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Facebook, Twitter, Gender: How Social Media Allows for Fragmentation of the Self in the Digitally Native Millennial

Clark Wolff Hamel
Bard College

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Facebook, Twitter, and Gender:
How Social Media Allows for Fragmentation of the Self in the Digitally Native Millennial

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Clark Wolff Hamel

Annandale-on-Hudson

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Dedicated to Myself

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I would like to start by thanking my parents. Thanks for bringing me into the world, watching me cry a lot, making me laugh even more, and just generally existing for me always. They are the most accepting, kind, empathetic parents a boy could ask for. I'm also honored to have been asked to make my mom's Facebook and Instagram accounts, and my dad's Instagram account.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: A Theoretical Look at Social Media, Gender, and Gendered Social Media.....	7
Chapter Two: The Effect of Gender on Facebook and Twitter as Performative Social Spheres.....	26
Chapter Three: Commodity and Coming Out: Morality in Online Queerness.....	48
Conclusion.....	63

Introduction

When I started this project, I was an avid Facebook user. I still am. I think that this is an important statement to make; but the extent to which my use of social media affects this project is unclear. In fact, part of what this project seeks to do is interrogate the connection between social media, thought, and the self.

The first time I ever used Facebook to discuss my gender or sexuality was in 2009, when I made a post on National Coming Out day telling what I believed to be the whole world that I was queer. I used the word bisexual at the time, but sexuality is fluid and I've changed a lot over the past eight years. I did not hide this status from my mom, but I'm not sure if she ever actually saw it. I came out to her in person later that same year. When I came out to my mom as transgender nearly two years ago, she told me she already knew because she had seen my Facebook status about it, but wanted to wait for me to tell her myself before she said anything or made any changes in the way she spoke to me or about me. This still strikes me as one of the more compassionate ways someone can relate to another person offline while still acknowledging their online presence. In this case, both online and offline were expressions of my real self, but they were respected as separate spaces.

I continue to use Facebook to remind people of my pronouns (they/them/theirs, the most common gender neutral way to refer to someone) and crack jokes about my gender and sexuality. My Facebook is a space to be the person I wish I could so easily be offline—funny, flippant, angry, petty, resilient. I do not feel the need to act on those things offline, because Facebook and Twitter are spaces made for me to tune into those parts of myself. They are social spaces that

have the feel of being a private and personal space, especially when posting for a targeted audience, such as the queer community.

This project stems from a deep interest in the way that the Internet allows us to express who we are, who we think we are, and who we want to be. Erving Goffman and George Herbert Mead have written extensively on the way the self is performed and presented in different social spaces. Through their theories of the self and morality, I explore how that self is made more complex in the realm of social media.

The relevance of this project comes from the increase of social media outlets and usage along side the ever growing knowledge of gender identity politics in more public spaces. In March 2017 alone, there have been glossaries of gender and sexuality descriptors published in both CBS and Cosmopolitan Magazine.¹ The way in which gender is being discussed in the United States, especially on the Internet, is more inclusive and truly an attempt to understand and allow others to understand. Gender is slowly being seen as less of a man/woman binary and more of a spectrum, as is sexuality.

With the growth of understandings of gender and sexuality comes the growth of how it is talked about in social spaces. For many millennials, Facebook and Twitter are some of those social spaces. The millennial has been defined as the demographic group that follows Generation X, and is often defined as those whose birth years range from the 1980s to the early 2000s². Millennials are often perceived as being confident and tolerant, but also narcissistic and entitled.

¹ <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/a9125732/womens-march-non-binary-gender-nonconforming/> as well as <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/transgender-gender-identity-terms-glossary/>

² Hais, Michael & Winograd, Morley. (2008). "MySpace, Youtube, and the Future of American Politics." *Meet the Millennials*. Rutgers University Press.

They are also considered to be “digital natives,” meaning that they were born into a world with ever advancing digital technology³. Because of this, the millennial places a lot of value on the way their self is expressed and viewed online. And when placed online, gender can be played with in a more comfortable way for many people, because social media often feels more private and less scary. Millennials will try out new pronouns, new names, post pictures of themselves gender bending, and sometimes create whole new profiles for an identity they wish to engage with more. They use social media to come out, to gain social capital and popularity, and to express both joy and pain surrounding their gender and sexuality. All of these points are explored in this project.

When we think about how gender will be discussed in the future, specifically relating to people who are transgender and identify outside of the gender binary, we must think about social media. Social media is a social space just as a home is, because it is a setting for connection and communication as well as discussing the self, be it directly through a post or a tweet, or indirectly through a section in someone’s profile on Facebook. To place gender in the context of social media is relevant to the way in which social media has become a normal and frequented part of life for millennials.

I have always been interested in how people present different selves and identities, specifically relating to gender and sexuality. Even more specifically, I am interested in seeing whether the Internet as a medium of self-presentation and a designated social space might alter and potentially fragment gender related identity. When the self is brought into an online medium

³ Hais, Michael & Winograd, Morley. (2008). “MySpace, Youtube, and the Future of American Politics.” *Meet the Millennials*. Rutgers University Press.

as a social sphere, it can be interesting to look at the differences between fragmentation and multifaceted identity. To fragment means a small part has been broken off or separated from something, according to Oxford English Dictionary. To be multifaceted in this context is to say that there are many parts to identity in the Internet as a public sphere. Because there is such space to have identities be both multifaceted and fragmented, I am interested to see whether they do more of one or the other throughout my research. Another part of this research will be looking into ideals of masculinity and femininity, and the way those gendered roles are performed online, or, perhaps, not performed at all.

My investigation is partly theoretical and partly empirical. For my theoretical portion, I will be using a series of contemporary writings on gender and the Internet, classical sociological theory, and other writings by authors such as art historians. These writings will help ground and provide a conceptual foundation for my own research through interviews on people's identities on Facebook and Twitter.

In addition to discussion of theory, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with people ages 18-28. This age range ensures that I will be only interviewing people who fall under the age of the millennial, which I discussed earlier. Millennial identities can be viewed as stronger than non-millennials because there are more mediums to express identity, specifically social media platforms that I will be looking at. Each interview was conducted privately and confidentially, though the settings varied, and lasted anywhere from fifteen to forty minutes. I began my interviews with basic demographic questions of age, gender, sex, sexual orientation, pronouns, and amount of schooling completed. After those questions were answered, we moved on to more in depth questions pertaining to what is written in someone's about me section, how

old they were when they created their social media, how often they use their social media, and if there are people they wish they were not friends with on Facebook. These are just some of the questions asked during interviews. None of my questions particularly pertain to gender and sexuality's effects on identity online, though people absolutely spoke about them. We ended with a debriefing, and an opportunity for the interviewee to ask me questions.

My project begins with a literature review that brings in thoughts and theories from both classical and contemporary sociological realms, as well as people outside of the field of sociology. I overview Michel Foucault, Eve Shapiro, Judith Butler, Erving Goffman, and many others. In discussing theory, I create a baseline foundation for the rest of the project and the arguments and claims I make myself. Many of the theories discussed in the first chapter are brought up in my later chapters, and used to back up my interviewees statements.

Chapter Two begins with a brief description of how I went about doing my empirical research, and the demographic statistics of who I interviewed and how it has effected my project. I interviewed around twenty people, which means this study is not representative but absolutely relevant and informative, and able to guide potential further research. After going over all the demographic information for all of my interviewees, I focus on two men and two women as case studies of sorts, and discuss other interviewees in reference to the case studies, as well as the theory that was set up in Chapter One. Chapter Two discusses the ways in which gendered performances are used on Facebook and Twitter, and how there is a clear distinction for millennials of a real and a fake self in reference to the offline and online selves respectively.

The third chapter begins by stepping away from gendered issues and discusses popularity, being “Internet famous,” and the idea of an account as a commodity. The idea of coming out online is then brought up, partially from an interviewee who talks about the way the Internet has helped queer and trans people in terms of visibility. I come to a discussion of morality, and how moral codes change when put into an online space, especially relating to contentious topics such as the politics behind coming out and the self as a commodity.

This project began with my own personal question of what it means to exist as a transgender person on Facebook and Twitter and has ended with a deep exploration of identity online—how it manifests, how it is performed, how it functions, and what it means. Facebook and Twitter, while not physical spaces necessarily, are social spaces, and that space must be explored the same way physical spaces historically have been.

Chapter One:

A Theoretical Look at Social Media, Gender, and Gendered Social Media

The literature that I have read pertaining to gender and social media can be organized into three separate clusters. The first cluster relates to self-performance and performativity, bringing in classical theory as well as other written work. Here, we can begin to think about the way that a person performs for an audience, and what a person may or may not want to share with a specific audience. The second group of literature I will be looking at focuses on technological advancement, the history of Facebook and Twitter, and the social dynamics and interactions on social media platforms. These writings include the way the Internet came into being, the existence of Facebook and Twitter as social mediums, and how these social media platforms are building blocks for social groupings. The third section of my analysis of literature pertains to the way self-performance of gender and sexuality specifically relates to the Internet, and Facebook and Twitter, directly.

Coming at gender and sexuality's connections to technology through works by scholars on gender and technology as well as performance and identity in general, we can see the dynamics of this relationship in the first two sections of literature. It also creates a space to begin to delve into the more explicit topic of my empirical research. I intend to approach my research question from all possible angles of Internet, identity, and the relationship between those two topics.

I.

Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault work to look at self-performance and identity in a classically theoretical way in terms of sociological thinking. The work done that explores self-performance also brings up concepts of self-censorship and surveillance at times, a topic I explore further in my empirical research as well.

The term “code switching,” in its origins, means to switch between two languages during a conversation. In the world of psychology, it has come to mean switching between social languages during conversation⁴. It describes the way a person can tend to act differently around different groupings of people, such as their parents versus a friend or colleague. In a more macro sense, this term can be applied to self-performance in the way that people tend to act and speak differently depending on the space that they are in and the people that they are around.

Erving Goffman’s book on *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life*, written in 1959, looks into the question of how we perform in our day to day lives, and how performances tend to be socialized to fit into the social expectations of the society that the person is performing in or for. Goffman discusses the way in which “a performance is socialized, molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented.”⁵ The people for whom one is performing comprise such a large part of what shapes that performance, rendering the space and audience two key parts of any presentation of the self. It is about

⁴ “code-switching”. OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press.

⁵ Goffman, Erving. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. First Anchor Books.

ensuring a secure spot in that social space, and allowing the self to modify in order to be accepted into that society.

The question of who the audience is, therefore, is also important to consider. The audience online tends to be much more ambiguous than an audience that is comprised of a group of people right in front of you. Here, we can think of the audience as an imagined other, a concept which I draw from Benedict Anderson's idea of the imagined community. The imagined community, as Anderson describes it, is a community formed not through everyday interaction among members of the community, but instead is built upon people imagining themselves to be a part of that group⁶. Anderson uses the imagined community to describe nationalism, depicting the nation as a socially constructed community. Like the imagined community, the imagined other is the way the audience becomes socially constructed and imagined by people who perceive others to be a part of that group, rather than an informed concept of who the audience on a platform might, in fact, be. The imagined community, Anderson's actual concept, can also be applied to the platforms of Facebook and Twitter.

Goffman also delves into how we can see many main parts of a society's value system and moral code, as well as its rules and regulations, through an individual's performance. In so far as the community accepts the performance, we can see if it is a natural part of the society. However, a performance that exists online may only be seen by a small portion of an audience that it is intended for, although it may feel as though the bounds of social media reach on and on. There are also pockets of communities online that can be considered societies, however, for which this concept does apply. If a part of society is comfortable with a performance that is

⁶ Anderson, Benedict. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso Books.

given, it becomes a sign that not just the performance is okay, but also the potential reality of the performance's actions and words. In this way, norms and etiquette are implemented within societies, on several scales. Goffman also discusses how "upward mobility [in social strata] involves the presentation of proper performances"⁷. This goes further into a discussion of the way that the social systems of class and power work in turn with performances by members of the society which has those systems. To gain upwards mobility, and reach higher levels of power and social standing, as well as reach a higher class status, one must engage in an ideal performance that has been already established by the upper class. Knowing which performances will be accepted by a social groupings is an important part of that upwards mobility.

Audience is important to think about in terms of discussing how we go about performance, but even more interesting is the question of who someone is performing for when there is no explicit audience. Online, there is only the imagined audience. As mentioned earlier, the imagined audience, which comes from the imagined other, is formed not through actual social interactions but instead through the perception of who an audience might be. This is especially applicable to social media platforms, because outside of the external validation that comes with a "like" or a "favorite," it is never a certainty that one person or another will see what someone posts online, even if they have access to it. Goffman questions how legitimate it is to perform explicitly for an audience, because "activities which are thought to be legitimate by some audiences in our society are thought to be rackets by others"⁸. Through this statement, Goffman points out a hole in the existence of performativity. Who are we performing for? And if

⁷ Goffman, Erving. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. First Anchor Books.

⁸ Goffman, Erving. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. First Anchor Books.

we are performing for a whole society, how do we know which audience will believe our performance?

This question of audience can translate into the idea of self-surveillance through Bentham's Panopticon. The Panopticon is an architectural design for a prison that ensures surveillance by the self and of the self. The Panopticon is circular in shape, with the prison cells facing inward; there is a tall watchtower in the middle of the circle, with one sided glass, so that the guard can look out but the inmates cannot see in. In this way, it is impossible to know if you are being seen. While there is always the option that the inmates are being watched, they never know for sure, and thus are forced to self-censor and alter their personhood to fit that which is acceptable for the setting they are in.

The major effect of the Panopticon is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power"⁹. In many ways, the Internet feeds into the Panopticon because of just that. The question of performing for an audience, as Goffman suggests, becomes a necessity when we think of being watched constantly. Additionally, the question of performing for an audience can be complicated by the fact that in the terms of the Panopticon, there is no explicit audience to be performing for. It is simply self-censorship. We can see the imagined audience working here as well, when one looks at the way the self is controlled through an unknown audience. So then, is this self-censorship performance? Or simply an act of controlling the self? Goffman would say that even the act of controlling the self is a performance, because it is a deviation from the normalcy one engages in privately.

⁹ Foucault, Michel. (1975). Discipline and Punish.

However, is the answer to this question different when it's being thought about online rather than offline? The ways Foucault discusses Bentham's Panopticon in reference to docile bodies is a good place to start. Having a body or a mind not be reactionary to being surveilled could mean people do not feel comfortable acting or speaking how they wish to because they are being watched. There is a sense of self-censorship and well as self-surveillance, because of the uncertainty that comes with never being sure if you're being watched or not. It is hard to imagine not putting on an act of some sort, be it simply self-censorship or be it performativity¹⁰, when you are being watched by an audience that you do not know. There is no strict audience to be performing for, instead, there is the blanket idea that there just is an audience, period. This brings us back to the imagined audience. So, turning to this concept in reference to an online self, it is easy to feel this sense of uncertainty in who to perform for, because online there is no certain audience. It is an unknown other, an imagined audience.

We can think here of the looking glass self, a concept developed in 1902 by Charles Cooley.¹¹ This is the concept that a person's self grows from a person's social interactions with others. When we think about this online, however, it is less of a looking glass and more of a monitor—the type we see in computers, TVs, phones—thus rephrasing the concept to be the monitored self. The monitored self, a phrase coined by one of my interviewees, whose story I will explain further in my second chapter, is more complex, because the self is growing from a whole new type of social interactions. They are not face-to-face; they are through a screen.

¹⁰ Although at this point we have agreed, to an extent, that they have a similar relationship to square and rectangle; performativity is not only self-censorship but self-censorship can be considered a form of performativity.

¹¹ Cooley, Charles Horton. (1902). "The Looking-Glass Self." *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Scriber's.

Additionally, the monitored self almost contradicts the idea of the imagined community, or the imagined audience, which states that it is not the actual interactions that form who we perceive to be in an audience or community, including ourselves, but instead our perceptions and preconceived notions of what it might mean to be in that community or audience. Instead, the monitored self suggests that it is entirely ourselves looking back on our interactions with other people that helps us form who we believe we are online.

Jumping to more gendered concepts of self-performativity, we can take a look at Judith Butler's 1988 work on *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. Here, Butler thinks about the body and gender as performative, something I have been alluding to if not speaking to directly thus far. Butler discusses how "one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well"¹². This pulls from West and Zimmerman's piece on *Doing Gender*, through Butler's phrasing of doing one's body, and not just being one's body. The body is actively being "done" by someone, typically the self. She also says that "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time"⁶. Similarly to Goffman we see a discussion of the growth of self over time through interactions and socialization. This adds to the idea of doing gender, as well as Butler's initial concept of doing one's body. There is an important part of gender formed through action being done repeatedly through a person's life. It is not necessarily learned, but performed to the point of reality.

⁶ Butler, Judith. (1988). "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Butler refers to gender as both a public action and a performative act. It is set in a publicly social sphere, not in the private sphere, making it a performance for a larger audience. This makes gender not quite a radical choice or project that “reflects a merely individual choice;” instead it just exists, with its existence dependent on a person’s choice of performance⁶. It is a role which can express or disguise a self, according to Butler. She believes that there is no real self, because vital parts of a person’s identity are always being performed, done through social and cultural expectations and norms. Because there is no real self, can there even exist a fake self? The question of how someone would work to create false self is imperative when considering Butler’s idea that there is no real self to form a fake self from. This can apply to Goffman’s idea of the self as being formed through performance, along with the self as an interior self as well as a societal self. Gender is socially constructed, but is also a key element of the self. In this way, no matter how much the self, and gender within that, is socially constructed, it is still a vital part of identity.

II.

This second grouping of literature focuses on the Internet, and more specifically social groupings on the Internet. Here, I look at both sociological scholars as well as authors in other fields to explore the way that the Internet affects society.

The book *Society Online: The Internet in Context*, edited by Philip Howard, is a collaborative book comprised of chapters that explore the depths of communication and social standing in online networks and societies, as well as politics and gender in the online world. One

author, Pippa Norris, in her chapter on “The Bridging and Bonding Role of Online Communities,” asks whether online groups serve as a bridge or bonding function for larger society. She discusses how, perhaps, “textual communication via the internet strips away the standard visual and aural cues of social identity, including those of gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status—plausibly promoting heterogeneity, where no one knows that you are a ‘dog on the internet’ (Holmes 1997)”¹³. This is interesting to think about in an age where we can see the Internet as a place to engage more with our identities. However, quite contrastingly, Norris suggests that some do actually revel in the fact that online they are anonymous. The Internet may be a place where on a base level it is hard to know someone’s race, gender, age, etc, but there is also the idea that the Internet is the place where people want to find others who share certain identities and struggles, making them quick to share who they are. Looking directly to Facebook, there are many groups for specific identities—spaces that are considered only for certain demographic groups, surrounding race, gender, or ability for example.

Leslie Regan Shade, in “Bending Gender Into the Net,” speaks about the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, and the gendered implications that came along with such a new and vast technology. To throw Shade into the discourse, she talks about how, with the rise of the Internet and new technologies in the 1990s, the media portrayed women as “cyber-phobic, victims of harassment, or potential online pickup material”¹⁴. This is interesting, considering Shade’s description of the history of telephone technology earlier in the chapter. Regarding the telephone, women were considered the most competent for usage, as secretaries and telephone operators.

¹³ Norris, Pippa. (2004). Society Online. “The Bridging and Bonding Role of Online Communities.” Ed: Philip N. Howard. Sage Publications Inc.

¹⁴ Shade, Leslie R. (2004). Society Online. “Bending Gender Into the Net.” Ed: Philip N. Howard. Sage Publications Inc.

Contrastingly, women were not considered apt enough to do computer work, despite being the ones most knowledgeable and most suitable to use telephone technology. When we think about these two different technologies, we can see clearly a gender gap.

Additionally, according to Shade, “men are slightly more privacy conscious” than women are, and “because of the anonymous nature of the Web, more men than women search for sensitive information online (*The Online Health Care Revolution*, 2000).”¹⁵ This brings in the question of whether, in the context of millennials, men or women tend to care more or less about privacy and anonymity. The idea that men take advantage of the anonymity of the internet more than women do is especially interesting, thinking about what is considered to be taboo or “sensitive information” online. Because of this, privacy and anonymity are topics that are very subjective.

In my empirical research, I focus entirely on Facebook and Twitter, both of which are primarily text based mediums, though it is possible to post photos and images on them. There are mentions of the social media platforms Instagram and Tumblr, but no in depth analysis. *Business Insider* has two articles that describe the histories of both Facebook and Twitter. Twitter started in 2006, with the idea of co-founder Jack Dorsey. He imagined it as an SMS based communication platform, but it became a mix of that idea with that of a blogging platform¹⁶. To post on Twitter, or to tweet, is a 140 character endeavor, as was once the length of a standard text

¹⁵ Shade, Leslie R. (2004). *Society Online*. “Bending Gender Into the Net.” Ed: Philip N. Howard. Sage Publications Inc.

¹⁶ Carlson, Nicholas (2011). *Business Insider*. “The Real History of Twitter.”

message. In this way, it was initially much more about person-to-person communication¹⁷. You can use the @ symbol to tweet directly at a person, making it even more personal. Meanwhile, Facebook started in 2004 by Harvard sophomore Mark Zuckerberg, who was accused of stealing the idea for Facebook from three of his friends. These allegations were proven to actually be true; however, Zuckerberg only stole ideas, not any legally binding language, so there was no way to file against him¹⁸. Facebook actually began as Facemash, a website used to rank Harvard students on attractiveness by pulling their pictures and names from the Harvard websites. Zuckerberg also took from ConnectU, a dating website that Zuckerberg was asked to help build, but instead intentionally delayed until he could build Facebook for himself. Facebook's origins as a ranking site brings us to a question of judgment, and whether those expectations of judging people still exists on modern Facebook.

Meanwhile, in her book on Twitter, Dhiraj Murthy compares Twitter to Facebook, talking about how Twitter is often considered the more public version of Facebook. This has some truth to it, but is definitely flawed, as the two social media platforms are different and useful in their own ways. Twitter is not only about reaching and getting in touch with people you know, but is also about reaching a much broader audience and having people be aware of what they are saying. Twitter is known for being a political space, in that you can say something succinct and have it reach a wide audience, something not as possible with mediums like Facebook. In fact,

¹⁷ Murthy, Dhiraj. (2013). *Twitter: Digital Media and Society Series*. Polity Press.

¹⁸ Carlson, Nicholas (2010). Business Insider. "At Last—The Full Story of How Facebook Was Founded."

Murthy also talks about how Twitter has “redefined existing cultural practices such as diary keeping, news consumption, and job searching, to name a few.”¹⁹

III.

The third and final section of literature relevant to this project blends foci on self-presentation, gender, and sexuality on the Internet. One of the main texts I will be discussing is by Eve Shapiro, entitled *Gendered Circuits* as well as a collaborative book entitled *Facebook and Philosophy*, edited by DE Wittkower. Both of these books are focused on the way that performance online and offline are different, and how those differences allow us to manipulate our individual or various selves, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Shapiro’s book *Gendered Circuits* focuses very specifically on the way technology interacts with gender as identity and as presentation, looking at concepts such as authenticity and audiences. Shapiro brings up the idea that “how each individual presents gender is therefore a product of the technology of power wielded during any era.”²⁰ This brings in the idea that the architecture of technology encourages and enables engagement with another self. Shapiro says that our gendered presentation is a result of power in the context of technology. This leads to the question of whose power Shapiro is talking about. In a strictly societal stance, as Goffman reminds us in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, men are deemed superior to women and

¹⁹ Murthy, Dhiraj. (2013). *Twitter: Digital Media and Society Series*. Polity Press.

²⁰ Shapiro, Eve. (2010). *Gender Circuits*. Taylor & Francis Publishing.

women deemed weaker than men²¹. Perhaps this is the power Shapiro refers to. Within technology, which is viewed as a male dominated field²², it is hard for there not to be power dynamics in relation to technology. However, does this make it so that the usage of those technologies is gendered? Can the technology involved in a person's life help shape gendered presentation? These questions were addressed briefly earlier with the discussion of the gendering of the telephone as well as the computer upon its new existence. Trying not to generalize too much, technology was and continues to be perceived to be something women are incapable of, but when it comes to using it to perform mundane tasks, women are put to work.

This brings West and Zimmerman's piece *Doing Gender* into a new scope pertaining to technological advancement. West and Zimmerman write about the differences between gender and sex, and the way gender is expressed compared to biological sex. Sex is defined as the biological aspect of one's self. This can be represented through chromosomes, genitalia, hormones, and secondary sex characteristics; however, chromosomes are the truest way of defining sex. Gender, on the other hand, is a person's own identity. It is who they are, based partially on the binary of man and woman, but passing that as well and turning into a full spectrum, where people can identify within or outside of that binary. Gender has very little to do with someone's sex, as someone could have one sex and a different gender. People can identify as non-binary, falling outside the gender binary, or they can identify as transgender, which means that a person identifies with a different gender than their sex assigned at birth. To be cisgendered is to identify gender-wise with the sex you were assigned at birth. For West and Zimmerman, to

²¹ Goffman, Erving. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. First Anchor Books.

²² STEM—science, technology, engineering, mathematics—in general is a male dominated field

do gender is to present masculinity and femininity in different scopes based on other aspects of biological sex and gender identity, making clear the distinction between identity and presentation. Meanwhile, Shapiro discusses the concept of identity work in *Gendered Circuits*. She describes identity work as “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities”²³.

West and Zimmerman, along with Shapiro, create a discourse that makes clear how identity is dependent on many other things, such as the activities we do and the technologies we engage in. It is also important to note that gender identity can be different from gender presentation. A person can present masculine but identify as a woman, or be a person who has been assigned female at birth (AFAB), and has XX chromosomes, and identifies as a man but still dresses in a stereotypically feminine manner. This feminine presentation does not affect the actual identity this man has. This discrepancy is confusing to many people, partly because the knowledge of these differences and their importance is not particularly widespread knowledge. However, technology, in the way Shapiro describes it, can greatly help people to understand this difference between presentation and identity. The other hand to this is that it only makes it harder because the lines between presentation and identity are allowed to blur.

Shapiro believes our identities are fragmented in a way that allows us to compose separate identities in different mediums. This can apply to the changing and fragmenting of identity online versus offline, but could also apply to presenting different identities on differing online mediums themselves. Shapiro says that in a potential cyborg world, these fractured

²³ Shapiro, Eve. (2010). *Gender Circuits*. Taylor & Francis Publishing.

identities will become so fragmented that we can compose and recompose “multiple, contradictory, fluid, and fractured selves” at will²⁴. There is, of course, the question of real bodies doing this exact thing. However, I wonder if this is already happening on Facebook and Twitter, and if it is, does that mean the cyborg world is already in play? Or will it come in to play through the use of social media platforms that enable multiple and contradictory selves?

There is, however, a big difference between having an identity fragmented versus it being multifaceted. Fragmentation implies that there will be different aspects of identity broken down and apart into different spaces. This could apply to being a part of multiple different Facebook groups that address different parts of a person’s identity, as well as following different activists on Twitter who may post only about gender issues or racial issues. Having identity as multifaceted is different, as that implies an identity which has many sides and parts to it. This brings in the question of how intersectionality²⁵ applies to the potentiality of a cyborg world as Shapiro describes. The line, then, between having an identity be intersectional and multifaceted, versus being fragmented or fractured, is a thin one to walk.

Another important topic that Shapiro brings up is that the rules of authenticity are different online²⁶. While it is entirely possible to have multiple authentic selves, it is also possible to have multiple inauthentic selves. A fake identity can be an outlet for parts of the self that are otherwise generally hidden, a space to have fun and play with identity, or even as a

²⁴ Shapiro, Eve. (2010). Gender Circuits. Taylor & Francis Publishing.

²⁵ The way identity becomes complex in terms of identifying with more than one aspect of the self. Someone who identifies as a black, lesbian, woman has an intersectional identity because she includes race, gender, and sexual orientation into who she is. Intersectionality has become an important part of identity politics because of the way in which it allows people to bring together multiple, potentially contradictory, parts of the self.

²⁶ Shapiro, Eve. (2010). Gender Circuits. Taylor & Francis Publishing.

scapegoat for some to be unkind on the Internet. The self that is being presented online is being presented to an imagined other. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the audience could be vast or narrow, and because it is unclear who will receive the content, even when performing for a specific audience, it is hard to craft that presentation. Because social media platforms have allowed intentional self-presentation and multiple selves accessible and impermanent, people can use these identities as an actual performance. The imagined other of the audience that may or may not exist has an affect on the self that is created in a way that questions intentionality and authenticity.

The imagined other of an audience is also brought up by Mimi Marinucci in her chapter in *Facebook and Philosophy*, “You Can’t Front on Facebook”. Marinucci discusses the disinhibition effect, which is where people feel less restrained online and feel as though they can more openly express themselves, be it about identity or otherwise²⁷. When people are online and engaged in the disinhibition effect, they self-disclose and feel more comfortable acting rebellious than they would offline. This could be because the consequences involved are not seemingly as tangible, or do not affect the person as directly as acting out offline would. However, it could also have to do with anonymity. When engaging online, people might feel a freedom to ignore social conventions and expectations²⁸. In terms of authentic identity rather than performed identity, the disinhibition effect can enable a person to feel comfortable being their “true self” online.

²⁷ Marinucci, Mimi. (2010). *Facebook and Philosophy*. “You Can’t Front on Facebook.” Ed: Wittkower, DE. Carus Publishing Company.

²⁸ Marinucci, Mimi. (2010). *Facebook and Philosophy*. “You Can’t Front on Facebook.” Ed: Wittkower, DE. Carus Publishing Company.

If the disinhibition effect is real, and we are assuming from here forth that it is, it could help a person come out as transgender, genderqueer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, etc in spaces such as Facebook or Twitter. The disinhibition effect can allow a person to feel comfortable engaging in a gender and/or sexuality that they do not feel comfortable engaging in outside of that social media platform or outside of other social media platforms in general. Looking at another side of things, someone could impulsively or disingenuously post something online relating to identity, and then feel as though they must follow through with performing or engaging with that identity offline, or continue to engage with that false identity online. Once someone has self-labeled, it is hard to stop the construction process of a new identity, because self-fulfilling prophecy often makes the person want to continue the construction. This can make it very difficult to tell when someone is posting something genuine or not genuine about their identity online. Under some circumstances, we might even self-label and then actually believe it to be real, and then it becomes real. This complicates the idea of what “real” online identity means even further.

Shapiro engages with the disinhibition effect as well, but calls her variation of it Identity Tourism. Identity Tourism is the idea that we “take on racialized, gendered classed, or national identities in cyberspace without recognizing the ‘real-life’ circumstances and disadvantages of these identities”²⁹. Following my earlier line of thought, the danger here is that Identity Tourism allows people to engage with historically oppressed groups of people without realizing that they will have to go through the oppression it comes with. Once the person starts to experience the oppression that is brought along with engaging with a minority identity, the consequences could

²⁹ Shapiro, Eve. (2010). Gender Circuits. Taylor & Francis Publishing.

be that the person is so unaware of the lived experiences and inequalities those groups of people have, they gain even more privilege than they already have, and end up culturally appropriating whole groups of people, simply because they are unaware of the consequences of their actions. Additionally, it is possible for someone to take on an oppressed identity because they truly do want to engage with that part of that identity and do not mind the potential consequences involved, for example, a man who enjoys engaging with femininity online, but who views himself as masculine offline and does not mind if he is associated with that femininity offline.

In addition to Marinucci's chapter, Tamara Wandel and Anthony Beavers also have a chapter on "Playing Around with Identity." In this chapter, Wandel and Beavers connect to Erving Goffman, talking about how he leads us to think about the self that we create and perform for various selves and how that relates to identity³⁰. For people on Facebook and Twitter, that could be showing multiple identities or different sides of a self that we may feel uncomfortable showing to other people, which is something that Eve Shapiro also discusses. This directly relates to the disinhibition effect that Marinucci discusses in her chapter. In many ways, they are all interconnected in their ideas.

* * * * *

Having these three different sections of literature allow me to delve into the topics of identity/performance and the Internet individually while also finding ways that they interact specifically. The theories on self-performance and self-surveillance directly interact with

³⁰ Beavers, Anthony & Wandel, Tamara. (2010). Facebook and Philosophy. "Playing Around with Identity." Ed: Wittkower, DE. Carus Publishing Company.

theories on the Internet's effect on humanity and human interaction. Creating a space for these three topics to exist separately while still intertwining will allow my literature review to come from a space of analyzing each topic itself and also relating all three topics to each other and to my project itself, which focuses mainly on the presentation of gender and sexuality on social media platforms, which are much more specific dimensions of self-performance/identity and the Internet.

Chapter Two:

Gender's Effect on Facebook and Twitter as Performative Social Spheres

“When you make a Facebook as young as I made it, part of that is building a following, I guess. I don't really know *what* they're following...” —19 year old straight white male

My empirical research on Facebook and Twitter began with a Facebook post. I reached out to see if anyone would be interested in being interviewed for this project:

“Hello! I am conducting research for my Sociology senior project on identity on social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter. I am inviting people, ages 18-28, to participate in an interview for my study. It is fully confidential and will last about half an hour. Interviews will be conducted in person, unless we can find other arrangements. If you would like to participate, or know someone who might, send me a private message or email me. Thank you!”

Within the first couple hours of posting, I got around ten responses from people from all over the country, people I went to high school with, people I've never actually met but happen to be friends with on Facebook. I thought that Facebook would be an ideal place to put the initial call for interviewees, as the main criteria, not listed in my advertisement, is that the person must have a Facebook and/or Twitter account in order to participate. I interviewed many people from that initial post, and then based many other interviews from people they recommended to me. I interviewed eighteen people total before beginning to analyze the interviews for patterns and potentially significant thoughts.

I ended up interviewing eight men, eight women, and two genderqueer³¹ people. The age range of people that I ended up interviewing was smaller than my initial intended range, going from 18 to 24. However, this is still in the age of the millennial and it was still a good age range to work with. Though the age range was smaller than I projected, it still encapsulated the millennial. Some brief statistics of the people that I interviewed:

All eight men have a Facebook account and all except one created their Facebook account at age twelve. Four have Twitter accounts, which were created in later teen years. Four men did not say they were heterosexual or straight, but did not explicitly call themselves gay, bisexual, or queer. They either did not wish to answer the question, stuttered over an answer, or said they were not sure. The four other men stated they were straight or heterosexual. Almost all of the men labeled themselves as white, the exceptions being one man who identified as black and the other using the response, "Jewish." All the men except for one are cisgender³². The one man who did not identify as cisgender stated that he was unhappy with the concept of gender, and that he would rather not give himself a label, but said that he used he/him/his pronouns.

The women involved all identify as queer. Answers to the question of sexual orientation ranged from bisexual, pansexual, questioning and queer, to lesbian. Women created their Facebook account anywhere from age twelve to fourteen. Four also have Twitter accounts. All except two identified as white or caucasian, with one woman identifying as Latina and the other as Chinese. The two genderqueer individuals are assigned female at birth, but identify as

³¹ Falling outside of the man/woman binary; someone who does not identify as a man or a woman. To be genderqueer falls under the umbrella of being Trans, which means that a person does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

³² Those who do identify with the gender which they were assigned at birth are considered cisgender.

transgender or non-binary, meaning that they do not conform to the binary of man and woman. One is 21 and the other is 18. They both have Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Before beginning to talk about Facebook and Twitter, I should explain the basic concepts of Friending and Following. On Facebook you have friends, while on Twitter you have followers. Facebook is one of the only social media sites that does not use the concept of followers. Because of this, Facebook is a more personal site.

On Facebook, you must request to be friends with someone. That person will get a notification, on the site and/or through an email, that you have added them as a friend. From there, you may either ignore or accept the friend request. If you ignore it, and then they try to friend you again, you have the opportunity to block them. This means that they will no longer be allowed to attempt to friend you again. After accepting someone's friend request, you now have access to view their profile, photos, about me sections, and timeline. You may post on their timeline, and have the ability to direct message them. There is also a part of Facebook where you can block someone from seeing certain things you post; for example, if you did not want your mother to see what pictures you post, you can block her from those by changing your privacy settings.

On Twitter, you can have either a private or public account. If you have a private account, someone will request to follow you, and you can either accept or deny the request. If you have a public account, anyone can follow you, and you can follow them as well. Once you follow someone, their tweets will show up on your feed, which is the homepage that you scroll through, consisting of the tweets of each person you follow, in chronological order. If someone follows

you, they can see anything and everything that you tweet. There is no privacy setting on Twitter to customize who can see what, like there is on Facebook.

It is relevant to note that some interviews were done before Donald Trump became elected the President of the United States, while others were done after. I believe that it made a difference during my interviews in terms of talking about identity and culture online, and it was brought up directly in a few of the interviews I conducted. The political climate has affected the way in which people choose to talk about themselves, both offline and online, and has brought about a fear of being honest about oneself on public forums. Additionally, because I solicited my initial interviewees from my Facebook account, many of my interviewees came from small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast, and have socially liberal or left leaning ideologies. This could skew certain data. This is not a representative sample, however, it does not have to be such in order to be valid, interesting, and significant.

To begin an in-depth analysis of my interviews, I want to start by discussing Facebook and Twitter, as well as Instagram, as social spaces. Like a school or a restaurant, a public bathroom or a library, social media sites have become social spaces. They are spaces not only for communication and interaction, but also for performance and identity. Thus, while they are primarily social spaces, they are also spaces for an individual to explore the self in a way that is not always possible offline. In this chapter, I will be looking at the way in which people explore their own identities online, primarily relating to gender and sexuality. Although I did not explicitly ask questions relating to gender during my interviews, or prompt people to speak to gender or sexuality, most interviewees decided to go that direction themselves while talking,

making it clear that the “fake” and “real” dichotomy that is present in the online versus offline spheres and discussed in this chapter relates to gender in a large part.

Five of the eight men who I interviewed claimed that they are either “not big posters” or do not have a “Facebook presence.” The other three men claim to have highly alternate personas online and do not post personal details but instead work to cultivate an online presence. In this chapter, I will analyze the interviews of two men—Steve and Markus³³. The use of the phrase “Facebook presence” is something to note—the idea that they might not engage in having a certain presence, but they acknowledge that others do create certain personalities and presences on Facebook. Other men discuss watching others who they are friends with on Facebook curate an alternate self, or another personality online. To curate a self online is to not only perform a self, but to perform a creative and crafted self. While Judith Butler believes that there is no real self³⁴, these men seem to believe that there is a very real self, with social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter being the explicit setting, the social space, to engage in a more exact performance, or a false self. In curating the self, there is an ability to make the self anyone, potentially someone you are not offline—a fake self. This distinction makes the real self the offline self. While there is less talk of the real self among Steve and Markus, there is absolute acknowledgement of having a fake self, implying that there must also exist a real self. There is a more tangible ability to create a self or perform a self in online social spaces like Facebook and Twitter, although according to Butler, the offline self is still being performed, because all selves are performed. This creates a layered version of the self.

³³ Names have been changed.

³⁴ Butler, Judith. (1988). “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Some participants disagreed over which online platform was better for creating an online persona, or alternate self. One interviewee, Gabe³⁵, a 21 year old white male who created his Facebook when he was 12 and his Twitter when he was 18, spoke of the ability to create a persona on Twitter.

“Twitter is more inclined to be a persona. You only have 240 characters to express what you’re thinking. You end up either fine tuning it or not. You can craft a personality that is not so directly a reflection of who you are offline... To some extent, you’re expected to present your most real or your most vanilla self on Facebook.”

The first interesting part of what Gabe says here is that he speaks incorrectly regarding the maximum number of characters available in a tweet³⁶. Was this a simple slip up in language during our conversation, or did Gabe actually forget there were only 140 characters allowed in a tweet? Does it seem like there is more space than there are actually is for someone who is a bigger Twitter than Facebook user? On Facebook, there is no actual maximum or minimum for posting, in terms of the number of characters or words. Perhaps engaging with an alternate self seems more feasible on Twitter for Gabe because there is a more precise format to which a person has to follow when posting (tweeting). Additionally, to bring other forms of posting into the equation, posting pictures on Facebook is much more common, and also exists explicitly as an activity through the Profile Picture and the Cover Photo. Meanwhile, on Twitter it is not required to have any profile photo.

³⁵ Name has been changed.

³⁶ There are only 140 characters available for use in a single tweet

There is also an interesting discrepancy in terms of the medium he views as performative. Despite Gabe saying that a person is expected to be their “most real self” on Facebook while feeling more able to create an alternate personality on Twitter, both Steve and Markus have crafted their alternate selves using Facebook, and, for Steve, Instagram as well. In terms of perception of performative spaces there is a clear difference here from straight white man to straight white man. Meanwhile, there was only one person interviewed, a 23 year old woman, who spoke of creating an entirely alternate and characterized persona on Twitter. A few other interviewees, mostly men, talked about using Twitter as a medium to discuss more openly and honestly things relating to mental illness, romantic problems, and stress related emotional issues. This goes against Gabe’s idea of using Twitter to create a persona, and shows more of Twitter’s honest and less curated side. However, the use of Gabe’s words “fine tuning” in reference to creating a persona is worth noting. There is a clear idea of the curation of an online persona, with words like “fine tuning” being used to describe how it is not only created, but crafted. Here, we can begin to look at Steve’s specific persona and begin to unpack it.

Steve created his Facebook when he was twelve years old, and he does not have, nor has he ever had, a Twitter. During our interview, he says that his gender (male), sexuality (straight), age (19), and education (pursuing an undergraduate degree) are all available to be viewed by any person he is friends with on Facebook. Steve told me about the persona that he engages with specifically on Facebook, and also on Instagram³⁷. Steve begins telling me about this persona

³⁷ Instagram, a mobile app that allows people to post and share photos and videos, is popular among millennials as well

when I ask what is said in his Facebook about me box. He tells me that it says “fka³⁸ Clementine Dave.” I ask why the “fka.” Steve tells me that it originally just said “Clementine Dave”, and then he changed it to an academic joke. When he changed it the third time, it became “fka Clementine Dave.” This is one way that Steve engages with Facebook—through creating jokes for people who keep up with his presence. Someone who is only friends with him now would not know that at one point he was “Clementine Dave” but now he is “fka Clementine Dave.” Instead, it is an inside joke of sorts for those that are involved in and closely follow who Steve is online and the way that he fixes his persona. I prompt him further, asking him who Clementine Dave is, and how it relates to who he is. He continues, saying he “developed this goofy alter ego called Clementine Dave³⁹...it’s who I want to present myself as. It’s a character. It’s an avatar almost. It wasn’t that intentional when I started doing it, it was just kind of silly.” When I asked when it became intentional, he continued, “when I started using Instagram. I really rode the wave of ‘this is my aesthetic’ in terms of Clementine Dave.”

Steve describes Clementine Dave’s persona as a boy who wears sunglasses, a lot of pink, and has a mustache. While the word aesthetic does not directly refer to Steve’s alternate persona, it is a way to describe certain stylistic choices made by him. While an aesthetic literally refers to something beautiful or pertaining to the visual, it has come to mean something else. Now, an aesthetic is a stylistic signifier that helps define someone’s personhood through an exterior language. While previously, one could call something a fashion statement, now it would be labeled an aesthetic. It is done in order to change how he looks, but more than anything, to

³⁸ An initialism that stands for “formerly known as”

³⁹ Name has been changed, as have any identifying descriptors of this persona.

change the way that look reflects on who he is in terms of personality or character. Aesthetic also tends to refer to a curatorial choice. It is usually a conscious decision to label something your aesthetic.

Steve, unprompted by me, reveals that Clementine Dave allows him to play with his gender in a way that he does not have the opportunity to offline. He calls Clementine Dave “less than masculine” though identifies him as an explicitly male figure, just a male figure who is more fluid and “open about wearing pink.” The association here, with pink and a loss of masculinity, struck me as a harsh stereotype. For a man who wants to play with masculinity or feels like he is playing with masculinity, it really does not seem like that much play is going on. Upon being shown a few photos of Clementine Dave, the femininity that is engaged with is entirely performative and stereotypical. It is through the color pink and flamboyant or feminine poses. He talks more about the femininity displayed by Clementine Dave:

“I’m far more flamboyant through this pseudonym. It’s like a pen name. People associate it with you, but it’s like, it’s a Clementine Dave thing, not a Steve thing. I don’t know if I’m being more of myself or more of who I want people to think I am.”

Steve says that it is not his “thing” to be so flamboyant offline, but he likes to engage in it online. Is Steve actually flamboyant in his real life, his offline life, but does not want to face it or think about it? Could this be some form of internalized homophobia? Steve says he is straight. There was no hesitation, no questioning of sexuality. However, I wonder if Steve could be using Clementine Dave to project a closeted personality of his own, rather than it being an alternate

and fake persona. Or perhaps he just wants to avoid the “cis straight white boy” trope. The “cis straight white boy” trope has to do with the fact that they are considered to be the most privileged group of people systematically and institutionally. Being straight, cisgendered male, and white, this group of people is often looked down upon by radical feminists and others, in part due to the power and privilege that they have and often overlook.

The question of being who someone wants others to think they are came up frequently in interviews with everyone. Although none of the questions I ask while interviewing particularly broached the subject of gender or sexuality other than the initial demographic questions, the discussion of those things came up anyways. What people are choosing to discuss during these interviews speaks to the empirical, rather than theoretical, importance of gender in social media. There was a clear intention behind displays of gender, be it an actual identity of Steve or a false persona of Clementine Dave. For people who identified as genderqueer, non-binary, or transgender, they spoke of the ways in which those things have, in some ways, taken over the idea of an online personage, which I will discuss more later.

Markus, who I mentioned earlier, is another cisgender male who actively creates a persona on Facebook. Unlike Steve, he talks about using Facebook in the same way many people use Twitter, meaning that he uses his Facebook profile to curate and cultivate an online, alternate, humor based persona. In this way, he goes against Gabe’s distinction from earlier, of Twitter as a typically performative place and Facebook as a more honest representation of a person. Markus talked about how his posts “take the form of short jokes or cryptic things that use improper grammar...people probably find them hard to understand.” He also talks about his “license and liberty to post bluntly...because of the manner in which they’re written about on Facebook.” In

turning things into jokes through improper grammar and spelling, through short jokes, and through writing in continuative series', Markus is able to use Facebook as a medium for a comedic self. The act of posting so bluntly about vaguely serious issues and topics is turned humorous when put into the context of his overall Facebook persona.

When I asked Markus explicitly if he feels as though he can be someone else through posting on Facebook, he said yes, that it lets him present someone who does have some similarities with who he is, but in the end is more of a caricature. While Steve claims that Clementine Dave is a more "flamboyant" version of himself, Markus's alternate self is a clearly different person. It is a caricature and comedic version of his offline (real) self. However, he also creates complete characters on Facebook, and posts as a completely other person that has no relation whatsoever to who he is. There is a duality of the real and fake selves here, though neither is truly unperformed. One of these characters is an "old deadbeat dad alcoholic, obsessed with lifting and online dating," for which he made 89 posts over the course of the year. This is in addition to other fictional characters' posts, random posts, and series of posts. He also talks about his group of small but dedicated followers, who keep up with these posts through liking and commenting, despite their excessive nature. For Markus, it is much more about creating this caricature, and has very little to do with personal identity. It also prevents him from expressing too much about his offline self, because he has set up this specific way of posting.

He finishes up his interview, saying "I might be putting too much thought into what I post on Facebook." The self-deprecation and self-consciousness present in Markus's furrowed brow and slight, uncomfortable laughter after saying those words makes me think that Markus is self-conscious about posting so much and in such an organized and thought out manner.

Another interviewee, Carl⁴⁰, does not have anything written in his about me section on Facebook and does not have a Twitter account at all. He says that he once had something in his about me box, but deleted it because “it was too earnest.” This fear of being genuine online could stem from the split between the real and the fake of offline versus online. This brings us to the complex and often overlooked fragility of masculinity. Steve is unable to engage with femininity outside of his alternate personas, and believes that wearing pink signals a loss of masculinity. For Carl, speaking in an earnest or genuine fashion is weak and shameful. For Markus, he does post genuine things, but in a cryptic manner through humor and alternate personalities. There is very little authenticity for all three of these men online. Why do these men think that being their real selves is not okay once entering the social sphere of Facebook?

There is little about personal identity for either Markus or Steve in terms of the characters that they create online. For Carl, there is no identity at all, no information about the self and no proclamation of personality or persona. Steve and Markus are what I would describe as a clear example of using social media to express and exist within a fake self. In disagreement with Judith Butler, both men discuss how their online self is a fake self compared to their offline real self. The idea of what quantifies a real self, then, comes into question. Is a real self, in this age, for millennials like Steve and Markus, just their offline self? Or is it something more? Both Steve and Markus consider their real self to be their offline self. Meanwhile, Carl believes there is no point to having a self online at all.

⁴⁰ Name has been changed.

There were two women, Joan and Alice⁴¹, who also engaged in playful alternate personas online. For Alice, it happened on Twitter. For Joan, it was on Facebook.

Alice and I sat on her living room couch together, and our interview was much more of a casual conversation. Many of her answers were embedded with subtle humor. Alice is a 23 year old pansexual white woman who recently graduated college. When I asked Alice whether she ever dives into an alternate persona or other part of herself online, she answered with another question. She asked me if she could share “something weird” that she did on Twitter when she was in high school. I said yes, absolutely. Alice went on for about five minutes, talking about her 16 year old antics on Twitter, which she and her friends at the time deemed “Ping-Pong Living⁴².” Ping-Pong Living was four people on Twitter, including Alice, engaging in alter egos which she described as “strange robotic normies.⁴³” When I asked about her use of the word “robotic,” I learned that she meant they were pretending to be literal robots. Alice was suburban parent, but from “a corporation that created robots of that.” In Ping-Pong Living, whenever someone would Follow them, Alice and her friends would view it as people subscribing to their service to read their tweets, somewhat like a soap opera. It was, in a lot of ways, performance art online. Alice told me that she used Ping-Pong Living to be a different person as well as for art. She continues, saying that, other than Ping-Pong Living, she has been pretty much herself online since she created her Facebook and her Twitter. Alice, similarly to Markus, indulged in an alternate persona in order to relate to and please an audience, no matter how small. This persona had nothing to do with her actual self, just as Markus’ did not.

⁴¹ Names have been changed.

⁴² Name has been changed, as have descriptors.

⁴³ A normie is defined as someone who engages in mainstream culture.

In Ping-Pong Living, Alice was known as Ms. Husband and her boyfriend at the time was Business Husband. These were their respective handles; she did not inform me of the other two handles. The idea behind crafting a personality that she seemingly would never engage in offline, a “robotic normie”, is an interesting one. Additionally, the labeling of both herself and her boyfriend as Husbands could be seen as a way of looking into masculinity from a woman’s perspective. Was this a play on sexuality, did they both want to be husbands? Or was the idea of being two different types of husbands fun? Being in high school and pretending to be married is another point to look into. There is a desire to be more adult and more mature, however, the play that they are engaging in is clearly that of younger people, partly because it is online, something that we can say only the digitally native might feel comfortable doing.

The excitement with which Alice spoke when discussing Ping-Pong Living shows that this was an exhilarating thing for her at the time and that she looks back on it fondly. Perhaps Alice wishes that she was still doing something like it online. However, Alice also said that she likes being herself online, and that she likes making jokes and talking about her period. The honesty present in this phrase, “talking about her period,” was unique thus far in my interviews. While men are engaging in multiple alternate personas or avoiding talking about themselves at all, Alice is talking about menstruation. Alice says that “I really try not to do cryptic tweets and Facebook statuses. There’s enough of that going around.” Her thought that there are enough cryptic tweets and Facebook statuses rings true when thinking about how Markus spoke of his own Facebook usage. Markus spoke of a feeling of guilt regarding how he puts so much thought into his Facebook usage, and even used the word “cryptic” to describe his own humorous postings, as Alice does in her critique. We can see many parallels between Alice and Markus,

except that Markus is the one being cryptic and Alice critiques that action, bringing in a potentially gendered split.

Joan found her alternate persona on Facebook. Joan is a 20 year old white, queer woman in her third year of undergraduate at a liberal arts school in the Northeast. She made her Facebook at age 12, and then got rid of it for a few years in high school, before starting a new one upon entering college.

Joan mentions her alter-ego, which takes place on an alternate Facebook account. She says that the alter-ego, named Simon⁴⁴, started out as a character for a movie idea, but she never got around to making the movie, so she just created the character instead. She says that although it is a character outside of herself, that has been developed and curated, it is also a way to post on her behalf when she gets self-conscious about posting too much on her own account. This goes back to the fear of being sincere on social media that Carl initially brought up.

However, we can also think back to the disinhibition effect, which is theorized by Mimi Marinucci⁴⁵. This is the idea that people feel less restrained online than offline. While Marinucci has no exact or explicit answer to why this occurs, we can see Joan both engaging in it and rejecting it. Although Joan fears that she is posting too much on her actual Facebook account, thus resorting to posting on her alter-ego's account, everyone who is friends with her other account knows that it is also her. So what, then, is the real point? If it is a fear of being genuine and sincere, then how does the audience view Simon's posts? Is it seen as a genuine post on

⁴⁴ Name has been changed

⁴⁵ Marinucci, Mimi. (2010). Facebook and Philosophy. "You Can't Front on Facebook." Ed: Wittkower, DE. Carus Publishing Company.

Joan's behalf? Or as something Simon would say? This brings us to the question of whether Joan is doing this for herself or for an audience. Additionally, we can see Markus also engaging in this same effect, as he vaguely shames himself for posting so much on his Facebook for little to no reason.

When asked why she's still doing it, Joan says that it's because of the time and energy she has already put into it. She goes on, saying "I have to let her keep living...maybe after [college] I'll delete her." Joan says that Simon's main audience is her college friends, thus, it would make sense for her to not see a purpose to continuing to have her live on past college. The audience has dissipated. However, it also could be a more personal reason for keeping her alive now but knowing perhaps when she will be deleted. Additionally, Joan refers to her as though she is a real person. Joan talks about Simon's audience, her appeal, and her personality. But Joan also acknowledges how she is an entity created from herself, and refers to her as a character. She says that Simon must keep living, but was Simon ever really alive in the first place? Isn't she just a character? So we must ask—is Simon a character or a real person in Joan's mind? Is it possible for her to be both? And if she is both, in what way does this affect her offline self and life? According to Joan, people do come up to her and tell her that they like Simon's presence on Facebook, that they think she is funny or interesting or that they admire Joan's creativity. However, Joan did not speak to her offline self being affected by Simon's existence in any other way.

The difference between the women's alter-egos and fake selves compared to the men's alternate personalities online is stark. There exists the fact that neither women associate their actual profile or page on Facebook or Twitter with their fake or alternate selves. While both

Steve and Markus use their actual Facebook profiles to create these characters, they are using their names, their pictures, and directly associating their own offline selves with these accounts; Joan and Alice make them fairly distant from their actual profiles, because they are not playing with their actual self, instead, they are playing with the idea of the possibilities of Facebook and Twitter. Simon is a character of her own, and though Joan uses photographs of herself to represent her, that is the extent to which they share a life. For Alice, there is no comparison or similarity to her real life from Ping-Pong Living. Both Steve and Markus are using their Facebook profiles to engage with a self that does not reflect their “real” offline selves, while Alice and Joan created whole other profiles in order to craft their characters. The men are not playing with characters, they are playing with themselves.

During my interviews, I ask a series of questions relating to the interviewee’s “about me” section on both Facebook and Twitter. I ask them to share what is in them, if they feel comfortable doing so, what it means, if they relate to it, if it describes who they are in any way, and how long it took to decide what to put there. The “about me” section on Facebook takes the format of a small space to put in a little biography. It is situated directly under the profile picture. The way that an intro section, or an about me box, functions is that it is supposed to be a place where someone can say something short and important about themselves. However, most people that I interviewed used it instead as a space for humor, typically self-deprecating in nature.

Twitter has a similar feature, also directly under the profile picture on someone’s personal profile. Beneath the profile picture is your Twitter name, your handle, and then whatever you have chosen to write about yourself. The difference between the Facebook and Twitter about me

sections is mostly the fact that on Facebook, it is a clear feature. It is in a box, it has a label on it. On Twitter, it is free floating and comfortably situated spatially.

One interviewee, Ruth⁴⁶, spoke quite a bit about what is written in her about me box, and why it is important to her. Ruth is a 21 year old white, pansexual, woman. She is new to Twitter, only having made it earlier this year. She has had her Facebook account since her freshman year of high school. She says that creating her Facebook account that late was a little embarrassing. The creation of a Facebook account that “late in the game,” as she calls it, is not actually something to be embarrassed about by any means but, because of her age, was a little bit later than most other people I interviewed. In fact, Ruth created her Facebook the latest of anyone that I interviewed.

Ruth spoke directly to many gendered tropes as well as sexuality when talking about her about me sections on both Facebook and Twitter. When I asked her what was written in her about me sections, she said:

“On Facebook it says ‘my husband doesn’t find me attractive anymore :(’ And on Twitter, it’s ‘eternal sidepiece.’ I think I wrote my Twitter bio in a moment of emotional angst and anger. I remember the day...Ok so I don’t remember the day but I do remember I thought it was funny, but I was like ‘it’s true too.’ My Facebook bio I actually wrote last week...I saw it in a newspaper advice column and I thought it was funny but really sad too.”

⁴⁶ Name has been changed

For Ruth, both her Twitter and Facebook about me sections have to do with the way she is perceived and treated by men. To be eternally a sidepiece⁴⁷ is to reduce oneself to a life of being less than other women, and an object to most men. Ruth says that she wrote “eternal sidepiece” in a moment of angst and anger, probably over feeling like just that, or feeling used by a man sexually or romantically. Whether this came from a specific instance, we do not know.

Her Facebook “about me” references the way that women write in to advice columns to talk about their relationship problems. Ruth is 21 and does not have a husband, however, to say that her husband doesn’t find her attractive anymore might mean that Ruth herself is feeling unloved or under appreciated. I asked Ruth if either of those about me sections spoke particularly truly and she said that they both did, though not realistically relating to what those things actually mean. She says that she sometimes feels as though she lets herself “get pushed around” in relationships. She also says quite bluntly that this is changing, or that at least she hopes it is. Ruth also speaks to her Facebook about me, where she brings in the theory of the male gaze. Ruth defines it well through her own experiences.

“‘My husband doesn’t find me attractive’ applies to how, as a woman, we’re always looked at through the male gaze. And sort of how unrealistic standards of beauty like control how I feel about myself. Just the world around me and other girls. Obviously it’s kind of sarcastic, I don’t have a husband. But there’s something about that phrase that’s really sad. It’s like...no one’s asking if you find yourself attractive, it’s all about if the man in your life finds you attractive. Men.”

⁴⁷ The word sidepiece is typically applied to heterosexual relationships, and tends to refer to a solely sexual relationship between a man and a woman, where the woman is being seen outside of a more serious relationship that the man is already engaged in.

Ruth brings up some important ideas here relating to feminism and female sexuality. Bringing in the male gaze allows us to look at the way a woman's presence online may be geared towards men, making the opposing gender her audience. It is also Ruth making a statement about how she does not want to gauge her own self worth based on what a man thinks of her. In talking about her own self-esteem in the "real world", offline, and how a lot of it is based around unrealistic beauty standards that are set and thus seen through social media, Ruth creates a dialogue between man and woman both online and offline. She brings her offline problems and critiques relating to gender onto her Facebook. However, it is not an explicit statement. She does not have a husband, and thus, it could be viewed as a simple joke to someone who did not know Ruth or someone who didn't talk to Ruth about it. However, the offline and online worlds are so separate that no one would ask Ruth if she and her husband were okay. Or ask her if she has a husband, for that matter.

In being a self-aware sidepiece or to not have your husband find you attractive, Ruth is reflecting on the extent to which she is dependent on male validation and heteronormative values. It's also interesting to note that while Ruth is a woman who self-identifies as pansexual, both of her about me sections are about heterosexual relationships. Ruth's gender almost trumps her sexuality in the way it is discussed, though this is probably not conscious.

Ruth continues to talk about her online presence, saying that sometimes she wishes she could just delete her web presence in general. She says that she doesn't know "how healthy it is" for her, and that she doesn't like to put value on it, "though I know I do on some level...It's very easy to get wrapped up in who you are on the Internet and relationships that you form on the

internet.” When I asked why Ruth felt those Internet relationships were not healthy for her, she responded, backtracking.

“I don’t think that they’re not healthy, I guess, I’m just not sure how real they are, or how much of this person I really know, why they’re befriending me on the internet. While it’s flattering, it’s just not real....Ultimately, it’s just this sort of very surface level support and validation that’s very flighty.”

Rather than ending her thought by saying that they are not healthy, Ruth comes to the conclusion that they are not real, bringing in, once again, the strangeness of a real versus fake persona or in this case a real versus fake friend. And, again, we see the association of realness with offline and fakeness with online social spaces. For Ruth, healthy is connected to realness, suggesting that the fake is unhealthy. Does this make online relationships unhealthy? Ruth says that they are surface level, as well as being a flighty form of validation. Is something surface level inherently less healthy, or just less meaningful? Or is this just Ruth’s own self-deprecation of her online interactions? Perhaps both. She says that it’s flattering to have someone befriend her on the Internet, becoming what is colloquially known as an “Internet friend.” However, just because something is flattering does not make it any more real, healthy, or meaningful. Eve Shapiro says that in an eventual, hypothetical, cyborg world, these identities could become fragmented to the point of composing and recomposing “multiple, contradictory, fluid, and fractured selves” at will⁴⁸. Are Ruth’s relationships online, with her “Internet friends,” an engagement with that contradictory self? Despite saying it’s unhealthy and she doesn’t like it, she still continues to

⁴⁸ Shapiro, Eve. (2010). *Gender Circuits*. Taylor & Francis Publishing.

pursue an online persona and presence. The personality remains, in an act of cognitive dissonance.

Starting with Steve and Markus, we can see the way that men consciously engage with alternate selves through their actual profiles online, particularly through Facebook as a medium. With Joan and Alice, as well as Ruth, it's clear that Twitter is also used to curate personas. However, for Joan and Alice, it is completely detached from their actual profiles online. They are not one person acting like another. They act as though they have two distinctly separate selves. Thus, the self can be both fragmented and fractured by Facebook as well as Twitter and Instagram. We can see in the men a multifaceted identity present, though the women display more of a fragmentation. However, it could be said that these are not fragmentations of the self at all, only performances of the self or new versions of a self outside of the "real" offline self entirely.

Chapter 3:

Commodity and Coming Out: Morality in Online Queerness

While many people spoke about gender in relation to their use of Facebook and Twitter as social spaces, there were also plenty of people who spoke about how Facebook and Twitter can be used for more than that. Some interviewees barely mentioned gender while discussing their Facebook and Twitter use, partly because I did not ask many questions that specifically pertained to gender and sexuality. Most questions in my interviews were up for interpretation, and the insertion of gender and sexuality was fairly interviewee specific. However, of the few people who did not speak about gender and sexuality, they were mostly cisgender straight white men.

The interviewees that did not speak as much about gender or sexuality did talk about Facebook and Twitter as social spaces. One example of this is the way Facebook and Twitter have been used to discuss the current political climate, which is something that was only talked about by those who were interviewed after Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. Here, we see how the world at large has affected these select individuals in the way they have chosen to respond during interviews.

Lucy⁴⁹, a 23 year old lesbian, talked about how she feels more comfortable saying things that are candidly serious and “real” but also funny on Twitter, using a raw, emotional humor. Lucy barely spoke to her sexuality, despite identifying strongly as a lesbian woman. Additionally, her interview was done after Donald Trump became President of the United States, potentially

⁴⁹ Name has been changed

changing the way she might have answered my questions prior. She says that having the space that Twitter provides is especially important,

“considering the climate politically right now. Before, [Twitter] was fun and funny...but last night I tweeted something that was funny but also NOT funny at all. I use humor as a way to inform. It’s funny for two seconds then you realize the reality of things going on.”

For Lucy, Twitter is a medium to express discomfort with the political atmosphere while also continuing to engage in humor.

Another interviewee talked with me about how his mental illness was something he preferred to talk about on Twitter, rather than offline, because he could put it into a humorous context without alarming or upsetting people. He says that when he talks to people or makes jokes about his depression “in real life,” it is often seen as “a downer” and not something people will find funny. Put on Twitter, he tells me that some of his most liked tweets are self-deprecating and about his chronic depression and anxiety. Is humor considered necessary by other millennials when broaching serious topics?

We saw Markus in Chapter Two using humor to discuss serious topics pertaining to his life. Lucy is not the only one who considers Social Media, and Twitter specifically, a place to talk about important issues. There is also a definite question of how this would be interpreted if it was done offline. If someone with a history of depression were to make a joke about suicidal tendencies offline, it would be handled seriously, but online, there is a barrier—the screen. This begs the question—does being on Twitter change the moral code of responding to mental illness?

The two individuals who are not cisgender, identifying outside of the commonly used gender binary, both discussed having their pronouns in their bio sections, to make it clear that they use “they/them/theirs” pronouns rather than “she/her/hers.” The use of plural pronouns for the singular person has been popular among people who do not identify on the gender binary, or who are transgender but have not transitioned. Some people have found other alternative pronouns, such as ze/zim/zir, however, many have taken to using they/them/theirs. The two non-binary/trans people did mention including their pronouns in their profiles on both Twitter and Facebook. Goffman says that performances tend to be socialized to fit into the social expectations of the society that the person is performing in or for⁵⁰. These people are performing for both a queer and a not-queer audience, thus, it is important for them to fit the social expectation that they let the rest of the world know their pronouns. For the non-queer community, the social expectation is that they do not want to be misgendered, and thus they will include their pronouns so that people are not judging their gender identity based on their gendered presentation. However, for the queer community, it is somewhat of a norm to include someone’s pronouns in their personal social media spaces, so that people do not misgender them through using incorrect pronouns. It is more about respect of the person and less about anxiety around the self doing or saying the wrong thing.

Sam⁵¹, one of the two, talked about being in the closet⁵² in high school, and using Facebook to express their sexuality, their gender, and talk about their sobriety. For Sam, “posting

⁵⁰ Goffman, Erving. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. First Anchor Books.

⁵¹ Name has been changed.

⁵² Being in the closet is a phrase in the LGBTQ community that means a person has not disclosed information surrounding either their sexuality or their gender to the public or to their family and friends.

really personal things...can be a motivator for people to come forward about who they are and what they've experienced." It might be less about talking about themselves, and more about the way that those posts will affect others. It's hard to tell, however, why it's important to them that people come forward about who they are. Is this an altruistic act? Does others' trueness to themselves make Sam happy or is it something more? Sam is completely sober and says they post on every year mark of sobriety, and also use National Coming Out Day to remind people of their pronouns.

However, they also admit to posting "for selfish reasons, to communicate personal information." Sam has more than one motivation in posting overly personal information. Facebook, for Sam, is a medium to come out and express their gender and sexuality, both in high school and in college, but it is more than that. Facebook is more than just a social sphere, and we can witness that here. They continue, saying that it "sounds so stupid and millennial," but finish their statement by saying "I don't care how it sounds, I just want to do something." Sam views social media as a place to motivate and help others through posting personal thoughts and feelings; posting information that other people can relate to and feel okay with makes Sam feel good.

The idea that using Facebook as a connective space is "stupid and millennial" is an interesting statement. Using millennial with a negative connotation, despite being a millennial themselves, is part of the life of 18-28 year olds. There is a self-deprecating nature to millennials, possibly due to the mistrust older generations have in them, and the belittlement and harassment they receive for being digitally native.⁵³ However, to share something personal online takes

⁵³ Hais, Michael & Winograd, Morley. (2008). "MySpace, Youtube, and the Future of American Politics." Meet the Millennials. Rutgers University Press.

courage and a lack of regard for the consequences. As Mimi Marinucci talks about, the Disinhibition Effect can allow people feel less restrained when posting only, because they feel like less people are seeing it, or that it is only for us, despite the clear audience that comes with social media.⁵⁴ This alters the social norms on Facebook because these normative orders that are emerging online are different than those offline. People interact in a very different way and this builds a new kind of moral order. But what happens when people care more about the effect they have on those they can directly impact positively than those who could view those personal details as offensive or ridiculous? For Sam, it is both for personal reasons, and for the expression of empathy with others that they post personal information about things such as gender and sexuality, as well as substance abuse, online.

When I asked my interviewees if there was anyone they wished they weren't friends with on Facebook, most of my interviewees said yes, absolutely. Most of the people my interviewees wished to unfriend were family, coworkers, or bosses. However, very few of them said they would unfriend these people given the chance. No one directly noted friends as an area for social capital, or spoke of a feeling of popularity coming with having many friends on Facebook. In fact, most people did not want as many friends as they have, but don't want to unfriend them. While some people chalk it up to not having the time to unfriend people, others stated that they felt it was rude or unkind to unfriend someone, even if it's someone you don't know that well or never interact with outside of Facebook. According to many of my interviewees, it is seen as a highly passive aggressive move. We return to the idea of a changing moral compass online,

⁵⁴ Marinucci, Mimi. (2010). Facebook and Philosophy. "You Can't Front on Facebook." Ed: Wittkower, DE. Carus Publishing Company.

where it goes past the act of cold shouldering someone in person, and it a clear and direct action, the meaning of which is not as arguable. To unfriend someone is to make a statement that you no longer want that person to know about your life—a huge social snub. Thus, to do so is not taken lightly. Goffman delves into how we can see many main parts of a society's value system and moral code, as well as its rules and regulations, through an individuals's performance. Part of this society's moral code is not unfrinding people for just any reason.

Steve, who I talked about in Chapter Two, mentions that when he was in high school, he spent a chunk of time every day unfrinding people. Another interviewee talked about how he would look at whose birthday it was, and if he did not feel inclined to wish that person or people a happy birthday via the internet, he would unfriend them. The ritual of unfrinding can be cathartic and also add to a more refined version of a Friends list, where your Friends are actually also your friends. However, this goes against the moral code established earlier of not unfrinding for the sake of unfrinding. Is there an age, perhaps, where unfrinding people becomes less acceptable? Or is it a change with time periods, between older and younger millennials? For many of my interviewees, having people on their friends list is not a sign of actual friendship, acquaintanceship, or even a sign that the two people have met. Most people cite that their family members are the only reason they do not post more risqué or inappropriate things on Facebook, while others say that it is because of their potential or current employers.

For those that regret being friends with family on Facebook, it is not because they are family, but instead because of differing political and social views. Most people who said they wished they were not friends with family members followed up the sentence or thought by adding that they were more conservative. One interviewee talks about how she feels as though

she cannot always say what she really wants to say online because of who she is friends with. She says that she is friends on Facebook with her mom, and it makes posting difficult sometimes.

She explains:

“You kind of actively have to filter what you’re posting, in terms of what [your mom is] going to call you questioning you about. But I’m friends with a lot of people who I used to go to this religious summer camp...they post a lot of pro-life things.”

Caroline⁵⁵ is a pro-choice, self identifying liberal. However, posting becomes difficult when she knows that her friends could end up arguing on a post with her. It also makes “scrolling through difficult” because it is hard to see so many people posting things she does not agree with and not say anything. However, she does not want to get into a fight online. Much of not unfriending, and also the censorship that goes into knowing you are friends with someone you do not want to be friends with, has to do with politeness. For many people, it greatly affects how they post.

Olivia⁵⁶, an 18 year old Chinese woman, spoke to her experience becoming and then being popular on Twitter in her early High School years. She became popular quickly, and was not sure how to deal with it. She deleted her Twitter soon after becoming so popular, or “Twitter famous” as it is colloquially called, as it caused her a lot of anxiety and pressure. She explains her experience fairly vaguely.

⁵⁵ Name has been changed

⁵⁶ Name has been changed

“I had Twitter, I’d be myself on Twitter, and literally overnight, my Twitter became a commodity, and I amassed hundreds of followers...I let the stress get the best of me. I would literally stress about tweets. If I only got one like, I would delete it. The summer before my junior year [of high school], I deleted my Twitter. I would literally be thinking in terms of Tweets. It just wasn’t good for my mental health. But now I just post for myself, because it’s fun.”

Olivia’s Twitter gained fame quickly and quietly, and it immediately caused Olivia stress. She says that she would be herself on Twitter—here lies the undertone that she had the possibility of being someone other than herself on her Twitter account. The use of the word commodity in reference to a Twitter account is also important to unpack. Here, we have a word that generally refers to valuable material goods being used in order to discuss an account within a social space on the Internet.

We can think about commodities online functioning instead as a valuable social good rather than material good. Thinking about the self, online or offline, as a necessity, brings in George Herbert Mead, who says that “selves can only exist in definite relationships with other selves.”⁵⁷ In the sense that the self is a resource, they do only exist within relationships to other selves. Without other people’s selves, then there would be no viewing of the personal self or identity as commodity. It takes other people in order to view yourself in that specific way. It’s important to ask then, which self the followers are relating to, and if it is okay to relate to a fake self.

Olivia allowed other people to determine who her self was on Twitter. She allowed her online personhood to evolve with a growing audience, and it created a bell curve of sorts. She

⁵⁷ Mead, George Herbert. (1934). “The Self.” Mind, Self, and Society. University of Chicago Press. Pg 164.

went from not posting much, with a small following, to posting a lot with a large audience, and then stopping posting all together. She became self-conscious to the point of never wanting to post. She says that she rarely posts on Facebook now, and her Twitter is deleted. This can also relate to Erving Goffman's idea that upward mobility in a social system requires the presentation of a proper performance for that social system.⁵⁸ While Olivia did not consciously perform in such a way, she clearly performed in a way that pleased a large audience, pushing up the social ladder.

The idea of Facebook or Twitter accounts as commodities could be seen as a breakage of the self. The self is one entity, and then becomes another once the account is seen as a popular commodity, or even simply as popular in general. As soon as the self has another purpose—to serve an audience—there could be that fragmentation. As discussed previously, this is absolutely different from having identity be multifaceted. One important point to note is that someone's Facebook account could fragment the self even without being a commodity. Looking at the way that Markus, from Chapter Two, talks about his small but faithful following, or how Steve does not know what they⁵⁹ are following, we can see how having any account with a “following” can make people feel as though they need to present differently or have some sort of alternate personhood.

What a following actually is has become harder to define because of the lack of a maximum or minimum following allowance. When you want to see what someone posts on

⁵⁸ Goffman, Erving. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. First Anchor Books.

⁵⁹ To which I must ask: Who is the “they” that Steve references? A general audience? His Facebook friends? It is absolutely unclear who “they” are. However, we can assume that Steve does believe he has a following, if he is to refer to a “they” when speaking about having a following. The “they” could, simply, be who he believes is following him, faithfully.

Twitter or Instagram, you Follow them. Does this make you a part of that person's following, then? Or is the following those who are, as Markus says, faithfully aware and knowledgeable on what is being posted overall? Markus and Steve talk about their followings on Facebook, where you do not follow someone, but instead friend them. You are presented to that person as a potential friend, someone who will be there for you, rather than a follower, who will just follow what you are posting consistently. Does a Friend have more worth, quantitatively, than a Follower?

Penelope, a woman from LA, brings up obligation and necessity when talking about Facebook and Twitter as social spaces. She believes that, coming from a "very social world, like LA" it is important to take advantage of those spaces, "or else you're rejecting an aspect of society." She also says that ignoring it is limiting the possibilities of life. Penelope is 18, born in 1998, and thus grew up digitally native. Growing up digitally native, labeled as a millennial, it's easy for Penelope to view social media as a vital aspect of society. She does not know life without it. To call ignoring social media limiting is an interesting choice of words. She says that it is limiting possibilities of life...but what exactly are those possibilities?

We can look to the way Facebook serves multiple functions, and though one of them is as a social space, it is also a platform for sharing personal and political information, as well as a space for networking. LinkedIn, one of the more commonly used job networking websites, connects to Facebook to create profiles. As do Instagram, Tinder, and many other applications. Facebook has become a crux for other social media sites. Additionally, through Facebook groups people can share everything from solidarity in personal experiences to job opportunities. In this way, Facebook has become an important part of our society as a place to get to know one another

and get to know what is going on in the world. Does this make Penelope right? Are those without social media missing out on a vital part of life?

We can look at David⁶⁰, a young cisgender man out of college, who talks about the way Facebook is a place to express the self and also share the self.

“It’s easy to make fun of people for what they put on Facebook but that is their page, their profile. It’s a way for people to learn about current events but also share their sexuality, their gender, their identities. I’ve seen a lot of people come out online, because they know it’ll reach a larger audience that way. It’s easier than telling each individual person. I appreciate that ease.”

While David himself is straight and cisgender, he says that he has seen many people use Facebook as a platform for coming out. Is this because people feel more comfortable on the platform of Facebook than they would on Twitter? If so, does it have to do with Facebook being a space for Friends rather than Followers? Facebook has more space to explore personal identity because there are quite literally more sections on your personal profile to discuss yourself, your life, and who you are. This brings in the issue of the complexity of the self and intersectionality. Is there room to share each part of the self that a person wants to on Facebook? On Twitter you are not given space to list personal information, while on Facebook there are sections for “Work and Education,” “Places You’ve Lived,” “Contact and Basic Info,” “Family and Relationships,” “Details About You,” and “Life Events.” Facebook is a place more open for sharing who you are, on a fundamental level, which also makes it easier to create a fake self. The way that the two non-binary people I interviewed use Facebook’s features to tell their respective audiences about

⁶⁰ Name has been changed.

their pronouns is just one example of how people are using Facebook as more of a space to discuss the self.

This self may or may not be related to gender and sexuality, though David implies it might for some. David, himself, has never come out on the Internet. He does not need to, he is straight and cisgendered. However, he has noticed this trend; he says that he has friends who have come out online. David went to school in an extremely rural area, and grew up in a small city. Mary Gray writes about LGBTQ identities in rural America⁶¹, and the way in which the Internet has aided and detracted from people in rural areas feeling comfortable with who they are, which I connect to my own research.

To come out generally means to share ones sexual orientation with the public. It can also refers to gender identity, but was originally used for sexual orientation and continues to be used this way. Gray says that people find “comfort and familiarity in the narratives of realness circulating online because...these stories resonate with the complex negotiation of visibility and maintaining family ties that consume rural young people’s everyday lives.”⁶² The narratives of other young people can teach youth how to come out, and how to balance being out on the Internet while still maintaining their family and friend relationships, with people who may not be fully accepting of their sexuality. George Herbert Mead says that “It may seem to be a molding of the individual by the forces about him, but the society likewise changes in this process, and becomes to some degree a different society.”⁶³ This implies that, while a society could be less

⁶¹ Gray, Mary. (2009). Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America. “Online Profiles: Remediating the Coming-Out Story.” NYU Press. Page 124.

⁶² Gray, Mary. (2009). Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America. “Online Profiles: Remediating the Coming-Out Story.” NYU Press. Page 124.

⁶³ Mead, George Herbert. (1934). “The Self.” Mind, Self, and Society. University of Chicago Press.

accepting than a person likes, coming out can inspire others to come out, and thus allows the society to grow.

Sam, who I mentioned earlier, talks about being queer in an all girls high school. They were able to find parts of their identity that they felt comfortable with online, on mediums such as Tumblr⁶⁴, and specifically says that these spaces “can make a difference to people.” In Gray’s chapter, she talks about a boy named Josh who felt as though his lack of knowledge about gay terminology and the gay community in general came from his “lack of Internet access” rather than “his rural surroundings.”⁶⁵ This comes from a distinct knowledge that the Internet can act as a space for being queer, being transgender, and falling anywhere within the LGBTQ spectrum, regardless of upbringing or geographic location.

For Brandon, another young, closeted gay boy in Gray’s study, “reading online personals and coming out stories was a way to experience what coming out to his parents might feel like.” Meanwhile, Sam came out online and used sharing their own experiences to help others understand what it is like. They are the two separate sides of the coin, so to speak. The Internet can be used as a way of staying connected with the positivity that this platform creates regarding openness of sexuality. It allows for a palpable connection with others who are struggling, and in this way creates space for people to share their pain and empathize. When someone comes out on Facebook by making an explicit status, there is intention there. In fact, there are now designated

⁶⁴ Tumblr is an online blogosphere where people can follow each other, repost or post images, text, gifs, and video.

⁶⁵ Gray, Mary. (2009). Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America. “Online Profiles: Remediating the Coming-Out Story.” NYU Press. Page 130.

days, such as Transgender Day of Visibility and National Coming Out Day⁶⁶, which have taken a turn to social media's sphere in order for people to come out to specific audiences online.

The idea of the Internet being a secure space to share your gender and/or sexuality is interesting when thinking about the way in which Foucault's theory of the Panopticon can be applied. It is not only a question of audience, but also a question of surveillance. While Facebook seems like a somewhat private place, it is actually quite public. I'd like to compare it to Bentham's Panopticon, which I described in Chapter One but will go over again. Bentham's Panopticon was a prison designed to ensure self-surveillance and control, through having each inmate never sure whether they are being watched or not.⁶⁷ The Internet acts similarly, in that you are never quite sure who is seeing what you are posting. While a certain group of people may like your coming out status, many more may have seen it, but you will never know who those people are. In this way, there is an uncertainty in terms of audience and viewership.

Online, there are certain social rules and moralities that are specific to the Internet as a social space. One question that I asked interviewees was whether or not they thought there was etiquette on social media. The sympathy and empathy that comes with being an example for younger queer people online, the politeness that prevents us from unfriending people, and emotional and political expression through humor are all versions of acting differently online than one would offline. We are forced to ask what is appropriate and what is right online compared to offline. There are self-imposed moral judgements placed, with people calling themselves "stupid and millennial" and feeling uncomfortable for being popular online. When

⁶⁶ Transgender Visibility Day is March 31st and was founded in 2009, while National Coming Out day is November 11th and was founded in 1988.

⁶⁷ Foucault, Michel. (1975). Discipline and Punish.

we're thinking about Facebook and Twitter as social spaces, we can see how these social spaces contribute to certain social dynamics. One of those is coming out, one is emerging morality, and one is facilitating a fragmentation.

A Conclusion

Talking to other people about their use of social media has been an enlightening and fascinating experience, partly because I learned that people are using social media to challenge boundaries in ways I had not previously imagined. The extent to which people enjoy playing with gender and sexuality online along side the way people use these outlets to discuss their real identity is important to note. While some people have Facebook and Twitter as spaces to be themselves, others relish in the ability to pretend, and others still have their accounts and do not feel the need to engage with any parts of the self through them.

Many of my male interviewees used Facebook as a space to exist as whole new selves, while others saw Facebook as a utility for connection and communication, with Twitter being more of a performative space. Men are finding themselves attempting to escape the “cis straight white man” trope, and part of that escape is presenting on social media in a feminized way. For the women involved, very little was intentionally performative. Two women used social media as a space to play pretend, however, the rest of the women and the two trans people identify with Facebook and Twitter on a more personal level. They view them as spaces for being true to the self, for sharing the self, and for helping others realize who they are and find ways to talk about it. Whether this is a specifically gendered difference is hard to say, because my sample size was so small and niche. However, I can say with certainty that in terms of sexuality, Facebook and Twitter are spaces where people feel more comfortable being vocal about their sexual orientation.

The self can be broken into pieces when it is brought into a brand new social space that presents the opportunities that Facebook and Twitter do. For many people, it goes past pretending to be a different person, and turns into remembering the intersectionality present in a person's selfhood. When I discuss intersectionality, I am referring to the way in which class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. all tend to intertwine within someone's real self. Judith Butler would tell me that there is no real self, and that even the intersectionality is performed, through sharing those experiences with others and knowing that these facets of identity, while together, also exist as individual units⁶⁸. However, to think of the self as a bunch of separate parts is not as productive as acknowledging the way that these parts come together. And having the self be multifaceted is part of that. The fragmentation that we see in so many of my interviewees is another question. What brings someone to decide to break apart the self in this way, or to create a whole other self?. For many interviewees, it seemed like either an outlet for the subconscious or a fun way to play with identity and bring fictional characters to life.

As discussed earlier, more varying gender identities are becoming accepted in mainstream culture, and readily consumed by media and the rest of the world. So why do people feel so self-conscious, men specifically, about acting more feminine? We see Steve acting feminine, engaging with this whole other side of himself, however, it is not totally clear why. Is this another affect of the cis-hetero patriarchy? When thinking about the intentions behind performativity, we are brought back to Erving Goffman, and George Herbert Mead. Goffman, who says that "a performance is socialized, molded, and modified to fit into the understanding

⁶⁸ Butler, Judith. (1988). "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

and expectations of the society in which it is presented,”⁶⁹ makes us think about the way in which people are socialized on Facebook and Twitter. From my interviews, it’s fairly clear that there is no one universal way or reason to use Facebook or Twitter. In fact, there are many ways a person can be socialized and molded on Facebook. For Gabe, it is as a communicative space, for Carl it is a space to see what other people are doing, and for Markus it is a place for creativity and craft. Thus, the expectations of the society are multi-faceted. It only makes sense that the people who use Facebook and Twitter a lot also end up becoming multifaceted or engaging with multiple identities. They are adapting to fit the society they have become a part of.

Meanwhile George Herbert Mead talks about how “the self is something which has a development...it arises in the process of social experience and activity.”⁷⁰ Not only does the self adapt, as Goffman says, it also develops and grows through social experiences⁷¹. It is not only about the social setting of Facebook and Twitter, but it is also about the way in which interactions in those spaces take place and exist. Though both theorists were writing in the mid 1900s, their theories of self-performance are still relevant to the Internet and social media. The relevance that this holds makes me believe there should be more work being done on performance and identity online. There is so much classical theory based around how we interact with each other in person and in social groupings, and the Internet exists now as another social space.

⁶⁹ Goffman, Erving. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. First Anchor Books.

⁷⁰ Mead, George Herbert. (1934). “The Self.” Mind, Self, and Society. University of Chicago Press.

⁷¹ Goffman, Erving. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. First Anchor Books.

One large question I have is what it is like for people who did not grow up being taught that Facebook and Twitter were ways to connect with others and express themselves. Listening to men, women, and trans people in the millennial age group discuss their social media use makes me wonder how older people use social media. Or rather, why they use social media. Over the course of my interviews, it has surfaced that a large part of social media use for digitally native people is the feeling of obligation—if you do not take part in social media, you are missing out on an entire part of life. Past the feeling of obligation, there is a knowledge that these spaces can exist to play with the self. For non digitally native Facebook and Twitter users, what is the tangible reason for using?

Past that, I am left wondering how people evolve while social media evolves. With each new digital gadget, there is more space to present the self, more space to act on a self otherwise hidden, more space to show who you want to be or who you think you really are. While I looked at Facebook, Twitter, and briefly Instagram, there is also Snapchat, Youtube, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Tinder, Grindr, and so many more. Is there a distinct difference in performance on a more visual space, such as Snapchat, Youtube, and Instagram? Or do they hold the same pressures and thoughts as text-based social media spaces?

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