individuals can find an ever-present audience and a place to seek out positive reinforcement. These individuals are said to use social networking sites as a platform to boast or brag, attract followers to gain public glory, and utilize profile pages as a flattering mirror to reflect their accomplishments.

Another reason why social networking sites are said to be an especially fertile ground for narcissists is because they can function as "a gateway for hundreds of shallow relationships (i.e., virtual friends), and emotionally detached communication (i.e., wall posts, comments)" where users can develop shallow—as opposed to emotionally deep and committed— relationships that allow them to "self-regulate via social connections" (Mehdizadeh, 2010: 358; Buffardi and Campbell, 2008: 1304). This gives narcissistic

individuals the ability to participate in the "dynamic self-construction via relationships" they need to constantly affirm their narcissistic esteem (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008: 1304). Easily forming "superficial 'friendships' with many individuals" on social networking sites, narcissistic individuals often feel inclined to accumulate a large group of 'friends' to the extent that many of them accept cyber-friends they do not even know (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008: 1304; Lee, 2013: 185). Gentile, Twenge, et al. (2012) indicate that individuals demonstrating EE are predicted to have a high friend count on social networking sites, driven by their desire to seek attention from as many people as possible (1932). Carpenter (2011) similarly suggests that EE users are more likely to accept friend requests from strangers regardless of their potential followers' biographical information (483). As Buffardi and Campbell (2008) indicate, "Narcissists do not focus on interpersonal intimacy, warmth, or other positive long-term relational outcomes… they are very skilled at both initiating relationships and using relationships to look popular, successful, and high in status in the short term" (1304).

Narcissistic individuals seeking attention can find it easily on Instagram. With its simple, user-friendly interface, Instagram (IG) is a multi-functional site that allows IGers to share photos publically or privately while remaining relatively anonymous. While some users download the app simply as a photo-editing tool to improve the look of pictures and choose to keep their private profiles, others share photos publically and collect followers in the form of weak ties— connections to users that provide evaluative input but are not marked by emotional closeness (Gentile, Twenge, et al., 2012: 1932). Compared to Facebook, the bio section on individual user profiles is relatively limited by a short word count and the information required for sign-up is minimal. There is less

information available to tie users to their offline activities and as such Instagram users tend to act more freely than they do on Facebook. Some IGers even create 'secret' accounts in which they only accept followers they do not know and are careful to never show their face. Many of these secret accounts function as private yet public diaries that keep users 'accountable' by tracking their fitness goals and progress. This allows the social networking site to be particularly attractive to narcissistic individuals as they find the perfect platform for unchecked instances of oversharing that can help satisfy their attention-craving attitudes.

Instagram has become notorious for one particular kind of attention-craving female user who "posts all manner of inappropriate pictures that she would never share on Facebook or any other form of social media where the normal rules of society still apply" (Bolen, 2013). Social networking sites for fitness junkies take on a new meaning— a virtual progress journal. In a comically edgy post about this common type of female user, which she refers to crassly as "The Female Douche", Bolen (2013) outlines how this narcissistic female user is "way more into herself than the normal self-obsessed human". Indicating that this self-obsessed female user "lives for a good gym mirror selfie after an intense ab workout", Bolen (2013) suggests that she "doesn't even care that there are other people in the gym watching her snap pictures of her toned stomach and firm glutes at flattering angles via mirror". This user is known for posting a ton of selfies with numerous hashtags included in her own comments underneath, such as: #progress #thinspiration #girlswithabs #strongisthenewsexy #iamthenewsexy #tellmeimpretty" (Bolen, 2013). The fitness industry is booming. Fitness accounts like hers on Instagram are filled with selfies exposing girls in sports bras and underwear,

justified by hashtags like #progress, #girlswithmuscle, and #fitspiration. This narcissistic individual is using fitness "as a thin veil to disguise her generally [promiscuous] behaviour… she's not photographing the perfect sunset, capturing her plate of food in just the right light, or taking pictures of her dog being silly and cute like normal miserable people; she's just making sure to include at least a few inches of cleavage in that selfie of her holding a martini" (Bolen, 2013). As Bolen (2013) indicates, this user "thrives on attention driven by sexuality," flourishing in an environment of constant attention and easy self-affirmation from complete strangers.

While most of the research done searching for some correlation between social networking sites and narcissism focuses on grandiose exhibition and entitlement/exploitativeness based on the NPI scale, Turkle (2011) describes narcissism in a different way. She indicates that in the psychoanalytic tradition, narcissism is not just a way to describe people who love themselves (Turkle, 2011: 177). The incessant need that narcissistic individuals feel to accumulate 'friends' is in fact the result of "a personality so fragile it needs constant support" (177). Because the narcissistic self cannot tolerate the complex demands of other people, she indicates, it relates to them by "distorting who they are and splitting off what [they] need, what [they] can use" (Turkle, 2011: 177). On social networking sites, this means creating a large support network and then selecting limited contact only with those people who serve a particular purpose. As Buffardi and Campbell (2008) indicate, "individuals use social networking sites to maintain deeper relationships as well, but often the real draw is the ability to maintain large numbers of relationships (e.g., many users have hundreds or even thousands of

'friends')" (1304). Narcissists take what they need and move on; if they are not gratified, they simply try someone else (Turkle, 2011: 177).

I would argue that this definition of narcissism—as a form of weak and fragile personality— is a more accurate representation of many members of the millennial generation who grew up on social networking sites. Even though SNS users seem self-absorbed and egotistical, this is symptomatic of a much larger problem. The digital self is a form of identity that is narcissistic by structure; it cannot be anything else but narcissistic. The digital subject is structured to "need" connection, to constantly interact with and compare itself to the positively exaggerated representations of others. Overwhelmed by this pressure to compare, SNS users are left feeling less self-assured and more insecure than they were before logging on because they are caught in a vicious circle of comparison, inadequacy and alienation that makes them seem more self-obsessed. Users boast about themselves and their achievements in a desperate attempt to compete—or even keep up— with others. Narcissism does not occur in a vacuum; it operates in conjunction with a number of technological and economic drivers which allow it to come to fruition and operate as its condition of possibility. From this perspective, the vicious circle of narcissism and panic insecurity is the ideological by-product and condition of digital capitalism.

Chapter 2: How SNSs Are Changing the Way Users See Themselves and the World

Social networking site users have more 'friends' and know more about each other than ever before. Inescapably implicated in relational subjectivity, people develop perceptions about themselves in their interactions on SNSs; their identities are shaped by diffracted and distorted reflections of their own image and others'. Much of the recent research done on social networking sites depicts individuals as independent, self-willed subjects capable of determining their own field of actions online. SNS users are seen as free agents who construct their own unique identity and act freely in boundless virtual realms. But the digital self that is formed and fashioned is influenced by online interactions and inspirations. Developed through an ongoing process of mediated representation and identity experimentation, the digital subject should be seen more as a relational topology, formed and sculpted in interactions on various social networking sites. In this chapter, I explore how social networking sites are changing the way users see themselves and the world as they seem to calculate self-worth through constant comparison to others based on embellished but not entirely untrue representations. Questioning whether social networking sites can help cure or actually contribute to loneliness, I look at why SNS users have notoriously short attention spans and seem to treat life experiences as a way of accumulating sharable content. In a world where the last lines between public and private blur into nothingness, internet users live in a kind of virtual panopticon where self-surveillance, examination and normalization are constant.

2.1 Calculating Virtual Self-Worth through Constant Comparison

One of the reasons why SNS users are willing to make their lives public in a society of constant surveillance and examination is because how many friends, followers, likes and popular posts an individual user has is now used as a measure of popularity and even self-worth. Value is calculated through shallow virtual metrics. Users live in a world where their accepted sense of worth in the 'real' community is measured in part by their virtual profile. While membership on social networking sites is formally voluntary, a complete lack of membership on any social networking site is widely acknowledged as strange and suspicious. The website and social media app Klout is a perfect example of how virtual existence can be used as a calculation of value. Applying social media analytics, Klout gives users a numerical ranking from 1-100 according to their online presence and influence across a number of sites including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, FourSquare, and LinkedIn.[8]

Users create accounts on SNSs because without them these days, a person does not exist. There is a degree of social coerciveness or peer pressure that compels many to give away a certain degree of their privacy. People are constantly judged by their online presence. In an interview, one student told Turkle (2011) that on Facebook, "you don't have to be on a lot, but you can't be on so little that your profile is totally lame" (250). There is a pressure to appear virtually attractive and in demand. Those who fail to appear 'normal' become apparent under the disciplinary gaze. Users need to have friends who

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[8] Klout is a website and mobile app launched in 2008 that ranks users on a score of 1-100, the numerical indication of their virtual social influence through social media analytics based on the size of their social media networks, popularity of content, and interaction with other users.

actively like their photos and comment under their posts. If they share content and receive no response, they become a virtual pariah. There must be some explanation for why no one wants to interact with them online. In this pressure to conform, the digital subject comes to being, forever caught up in a process of constant virtual examination. As Prior (2014) suggests, "People are very upset if they put a status and nobody likes it… nobody is making a Facebook page just for themselves, they already know what they're doing".

Turkle (2011) finds that some social networking site users will take this to an extreme, creating fake profiles on sites like MySpace and Facebook to start very critical conversations about themselves and see who chimes in (241). Taking time to copy and paste photos from the Internet and include personal biographic details, these individuals go to great lengths to make false profile pages that seem legitimate and believable. Perhaps the digital subject sees this as a way to step outside itself and reveal how it looks to others. There is some kind of fascination—even obsession— with how the self is viewed by others online.

This fascination plays an important part in the way that social networking sites are altering the way users define themselves in relation to others. SNS users live in a culture of "me, me, me", and yet they obsess over others. These users often spend hours and hours pouring over pictures posted by others— studying, analyzing, comparing. Attempting to distract themselves with the deafening buzz of digital connection, they are inundated with a constant stream of updates about others' lives as popular users make excitement out of the most mundane tasks in carefully and cleverly worded tweets. Able to control projected versions of themselves, people negotiate what they want and do not

want to be exposed. Facebook users see only the selected information that their 'friends' want to display, and most tend to leave out any unflattering details about themselves that might contribute to negative perceptions. Instagram users similarly play up the more desirable parts of their lives, often causing their followers to jealously eye the things they long for. Constant comparisons lead to a process of deep self-reflection that can result in a sense of inferiority or self-loathing. Individuals become haunted by that which they do not have. Some become jealous and resentful of others for what they possess, what they do, even who they are. Tormented users seeking solitude and anonymity instead find a place where they can far too easily fall into obsession over what they do not have, what they wish to be, what they think they should be.

2.2 The Claude Glass: More Beautiful Than Reality

Figure 3: The Claude Glass

Calculating self-worth through comparison on social networking sites can be detrimental to the user because they are measuring themselves against the carefully managed self-

presentations of others. By 'untagging' pictures or defriending followers, individuals can construct a flattering image of themselves— one that is often more beautiful than 'reality'. Mehdizadeh (2010) indicates: "Unlike a mirror, which reminds us of who we really are and may have a negative effect on self-esteem if that image does not match our ideal," social networking sites show a positive version of ourselves (358). In his article titled "Picture Pluperfect", Nathan Jurgenson (2012) explores the way that users sculpt themselves in their profiles. Contesting the claim that social networking sites function as windows into the lives of their users, Jurgenson (2012) suggests that profiles on a social networking site act more like a Claude glass—named after Claude Lorrain— more commonly known as a black mirror. This alternate metaphor refers to a pocket-sized device that was popular in the late eighteenth century, used by painters and wealthy vacationers who took to the European countrysides in search of landscapes reminiscent of picturesque paintings. This original hand-held device was a small mirror made of convex, gray-colored glass that when held up and looked into distorted reflected images by brightening colour tones and pushing more scenery into a single focal point of the convex shape. Gazing at the reflection shown in a Claude glass, one can see a constructed image "thought to be even more beautiful than reality" (Jurgenson, 2012: 1). Jurgenson (2012) suggests that social networking sites offer a similarly distorted image, generating a representation of the user that is split against itself and juxtaposed against an idealized world of other user selves.

　　　With more than 100 million current users, the Instagram community is a vast virtual abyss of interconnected photo albums that can demonstrate Jurgenson's (2012) metaphor of the Claude glass applied to social networking sites. IG users create a

distorted reflection of their lives by posting pictures that tend to selectively show the better parts of their everyday existence. This can take the form of virtual bragging, demonstrating to other users that that they possess certain status symbols or coveted material objects. In the case of infamous 'selfie' photos, users post self-portraits that they consider to be flattering in an attempt to prove that they have desirable physical attributes. Facebook accounts function in a similar manner— users tend to post status updates about recent successes or accomplishments in their lives. On Facebook, people share photos of exciting nights out with friends, trips to exotic places, dates with their significant others and new additions to the family. Facebook timelines even highlight 'milestones' and important events for you.

Social networking site users showcase "a version of self that is attractive, successful, and embedded in a network of meaningful relationships" (Toma and Hancock, 2013: 325). Few users regularly take the time to include posts about their bad days, jobs lost, or nagging frustrations unless they are seeking comfort and attention. Many simply gloss over the bad for fear of damaging the virtual reputation they have so carefully sculpted. When users post on their own profile pages, they tend to share the highlights, the happy moments, the praise and encouragement from others. In this phantasmatic reimagining of the digital subject, the psyche meets the social (Butler, 1990). On social networking sites, the psyche is formed in a digital ego that cannot disconnect, in a digital superego that constantly engages in self-surveillance of a user's reputation and compares it to others, and in a digital id that is intense, forceful, and indicative of users' deepest emotions and passions. The digital ego must circulate and self-regulate to survive. Careful not to post too much or too little, privacy is necessarily

sacrificed for the sake of self-presentation because if the digital ego paid attention to privacy it would die; it would have to retreat back into a bodily ego. Deeply attached and addicted to attention, this ego needs to gain exposure— it feeds on support and encouragement from positive responses to photos and status updates.

2.3 GYPSYs on SNSs: The Grass is Always Greener

In the deeply disturbed psychical connection of network culture, careful regulation by the digital ego can make a user's life appear better. This can create unrealistic expectations and lead to disappointment when SNS users constantly compare themselves with the carefully crafted appearance and activities of others. Selective portrayals are all too often taken as accurate representations. Overly positive representations can leave friends and followers feeling inadequate, jealous, even resentful. They make users' lives appear dull in comparison to others' distorted displays. Contreras (2013) indicates that social networking sites can create dissatisfaction because comparison is difficult to avoid and users are led to believe that the grass is greener elsewhere (412). Social media feeds are flooded with images and content showing the positive aspects of individual users' lives. These selected highlights might make the monotony of daily life seem depressingly dull in contrast. In an article titled "Why Generation Y Yuppies are Unhappy", ghost writer @waitbutwhy (2013) explores how the Gen Y age group born between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s have come to be a unique brand of yuppie called Gen Y Protagonists & Special Yuppies (GYPSYs). This kind of yuppie is different from others insofar as they feel that they are the main character of a very special story, but they are also very unhappy. These two qualities are inextricably linked. The author offers a fairly

straightforward explanation— when the reality of someone's life is better than they had

expected, they are happy. When reality is worse, they are unhappy.

GYPSYs have been raised by Baby Boomers, a generation who worked hard

through the 70s, 80s, and 90s during a time of unprecedented economic prosperity; they

have done better than they expected to and are left feeling gratified and optimistic

(Anon., 2013). The Baby Boomers have passed this positive life experience on to their

children, raising Gen Y yuppies with "a sense of optimism and unbounded possibility"

(Anon., 2013). GYPSYs have grown up being told that they can be anything they want to

be and as such set out to live Their Own Personal Dream rather than settling for the

American Dream. Gen Y yuppies are led to believe that they are special and superior,

often developing a strong sense of entitlement and arrogance at an early age. In addition

to these unrealistic expectations, GYPSYs grow up in a social media world where:

A) What everyone else is doing is very out in the open

B) Most people present an inflated version of their own existence, and

C) The people who chime in the most about their careers are usually those whose careers

(or relationships) are going the best, while struggling people tend not to broadcast their

situation.

The article aptly indicates how Gen Y is left feeling, if somewhat incorrectly, like

everyone else is doing really well. This leads to misery and unhappiness in a world built

upon wildly unattainable ambitions where disappointment is inevitable (Anon., 2013).

Social networking sites can contribute to frustration and dissatisfaction because the

digital self builds expectations based upon unrealistic standards set by others. Turkle (2011) echoes this concern in her research, finding that "people report feeling let down when they move from the virtual to the real world" and often fidget with their smartphones uncomfortably, longing for virtual places where they might be more than they are offline (12). When aggregated, online social interaction "paints a picture of who we are, what we like, and how we live our lives" (Contreras, 2013: 12). Instead of thinking of social networking sites as a clear window into the selves and lives of users, they should be thought of as more like a painting— a picturesque, meticulously mediated representation.

2.4 Social Networking Sites: A Cure For or Cause of Loneliness?

Despite what their title implies, social networking sites often end up being more about the individual than about their increased social interactions with others. Relentless comparison to the digital highlight reels of others can leave users feeling disappointed and alienated despite their constant connection to others online. In an article titled "People or Profiles: Individual Differences in Online Social Networking Use", Carpenter, Green, et al. (2010) indicate that this perspective is one of two competing cultural and academic narratives on how social networking sites affect loneliness in existing bodies of research. While some authors condemn social networking sites as "an isolating distraction from deeper social interactions", others see them as a way to fight off feelings of loneliness by connecting with old acquaintances and keeping up with distant friends (Carpenter, Green, et al. 2010: 538).

Mark Zuckerberg claims that Facebook is a prolific communication tool designed to cure loneliness because it "fills the void created by the lack of real face-to-face conversations" (Lee, 2013: 15). Not all share this sentiment. An emerging body of research is beginning to indicate that social media sites like Facebook not only fail to cure loneliness, they actually spread loneliness among online friends. A research study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* December 2009 found that "loneliness occurs in clusters, extends up to 3 degrees of separation, is disproportionately represented at the periphery of social networks, and spreads through a contagious process" (Lee, 2013: 186). These research findings suggest that the spread of loneliness is stronger than the spread of perceived social connection (Lee, 2013: 186). Ryan and Xenos (2011) conclude that even though Facebook users are more likely to be extroverted and narcissistic, they also have stronger feelings of family loneliness (1662). These authors find that for lonely people in particular, "it appears that they are mainly using Facebook to partake in passive activities, instead of providing active social contributions" (Ryan and Xenos, 2011: 1663). This begs the question: "Why do people feel lonely even when they are surrounded by hundreds of online friends?" In answer to this, Turkle (2011) indicates that as people now function in society without much face-to-face contact, the ubiquity of texting, emailing, and social networking has pushed them closer to their machines while driving them further away from each other. We are more connected than ever, and yet the same social networks that connect us "have the ability to make us feel completely alienated" (Contreras, 2013: 414). This may be because while communicative devices allow people to send messages and scan the latest status updates, they also result in less face-to-face communication. Turkle (2011) worries that if you are

spending hours a day on social media or virtual worlds, "there's got to be someplace you're not" (12). She believes that time spent online means less spent with friends and family.

Social networking sites are like candy. When users log on, they enjoy small, bite-sized doses of easily digestible content or a quick hit of emotional gratification from their instant interactions. Devoid of depth and lacking in lasting effect, users often experience a fleeting sense of contentment that leaves them wanting more. Candy is addictive. Project Manager of *My Yoga Online* Courtney Prior (2014) indicates that when SNS users log on they "feel like they are connected because they like each other's comments and share or receive praise but it's all fake… we're not actually connected to any of these people and it makes people feel alone". The rush of emotion and sense of satisfaction users get fade away as fast as they move on to the next post on their social network feed. The digital subject invests time and energy in online others by offering support and encouragement in the form of positive comments or likes, hoping that one day the favour will be returned. But there is no guarantee of this.

In recent years, social scientists have begun to use the term 'ambient awareness' to describe the habitual desire to share and keep in constant contact via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social networks. Professor Andreas Kaplan of the ESCP Europe Business School in France defines this term as "awareness created through regular and constant reception, and/or exchange of information fragments through social media" (Lee, 2013: 171). Clive Thompson of the *New York Times* writes, "Ambient awareness is very much like being physically near someone and picking up on his mood through the little things he does—body language, sighs, stray comments—out of the

corner of your eye" (Lee, 2013: 171). Social networking site users do not need to be physically near each other to feel this ambient awareness. They can be a world apart.

2.5 Seeing the World through a Cell Phone Screen

Contreras (2013) warns that we cannot ignore the serious consequences of living in this digital age—alienation, loneliness, disappointment, and a loss, or at least redefinition, of social skills (412). Individuals are starting to see the world *through* their smartphones and tablets. Rather than looking directly at something, people see things on the screen of their camera phones and take pictures of or film them happening. This can result in a filtered view of reality, one that separates users from their surroundings and changes the way things are seen. On social networking sites, users do not pick up on inaudible gestures and forms of nonverbal communication like body language or facial expression. They can read what they want into or out of text. They can insert emotion to give themselves butterflies or skim over the painful parts of a message to avoid the sting of someone's words. SNS users can take time to type, edit, and rewrite their responses. What happens when individuals no longer have access to subtle cues in tone and speech, visual tells and twitches, or physical triggers like pheromones found only in face-to-face exchanges?

When there is a lull, people check their devices (Turkle, 2011: 153). What of solitude? People are losing the ability to sit alone in silence and contemplate their thoughts or venture cautiously into the depths of their own minds. Turkle (2011) believes that networked devices and ever-changing new technologies are redrawing the boundaries between intimacy and solitude; users can feel at once in possession of a full social life and yet curiously isolated in the half-light of virtual community (11). Public places are no

longer communal spaces but areas of social collection where "people come together but do not speak to each other" (Turkle, 2011: 155). Groups of individuals sit together, staring at their cell phones; they expect to be treated by others as anonymous or even absent. Any breach of this—such as attempting to spark up a conversation— is seen as an intrusion or invasion of privacy. Turkle (2011) fears that "a stream of messages makes it impossible to find moments of solitude, time when other people are showing us neither dependency nor affection" (203). What happens when people no longer take the time to stop and reflect? In solitude, "we don't reject the world but have the space to think our own thoughts" (Turkle, 2011: 203). When SNS users are always on, always reachable, Turkle (2011) worries that seeking solitude can seem suspiciously like hiding (203). People find it hard to believe that someone might not want to be reached. The digital subject does not turn off; disconnection is death.

There is little room left for random interaction with strangers in public places because passersby are too busy tapping away at their screens. Engaging in conversation with strangers can open one's mind to the ideas and opinions of others, to people who do not run in the same social circles or even share similar views. In a world where online experiences are tailored to the individual and their personal preferences, where people can choose their 'friends' and engage only in the conversation threads or chat rooms that pique their particular interests, random conversation is hard to come by. But random conversation is one of the key tools that can make the world into a classroom. Conversations with strangers at a bus stop can change an individual's perspective about an issue, or at least encourage them to keep an open mind to the opinions of others. What happens when random conversations take place less and less?

One serious consequence of this is that the millennial generation appears to have the attention span of a goldfish. They love lists. They lose interest in lengthy articles and favour quick sound bites. As Mullally (2012) indicates, "The velocity with which information is digested in real life and exhibited online has been condensed to seconds… Instagram creates a pretty flipbook of what its users got up to that day, only to be refreshed a few hours later, with more images in one's feed depending on who you are following" (3). On social networking sites, users can flip through life. They can move on to the next image when bored, changing the channel on a virtual television set. Social networking sites have picked up on this. In recent years, Facebook and Twitter have allowed users to see their last entire virtual year in review. Facebook's 'Year In Review' reveals "your 20 biggest moments from the year including life events, highlighted posts, and your popular stories" (Contreras, 2013: 20).

On social networking sites, sometimes even users themselves are reduced to lists. Turkle (2011) explores how on Facebook users are asked to catalogue their favourite things by creating lists of music, movies, books, and more, without being given any space to explain *why* they like certain bands or documentaries instead of others (185). Limited to cookie cutter categories, there is no room for sharing obscure hobbies or interests that do not fit in generic lists. In true Foucauldian fashion, individuals are encouraged to craft identities based on sets of categories, divisive labels and identity classifications that make them into objects (Gordon, 1999: 400). As Turkle (2011) indicates, "You get reduced to a list of your favourite things" (185). People can skim over what they want to know about someone in seconds and move on to the next. A perfect example of this is on Facebook where profile 'cover' photos that span across the top of a user's page are public. UI/UX

designer Lauren Pagan (2014) explains how this public photo banner acts as the front cover of her digital life, "I have ten boxes that I fill with ten photos that represent me… they are how clients will perceive me when they look at my page; right now I have my family, friends, elephants, cowboy boots, tea… it's your cover for how you want people to perceive you".

Another consequence of living in the digital age is that even milestone moments must be documented on social networking sites. Special experiences are stopped and staged for the perfect photo. Sherry Turkle (2013) wonders, "in digital culture, does life become a strategy for establishing an archive?" (300). When we know that everything in our lives is captured, "will we begin to live the life that we hope to have archived?" (Turkle, 2011: 300). Who are we really living for? Susan Sontag writes that in a world where things do not happen unless you post about them, "travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs".[9] Jeremy Glass laments the way that technology has doomed the spontaneity of adventure: "We can't jump off bridges anymore because our iPhones will get ruined… We can't take skinny dips in the ocean, because there's no service on the beach and adventures aren't real unless they're on Instagram".[10] In an interview, Jacquie Laidler (2014) explains how after going scuba diving in the Caribbean, she realized that she had been more concerned whether her mom was getting a good photo of her than of the fish she was swimming with. With regret, she recalls: "Your focus is on getting the right shot to show people rather than living the moment". On popular gag site *The Onion*, an article titled "6-Day Visit to Rural African Village Completely Changes

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[9] Susan Sontag, quote from brainyquote.com accessed January 3 2014.
[10] Jeremy Glass, quote from goodreads.com accessed November 12 2013.

Woman's Facebook Profile Picture" pokes fun at this idea, showing a photo of a young

Caucasian woman sitting with her arm wrapped around two African children. The short

blurb underneath this picture suggests that when 22-year-old Angela Fisher walked into

the dusty, remote rural Malawian village of Neno she says: "I just knew my Facebook

photo would change forever". The joke continues: "I can't even imagine going back to

my old Facebook photo of my roommate and I at an outdoor concert", making light of

another popular Facebook profile photo choice. Fictional traveler Angela Fisher has

moved up in the social networking world from mainstream outdoor music festivals to

global philanthropy, or at least she wants everyone to think so.

In their affinity for condensed, easily digested information, Gen Yers tend to gloss

over the fine print, necessarily sacrificing some of their personal privacy in return for

membership on sites. Social networking sites like Facebook take advantage of this,

constantly changing their policy to declare ownership over user content and put it to

commercial use (Turkle, 2011: 255). When Instagram changed its policy to allow the

company to sell users' photos for profit in 2012, there was an unprecedented uproar from

IGers (instagrammers).[11] The print had not been fine enough. Instagram's intention to let

commercial interests use posted photographs alarmed IGers and caused a backlash that

echoed worldwide. Ironically, what many users may not have realized is that Facebook—

the company that owns Instagram— already does this with peoples' profile pictures. One

individual I spoke to was shocked to receive a phone call from his mother asking if

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[11] Shortly after Instagram announced their new Privacy Policy and Terms of Service in 2012, co-founder Kevin Systrom gave a public statement acknowledging that the company recognized users were upset and confused, introducing two online documents to clarify changes and address concerns (http://blog.instagram.com/post/38252135408/thank-you-and-were-listening).

everything was okay in his personal life. She had seen a picture of him as the poster-boy

for an Internet dating service. This Facebook user had not been asked permission or paid

to pose as a model for the dating site. He had, however, consented the moment he agreed

to Facebook's Terms and Conditions and posted a profile picture. Even when deleted by

the user, photos do not simply vanish into virtual thin air. As this individual learned from

his lesson, content posted on Facebook under the public share setting is no longer the

property of the owner. And yet, Facebook users do not fight this case. Facebook is

deemed a necessity. Perhaps a necessary evil to some, but one that users are not willing to

give it up. As Turkle (2011) indicates, if the site demands information, "young people

know they will supply it… they don't know what else to do" (255). Some users believe

that if Facebook were deleted, the only available record of their lives would be deleted.

Most do not take the time to print off paper or even save virtual copies of the hundreds—

if not thousands— of photos they are tagged in. Sherry Turkle (2011) hears this

repeatedly in interviews she conducts with adolescents, indicating that one Facebook user

felt "all [her] memories would probably go along with it… all of that would be lost"

(192). Part of the digital subject would be destroyed.

2.6 Private Gone Public

One of the most serious consequences of the digital age is the pervasiveness of a new

kind of sharing in which SNS users willingly divulge personal details to those in their

inner circles but also to acquaintances, distant relatives, and strangers they happen to be

connected to online. As Contreras (2013) aptly indicates, "We no longer worry about

oversharing because oversharing has become the default" (37). Why do individuals seem so willing to share what was once private information and subject themselves to constant public scrutiny in processes of virtual examination? Lee (2013) indicates that "the overwhelming majority of people are willing to give up some part of their privacy in exchange for being connected" (13). Sharing has become the default setting because "if you don't post about it, it never happened" (Pagan, 2014). As Mullally (2012) indicates in her article on Instagram, social networking "has made public sharing an automatic human behaviour" (3). As the exposed nature of private or personal matters has become the norm, more content shifts from private to public share settings every day.

In a pure theory sense, the notion of public/private is constantly being contested and redefined in the virtual world of social networking. In this deeply voyeuristic society, individuals are spurred by an incessant desire to look in on each other. They satisfy their social curiosity by watching reality TV shows, following celebrities on Twitter, and peeping in on the personal lives of complete strangers on Instagram. The common practice of spending time scanning the content posted by friends or strangers on Facebook has even led to an appropriation of the word 'stalking'. Users 'stalk' or 'creep' one another when they scroll through their profiles and photos, "moving from the postings of [their] prey to those of their friends" (Turkle, 2011: 244). Despite the negative connotations, many users do not seem to consider this behaviour to be inappropriate or malicious because it is so common. To build a fuller picture of their 'prey', SNS users scan content that is publically available, viewing actions and interactions that are openly shared online. The digital subject knows no bounds in networking culture because they do not exist. Some users feel, however, that stalking is "a guilty pleasure and a source of

anxiety" because even though there are no societal rules against it, the action seems creepy, "like listening in to a conversation that you are not in" (Turkle, 2011: 253).

As actors on this never-ending show, SNS users live their lives in public more than ever before. Sherry Turkle (2011) sees this as the end of a certain kind of public etiquette. People speak into invisible microphones on their mobile phones and post about the intimacies of their daily lives on Facebook walls "as though unconcerned about who can hear us or the details of our physical surroundings" (Turkle, 2011: 16). Social networking sites allow individuals to share their lives instantly. Participants post about fleeting moments online that they might never have exposed otherwise. Turkle (2013) thinks that this might be because people like that the Web 'knows' them to the extent that they are willing to compromise their privacy by "leaving electronic breadcrumbs that can be easily exploited" (280). Depending on the social networking site, users can choose to share varying degrees of 'personal' information about themselves on their profile pages. Whereas the bio sections on Twitter and Instagram tend to be rather limited, Facebook users can—if they desire— choose to include everything from basic info to educational background, 'likes', favourite pages, places traveled, relationship status and sexual orientation. On Facebook, 88 percent of users share gender, 84 percent share photos, 74 percent share their date of birth, 63 percent share their relationship status and 40 percent share their sexual orientation (Contreras, 2013: 434).

Contreras (2013) indicates that "the web is now filled with bits of data that complete puzzles about who we are, what we've done, and where we've been" (36). Data capture is a real concern. There is a wealth of research being conducted on the abuse of user privacy rights and hijacking of social networking sites by governments as a form

of citizen surveillance. Information from years ago can resurface, be reformatted, and reveal parts of the self thought to be safely stashed away long ago. As Turkle (2011) indicates, spur-of-the-moment posts or slip-ups can be saved… there is no wiggle room for "general human error" (258). There is visual proof of everything— saved written proof (Turkle, 2011: 258). The Internet has its own peculiar echo chamber (Turkle, 2011: 196). Bits of information can be picked up, shared, saved, misconstrued, and misused. While some worry about the loss of privacy, others accept the risk that they are taking when they choose to become participating members of a virtual community. Digital existence depends on the provision of information. Younger generations are aware that most of their online actions can be made accessible to any authorities, hackers, or future employers who take an interest in them. Some of the young individuals Sherry Turkle (2011) interviews do not seem to mind, stating that "everyone running for office, everyone about to get a judicial appointment or an important corporate job, will have an accessible Internet past with significant indiscretions" (255). At least the playing field will be level. These optimists hope that digital memory "will not be punishing but will create a more tolerant society" (Turkle, 2011: 255).

2.7 Living in the Virtual Panopticon

In this increasingly integrated digital world where the notion of public/private is constantly being contested and redefined, it is easy for social networking site users to feel like conventional borders and boundaries are fading when the flick of a computer switch or changing one's privacy settings on Facebook can be the distinction between the individual and the virtual global order. In January 2010, Mark Zuckerberg told a San

Francisco audience, "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people" (Lee, 2013: 200). Not all consider this to be a positive development and it is becoming increasingly clear that changing privacy settings does not necessarily protect users in the way they think it does. Bringing a whole new relevance to Foucault's notions of self-surveillance, examination and normalization in this digital age, cyber citizens constantly patrol each other in a virtual form of Foucault's panopticon, ever the critics of their 'friends', their followers, and themselves.

During an interview with a prominent member of the 'Weberati' at the 2010 Webby Awards ceremony held to recognize the best and most influential websites of the year, Turkle (2011) was surprised to hear a misguided reference to Foucault's panopticon listed as the reason why one individual was *not* worried about Internet privacy (262). This Web enthusiast offered a positive interpretation of Foucault's panopticon—a wheel-shaped prison structure with an observer at the center or hub— which makes all prisoners feel like they are constantly being watched (Turkle, 2011: 262). He suggested that the Internet and social networking sites should be used as democratizing instruments for a government to keep its citizenry in line through constant surveillance and the threat of punishment (Turkle, 2011: 263). With someone always watching, recording, and reposting, individuals are only safe if they are not doing anything wrong (Turkle, 2011: 262). As Foucault indicates: "the task of the modern state is to reduce its need for actual surveillance by creating a citizenry that will watch itself… a disciplined citizen minds the rules" (Turkle, 2011: 262). In this particular application of the virtual panopticon, Foucault's critical take on disciplinary society is twisted into a justification for why the

U.S. government should be allowed to use the Internet to spy on its citizens (Turkle, 2011: 262). The panopticon serves as a metaphor for how "every citizen becomes his or her own policeman" when all turn eyes on themselves in their online actions (Turkle, 2011: 262). In this reinterpretation of the panopticon, privacy becomes something users must be willing to partially relinquish in return for virtual existence and even empowerment, rather than one of the most important civil liberties (Turkle, 2011: 263). As Turkle (2011) indicates, this constant surveillance and examination leaves very little space for dissent which is problematic because "sometimes a citizenry should not simply 'be good'" (263).

Chapter 3: What Attracts Users to Social Networking Sites?

It can be easy to get lost in a sea of negative responses to the ever-increasingly constant need to be connected on social networking sites. SNSs are condemned as a way to escape 'real' in-person contact; cyber skeptics lament the loss of face-to-face communication. In this chapter, I attempt to understand why social networking sites continue to engage users in a time when most young people would rather text than talk on the phone and SNS use has become so attractive it can constitute addiction. Reflecting on the research of cyberoptimists, I explore whether social networking sites can function as connectivity tools that bring together like-minded individuals and provide systems of support, as users are said to positively influence each other through the creation of virtual communities. Attempting to explain why lonely SNS users look online for a sense of support, acceptance, and belonging in a world where attention capital is eclipsing social capital, I question whether virtual communities should be considered communities at all if they lack geographical ties, emotional depth, empathy and social responsibility. Finding that virtual communities are created to offer support for users in their need for self-expression, I consider whether they might also create a space for users to engage in alternative acts of performativity.

3.1 Why Social Networking Sites?

Existing research across a range of disciplines attempts to uncover why users invest countless hours on social networking sites every day. Staring at pictures, reading other people's statuses, following random chains of content from friends to strangers. What are

they looking for? What do they see? Some people seem intent on distracting themselves; others look for inspiration. Perhaps some users even see reflections of who they would like to be in the accounts of those they follow. Turkle (2011) suggests that users treat their mobile devices like a retreat, like their refuge (275). Others surrender to the Web and social networking sites as a kind of wilderness or place to get lost because "its boundaries are unknown, unknowable, its mysteries uncountable" (Turkle, 2011: 275). This section explores suggested reasons why users are so attracted to social networking sites. Finding that some members of the millennial generation use SNSs as a form of digital diary and most prefer them as an alternative to talking on the phone, more specific explanations point to self-affirmation theory, the Five-Factor Model borrowed from social psychology and the fear of missing out (FOMO) as reasons why individuals do not want to disconnect from social networking sites.

One explanation for why people are attracted to SNSs is because they can function like a kind of virtual diary or "cyberspace confession box" (Altheide, 2000: 16). As Caroline O'Donovan (2013) indicates in an article on how diaries are the original social media, "people have been recounting their daily activities and reflecting on them for much longer than Twitter and other social media platforms have been around". Individuals desire to record their existence because they find comfort in writing and sharing their experiences but also because "they are *empowered* by claiming their own narrative" (O'Donovan, 2013). Suggesting that people journal as a way of strengthening 'kin and friend', O'Donovan (2013) indicates that people write for private audiences "with an implicit understanding that their words might someday reach a wider audience".

Another reason why the millennial generation is so attracted to these sites is simply because they have grown up with them. As Gardner and Davis (2013) indicate in their book *The App Generation*, young people in this digital age "are not only immersed in apps: they've come to think of the world as an ensemble of apps, to see their lives as a string of ordered apps, or perhaps, in many cases, a single, extended, cradle-to-grave app" (7). This assertion indicates that whatever someone wants should be available in an app, provided by an app, or if it does not yet exist, should be created as an app (Gardner and Davis, 2013: 7). As Facebook rose to prominence as the largest social network in the world over the last ten years, some forecasted that niche apps and social networks would eventually overshadow the giant when it finally reached saturation point (Mullally, 2012: 3). This has not happened yet. Instead, elements of Facebook itself have fractured and been replaced by apps (Mullally, 2012: 3). Facebook tries to buy up and reincorporate these apps as quickly as possible, offering what may seem to some like absurd sums of money for start-up companies. An example of this is when Facebook spent $1 billion to acquire Instagram in 2010, attempting to "piece together a bigger puzzle than it has already created" (Mullally, 2012: 3). In her article about Instagram, Una Mullally (2012) suggests that users have begun to gravitate towards "specific tools that do specific things, not necessarily specific places for specific people" (3). Twitter has replaced status updates. Instagram has replaced photo albums. Mobile dating apps like eHarmony and Tinder have harnessed flirting through instant messages.

Another explanation for why social networking sites are so popular is because Gen Y would rather text or send SNS messages than talk on the phone. As Lee (2013) indicates, connecting through social networking sites is simply "more convenient than

emails and less intrusive than phone calls" (15). Curious as to why this preference has

become the norm, Turkle (2011) suggests that virtual technology "offers us substitutes

for connecting with each other face-to-face" in a world where machine-mediated

relationships are formed through networked devices (11). While at first online

connections were perceived as a substitute for face-to-face contact when the latter was for

some reason impractical, now in-person communication is simply considered too slow or

too time consuming (Turkle, 2011: 13). Users would rather send a message on their own

time than be forced into having a drawn-out conversation with someone on the phone.

With messages, it is acceptable to take a minute, an hour, a day, even a week to respond.

During a phone call, any lengthy pause could be considered awkward.

In their attempt to explain why social networking sites have become increasingly

popular in recent years, Toma and Hancock (2013) propose self-affirmation theory as a

cohesive theoretical narrative, suggesting that "people have a fundamental need to see

themselves as valuable, worthy, and good" (Toma and Hancock, 2013: 321). Social

networking sites provide a virtual venue where individuals can fill this void, as most

users almost always receive some degree of praise or compliment for posts and photos

they put up on their page. In his straightforward explanation of why we love social

networking sites, Kutchinsky (2013) suggests that they merely offer "an outlet for that

abundant need teens have for self-expression" (44). In a similar argument, Kang (2013)

suggests that "racking up followers and 'likes'" can feel like a measurable way for users

to experience acceptance (1). This assertion is best supported by examples on Instagram,

where some users even post comments under their own pictures imploring anyone and

everyone to become a follower and 'like' their posts. Young users seem to desperately

seek out validation and acceptance on SNSs, regardless of where it comes from (Kang, 2013: 1). This is especially evident on social networking sites like Instagram where users seem to be more promiscuous about who they will accept as Followers because they are less closely tied to their offline identities than on sites like Facebook. Perhaps this is because, as Boyd (2007) indicates, some users seem to feel that "by connecting to anyone who seems interesting, they gain control over the structure" (132).

Another possible reason for our attraction to SNSs is based on the Five-Factor Model borrowed from social psychology (McCrae and Costa, 1997). Commonly referred to as the Big-Five framework in recent literature, this explanation indicates that certain personality traits can influence Internet usage and cause individuals to be more or less likely to engage in social networking sites. Outlining five factors that represent personality traits at a broad level—extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness— this explanatory model problematically simplifies a number of specific aspects (ex. sociability), containing specific traits (ex. talkative, outgoing), into broad dichotomous categories such as introversion or extraversion (Correa, Hinsley, et al. 2010: 248). In one such study, research by Orr et al. suggests that shyness is a factor in our attraction to social networking sites, as individuals "who are socially anxious like to use Facebook to combat loneliness" (Ryan and Xenos, 2011: 1659). This study finds that socially anxious individuals "tend to feel more comfortable maintaining social relationships in online settings than they do in face-to-face interactions" (in Ryan and Xenos, 2011: 1659). This generalized categorization of individual personality differences into five broad domains is an attractive model but

problematically oversimplified, as personality traits seem to be extracted in isolation and sorted neatly into boxes.

At the 2012 South by Southwest Interactive festival, Carol Hartsell, comedy editor of The Huffington Post, offers another answer— social media is attractive because it has democratized comedy and given everyone a platform to be funny (Lee, 2013: 24). As she explains, "People just naturally want to make other people laugh and it's hard to find an audience when you want to be funny… When you're a kid, it's your family. But when you're an adult, the Internet gives you a constant audience" (Lee, 2013: 24). While there may be a degree of truth to this argument, not all who use social networking sites want try their hand at humour.

There is also a kind of peer pressure to participate in social networking sites. In an attempt to understand what attracts us to social networking sites so strongly, Paul Miller, senior editor for The Verge, left the Internet for one year starting on May 1, 2012 (Lee, 2013: 15). After his experience, he determined that there are two kinds of people who live with technology constantly in their face and have the means to participate in social networking sites, "people who freak out when they're forcefully separated from their devices or connectivity, as if their arm has been cut off, and people who feel really chill when they're forcefully separated from their devices or connectivity, as if they've been let out of prison" (Lee, 2013: 15). Boyd (2007) suggests that there is a third kind of person in contemporary digital societies— a small but significant cohort of people who choose not to participate, as conscientious objectors (121). This relatively small percentage of the population stays invisible not because they lack access to the technology required but because they seek to resist conformity and remain anonymous.

These individuals are becoming increasingly rare in our digital society. The vast majority dive headlong into the abyss, compelled to stay constantly connected due to FOMO — fear of missing out. Attachment to mobile devices is more real than ever, deeply felt like separation anxiety or the loss of a limb. In his book *Facebook Nation*, Lee (2013) finds that there is a name for this feeling — 'nomophobia', a term derived from the sentence no-mo(bile)-pho(ne)-bia (49). Defined as the fear of having no phone or being out of mobile contact, a 2012 study in the United Kingdom suggested that two-thirds of people suffer from nomophobia (Lee, 2013: 49. This study concluded that there are more nomophobic young adults aged 18–24 than average (77 percent) and also that 41 percent of people, more men than women, regularly use two or more phones in an attempt to stay connected (Lee, 2013: 49). While nomophobia may be a symptom of our increased attachment to mobile devices, it does not provide an adequate explanation of why individuals are attracted to social networking sites in the first place.

The urge to stay connected is changing generally accepted conventions about when it is appropriate to use mobile devices. It is not uncommon now for people to have their phones in their hand or on the table during a conversation or meeting. Even some of those who considered this behaviour to be taboo are starting to change their opinion, overcome by the culture of "if they are doing it, why shouldn't I?" Communicative devices allow users to "connect to a lot of people from a distance", but Turkle (2011) worries that "a lot of people from a distance can turn out to be not enough people at all" (280). As she indicates, "the ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind… they are the ties that preoccupy" (Turkle, 2011: 280). They are weak ties. This is majoritarian subjectivity being constituted by the net. The digital subject exists in

a web with interconnected others, constituting and constituted by one another in their online actions and interactions.

3.2 Addiction to SNSs

Sherry Turkle (2011) warns that the weak ties formed in constant digital connection can actually leave you "more isolated, without real people around you… so you may return to the Internet for another hit of what feels like connection" (227). This can lead to addiction. Many SNS users describe feeling a constant nagging desire to check their phone and see if anyone messaged, hoping to see an update or notification on any one of their social networking sites. For some, attachment to mobile devices comes from a craving for comfort. Others associate cellular phones with safety. When asked to describe the feelings experienced during separation from their devices, many admit to feeling anxious or even 'naked' (Turkle, 2011: 248). Phones have become security blankets. Individuals feel the need to touch their mobile devices frequently, sometimes up to hundreds of times a day. Some even sleep with their phones at night, ever vigilant for the slightest hint of a sound, vibration, or illumination of the screen.

If this constitutes addiction, then it may be the most widespread form of addiction today— one that spans across ages, user demographics, and nearly every kind of person. Turkle (2013) is careful to warn that the addiction is not to technology but "to the habits of mind that technology allows us to practice" (288). She also warns that applying the addiction metaphor to technological devices is dangerous as "talking about addiction subverts our best thinking because it suggests that if there are problems, there is only one solution" (Turkle, 2011: 293). Turkle (2011) fears that "to combat addiction, you have to

discard the addicting substance" (Turkle, 2011: 293). That is not going to happen.

Forbidding cell phones or social networking sites is not going to work. While this might

be true, I would argue that addiction is the only word that can describe our compulsion to

be constantly connected through social networking sites. The Merriam-Webster definition

of addiction is "a strong and harmful need to regularly have something (such as a drug) or

do something (such as gamble)".[12] The need to check SNSs frequently is becoming

increasingly harmful, and deadly, in the case of using mobile devices while driving.

An article by Ann Hui in the *Globe and Mail* published on August 30 2013

indicates that the use of cell phones kills more drivers than booze does[13]. And yet people

cannot seem to stop. New rules, higher penalties, and increasing statistics of accidents

caused by distracted driving have not solved the problem. What is it that individuals are

willing to sacrifice their lives for? When asked for a reason, most answers sound similar.

As Turkle (2011) finds in her interviews, social networking site users feel like they just

have to see what someone posted on their wall, they *need* to know who sent them a

message (171). For this reason, many SNS users are willing to take the risk and put their

lives in danger, though they often fail to see it that way. Most of the individuals guilty of

distracted driving claim that they do not feel in danger, that they are competent drivers

and do it all the time— as though this makes them less likely to make a mistake or get in

an accident. Despite the increased numbers of incidents causing death, mobile users

cannot seem to put their devices down. This addiction, this compulsion to be connected,

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[12] Addiction- a strong and harmful need to regularly have something (such as a drug) or do something (such as gamble); an unusually great interest in something or a need to do or have something (Merriam-Webster).

[13] This *Globe and Mail* article explores how law enforcement officials are still struggling to deal with the problem of distracted driving in Canada despite a ban on the use of hand-held devices while driving in every Canadian province and territory with the exception of Nunavut.

runs deeper than the fear of death itself. Or at least is capable of overriding the sense of fear with stupidity.

In an interview, Duncan Strong (2014) indicates that at the core of this might be what is known as arousal addiction, a form of addiction outlined by Dr. Philip Zimbardo in his recent TED talk and eBook *The Demise of Guys* (2011). While his research focuses on social intensity syndrome in young males, the basic principle of his argument is that people can become addicted to constant novelty and ever-changing amusement. While drug addiction makes the user want more, arousal addiction makes the user want different. I would argue that social networking sites can lead to both forms of addiction in men and women. The addictive process deepens and changes the brain's structure. Users experience a spike of dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin and other brain chemicals that can actually cause the brain to rewire itself to expect unending novelty, shock, and surprise. The Internet world is like crack cocaine; it can feed these reactions. It is a high-speed delivery mechanism for new experiences whether they are authentic or not. That is why the brain is never truly satisfied with interactions on social networking sites— there is a deep sense of longing that can never be fulfilled because the brain expects constant novelty and change. As Strong (2014) indicates, addiction can cause people to become anxious, depressed, and irritable— "you cannot have it all at that rate".

In a desperate attempt to disconnect from the addictive lure of social networking sites, some individuals are turning to Eastern practices of meditation and yoga in their search for silence and stillness. Trapped in a dangerous pattern of comparison and disappointment on social networking sites, these users feel that it is necessary to 'detoxify', to break free the shackles that chain them to their mobile devices and SNS

accounts. Turkle (2013) indicates that some users periodically or permanently delete their accounts in an attempt "to find [themselves] and others more directly and to live a less-mediated life, to move away from performances and towards something that feels more real" (275). In the abundance of yoga studios popping up in the Western world, a renewed interest in Eastern traditions focuses on the benefits of mindful breathing and meditation (Turkle, 2011: 289).

This is not the first time that meditation has been used to treat addiction. Since the 1930s, millions of people in recovery programs for other process addictions like alcohol, narcotics, or gambling have turned to the Twelve step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The eleventh step of this program is daily prayer and meditation, designed to calm the mind and find peace. In the silence of yogic practice, individuals turn their phones off and often leave them outside the room. This may be the only moment of the day when mobile devices are more than an arms reach away from social networking site users. At first, the silence is deafening. Meditation—effectively the ability to focus on mindfulness and nothing else— is incredibly hard for people who are used to being always on, always multi-tasking, always dividing their attention. As Turkle (2013) indicates, when we try to reclaim our concentration "we are literally at war with ourselves" 296). Attempting to disconnect can be a painful process. The constant need for connection is part of a dialectical process that runs much deeper than users may realize. Caught up in the cycle of narcissistic attachment and insecurity, the virtual subject needs to circulate to survive.

3.3 Virtual Community: A Sense of Belonging on Social Networking Sites

One of the most convincing arguments for why people are so attracted to social

networking sites is based on the concept of virtual community. While some fear that

users are falling into a toxic cycle of addiction to SNSs, others see hope in these sites as a

platform for cultivating social capital through the creation of virtual communities where

members can find support and a sense of belonging. Author and critic Howard

Rheingold, who lectures at Stanford University, is considered to be the leading authority

on 'virtual communities'— a term which he is credited with inventing.[14]

As Goodings, Locke and Brown (2001) indicate, Rheingold popularized use of

the term 'virtual community' in research that described his experiences with the first

wave of Internet based forums for communication emerging in the 1980s. Rheingold

(1993) defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net

when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient

human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (7). This loose

definition is problematically elastic, as 'enough people' and 'sufficient human feeling'

remain open to interpretation. While most theorists focus on defining virtual communities

in terms of the first qualification based on the length of public discussion, Maria

Bakardjieva (2003) introduces the idea of 'virtual togetherness' to explore what sufficient

human feeling might mean. Inspired by Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined

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[14] Howard Rheingold began to explore influential online communities as early as 1985 before
publishing his seminal book *The Virtual Community* (1993) about computer-mediated
communication and social groups, which points out the potential benefits of belonging to a virtual
community for personal psychological well-being (rheingold.com).

community, virtual togetherness refers to "the sense of belonging that members feel even in the absence of regular contact with large groups of fellow members" (Goodings et al., 2007: 464). While Anderson (1983) defines his imagined community as a sense of interconnection bounded by the shared experience of a given geographical location or common 'place', Bakardjieva (2003) brings in a psychological—or subjectivist— element of community based on how users "feel membership and shared emotional connection without necessarily possessing clearly enumerable 'strong ties' to large numbers of fellow users" (Goodings et al., 2007: 464).

With the inclusion of this subjectivist element, Goodings et al. (2007) believe that it is possible to counter the conventional claim that "the Internet is not any sort of place at all, in the usual geographical sense of the term" as these authors believe that "a dialectic between collectivity and place, resulting in the grounding of a shared sense of the past in a particular place," should be considered to be the base of all communities (463). If this is true, then social networking site users can form communities throughout their ongoing interactions in the virtual places they visit, such as Facebook pages or Instagram accounts. In her book *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle (1995) describes how early adopters of what we would now call internet-based social networking formed online communities that seemed to supplant and far exceed the boundaries of their own face-to-face communities. Turkle (2011) indicates that these participants saw real life (RL) as "just another window" or tab on an Internet browser and therefore felt that the experience of the 'real' world does not qualitatively differ from opening up a new communicational channel on a computer (ix). In the early years, Facebook required users to provide a predefined offline social network such as a university or college in order to create an

account. RL 'place' seemed to loom large over the mediated network; users were still tied to one another geographically (Goodings et al., 2007: 475). Since Facebook has dropped this requirement, anyone can become a member, and the place constraint of communities on Facebook has become completely digital.

Some of the literature on virtual communities questions whether the word 'community' is appropriate at all in this context. In her earlier work, Turkle (2011) used the word community to describe Facebook— a place of weak ties (239). In more recent research, she indicates that social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram are not virtual communities because communities should be "constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities" (Turkle, 2011: 239). In many of my interviews, subjects similarly indicate that communities must still be geographically tied— physically linked to a specific region or area— to give members shared interests and experiences. Interviewee Jacquie Laidler (2014) indicates: "If I meet someone from a geographically shared community, I feel an instant connection to them… if someone just adds me on Facebook I don't get that".

In answer to this, Goodings et al. (2001) find that virtual communities faced with the task of constructing a relationship to place are forced to effectively mediate the social relations of community members (475). Mediation—whether electronic or not— becomes a structural feature of both off-line and on-line communities, in this sense (Goodings et al., 2001: 475). Their question revolves around the modalities through which mediation is conducted, and how this resources identity (Goodings et al., 2007: 475). Relating the dialectic between collectivity and place to virtual communities, Goodings et al. (2007) introduce the concept of place-identity, indicating that "a

collective that can lay claim to place finds in its relationship to this social space the basis

for both a sense of its own collective history, and the grounds for a series of identities"

(465). These authors suggest that "finding a sense of 'locatedness' in the fluid social

landscape of online exchanges requires constant interactional work to be done on the

particular past experience and the contextual situation in which it arises" (Goodings et al.,

2007: 475). Boyd (2007) proposes a similar idea, suggesting that by choosing who they

follow, friend, or let follow and friend them, users "write their community into being"

(131). Even though identities may be 'naturalized'—that is, seen to simply emerge from

place itself— these authors believe that identities "are formed and maintained

discursively through routine interaction and through the use of mediating symbolic

resources" (Goodings et al., 2007: 465). Members of a virtual community need not live

geographically close to one another in offline life because they are constantly creating a

shared place in their experiences and collective history online. As Goodings et al. (2007)

indicate, virtual communities deploy existing symbolic and discursive resources to

"define and create a shared sense of belonging with respect to a real or imagined social

space" (466).

3.4 Virtual Lack of Community: Attention Capital Eclipsing Social Capital

The shared sense of place-identity in these virtual spaces can be so strong that users

choose to turn away from face-to-face offline interaction in favour of their membership to

virtual communities. In my attempt to understand whether online place-identity is enough

to allow for the creation of virtual communities in lieu of offline geographical ties, I turn

to American political scientist Robert D. Putnam and his work on the erosion of

community and social capital in a world where individuals seem to be increasingly

disconnected from their families, friends, and neighbours. [15]

In his seminal book *Bowling Alone*[16], Putnam (2000) attempts to demonstrate that

Americans are experiencing "the collapse of networks of interaction among individuals

that imbue human life with qualities needed for community, collective action, and

democratic participation" (Boggs, 2001: 281). Central to this collapse is a diminishing

stock of social capital, or, "citizen engagement in community affairs" and other features

of social life—networks, norms, and trust— that enable participants to act together more

effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 2000: 665). Putnam (2000) lists 'Internet

chat groups' as a form of social capital, hoping that these groups "may bridge across

geography, gender, age, and religion, while being tightly homogenous in education and

ideology" (23). In this virtual age of shallow connectivity, social networking sites have

largely surpassed Internet chat groups in terms of popularity. Do social networking sites

allow for the same kind of citizen engagement that can increase social capital by bridging

across geography and different demographics while remaining homogenous in user

ideology?

Concerned about the current state of democratic involvement, Turkle (2011)

hopes to open up a similar conversation about technology, privacy and civil not because

she is romantically nostalgic or Luddite but because "it seems like part of democracy is

defining its sacred spaces" (264). Cyber optimists might argue that social networking

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[15] Robert D. Putnam published *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in 2000, a book that draws on evidence including nearly 500,000 interviews over the last quarter century (http://bowlingalone.com/).

sites promote citizen engagement through virtual community because they make users more informed about and in tune with political happenings, creating social capital by raising awareness. Social networking sites create new networks of interaction that can encourage collective action and democratic participation. Optimists indicate that SNSs can generate important conversations that might not take place otherwise, some of which are political in nature. In Foucault's conceptualization of power, the political subject is shaped by power relations that function in a complex system of historically specific knowledge, truth claims, and discourses. Social networking sites provide a new venue for circulating knowledge and discourses. Twitter is regarded as a highly politicized virtual arena where individuals can voice their opinion, garner support for causes and fundraise for political campaigns, while actively engaging in spirited debate about global issues. Facebook can create avenues for conversation through chains of politically charged statuses or reposted content on controversial topics that get users talking. As Turkle (2011) acknowledges, "we have new sources of information, such as news of political events from all over the world that comes to us via photographs and videos taken by the cameras on cell phones" (261). Kevin Synstrom, the founder of Instagram is quoted saying, "Ten years from now… everyone is going to be connected through the devices in their pockets and the palms of their hands, and I think that's really, really powerful… everyone in the world should be using this to share what's happening in the world" (Contreras, 2013: 139).

Yet in an article about Putnam, Boggs (2001) aptly indicates that "TV, the Internet, and other technologies have speeded up our lives to the point where we no longer invest 'social capital' in each other by means of overlapping memberships in clubs

and other organizations, which are essential to human trust and mutual support" (281).

Social networking sites are about attention. Before Instagram was released to the public,

Howard Rheingold was invited to test the app because he taught one of Instagram's

founders, Mike Krieger (Kutchinksy, 2013: 43). His feedback was simple: "People like

attention. Until recently, in terms of media, only celebrities got recognition... these days,

attention is a currency, whether it's because you want to pitch your business or get an ego

boost" (Kutchinksy, 2013: 43). As a personal attention-grabbing app, Instagram was

bound to succeed. If attention is the new currency in a world of weak ties and garnering

attention is what social networking sites are mostly about, then do these sites really

increase social capital or contribute to developing a sense of virtual community? While

some SNSs might help provide a platform for developing social capital by turning users'

attention to democratic participation, I would argue that this is not the primary use of

image-based social networking sites like Instagram and Pinterest.

The most common use of social networking sites appears to be as "a convenient

tool for procrastinating, gossiping, relieving boredom, or expressing narcissistic drives"

(Toma and Hancock, 2013: 321). While Twitter can function as a real-time expository—

albeit unregulated— news source, social networking sites like Instagram and Facebook

are far less likely to serve political purposes or open up debate about relevant issues.

Skeptics worry that the millennial generation is actually "less informed, less literate, and

more self-absorbed because the immediacy and intimacy of social-networking sites have

focused young people's Internet use on themselves and their friends instead of on

learning new knowledge and useful skills" (Lee, 2013: 21). Most people would rather see

pictures of pretty sunsets and cute kittens than the aftermath of a suicide bombing.

Perhaps this is just a case of choosing blissful ignorance. Or perhaps it is a reflection of how social networking sites are changing the way the digital subject chooses to view the world.

Instead of using SNSs to spread awareness about issues or convey important information, many users remain focused on attention capital, accumulating followers in an attempt to earn the highest possible amount of positive encouragement. In extreme cases, what Contreras (2013) calls 'super users' have more than the average 140.3 friendships on Facebook with some gaining up to 5000— the limit that Facebook has established (79). Lee (2013) refers to these as 'power users', or, individuals who dominate the online space by "excessively tagging photos, sending messages, 'like'-ing things all the time, and obsessively 'friend'-ing new people on Facebook" (32). These users make up between 20 and 30 percent of the Facebook population (Lee, 2013: 32). Turkle (2011) indicates that communities should function as support networks where people can find help in hard times while offering reciprocal sympathetic efforts for other members of the community when they face challenges (238). Super users are unlikely to hear cries for help if they are being drowned out by virtual babble from their hundreds or thousands of virtual community members. Power users attempt to increase the size of their virtual communities as a superficial means of fostering shallow connections. Self-centered individualism runs rampant.

Rather than functioning as a space where users share common responsibilities in a kind of virtual stewardship, I would argue that virtual communities on social networking sites tend to more closely resemble a tragedy of the commons. SNS users seek reassurance and encouragement from others when they post content but often do not take

the time to offer reciprocal support when it is desired. Social networking sites feature endless monologues spoken in first person narrative, with far too many storytellers spilling their life stories to a less than sympathetic audience. Is there such thing as social network responsibility? If a user notices a red flag or concerning post shared by some troubled user, should they be expected to intervene? How can SNS users accurately judge the severity of a situation if their 'friends' are expected to stretch the truth? SNS users tend to exaggerate to get their point across in a world where everything is screamed in caps lock. Text is far too easily misinterpreted. In one interview, a subject tells Turkle (2011), "what they post on the Internet bears only a glancing relationship to reality" (239). In another, her subject indicates, "the Internet is our new literature" (Turkle, 2011: 239).

3.5 The Humanisharian

Contreras (2013) states: "in a world where we are all connected, everyone is slowly becoming more aware of their own ability to influence… everyone has a unique voice and everyone has the ability to get immediate feedback on what they have to say" (381). While this form of social influence gives SNS users the capacity to raise awareness about important issues and actively influence change, I would argue that social networking sites are actually breeding social apathy. The re-posting of sensitive content on social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram has given birth to a particular kind of Internet (non)activist: the "humanisharian".

This social media user picks up posted content—often shared by a Facebook friend or follower on any SNS— that pertains to a trending global issue or social concern

and copy and pastes or reposts it onto their own page. Even though this action requires minimal effort and takes a mere second, the "humanisharian" enjoys a quick rush of instant gratification for publicly expressing their concern and compassion. Re-posting allows the humanisharian to reap the benefits of feeling like they have enriched the global community without actually having to contribute to a genuine relief effort or donate their time to support a specific cause. As Turkle (2011) indicates, this form of virtual gratification may "keep us from taking positive action because we already feel we've done 'something'" (238). Project Manager Courtney Prior (2014) of *My Yoga Online* says, "We sensationalize things that we don't know anything about because it's trending; everyone jumps on the bandwagon because there's a heart-wrenching picture. We think we're more aware than we are, that's the problem". While sharing information and raising awareness is important, it is not a complete solution.

More optimistic accounts indicate that social networking sites are being used to foster genuine connections and spark change. Some SNSs go further than raising awareness, connecting individuals to drive positive change. These include funding sites for start-up organizations and ideas. A successful example of this is Kickstarter, "*a funding platform for creative projects*" which allows users to construct a page where others can pledge money to make a project become a reality (Contreras, 2013: 331). This SNS allows individuals, companies or organizations to ask for financial assistance, with a personalized social element that lets users connect through Facebook (Contreras, 2013: 332). Organizations like TED Talks, Sundance, and Pitchfork have received assistance through this website, an example of a social networking site that allows ambitious individuals to change their community, change their world, and change themselves.

3.6 SNSs as a Rearticulatory Subversive Practice

On social networking sites, many of the same ideas are reposted and retweeted. The temptation to engage in humanisharian behaviour instead of sacrificing the time and energy to take any substantive action is overwhelming. As Turkle (2011) indicates, "social media asks us to represent ourselves in simplified ways" (185). When faced with an audience, "we feel pressure to conform to these simplifications" and become afraid to deviate from the representation that we have allowed others to see online (Turkle, 2011: 185). Caught up in Foucauldian processes of examination and normalization, SNS users become lost in the need to belong, to conform to virtual standards of what is 'cool', new, and exciting. It is in this context that some authors criticize Foucault for creating a subject that is no more than a passive product of external conditions— one that lacks agency and the capacity for activity. If the political subject is no more than a passive product of power relations, how can there be a possibility of progress or transformation? I argue that this interpretation is misguided, as power is not antithetical to agency and the Foucauldian political subject retains a degree of transformative potential in the freedom to resist dominant power structures and identify the contingency of differences.

Buried deep in the attention-seeking trend that screams "look at me, look at where I have been, what I wear, what I eat, how cool my friends are", there is a safeness from knowing and understanding real exploitation. When a person uploads a photo of their last meal or attempts to decipher a Facebook 'friend's' cryptic status update, they temporarily lose sight of who is accumulating knowledge on them, what they are doing for what purpose, what is politically and socially important, what is 'good', what is 'bad', and who

might be watching. As individuals become more aware of the monotonous and mundane happenings of other people's lives, they become less aware of what might really matter. But social networking sites can also allow users "to construct, edit, and perform a self" (Turkle, 2011: 212). In this capacity, social networking sites have the potential to be subversive in a Butlerian sense.

While read by some as "passive and manipulated, leaving little room for agency," Foucault's docile body can also be seen as "malleable, contested, and a contestable site of power and knowledge" (King, 2004: 32). Emancipatory possibilities exist because the political subject has the capacity to move from passivity to activity by identifying and resisting the limitations of existing power structures and dominant discourses in their particular contemporary reality. It is here that Butler attempts to break free of the shackles she sees as limiting Michel Foucault's work— the inspiration for her idea that hegemonic heteronormative standards rest on the repetition and reiteration of dominant discourses. Raising questions about the problem of locating or accounting for resistance in Foucault, she asks "how can we work the power relations by which we are worked, and in what direction?" (Butler, 1993: 100). Where does resistance to disciplinary subject formation take place (Butler, 1993: 87)?

Butler (1993) finds that because a Foucauldian subject is never fully constituted, it can therefore constantly be made, re-made, in the process of making. She indicates that identifications are never fully and finally made, "they are incessantly reconstituted… constantly marshaled consolidated, retrenched, contested, and, on occasion, compelled to give way" (Butler, 1993: 105). The failure of identity—as a constantly inflected struggle— is actually success. Conventional rules rely on repeated citation and

reenactment; forms of alternative performativity have the potential to challenge them. Cyber optimists indicate that SNSs can serve as a place where identity can be developed and re-developed time after time, with the potential of performativity as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice offering a new hope for users. Butler (1993) outlines this idea in her work, indicating that social networking sites can allow for a form of resistance against the hegemony of heteronormative standards. One of the central arguments she makes is that although performativity cannot be understood as outside processes of iterability and ritualized production; it does not foreclose the potential for agency (Butler, 1993: 15).

There can also be an argument made for agency in the ability to identify the contingency of differences and refuse to accept these as given conditions. Garth Gillan (1987) suggests that initiating and sustaining critique in the contestation of difference is the means to achieving freedom in Foucault's work (153). Seitz (1993) adopts a similar line of argument, indicating that the Foucauldian subject becomes more than a mere product or artifact of power by identifying "the contingency of differences, differences rendered by articulated identities, which are always specific, but always also in a condition of development" (452). This condition of constant development allows the subject to become "the ground for a kind of philosophy of conflict," one that is shaped through the identification of differences and the endless creative possibilities "associated with the absence of a predetermined logic for change" (Seitz, 1993: 444). Venn (1997) finds that the Foucauldian political subject gains autonomy by exercising a freedom that looks for a 'way out' by "seeking in the singular, the contingent, and the arbitrary event the signs or the experience of what dislocates the given reality" (7). As Foucault (1982)

himself argues, "the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are" (785).

Advocates who defend SNSs as a positive development in human communication indicate that virtual communities can serve as sites of struggle for the rights of oppressed identities, for those that do not conform to the artificial—though strictly enforced—rules that govern normative heterosexuality. In everyday offline life, certain identifications of the self are encouraged to the exclusion of those that are prohibited, disavowed, and not allowed to come into presence. Sites like Instagram are capable of setting the stage for alternative action and resistance against conventional standards. King (2004) believes that Butler's theory is compelling for theorists of critical education and the internet because "it provides theoretical support for the claims of those cyberoptimists who argue that the internet provides a forum for resistance where subjects can reconfigure and displace the symbolic coordinates of their socio-symbolic existence through 'resignification' and 'performative displacements'" (43).

Chapter 4: A Case Study in Social Networking Sites, Body Image Issues, and Eating Disorders

In this chapter, I apply my observations to a specific case study and examine how participation on social networking sites can encourage constant comparison to unrealistic standards of beauty, negatively affecting self-perception and contributing to body image issues in female users aged 15-24. While social networking sites cannot be blamed as the source of ideal body-type obsession and examination taking place in a virtual regime of self-surveillance, these sites are critical to a shift that has taken place— the user has now become part of the conversation. Moving into the digital era: Web 2.0 has replaced Web 1.0 (Contreras, 2013). In Web 1.0, users surfed the web searching for information or content. Now, they participate. The web has become social. In Web 2.0 we "create and collaborate on virtual collages with Pinterest, we upload real-time videos on Socialcam and Snapchat, we learn together on Udemy, we shop for our friends on Amazon, we turn links into memes on Reddit, we share presentations on Slideshare, and we stream our friends' favorite songs on Spotify" (Contreras, 2013: 39). In this turn towards the social, the web has also become more interactive and participatory. Some hope that as part of this participatory web, SNSs can provide a source of support for individuals belonging to virtual communities in examples such as the #FitFam community on Instagram. Others believe that social networking sites have the potential to create a space for subversive, rearticulatory practices to take root in counter-movements built around ideas like #strongnotskinny and #loveyourbody.

4.1 When Foucault Meets ED: The Virtual Subject under Self-Surveillance

In a world where the virtual and 'real' can no longer be separated, an obsession with a certain kind of ideal body-type can easily cross over and begin to pollute all aspects of a user's life. Caught up in a culture of inescapable examination and normalization, everything becomes about "the body you've always wanted". This can lead to a deadly form of physical obsession with 'improving' one's body through strict surveillance and punishment. In the modern digital version of self-surveillance, patterns are emerging that indicate a renewed obsession with the ideal physical form and perfect body-type amongst female users. The result can be devastating.

In her 2004 article "The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body", Angela King suggests that even though the female body is conspicuous by its absence in Foucault's work, it perfectly exemplifies his arguments about discipline (6). Female users tend to be especially careful about what information is allowed to appear on their SNS pages, engaging in self-surveillance by monitoring their pages and immediately deleting any content that might reflect upon them in a negative light. This may be because female users more strongly feel the need to constantly be in control of the way they look to others and ultimately to themselves. Facebook was quick to introduce the "untag" and "request for approval" options that allow users to decide which posts or photos show up on their profile page timeline. Instagram lets users delete negative comments and block or report any accounts that they deem inappropriate. In her research, Turkle (2011) is shocked to find that some female users on Facebook even use "shrinking software" to appear thinner in their profile photographs (183). While the use

of this software is not obvious in the thumbnail version of a profile picture, it is possible to see that the background is distorted when the photo is enlarged (Turkle, 2011: 183). Given the constant pressure to conform to conventional standards of beauty and desirable body types in Western society, the use of shrinking software should not be all that surprising.

In this digital age, virtual communities can become a breeding ground for the perpetuation of obsessive tendencies and encouragement of eating disorders. Reflecting the vicious circle of narcissism and insecurity outlined earlier in this work, SNS users on sites like Instagram and Pinterest can scroll through pages and pages of 'perfect' bodies and compare their own bodies to these airbrushed ideal representations. Accepting these images as legitimate standards of beauty, users are often left feeling inadequate and resentful; they begin to hate their own bodies and imperfections. The digital subject turns on itself, harshly critical of perceived flaws. In extreme cases, this negative self-reflection can lead to severe body image issues and contribute to an eating disorder. Existing research on eating disorders tends to characterize anorexia nervosa as "a transitory, self-inflicted problem developed by young women lost in their world of fashion and calorie-restricting", a belittling stereotype that masks the real underlying issues (Katzman and Lee, 1996: 389). Eating disorders are not a voluntary choice made by an individual or a sign of vanity. These disorders are, however, characteristic of the fragile form of narcissism outlined in Chapter One— "a personality so fragile it needs constant support" (Turkle, 2011: 177). Individuals suffering from eating disorders are far from self-absorbed or even self-confident. As Katzman and Lee (1996) indicate, "the universal power of food refusal [is] an attempt to free oneself from the control of others" (389). An

eating disorder is a constant struggle for control over body image fought through self-surveillance and punishment.

4.2 Changing the Way We See Ourselves: Thinness, Femininity, and Digital Fitness Diaries
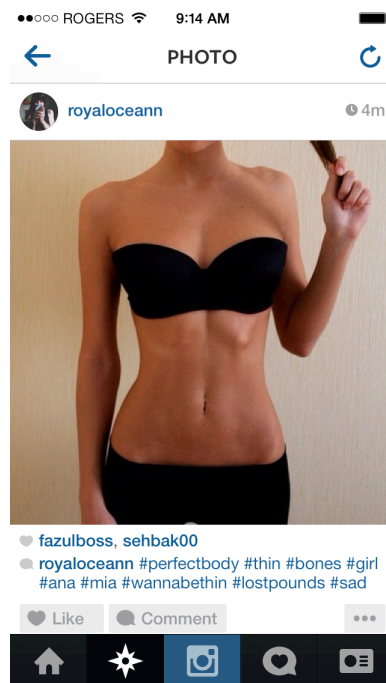

Figure 4: #perfectbody #thin[17]

In this new digital form of self-surveillance, patterns are emerging that indicate a renewed obsession with ideal body-types that are unrealistic for most female users. On social networking sites dominated by women, the idealization of unrealistic standards of beauty and thinness is an old truth in a new form. Lynn Crilly, a counsellor and author of

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[17] Instagram screen shot captured November 12, 2013.

Hope with Eating Disorders says: "Weight is an obsession of modern life... it's a toxic cycle— and while no single cause or person can be said to be 'responsible', the internet undoubtedly plays a role" (Stroud, 2012: 21). This form of self-surveillance has a distinctly Foucauldian ring to it; users are constantly monitoring their bodies and measuring themselves against the bodies of others.

A fixation on weight is nothing new to Western society. Waif-life figures have walked the runways of the Western world for decades, periodically replaced by 'normal' sized women and then back in vogue, but thinner. From the cover of women's magazines where "advertising exerts a deadly tyranny" to popular Instagram fitspo pages, the appearance of youth and thinness is valued above almost all else in contemporary Western society (Turkle, 2011: 230). Perhaps it should be unsurprising that liposuction is the most requested operation in our culture obsessed with slenderness, with females outnumbering male patients nine to one in the procedure (King, 2004: 28).

King (2004) finds that gender, specifically femininity, can function as a discipline that produces certain bodies and identities; expectations of femininity can operate as an effective form of social control (6). Women's historical association with the body— strengthened by biological essentialism and determinist paradigms— has resulted in her "being judged by and valued for her appearance more than man, often above all else" (King, 2004: 30). King (2004) likens Foucault's commentary on how subjectivity is produced to Simone de Beauvoir's famous phrase: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (14). Feminine gender creates a set of categories and classifications that form a constitutive part of socially accepted identity. Over the centuries, women have been subjugated primarily through their bodies, as "gender ideologies and sexist reasoning

stem from perceived biological differences between the sexes" (King, 2004: 8). Virtual

representations of this are easily be found on Instagram and Pinterest, where popular

hashtags and Pinterest boards amalgamate pictures and pins showing women who are

almost always thin and beautiful, fresh and young looking because "while both sexes

dread ageing, it is the woman who is expected to prevent it" (King, 2004: 26).

The fixation with weight and thinness takes on an intensified, more viral form via

social networking sites. While some people utilize social media sites to help them stay in

shape, as "social apps that track and share their fitness habits make them feel accountable

and more likely to follow through with their fitness plans", others use SNSs to look at

'fitspirational' photos of other women's bodies and post content of the physical ideals

they hope to achieve (Lee, 2013: 150). These fitspirational photos present perfectly toned

figures followed by hundreds of comments from users praising the body they see,

lamenting the fact that theirs do not look like that, or declaring that they will do what it

takes to become more like it. On sites like Instagram, users obsess over, strive for, and

sometimes even document their own attempts to reshape their bodies to be more like the

ones they see in a form of digital fitness diary. Virtual vision-boards Pinterest display

ideal-type image-crafting and desire according to internalized societal stereotypes and

gender expectations. There are endless lists telling users how to "Lose 10 lbs. in 3 Days",

"Get Your Beach Body by Eating Only This", and "Look Like a Victoria's Secret

Model", accompanied by photos of stick skinny models with designer clothes draped

over their thin frames. Popular memes read: "Fit is beautiful", "Do it for the body you've

always wanted", and "You are entirely up to you. Make your body. Make your life".

4.3 From Thinspo to Fitspo

In this case study, social networking sites are affecting young women by digitalizing their fixation on weight and thinness, perpetuating gender expectations about physical appearance while giving users new tools to sculpt their bodies and affecting the way they see themselves as compared to others on SNSs. These sites have also contributed to the widespread circulation of dangerous 'thinspo' content that before only shared amongst "a secret community of body obsessives and self-starvers" (Stroud, 2012: 20). In recent years, this has sparked a counter 'fitspo' movement that shifts the focus from achieving thinness to fitness.

Until recent years, 'thinspo' was a word that only a select few recognized. Thinspo websites or blogs promote anorexia and bulimia as "beautiful and empowering, chock-a-block with pictures of rake-thin girls viewed as 'thinspiration'—a dirty secret among those with eating disorders" (Stroud, 2012: 20). Over the past few years, as photo-sharing sites like Instagram and Pinterest have risen to prominence, this has all changed. Popular Thinspo images began circulating on Instagram accounts and Pinterest collections wholly dedicated to 'inspiring' followers to maintain eating disorders and achieve excessive thinness ("'FitsPo' now replaces 'ThinSpo'", 2012).[18] Harmful hashtags associated with the 'thinspo' or thinspiration movement encourage excessive skinniness, eating disorders, self-harm, and self-hate. On Instagram, hashtags #ana (anorexia), #mia (bulimia), and #ed (eating disorder) generate cloud collections of photos displaying skeletal figures and severely underweight individuals. Even though Tumblr,

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[18] From Blisstree site, as quoted in Asian News International (ANI), May 23 2012.

Instagram and Pinterest are trying to crack down on this form of troubling content-image, the momentum with which this particular movement has gained popularity on SNSs is alarming.

In recent years, 'thinspiration' has lost its popularity to 'fitspiration'. In this hugely popular counter-movement that spans across all social media platforms, fitness enthusiasts post pictures of what they would rather look like. The movement built around physical fitness and health shifts the goal from thinness to fitness, from skin and bones to muscle. As quoted on the website Blisstree, "Fitspo aims to motivate you to hit the gym with photos of svelte, tanned women in sports bras and micro-shorts".[19] Fitspo images are accompanied by 'inspirational' quotes such as:

"You don't always get what you wish for, you get what you work for"

"Enjoy your pain, you've earned it"

"Some call it obsession, I call it dedication"

"Push yourself, no one is going to do it for you"

"Skinny girls look good in clothes, fit girls look good naked"

"It's not a diet, it's a lifestyle"

"Learn to love the burn"

"You call it obsession, I call it dedication"

"Sweat is fat crying"

"Nothing tastes as good as fit (thin) feels"

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[19] From Blisstree site, as quoted in Asian News International (ANI), May 23 2012.

It is unclear whether fitspo is in fact a 'healthier' movement or "just thinspo in sheep's clothing" ("'FitsPo' now replaces 'ThinSpo'", 2012). Users continue to upload images of the bodies they desire. While these bodies are no longer sickly skinny model figures hash-tagged #ana (short for anorexic), the more voluptuous or full-figured 'healthy' bodies still look nearly 'perfect' and have often been enhanced with Photoshop or plastic surgery. In this way, "fitspo can be seen as a thinly veiled misnomer for thinspo, putting emphasis on body image and nearly impossible standards" ("'FitsPo' now replaces 'ThinSpo'", 2012). Fitspirational images still show what are considered to be perfect bodies with body fat percentages low enough to let abdominal muscles show through. Even though the toned, tanned fitness models appear to be healthier than skinny runway models, both body types represent idealized physical forms that conform to dominant societal norms and conventions about what defines beauty and are very difficult to achieve for most women.

An example of content shared in this new fitspiration culture is the popular hashtag '#strongisthenewskinny'— a tag that spans across all networking sites promoting buzzwords fitness and 'health'. The term 'health' should be used reservedly in the fitspo case, as much of the fitspo movement actually show alarming tendencies towards orthorexia nervosa— a proposed mental disorder that indicates an obsession with health to the extreme based on an excessive preoccupation with avoiding foods perceived to be unhealthy.[20] Problematically, the fitspo images circulated on sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest remain focused on the physical, on an obsession over beauty and

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[20] The American Psychiatric Association does not yet recognize orthorexia nervosa as a mental disorder.

the body that can result in diminishing self-esteem and an unconscious effort to repair perceptions of self-worth (Toma and Hancock, 2013: 321).

Judith Butler (1993) warns that potentially transformative acts of performativity can be hijacked and rearticulated as dominant discourses. This may be the case with fitspo replacing thinspo— one form of unrealistic, unhealthy obsession replacing another. Potential acts of performativity can be coopted by conventional norms. Chichi Kix, the trainer and writer behind the blog Fit Villains, wrote on Facebook: "Don't get me wrong: I love, LOVE seeing fit girls more and more often. I appreciate muscle... and it IS slightly more refreshing than images of thinner and thinner models" ("'FitsPo' now replaces 'ThinSpo'", 2012). She continues, "But considering that the majority of fitspo models still represent an unrealistic and unattainable ideal for most women, I don't think it's necessary to pair motivational messages with images of ripped, toned, albeit gorgeous ladies" ("'FitsPo' now replaces 'ThinSpo'", 2012).

4.4 Virtual Communities: The #FitFam IG Community

Cyber optimists might suggest that while social networking sites contribute to the problem, they can also provide a solution to the increasing sense of alienation and inadequacy users feel when they constantly compare themselves to the unrealistic accounts of others online. In the case of eating disorders and obsessive tendencies amongst young female users, a positive change in recent years has been the creation of virtual communities that function as online support centres for those suffering from eating disorders. These virtual help forums remind us that "while it can be dangerous, the internet can also help people suffering from an eating disorder" (Stroud, 2012: 21).

One specific example of a community that has developed on Instagram is the IG #fitfam, or, fit family. This term has emerged within circles of fitness enthusiasts who stumble across each others' accounts on Instagram and follow one another, forming long-lasting friendships built on shared interests such as working out at a gym every day and eating clean (healthy). The majority of members are female, aged 15-24, who adhere to a strict self-imposed fitness regime and bodybuilding diet like IIFYM (if it fits your macros), flexible eating, or IF (intermittent fasting). Some of these fitfam enthusiasts are personal trainers to begin with, others quit their day jobs to pursue their passion for fitness after encouragement from their fitfam friends. Even though most members of a fitfam will never meet each other in offline life, they provide constant support and encouragement for one another, liking and commenting on each others' photos religiously.

Satisfying the criteria outlined by Goodings, Locke, et al. (2007), this online community shares an imagined social space with a sense of collective history and the grounds for developing a series of identity (475). Members of the fitfam community speak to each other using their own terminology, regularly sparking conversation threads on Instagram photos that make reference to gains (muscle growth), cutting (dieting and exercising to lose fat), macros (food macronutrients), and the challenges of prep (fitness competition preparation). There is constant interactional work taking place here, as members of the virtual community are constantly creating shared experiences and particular identities built around a shared past that are "maintained discursively through routine interaction" (Goodings et al., 2007: 465). While anyone can use the hashtag #fitfam, the inner circle of this particular group forms an elite community with imagined

borders. The more popular fitfam 'celebrities'—with tens of thousands of followers or

more— only interact with each other on a regular basis. While these users sometimes

take the time to answer questions asked by their regular Instagram 'fans', fitfam

'celebrities' tend to devote more energy to actively supporting other popular members in

their exclusive club.

As Boyd (2007) indicates, "The size and diversity of [an] imagined community

depends on the individual; some imagine acquiring fans while others imagine a

community that is far more intimate" (131). In one #fitfam case, fitness and clean eating

enthusiast Vevian Gerke (@fitalicious_me) quit her day job and moved her life across the

United States after achieving 100,000 Instagram followers by January 2012. Vevian

Gerke then launched what she called "Project Fit Nation", offering to give cooking

lessons and personal training services to any family who would pay for her flights and

provide accommodation throughout the duration of her stay. Since launching what her

#FitNation project, @fitalicious_me traveled to several states and helped more than 23

families in their desire to lead healthier lives, even taking her project international with a

recent trip to France. Now with more than 140,000 followers on Instagram, Vevian has

travel plans lined up for the next year, at absolutely no hard cost to her. In this particular

case, the Instagram #fitfam fan base built up around her functions as an audience but also

as an active support system because her followers have her family. This is just one of

many instances in which #fitfam members become close friends, often driving or flying a

considerable distance to meet each other in person. Some have even moved in as

roommates and started businesses together, building relationships based on shared values

and weak ties that then develop into stronger, more substantial connections. All this

because one day they shared pictures that brought them together online and then off.

4.5 SNSs as Subversive Practices for Body Image Issues

Cyber optimists might also indicate that social networking sites can become places for

users to challenge conventional standards of beauty and body-type perpetuated on these

sites by engaging in acts of alternative performativity. As Stroud (2012) aptly indicates,

while it is easy to point blame at social networking sites and the Internet, "we need to

acknowledge that the relentless pursuit of [conventional norms like] thinness is

something we all contribute to" (21). If users are able to acknowledge that their actions

on social networking sites might actually reiterate and reify existing standards and gender

stereotypes, then they can begin to consider how these sites could be used in a more

positive way instead of as part of the problem. Butlerian resignification on social

networking sites could take the form of accounts dedicated to hyperbolic displays of

unconventional beauty or body shape. Some displays of this nature may have already

begun to take root, as hashtags like 'loveyourbody' and 'justbeyou' are used to link

together positive images and generate support.

Social networking sites can help uncover the extent to which dominant discourses

are deeply rooted in societal standards. Sites like Instagram and Pinterest can also

function as a battleground for users who seek to end "the digitally enhanced, unrealistic

'beauty' in the pages of teen fashion magazines" (Lee, 2013: 108). In July 2012, with

support from friends and strangers who rallied on social networking sites, 14-year- old

Julia Bluhm from Maine hand-delivered a petition signed by 84,000 people to the

executive editor of Seventeen magazine, urging the publisher not to alter the body size or face shape of the girls and models in the magazine.[21] Not long after, Bluhm wrote on change.org, "Seventeen listened! They're saying they won't use Photoshop to digitally alter their models! This is a huge victory, and I'm so unbelievably happy" (Lee, 2013: 108). Social networking sites can create the kind of virtual connectedness that "helps drive change" (Contreras, 2013: 725). Users have the capacity to change themselves, change their communities, change the world.

4.6 The Challenge of Regulating Virtual Communities

Figure 5: Stop Pro Ana/Self Hate/Depression[22]

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[21] Story from *Facebook Nation* by Norman Lee (2013). Springer Science + Business Media: New York.

[22] Instagram screen shot captured November 6, 2013.

Social networking sites can be a source of constant pressure and feelings of inadequacy when users compare themselves to others. Pagan (2014) indicates that SNS users find comfort in virtual communities because "when people are obsessed over something (ex. fitness), they have the support of all these other people who feel the same way they do". In this case, social media sites can function as a double-edged sword in terms of community, providing online support systems for those in need but also linking to dangerous self-harm circles on sites like Instagram and Pinterest. Those already suffering from an eating disorder can find easy access to triggering images through #ana, #mia hashtags. Others teetering on the brink of an eating disorder might find the content that helps finally push them over the edge. This can lead to a sense of helplessness. The capacity to share dangerous content quickly and easily in online communities can contribute to an already existing problem amongst young female users.

In dangerous online communities, users can share inappropriate content that encourages self-hatred, starvation, even bodily abuse. Regulating the potentially harmful exploitation of social networking sites is a challenge. As Stroud (2012) indicates, policing the internet is impossible and banning certain sites might actually increase the problem (21). In an attempt to discourage the spread of pro-ana content, some social networking sites like Instagram now display an explicit content advisory warning—which includes a link to the national eating disorders website— that pops up on the screen when flagged images tagged #ana, #mia, or #thinspo are clicked. But there is a possibility that pushing thinspo supporters off SNSs like Instagram might just cause them to "become more

covert and sneaky in the way that they recruit new members, [therefore] harder to distinguish from the genuine support forums that also exist online" (Stroud, 2012: 21).

The challenge of regulating virtual communities is evidenced in a case that took place in 2012. When 'rapidly shrinking' model and presenter Alexa Chung "posted an image of herself with knobbly knees and legs like sticks" on Instagram, there was a range of reactions from followers (Stroud, 2012: 20). Some users posted cruel comments, harassing her for being 'thinspo' and leaving comments like "Ew, she's so skinny, it's gross" and "UR ugly" (Stroud, 2012: 20). Other users applauded her for achieving a degree of skinniness they so desperately sought, reposting her photo all over thinspo pages as pro-ana inspiration. Instagram reacted directly to this case of online harassment, warning users that the site was "not the place for active promotion or glorification of self-harm" and that "any account found encouraging or urging users to embrace anorexia, bulimia or other eating disorders... will result in a disabled account without warning" (Stroud, 2012: 20). Pinterest followed suit by announcing that it plans to halt any content promoting anorexia (Stroud, 2012: 20). Facebook plays an even more direct role in online support with the introduction of their Samaritans suicide risk alert system (Lee, 2013: 172). In March 2011, Facebook requested that if any users notice that someone is "posting depressing photos or writing about killing themselves, their Facebook friends click on the 'report suicidal content' link to alert Facebook staff members who are monitoring these reports 24/7" (Lee, 2013: 172). In this way, social networking sites can truly impact—and even save— the lives of users.

Until these recent changes, the main strategy on sites like Instagram had been "to let its users self-police, relying on its community to report and flag up inappropriate

images and accounts" (Kutchinksy, 2013: 43). Instagram authorities would then delete some of the more extreme content and suspend or disable accounts of repeat offenders (Kutchinksy, 2013: 43). With more than 40 million images being uploaded daily to their network, it is unsurprising that Instagram's staff—now just over 20 employees, up from only 11 in 2010— "are struggling to police the site against the thousands of users determined to post inappropriate content" (Kutchinsky, 2013: 44).

Conclusion: Forever In Our Digital Memory

Figure 6: How To Be Happy[23]

Caught in a vicious circle of narcissism and panic insecurity, unhappy but unsure why, some users are beginning to look for a way out. The solution seems obvious: "stop comparing yourself to others". Stop fixating on what others have, how they look, what activities they are involved in. If this were easy or even possible, individuals would be free from feelings of inadequacy intensified in their virtual interactions on social networking sites. Escape is not so simple. The digital subject is structured to need connection. Connection to others online constantly posting about their personal activities

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[23] Instagram screen shot captured March 6, 2013.

and accomplishments inevitably leads to comparison. Privacy and disconnection are not possible because the digital subject needs to circulate to survive.

In my research, I attempted to demonstrate why the SNS user should not be blamed. Caught up in a dialectical process driven by neoliberal capitalism, people now must participate on social networking sites to exist in contemporary Western society. This is the paradox of modern subjectivity manifested in a new form. This work does not make a claim about the novelty of this paradox, but about the novelty of the form of the paradox. While some lament social networking sites as the end of human communication, these sites are not the end but the latest development. Home telephones were the death of the written letter. Mobile devices will replace the desktop computer.[24] Human beings have always looked to new technologies to help keep the frantic pace that technology makes possible, even if these new devices only "encourage ever-greater volume and velocity" (Turkle, 2011: 280). As Sherry Turkle (2011) indicates, "our habitual narratives about technology begin with respectful disparagement of what came before and move on to idealize the new" (242). In this triumphalist tale, "every new technological affordance meets an opportunity, never a vulnerability, never an anxiety" (242). The human relationship with technology is deeply narcissistic. We create it, we use it, we seek to improve it but all too often we do not thoroughly test it. We do not take the time to predict all of the potentially negative outcomes or effects. We just manipulate, exploit, and reap the benefits of what we create. Only when the complications start to creep in, when the questions or concerns arise, only then do we wonder, retrospectively, if what we have created might do more harm than good. As Sherry Turkle (2011) indicates, "We

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[24] Mobile browsing will surpass desktop browsing by over 80 percent in 2014 (Pagan, 2014).

build technologies that leave us vulnerable in new ways" (235). In this section, I reflect upon the conclusions reached in my research and turn to what the future direction of social networking sites might be.

All too often caught up in a bad habit of constantly comparing themselves to others on social networking sites, many users exaggerate the positive and desirable parts of their lives while downplaying or even omitting the negative. This can contribute to an inflated sense of self and narcissistic tendencies; paradoxically, it can also breed feelings of inadequacy and alienation. I arrived at this phantasmatic reimagining of virtual subjectivity as a vicious circle of narcissism and insecurity in Chapter One by exploring how online identity play and carefully managed representations affect self-worth and social self-esteem on SNSs. In Chapter Two, I examined how social networking sites are changing the way we users see themselves and the world, as continual comparison of their lives to the distorted displays of others can lead to disappointment and loneliness when the grass always appears to be greener for someone else. Concerned about how the private has become public in a digital world where oversharing is the default setting, I outlined how cybercitizens are always watching one another and themselves in a modern form of Foucault's panopticon where examination and self-surveillance are the norm. In Chapter Three, I explored why people are attracted to social networking sites, examining a range of explanations from existing research such as self-affirmation theory and the Five-Factor Model borrowed from social psychology. Focusing on the sense of acceptance and belonging that the digital subject seeks in virtual communities, I indicated how the concept of community must be reconfigured in a world where attention capital is eclipsing social capital and social networking sites can provide the platform for

rearticulatory subversive practices. In Chapter Four I applied my research findings to a case study, exploring what might happen when Foucauldian habits of self-surveillance, examination, and normalization are manifested in a digital form that can trap young female users in a cycle of comparison to unrealistic body-types resulting in self-hatred and the severe physical self-discipline of an eating disorder.

Future Research Directions

Posts on SNSs come into the world like digital stillborns, just as quickly abandoned as they were produced. And yet these stillborn thoughts do not disappear. They are not so easily forgotten. These scattered seeds sewn on social networking sites continue to float around in the virtual ether, following users, constructing them, constituting them. Though this constitutive part of the user has left their body and moved beyond their control, it continues to terrorize them. On social networking sites, individuals become ghosts of themselves; they haunt the digital landscape and linger on long after they have left. Virtual spaces often feel like a comfortable place for stream-of-consciousness type thought. Turkle (2011) suggests that "you feel in a place that is private and ephemeral" (258). Staring at a screen, users feel protected, less burdened by expectations they "succumb to illusions of privacy" (Turkle, 2011: 188). This 'free' feeling is deceiving; it is a "seductive but dangerous habit of mind" (Turkle, 2011: 188). The Internet is forever and "with every connection we leave an electronic trace" (Turkle, 2011: 260). The words "delete" and "erase" are merely metaphorical in this digital age and SNS users are finally becoming aware of this (Turkle, 2011: 259). A part of each user lives beyond their control, one that they created but cannot destroy. As Contreras (2013) contends, a digital

version of a person's life exists as "rows and columns in massive databases somewhere in a 'cloud' of computers that we will never see, hear or reboot" (13). SNS users have lost full control and ownership over some of the most memorable moments of their lives. Forgetting that every message, every Facebook post and every Instagram picture leaves a trace is living in fiction. And yet, many people seem satisfied with this situation. Either they do not understand, or the benefits outweigh the risks. Some simply cannot imagine life without social networking sites.

Rather than identifying social networking sites as the singular cause of deteriorating social skills and alienation, further research could explore how the virtual subject is an ideological byproduct and condition of digital capitalism. As Strong (2014) suggests, it is not the technology of Facebook or other social networking sites that is harmful right now, it is the culture— the culture of how people choose to use it, of what they choose to post. Social networking sites are not inherently destructive; the technology itself is not what drives us towards narcissism and self-destruction. Cyber optimists happily embrace this latest chapter in the technological narrative and suggest that rather than fighting the private-to-public tide sweeping across the web, it is time to consider what might be done to help guide the future of social networking sites in a positive direction. Addiction to social networking sites and the apps that make everyday life easier is not going to go away. Attempting to completely change digital behaviour simply will not work. It is time to ask how these sites can be used to encourage positive reconstructions of self-worth in virtual subjectivity. How should social networking site support teams deal with dangerous user content? How can one become a good social

media Samaritan? These are the questions that must be addressed now, before technologies are upgraded to new forms that make obsolete any issues with the old.

We have reached a point where "we can see the costs and start to take action" (Turkle, 2011: 296). Turkle (2011) proposes adopting what she calls *realtechnik*, neither a cyberoptimist nor a Luddite perspective (294). This Heideggerian approach means being skeptical about linear progress while encouraging humility, "a state of mind in which we are most open to facing problems and reconsidering decisions" which can help acknowledge costs and recognize the things we hold inviolate (Turkle, 2011: 294). Turkle (2011) believes that younger generations are already beginning to attempt this, trying to "reclaim personal privacy and each other's attention" (Turkle, 2011: 294). While Gen Y is fully immersed in SNSs, they are also becoming deeply critical of their actions. It is time to become attuned to the anxiety and vulnerability of the tormented virtual subject. It is time to recognize that while social networking sites are giving rise to a new form of virtual subjectivity, it is still emerging and will never be complete. As the digital subject continues to circulate and network culture provides the framework within which subjectivities are constituted, either something amazingly transcendent is going to happen or an absolute disaster, or perhaps both.

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