Identity, Authenticity, and Social Media: from Theory to an Integrated Framework
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We, the undersigned committee members, approve of this exam as fulfillment of the first Area Exam requirement for the City, Culture, and Community Ph.D. program.

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Abstract

This exam develops an integrated theoretical framework for analyzing identity and authenticity practices on social media. Combining perspectives from Science and Technology Studies, Symbolic Interactionism, and Identity Theory, it argues that a comprehensive understanding of identity enactment and negotiation processes on platforms requires attention to both sociotechnical dynamics as well as individuals' experiences and interpretations. Four theoretical lenses are offered: (1) technologies and users are in an ongoing co-constructive relationship, (2) the self is a process, not a static property, (3) the self is a network rather than a node, and (4) authenticity is a practice rather than a property. The exam then identifies three outstanding conceptual tensions, proposing directions for future research that leverage this integrated theoretical model. This model allows for analysis of complex relationships between platforms, algorithms, social interactions, and self-presentation practices in shaping experiences of identity and authenticity on social media.

Introduction

"[The] mask is our truer self." (Park 1950:250)

The core focus of this exam is the mask. More specifically, I am concerned with how

identities are conceived, enacted, and received; what Goffman (1959) calls the performance of

self. This perspective recognizes that we must begin by acknowledging that selfhood and identity

are a project, authenticity is an ongoing accomplishment, and successfully managing one's

impressions requires virtuosic skill and reflexivity. I bring this perspective to contemporary social

media platforms[1], which are the focus of both anxiety and excitement in popular media and a rich

site for scholarly study across disciplines[2]. While each platform has unique characteristics and

affordances, this exam's goal is to assemble an integrated theoretical framework for understanding

identity and authenticity that can be used across social media platform contexts.

In the pages that follow, my intention is to carefully analyze identity and authenticity on

social media by exploring contemporary identity theory from across the social sciences and

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[1] I take my operating definition from Burgess et. al (2018), who define social media as "those digital platforms, services, and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection" (p. 1).

[2] I pull primarily from scholarship in Sociology, Communication, Media Studies, and Internet Studies.

considering it within the framework of Science and Technology Studies (STS) as a macro-level frame and Symbolic Interactionism (SI) as a tool for understanding micro-level interaction and bottom-up development of structures and norms. I will begin with STS, which will be followed by a discussion of SI and then by identity theory in an effort to most effectively situate these frames from the macro to the micro. I will make the case that the unique practices and affordances[3] of social media platforms complicate our tools for understanding identity and authenticity and require the combined strengths of these three theoretical frameworks in order to account for such a dynamic sociotechnical environment. Along the way, I will highlight the specific ways that the social media environment problematizes existing theoretical and empirical work while noting how the merging together of these theoretical frames gives us a way forward. In the final section, I will step back to be more explicit about how each of these threads comes together to support four theoretical lenses that can be used as tools to examine three remaining conceptual tensions.

While social media platforms and their associated technologies enable a diversity of uses and relationships, there are certain underlying logics (van Dijck and Poell 2013) – like connectivity, self-disclosure, and social comparison – that shape the experiences of all users to some degree. These logics are scripted in the design and affordances of platforms, influencing how people present and perceive themselves and others even for those who aim to limit their use or participation. At the same time, users have varied relationships with social media that depend on their gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, and level of education as well as factors like their level of online activity, skills, interests, and goals. There is no single type of user, but rather multiple archetypes that differ in how they engage with and are influenced by these logics. While the logics of social media operate on some level for all users, how individuals adopt, resist, or transform them depends on the diverse ways they choose to use these technologies. I aim to

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[3] Defined as "packages of potentials and constraints" (Baym 2015:19), originally established by Gibson (1977) and Norman (1988).

assemble an integrated theoretical framework that is useful for analyzing all types of users. This framework recognizes that each platform introduces particular constraints, affordances, and dynamics, and cultures that meaningfully impact users' identity and authenticity in distinct ways.

Before moving to the first of these theoretical frameworks, I want to explicitly describe how I have chosen to operationalize identity and authenticity as the key concepts of the exam. In the pages that follow, I will broadly refer to **identity** as the self-concepts that people develop and communicate to others about who they are. Identity is an ongoing performance constructed and negotiated through the interactions we have with others and the meanings we exchange. It is not a simple external representation of a core and coherent internal self. In the same way that this pushes back against the colloquial and popular understanding of identity, my operating definition for **authenticity** moves beyond the conventional notion that it consists of longstanding commitment to a set of differentiating traits tied to a particular identity or community. I expand this definition to encompass authenticity as an ongoing performance that is successfully accomplished when intended meanings are achieved in interaction. It is important to note at the outset that interaction itself often takes a distinct form on social media given that an individual can only see their side of an interaction and must build their perception of the other parties via the reactions, replies, and metadata that emerge asynchronously and is mediated algorithmically.

Science and Technology Studies (STS) Theory

"[STS] approaches [embrace] the methodological principle of paying attention to how the borders between the social and the technical [are] drawn by actors, rather than assuming that these borders are pre-given and static."

"Rather than taking an essentialist view of technologies and their contexts, we [agree] that describing the activity of actors [is] more interesting than a promethean history of technology that emphasized how heroic inventors and engineers stole great ideas about technology from the gods and gave them to mere mortals." (Bijker et. al 2012:xxvi)

Broadly speaking, STS theory is useful to this exam insofar as it provides theoretical frames and methodological nudges that put our focus squarely on the details of the dynamic

dialectical relationships[4] and interactions that surround any technology. Scholarship in this tradition acknowledges these relationships and problematizes the assumptions about objectivity and teleology that characterize many popular understandings of science and technology. My goal in this section is to broadly paint the key schools of STS thought before zooming in to examine how the complementary concepts of **scripting**[5] and **co-construction**[6] support my argument's core focus. I argue that STS concepts are particularly helpful for analyzing identity and authenticity on social media because these concepts deeply engage with the web of mutually influential relationships between users, platforms, and their affordances. In particular, scripting and co-construction are a route to interpret the design of social media platforms, their effects on users and their conceptions and performances of self, and how these in turn reshape platforms.

There are four foundational concepts about science and technology that I will mobilize toward this end. First, that **they are social institutions** (Merton 1957). As such, the individuals involved in these social institutions have priorities, preferences, and personalities that drive their interests and values and affect their work. (Merton 1972). Second, that **they are negotiable and contested**. Taken-for-granted boundaries between disciplines and concepts and unquestioned assumptions about how development and adoption proceed are questioned (Jasanoff 2004), objectivity is held up and deconstructed conceptually (Haraway 1988), and scholars challenge the assumptions buried in the cultures of science about what can be relied upon (Collins 1975). Third, that neither science nor its associated technical artifacts **proceed with linear development**. Kuhn (1962) rejects a cumulative model for development in favor of a series of revolutions or shifts in

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[4] These dialectical relationships are at the heart of STS thought – there is a web of co-constructive and tangled relationships involving researchers, corporations, developers, investors, users, and even non-users.

[5] "Technological objects enable or constrain human relations as well as relationships between people and things…like a film script, technical objects define a framework of action…attribut[ing] and delegat[ing] specific competencies, actions, and responsibilities." (Akrich 1992: 207, 208)

[6] Emerging from the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) context to address the weakness of the "social shaping" thesis (which argues that technological development is fundamentally driven by social factors), co-construction emphasizes the ongoing mutual shaping of technology and society (Bijker 1995).

perspective and Bijker et. al (2012) build on this by refocusing attention on unsuccessful as well as successful stages of development, arguing that successful developments are far from the only option. For example, the internal combustion car engine retrospectively seems like a logical and inevitable development but there were other failed designs along the way that held their own sociotechnical rationale in context, such as the steam-powered car engine which ultimately faded away. Finally, science and technology **complicate assumed boundaries** such as those between agency and structure (Bijker et. al 2012:xix), society and nature, and how certain quasi-objects[7] straddle these lines by requiring us to attend to both human and non-human actants and their ongoing interplay (Latour 1993).

In short, STS rejects the teleological in favor of a multidirectional view of the process of scientific development (Ferguson 1974), fixed meanings of artifacts or assemblages in favor of interpretive flexibility (Bijker et. al 1987; Pickering 1995), and strict objectivity in favor of situated and contextually contingent claims (Jasanoff 1997). I adopt it here with an eye toward "opening the black box[es]" (Bijker et. al 2012:xliii) of technology and society and engaging in the sort of thick contextual description that allows for more expansively considering the design, operation, and effects of social media networks and examining the intricate sociotechnical processes, power dynamics, and scripts that shape the construction and negotiation of identity and authenticity in online environments.

INTEGRATING STS CONCEPTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

It is best to think of STS as a broad category that contains distinct but complementary approaches to analyzing sociotechnical networks. Although I argue that scripting and co-construction are the most appropriate perspectives here, they exist within the bounds of the Social Construction of Technologies (SCOT) framework and are adjacent to the other significant

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[7] Per Latour (1993), these sit between the poles of nature and society and are the category that links human and non-human actants; they are non-social items that require the social in order to have meaning.

STS approaches. Considered as complementary perspectives, I will briefly highlight the dominant perspectives in STS theory along with their utility in analyzing identity and authenticity online before considering scripting and co-construction in more depth.

Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK)

Most prominently articulated by David Bloor (1976), SSK sets the stage for STS development by articulating his version of the "Strong Program[me]", which emphasizes impartiality toward the truth or falsity of beliefs and seeks to explain these symmetrically in the sense that sociologists should offer the same kind of explanations for why people believe in ideas that are generally accepted as true as they do for ideas that are generally accepted as false. Bijker (1995) frames the concept simply: do not use the working or non-working of an artifact to explain its success or failure. The idea is that we should not assume that people who believe in "true" ideas have better reasons for believing than those who believe in "false" ideas, but should rather examine the social processes that lead people to accept or reject certain beliefs. He calls on Durkheim's (1915) analysis of religion as a reference point for how scientific knowledge is assumed to be sacred and set apart. Impartiality and symmetry are helpful in considering how identity is performed and authenticity is understood on social media; much like with scientific knowledge, true and false self-representations, rational and irrational behaviors, and successful or unsuccessful attempts at authenticity should all be considered as equally valuable analytically.

Social Construction of Technologies (SCOT)

Hughes' (1987) Large Technical Systems (LTS) model argues that technology is not a neutral force, but is instead embedded in social and political relationships, and that technological development is shaped by a range of actors with different interests, including engineers, corporations, governments, and users. For Hughes, each component of a LTS network (such as physical artifacts, people, organizations, laws) can be isolated for analysis but should not be

considered outside of their context. As such, LTS development is not solely a technical process, but a *socio*technical process that requires careful attention to the social and political dimensions of technology. The SCOT approach was developed alongside this but changes the emphasis, arguing that the growth and stabilization of technologies is directed by the social (Bijker et. al 1987). Social groups define and solve the problems involved with the development and adoption of a technology and give meaning to it as it's used. In doing so, SCOT expands the unit of analysis from a specific technical artifact or scientific development to a sociotechnical assemblage[8] (Bijker 2010). As this concept has been adopted within SCOT, there has been an increased focus on the user of technology and the process of co-construction between the technology, the user, and their social environment (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003).

SCOT posits that technologies, including social media, are in an ongoing, inseparable, and co-constructive relationship with society. It underscores the significance of examining sociotechnical assemblages[9] and the ways in which various social, cultural, and institutional factors shape technological evolution. A central concept in SCOT is interpretive flexibility, which elucidates how disparate social groups can attribute unique meanings to identical technologies as a result of their social context and material needs.

In this context, technological frames, or shared cognitive structures, play a pivotal role. As defined by Bijker (1987), a technological frame comprises the concepts and techniques utilized by a community in problem-solving. These frames guide the interactions within a social group, but this guidance is not absolute. The influence of a technological frame varies among actors based on their degree of inclusion in the frame. Those with high inclusion interact more within the confines of that particular frame, while those with low inclusion do so to a lesser extent.

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[8] Borrowing from Deleuze and from ANT (see next section), a sociotechnical assemblage is a fluid network of social, technical, human, and non-human forces that can be considered as a unit greater than the sum of its parts.
[9] Alternatively, 'sociotechnical ensembles' (Bijker 1995)

Users, therefore, actively participate in assigning meanings to platforms and features, and in establishing norms. These actions can significantly impact their online identities, which are shaped by multiple social groups and contexts. The concept of technological frames thus provides a lens to understand how social groups negotiate identity and authenticity within specific settings, and how this can influence the development and interpretation of technology.

Actor Network Theory (ANT)

ANT problematizes the social by arguing that neither society nor the social exists *a priori*, and that both must be retraced through subtle connections among non-social resources (Latour 1990, 2007). ANT focuses on the heterogeneous assemblage of human and non-human actors in a network, such as algorithms, platform features, and other non-human elements in the sphere of social media. Central to ANT is the concept of translation, a process whereby different actors bring their own interests, values, and forms of knowledge to the table to work toward shared goals or understandings. In the case of social media, this involves users, platform owners, advertisers, and others working together to create a shared understanding of online identity and authenticity.

ANT distinguishes itself from SCOT and SSK by considering both human and non-human actors as having agency and by emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of these actors in shaping social and natural worlds. Jasanoff (2004) challenges ANT by critiquing its tendency to flatten distinctions between human and non-human actors, but acknowledges the networks in shaping technological development. In the context of social media and identity, ANT points to the dynamic nature of agency (contingent on the actions of other actants) that results from the shifting power dynamics between users, influencers, platforms, and AI-driven algorithms, as well as the emergence of networked interactions and their influence on creating a social media environment that complicates performance and reception of identity.

Feminist STS

Feminist approaches to STS emphasize situated knowledges, power dynamics within assemblages, and active user participation. This perspective broadens the concept of technology to include not only artifacts but also the cultures and practices associated with them (Wajcman 2010). In contrast to SSK, SCOT, and ANT, feminist theories focus on the importance of understanding the contexts and perspectives from which knowledge is produced (Haraway 1988) as well as the hierarchy of social relations that are at play. By treating users as active participants rather than passive recipients - an argument born from the history of making research and invention the domain of men and relegating women to users of technologies rather than creators – feminist approaches prioritize the user's point of view and examine their roles in shaping technology and technological experiences (Cowan 2018).

The concept of 'situated knowledges' encourages a consideration of how users' backgrounds, experiences, and social positions inform their understandings (Haraway 1988). Power dynamics within assemblages help recognize how platforms, algorithms, influencers, and other actors might reinforce or challenge existing power structures, influencing users' experiences and the construction of online identities (Wacjman 2010). Active user participation acknowledges the agency of users in shaping their online identities and experiences while considering the varying degrees of power and influence within networks. Configuring the user (Woolgar 1995) involves examining how platforms and algorithms shape users' experiences and understanding of identity and authenticity, and how users might resist or challenge these configurations. By broadening the concept of technology, feminist perspectives on social media examine how online platforms are embedded within wider social, cultural, and political contexts, and how these influence users' experiences and understandings of identity and authenticity.

Limitations of SSK, SCOT, ANT, and Feminist STS

These approaches are insufficient in their focus on knowledge production, social groups, actor-networks, and power dynamics, potentially overlooking the intricate and ongoing interplay between users and the design of the platforms themselves. In contrast, scripting (Akrich 1992) proves particularly useful as it identifies how social media platforms inscribe specific values and expectations about identity and authenticity, shaping user behavior and online performance.

Co-construction (as an adjacent concept) enables analysis of the ongoing negotiation between users and platform design, acknowledging the mutual influence and adaptation as users navigate and challenge the affordances and limitations of social media environments.

SCRIPTING, CO-CONSTRUCTION, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The preceding discussion was not intended as summary, but instead as both context setting and support for my argument that these two frameworks represent the best possible path for analysis. Scripting refers to how technology designers inscribe their assumptions about users and their behavior into technological artifacts, thereby influencing user experiences and practices (Akrich and Latour 1992). Consider the case of Instagram: initially, the platform was only available on mobile devices and only allowed users to post square images to their profile page which were often edited with relatively strong filters. This small list of features contained a number of assumptions that affected interactions and relationships. Users could share only one (often heavily filtered) image at a time, requiring them to carefully consider their self-presentation because these images remained publicly visible on their profile permanently by default. This shaped a performative dynamic in which users hemmed and hawed about whether an image was "Instagram worthy" (Leaver et. al 2020) and whether it matched their desired self-presentation. Further, the only interaction available to users was public via likes and comments. Consider how the platform has now changed: a style of post that expires in 24 hours is now available, there is an

emphasis on unfiltered (understood as more "real" or authentic) images, and direct messages allow for private conversations. These changes reflect changing assumptions about the nature of their user base, reshapes how users consider the app, and ultimately shapes the nature of a user's social relationships either directly or indirectly.

Built on ANT principles, technical objects are thus considered as actants; designed and built by humans, but active in their effects on actor-networks. There is a significant amount of scholarship that mobilizes scripts within feminist STS frameworks, considering how gender is inscribed into technologies (Oudshoorn et. al 2003) and enables or constrains specific performances of gender (Saetnan et. al 2000). Scripting is similar to Woolgar's (1990) concept of "configuring the user", but places more agency in the hands of users as active participants.

This is where my choice of co-construction as a complementary framework enters. While scripting is a valuable perspective on how designers' assumptions influence user experiences and practices, it is essential to recognize that users are not merely passive recipients of these inscriptions. Instead, users actively engage with, resist, and even transform these scripts to align with their needs, values, and desires. For example, users may repurpose features in ways that were not initially intended by the platform, such as using hashtags for activism or creating alternate profiles to bypass platform restrictions. By emphasizing the dynamic interplay between designers' intentions and users' agency, we can more comprehensively understand how identity and authenticity are negotiated and performed on social media, incorporating both the inscriptions embedded in technologies and the active role of users in shaping their experiences and practices. When combined with the concept of co-construction, scripting moves away from technological determinism by emphasizing this mutual shaping of users, technology, and social order.

Consider Instagram again: given the initial technological scripting and user behavior over time, the platform is shaped and reshaped again and again by its users. Expiring Instagram Stories

were introduced in response to users who posted less and less because of the "Instagram worthy" pressure and moved to more ephemeral services like Snapchat with less of this pressure. In response to users who created videos on TikTok and reposted these videos to Instagram, the platform was again reshaped to bring some of these same features in as an acknowledgment of user preferences. However, this co-construction goes both ways: the platform changes its features and users reshape their behaviors and use. For example, there is an ongoing cycle wherein platforms use AI tools to moderate content and users adopt novel language to escape this moderation. Via this "algospeak" (Lorenz 2022), users attempt to escape via replacement of letters (e.g. C0vid or v@cc1ne) or even novel synonyms that are invented and adopted (e.g. "unalive" for dead or "panini" or "panda express" instead of pandemic). Platforms inscribe their technologies with scripts, users participate, respond, and reshape these technologies (or even hijack them for uses that designers eventually cut off), and the cycle continues onward.

Platforms like Instagram embed specific values that shape the conception and performance of identity. These values, inherent in Instagram's design, create a delicate balancing act for users: they must strive for visibility without seeming overly self-conscious, share personal details without crossing into oversharing, and uphold authenticity in a space often criticized for its inauthenticity. Performances of identity on Instagram are intentionally public and visible, yet they must avoid appearing too calculated or risk falling out of step with societal expectations. Authenticity, a value strongly emphasized by the users and reward systems of the platform, becomes a critical part of how these performances are interpreted. In the face of widespread criticism that social media is inherently inauthentic and detached from 'real life', users often find themselves in a paradox. They may overcompensate by sharing excessively or highlighting negative aspects of their lives, all in an effort to appear more authentic within the confines of the platform's inscribed values.

MOVING TOWARD PRACTICES: ENACTING SCRIPTS AND CO-CONSTRUCTION

This exam fundamentally focuses on analyzing identity practices through the lens of STS concepts, while paying special attention to the user side of the co-construction dialectic. To do this, we consider how these practices are enacted through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism (SI), a complementary perspective that identifies how meaning is generated and understood specifically through interaction at a micro and meso level. Understanding the user side is crucial, as it sheds light on how individuals engage with, interpret, and modify the technologies they use, shaping their experiences and the broader social context.

To better understand the user side of co-construction, we can draw on a handful of theoretical frameworks: first, context and group-based epistemic cultures (Cetina 1999) - the unique ways communities create and validate knowledge - shape the interpretations users assign to their experiences. Second, these interpretations are an aspect of the ongoing process of reflexive modernization (Giddens 1991), wherein users consciously adapt their identities in response to technological change. Finally, sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2009), collective visions of desirable technological futures, further guide users' perceptions and interactions in terms of how they approach and resist technologies. These approaches can work within a SI framework to interrogate how co-construction actually operates in performing an individual's identity.

In examining the role of technology in understanding people, Bijker et. al (1987) argue that the characteristics of machines (or social media networks, in this case) provide a tangible focus for ongoing debates on the fundamental qualities of humans. By exploring how technology lends itself to different interpretations, we can uncover how these differences express and give rise to competing preconceptions about essential human qualities. Thus, the analysis of technology and identity on social media provides valuable insights into how people sort through their identities and relationships through the use and interpretation of technological artifacts. Truly, "attempts to

determine the characteristics of [technologies] are simultaneously claims about the characteristics

of [persons]" (Bijker et. al 2012:304).

Finally, I take Jasanoff (2004) as correct in her claim that "science and technology account

for many of the signature characteristics of contemporary societies" (p. 13). This seems to be

understood at a popular level, given the ongoing public conversations about the effects of social

technologies on our social practices. Via scripting and co-construction as frames, I turn next to SI

as my method for understanding how identity and its meanings are enacted and understood.

Symbolic Interactionism

INTRODUCTION

"Theoretical positions are not the end of research, but the beginning." (Lauer and Handel 1977:xvii)

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is an expansive theoretical perspective that centers

interaction in analysis, highlighting how it is the site where meaning is created, negotiated, and

applied. It is appropriate for analyzing generic social processes (Simmel 1950) that recur across

situations and contexts (Prus 1987) as well as for examining interactions and social realities

(Charmaz 2014) at a micro level to understand how people construct selves, social environments,

and societies (Charmaz 1980). SI assumes that individuals have agency and an interpretive nature,

operate with reflexive and active thought, are fundamentally social, and live in a fluid world where

social life is oriented around process rather than stability[10] (Charmaz et. al 2019).

This section's discussion of SI is intentionally placed after the previous analysis of STS

theory; while it made the case that scripting and co-construction were the best route to

understanding the ongoing relationship between the design of platforms and the effects and

responses of users, SI emphasizes the micro-level processes that are central to understanding the

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[10] Stability is not a fundamental concept for SI, though structures and stable forms can emerge through repeated individual and collective actions via habits or routines and individuals often enter interactions with memories and assumptions that shape their interpretations.

online experiences of users. If STS gives us the *what*, then SI gives us the *how*. STS alone lacks the detailed examination of individual interactions and interpretations that are crucial for understanding the complexities of identity and authenticity on social media. It isn't that STS does not attend to methods (Felt et. al 2016), but rather that its methods are not well-suited for the focus of my questions because they are primarily concerned with macro and meso-level practices (Law 2016). As this section's epigraph says, theory should ultimately enable the empirical testing of research questions; combining SI's methods within a broader STS framework allows for this. When the next section turns to the substantive concerns of contemporary identity theory, these first two sections will support both structural (STS) and interactional (SI) levels of analysis.

Harold Blumer (1969) articulated the most widely-accepted framing of SI principles, which are based on Mead's (1934) foundational work. I will use Blumer's three precepts to structure this section of the exam: (1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them, (2) the meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of social interaction, and (3) meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things they encounter. Each of these will be the basis for one following section. After an overview of the substantive content and debates within each principle, I'll shift to focus on how the social media context problematizes longstanding SI assumptions and methods. SI is at its base a constructivist perspective, much like that of SCOT or even the Social Construction of Reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967), arguing that meanings are continually reevaluated and reinterpreted and that this explains why individuals confronted with identical situations may respond in different ways (Mead 1934; 1938).

Although these three precepts may initially appear obvious, they should be understood as a response (Carter and Fuller 2016) to structural functionalist (Parsons 1991 [1937]) and behaviorist theoretical models. Mead's foundation essentially argues that society has structure but that actions

and interactions do not flow out of this structure; Blumer (1966) summarizes this by writing that for Mead, "society is not a system…but a vast number of joint actions…all being pursued to serve the purposes of the participants" (p. 543). That said, there are three broad schools of SI thought that differ in emphases: in a slight contrast to Blumer, Kuhn (1962, 1964) stresses the significance of social roles and the self-concept (Mead 1934) in understanding human behavior, while in a more serious contrast to Blumer, Stryker (2003) flips the model by emphasizing the role of structure in shaping interaction from the top down. Central to these perspectives are the concepts of **role-taking** and **defining the situation**. Role-taking refers to the process of mentally assuming the perspective of another person to understand their expectations and attempt to respond appropriately with this perspective in mind. 'Defining the situation' involves interpreting the meaning of a social context or event to determine appropriate behavior.

As I turn to these precepts next, my intention is to repeatedly emphasize the ways that the social media context problematizes SI's assumptions and methods when considered in isolation. More broadly, STS and contemporary identity theory provide unique perspectives that enrich our understanding of SI in the study of social media. STS highlights the role of technology and structural forces, challenging SI's emphasis on individual interactions[11], while identity theory provides insights into the psychological processes of identity construction, complementing SI's focus on social interactions. By integrating these perspectives, we can develop a more nuanced and well-rounded analysis of identity and authenticity on social media that works as an effective toolkit for answering empirical questions.

BLUMER'S FIRST PRECEPT

"*Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.*"
(Blumer 1969:2)

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[11] SI emphasizes this, but not exclusively. Mead and Blumer treat "initiating factors" like attitudes, norms, motives, and structure as part of the process of reflection and self-interaction that drives individual action and connects the macro to the interactional micro level.

"As interactionists…we appreciate the importance of the ordinary." (Kotarba 2014:10)

This precept frames humans as more than animals responding to unmediated stimuli or cogs in a larger structural machine (Mead 1934). Instead, it asks us to understand individual behavior as a function of the meaning that humans attribute to objects and situations as well as the outcomes expected from their behavior (Lauer and Handel 1977). Meaning is best understood as a relationship where the individual responds to an event, object, or symbol via an interpretive and reflexive layer in a non-instinctive and symbolically mediated way (Blumer 1969).

This perspective emphasizes the active and interpretive nature of human beings in shaping their own experiences and understanding of the world. By recognizing that individuals assign meaning based on their personal history and social interactions, it undercuts any notion of objects holding intrinsic universal meaning. It points to the possibilities for emergent creativity in new or ambiguous situations where individuals are confronted with objects that do not have associated habituated meanings, which explains why individuals confronted with similar situations may respond in different ways as they come to different 'definitions of the situation'. In this context, symbols play a crucial role as learned and shared meanings that facilitate communication, mutual understanding, and the organization of social life (Aboulafia 1991).

Although symbols represent shared meanings or understandings, SI enables interpretation of individual behavior through the lens of personal experiences and meanings. One's definition of the situation represents their understanding of the meaning of objects, situations, and the non-intrinsic meanings of objects as human constructs. For example, the meaning of a social media post can vary depending on the context of the interaction and the individuals involved; it can be perceived as informative, entertaining, offensive, or inspiring. The interpretation and response to the post are shaped by the participants' experiences, perspectives, and goals within the

social interaction that they bring to the situation. Further, the influence of others drives individual interpretation; one's current self-concept informs the meanings attributed and this self-concept is influenced as a looking-glass self (Cooley 1902) via imagining how one is perceived by others.

In groups, shared meanings facilitate understanding and collaboration and contribute to the formation and fluidity of self-concept through social interactions. Individuals continuously refine their self-concept based on their relationships and engagement with others. SI is a rich framework for examining how individual interpretations and shared meanings come together to create interconnected communities that influence identity and authenticity in various social environments. The second and third precepts explore the social interpretive process in more detail.

Problematizing Blumer's First Precept

First, social media features and interactions, such as likes, comments, and shares, amplify the reach and impact of social interactions, while also increasing potential for misinterpretation due to lack of contextual cues and because interaction itself is often not directly observable. This creates a different dynamic compared to face-to-face interactions, where tone of voice and body language provide a fuller set of clues. This lack of context along a confusing and shifting array of media inputs[12] make it very difficult to effectively interpret these things. A "like" on Instagram can signify enjoyment of a post or acknowledgement that it's been seen but it also could be used simply as a bookmark or could even signify dynamics such as feeling frustration about not being invited to an event and signaling to the poster that one is aware of being left out. Given this lack of clues and the volume of interactional inputs, attempts at role-taking are difficult even when we have heuristics to prioritize certain types of people or posts as objects. Attempts to define situations are interrupted by conditions that an individual doesn't have the ability or even capacity

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[12] The revenue-driven goals of a platform do not always align with the user's social intentions, so there are a large volume of symbolic systems designed to maximize engagement that users must master. Additionally, the structure and format of social media platforms is not stable; operators frequently change design and features without notice and use A/B testing that serves different interfaces and features to different users.

to interpret. The high volume and frequently one-sided nature of interactions interrupt the ways that individuals may reduce ambiguity via multiple interactions over time.

Second, the evolution of self-perception in the social media context is unique, as digital affordances enable users to view themselves as the sum of their self-tracked and platform-tracked metrics. That is, individuals define themselves via the types of posts they tend to make and the gestalt of how these posts are received, impacting the "I/me" dynamic that I will discuss more in the third precept ("I" represents the spontaneous, creative aspect of the self, and "me" represents the reflective, socially aware aspect). This version of themself (what Charmaz et. al [2019] call a 'data double') might reveal patterns of engagement, leading to targeted ads that shape their self-perception or a self-concept that is shaped by the perceived meaning of their engagement metrics. Blumer (1966) argues that "different groups come to develop different worlds… as the objects that compose them change in meaning" (p. 540) This dynamic, ever-changing online world, with its unique set of feedback mechanisms, results in a different way of shaping self-perception and self-concept compared to how a holistic sense of self (i.e. *gestalt*) is formed based on the sum of feedback from offline interactions.

Lastly, social media platforms, with their unique affordances and symbol systems, significantly influence cognition and behavior. Affordances can be considered in the high-level sense of what dynamics and conditions are enabled by platforms and in the more granular sense of features and buttons. Boyd (2010) orients her platform analysis around four of these high-level affordances: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. These higher-level affordances may influence cognition more because they change analytical framing for communication, but granular affordances like the ability to tag others in posts or photos, use image filters, and react to content from a list of designated possibilities also shape behaviors insofar as they create a set of probable uses, meanings, and practices for users (Postigo 2016). The ever-evolving nature of

online communication, combined with the rapid adoption of new symbols and conventions, can lead to distinct ways of interpreting and assigning meaning in digital spaces. The symbol systems we use are not a minor choice; they shape both our understanding of reality and our cognitive processes. For example, consider the evolution of hashtags on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Hashtags began as a simple organizational tool to make topical content searchable, but have since evolved into powerful symbols that can convey rich ideas, affiliations, or movements but often are used for mundane and everyday communication or for humor. The prominence and evolving use of emoji on social media shares a similar dynamic. Their contextual interpretation is made more difficult because of their rapidly evolving scope (new emoji are introduced at a regular cadence) and usage and their different meanings and connotations across user demographics. This differs from offline communication, where changes in symbol systems occur at a slower pace and are influenced by more stable factors like cultural norms, socialization, and life experiences. On the other hand, online communication is influenced by rapidly changing platform-specific norms, algorithms, and trends, which can lead to more immediate and fluid shifts in how individuals present themselves, interpret the actions of others, and shape their self-perception. Although adoption of these changes is uneven as users have agency in how they choose to engage with new features, the logics of social media being modified by these changes operate for all users to some degree.

BLUMER'S SECOND PRECEPT

"The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows." (Blumer 1969:2)

"It is necessary to view the given sphere of life under study as a moving process in which the participants are defining and interpreting each other's acts" (Blumer 1969:53)

The meaning of an object or situation does not inherently exist but rather emerges through interaction, which serves as a formative and creative process. This process transcends merely

expressing *a priori* factors, such as culture, personality, or social structure. Further, meanings are interpreted through shared language and communication, which necessitates constant handling and evaluation of symbols and other inputs into meaning.

Blumer's second precept underscores the importance of a distinct type of interaction where individuals engage with one another as subjects, recognizing each other's unique perspectives and self-awareness, rather than treating each other as mere objects or interacting in a subject-to-object manner. This approach emphasizes the value of mutual interpretation and understanding, capturing the intricacy and richness of human interactions. Within this interactive context, individuals constantly manipulate symbols and negotiate the meaning of situations, adopting the standpoint of the other in their conduct (role-taking, in Blumer and Mead's terminology). Furthermore, Blumer believed that any adequate explanation of human social life must account for the autonomous contributions of each participant (Shibutani 1988), meaning that we should consider both joint and individual perspectives within an interaction frame. Cooley's (1902) organic view of society posits that social order is dependent on the harmonious functioning of interconnected mental selves and the self emerges from an interactive process of joint action (Carter and Fuller 2016) informed by these joint and individual perspectives.

At a micro level, meaning in interaction arises via communication. Communication that includes naming objects and events[13] creates boundaries and frames one's relationship to what is named by categorizing it and making it legible to others and oneself for interpretation (Charmaz 2014; Strauss 1997 [1959]). Mead's (1934) Generalized Other refers to the internalized understanding of the attitudes, expectations, and values held by a person's social group or society as a whole as opposed to the internalized understanding of another individual (as in role-taking) and so represents an individual's awareness of the broader social norms and conventions that guide

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[13] Strauss gives the example of "my girlfriend" or "my boyfriend", which places the person in a category that includes exclusivity, intimacy, and various social norms.

their behavior in various social situations. It is the mental representation of society's expectations that helps individuals to anticipate and adjust their actions to align (or not) with the shared values and norms of their social environment. Finally, meaning making is dynamic; although thought is always the solution of problems for Mead[14], non-habitual situations require more than habitual actions. It is not possible to predict an individual's behavior or understandings from their self-concept because it exists in relationship with their perception of how they are seen by others (à la Cooley's looking-glass self) as well as the self-concepts that others hold for themselves. Interaction has both predictable and unpredictable elements.

Problematizing Blumer's Second Precept

Interaction on social media platforms is influenced by their unique social dynamics, practices, and affordances. The sociotechnical assemblages associated with these platforms are intricate, but they generally enhance the reach and influence of social media networks over time.

As users engage in ongoing co-construction through interpretation and resistance against platform scripts, the volume, reach, and complexity of their interactions increase. However, it's important to note that the ways of participating in communication and interaction on social media platforms differ significantly from face-to-face interactions. This difference is not just in degree, but also in kind, encompassing a wide range of interactions from simple likes and shares to extended threaded conversations with many participants. Features such as likes, shares, and retweets introduce new dimensions of engagement and feedback, potentially altering the process of meaning-making. The quasi-public asynchronous nature of communication on social media, the presence of multiple ongoing conversations, and the potential for anonymity further challenge traditional interaction dynamics, as understood by Blumer's second precept.

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[14]Mead views thinking as an internal dialogue or conversation that individuals have with themselves. Through this inner conversation, they can articulate their problems, consider different solutions, and ultimately choose a course of action. For Mead, thinking is social and represents "internalized interaction" (Blumer 1966:533).

While some of these traits resemble affordances of offline communications or extensions of offline practices, it's the combination of these affordances and technologies (considered as an assemblage) like always-connected smartphones that redefines interaction as a site of meaning-making. This redefinition is not a simple comparison with face-to-face interactions, but a recognition of the broad spectrum of interactions that social media platforms enable.

This second precept is further complicated by the fragmented and algorithmic nature of interaction in this setting. Not only is interaction multiple, asynchronous, and less than transparent, it is also shaped by opaque algorithms that present objects to users in ways that are unpredictable or even unknowable due to their technical sophistication. The appearances online media present us with, increasingly consequential in our daily lives, are shaped in part by the economic imperatives (van Dijk 2013a) and cultural preferences (Jasanoff 2004) of the platform.

Moreover, our online interactions are based on habits adapted to these platforms, differing from the entanglements we have with other objects and infrastructures. Being rooted in everyday sociality and knowledge, online media comprise a space governed by norms including the metricization of social life (Burrows and Savage 2014) wherein the most important elements of social life are those that can be quantitatively measured – followers, likes, views, etc. The top-down and peer-to-peer monitoring (or even surveillant [Albrechtslund 2008]) affordances of digital communication technologies create opportunity for surveillance with significant scope and depth; rather than being limited to the information available in an immediate situation, it is possible to follow an individual across platforms, uncover private information and quasi-private interactions, and do all of this with very little cost at a very large scale. Together, these mark a clear example of what has been called deep mediatization, or the "increasing entanglement of our social world with pervasive media technologies" (Hepp 2020:3).

Finally, adapting "the social act" (Mead 1934) - which refers to the dynamic, interactive process where individuals adjust their behavior in response to others - as a unit of analysis in social media contexts poses its own set of challenges. For instance, if social media posting is interaction, how do we use "the social act" as a unit of analysis for posts as "exhibitions" that are not interactional in the typical sense (Hogan 2010) or posts with unknown audiences that are difficult to imagine because of public sharing settings and algorithmic mediation?

BLUMER'S THIRD PRECEPT

"These meanings are handled in, and modified through, and interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (Blumer 1969:2)

"The self is as much a sociological as a psychological entity." (Carter and Fuller 2016:14)

The heart of this third precept is that one's behavior and the associated sense of self-concept are driven by interpretation of the meanings that arise from interaction. Interpretation consists of handling and sorting through the various meanings that one has indicated to oneself about the objects encountered in interaction and the possible courses of action. This third precept is one of the more contested concepts within SI, but Mead (1934) and others build their case based on his concept of the "I" and the "me", which represent the duality of the self in the interpretive process. The "I" is the impulsive and unpredictable aspect of the self, while the "me" embodies the organized community within an individual, reflecting their attitudes and social roles. This dialectical process between the "I" and the "me" forms the foundation of one's self-concept and the ongoing process of interpretation in social interactions. Aspreviously mentioned, the I/me dialectic is problematized via social media due to fragmented self-presentation but also due to how social media modifies one's self-understanding more generally such as through selfies (Abidin 2016; Stavans 2017) and other sorts of posts that provide instant and direct feedback about our appearance, activities, and opinions (Belk 2014). I understand the I/me dialectic as enacted in the

context of meaning-making that is best processed via a narrational view of selfhood (Fisher 1989).

This perspective emphasizes that people negotiate and interpret symbols related to their identity

through communication as narration, interpreting and evaluating new stories against older stories

acquired through experience. On social media, narrative experiences shaped by platform

affordances, social interactions, and identity enactment processes all play a crucial role in

influencing users' beliefs and actions related to identity and whether it is received as authentic.

This approach allows for a deeper examination of how individuals assess authenticity in others

and themselves by identifying with stories or accounts that offer "good reasons" for being

accepted, which align with their knowledge, values, and beliefs, and are consistent with their ideal

basis for conduct – effectively a rational approach to selfhood, per Cooley (1902).

Beyond this, this third precept is enabled by two fundamental SI principles mentioned

briefly at the beginning of this section: role-taking and defining the situation. Role-taking is not

role-playing, but rather is the tool for interpretation whereby an individual imagines the

perspective and experience of the other(s) in an interaction. This is a portion of how one defines

their situation, which is more important than any "objective" measure of what is happening; it is

how one represents a situation to themself symbolically so that an interpretation and action can be

made. The most influential articulation of this is from Thomas and Thomas (1928): "if people

define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 572). Defining the situation

allows individuals to understand the meanings and implications of a situation, which enables the

possibility of responding effectively. The process of interpretation and meaning-making is

iterative, as individuals continually refine their understanding based on new information,

experiences, and interactions. This dynamic and cyclical process of interpretation and

meaning-making is at the core of the third precept, emphasizing the significance of individuals'

perceptions and understandings in shaping their behavior and sense of self.

Problematizing Blumer's Third Precept

Technology not only changes what we do but also transforms our understanding of ourselves and our relationships with others, as we navigate both online and offline identities (Turkle 2012). Social media platforms have a profound impact on behavior and interaction via both augmenting the volume and depth of existing social interaction and extending communicative capacities and practices (boyd 2014). Further, platforms script and shape users' thoughts and actions according to platform owner goals via their designed affordances, such as likes, comments, and algorithm-driven content curation (Woolgar 1990). This gives rise to the "dialogical self," a notion wherein an individual's self-concept is continuously negotiated through communication processes with others and within oneself (Salgado and Hermans 2005; Hermans 2004).

This established theoretical framing is burnished by ongoing empirical work on social media. For example, there is evidence that this dialogical dynamic is accelerated on social media, further expanding the "world and its others" as individuals engage with a diverse range of people and ideas (Couldry and Hepp 2017). The pervasiveness and unique affordances of social media platforms, such as instant feedback and curated content, challenge the traditional understanding of interpretation in Blumer's third precept, leading to fragmented and evolving self-concepts within a process of interpretation via self interaction (Blumer 1966). Given previous research that indicates how the self-concept is formed and interpreted via interaction (Snow 2001), the accelerated pace and new forms of feedback challenge these interpretations.

Digital impression management (Kaufman 2014), bringing Goffman's (1959) brand of performative interaction to a specifically online context, further problematizes Blumer's third precept as it analyzes how platform affordances materially change dynamics of social performance even when they resemble older or offline versions. Cooley's looking-glass self is mediated by multiple layers of technology and distance and a digital Generalized Other that expands the

number of possible individuals who have an influence on how we see ourselves while maintaining

some level of control over audience (Altheide 2000, 2004; Robinson 2007; Zhao 2005) alongside

the sometimes unwanted pressure to participate in pervasive sociality[15] (Cohen 2012) for users.

Simmel's (1971) "stranger" relates to this phenomenon, as social media enables unique positions

within social groups, sometimes prompting surprising revelations and confidences due to

anonymity and perceived distance. Lastly, online anonymity and pseudonymity's impact on

interpretation, along with algorithmic influence, enables confirmation bias that may be amplified

compared to offline interactions due to factors such as algorithms that curate content based on user

preferences, the vast amount of available information, and the self-selecting nature of online

communities, further muddying the interpretative process in social interactions on these platforms.

BRINGING TOGETHER STS, SI, AND IDENTITY THEORY

"The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise." (Mills 1959:5)

In the previous section of this exam, I analyzed STS theory and its contribution to

understanding identity and authenticity on social media. The following section will consider

contemporary identity theory and what it argues more broadly, outside of social media. I chose

these three theoretical lenses because although each contributes unique insights and perspectives

to these questions, they are all insufficient on their own. Per Sewell Jr. (2005), the social is always

double – we consider meaning, but we also cannot neglect the material. In fact, technologies are

always both a material and a social form (Williams and Williams 1990), underlying the necessity

of engaging theory that takes social media seriously as both. The social world cannot be simply

divided into "pure" face-to-face communication and mediated communication, as these types of

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[15] The concept of pervasive sociality is borrowed from Mead (1934), who pointed to sociality (capacity of being several things at once) as a defining characteristic of being a human being. More specifically, this sociality is communicative and social insofar as it involves the I, Me, and Generalized Other. This fundamentally communicative sociality is extended by wide adoption of ICTs.

communication are intrinsically interwoven, forming a web of interconnected experiences (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Acknowledging this interconnectedness is essential, as in SI, there is no "pure experience" to contrast with mediated experience; our everyday communication, transactions, and interactions are deeply intertwined with technology, making it impossible to separate the two (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

Each of these three perspectives has inherent limitations. STS focuses on technology and structural forces, but lacks detailed examination of individual interactions and interpretations. SI emphasizes the importance of social interactions and individual interpretations, but may not fully account for the role of technology and structural forces. As we will see next, identity theory provides insights into psychological processes of identity construction, but may not sufficiently address the social and structural aspects of identity and authenticity on social media. Together, they provide an appropriately comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between structural, interactional, and psychological dimensions of identity and authenticity.
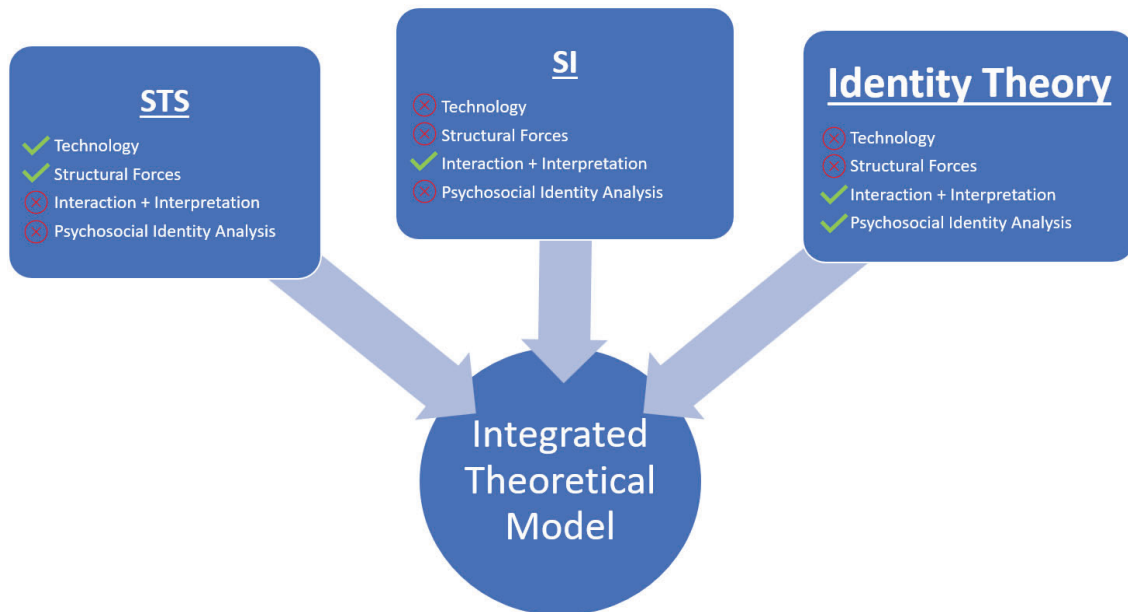

Figure 1

Contemporary Identity Theory

"It is easy to agree on the fact that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what" (Castells 2009:7)

BUILDING ON FOUNDATIONAL IDENTITY SCHOLARSHIP

The focus of this section is rounding out the picture that I have been sketching about how identity and authenticity are navigated by individuals in the particular social arrangements, technical structures, and platform affordances of this moment in contemporary social media. Both STS and SI are partially oriented around exploring the web of relations between identity, sociality[16], and technologies. These frameworks are essential, but more recent identity scholarship has continued to work through many of these same questions through a psychosocial and interactional lens. Per Vignoles et al. (2011), I take these core questions to be concerned with identity's (1) primary level of operation, (2) stability or fluidity, and (3) constructedness. This work has often undercut their implied dichotomies by complicating the questions and highlighting the artificial nature of their distinctions. Castells is correct in his claim about the ease of declaring all identities as constructed, but just like the question of identity's levels and its stability, making broad claims is easy but pursuing fuller understanding in actual conditions is much more difficult.

In sociological scholarship the definition of identity has not fundamentally changed over time, but has been clarified. While selfhood and identity are closely related, they address different aspects of an individual's understanding of themselves and their position in society. Selfhood is more concerned with an individual's internal perception of who they are (Mead 1934), whereas identity is focused on the various social roles and group memberships that define individuals in

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[16] Per Mead (1934), the capacity of being several things at once. For the purpose of this exam, I have opted for operating definition that centers the individual's perception of their identity which is expressed and received via interaction; that is, I consider identity as "the basic cognitive mechanism that people use to sort themselves individually and collectively" (Brekhus 2020:12) – this doesn't neglect the social and group pieces of one's identity, but sets up my analysis for considering identity performance and strategies centrally.

relation to others (Goffman 1959).

CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY THEORY AND ITS TRENDS

Building on these three questions, Brekhus (2020) expands on the concerns of identity theory with guiding questions of his own. For this exam, the questions of particular interest are organized around the individual's perspective. I will concern myself with defining and describing selfhood including multiplicity via context and setting and with describing how identity is shaped by and mediated through technologies. Sociologically, this exam aligns with his perspective that identity is a cognitive mechanism that individuals use to sort themselves as well as an "interactional accomplishment" (p. 13), taking a cue from SI for how it is enacted.

Approaches to Identity Theory

"Most fundamentally, in our view, identity involves people's explicit or implicit responses to the question: "Who are you?" This may sound fairly simple, but in fact it masks a considerable amount of complexity." (Vignoles et al. 2011:23)

Identity theory is an attempt to unmask this complexity by unpacking the explicit and implicit responses to this question and the mechanisms by which individuals experience and express their answers. Burke and Stets (2023) contrast Traditional Symbolic Interactionism (TSI) with Structural Symbolic Interactionism (SSI) to identify how these differences drove the development of identity theory. The primary difference between TSI and SSI is the nature and role of social structure in how interaction shapes meaning. They frame the primary theoretical approaches to identity theory via their core foci: interaction (McCall and Simmons 1978), social structure (Stryker 2003), or perceptual control (Burke 2007).

Ultimately, these three don't compete with each other but instead provide complementary lenses (Figure 2). Fruitfully applying identity theory to social media fields with collapsing contexts (Marwick and boyd 2010)[17], constantly shifting audiences, and rapidly evolving norms

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[17] The structure of the social internet makes it difficult if not impossible to achieve Goffman's (1959) audience segregation. Marwick and boyd define context collapse as "the flatten[ing] of multiple audiences into one" (p. 122).

requires a more general and comprehensive approach to identity theory that doesn't focus on any
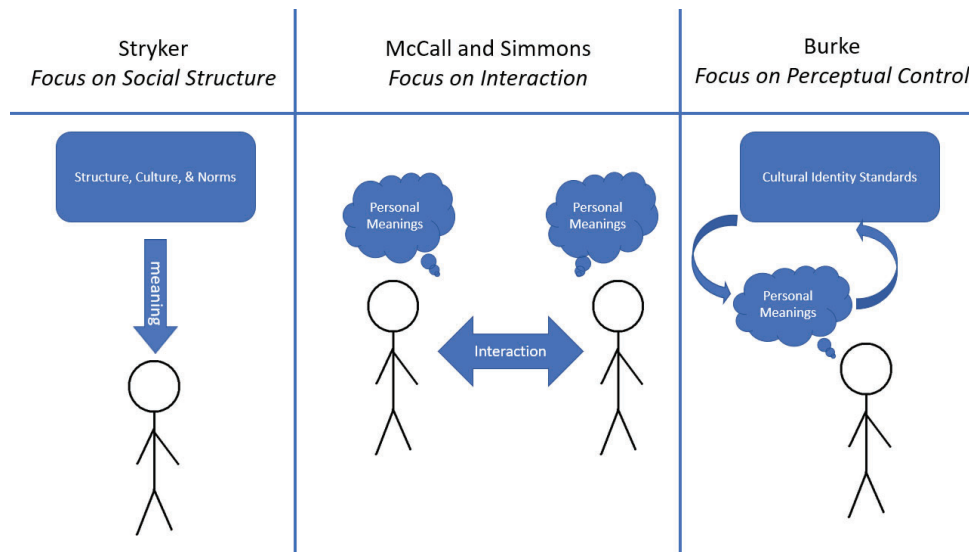
one level to the exclusion of the others.

Figure 2

Trends

There are three trends in the contemporary identity literature that inform this discussion.

First, there is a move toward expanding the concept to include collectives via the idea of

"collective agency" (Cerulo 1997). This is distinct from the established concept of categorical

identities (i.e. an individual's identity as a member of a defined social group), but instead implies a

shared status or relationship that allows an individual to identify as part of either a small group

that truly does act as a unit (e.g. a neighborhood association or friend group) or an "imagined

community" (Anderson 1983) that ostensibly acts as a unit, such as a nation or a city. Per Cerulo,

individuals identifying in collective identities is one way that categorical identities are reified,

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Consider a university student who uses Facebook to connect with a variety of individuals in her life - her family, high school friends, university friends, professors, and potential employers. Each of these groups represents a different audience with whom she would interact differently in a face-to-face setting. However, on Facebook, all these audiences are collapsed into one. When she posts a status update or shares a photo, it is potentially visible to all these groups simultaneously. This makes it challenging for her to present herself in a way that is appropriate for all audiences.

resting in part on Durkheim's collective consciousness (1893).

The second trend is that of individualization, which refers to how social structure drives individuals to prioritize the individual over the group. (Elliott 2014) That is, "individualization is the social structure of the second modernity" (Beck and Willms 2004:63) – structure itself is what pushes people to become individuals as their primary identity marker as part of the post-modern project of the self as flexible, in process, and driven by identity work. Reasonable people disagree about whether social media affordances (Bucher and Helmund 2018) do in fact cause greater atomization, but this is an ideal analytic lens for this exam specifically because of that existing cultural debate.

Finally, Brekhus's 2020 work represents a significant contribution to sociological identity theory by arguing against criticism of sociological identity theory that casts it as essentialist (Andersson 2021). Brekhus identifies how identity is accomplished socially via performing and constructing authenticity, balancing multiple attributes as identities, and using identity fluidly across contexts. In short, "authenticity, multidimensionality, and mobility" (p. 14). This work frames the remaining discussion of theoretical underpinnings and social media analysis.

IDENTITY AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS, EXPRESSIONS, AND BASES

How have the ideas of multidimensionality and mobility developed in the contemporary identity literature? The following sections describe how these characteristics are expressed and the bases that these identities are typically built on before looking to authenticity in more detail.

Multidimensionality

"The assembling of the self through combinations of attributes and affiliations is an identity project made complicated by the demands of modern life" (Brekhus 2020:127)

Brekhus pinpoints three core components of multidimensionality: the inherent multifaceted nature of an identity, the reality of individuals managing multiple identities, and the fragmentation

of these aspects due to the influence of modern life's technological and social evolution. In at least one major way, this is not new: Henry James 1982 [1892] famously wrote that "properly speaking a man has as many social selves (or self-conceptions, per Markus and Nurius [1986]) as there are individuals recognizing him" [p. 281]), though Mead pushed back on this via his discussion of the ego and the social self. Du Bois (1903) even echoes James in his writing about double consciousness. However, there has been significant scholarly attention paid to multidimensionality across social science disciplines that have dramatically expanded the theoretical base that identity researchers draw from.

Multidimensionality first seeks to untangle the notion of categorical identity markers as coherent. Conceptually, this rests on Hill Collins's (1990), Lorde's (1988), and hooks's (1981) work on overlapping and intersecting identities – later called 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1991). Instead, they contain diverse and varied experiences and worldviews as well as multifaceted, interrelated, and sometimes overlapping sets of traits. Brekhus (2020) describes generations as a prime example of this; although it has a specific year-based definition, 'millennial', is often shorthand for white, middle class, and college educated – and these categorical identities often mask the multifaceted nature of personal narratives (Risman 2018). Seeing as this group represents a small minority of millennials; this illustrates the difference between accented particularization and unaccented universalization, a form of social marking as a shortcut for cultural cognition (Zerubavel 2018). The multidimensional self recognizes the heterogeneity contained in each of an individual's identities while undercutting popular and scholarly assumptions about the shape and order of an individual's hierarchy of identities.

In addition to this form of multidimensionality, individuals also possess multiple identities spanning their roles, groups, and characteristics (Burke and Stets 2023). Gergen's (1991) earlier work supports this, arguing that modern social life situates individuals in multiple social contexts

that allow for an expanding amount of opportunities to build and refine identity. Further, he argues

that this multiplicity feeds itself as individuals try to combine their expressed external identities

into a unitary internal sense of self, which causes them to be more reflective and less stable. This

echoes Giddens (1991) and his project of the self as ongoing, which in addition to this multiplicity

can also lead to situations where identities may simply change permanently (Burke 2006).

Gergen's primary contribution is the concept of "social saturation", the effects of which

Papacharissi (2012) describes as holding "multiple, disparate, and even competing potentials for

being" (p. 4). In Gergen's words, this causes a "populating of the self" that can lead to

multiphrenia, an acute awareness of the unlimited possibilities and challenges of multiplicity that

can lead to internal conflict and social paralysis. For example, an active user on social media

might be managing four platforms with four distinct identities – Linkedin for their professional

identity, Snapchat for their playful and intimate identity with close friends, Instagram for their

most polished and public-facing social identity, and Twitter for a pseudonymous political identity.

They balance these on the same device(s), often at the same time, and have hardly any barriers to

changing these performances of identity or even multiplying by creating new opportunities for

identities in new contexts or new platforms.

The third element of multidimensionality is fragmentation, which points to how multiple

and multidimensional identities do not necessarily cohere around a 'core self' and may instead be

confounding or contradictory. This is based in postmodern and post-structuralist theory that rejects

categorical identities (even multiple or multidimensional) to make room for more fluid definitions

(Han 2019).

Because the self is made up of multiple identities that are in a mutually constructive

relationship with behavior and social structure (Serpe and Stryker 2011), understanding how these

identities are deployed and balanced across settings is the piece that I'll turn to next.

Mobility

"Identity is a multidimensional resource deployed across a plurality of social contexts." (Brekhus 2020:130)

Mobility describes the ways that identity is fluidly adopted and used across settings. Identity being mobile is inextricably tied to it being multidimensional. Finkenauer et. al (2002) tie this centrally to their definition of identity, arguing that identity is composed of the aspects of the self that are relevant, accessible, and expressed in a given setting.

In the context of identity theory, 'mobility' primarily refers to the enactment of identities across different social, cultural, or personal contexts. This concept is distinct from short-term identity shifts that gradually solidify over time, as described by Mullaney (2005). These short-term shifts are often triggered by significant life events or changes in personal circumstances, and over time, these temporary adaptations may become a permanent part of an individual's identity. On the other hand, 'cognitive migrations', a term introduced by DeGloma and Johnston (2019), refer to long-term identity shifts that occur when individuals mentally and emotionally relocate themselves in new social or cultural contexts. This process often involves a significant transformation in an individual's self-perception and understanding of their place in the world.

Individuals are often conscious of the ways that they deploy various selves across social settings and the way that they choose to mentally or verbally narrate this work is analytically meaningful to identity theorists. Despite the theoretical framing described previously, there remains a cultural commitment to a stable and coherent 'core self' that is consistent over time (Brekhus [2020] calls on high school reunions as an example), so they work to narrate inconsistencies across time, space, and social environment toward this end (Snow and Anderson 1987). This work becomes more difficult given how the structure of platforms leads to often unwanted overlap between social contexts and the inherent difficulty or impossibility of hiding all

of one's online past – combining to create an environment where audience segregation and self-presentation are not fully within an individual's grasp.

There are various reasons why individuals opt to adopt a certain identity over another. Even beyond Goffman, there are accounts of identity that rest on the idea that people may adopt a certain one of their identities because of observable factors or circumstances. For example, what is stigmatized in certain settings may be celebrated in others (Raphael 2017). That is, culture helps to explain how a given individual chooses to mobilize their identity depending on their current social setting. These sorts of serious considerations are not the only explanation for identity mobility. In many cases, identity play (as opposed to the identity work described above, which requires intentionality around maintenance and reception) is a way for individuals to engage in experiments around potential future selves. This may maintain space for preserving one's existing primary identities, but this is not necessarily the case (Ibarra and Petrigelieri 2010).

The most classic examples of mobility and multidimensionality highlight the difference between one's work self and home self or between one's vacation self and their everyday self, but social media affordances allow for possibilities that are both more nuanced and difficult in practicing these.

Expressing Identity: Salience, Prominence, Commitment, and Dispersion

While multidimensionality and mobility describe the characteristics of identity, these terms give us the vocabulary to describe how identity is expressed in practice via identity work that aims to support one's self-concept (Snow and Anderson 1987). That is, through the lenses of salience, prominence, commitment, and dispersion we are able to analyze how identities are put into practice in daily life. These ways of expression are not isolated; they often exist in reciprocal relationships (Brenner et al. 2014; Stets and Burke 2003; Stryker 2000; Stryker and Serpe 1994).

Salience refers to the likelihood that a given identity will be invoked or activated in a given moment (Burke and Stets 2023), meaning that it can be empirically measured by measuring the proportion of time spent exhibiting traits of any particular given identity over a time span. This concept has been used to criticize Mead's (1934) 'generalized other' insofar as it is stable and unmodified, given that salience highlights how context-specific any identity is (Brekhus 2020). Salience establishes how identities motivate behavior but are also indicative of underlying cognitive schema. Prominence (elsewhere 'centrality') is an identity's importance to an individual. This tends to increase when identities have more shared meanings; for example, a person who is a soup kitchen volunteer, Big Brother, and non-profit employee would see high prominence for these identities (as opposed to their others) because they all share selflessness as a meaning. These meanings are partially shaped from the outside, but Burke (2004) demonstrates how these are also shaped via one's development of internal identity standards[18] that are able to be understood and performed across diverse contexts. Prominence is related to salience insofar as it represents one of the underlying cognitive schema that motivate behavior – what we value and are most proud of, we tend to put into practice most often. As opposed to the prior two, commitment has an external reference; it measures the connections to other people that result from a given identity and refers to both the number of ties and the strength of these ties. Given this external reference point, commitment has a particularly strong reciprocal relationship with prominence and salience.

Dispersion is the newest of these concepts and refers to how identity meanings are not a single point, but instead a set of meanings that coalesce around a point (Burke 2020; Cantwell 2016). The concept is new enough that there is fundamental disagreement about its significance. Some argue that it represents flexibility, others that it indicates uncertainty, but recent empirical work seems to indicate that it could represent inconsistency. Separate from this debate, it certainly

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[18] "Internal cognitive representation…containing the meanings and norms that the person associates with the role" (Stets and Burke 2000:232)

indicates how having multiple meanings for a given identity are not necessarily redundant or even

overlapping. Instead, dispersion points to how meanings might circulate around a reference point

in a way that accepts many contributions to an identity's internal or external significance.

Bases of Identity

Sociological identity theory has evolved to recognize that identity has its base in much

more than just role identities. Each of these four bases (role, person, category, and group) are often

operating simultaneously, meaning that it isn't possible or desirable to entirely isolate them.

Instead, it is useful to see identity bases as an analytic tool; what we choose to focus on will

highlight certain considerations. Per Burke and Stets (2023):

> *"...person identities, role identities, group, and categorical identities, are frequently all relevant and influencing individual's perception and actions…we cannot thus easily separate the identities empirically, they are simply analytic distinctions" (p. 178)*

In contrast to the archaic Spinozan (1985 [1677]) conception of a the free [person] who is guided

solely by reason (Nadler 2015) and chooses their actions based on comprehensible causes from

their nature, contemporary identity theory recognizes that not only are individuals guided by parts

of their identity that they do not choose, but that they are also not always aware of these things.

To this point, I will briefly expound on these four bases of identity. While role identities

come from the meanings associated with formal (i.e. occupation) or informal (i.e. friend) roles,

person identities are based in what an individual sees as unique in themselves as far as their

morals, beliefs, or personality. These person identities are almost always salient and are among the

most prominent of any individual's identities. While Castells (2009) argues that this makes person

identities more significant than role identities because they involve intentional construction and

positioning, others see person identities as flowing from role identities. Group and category

identities are simple; they both involve membership in either social groups (i.e. clubs or

organizations) or categories (i.e. racial or ethnic groups) based on classifying individuals by their

social or physical characteristics. Foundationally, the emphasis on role identities in sociology is based not only on SSI, but also in the recognition that for some people, person identities can be an optional outlet for creativity, identity play, or even attention-seeking as one attempts to emphasize their own uniqueness. On the other side of this, one might consider person identity as a controlling concept across an individual's multidimensional self since it operates across multiple identities.

AUTHENTICITY

In addition to multidimensionality and mobility, the third element of identity to discuss is authenticity. These three are tied together insofar as "we strive toward authenticity to ourselves and to our categories of belonging in multidimensional, fluid, and mobile ways" (Brekhus 2020:1). Although these first two traits were discussed in the context of identity theory, I chose to break authenticity into a separate category because of its particular importance on social media. In comparison to the study of identity more broadly, academic and popular discussion of identity on social media has an outsized focus on authenticity. It is common to hear that the particular sorts of identity performance online are inherently inauthentic in contrast to those occurring away from social media, but this claim is insufficiently interrogated. Some of these claims are based in a misguided commitment to digital dualism (Jurgenson 2011) and others are based in the accurate observation of the relatively asymmetrical relationship between performance and perception on social media specifically. In this brief section, I will describe the broad contours of how authenticity has been theorized within the context of identity scholarship. That being said, I will argue that authenticity online is an underdeveloped concept that I will explore along with identity as the primary focus of this exam.

Even away from social media, authenticity is a problematic concept. Colloquially, it's often understood as an essential trait rather than a performance; for example, certain restaurants are called authentic when they conform to a particular image and experience and people are called

authentic when they don't seem to care what others think of them and instead are 'true to themselves'. Even by some scholars, it's defined as "unobstructed operation of one's true or core self in one's daily enterprise" (Hepner and Kernis 2011; Kernis and Goldman 2006). Of course, these imply a core and stable self that the majority of identity theorists reject. Instead, I conceive of authenticity as an ongoing accomplishment that happens in the process of interaction. Although Giddens (1991) seems to conflate authenticity with sincerity (or being 'true to oneself'), this confusion is illustrative insofar as authenticity is most likely to be understood as sincerity when it is conceived of as a fixed trait. Authenticity is impossible to separate from the social world that perceives and shapes it, so it is inherently ongoing and unstable.

Perceived authenticity is based in verification, defined by Burke and Stets (2023) as the process by which "individuals compare in a rapid and quick manner self-in-situation meanings with identity standard meanings, and when the difference or error is close to zero, the person's identity is verified" (p. 119) – for example, an individual attending a black-tie fundraiser wearing appropriate clothing, using context-specific etiquette around eating, and sticking to expected topics of conversation hopes to have their social identity verified by other guests as they walk in and engage in conversation. Verification of role and category or group identities has effects on self-efficacy or self-esteem, but verification of person identities specifically is what shapes an internal and external sense of authenticity. Rather than monitoring their behavior, individuals primarily monitor how they think that they are being perceived and how this matches the meanings that they attribute to themselves (Burke 2007), but never ultimately know whether their perception is accurate. Even without the complications inherent to social media exhibitions and interactions, there are a variety of ways that this perception and verification process can be interrupted and thus undermine the process of establishing authenticity. When the affordances of

contemporary social media networks and mobile devices (such as the possibility for constant connectivity, asynchronicity, and social saturation) are added, these complications multiply.

For these reasons, I argue that theorizing about authenticity on social media is fairly underdeveloped. While some work maps established identity theory concepts onto these relatively novel settings, others use consistency between self-presentations as a proxy for authenticity, and still others lean on an outdated understanding of authenticity and identity that relies on a stable core self. In the following sections, I will bring together work in STS, SI, and identity theory in the context of contemporary social media platforms to analyze how these concepts may need to be updated to reflect these sites as sociotechnical assemblages.

Negotiating Identity and Authenticity

"...dépayesment, quite literally, de-countrifying....immersing oneself in something foreign so that...the familiar has become strange – and can be seen with fresh eyes." (Turkle 2004:3)

This exam is situated at a time when many of the relevant technologies are mature and domesticated (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992), meaning that relevant forms and structures for both hardware and software have largely stabilized and that their associated practices no longer seem as new or threatening (Baym 2015). That said, social media is a site that is familiar, but still developing – tamed to the extent that both children and the elderly use some of the same platforms, but still in flux. The ground feels stable and the tools taken-for-granted, even as platforms move according to both capital and technological concerns and the cultures associated with platforms are the focus of cultural hand-wringing in terms of what they mean for social practices and identities. The goal of this final section is *dépayesment*; domestication often also means invisibility for users and observers because technological access has become more ubiquitous and commonplace (even if usage is not equally distributed). I will offer four theoretical lenses and three conceptual tensions that bring STS, SI, and identity theory together in order to

make social media platforms visible and fresh to us in a way that in turn makes them more legible, ultimately identifying a few directions for empirical study. Within each of these lenses, I will highlight existing work that utilizes a theoretical foundation similar in part to what I have offered in this exam; as I work through the three outstanding conceptual tensions, I will make the case for how my integrated theoretical model may contribute to future empirical work in these areas.

THEORETICAL LENSES

Lens 1: The development of sociotechnical systems shapes and (re)configures the human condition in an ongoing and co-constructive way, which problematizes an individual's definition of the situation.

Whether it is a stone axe being shaped by the needs and shaping the practices of primitive hunters or smartphones being shaped by our social practices and in turn reshaping them, technologies have always been part of an ongoing and co-constructive process with individuals and cultural practices. With that in mind, the internet and social media are not categorically different; their level of influence is different by degree and quality and we should approach it as researchers by considering a digitally saturated world (Markham and Tiidenberg 2020) not as an object of study itself, but as something we "see and live through" (ibid:11). This is an STS-based argument, but taking Schroeder's (2018) criticism seriously that the hyperlocal and contextually-situated methods that STS leans on do not allow for broader generalizing or theory-building, I chose to bring SI and Identity Theory to this analysis as companions. That said, the pace of technological development for information and communication technologies (ICT) such as mobile phones, cellular data plans, and Wi-Fi over the last thirty years has been notably rapid in terms of consumer adoption and influence, which disrupted established cultural frames (Goffman 1974) for understanding social relationships and communication and pushed us into an unsettled time (Swidler 1986) that reopens familiar conclusions about identity and social interaction (Marvin 1988). Because making meaning by defining the situation in interaction relies

on some level of shared understanding and collective meanings, the environment surrounding

social media asks us to step back and consider how this exam's three frames allow a way forward.

This first lens begins with co-construction of identities and systems. The development of

sociotechnical systems and the human condition are intertwined, which in turn affect the

characteristics and expression of an individual's identities. Metaphor and conceptual frames do not

just help to interpret, but actually frame and govern our thinking (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) about

ourselves and others, so at the various moments in history when digital technologies feel most new

and unfamiliar (Turkle 1984)[19], they push individuals to think differently about their own identity

roles, their salience and expression, and how they are interpreted in interaction. However, it is

these governing metaphors and concepts that are most difficult to see and understand because they

are a kind of superstructure. SI helps us step outside of the conceptual systems and see them by

emphasizing the role of social interaction in shaping meanings and identities even as these

metaphors shape definitions of the situation, role-taking, and interpretation of objects. The

ongoing and co-constructive nature of sociotechnical systems shapes and reconfigures individuals'

self-concepts, roles, and interpretations of their situations. In short, computers (and ICT) do not

just do things for us, they do things to us (Turkle 1995). We can opt out of using certain ICT and

social media, but cannot completely opt out of their influence.

As identity is expressed and interpreted through interaction, this ongoing reconfiguration

leads to fluidity and change in definitions of the situation. STS helps us understand the unsettled

and influential technological landscape while identity theory gives us a frame for understanding

identity itself as fluid – we have already discarded outdated concepts of a "core" or "true" self in

the previous section in exchange for a fluid set of identities expressed in interaction. While

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[19] If this were true in 1984 with consumer-level computers and software coding, how much more must it be true now with developments such Generative Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models that are not only difficult for non-specialists to understand, but even experts in other fields?

initially experienced as a tool, a subset of frequent social media users eventually begin to experience the internet as a primary place for interaction and a way of being (Markham 2003), particularly in an always-on (boyd 2012) and smartphone-driven context. The processes at work here are concerned with objects and interaction, but also the self; the possibility of constant connectivity via intentional or ambient engagement and an always-on orientation to ICT leads to a continual and ongoing mapping of the self (Markham 2020) marked by huge flows of social information, awareness of being seen and perceived by others, and inability to grasp the extent to which one is being seen or surveilled (Trottier 2012). What is visible in certain user type behaviors points to dynamics that ultimately reshape self-understanding and identity for all users.

These layers and layers of mediation modify power dynamics related to the expression and reception of authenticity. Devices that enable constant connectivity and access to the online social graph change one's sense of self as well as one's access to information (Turkle 2004 [1984]) and enable a cyborg quality (Haraway 1985) to an individual's orientation to both performing their own identity and interpreting the authenticity of another's in interaction. Asymmetrical access to information in interpreting asynchronous or quasi-synchronous interaction makes achieving a verified identity through perceived authenticity (Burke and Stets 2023) more difficult for an individual because it decreases the control that individuals have over the nuances of their presentation as well as their ability to understand how they are perceived.

In the empirical literature, researchers have addressed this lens through studying self-presentation and identity construction in online environments, the algorithmic impact on users' identities and experiences, and the tension between online privacy and self-presentation. Across platforms, studies have identified dynamic and cyclical processes of identity creation and consumption through user-generated content (UGC) as a site for interaction (Fisher et. al 2016). This encompasses the existence of splintered or multiple identities (Giddens 1991), diverse

settings, and unconventional use of modalities like photographs for communication (Goldberg 2017). Research has also examined how algorithmic sorting shapes online experiences. While the underlying models of these algorithms can be opaque and difficult to fully understand, leading some to describe them as a kind of 'modern myth' (Barocas et. al 2013; Vertesi and Ribes 2019; Ziewitz 2016), users often develop a general understanding of how these systems operate. They form 'folk theories' (Karizat et. al 2021) based on their experiences and observations, and adapt their behavior to increase their visibility to these algorithms. Still, to the average user this represents advanced technology, high-level math, and a shadowy controlling force that is liable to change at any time without user awareness. This is added to the existing tension around asymmetrical interpersonal surveillance (Trottier 2012) that is mandatory as part of participation.

Lens 2: The self is not only an entity, but a process.

Giddens (1991) proposed the idea of the self as an ongoing project, a concept that Gergen (1991) further elaborated on by suggesting that this project becomes saturated due to the influence of our sociotechnical environment. Although individuals do not typically think of themselves as performers, they do match behaviors to feedback and audiences (Papacharissi 2012) as part of a "personal public" (Schmidt 2013) that uses social media posts as conversational rather than as broadcast and uses phatic everyday content such as location check-ins, short anecdotal posts, or even photos of meals to support ongoing connection via ambient digital intimacy (Rogers 2013) which allows for identity expression and verification.

Accepting the self as a process, we find that digital media introduces complexities to authenticity through the lens of verification (Sturken et. al 2004). This arises from digital self-expression's inherent mobility and rapid pace (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002) within ubiquitous ICT (Ling 2004), which limits the cues available for interpreting self-presentation (Baym 2015). Paradoxically, this situation leads observers to question the authenticity of

self-presentations that adeptly utilize the relevant affordances. Finally, feedback and adaptation, which involve users' responses to their online interactions and their adjustments to these experiences, are crucial in understanding the self as a process intertwined with both social and technological factors. Goffman's dramaturgical framework has been tested and found useful in a social media context (Hogan 2010), but as communication shifts from face-to-face interactions to algorithmically sorted exchanges, users' perceptions of how their social graph and interactions on social media work (Papacharissi 2012) —what we might call their 'mental model' of the social media landscape— and how imagined audiences shape expression of identities (Litt 2012) become increasingly important. In short, the structure and affordances of social media platforms make it such that users are not able to understand their immediate audience (Litt and Hargittai 2016) or the potential future audience for persistent and archived content (boyd and Ellison 2007). This perceived audience influences the expression and interpretation of multidimensional identities through a process of structuration (Giddens 1986). In this context, structuration refers to the dynamic interplay between micro factors (such as an individual's adoption of platform affordances) and broader technological structures and processes (like the algorithmic sorting that determines the visibility and prominence of content on the platform) in shaping identities.

Empirical work has explored some of these themes, but there are significant gaps related to within- and between-platform experiences. In the context of active online subcultures, users work to match their self-presentation to shifting online and offline expectations (Williams and Copes 2005). This is partially explained by attempts to balance impression management and privacy concerns (Krämer and Haferkamp 2011) on specific social media platforms (Ranzini and Hoek 2017). For instance, a user on LinkedIn might present a more professional image to match the platform's business-oriented environment, while the same user on Instagram might share more personal and casual content to fit the platform's more relaxed and personal atmosphere. However,

this perspective misses the opportunity to explain how computer-mediated communication (CMC) is not categorically distinct from offline self-performance but instead on a continuum depending on user skill and preference. For example, a skilled user might seamlessly integrate their online and offline personas, presenting a consistent image across both realms, while a less experienced user might struggle to reconcile their online persona with their offline identity. CMC also offers opportunities for communicating as desired. These are not impersonal, but enable hyperpersonal communication (Markham 1998; Walther 1996). For instance, a user might use the anonymity provided by certain online platforms to express views they might not feel comfortable sharing offline, or they might use the asynchronous nature of online communication to carefully craft their messages. All of this work would benefit from applying Baym's (2015) framework for qualitatively analyzing the affordances of ICT and the characteristics of their use (such as interactivity, temporal structure, and replicability in particular).

The other strand of relevant empirical work here centers around the interplay and continuity of online and offline expressions of identity. Broadly speaking, in contrast to earlier work that highlighted how users explored new identities much different than their offline identity online (Markham 1998), more contemporary work highlights how individuals typically recreate their multidimensional offline identities in their online expressions (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013) or create a blended identity shaped by the interplay between the online and offline (Yurchisin et. al 2005) – some of these tied to specific contexts like exploring narcissistic tendencies (Mehdizadeh 2010). Finally, these dynamics are each reflexive; the more individuals are able to use contextual performance feedback, the more successful their identity expressions tend to be (Jacobs and Merolla 2017; Laybourn 2022) although individuals need technical skill in navigating affordances in order to maximize perceptions of authenticity (Jackson and Luchner 2018) and minimize reputational risk (Pitcan et. al 2018)

Lens 3: The self is not a node, but a network.

Each of these lenses represents a different way of looking at the same questions. In this case, I argue that as individuals engage in social interactions and interpret the meanings of these interactions, they continuously work through their identities in relation to the technological environment, fostering an intricate network of interwoven identities. Further, this technological environment is such that often only one side of an interaction is visible for an individual or for observers; the other side can be inferred via external phenomena such as comments, likes, or shares – but the reception and interaction itself is partially hidden because it is rarely synchronous and typically mediated algorithmically.

Within the context of this exam's theoretical frames, this lens offers three insights. First, that individuals are inexorably tied to their sociotechnical network. On a basic level, this means that not only do some individuals participate in the "always-on lifestyle" (à la boyd), but that even for those who tend toward less participation with ICT it is not possible to truly opt out; per Castells (2003), "even if you don't care about the networks, the networks care about you anyways. For as long as you want to live in society…you will have to deal with the network society" (p. 282). The network of online sociality is comprised of technology, user agency, and UGC and is mediated by algorithmic sorting (van Dijck 2013a); taken together, users are not in charge of the shape or character of their online sociality, but part of a network that they cannot fully control. Social media content is something distinct from broadcast or traditional interpersonal media and inherently requires that participants engage in ongoing peer monitoring (Schroeder 2018) as part of their meaning-making which involves sorting others (Miller et. al 2016). Individuals are unable to step outside of these networks and cannot entirely control the shape and character of their interaction and meaning-making around identity and verification that must happen inside of them.

As individuals interpret and respond to social cues and feedback on social media platforms, they engage in reflexive processes that involve self-awareness, self-evaluation, and identity negotiation. This is not driven by specific ICT so much as it is shaped by an approach toward ongoing peripheral connection (boyd 2012). Awareness of the volume and reach of one's social cues through both intentional posting and ambient sharing of metadata (e.g. likes, 'currently online' markers, tagged photos, etc) creates an environment where individuals are reflecting about their identity performance and evaluating its reception in an ongoing way as they try to balance their inability to fully control their network (boyd 2008) against the awareness that they cannot step outside of it. Users are cognizant of the normalization of connective media (van Dijck 2013b) and often report feeling stuck between resisting this and embracing it (boyd 2008). However, ongoing establishment and reestablishment of group and network boundaries are a part of offline identity formation as well; this boundary work is how conceptions of I, we, and they get formed and reinforced (Lamont and Molnár 2002) and the difference online is that the characteristics of the network have changed (Walker and Fitzgerald 2022) and challenge established theoretical frames. SI theorists have long recognized that life is lived via overlapping, complementary, and conflicting spheres of influence (Park 1938) and this particular context asks for researchers to understand how the character and operation of these spheres work on social media platforms.

Empirical work thus far has used this lens toward three ends. First, that individuals adapt their self-presentation with awareness of interconnected and overlapping contexts. Researchers have identified challenges in terms of balancing this both across (Davidson and Joinson 2021) and within (Litt 2012) platforms and across time[20] and space as individuals attempt to balance highlighting different parts of their networked self across the appropriate parts of their networked social world. There is evidence that they match identities to platforms to maximize perceptions of

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[20] David and Joinson (2021) identify time collapse as "muddled boundaries between the past and present on social media" due to asynchronously accessible archived content

authenticity (Kasperiuniene & Zydziunaite 2019) by matching their self-presentation goals to the appropriate platforms (Lee et. al 2015) and modulating their presentations appropriately and recognizing the permanent nature of content on some platforms (Stsiampkouskaya et. al 2021). For example, an individual may want to share travel photos in a way to maximize their desired impression (Lyu 2016) but needs to consider their goals and the specific affordances and norms (or even algorithms [Bhandari and Bimo 2020]) of their chosen platform.

This lens highlights the necessity of studying everyday practices on social media. Per Brabham (2015), "very few social media users use social media tools to coordinate revolutions" (p. 1). Instead, as researchers study how users adapt and extend their everyday social goals and practices via ICT like social media, we also need to adapt and extend our theoretical tools.

Lens 4: Authenticity is not a property, but a practice.

The primary goal of identity performance is typically defined as when audience reception matches self-attributed meaning(s) and the intended impression associated with one's identities (Burke 2007; Burke and Stets 2023). Authenticity is not an inherent quality, then, but an outcome of intentional and continuous negotiation and performance of identities within particular contexts - in this case, sociotechnical contexts. It "does not inhere in the object, person, or performance said to be authentic…[it] is a claim…either accepted or rejected by relevant others" (Peterson 2005:1086). Of Laybourn's (2022) five dimensions of authenticity, I am most concerned with context, being, and consumption (rather than perceived sincerity or integrity) (Laybourn 2022) because despite the dystopian anxieties about mediated sociality fundamentally changing relationships (Baym 2015), my analysis attends to practices. In this case, the unique affordances of social media and this broad cultural concern with the effects of social media on sociality lead to an exacerbated "self-presenter's dilemma", wherein attempts to impress a target have the opposite effect when the target perceives that identity verification is important to the presenter (Leary

2019). One way that performers work to counteract this is through distancing behaviors (Fleming and Rudman 1993) or self-effacing approaches wherein they intentionally downplay their own self-importance or effort via language, tone, or affect. This is a common approach on social media, where individuals aim to counteract the idea that one's self-presentation on social media is a polished and inauthentic version of themself by crafting an equally-performed but unpolished version with blurry photos, misspellings, and the like.

It follows that authenticity happens via interaction and follows a similar reflexive feedback cycle. One of sociology's goals is to uncover social practices that might be enacted unconsciously or seem counterintuitive (Jurgenson 2019). On social media, novel methods such as the use of photos as sharing experiences rather than documenting objects (van Dijck 2007) in order to extend modalities for sociality and unique affordances such as the social media profile as public personal archive of ordered past selves (Jurgenson 2019) are two such practices aimed at successfully authentic identity expression. As in the other lenses, individuals monitor feedback and continuously adapt their behavior toward achieving a reception of authenticity, but in this case they balance a desire for authenticity against privacy costs (Steinfeld et. al 2012) and against a desire to use active identity play (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2010) to explore and search for identities that feel internally authentic. Across the lifespan of the social internet, identity play has taken the form of more overt cases like MUDs or MMORPGs, more subtle examples like identity play via storytelling on early platforms like MySpace, or private and technically-enabled cases such as the use of multiple profiles (i.e. Rinsta/Finsta [Kang and Wei 2020; Taber and Whitaker 2020]) or privacy settings to segregate audiences.

REMAINING CONCEPTUAL TENSIONS

While the purpose of the preceding four theoretical lenses was to highlight how STS, SI, and identity theory can be most fruitfully brought to bear on negotiating identity and authenticity

on social media, the goal of the remainder of this exam is to point to three outstanding conceptual tensions. For each, I will briefly outline themes in existing empirical work before proposing possibilities for future research that leverages this exam's framing.

Tension 1: In the identity literature, there is ongoing debate about the utility of conceptualizing identity in an individualistic, social, or collective manner. Given how social media both collapses context and creates social siloes, do these conceptual categories still work?

Scholars have come at this tension from three angles. First, via **managing context collapse** via self-presentation. Work in this vein has established how individuals manage overlapping and collapsed social contexts via putting on a lowest common denominator self-presentation that aims at minimizing offense (Gil-Lopez et. al 2018) or by performing a "hoped-for" self that they don't fully identify with but know will present positively (Marichal 2013). Earlier work identifies how this is not a new phenomenon but was a concern even with early adopters creating personal homepages and managing unclear audiences (Rosenstein 2000). Another way that users approach this is through attempting to segregate their audiences using technical affordances such as "Close Friends" lists (Xiao et. al 2020), an example of **managing multiple audiences** in order to attempt to escape collapsing social contexts – but one that creates a new problem (social siloing). This is a step closer toward speaking to this first tension because it allows users to attempt to balance multiple identities across conceptual categories (boyd 2014; Ellison et. al 2007), albeit haltingly. The third approach here is to consider **identity construction performance as an inherently cyclical process**. In this approach, individuals are not just expressing their identities online and aiming for authenticity in how they're received, but instead are generating and regenerating their own multidimensional identities (Fisher et. al 2016) via the mosaic of platforms, affordances, and modalities they choose to use. Madianou and Miller (2012) call this "polymedia", that the choices around medium that users make communicate or even become the message itself.

Each of these is insufficient because they address only part of this tension; they identify the problems around context and audience, but do not sufficiently bring identity theory to bear on their questions, leading them to be underdeveloped toward my concern. The goal of this exam has been to bring its three theoretical frames to bear on a social media environment where existing theorizing does not match the needs of the current sociotechnical context. Next, I'll close this first tension by proposing an empirical project that leans on this exam's theoretical framing.

Conceptual Focus and Methods: As social media enables simultaneous interactions with diverse audiences and contexts, how do individuals navigate and negotiate the boundaries between individualistic, social, and collective identities? Can existing theories of identity account for these complicated, context-dependent processes? This topic is well-suited for comparative user case studies combined with the 'walkthrough method' (Light et. al 2016)[21]; users would demonstrate their usage, explain their choices, and reflect afterwards via structured diary entries. To do this, I propose to first develop user archetypes through quantitative subgroup analysis. By analyzing factors like users' frequency of use, types of activities, audience management strategies, and demographic attributes across multiple platforms, I could identify patterns that point to key archetypes of users—for example, "highly active users," "casual users," "personal brand-focused users," "privacy-conscious users," and so on. Once these archetypes have been established through large-scale analysis, a comparison-based qualitative study could examine how these practices are enacted and experienced across user groups. This would provide insight not only on their mindset and goals, but around their rationale for choosing audience management tools (e.g. Close Friends, block lists, or multiple accounts). This tension can be best addressed via Instagram because (1) research has established that users on this platform in particular have a heightened focus on

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[21] "...a way of engaging directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences…slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use in order to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis" (p. 882)

managing multiple audiences via platform affordances and user workarounds (Jin and Wei 2020),

(2) there is a strong culture of self-conscious performance and image management (Leaver et. al

2020), and (3) the platform has a relatively small set of modalities for communication and

audience segregation to analyze.

Research Question: How do users on Instagram balance overlapping, complementary, or

competing individual, social, and collective identities across a profile and social graph that

includes diverse audiences?

Theoretical Salience: This question brings categories from identity theory to a specific platform

and is well-suited for integrating the other two perspectives, beginning with STS as a lens for

understanding how the development and design of Instagram as a sociotechnical system influence

the way individuals experience their identity boundaries within the platform's constraints and

affordances. That alone does not sufficiently attend to a micro-level understanding of behavior;

SI's methods emphasize the importance of understanding how users engage with diverse

audiences and interpret social cues in the online environment. As users navigate their individual,

social, and collective identities on Instagram, SI helps us explore the meanings they attach to their

actions and interactions as they use platform affordances based on their needs and level of

technical and social skill as well as how they adapt their self-presentations based on the

expectations of various audience groups.

Tension 2: Is there continuity between an individual's online identity and their offline identity?
Does maintaining a divide presume a digitally dualist framework?

Much like in the previous section, existing empirical work is strong and helpful but only

goes partially toward addressing this particular tension. The first approach has aimed directly at

continuity and discontinuity in identity performance and self-presentation. Scholars have drawn

from Goffman's focus on the routine and taken-for-granted social behaviors (Treviño 2003) and

identified platform affordances that are leveraged for both intended (Taber and Whitaker 2018; Taber et. al 2022) and "off-label"[22] (Haferkamp and Kramer 2010) ends toward a user's goal of maximizing positive online self-presentation rather than continuity. Another strand of findings ultimately complicates the question itself, identifying sites for identity play both for bonding via humor (Weitz 2017) that creates an ambient affiliation (Zappavigna 2012) and for trying on identities that they perceive as too risky offline (Danet 1998); the goals of these behaviors are not continuity or authenticity, but showcasing identities that are either logistically impossible or socially untenable offline. The second approach has focused on **the constructed nature of the distinction** between online and offline selfhood, a strand that can be traced back to Meyrowitz's (1986) work on early electronic media affecting our collective sense of place. Others have focused on the co-creation of unique personas through online and offline forces (Hanson 2022) and how influences from one social location subtly spill over into others (Marder et. al 2016), but much of this is still oriented around the notion from the early social internet - that these two realms are distinct (Zhao 2005). It is more appropriate to step back and consider how an outdated digital dualist (Jurgenson 2011) framework is a controlling metaphor for how we think about identity (Slater 2002) and work to consider how this has changed in the context of mobile devices and ambient ICT. Finally, scholars have identified **complexities inherent in discussing whether continuity makes sense** as a conceptual category (Ellison et. al 2007; Turkle 2012). Across most of the landscape of social media, profiles and platforms do not exist in a vacuum, but as an assemblage of posts and stories, private and public presentations, permanent and temporary content, sometimes simultaneous online and offline interactions. Considering any of these distinct sites as a "social act" is difficult at best because even if a researcher can capture all of the important elements of these assemblages, they are analytically useful only insofar as they are

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[22] Repurposing features for goals outside of their ostensible purpose; i.e. joining Facebook groups not for networking or accessing content, but as a signal to others of one's interests

considered together with mutual and overlapping influence. Finally, we have established that selfhood, identity, and authenticity are not static; there is a reflexive feedback loop across social media (but particularly in certain sites like internet dating [Yurchisin et. al 2005]) that invites deep intentional reflective consideration of selfhood, values, and self-presentation.

This empirical work is strong, but the rapid rate of sociotechnical change means that more work is necessary to put some of these pieces together in the context of trends that push toward more and more integration between all of the modalities for sociality available. To bring this exam's theoretical framing to bear on this concern, I propose the following course of study:

Conceptual Focus and Methods: As social media has been increasingly domesticated, has that changed the way people conceptualize, discuss, and experience (dis)continuity between their online and offline experiences and identities? To explore the continuity or discontinuity between online and offline identities, this topic is well-suited for a combination of in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, and content analysis of users' social media activity. By conducting in-depth interviews, researchers can gain insights into how individuals perceive the relationship between their online and offline selves and how they navigate the potential discrepancies or alignments between the two. Digital ethnography allows for the observation of users' online behavior in real-time, providing context for the claims made during interviews and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of their identity performances. Content analysis of users' social media posts, comments, and interactions can help identify patterns and trends in their self-presentation across various platforms, revealing the extent to which their online identities align with or deviate from their offline personas. By triangulating these methods, researchers can obtain a richer understanding of the factors shaping individuals' experiences of (dis)continuity between their online and offline identities, as well as the potential implications for their sense of self and social relationships.

Research Question: For individuals who use multiple social media platforms, how do they (1) understand their own attempts at continuity or discontinuity between online and offline self-presentation, (2) use platform affordances for strategic self-presentation of identities that they specifically want to emphasize online, and (3) balance self-presentations across different platforms as compared to their offline self-presentations?

Theoretical Salience: The STS perspective enables us to examine how the design, affordances, and constraints of various social media platforms shape the ways in which individuals construct and present their identities online. By considering the interplay between technological features and users' self-presentation strategies, we can better understand the extent to which online and offline identities are influenced by or diverge from one another due to the sociotechnical environment. SI enters by allowing us to interpret the meanings that individuals attach to their online and offline self-presentations, as well as how they understand the social cues and feedback from their online interactions. By focusing on the interpretive processes that underlie individuals' online behavior, SI sheds light on the motivations and goals driving their attempts at continuity or discontinuity between online and offline identities. Furthermore, SI can help us investigate how individuals develop their sense of self and negotiate their identity boundaries as they navigate the blurred lines between online and offline realms. Finally, identity theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals manage and reconcile the various identity categories that emerge from their online and offline interactions. As users balance their individual, social, and collective identities across different platforms, identity theory identifies insights into the strategies they employ to maintain coherence and authenticity, as well as the potential challenges and tensions they face in doing so. This integrated approach captures the full spectrum of identity-related processes, shedding light on the dynamic nature of self-construction and negotiation in this context.

Tension 3: Identity and authenticity depend on interaction, but the self online should be understood as at least partially algorithmically mediated, meaning that we have less control over our online self-presentation than ever before. Is this fundamentally different from the ways that we highlight and occlude various parts of ourselves as we always have?

In a sociotechnical context marked by a technical capacity and cultural orientation toward constant connectivity primarily used for socializing (Miller et. al 2016), the web of our material semiotics is heavily weaved with discussion and effects (Baron 2008) of "the algorithm" on our sociality. Scholars attending to this final tension have approached it first through exploring **the inherent overall complexity of online interaction** as a site for study. I take a syntopian perspective here in order to highlight the ways that technology simultaneously enables and disables (Katz and Rice 2002); the mediation resulting from opaque algorithm-driven interaction enables new sorts of sociality and also makes them more difficult to understand for participant and observer. Interaction and meaning-making are thus mediated by multiple inscrutable forces, making it difficult for users to grasp the entire process. Platform-specific challenges such as navigating nascent sites for interaction (Ellison et. al 2006), context-specific platform norms (Waterloo et. al 2018), and balancing incentives for authenticity against financial gain (Foster 2022) are stacked on top of broader forces like the effect of perceived surveillance (Trottier 2012) and imagine audience (Marwick and boyd 2011). Successfully achieving an authentic performance online is already difficult (Haimson et. al 2021) because of factors like positivity bias (Shim et. al 2016), but **algorithmic mediation adds a new layer to interaction** because it is highly technically developed and opaque to the point of inscrutability and it is difficult for participants to predict or interpret. As online interactions become more algorithmically mediated and stratified by the technical abilities and social goals of users, individuals' roles in online spaces become more differentiated, leading to a higher degree of interdependence (Ling 2012 [Durkheim 1893]) among people. Algorithmic influence is most central on TikTok, but it is central to the content feed on

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as well. Technological systems' users develop folk theories to understand their own experiences with a system (Toff and Nielsen 2018) that guide their responses to the system and to each other, using these theories with a borderline obsessive level of focus and energy to co-produce (Karizat et. al 2021) their expression of identity. Users have less control over what they present to others and often have no way of knowing who is seeing what they share, even among an expected audience.

As in the previous two tensions, the existing empirical work is a strong foundation to build from; we have rich findings with thick description of the experience of interaction on social media and have begun to understand how algorithmic influence as yet another source of mediation has complicated interactionist analysis. Because this influence disrupts the amount of predictability and control that individuals once had over their self-presentation, I propose to zoom out to understand how users approach impression management via this course of study:

Conceptual Focus and Methods: When social media networks were newer and smaller, content was sorted by profile or in a chronological feed. Users adjusted to these expectations, but these networks grew to the point where they claimed that the amount of content to display in this way was no longer feasible, which meant that content began to be sorted algorithmically to ostensibly surface the most relevant (or most ad-friendly) posts for users to see. More recently, platforms like TikTok have been designed specifically with algorithmic sorting in mind. When unexpected situations in a social context arise that change the structure or foundation of a setting, they create a frame break (Goffman 1974) wherein the expectations, structures, and processes are disrupted and exposed. This is one such situation. Given this, how has the adoption of a new, algorithmically-mediated frame changed the experience of impression management in the context of social media? This can be addressed via comparative case study that examines user behavior on Instagram (which uses an algorithmically-driven feed but keeps individual user profiles central)

and on TikTok, which prioritizes its algorithmic "For You Feed" to the exclusion of nearly everything else. Interviews would be a strong companion to the case study content analysis, wherein users would be asked to reflect about their strategies and reception.

Research Question: How do active users of both Instagram and TikTok approach their self-presentation on each platform and reflect about the reception of their identity expressions?

Theoretical Salience: STS is particularly adept at examining the role of algorithms and platform affordances in shaping users' self-presentation strategies on Instagram and TikTok, but may not fully capture the nuanced ways individuals interpret and attach meanings to their online interactions and experiences on these platforms. SI excels in addressing these interpretive processes and the significance of social cues and feedback within algorithmically mediated environments like Instagram and TikTok, yet may not fully account for the broader framework of identity management across different platforms and contexts. Identity theory, on the other hand, is well-suited for investigating how individuals manage and reconcile the various identity categories that emerge from their online interactions on both Instagram and TikTok but does not fully account for the sociotechnical dimensions of online self-presentation and the role of algorithms in shaping these processes. By using these frames together, we can approach a more holistic understanding of the ways users adapt their self-presentation strategies in response to the shifting expectations and uncertainties brought about by algorithmic mediation on these platforms, while also highlighting the importance of social meanings and the negotiation of identity boundaries in these dynamic environments.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have brought three distinct literatures into conversation with one another in order to make a theoretical argument that pushes back against a digitally dualist attitude and assemble a holistic theoretical framework capable of answering empirical questions about how

identities are enacted, received, and experienced on social media. I have aimed to do this in service of a research agenda that is primarily interested in studying "normal, everyday social media" (Brabham 2015) as a site where identities are shaped and expressed through the unique affordances and modalities of contemporary social media platforms. Our everyday technologies change the way that we see the world (Turkle 1995), whether this is an automobile changing the way we think about cities or a smartphone changing the way we consider sociality. As digital technologies have evolved from a tool into a way of being (Markham 2003), their forms, affordances, and values have in turn shaped our understanding of the world and what we perceive, value, and work for; our governing concepts and metaphors shape our values and practices (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). On the foundation that this exam has assembled, I plan to turn my attention in the following exam to memetics and online humor, studying how these work together in the context of "everyday politics" (Highfield 2016) as a site where identity and authenticity are enacted on social media.

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