

# Media Sociology: A Reappraisal

Edited by Silvio Waisbord

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## Sociology and the Socially Mediated Self

*Jeff Pooley*

The rapid ascent of social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook is a gigantic, but largely untapped, opportunity for media sociology. So far, sociologists' contributions have been modest, especially compared to work with a psychological cast. Consequently, a major role for sociological studies of social media is to bring the discipline's core intellectual commitments to bear on a research area that is now largely ahistorical and individualist. Cumulatively, a handful of rich sociological studies have begun to chart a more interactional, institutional, and historical approach to social media questions. A foundation is, therefore, in place, but SNS merit greater attention from sociologists and sociology-oriented communication scholars.

Explicitly mindful of the relative prominence of psychology vis-à-vis sociology, this chapter reviews a rapidly growing body of research: work centered on social media and the self. Facebook's swift rise and its fascinating implications for self-presentation have set off a predictable mushroom-burst of scholarship: 179 articles, books, and chapters, half of which were published in the last two years.

Research on SNSs and the performance of self is well suited for a probe on the relative contributions of psychology and sociology. After all, there is some evidence that sociologists have taken a renewed interest in media questions recently, drawn by the patently disruptive internet (Jurgenson and Ritzer 2012). There is, too, a rich tradition of sociological work on the social self, with obvious relevance to Facebook self-fashioning. Psychologists, of course, have their own sophisticated theories of identity and selfhood. The social-media-and-the-self research context consequently makes a kind of natural experiment possible. Under favorable conditions, will sociologists contribute to a media-research literature? And will com-

munication scholars adopt sociological perspectives to any significant degree?

The answer, based on this review, is a qualified "no" on both counts. Sociologists remain marginal, markedly outnumbered by psychologists and especially communication scholars. More important, most of the SNS-and-identity work produced by communication researchers bears the intellectual and methodological imprint of psychology. Judging by this small island of research, communication remains psychologized.

The reason this matters has nothing to do with disciplinary score-keeping. The issue instead is the lens through which scholars are making sense of the new social media landscape. In line with assumptions of mainstream psychology, the great bulk of studies under review (1) assume a pre-social subjectivity. That is, many researchers begin with pre-formed individuals, endowed with traits like extraversion or high public self-consciousness. Likewise, the typical approach is (2) ahistorical, implying (without intending to) that modern western individualism is timelessly universal. In this literature (3) difference is tracked mainly at the psychological-trait level: class, race, and gender inequalities are mostly neglected, as are the wider economic and social contexts. Facebook and its competitors are treated as (4) a bundle of technological affordances, and not as profit-seeking corporations with a major economic stake in a sharing self.

The point is not to dismiss research with a psychological inflection. Some of this work is brilliant, with counterintuitive findings and a rich theoretical yield. Yet the literature is partial in patterned ways that sociologists are sensitive to; media sociology can thus serve as a corrective. Though greatly outnumbered, the few sociological studies of the SNS self can be read to suggest an alternative approach. The self, these scholars agree, is irreducibly social – even the individualist self of the modern West, which denies its own embeddedness. The identities that get performed on Facebook, they argue, are bound up in a mix of interrelated shifts associated with modernity: market relations, urbanization, consumer culture, and the rise of mass-produced imagery. As subjects, we are shaped by these developments even as our actions help reconstitute them. Sociological studies insist that the complex societies we are born into are already stratified along axes of difference – economic, cultural, racial, etc. – with cross-cutting power and resource inequalities. Even the technological edifices we confront, sociologists argue, are products of a related mix of culture, market, and human purpose – including our own, as we interact over time with technologies and each other. This nascent sociological

approach repositions the intellectual stakes: If we “brand” ourselves on Facebook – and Facebook is a platform well-matched to self-branding – then we cannot ignore the constellation of historical developments that brought to the fore calculated self-performance and Facebook.

This presents a messy object of study – one that the ahistorical, individualist orientation suggested by mainstream psychology is ill-equipped to address. A sociological alternative is already emerging.

### Social media and the self: the review

To generate a picture of research on social media and the self, I read and coded all the published work on the topic that I could locate. The idea was that the research area, new and fast-developing, would provide a snapshot of the disciplinary mix contributing to contemporary media research. My intention was not to supply a traditional literature review, but instead to filter the historical relations between psychology, sociology, and communication research through a current research lens.

To locate relevant works, I used a mix of Google Scholar, Google Books, and citation chains from already-identified work to build up a bibliography, which I continued to supplement until the results were written up in early 2013. One hundred and seventy-nine articles, books, and book chapters were collected in the resulting corpus.

Four criteria were used for inclusion. First, works must be “academic” studies, excluding media accounts and public intellectual essays (like C. Rosen 2007). Second, items must focus on SNSs. I relied on boyd and Ellison’s (2007: 211) tripartite definition of SNS: web-based services involving (1) at least a semi-public profile; (2) a list of connected users; and (3) the ability to observe (at least some of the) profiles and connections made by others. Work centered on, for example, Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter meets these criteria, but studies of online dating sites and personal homepages would not. Third, only published works in journals and books were included. Theses and conference papers (even those published in proceedings) were excluded. Fourth, items must “substantially” focus on aspects of self and identity. Studies focused exclusively on relationship-maintenance, for example, were not included in the bibliography.

Each criterion entails an obvious cost. Academic work is not (or at least should not be) separated from other discourses, nor are bounda-

ries always clear. Online dating and personal website research, moreover, is often suffused with the same themes and questions taken up by scholars studying “genuine” SNSs. Excluding conference proceedings and theses was particularly painful, in part because these works are frequently cited in the fast-evolving quasi-field. The question of what counts as a “substantial” engagement with self-related questions was inevitably subjective and required a series of tough judgment calls. The criteria are nonetheless justified, given feasibility requirements, as well as the need for full-text searching of the works under review.

Given these criteria, I attempted to collect an exhaustive body of works, with the knowledge that many eligible items would inevitably be excluded. In particular, books and chapters centered on the self/social media theme were probably missed, given search limitations. Even if the unattainable ideal of full inclusivity were achieved, the corpus is already out of date: based on the current publishing growth curve, more than forty new items will have appeared by the time this chapter is published. Because of the flood of social media posts advertised in the job market of recent years, publications on this and other SNS topics are sure to follow.

Even with these limitations, the 179-count corpus of published works analyzed here provides a snapshot of the literature.<sup>1</sup> Each work was read, annotated, and extensively coded for a number of attributes, including the disciplinary orientation of the journal (if applicable, as described in journals’ “aims and scope” self-descriptions). Data on the first author of each item was also collected, including training (university, discipline, and location) and current post (university/organization, discipline, and location), based upon public websites, posted curricula vitae and dissertation databases. Citation data were collected based on selective full-text author and title searches. (Books and book chapters were scanned and run through optical-character recognition software.) The included works were also tagged for methodology and “key” themes, based on close readings.

Content analysis like this has many obvious limitations, including the reliance for some attributes on my value-laden judgments. Still, the approach is arguably preferable to a traditional literature review, which on its own is far more susceptible to cherry-picking and proof-texting. I rather interweave findings from the bibliographic coding with interpretations and quotations from selected works exemplifying a particular pattern observed in the data.

### Overview of findings

As expected, the review revealed an interdisciplinary blend of work, with contributions ranging from literature to computer science. Scholars with formal psychological training were prominent, though outnumbered by researchers trained in one or another communication program. Still, many of the communication scholars approached the topic with assumptions rooted in mainstream psychology.

Based on disciplinary training, communication scholars were far more prominent in the literature than any other field, accounting for nearly half (eighty-two) of the items. ("Communication" is a big-tent designation, referring to training or employment in a department with "communication" or "media" in its name and not linked to another recognized discipline.) Psychology-trained first authors were also plentiful, accounting for over a fifth (thirty-seven) of published works. Just seventeen articles or chapters – less than 10 percent – were authored by trained sociologists.

A number of other disciplines contributed to the SNS/self literature, including scholars trained in library/iSchool programs (nine items), literary studies (seven), education (six), anthropology (five), business (five) and computer science (four). Psychiatry, theater, gender studies, philosophy, and geography each registered a single study.

Among journals, the basic pattern held, though with notable shifts. More than one-third (38%) of articles appeared in psychology journals, slightly edging out communication journals (34%). Interdisciplinary publications accounted for 16%. Computer science journals placed fourth with less than 4%. Significantly, only two articles – about 1% – were published in sociology journals.

In geographical terms, more than half (56%) of first authors were trained in the United States. Also prominently represented are scholars trained in the United Kingdom (11%), Australia (8%), Canada (8%), and Germany (5%). Three other countries – the Netherlands, Norway, and Estonia – registered four studies each, with one or two studies from scholars trained in other European countries, East Asia, and Israel. The geographic spread, lopsided as it is, reflects the overall pattern of English-language research output on media topics.

A majority of included studies employed quantitative methods, though qualitative methods were also well represented. Excluding essays and other studies without empirical data (accounting for 30 studies, or 17% of the total), over half (57%) of the items were quantitative, with an additional 8% opting for a mixed quantitative/

qualitative approach. The remainder – just over a third (35%) – drew on qualitative data, e.g. semi-structured interviews and ethnography.

The most common method by far was the quantitative survey of SNS users, employed by almost half (46%) of studies. Quantitative content analyses of SNS profiles and wall posts were also relatively common, appearing in nearly a fifth (19%) of works. Eleven studies (7%) were centered on controlled experiments.

Of the qualitative approaches, semi-structured interviews (11%) and ethnographies (11%) were most frequently employed. What counts as "ethnography" is fuzzy, of course, but most authors self-identified their work as ethnographic if it included a mix of participant observation, interviews, textual readings of profiles and status updates, and "guided tours" (users taking the researcher through their SNS profile and activity). Focus groups of users (7%) and qualitative textual analysis of SNS content (7%) were also relatively common. Three papers relied on a case study approach, and three others used open-ended surveys. A number of other methods – including usage diaries, historical analysis, usability tests, and participant observation – were each used by a single study.

### Psychology and sociology in SNS/self research

The influence of psychology is far more prevalent than the disciplinary training data suggest. The main reason is that psychological approaches have long been well represented within US communication research. In the SNS/self literature, communication scholars with a background in interpersonal and computer-mediated communication (CMC) traditions are especially common.

In addition to the thirty-seven studies authored by psychology-trained scholars, forty-one communication-authored items – half of the communication total – were classified as "psychology-influenced." No single trait determined the "psychology-influenced" label; instead, a mix of factors – including the psychological background of cited studies, theories, and journals, the use of standard psychological scales, and publication in a psychology journal – were considered. While these forty-one studies do not exhibit each and every trait, they do share "family resemblances" in Wittgenstein's sense.

Fourteen communication papers were judged "sociology-influenced" using similar, if more liberal, criteria – since no communication studies were published in sociology journals

and few cited any. Together, the seventy-eight psychology and psychology-influenced communication studies made up a plurality (44%) of the corpus. Psychological research was two and a half times more numerous than the thirty-one sociology and sociology-influenced studies (17% of the total).

The imbalance is far more pronounced in journal-publishing terms. A plurality of articles (38%) appeared in psychology journals, including twenty papers authored by communication-trained scholars. Indeed, psychology-influenced communication scholars published more often in psychology journals (eighteen studies) than communication outlets (sixteen studies). Overall, more studies appeared in psychology journals (sixty-one) than communication journals, despite the relative prominence of communication scholars in the corpus as a whole. By contrast, just two studies ran in sociology journals.

Unmistakable here is the residue of American sociology's decades-old neglect of media research. Psychology supports at least five media- or web-oriented journals, including the top two journals in the SNS/self literature, *Computers in Human Behavior* (twenty-three studies) and *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* (sixteen studies). Psychology-influenced communication scholars are clearly comfortable publishing in these outlets.

In contrast, not a single sociology journal centers on media or internet topics, forcing sociologists to publish in communication (six articles), interdisciplinary (four) and even psychology (four) titles. Likewise, no communication scholar – sociology-influenced or otherwise – published in a sociology journal.

Citation patterns provide another telling reflection of psychology's relative dominance. It is true that sociologist Erving Goffman is cited in seventy-six studies, placing him among the most-mentioned figures. In particular, Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* gets a frequent nod, even among psychologists and psychology-influenced communication scholars. Still, in the vast majority of instances, the engagement with Goffman is perfunctory. These passing references come off as symbolic and half-obligatory, prompted by the iconic stature of Goffman's (1959) work (Allen 1997). Psychology's in-text American Psychological Association (APA) citation style – which most communication scholars and journals use too – makes serial, decontextualized referencing especially easy (Bazerman 1988; Madigan, Johnson and Linton 1995). There are studies in the corpus that grapple seriously with Goffman's dramaturgical approach (e.g. Hogan 2010), but none of these were

authored by psychologists or psychology-influenced communication scholars.

Consider the parallel case of comparably prominent scholars in the self-oriented literatures of sociology and psychology, respectively. Mark Leary and Roy Baumeister, major figures in the psychology of self and identity, are cited frequently: Leary in twenty-five studies and Leary and Baumeister in twenty-one. Peter Burke and Sheldon Stryker – arguably the most prominent sociology-of-self scholars working in the symbolic interactionist tradition – are nearly invisible. Burke is referenced in just five studies, while Stryker appears only twice.

Morris Rosenberg, another important sociologist of the self, does appear frequently in the SNS/self studies – but almost always for his widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, deployed in thirteen articles. His major work on the self-concept, *Conceiving the Self* (1979), is mentioned just three times in the entire corpus.

Psychologists of self working outside the mainstream are mostly ignored, too. Kenneth Gergen, an important critic of the discipline's scientism (Gergen 1973), has written insightfully for decades on the self in a media-saturated culture (Gergen 1992, 2009). Yet he was cited just once in the entire psychology and psychology-influenced body of studies, by a self-proclaimed "discursive psychologist" whose work is also unusual for its engagement with sociological theory (Goodings 2011).

One plausible explanation for the psychology-sociology discrepancy is the disparity in size between the two disciplines, at least in the United States. In 2011, over five times as many doctorates were awarded in psychology (3,594) as in sociology (656). Still, sociology doctorates are far more likely to plan an academic career (85%) than those in psychology (48%), largely due to doctoral requirements for clinical, nonacademic psychological practice (National Science Foundation 2011). Correcting for these academic-career plans, psychology PhDs outnumber sociology PhDs by a 3-to-1 ratio. Given this large gap, psychologists are arguably underrepresented relative to sociology in the SNS/self literature.

The two disciplines' relative size cannot, however, explain how the lopsided contributions to SNS/self research get reproduced within communication research. To account for the predominance of psychology, we need to turn to the discipline's peculiar history. As Katz and I (Pooley and Katz 2008) have argued elsewhere, American sociology effectively abandoned the study of mass communication. In the early to mid-1960s, its media research agenda was handed off

to the new, would-be discipline of "communication," then establishing itself within journalism schools and speech departments. Partly owing to the individualist, social psychology-oriented "behavioral sciences" tradition from which the US communication tradition emerged, but also to a major shift in federal funding then underway (Crowther-Heyck 2006), the new field's basic mental architecture was largely appropriated from psychology. Though it is easy to point to counterexamples and pockets of intellectual resistance, US media research was in effect psychologized in concert with the emergence of "communication" as an organized academic discipline.

### Psychology-oriented studies

Does it even matter that psychology-inflected work is far more plentiful than studies with a more sociological cast? Is this just an elaborate exercise in disciplinary bean-counting? After all, the differentiation of the various social science disciplines took place in the recent past. And few if any demarcation criteria, whether drawn along substantive or methodological lines, hold up under scrutiny (cf. Calhoun 1992).

Even if absolute distinctions are rare, the evidence here suggests that real differences persist in terms of what Becher (1989) has called "disciplinary cultures." Sociology, despite its smaller size, is more eclectic and open to critical, historical, and qualitative work. Psychology, especially in the United States, is more centripetal, owing in part to its long-standing aspiration to natural science status.

These differences are apparent and consequential in the SNS/self literature. It is not just that psychology-influenced studies furnish a partial picture of Facebook self-presentation. The problem is that their omissions – big omissions like culture, capitalism, and history – are not typically articulated or apologized for. Scholars and students stumbling on the literature could be forgiven for not knowing what they are missing.

### Methods

Among the empirical studies authored by psychologists, the overwhelming majority (83%) turned to quantitative methods of one kind or another. Over three-fifths (68%) employed quantitative surveys, while a partially overlapping quarter (24%) used content analysis. A surprisingly small number of studies (three – 8 percent of the psychology total) conducted experiments. The numbers are similar for

psychology-influenced communication scholars: most (80%) studies are quantitative, with another 10% mixing quantitative and qualitative methods. Over half (56%) used surveys, 15% employed content analysis, and a full fifth (20%) ran experiments.

### Personality and disposition correlates

By far the most common approach among psychologists was to treat personality, self-esteem and other self-related disposition measures as independent variables, with various attitudes toward, and/or engagement with, SNSs as the dependent variable. Over half (57%) of psychologist-authored studies used this "personality and disposition correlates" approach, which centers on explaining aspects of the SNS self with reference to psychological traits. Many (29%) of the psychology-influenced communication studies also employed this broad approach.

Among these studies, correlation analysis of survey data was nearly universal. Very often, course-enrolled undergraduates were surveyed, and most of the time SNS behavior measures relied on survey self-reporting. The results – particularly on the personality trait predictors – have been notably weak and contradictory from study to study (Bergman et al. 2011: 707; Ross et al. 2009).

### Michigan State

Another major cluster of psychology-influenced work on SNSs and the self has emerged from Michigan State's College of Communication Arts and Sciences. The Michigan State program, largely shaped by David Berlo (a student of Wilbur Schramm) in the late 1950s and 1960s, produced more communication doctorates than any other institution until Berlo's departure in the early 1970s (Rogers 2001). Like many other US communication programs founded in the early postwar decades, Michigan State stressed quantitative training within a psychology-oriented social science approach. Unlike most other programs, however, Michigan State self-consciously blended interpersonal and mass communication research, which elsewhere remained divided along speech- and journalism-derived lines.

In the Facebook era, of course, the interpersonal/mass communication distinction is fading. A body of CMC research most strongly associated with Joseph Walther (1996) has provided the foundation for a series of more recent Michigan State studies of SNSs and online dating self-presentation. The pre-SNS CMC literature, including

Walther's widely employed "hyperpersonal model," explored the effects of technology-related attributes like physical isolation, asynchronicity, and reduced visual cues, on interpersonal communication. Among other findings and predictions, this literature concluded that communication online is conducive to "selective self-presentation" (Walther 2007).

This basic CMC-affordances approach has been updated and widely adopted by SNS scholars, including Walther and other Michigan State colleagues. Indeed, fifteen studies (8%) in the corpus have Michigan State-trained or -employed first authors, far more than any other university – despite the exclusion of Michigan State's non-SNS online dating studies. Among scholars represented in the corpus, the most often cited (Ellison, referenced in 70% of the studies) and third-most cited (Walther, 34%) are both based at Michigan State.

The Michigan State work is methodologically inventive, conceptually rich, and widely cited, even by trained psychologists. Ellison co-authored the major orienting article on SNS research (boyd and Ellison 2007), referenced in about a third (32%) of the corpus. A pair of fascinating experiments, first-authored by Walther (Walther et al. 2008, 2009), used mock Facebook "friends" appearances and comments to test his and Park's (2002) "warranting" hypothesis – that, in forming impressions, people rely more on other-generated information (e.g. Wall comments or "friend" attractiveness) than self-generated data (e.g. profiles) since the former are harder to manipulate.

The Michigan State literature is unmistakably influenced by psychological currents within and beyond communication. The works draw heavily on psychological social psychology, and a great majority of the journal citations reference psychology and psychology-oriented interpersonal communication titles. One index of the psychological cast of these studies is their frequent focus on the "social capital benefits" of Facebook and other SNSs. In defining "social capital," Ellison and her co-authors awkwardly invoke Bourdieu – without engaging with his critical, power-laced conception of the term (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007: 1145 and 2011: 875).

### Psychology and SNS/self research: a critique

Despite its ingenuity and conceptual yield, the psychology and psychology-influenced work on SNSs and the self offers a narrow view

of the topic. Given its dominance in the literature, key psychological assumptions may drown out other relevant aspects of study. I focus here on five overlapping themes in the literature that cumulatively render invisible broader social, economic, historical, and cultural contexts.

### Causality

The studies' heavy reliance on correlational survey analysis and experimentation are not intrinsically problematic. They yield important findings that are not easily obtainable via other approaches. But they are employed unreflectively and without sufficient humility about their limitations.

The validity problems inherent in survey research and experimentation are not at issue – nor are the significant complications due to student samples and self-reported SNS behavior. More fundamental is the implicit picture of causality that these studies invoke.

By isolating independent variables to attempt to account for discrete outcomes, this literature implies that SNS selfhood can be explained in cause-and-effect terms. Whether the independent variable is SNS differences or user-narcissism, the suggestion is that social life can be explained by some number of isolated factors. (This assumption creates causality dilemmas in interpreting findings, since personality traits like narcissism may predict SNS behavior or else result from SNS use (Bergman et al. 2011: 710).)

Researchers often concede the artificiality of the lab setting and the fact that correlation is not causation. Nevertheless, research design – and accompanying language like "explains" or "accounts for" – leaves an ontological residue. Social life operates according to a cause-and-effect logic which is, moreover, measurable. As methodological fiction openly acknowledged, there is no problem with these assumptions. But reflexivity is rarely on display in the psychological SNS/self literature.

The fundamental complexity and messiness of social life is, therefore, occluded. In particular, historically emergent economic and cultural factors – in all their elaborate interpenetration – are excluded by default. Since these factors are hard, if not impossible, to measure as quantifiable variables, and resist cause-and-effect reasoning, they are ignored. The resulting picture of social life is grossly attenuated.

### The pre-social subject

Even though theoretical resources abound in psychological social psychology to ground individual selfhood in social relations and wider patterns of culture, most of the psychology-oriented literature under review assumes a pre-social subjectivity. Here again methodology plays a role. Most studies treat their subjects as pre-formed individuals whose differences overwhelmingly relate to the psychological traits they already bear.

This account omits the social and cultural sources of these traits. The implication is that subjects pop out of the womb with, say, a positive attitude to self-disclosure. The few studies that examine gender or cultural orientation are a partial exception, but even contrasts like "individualist" and "collectivist" are blunt and decontextualized.

### The end of history

These studies also neglect the historical specificity of the patterns that they measure. By treating personality and self-performance as timeless traits and behaviors, they imply that it was always thus. But modern western individualism, for example, is a product of the comparatively recent past – developing from the early modern period onward. The sense that we are each dignified individuals guided by self-defined purposes is even newer, and emerged unevenly across social strata. The quest for self-fulfillment and authenticity spread widely only in the mid-nineteenth century, mixing developments in art, literature, and social thought with a nascent consumer economy. The growth of visual and electronic mass media, celebrity culture, and an advertising-driven consumption economy are all crucial and interrelated backdrops to the self that is performed on Facebook. These are recent changes, but the impression gleaned from the psychological literature is that the modern self is eternal, etched in human nature.

### Equality and pluralism

Every individual sampled in the psychology-oriented SNS/self studies was born into a more-or-less stratified society, with patterned inequalities of power and position. Some of that relative privilege or marginality derived from ascribed categorical identities like race and gender for which there is no realistic opt-out. Economic and geographic contingencies helped to determine who has the iden-

tity resources – not to mention technological access – to present a desirable image of self. Indeed, SNS self-presentation is especially conducive to status markings and performed privilege.

Power and inequality rarely if ever appear in the psychological work under review. Instead, research subjects are treated as a collection of individuals distinguished mainly by personality or levels of self-esteem.

### Technology ex nihilo

The technological affordances of Facebook and other SNSs are widely discussed in this literature, but the sites appear as always already configured. In the typical treatment, individual self-performances – and the impressions formed of those performances by others – are influenced by these sites' architectural features. Several studies discuss privacy settings and creative user adaptations, especially in relation to tensions between privacy, context collapse, and self-disclosure benefits (e.g. Ellison et al. 2011; Vitak 2012).

But these studies neglect the social and economic forces that helped to shape SNSs in the first place. The affordances built into technologies are designed by humans embedded in social contexts. These medium-specific features often have unintended consequences, and users react, adapt, and ultimately reshape technologies through their ongoing interactions. Technologies like SNSs are dynamic, a mix of congealed human action suspended in design, modified by user practice and then reengineered with those practices and other imperatives in mind.

In the case of SNSs, "other imperatives" prominently include the need to attract investment and generate profits. The cultural currents supporting performative self-expression predated Mark Zuckerberg's entrepreneurial pluck; indeed, they helped shape the Web software he initially designed. But Facebook's business model – to peddle self-disclosure to micro-targeting advertisers – requires that semi-public sharing take increasing hold among its worldwide users.

The relationship between technology, economics, and culture is complex: Facebook was informed by, and benefited from, a pre-existing exhibitionist strain in the culture – itself the product of an intertwined, historically emergent mix of cultural and economic factors. Facebook, in turn, has a plain interest in spreading this culture, in part by encouraging more liberal sharing norms through its default settings.

There is no independent variable that can explain this dynamic.

Sociologists struggle too, but their more catholic approach means that the questions are at least posed.

### Sociology-oriented studies: a reply

Though they are relatively few, sociologists and sociology-influenced communication scholars in the corpus furnish a response of sorts to the limitations identified in the psychology-oriented literature. They tend to employ diverse methods, emphasize the social self, and ground their analysis in history and relations of power.

Perhaps because of these different assumptions, the sociology-oriented studies are not often cited in the rest of the SNS/self literature. One exception is work by Alice Marwick, a communication-trained assistant professor at Fordham. Marwick is cited in 20 studies (11% of the total), a prominence attributable to the excellence of her work as well as co-authorship with high-profile scholars like boyd (Marwick and boyd 2011) and Ellison (Marwick and Ellison 2012). Based on the inclusion criteria, one of Marwick's articles was classified as "sociology-influenced" (Marwick 2012), which has not yet been cited. The only widely cited item among the sociology-influenced studies is an article by a team of sociologists at Temple (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). That study's general orientation, early publishing date, and prescient focus on Facebook helped to attract eighteen citations (10%). Tellingly, a related study from the same team (Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao 2009) – this time focused on racial identity displays – has been referenced just twice.

### Methods

The trained sociologists in the corpus were far more likely than their psychological counterparts to employ qualitative methods. About two-thirds (64%) of the fourteen empirical studies used only qualitative methods – including six ethnographies and two interview-based works. One study mixed quantitative content analysis with interview techniques, while the remaining four (29%) used quantitative techniques like survey research (one) and content analysis (three).

Of the nine empirical studies by sociology-influenced communication scholars, four employed just qualitative methods (including three ethnographies), while three others relied on quantitative methods (including two surveys). The two remaining articles mixed survey analysis with interviews (one) and focus groups (one).

Overall, the sociology-oriented work was far more likely to employ at least one qualitative method (70%) than the psychology-oriented work (13%). Like all methods, ethnography and open-ended interview-style approaches are partial and imperfect. Findings are far more dependent, for example, on the interpretive summaries generated by researchers. Samples are rarely representative. Methods like these, moreover, have trouble capturing those facets of social life (like international trade or policy making) that are not typically part of everyday lived experience.

But qualitative approaches tend to be more sensitive to the complexity of actual social experience than alternative methods. That same sensitivity to nuance and contradiction means that these studies rarely depend on simple cause-and-effect explanations. They also tend to be more self-reflexive about their own limitations. When supplemented by work focused on wider social and economic forces, qualitative approaches can generate findings more closely matched to the layered and interdependent social world they study.

### The social self

It is a core tenet of sociology that individual selfhood is produced within social relations – even if the individualism of the modern West denies those social origins (Elias 1978). George Herbert Mead's (1934) classic account of self-formation – centered on the social process of imagining oneself through others' eyes – is frequently cited in the sociology-oriented SNS/self literature. Mead's work on the self and significant symbols formed the core of the "symbolic interactionist" tradition named by Mead's student Herbert Blumer. Many of the SNS works under review are explicitly indebted to Mead and/or symbolic interactionism (e.g. J. Davis 2010, 2012; Farquhar 2012; Tufekci 2008a).

Crucial to a symbolic interactionist approach is the insight that the self-making process is ongoing, not confined to early childhood or adolescence. The self-concept of a Facebook user, in other words, is constantly revised as she or he makes sense of the reactions of others while posting, chatting, "stalking," and commenting (Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao 2009: 162). As Eden Litt (2012) has explored in a smart essay, the ambiguous composition of one's SNS audience leads many users to lean much more heavily on their imaginations of that audience – which then doubles back on their self-concepts and presentation choices (see also Marwick and boyd 2011). The "imagined audience" theme is taken in a slightly different direction by

Marwick (2012), who discusses the SNS-enhanced process of "social surveillance." Facebook users, assuming they are being watched by their peers, may internalize the "surveilled gaze" and adapt their self-presentation (and even sense of self) accordingly (381; see also Humphreys 2011: 577).

In her ethnographic study of Myspace, sociologist Jenny Davis (2010) draws on more recent self-oriented work in the symbolic interactionist tradition that emphasizes identity verification (e.g. Burke 2004). She reads her subjects' profile constructions as standing invitations for other users to validate and affirm their self-concepts. "By shaping how they are seen," she writes, "[users] are at the same time able to shape how they see themselves" (Davis 2010: 1116). Common to all these studies is the basic insight that the self is made and re-made through a dynamic process of interpreting others' impressions in SNS interaction – which, moreover, is treated as embedded in offline sociality.

Like so many others in the bibliography, the sociology-oriented studies frequently reference Goffman's dramaturgical approach to self-presentation. The engagement with Goffman's work is, however, notably deeper in many of these studies. A number of works adapt Goffman's situation-specific, audience-tailored theory of face-to-face self-performance to particular SNS features, most often (1) the desegregation of previously discrete audiences and/or (2) the reduction in apparently unintentional, "given-off" cues (e.g. Enli and Thumim 2012; Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis 2008; Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010). In one especially creative rethinking of Goffman, Bernie Hogan (2010) draws a contrast between self-presentations that occur in synchronous "situations" and those that happen in asynchronous "exhibitions." The world is "not only a stage," he writes, "but also a library and a gallery" (2010: 379). Hogan observes that much SNS activity revolves around the curation of exhibitions, comprised of reproducible "artifacts" like photos, updates, and comments. The curator is not, in the first instance at least, the user, but instead the algorithms (like Facebook's EdgeRank) that select and render visible self-oriented artifacts according to proprietary criteria.

### History

Sociology arguably came to self-consciousness as a field trying to make sense of rapid social changes associated with (western) modernity. In that sense, the discipline is fundamentally historical, grappling as it always has with what makes modern life distinctive.

This historical orientation is reflected in the far closer attention paid to modern developments like consumer capitalism in the sociology-inflected SNS/self literature.

Papacharissi and Gibson, for example, embed their discussion of privacy and SNSs in the "urban problem of modernity" (2011: 78). The relative anonymity of city life made certain kinds of privacy easier to maintain, but also helped compel self-disclosure and the performance of a distinctive self in the midst of the faceless crowd.

The growth of an advertising-saturated consumer economy in the late nineteenth century provided an affective repertoire to perform (and adorn) a distinct self. A number of SNS/self works cite scholars like Andrew Wernick (1991) and Zygmunt Bauman (e.g. 2005) to emphasize the premium placed on attention and visibility in consumer-oriented cultures (e.g. Dobson 2012; Hearn 2008; Schwarz 2010). On sites like Facebook, the "threat of invisibility" is often perceived as far more horrifying than the "threat of visibility" – which, as Tania Bucher (2012) observes, Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm exploits by encouraging a "participatory subjectivity" driven by the "constant possibility of disappearing and becoming obsolete" (1164).

One obviously relevant backdrop to SNS self-performance is the wider media culture, which emerged in tandem with a broader set of modern social changes, prominently including the consumer economy. Visual media like film and the glossy magazine co-developed in complicated ways with consumer subjectivity, as models of coveted visibility or as vehicles for anxiety-suffused, aspirational advertising. Sociology-oriented scholars in the SNS literature frequently refer to media-culture antecedents of Facebook self-performance, as well as the ongoing, dynamic interplay between mass-mediated fame and SNS "micro-celebrity" (Marwick and boyd 2011; Litt 2012; Papacharissi 2010; cf. Senft 2008). Mark Andrejevic's (2004, 2007) work on self-disclosure in reality TV and the "interactive" web is often applied to the SNS context (Trottier 2011; Humphreys 2011; Marwick 2012).

Ori Schwarz's brilliant ethnography of young SNS users details the "'borrowed' cultural model of advertisements" in many photographic self-presentations, complete with self-designed logos (2010: 168). Many users of Shox, an Israeli SNS, orient their self-performances around stardom: "successful users speak of themselves as 'celebrities.'" Friends are assembled on the site according to the "logic of the catalogue," with the stress on physical beauty. Users are presented as "multiple choices, like products of different brands seen

synchronically one besides the other on the shelf, a visual economy of abundance" (Schwarz 2010: 175).

A handful of articles stress the significance of relatively recent social and economic shifts that have intensified modern aspects of self. A new "reflexivity," in Giddens's (1991) terms, or "liquid modernity" in Bauman's (2005) more critical take, characterizes the self-making process in the contemporary West (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010; Robards and Bennett 2011). A few of the sociology-oriented works apply Ernest Sternberg's (1998) argument that the "ability to present oneself has become a critical economic asset" to SNS self-performance (1998: 5; Litt 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011). Alison Hearn (2008) draws together many of the themes, theories and cultural trends already highlighted in her sweeping account of self-branding on Facebook and elsewhere – a topic addressed by Marwick too in her graduate theses (2005, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Alone among the 179 works in the corpus, Jenny Davis's (2012) ethnography of Myspace users takes seriously the moral ideal of authenticity. She describes the tension between the labor of self-presentation and the felt demand for "authentic" self-expression. Many users, she found, feel compelled to conceal their labor in order to maintain an "authentic" front. Though Davis does not trace the history of authenticity as a resonant moral ideal, rich philosophical (C. Taylor 1989) and literary (Trilling 1972) studies exist to supplement her analysis. Though almost never cited in the SNS/self literature, scholarship on the history and sociology of the therapeutic ethos – by figures like Jackson Lears, Philip Rieff, Erich Fromm, Warren Susman, Christopher Lasch, and David Riesman – describes the twentieth-century consumer culture's contradictory embrace of the authenticity ethic. Facebook's affordances arguably enhance what I have elsewhere called "calculated authenticity" (Pooley 2010).

Taken together, this sociology-inflected SNS/self literature sharply challenges psychology-influenced work's ahistorical approach. Traits such as narcissism are not just borne by individuals but wax or wane according to broader cultural developments (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010). One implication is that even Goffman's dramaturgical approach is insufficiently historicized, and that psychological concepts like "self-monitoring" (Snyder 1974) and "public self-consciousness" (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975) would be enriched by taking modern promotional culture into account.

### Difference

The psychology-oriented literature tends to treat SNS users as generic individuals who bear some mix of otherwise unexamined dispositions and traits. But differences in social life are also patterned along racial, class, and gender lines. Power and agency are unevenly distributed – inequalities which are expressed, challenged, and reproduced on Facebook and other SNSs. Work on these themes, though comparatively more prominent, is still rare within the sociology-influenced SNS/self literature.

Communication scholar Andra Siibak (2009, 2010) has employed quantitative survey and content analysis to study gender on Rate, an Estonian SNS. Among young users she surveyed, girls were especially concerned with appearance and photographic self-portrait. Siibak concluded that girls' SNS selves are more often "built upon the self-beliefs, norms and values that are associated with the traditional female gender role." In a parallel study – a content analysis of males' profile photos in Rate's "Damn I'm Beautiful!" community – Siibak found that appearance-oriented norms, including advertising poses, were also prevalent among male youths. In this group, traditional masculinity mixed with "newer more androgynous forms of masculinity introduced by the consumer culture" (2009: 411). Another quantitative content analysis, this one of MySpace profiles (Magnuson and Dundes 2008), found that female users in a heterosexual relationship were far more likely to highlight their significant other than their male counterparts.

Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao (2009) mixed content analysis of Facebook profiles with in-person interviews in their study of racial self-presentation. They observe that racial self-identification is excluded from Facebook's core identity fields. Even so, African-American and Latino student-subjects – as well as those with sub-continental Indian ancestry – invested a great deal in their racialized identity claims on Facebook. By contrast, white students and those with Vietnamese ancestry showed far less involvement. The authors read this racial gap as a "certain resistance to the racial silencing of minorities by dominant color-blind ideologies of broader society where direct referencing of race remains taboo" (2009: 175).

Schwarz's Shox ethnography uses Bourdieu's capital/field formulation to study status distinction between user communities. He proposes a new, "corporeal" conception of capital, grounded in body self-representations on the site. For many younger users, trade

in sexualized self-imagery is an adaptive strategy by a less-educated group already stigmatized as vulgar. Corporeal capital is the currency they possess – a “last resort in the virtual sphere” (Schwarz 2010: 176). But a group of older, better-educated users marks the boundary of its community, in explicit contrast to the skin-exposing youth, through self-aware parody and direct dismissal. These users prefer text over photos, exchange compliments on higher-status cultural themes, and work to conceal the effort involved in their self-presentational work. With its focus on status and class, Schwarz’s study bears little resemblance to the Michigan State social capital literature.

Relations of power, tethered to pre-existing and offline inequalities, may get reinscribed on SNSs. A number of sociology-influenced studies draw on Eszter Hargittai’s (e.g. 2008) work on socially rooted disparities of technical skill and access (e.g. Litt 2012; Papacharissi and Gibson 2011). Others point to audience desegregation on ubiquitous sites like Facebook, which often place users in a shared interactive space with authority figures like parents and bosses (e.g. Marwick 2012; Tufekci 2008b).

Common to all these studies is a sensitivity to the uneven topography of social life, as expressed in the dynamic interaction of online and offline worlds.

#### Technology in context

Scholars with a sociological orientation are far more likely to reference the profit-seeking economic context in which almost all SNSs operate (e.g. Enli and Thumim 2012). Each site’s architectural features are designed by engineers within the commercial framework of their employers. For sociology-influenced researchers, this does not mean that a site’s affordances dictate user practice; in fact, many studies highlight creative adaptations by users that go on to shape the living technology (e.g. Lewis, Kaufman, and Chistakis 2008; Papacharissi and Gibson 2011). As discussed, wider cultural currents permeating modern selfhood predate the SNS phenomenon by a century or more – and, indeed, helped to inform site designs intended to appeal to a broad user base. Technology, culture, and economics cannot be neatly partitioned, nor can SNS self-oriented activity be considered their collective product (Papacharissi 2010: 306).

In her ethnographic study of Dodgeball, Lee Humphreys (2011) found that users, though savvy and careful about their visibility to other users, were unconcerned about the data-mining surveillance

conducted by Google, Dodgeball’s owner. As Marwick observes, “Most social media users are less concerned with governments or corporations watching their online activities than key members of their extended network” (2012: 379). A few studies point to the value-producing “labor” invested by SNS users in performing their selves, which SNSs translate into revenue in the form of micro-targeted advertising (e.g. Hearn 2008; Schwarz 2012; cf. Andrejevic 2010). Ripe for analysis in symbolic interactionist terms is the possibility that users’ self-concepts are altered as they consume advertisements that they assume reflect their SNS activity.

Bucher’s (2012) superb study of Facebook’s EdgeRank algorithm – the proprietary formula that filters the content appearing in users’ News Feeds – is unusual for its focus on the subtle interplay between technology and self-presentational practices. Facebook’s EdgeRank apparently favors status updates that attract comments and other forms of engagement. By dangling the threat of invisibility, Facebook encourages a “participatory subject” through its algorithmic bias. The same filtering logic renders a certain kind of engagement-oriented update more visible, in the process modeling that brand of self-presentation to users.

A second Schwarz study (2012), comprising several SNS-related case studies, develops an argument of similar sophistication. SNS users, already influenced by promotional culture, interact with sites’ affordances in such a way that their self-marketing takes on a new character. The ability to record and display durable “objects” – witty status updates, party photos – has helped transform many users into what Schwarz calls the “new hunter-gatherers.” Armed with camera-phones and highly attuned to display-worthy experiences, many users live their lives poised to “record and collect valuable moments . . . in order to gain ratings, attention and recognition, and to maintain ties with acquaintances” (2012: 82). Schwarz calls this new attentiveness the “exploitation of the present,” the real-time search for recordable experience to display online. The “hunter-gatherer of the everyday” comes to view face-to-face encounters as potential resources for SNS sharing.

Bucher and Schwarz exemplify a sociological approach to SNSs as socially shaped technologies that intensify – even as they alter – existing norms of self-performance. One notable lacuna, however, is memory. Recent changes to Facebook, including the shift to narrative “Timeline” profiles, call out for contributions from the sociology of memory (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011).

### Conclusion

This review – focused on the comparative influence of psychology and sociology within SNS/self research – has neglected the contributions of other disciplines, including communication research that did not meet the “influenced” criteria for either sociology or psychology. The relatively glowing picture of sociology presented here also needs qualification. Despite the promise of the discussed studies, the potential contributions of sociology to SNS work remain mostly unfulfilled. Media research, abandoned in the 1960s, is still an afterthought for most sociologists, despite the obvious centrality of mediated communication to contemporary social life (Peters and Pooley 2012). The discipline’s incentive structure frustrates those few scholars taking active interest in media sociology. Publishing outlets are nonexistent; only one among the top twenty ranked departments has an explicit track devoted to media inquiry. In the case of SNS research, relevant streams of scholarship are segregated across at least five relatively insular American Sociological Association (ASA) sections. The rich heritage of work on the sociology of the self (Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010) is begging for more serious application to the SNS context.

This chapter’s harsh assessment of psychological work on SNSs and the self might be tempered too. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect a social psychologist conducting a controlled experiment on Facebook self-disclosure to incorporate the history of western individualism into her analysis. Nevertheless, these broader themes are compatible with mainstream psychological approaches, as evidenced by creative work that draws connections between SNS self-disclosure and the wider culture of mediated celebrity (Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen 2012). At the very least, limitations of method and approach could be explicitly articulated.

The study of SNS selfhood would certainly benefit from a great deal more sociology. The discipline’s existing marginality is lamentable, but the area – like its object of study – is still young. Sociology has the unique, if quixotic, virtue of attempting to grasp social life as a whole, in all its impossible complexity. A small number of sociologists and sociologically inclined communication scholars are already bringing a different perspective to social media research. They are too few.

### Notes

- 1 Due to space constraints, the full corpus could not be published here. A PDF bibliography of the corpus is available for download at <http://jeff-pooley.com/pubs/data/sociology-SNS-self-bibliography.pdf>.
- 2 For reasons discussed, theses and dissertations were not included in the bibliographic analysis.

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