

# College Students, Social Media, Digital Identities, and the Digitized Self

Author: Paul Gordon Brown

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:105053>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2016

Copyright is held by the author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>).

Boston College  
Lynch School of Education  
Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education  
Program in Higher Education

COLLEGE STUDENTS, SOCIAL MEDIA,  
DIGITAL IDENTITIES, AND THE DIGITIZED SELF

Dissertation

By

PAUL GORDON BROWN

submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

May 2016



# College Students, Social Media, Digital Identities, and the Digitized Self

By

Paul Gordon Brown

Dr. Karen Arnold, Dissertation Chair

## ABSTRACT

Social media and digital technologies are ever present in the surround of current traditionally-aged college students. Although research into understanding these experiences is increasing, there is a need for further research into what may be developmentally different for this generation. Postmodern theorists have posited that as a result of digitization, traditional conceptualizations of selfhood and identity may be changing. The contexts and affordances of these technologies are having an impact on human development and contemporary college students are uniquely situated to experience their effects.

This qualitative study aimed to understand how these college students conceptualize their sense of self and identity as a result of digital and social media immersion. In particular, this study explored aspects of digital identity and digitized selfhood to surface important behaviors and developmental processes that are being impacted. Sixteen traditionally-aged college students, primarily in their fourth year of college, participated in a series of interviews and observations to probe this question and were selected as exceptional cases for their heavy usage of social technology. During

this process, students were asked about how they conceived of their identity and identities online and how it impacted their overall sense of self.

Findings for this study did not reveal fully realized postmodern conceptions of selfhood, such as Kenneth Gergen's (2009) relational self, but participants did demonstrate understandings of selfhood and identity that hinted at this possibility, including what Robert Kegan (1994) would characterize as fifth order consciousness. Identities were found to be subject to contextual and relational processes that required constant maintenance and reconstruction. Additional findings uncovered college student developmental patterns that reach from being externally defined, and beholden to the views of others, towards internal definition, whereby students made conscious choices about social media use. Implications for practice include the need to educate students on digital reputation and identities, the importance of reflection and goal setting in relation to social media, and the necessity to partner with students as our collective understanding of technology evolves.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, the individual who should be acknowledged most in the production of this dissertation is my Chair, Advisor, and friend, Dr. Karen Arnold. It was through Karen's challenge and support throughout this process that I was able to achieve this milestone. Her strong intellect coupled with her care and support was invaluable.

I would also like to acknowledge the other members of my committee for their support, including Dr. Heather Rowan Kenyon and Dr. Gerald Kane. They both provided the knowledge and encouragement that allowed me to see this through. I am thankful for the time and care they took in providing feedback to make this dissertation the best it could be.

In many ways, it takes a village to complete a dissertation and I am eternally grateful to my doctoral cohort at Boston College for being partners on this journey with me. Adam Gismondi, Jessica Pesce, Dave Stanfield, and Adam Poluzzi, you were always there when I needed you. I'd also like to thank my fellow digital and social technology researchers for inspiring me and helping me think through important concepts. Josie Ahlquist, Edmund Cabellon, Paul Eaton, and Laura Pasquini are all contributing to this field in immeasurable ways and all have elevated the dialogue around the topics presented here.

None of this would have been possible without my family members to ground me. My father, Gordon, and my mother, Jean, have always supported my academics and taught and encouraged me to be a lifelong learner from an early age. They gave me space to be whoever I wanted to be. My sister, Leslie, and my brother-in-law, Bruce Myren, were always there when I needed them.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge and dedicate this dissertation to all of the people I met along this journey. In many ways, the doctoral process for me was a time for self-discovery. It was through my social media love affair with JetBlue Airways that I reconnected with old friends and made some new ones. These people are far too numerous to mention. You know who you are and what you mean to me. You opened up your homes to me and your guidance and advice were always a text message away.

Here's to new adventures!

*"Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.  
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!"  
- Unknown*

## College Students, Social Media, Digital Identities and the Digitized Self

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter One: The Problem of College Students, Social Media, and the Self</b>	<b>1</b>
Overview of the Study	2
Research Aims and Question	4
Research Purpose and Scope	5
Research Perspective	7
Key Concepts	9
Digital Identity and Self-Presentation	9
Online Identification: Anonymity, Pseudoanonymity, and “True” Identity	11
Digitized Selfhood and Development	12
Affordances and Functionalities	15
Research Significance and Rationale	16
Returning to the Research Question	18
Conclusion	20
 <b>Chapter Two: Social Media and College Students</b>	 <b>21</b>
Digital and Social Technologies and the Social and Participatory Web	22
Web 2.0	23
User-Generated Content and Microcontent	24
Social Media	26
Folksonomies and the Social Graph	27
Definitions: Social and Digital Technology	29
Social and Digital Technology Use and Adoption	31
Internet Usage and Device Ownership	31
Social Media Usage	33
College Student Learning and Development With Social Media	35
Theories and Frames	35
Constructivism and Co-Constructivism	36
Connectivism	38
Critical Theory	40
Usage of Frames and Theories	41
State of the Literature	42
Formal Versus Informal Learning	43
Academic Life	45
College Student Life Online	48
Qualitative Research	50
Conclusion	53
 <b>Chapter 3: Postmodernity and a Changing View of the Self</b>	 <b>55</b>
Young Adulthood and the College Years	56
Developing an Identity and a Self	57
Entering Postmodernity	58
The Self: Saturated and Fragmented, Fluid and Fused	60

Identity Fluidity	63
Fusion with Technology	64
The Self: Connected and Networked	66
The Postmodern Self	67
Evidence and Implications for a Generation	68
Conclusion	70
<b>Chapter 4: Methodology</b>	<b>72</b>
Definitions of Self and Identity	73
Research Question	74
Qualitative Research	74
Grounded theory	75
Conceptual Framework	78
Pilot Study	82
Research Design	84
Population and sampling	85
Data gathering procedures	88
Participant Recruitment	89
Pre-Interview Questionnaire	89
Instrument	91
Interviews	91
Protocol	93
Observations	94
Protocol	94
Data Analysis	95
Validity	97
Ethical Considerations	100
Positionality/Reflexivity	101
Limitations	103
Conclusion	105
<b>Chapter 5: Findings</b>	<b>106</b>
Participants	107
Technology Usage	107
Demographics	111
Curated Profiles And Digital Identities Online	114
Being Seen By Others	114
Context Collapse	116
A Selective View Of “Reality”	119
Curating Perfected Images	121
The Importance Of Likes	123
Deciding On The Perfect Photo	128
Perfection By Omission	129
Consuming Perfected Images	132
Fear Of Missing Out	133
Psychological Impact	135

Developmental Patterns Over Time	136
The Pre-College Years	137
The Post-College Years	141
Emergence Of Digitized Development and Selfhood	143
In Real Life Versus True Self	145
Digitized Selfhood.	147
Heavy Usage Versus Integration	147
One Self Versus Multiple Selves	149
The “Real” You?	151
Analogies.	153
Lower Integration Analogies	155
Slide Projector	155
Outfits, Coats, and Masks	156
Parallel Tracks	157
Higher Integration Analogies	158
Chameleon	158
Octopus	159
Horcruxes	160
Conclusion	161
<b>Chapter 6: Educational Potentials And Implications for Practice</b>	<b>164</b>
The Potential Of Social Media For Learning and Development	165
Educating For Digital Identities	167
Reputation and Rules	167
The Importance Of Reflection	172
Resetting One’s Relationship With Social Media	176
On Authenticity, Being Genuine, And Being Vulnerable	180
Helping Students Navigate Digitized Development	184
Understanding The Technology	185
Discussions Across Generational Lines	186
The Positive Effects Of Social Media	188
Conclusion	191
<b>Chapter 7: Conclusion</b>	<b>193</b>
Findings and Interpretations	195
Digital Identities And Digitized Development	197
Digital Identities	197
Digitized Development	205
Digitized selfhood	208
Summary	211
Limitations	213
Implications for Practice	214
A Future Research Agenda	217
Conclusion	220
<b>References</b>	<b>223</b>

**Appendices**

Appendix A: Interview Survey	237
Appendix B: Interview 1 Protocol	238
Appendix C: Observation Protocol	240
Appendix D: Interview 2 Protocol	242

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Participant Social Media Use Summary	108
Table 2: Participant Social Media Use Detail	110
Table 3: Participant Demographics	112
Table 4: Analogies of Digitized Selfhood and Digital Identity	154
Figure 1: Digital Identities and Digitized Development	204
Figure 2: Moving From External to Internal Definition	207
Figure 3: Technology Usage, Digitized Development, and Digitized Selfhood	212

## **Chapter 1: The Problem of College Students, Social Media, and the Self**

The use of tools and technology has always impacted the way human beings behave and interact with each other and with their environments. More recent advancements in social and digital technologies, however, present an interesting new reality. Social and digital technologies, and by extension, social media, are the means by which people connect online for the creation, sharing and exchanging of ideas, information and content. As a result of the rapid ascent of these technologies in recent years, social and digital technologies have been quickly integrated into daily life and society is increasingly dependent upon them. The rise of mobile technologies, the smartphone in particular, has made this pervasiveness ever-present and increasingly intimate. In essence, we are “always on and always connected.” We are able to share information, ideas, and communicate rapidly and on the go. We are able to accomplish previously complex tasks with speed and ease. The influence of social and digital technologies extends beyond just our external actions and behaviors, however, and also includes our internal life—how we conceptualize who we are.

It is this phrase, “how we conceptualize who we are,” that is at the heart of this research. Identity and our sense of self may look different in digital social media spaces. Existing as digital spaces, these technologies provide new affordances, or opportunities for action, that were previously not possible in the physical world. Existing as social spaces, these technologies are not isolated to the individual, and are not just tools. These technologies create spaces in which individuals can communicate, collaborate, and learn and spaces where individuals interact, create and maintain relationships, and construct identities. These spaces are made up of systems, contexts, and webs of meaning. It is this

set of unique properties, the digital and the social, which has the most profound implications for how we conceive of ourselves. Social and digital technologies are impacting how we think, how we act, and, perhaps even who we are.

### **Overview of the Study**

The current generation of traditionally-aged college students in the United States, those 18 to 24 years old, grew up at a unique point in history, a time period defined by the ascendance of social media. Social media—typified by such currently popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Snapchat—have been consistently present for this generation. For today’s college students, technology is completely integrated into their lives. As of 2014, approximately 90% of college students own laptops, 80% own smartphones, and 50% own tablets (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013). Approximately 92% of college students are online and 88% engage in social media (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). Furthermore, research demonstrates that college students using social media are accessing it frequently, multiple times a day (e.g. Junco, Heiberger & Loken 2011; Junco, 2012b; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). This generation is immersed in digital and social media technologies more, and more frequently, than any other demographic group (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011).

These college students are also the first generation born after the invention of the Internet. They are the first generation to experience their entire teenage years with social media in their surround, and they are the first generation to arrive at college largely already familiar with social technology. For this generation, the World Wide Web (Web) and social media are a fact of life that has always existed. Although this does not

necessarily entail that these students possessed equal access to the Web growing up, or that they are equally savvy in its use, these students have nevertheless grown up surrounded by maturing social and digital technologies. Strauss and Howe (2000) referred to this generation as “Millenials,” but this generation has also been given a number of tech-centric labels including: the “net-generation” (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007), and “homo zappiens” (Veen & Vrakking, 2006). These labels are an attempt to demonstrate how this age group has experienced a very different way of living as a result of their growing up alongside digital and social technology.

In order to be effective educational partners for this generation, college student educators must better understand the impact of technology and social media on student learning and development. As will be in discussed in Chapters Two and Three, a number of researchers have studied social and digital technology usage by and its impact on college students through the use of quantitative research methodologies. Although not directly applied to college students, research originating in other fields can also guide educators in understating college student development online. This quantitative research has contributed to a more clear understanding of how social and digital technologies, as tools, are impacting educational and related outcomes such as campus engagement and academic grades.

This research, however, only tells part of the story. Studying technology’s impact from a qualitative perspective, a number of researchers have begun to provide insight into the lives of college students online. Discussed in further detail in Chapters Two and Three, a number of these researchers are important to note as forerunners in this line of inquiry. Sherry Turkle, a sociologist at MIT, has been broadly researching the

relationship between human beings and the technology they use. Although not focused on college students explicitly, Turkle's work provides a frame for understanding what is occurring. danah boyd (2014), author of *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*, operates in a similar vein, but focuses more squarely on what is occurring to emerging adults in their teenage years. Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009), earlier on in the ascendance of social media, focused on a college going population with their book, *Online social networking on campus: Understanding what matters in student cultures*. Furthermore, a number of emerging doctoral researchers in higher education tackled this topic from a number of perspectives: Josie Ahlquist (2015) researched how social media impact the leadership development of college students, Adam Gismondi (2015) examined how social media relate to college students' civic engagement, and Paul Eaton (2015) explored how college students are developing online.

**Research aims and question.** The following study attempts to inform a qualitative understanding of this generation and their relationship with digital and social technologies. It aims to study what Sherry Turkle (2004) identified as “not only what the computer was doing *for* us, but what it was doing *to* us [emphasis added]” (para. 6). When digital and special technologies are understood in terms of affordances and spaces, it becomes increasingly evident that entire parts of this generation's life need to be better understood. Specifically, it focuses on a central feature of many development theories, the concept of self and identity, and attempts to understand how college students construct and make meaning of these concepts in digital and social media. In these new environments, where social and digital technologies are omnipresent, the boundaries between virtual and physical spaces, relationships, and contexts are increasingly blurred.

Prior societal rules and methods of organizing, relating, and working are changing. As a result, students must navigate complex environments. Mobile technologies, like smartphones, are also increasing the pace and frequency at which students must make sense of these new realities “on the fly.” The pervasiveness of social and digital technology, along with the demand that students nimbly navigate the contexts and environments created by these technologies, may be impacting students’ sense of self and identity—a critical exploration for which college student educators can serve as guides and stewards. To aide educators in helping students along their own journeys of self-discovery, more must be known about the impact of social and digital technology and its intersections with human development. Towards this end, this research asks one fundamental question: How do college students conceptualize who they are and how they present themselves when they are engaged in digital and social media?

**Research purpose and scope.** The research undertaken here is meant to be broad and exploratory in nature. As Reynol Junco (2014) points out, “very little attention has been given to how social media influence student development, although these sites and services are central to the lives of our students” (p. 95). Given the need for further qualitative research in this area, this study provides broad schemas for understanding. It recognized the limitations of our current knowledge and presents opportunities for further inquiry. It does not and cannot account for the myriad of different demographic factors that may influence these conceptualizations, but it does not discount them as unimportant. On the contrary, it is presented as a starting point toward deeper understanding. Subsequent researchers may wish to look at how conceptualizations of self and identity online may look different for different groups—such as individuals who are transgender,

individuals of varying ability statuses, and individuals of different races. The present study should hopefully serve as a starting place as opposed to an end point.

This research also builds on the developmental theories that precede it, although no specific theories are assumed nor were any explicitly set out to be tested. In the course of research, developmental patterns emerged that aligned with many of these theories but data also hinted at situations where existing theory may need to be modified or may not be applicable. In light of this, there may need to be revisions to existing theory as college students increasingly live part of their lives online. However, there are differing views on whether these developmental theories are universal and unchanging or whether these theories should be adapted, updated or revised with shifting times and contexts. In the leading textbook *Student Development in College* (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), the authors call attention to the perspectives of these two systems of belief. Under the universalist paradigm, where theory is assumed to be unchanging, Haskins (1957) states that human development:

remain[s] much the same from age to age and must so remain as long as human nature and physical environment continue what they have been. In his relations to life and learning the medieval student resembled his modern successor far more than is often supposed. (p. 193)

Under this belief system, traditional theories are equally as applicable to contemporary students as they were to the students under study at the time they were developed. Evans et al. (2010), however, contrast Haskins' (1957) assertion with the contrarian perspective of Woodard, Love, and Komives (2000) who believe that changing societal conditions and altered environments have created unique circumstances that require developmental theories to be constantly re-evaluated for applicability. Given the broad ranging impact of social and digital technologies, this claim is worthy of

investigation. Furthermore, under Haskins' (1957) caveat that the "physical environment" needs to continue as it has been in order for a theory to remain universal, it is possible that disruptive digital and social technologies, with their introduction of virtual environments, have altered the human environment to such an extent that traditional theories of student development might no longer hold. The physical environment is now accompanied by virtual worlds and the lines between the two are becoming increasingly blurred.

Therefore, this research attempts to understand college student interaction with social and digital technologies as not just a life stage event, or interactions that can be explained within the application of existing theory, but also as a potential space for evolutionary or revolutionary change. College student behaviors online both correlate with and begin to break away from traditional patterns of developmental theory. This research attempts to honor both, attempting to highlight traditional theory patterns while also exposing potential areas where theories may not apply or may need to be revised. While it will require further research that goes beyond what is presented here, it is worth noting that the conceptualization of self and identity in digital and social media may represent something wholly new, not captured by the theories that were developed prior to the advent of these technologies.

**Research's perspective.** Contemporary traditionally-aged college students are different than previous generations in that they have grown up alongside social and digital technologies their entire lives. As a researcher who is not part of this generation, I recognize that my perspective on technology, and this generation's use of it, matters in how it is presented and understood in this study. Writing in 2001, Prensky developed a

useful, albeit problematic, distinction between the current generation (the subject of this study) and those generations before it (that of the researcher). Digital natives, the emerging generation, are considered “native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). They are the current traditionally-aged students at colleges and universities. Digital immigrants, those born during a pre-Internet or pre-Web age, are strangers to these technologies. Digital immigrants learn to adapt to this new environment and are socialized into it differently than digital natives. This results in the retention of an immigrant “accent” when approaching new digital and social technologies. Digital immigrants turn towards older methods and ways of acting first, with digital and social tools as secondary, rather than primary or native tools (Prensky, 2001, p.2).

In the case of this study, I, as the researcher, recognize that although I possess a high degree of knowledge of and immersion in social and digital technologies, I have nevertheless experienced it differently than my participants. This study attempts to understand the experience of social and digital technologies from the students’ perspective. The digital immigrant/digital native concept, however, must be applied with a few caveats. Imbedded within these concepts, is a belief that all students, just by virtue of the time when they were born, possess a digital mindset and skill set. As Junco (2014) points out, this glosses over inequality in access to technology and varying levels of use and sophistication—an assertion that became evident over the course of this research. Some students did not have social media accounts until later in their teenage years—either due to parental restrictions or lack of access to technology—and students also displayed varying levels of immersion with technology and sophistication in its use.

Additionally, the digital native/immigrant concepts are culturally dependent, based on societal access to technology, and are ambiguous in their demarcations as to what qualifies as “digital technology.”

Cabellon and Junco (2015) propose a more useful distinction between an “adult normative” perspective and a “youth normative perspective,” as opposed to that of the digital immigrant and the digital native:

Generally, an *adult normative* perspective reflects an adult viewpoint, marked by a prescriptive approach, highlighted by negative beliefs, where the sole source of information is from themselves. Those who engage in the *adult normative* perspective often believe popular media’s negative portrayals of youth technology use. Conversely, a *youth normative* perspective reflects a youth-centered viewpoint, marked by an inquisitive approach, highlighted by balanced beliefs, where the primary source of information is from youth themselves. (p. 53)

For Junco (2014), the adult normative perspective:

takes a prescriptive and authoritarian approach to understanding youth social media use. Values related to the adult normative perspective include beliefs that social media use “ruins” young people’s ability to have “normal” relationships. It is often propagated through media accounts of how terrible social media are for young people. (p. xix)

The youth normative perspective “attempts to understand young people’s experiences through their viewpoint” (Junco, 2014, p. xix). Under this perspective, actions and behaviors by the current generation of college students are not, per se, “better” or “worse” than those that came before them, but perhaps just different. This is not to deny that digital and social technologies might privilege or cause to happen certain consequences that might be positive or negative for the students’ developmental growth and functioning in society. However, it does highlight the need to critically examine what one means by “better” or “worse” in relationship to traditional concepts such as engagement, academic performance, and social capital acquisition. Students are better

served by understanding how digital and social technologies open them up to doing new things and doing them differently than their predecessors rather than passing immediate judgment as measured by older paradigms of acceptable and productive behavior. To the extent possible, this research adopts this non-judgmental perspective.

### **Key Concepts**

Discussions about how college students may conceptualize self and identity online are not new, but researching how they do it is still developing. Over the course of this research, it quickly became evident that terms used informally in discussing these concepts within college student educator circles were ill-defined and loosely applied. In order to bring clarity to this and future research, definition of key terms is necessary. Terms like “digital identity” need a more specific understanding, “online identification” needs to be clearly understood, and a new term – “digitized selfhood” will need to be defined. Although all are present in this study, the terms describe different but related phenomenon. An understanding of this distinction is critical to advancing research in this area.

**Digital identity and self-presentation.** The term “digital identity” has frequently occurred informally as a point of discussion amongst college student educators and yet there has been little consensus (and even greater confusion) surrounding what the term means. One of the few instances of digital identity being discussed in the formal college student educator literature occurred in a special issue of the *Journal of College and Character*. The authors, Dalton and Crosby (2013), defined digital identity as “the composite of images that individuals present, share, and promote for themselves in the digital domain” (p. 1). They reference a blog post from Eric Stoller (2012) who argued

“social media have become so engaging for young people that a new dimension of personal identity development has evolved” (Dalton & Crosby, 2013, p. 1). Stoller (2013) further states, self-referentially, that “digital identity development is relatively new to the student affairs social media conversation” (p. 8), but then proceeds to discuss concepts of personal branding and reputation online, something different than what the term “digital identity development” may imply.

Unfortunately what occurs here, and often occurs elsewhere in the use of this term, is a conflation of the psychological processes of development and the crafting of the social media content. Although this content might *represent* an identity, and might be generated as a part of identity exploration, the content itself is not developmental. One’s data does not have a psychological life. The word development is used in both instances but in different ways. It confuses the process of developing (exploring) identity online with the process of developing (crafting) an online identity. Junco (2014) succinctly summed up the problem with this definition and outlines its implications:

Many student affairs professionals use the term digital identity development to refer to online professional self-presentation; however, it is important to tease apart the differences between using social media as part of the exploration and development of identity and using social media to present oneself in a certain way. Labeling the latter digital identity development confounds a developmental process with a professional communication strategy. Furthermore, labeling online professional self-presentation digital identity development may keep the field of student affairs from more critically and deeply examining how the emerging adult identity development process is affected by online interactions. (p. 257)

For these reasons, the term “digital identity” is largely avoided in this research, but when used, refers solely to one’s digital reputation and self-presentation to others. As such, the term “digital identity development” will be used sparingly in this research. This is to avoid conflating “self presentation,” or “the conscious or unconscious process

by which people try to influence the perception of their image, typically through social interactions,” with developmental processes (Junco, 2014, p. 111). Although developmental processes may influence one’s digital identity and presentation, digital identity is not, itself, developmental. In this study, how students choose to present themselves will play an important factor in how they conceive of themselves online. Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) recognized these aspects of identity play when stating the online profile “is and isn’t the student user” (p. 23).

**Online identification: Anonymity, pseudoanonymity, and “true” identity.** A further salient concept that Junco (2014) introduces is the term “online identification,” or the ways in which individuals choose to present their identity in social and digital contexts. In digital spaces, unlike what was possible in physical world-only spaces, users can choose to reveal themselves or not to varying degrees and can have one or multiple online identities. Junco (2014) describes three levels of online identity expression including anonymity, pseudoanonymity, and true identity. Each of these levels represents increasing degrees of revealing oneself and the extent to which they can be tied to an individual in the physical world (Junco, 2014). Anonymity is the complete absence or inability to tie a profile, posting or action back to a physical-world person. Pseudoanonymity includes the adoption of a persona or partial revealing of one’s physical self. True identity lacks any attempt at obscuring that the online profile, post, or action is tied to a specific physical-world individual.

In the digital space, as discussed earlier, there can be a range of possible identity expressions. These hold to one’s physical identity to varying degrees. The subject of this research questions what these boundaries are, if they even exist, and how students in

digital and social contexts experience them. This might result in the need to either accommodate or understand these new instantiations of student development from within existing theory or question whether these theories are still applicable at all. As stated earlier, this research attempts to understand the impacts of social and digital technologies not just under applications of existing theory, but also as a space where fundamental change may be occurring to the premises and assumptions of these theories.

**Digitized selfhood and development.** Arising out of this study, and explained in further detail in the presentation of results in Chapters Five and Six, is the extent to which the level of one's immersion with digital and social media impacts how one conceptualizes self and identity. Traditional developmental theories dating back to Erik Erikson (1968) posit that development bends towards the creation of a single stable identity consistent across contexts. The stable single self, the consciousness of this identity, is the final goal of development. In the context of the digital world, however, one is presented with the possibility of constructing multiple identities, identities that may or may not be commensurate with each other. The virtual nature of these technologies, and their existence as spaces, allows for unique instances of identity play and calls into question whether a single stable self is, or ever was, possible or even desirable.

If these technologies shape our reality, or more specifically change or expand what Haskins' (1957) referred to as our "physical environment," it might also follow that they are changing developmental processes and goals. Viewing social and digital technologies in this way calls into question traditional theories of development and hints at new ways of conceptualizing multiple or fragmented identities. Postmodern

formulations of self and identity follow this same line of argument as they understand “selves” to be “saturated” (Gergen, 2011), “fragmented” (Seider & Gardner, 2009), and “fluid” (Côté, 2005).

Social and digital technologies enable identity play by allowing individuals to create different online personas and digital identities. An individual might have multiple personas or identities: some anonymous, some pseudoanonymous, and some explicitly tied to their “true” physical-world selves. Individuals can switch between these personas and different social and digital spaces rapidly through smartphone or other technologies that let them move between one network or application (app) and another within a matter of minutes. Online personas are seemingly more fluid than what was possible when the physical world was the only space available.

Through the course of this study, it became evident that the extent to which participants integrated technology into their lives, and the intimacy with which they interacted with it, had an impact in how they conceived of themselves and their identities. Noted here, and explored in further detail later in this study, the notion of “digitized selfhood” becomes important. The term “digitized selfhood” denotes the extent to which individuals see their digital world selves as part of, or separate from, their physical world selves. The term “digitized” is used instead of “digital” to express that this occurs on a continuum. Digitization is the extent to which individuals see themselves as living their lives in digital spaces. Individuals may use technology to varying degrees, but they also integrate it into their lives to differing extents. Those with more intimate relationships with technology tended to conceptualize their self and identities differently than might have previously been seen in physical-world-only contexts. Digitized selfhood, as

opposed to digital identity, is deeper notion about how individuals conceive of themselves online and off, and the relationship between their various identities. This is in contrast to a view of digital identity reputation, presentation, and how one is viewed by others.

*Affordances and functionalities.* The blurring of the digital and physical worlds also coincides with the new affordances and functionalities enabled by digital and social technologies. These technologies give humans capabilities that were not previously available under physical world constraints (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). They are new abilities that may also lead to a reimagining of theory. As Majchrzak (2009) notes, understanding social and digital technologies “in terms of affordances, functionalities, and behavioral use patterns... [can] help us derive new theories or refine our existing theories” (Majchrzak, 2009, p. 18). In other words, “these new tools... provide users... with the capabilities that allow them to act and interact with each other in novel ways that are difficult or were impossible to do in earlier online or offline settings” (Kane et al., 2014, p. 276). Furthermore, “these novel capabilities may undermine or violate the assumptions of established theory, potentially requiring researchers to adapt these theories for application to social media settings or possibly develop new ones” (Kane et al., 2014, p. 276).

In her research, danah boyd (2014) noted that digital and social environments have different characteristics than those of “traditional physical public spaces” and that four affordances in particular are of note within these virtual environments, including “persistence: the durability of online expressions and content; visibility: the potential audience who can bear witness; spreadability: the ease with which content can be shared;

and searchability: the ability to find content” (p. 11). All four of these affordances became evident in this study over the course of participant interviews. It is these affordances provided by technology that are far more important than the specific technologies, apps and websites popular today. In virtue of digital and social technologies’ structure and structuring capabilities, the affordances of these technologies are changing the way humans behave and interact.

### **Research Significance and Rationale**

In order to be effective learning partners for this generation, student affairs professionals and college student educators must better understand the impact of technology and social media on student learning and development without the bias of adult normative perspective and strict development theory paradigmatic constraints. This understanding can help inform how educational practices may need to change. Current quantitative research, which is reviewed in Chapter Two, is useful in understanding correlations between student social and digital technology use and desirable outcomes such as campus engagement, social capital acquisition, investigative behaviors, and learning and comprehension. These outcomes have the ability to increase retention rates, degree completion rates, and elevate overall educational quality. What these outcomes do not do, however, is provide an understanding of *how* the developmental and learning process might change as a result of digital and social technology’s ascendance.

The current practice and the effects of social and digital technology use is important, but equally important is a critical look at the underlying processes at work. Without a critical examination of assumptions about how learning and development are impacted by these new technologies, theory and practice are merely treating the effects

without an understanding of their underlying causes. Central to contemporary understandings of learning and development is the creation of identity and the construction of self. Understanding how these processes play out or might look different will lead to better and more informed research and potentially new areas and ways of framing learning and development.

This research also aims to inform approaches to student development in social and digital spaces that might allow for the achievement of deeper transformative learning. Calls for this type of learning have been increasingly frequent as seen through joint statements from multiple higher education associations. These include *The Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1996), *Powerful partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Student Learning* (AAHE, ACPA, & NASPA, 1998), *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004), and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006). These documents come from the major professional organizations for college student educators, chiefly the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), but also including the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I), the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) and the National Intramural-Recreation Sports Association (NIRSA). These statements, with near-universal adoption by the major professional associations in higher education and college student affairs work, carry significant weight in how to structure and develop learning opportunities for college students. Digital and social technologies, as relatively new developments, allow

for the reformulation and transformation of educational practices that can better serve these ends.

In their widely cited work, *Learning Partnerships*, Baxter Magolda and King (2004) provide a model for the creation of these types of transformative learning environments. The creation of “learning partnerships,” or co-constructed mutually beneficial teacher-learner relationships, requires “becoming critically aware of one’s one composing of reality” (Parks, 2000, p. 6) and movement towards self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Kegan, 1994). Although this model of learning partnerships was developed prior to or at least during the nascent rise of social and digital technology, the method of mutual co-construction of meaning toward learning and developmental aims remains applicable. This research, which aims to work in concert with prior research, attempts to provide a better fundamental frame of understanding that will allow educators to engage with social and digital technology-using students in a more sophisticated and strategic manner towards learning partnerships. It goes beyond the physical world application of a tool, however, and into the inner life of a student’s understanding of these tools and their conceptualizations of themselves online. This will allow for more educationally purposive endeavors as directed by educators resulting in deeper transformative learning for students.

### **Returning to The Research Question**

The following research undertakes a process of inquiry under three initial assumptions. Outlined in this chapter, it is assumed that: (1) processes of development might change over historical time and are not universal, (2) current traditionally-aged college students in the United States grew up with social and digital technologies in their

surround, but that their skill sets are diverse and still evolving, and (3) value judgments placed on youth use of digital and social technologies must be understood within a youth-centered context and with a critical examination of traditionally held beliefs. From this basis, this research assumes three premises: (1) that the introduction of digital spaces has changed the human environment, (2) that these social and digital technologies are transformative and privileging new ways of being, acting and knowing, and (3) that current theories of student development remain applicable but must also be questioned in light of changing conditions.

This research attempts to understand the impact of social media and digital technologies on traditionally-aged 18-24 year old college students. Specifically, it provides insight into these students' digital lives and examines how traditional theories of development, particularly as they relate to the construction of concepts of identity and self, may or may not hold in these new environments. Specifically, this study asks:

How do college students conceptualize who they are and how they present themselves when they are engaged in digital and social media?

This qualitative study examines the experience of college students through a series of interviews and observations probing the students' understanding of their identities and how their senses of self manifest in digital and social environments. A sample was drawn from students who are heavy users and sophisticated in their navigation of digital and social spaces to understand how developmental and learning processes might be changing and may change in the future. Forward-looking, this research applies grounded theory methodologies to construct an understanding of students' digital and social experiences, how these understandings relate to the students

physical world experiences, and whether and/or how students reconcile the two. This understanding will help inform future avenues for research and implications for practice on how college student educators should approach educational opportunities for future generations of students.

## **Conclusion**

With the initial reasoning and rationale established for this study, the next chapter provides a review of existing literature on college students and their interactions with and the effects of digital and social technologies. Following this review, Chapter Three provides a theoretical grounding for understanding postmodern conceptions of the self. Furthermore, it explores the increasing intimacy between technology and human beings, and the potential ramifications of this intimacy. Chapter Four provides an overview of the qualitative methods utilized in this study as well as particulars of the research design and its limitations. Chapter Five reveals the results of this study along with quotes from students explaining their points of view, in their own voice. Chapter Six discusses implications for practice for college student educators through an interpretation of the findings and from the participants themselves. Finally, the concluding Chapter Seven provides summary and analysis alongside proposed areas for further study.

## **CHAPTER 2: Social Media and College Students**

Research on social media and their evolving nature, ideology, and effects is difficult. New ideas, technologies, and the public's use of these technologies are constantly evolving and doing so at a rapid pace. As a result of this, it becomes increasingly difficult to research and measure these phenomena at any one given time. A compounding issue is the relatively slow pace of academic literature publication. By the time something is published, even within the span of a few years, it might already be out of date. Furthermore, given this reality, words, definitions and concepts also change and must constantly be re-explained and re-examined as they evolve, as new technologies emerge, or as new uses for existing technologies surface.

The literature on digital and social media are also disparate and fragmented, although this is changing as a critical mass of research is beginning to emerge and social media matures. It is fragmented across different types of media (including websites, blogs, magazines, academic journals, white papers and reports) and in different media formats (including video and audio). The conversation also spans many academic disciplines (from business perspectives on its use to understanding of it as a communication method and societal phenomena) and is international in scale. Researching digital and social technologies often requires one to work from an interdisciplinary perspective and integrate knowledge from a number of different sources.

A majority of the research that is conducted specifically on college students and social and digital technology is quantitative in nature, often with sample sizes isolated to one institution or classroom and focused on very narrow questions of user use of a particular application or technology. Although there are a number of emerging

researchers addressing this, the research does not often utilize qualitative methodologies and focus on meaning making and construction, something Wintschitl (1998) advocated for in his research agenda developed over a decade ago. These gaps provide an opportunity for developing the next set of research questions for student learning, development and the Web. Although one might see these issues as impediments to research on the topic, it is also what makes it exciting and dynamic. This chapter provides an overview of digital and social technology and related terms, and reviews research on social media use by college students and its impact on their learning, development, and social lives.

### **Digital and Social Technologies and the Social and Participatory Web**

In order to understand the impact of technology, the Web and social media on college students, it is first important to understand the definitions and boundaries of these constructs. Often used interchangeably, terms such as “social media,” the “social Web,” the “participatory Web,” and “Web 2.0” refer to a set of related technologies and phenomena, although there is little consensus on their exact usage (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010). In the literature, these terms are often used in overlapping ways and are often reduced to discussing specific technologies and applications as stand-ins for their broader concepts. In addition to being vague, the definitions of these terms can change just as rapidly as the technologies that they seek to describe. It is nevertheless possible to establish a gravitational core from which one might begin to understand these concepts (O’Reilly, 2005).

In the following sections, these terms will be addressed, explained, and defined. As stated in Chapter One, the specifics and particulars of these technologies are perhaps

less important than the spaces they create and the affordances and functionalities they enable. Understanding current social and digital technologies provides a frame for understanding how these technologies have evolved and how they may be impacting human behavior and developmental processes as studied in this research.

**Web 2.0.** Web 2.0 is a series of technologies and ideologies that evolved over the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century and is inclusive of, and sometimes used synonymously with, social media. Haenlein and Kaplan (2010) refer to Web 2.0 as the technological and ideological platform upon which user-generated content is created and shared via social media. Although references to the term Web 2.0 can be found as far back as 1999 (DiNucci, 1999), the contemporary use and popularization of the term “Web 2.0” can be traced back to Tim O’Reilly who initiated the Web 2.0 Conference in 2004 (O’Reilly, 2005). This conference focused on the emerging nature of the Web as a platform. According to the original conference Website, as archived by the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine: “While the first wave of the Web was closely tied to the browser, the second wave extends applications across the Web and enables a new generation of services and business opportunities” (“Web 2.0 Conference,” 2004, para. 1).

This concept of the Web as a “platform” is similar to understanding it as an operating system. As a “platform,” the web provides information and services upon which applications can be built. These “applications” (or websites) can integrate with one another, call up information from each other without user intervention, and represent rich pages with dynamic content that can change in real time without needing to “refresh the page” or click on a link (O’Reilly, 2005). This platform is Web 2.0. It is powered by

new programming languages that allow for sophisticated interfaces that often look more like traditional computer applications than websites. These “platforms” also employ technologies that allow sources of information to be reformatted and represented on different websites in different ways (O’Reilly, 2005). In this way, websites and information are “interoperable,” or able to be called up, used, and represented by other webpages. Social media are examples of this “social software” of the Web (Alexander, 2006), but even software not formally designated as “social media,” can still employ social elements and technologies (McHaney, 2011).

Social technologies are as much a change in technology as they are a change of ideology. The ideology of social media encourages dynamically linked and linkable websites and content that allows sharing to occur within an open environment. Concepts are being “rethought” in different “2.0” ways under a regime where information is open, shareable, and able to be modified by the user (Mchaney, 2011; “Web 2.0 Conference,” 2004). An excellent example of this is *Wikipedia*, which employs “wiki” Web 2.0 technologies. Rather than having a yearly-published encyclopedia that is produced by experts and limited to the physical constraints of the real world, Wikipedia allows anyone to create a new entry or edit and add to an existing entry. The “Web 2.0 thinking” behind *Wikipedia* is that by opening up the encyclopedia to everyone, one can craft an even better, more comprehensive encyclopedia than the experts. This concept is often referred to as crowdsourcing, a term coined by Jeff Howe in 2006 to describe using the mass of individuals online (the crowd) to outsource the creation of the project.

**User-generated content and microcontent.** A key component of digital and social technologies is the proliferation and expansion of “user-generated content” (UGC,

or user created content, UCC). User-generated content can be any text, audio or video that an individual creates and shares (posts) online. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2007) provides three additional criteria for information to be classified as UGC: (1) that it be on the Internet and publicly available, (2) that creative effort must be present, and (3) that it not be created in a professional/commercial context. Haenlein and Kaplan (2010) elaborate on these principles to explain that UGC excludes email and one-to-one personal communications (condition number 1), direct copying or reposting (condition number 2), and non-commercially created products (condition number 3). User-generated content is the currency of social technologies and represents one of the greatest power shifts brought about by the technology: the ability to create and easily disseminate content shifts from the formal experts to individual users.

Traditional user-generated content has existed in long form (macrocontent) for much of the web's history. Posts on electronic bulletin boards and blog entries (essentially web "diaries" that can include a blend of personal thought and factual information) are examples of this traditional form of macrocontent. New types of smaller form content, microcontent, are becoming increasingly common on the Web. Microcontent includes content such as short "status updates" on social networking sites like Facebook, photos on Instagram, and "tweets" on microblogging sites such as Twitter (which were initially limited to 140 characters or less). Microcontent, in its original usage, was a term first coined by Jakob Nielsen (1998) to refer to the crafting of short headlines or abstracts in reference to longer form macrocontent. In the late 1990s, a period of Web 1.0, defining microcontent in this way aided individuals in the use of

search engines and in the rapid skimming of information as representational links to longer form content.

Anil Dash (2002, para. 2) updated the concept of “microcontent” to refer to “content that conveys one primary idea or concept, is accessible through a single definitive URL or permalink, and is appropriately written and formatted for presentation in email clients, Web browsers, or on handheld devices as needed.” This newer formulation follows much more closely with social technology ideologies. It is no longer a representation of other content, but content in its own right. The value of short form content, particularly as computing has gone mobile, is that it allows an individual to digest and skim information quickly and more efficiently. Furthermore, it can be shared and reformatted as needed. Microcontent, when combined with enabling platform of Web 2.0, is what has facilitated the rise of social media (Haenlein and Kaplan, 2010).

**Social media.** Social media are the means by which people share user-generated content via the enabling technologies of Web 2.0. At its core, social media are the contemporary way that people communicate on the Web. When many individuals hear the term social media, they often think of specific applications of the technology, such as the social networking site (SNS) Facebook or the microblogging site, Twitter. Social media, however, are not monolithic. Haenlein and Kaplan (2010) identify six different types of social media: “collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds” and social media platforms are typically a blend of these technologies (p. 60). Specific sites or applications might employ one, or many of these technologies. Because of this, new sites and applications are often created that might be similar to existing applications, but

nevertheless work with and represent information in different ways. This confusion is often why it is difficult to distinguish purely social technologies from related digital technologies. In many ways they are intertwined.

This sharing, linking, connecting and reformatting of information across sites is what is creating a social-media-powered open database-backed Web. As users share and make connections on social media, they are building a database that helps further the production and exploration of information. The proliferation of “sharing” and “liking” buttons and the ability to “tag” information on websites across the World Wide Web is what makes social media social. It creates a folksonomy, or a collaborative effort to categorize, tag and label content on the Internet (Vander Wall, 2007). In turn, these folksonomies help connect and resurface new content within social media.

**Folksonomies and the social graph.** Coined by Thomas Vander Wall in 2004, the term folksonomy is derived from the word “taxonomy,” a naming or classification scheme, combined with “folk,” denoting the social nature of the activity (Vander Wall, 2007). Folksonomies, also referred to as “tagging,” are key to understanding a database-backed Web. When a user “tags” something, they assign it a word or short phrase that describes its content. When adding a tag or category to a piece of information, they are forging a link to a concept or category. With multiple users tagging information, the aggregate of all of their tags is referred to as a folksonomy, the collective categories of a community of users.

Tagging in the Web 2.0 context is different than under Web 1.0. Under Web 1.0, experts assigned tags much like librarians categorizing physical books into neat categories. Yahoo’s web page from 1996, for example, shows how the website initially

attempted to organize the information on the web by creating and curating categories (Shirky, 2005). One of the realities of the Web is that information expands exponentially. The ability of experts to keep pace becomes increasingly difficult when confronted with the sheer volume of information available.

In social folksonomies, content is created via the community using individual user-defined and generated terms. This differs from previous methodologies that require an information gatekeeper such as a librarian or expert. Folksonomies can also generate different kinds of links and categories of information to which experts have traditionally never had access. Although many might think of tags as “subject” markers on pieces of information, they can also be used in other contexts and in untraditional ways. “Liking” on Facebook creates a tag on a piece of information that denotes “this user Likes this,” or in some cases, a different emotion or connection to the content. Additionally, on Twitter, “hashtagging” has the ability to inform searches and produce threaded conversations. Understanding these practices in this way highlights folksonomies as containing dynamic content that can be re-represented in numerous ways. This is a key idea in the ideology of Web 2.0. This is not to say that folksonomies do not have limitations, however. Alexander (2006) recognizes problems with its scalability (from a small to larger community) and with the contextual changes (differences in meaning and use) that tags can have over time and across cultures and geographies.

Taken together, these folksonomies and relationships between people and things are creating a “graph,” or a representation of how information is connected. This graph is as much about the interconnectedness of information as it is about the connectedness of people. The term “social graph,” was popularized by social networking site Facebook at

its 2007 f8 Conference when it opened its previously closed network and reimagined it as an open platform (Facebook, 2007). It was after this opening of the site that the aforementioned “sharing” and “liking” buttons became ubiquitous across the web. When the term “social graph” is extended to the entire Web-connected population and information, it can become a powerful new way of understanding the relationship between everything and everyone on the Web.

Graphs and folksonomies thus help us understand the “new Web” as one that is an increasingly dense connection of information that is “learning” and growing through human interaction. This process was enabled and hastened by the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies and the introduction of rapidly expanding and connected user-generated content via social media. When combined with the active participation promoted by Web 2.0 technologies, collective intelligence is harnessed through the combined power of the engaged users (Buckingham, 2003; Burnett and Mechant, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; O’Reilly, 2005). As Tim O’Reilly states, “much as synapses form in the brain, with associations becoming stronger through repetition or intensity, the Web of connections grows organically as an output of the collective activity of all Web users” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 2).

**Definitions: Social and digital technology.** Taken together, all of the aforementioned phenomena make up the social and participatory Web. This Web is built off the technological and ideological platform of Web 2.0. In these Web 2.0 environments, individuals create and interact within a social graph. They develop user-generated content and microcontent that is organized through folksonomies and shared via social media. Social media are the means by which people connect online for the creation, sharing and exchanging of ideas, information and content. It might also refer to

specific websites and applications that create these virtual environments and communities. Examples of social media include social networking sites (ex. Facebook, Google+), wikis (ex. Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (ex. Wordpress, Twitter), and other content sharing sites (ex. Pintrest).

Although presented here in a relatively linear fashion, these terms are often used interchangeably and concepts are often conflated and blurred in actual usage. Additionally, as technologies emerge and evolve, these technologies can add previously undeveloped functionalities that make it difficult to present clear and concise definitions. In addition to the technology itself changing, individuals may use the technologies themselves differently. For example, an individual may be part of a social media site and yet not use its social features. One who produces and uploads YouTube video content, shares it, follows it, and comments on it is using the technology in a much more social way than someone who merely watches and consumes it. Even though YouTube can be considered social media, one may not always use it in a social way.

Throughout this paper, the terms “the social Web,” “the participatory Web,” and “Web 2.0” are used interchangeably to refer to the entire phenomena related to social and digital platforms. The combined term “digital and social” is utilized to recognize that all forms of software, apps, and sites may possess social elements to varying degrees even though some may not explicitly be considered social software. When used in specific ways in this study, the following modifiers will accompany the terms “digital and social”:

- Media/Technologies. This refers to the websites and applications that are built to enable the social and participatory Web. (ex. College students *use* social and digital technologies to interact with others and modify and share content online.)
- Environments/Contexts. This refers to the virtual spaces created within the social and participatory Web. (ex. College students *interact in* social and digital

environments when they interact with others and modify and share content online.)

- Ideologies. This refers to the idea that information should be shared, modified, constructed and reconstructed in community online. (ex. College students *enact and are influenced by* social and digital ideologies when they interact with others and modify and share content online.)

### **Social and Digital Technology Use and Adoption**

Generationally there is a strong difference between the current generation's use of social and digital technologies and those before it. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (e.g. Brenner, 2013; Brenner & Smith, 2013; Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Pew Internet Project, 2014) and EDUCAUSE's Center for Analysis and Research (e.g. Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013; Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011), conduct survey research that provides broad snapshots of overall trends in social media, Internet and related device adoption. As with any attempt to capture these data, the statistics are changing rapidly and can often be obsolete by the time they are published. The exact technologies and the exact tools cited in this research, however, are less important than the trends and pervasiveness they reveal. Presented here as a moment in time, these statistics illustrate the rapid ascent and ubiquity of certain digital and social technologies as well as the devices used to access them. These statistics also reveal differences in the levels to which certain demographic populations have taken to them. These overall trends show no sign of change despite the fact that the exact named technologies and tools themselves might change.

**Internet usage and device ownership.** Compared to the United States population as a whole, current college students are more likely both to own internet-enabled gadgets and to use social and digital technologies. Ninety-seven percent of the adults closest to traditional college age in the Pew Internet Project (2014) study, those 18

to 29 years old, reported using the Internet compared to only 57% of adults age 65 and over. In addition to this divide across generations, there are also divides between the college educated and non-college educated, with 97% of adults with a college degree reporting internet use compared to 76% for those with a high school degree or less (Pew Internet Project, 2014). A gap of comparable size can also be found between those in households making over \$30,000 a year, of which 85-99% report internet usage, compared to those making under \$30,000 a year, of which 77% report internet usage (Pew Internet Project, 2014).

Traditionally-aged college undergraduates, those 18-24 years old, are also more likely to be connected than almost any other group. EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit trade association for information technology workers and decision makers within higher education, which conducts an annual National Study for Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, does not even track college student internet-use statistics. This is likely because Internet access on college and university campuses is nearly ubiquitous. College students are automatically online by virtue of their needing to conduct the business of being a student.

How individuals are accessing the Internet, however, also matters in understanding this generation. Increasingly more mobile forms of access are becoming the de facto way of accessing the social and digital technologies. The EDUCAUSE National Study notes that trends in device ownership among college students have steadily increased, with laptop adoption projected to reach over 90%, smartphone adoptions to reach over 80%, and tablets jumping to 50% in 2014 (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013). Desktop computers have been trending downward since the study was

initiated in 2004 (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013). Smartphones and tablets have seen the greatest increase in adoption in recent years, as each has jumped nearly 20 percentage points between 2011 and 2013 (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013; Pew Internet Project, 2014).

**Social media usage.** This rise in the use of mobile technologies has paralleled the rise of social media. A survey for the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that approximately 87% of young adults in the United States aged 18-24 engage with social media tools compared to 60% of other adults (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). As of May 2013, 72% of adults age 18 years or older use social networking sites (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Eight years ago, only 5% of adults accessed social media sites (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Examining some of the demographic cross sections of the data, age is one of the few factors that showed a statistically significant difference in usage. Eighty-nine percent of adults ages 18-29 years old use social networking sites versus 78% of those ages 30-49, 60% of those ages 50-64, and 43% of those 65 years of age or older (Brenner & Smith, 2013). The only other area where significant differences were found was in regard to race, where people of color indicated more usage than whites (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Consistent with a 2011 study, there was no significant differences between adults aged 18-24 who were college-attending versus those that were not (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011).

College students that are accessing social media are also more likely to be doing so via a smartphone. A study from the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research found that 89% of college students own a laptop compared with 61% of adults as a whole and 76% own a smartphone compared to 56% of adults as a whole (Dahlstrom, Walker,

& Dziuban, 2013). As of 2012, of those accessing social networking sites, 40% did so on a phone (Brenner, 2013). Sixty-seven percent of those ages 18-29 years old accessed the sites via mobile technology versus 50% of those ages 30-49, 18% of those ages 50-64, and 5% of those 65 years of age or older (Brenner, 2013). These statistics have been rapidly increasing within the past few years, as has the rate of mobile device adoption. Social and digital technologies, which enable and promote the ability to share microcontent and photos and videos “on the go,” are inherently tied to this rise in mobile device ownership. Internet analytics firms, comScore and Flurry report that in terms of time spent, social media apps are among the most used category of apps on smartphones in the United States, with the Facebook app as the number one most used app overall (comScore, 2014; Khalaf, 2013).

Although the overall rates of social media access across demographic factors such as sex and race are largely the same, certain sites and apps are more popular with particular subgroups over others (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Individuals of various identity groups also use these sites and apps differently (Junco, 2013). So although the levels of access to social media are largely uniform across young adults in this age range, what is being accessed is not. For example, although the most frequently accessed social networking sites overall were Facebook and Twitter, African Americans are more likely to use Twitter than their white counterparts (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). This difference in usage is important to note when conducting research in this area and when developing interventions and engagement with students online.

In addition to specific social media site access not being uniform among college students, students’ overall engagement levels are also not uniform. In discussing

engagement, the EDUCAUSE National Study references Everett Rogers' (2003) classic theory of innovation adoption. Students are classified into five categories of adoption, ranging from high to low, including: innovators, early adopters, mainstream adopters, late adopters and laggards (Smith & Borrenson Caruso, 2010). The distribution of students along this continuum is largely normal, with few student innovators and laggards and most students considered mainstream adopters (Rogers, 2003). In light of this reality, it is difficult to generalize across the current generation of college students despite their near universal adoption of social media technologies.

### **College Student Learning and Development With Social Media**

As college student adoption of social media has increased, so has interest in their impact on their learning and development. Although initially scattershot and of dubious quality, research in this area has increased since the turn of the decade. The following section will first detail useful theories and frames that have been used to understand the nature of learning on the Web. Next, a review and analysis of the literature is provided including a discussion of informal versus formal learning and perspectives on college student academic life. Finally, literature related to college student's identity, self-presentation, and social life are summarized. The theories and literature review presented here help inform the current study by providing some guiding philosophies and potential avenues for analysis as well as situating the study within the current knowledge base.

**Theories and frames.** Because social and digital technologies entail a different approach to the learning and developmental process, a number of theories and frames have been adapted or developed to understand learning in these environments. The paradigms presented here include constructivism, its variants co-constructivism and

connectivism, and critical theory. The following overview provides a broad explanation of these theories and is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead the main features of each paradigm are highlighted as a means for understanding the later presented research as well as to frame the subject matter of this study.

***Constructivism and co-constructivism.*** Some of the most useful theory frames in understanding learning and development in digital and social environments are that of constructivism and its variants (Bower, Hedberg, & Kuswara, 2010; Burnett & Merchant, 2011; Kellner & Share, 2007). Constructivism entails an epistemology under which knowledge is generated by individual human beings as a result of their experience and ideas. Each individual essentially “constructs” a system of truth for themselves through processes of accommodation and assimilation. Co-constructivism entails the joint construction of truth with another individual or in community. In a teacher-learner relationship, for example, knowledge is co-constructed by the two in partnership, and across all learners in the classroom. In the digital and social environment, this is extended to the broader communities and sub-communities on the Web that may interact with each other and share ideas and information. This type of learning and knowledge creation is highly applicable to digital and social environments because it accounts for this flattening of power relationships and the democratization of the learning process that is found online. It is the networks of social and digital technologies, along with the learners’ identities and actions online that become an important part of understanding learning and development in this space.

Burnett and Merchant (2011) utilize a constructivist frame in their analysis of social and digital technology use. In their analysis, the authors identified three “inter-

connected and mutually constitutive notions” at work in digital environments: practice, networks and identity (Burnett & Merchant, 2011, p. 51). Burnett and Merchant’s (2011) notion of “practice” includes one’s actions in constructing new information, in creating new (unintended) connections between information, and in problematizing distinctions between production and consumption. “Networks” involve the connections one makes to others on the Web, who is involved in the communications between these connections, and the significance of these connections (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). Lastly, “identity,” in Burnett and Merchant’s (2011) definition, involves both who we are individually and collectively, and how we represent ourselves when we enter into the aforementioned connections. Summarizing these concepts, Burnett and Merchant (2011, p. 50-51) state that any social media analysis “must account for the ways in which individuals’ meaning-making practices help them to perform identities within relational networks and how these networks contribute (or not) to [a] sense of belonging” (Burnett & Merchant, 2011, p. 50-51). Social media analysis is thus the interplay between practices, networks and identity.

To understand this interplay in an educational context, Bower et al. (2010) describe four pedagogical approaches to employing social and digital technology in education: transmissive, dialogic, constructive, and co-constructive. Each approach lacks or exhibits two qualities, production and mediation. The transmissive (non-mediated, non-productive) are most indicative of Web 1.0 informational practices (i.e. static Webpages linked directly to one another) and involve the direct transmission of knowledge. The dialogic (mediated, non-productive) are most indicative of Web 1.0 discursive practices (i.e. one-to-one communications and postings) and involve dialogue

between the instructor and instructed. The constructive (non-mediated, productive) are more indicative of Web 2.0 user-generated content production (i.e. video, podcast and photo production) and involve learner creation. The co-constructive (mediated, productive) are most indicative of Web 2.0 social media interactions (i.e. social sharing and development) and involve co-creation, co-curation, and collaboration among learners. Bower et al. (2010) examined the properties of specific Web 2.0 tools utilizing these pedagogical frameworks and nearly 85% aligned with the use of constructivist and co-constructivist pedagogies.

Social and digital technologies, with their privileging of mediated productive pedagogies, encourage the use of constructivist and co-constructivist design in teaching. Within these paradigms, the teacher/learner dichotomy is blurred and extended. Rather than being a teaching environment, it is more appropriate to understand these sites as learning environments. The paradigms encourage a flattening of the hierarchy within the teacher/learner relationship. This notion of “flattening” has precedent within the college student educator literature. Baxter Magolda and King (2004) refer to this as a form of “learning partnership,” where teachers and learners share expertise and authority in mutual co-construction. Learning becomes “mutually constructed meaning” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. 41) and students learn through engaging in these types of partnerships.

**Connectivism.** George Siemens (2005), however, takes issue with constructivist and co-constructivist theories of learning for their assumption that learning takes place “inside the person” (para. 11). Siemens proposes “connectivism” as a more appropriate way to understand learning in digital and social environments. He bases his theory in

networks (inter-connected information and people), chaos (a form of order where everything is connected, but patterns and meaning remain hidden within), and complexity and self-organization (the ability to recognize and form complex organizational patterns from randomness). For Siemens, when information is in extreme abundance, such as on the Web, it changes the nature of learning. In connectivism, as opposed to constructivism, learning continues to exist outside of the individual and might exist in digital spaces and databases. McHaney (2011) describes this as moving constructivism to the “next level” (p. 167). Co-construction is not just between two individuals, or in a classroom, but it exists across cyberspace and might continue to reach other individuals even after a time-defined learning experience has occurred.

Stephen Downes (2005) coined the term “e-learning 2.0” to describe a similar phenomenon. Like Web 2.0, e-learning 2.0 is also a platform, a platform where knowledge exists within the network, not just within the individual. The learning is “stored and manipulated by technology” (Siemens, 2005, para. 11) and happens within a common space (the digital commons provided by the platform, the digital and social environment). In connectivism, the process of learning, acquiring and remixing information is just as important as what is learned. It elevates the skill of being able to understand the network of information, how it works, where information is produced, and its level of relative quality. One’s ability to “synthesize and recognize connections and patterns” becomes a much more important skill than in other theories and approaches (Siemens, 2005, para. 12). Understanding knowledge in this way blurs the distinction between the virtual and physical. Learning does not just occur in the learner’s brain, but

in a common network of computers and brains. It is constructivism with a much larger scope.

***Critical theory.*** Because of the power dynamics and explosion of information entailed by constructivism, co-constructivism, and connectivism, some have suggested critical theory and pedagogy as an important way of understanding how the process of learning and evaluating information is enacted in social-digital environments (Asselin & Moayeri, 2011; Kellner & Share, 2007). Because digital and social technologies allow for the sharing of power and imply profound changes in power concentrations, Asselin & Moayeri (2011) define critical literacy as a means of examining this discourse through political, social and economic lenses. Within these contexts, Kellner and Share (2007) propose five basic concepts that underlie efforts at critically examining information on the Web: (1) the social constructivist nature of media and communication, (2) an analysis of text for “languages, genres, codes and conventions,” (3) examining the role of the audience meaning-making, (4) “problematizing” representational processes to examine “ideology, power and pleasure,” and (5) deconstructing commercial media production. All five of these concepts play off the aforementioned theory base of constructivism, co-constructivism and connectivism, and further add a postmodern viewpoint to examining the processes at work on the Web. Postmodern epistemologies are particularly helpful in critically evaluating the Web, as they move beyond the old modernist information categories of Web 1.0 and allow for significantly different ways of exploring meaning in digital and social environments.

By understanding the postmodern nature of social and digital technologies, we can begin to understand how these technologies are disruptive. Burnett and Mechant

(2011) describe this disruption and its connection to critical theory in relation to the “participatory culture” of social and digital technologies. This participatory culture liberates individuals to be able to add to, change and remix information in ways that were unavailable when resources were scarce and experts curated these processes. The author cites the work of Jenkins, Purushota, Clinton, Weigel, and Robinson (2006) and Buckingham (2003) as key exploratory works of this new culture that allows for new ways of “active participation.” In a Web 2.0 context, information is no longer passively consumed, but the distinction between consumption and production is blurred. As the connection to critical theory suggests, social and digital technologies have the ability to profoundly disrupt traditional power structures. This is especially true within the realm of education, where the traditional power dynamic of the authority or teacher as expert is challenged.

***Usage of frames and theories.*** The above stated theories and frames are useful in understanding how social and digital technologies play out in use within educational contexts. All of the previously mentioned paradigms—constructivism and co-constructivism, connectivism, and critical theory—highlight the way in which social and digital technologies are changing the landscape, power structures, and roles related to learning and development. Knowledge is created, curated, and debated mutually between learners and within the greater context of a broader connected community.

All of the theories and frames presented here problematize and blur the boundaries between teacher and student. They also blur the distinctions between in-class and out-of-class learning and between formal and informal learning. This is, in part, why some of this research is difficult to undertake and explain—it requires new language and

new conceptualizations of prior practice. Although these distinctions might no longer be as clearly delineated, they are useful in understanding current research on the impact of social and digital technologies on college student learning. In the next section, a review of literature is organized around formal and informal learning and both concepts are explained.

**State of the literature.** Much of the literature on social and digital technologies in the collegiate environment has been published since 2010 and the volume of its production continues to grow. Prior to 2010, literature was more often found scattered across disciplines than within traditional higher education and education-related journals. Additionally, research studies conducted on college students were often not undertaken with a goal toward an understanding of college student *qua* college students, but rather as research that *happened* to include college students as a sample. For example, many studies have examined the relationship between psychology's "Big Five" personality traits (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness-to-Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) and social media use by college students (e. g. Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2011; Ross et al., 2009; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Sheldon, 2013; Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012). Additionally, there has been study into student social media use as motivated by the fulfillment of needs, including emotional needs, cognitive needs (including information acquisition and deepening of understanding), social connection needs (with friends and family), and habitual needs (providing structure and routine to one's day) (e.g. Wang & Tchernev, 2012; Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012).

While broad studies of college students and social media are useful, they do not specifically advance an understanding of college student experiences with learning and development in the college context. The following sections review the contemporary research on social media's impact on the learning and development of college students. At first, a distinction between and definitions of formal versus informal learning are presented to frame the research. Loosely speaking, formal learning occurs in a classroom or structured environment, while informal learning is self-directed and occurs outside of classroom and structured contexts. Although the distinctions between formal and informal contexts are difficult to maintain, in the following review of literature, classroom learning will refer to learning as directed by a faculty member, and out-of-class learning and development will refer to the broader college experience and students' navigation of it. Because formal classroom learning is not a specific focus of this study, examples of this research, rather than an exhaustive review, are presented here. Literature on informal learning in the college context is provided more fully.

***Formal versus informal learning.*** When discussing student learning within the context of new technologies, many authors have made a distinction between formal and informal learning (Bull et. al., 2008, Downes, 2005; Kurkela, 2011; Greenhow & Robelia, 2004). Formal learning is what occurs in the classroom and is answerable to a set of regulations and traditional educational paradigms. It typically involves an authority (teacher) directing the content and method of the learning process (Greenhow & Robelia, 2004). This is opposed to informal or self-directed peer-to-peer learning that occurs more organically in a broader environment.

Informal learning has “unique properties” that set it up as an alternative method to formal instruction (Ito et. al., 2008). Informal learning is taken on voluntarily and driven by the learner, often occurring in a multi-dimensional socially-mediated way, that motivates one towards further learning (Bull et. al., 2008; National Science Foundation, 2006, Section I, Introduction; Greenhow & Robelia, 2004). Kamenetz (2010) believes that the current and future generations of students will increasingly turn towards these more informal learning opportunities as opposed to the formal learning environment currently provided by higher education. This includes the taking of individual courses, as opposed to seeking monolithic degrees, seeking out learning modules, as opposed to taking monolithic courses, and accessing education from a myriad of public and private sources, as opposed to solely relying on colleges and universities to provide content.

Informal learning, if harnessed correctly, has great potential to be used by educators to create a more seamless learning experience (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991). As Bull et al. (2006) note, however, given the diversity of informal learning, there is no single organization or knowledge body that represents or explores it. This situation results in a literature on informal learning that is fragmented across disciplines and across the numerous ways learners interact with social and digital technologies. Furthermore, the integration of informal learning into a formal curriculum environment may be difficult for educators who were taught under and learned how to teach using different paradigms of education.

In 1998, Wintschitl outlined a research agenda for understanding learning in the Web 1.0 era, calling for a greater understanding of student communication and inquiry on the Web, alongside a deeper qualitative understanding of Web-enabled learning.

Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes (2009a) updated this research agenda 10 years later, after the advent of social media, to focus more on informal learning and the ability of the Web to be a participatory and interactive hybridized space (spanning the physical classroom and the digital Web). In a response article, the authors identified informal learning and the following themes as drivers of the next wave of research questions in this area:

“learner participation and creativity, online identity formation, and transformative scholarship” (Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009b, p. 280). They also put particular emphasis on learning communities, social scholarship, and interdisciplinary inquiry (Greenhow et al. 2009b). All of these efforts represent an attempt to understand learning as a constant activity that does not solely occur in a classroom or physical environment, but rather a broader virtual or blended environment.

*Academic life.* During the previous decade, research available in education on student use of digital and social technologies in formal teaching environments was largely non-scientific and anecdotal. In 2000, Flowers, Pascarella and Pierson found little research on broad cognitive and intellectual outcomes associated with the use of the Internet. Additionally absent were qualitative studies called for by Windschitl (1998) to explore the nature of this learning. Within the past few years, however, this research has increased significantly and professors and other college teaching faculty are increasingly looking toward methods of leveraging social media platforms to advance student learning (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013).

For example, a number of studies include an investigation into the use of Twitter in the classroom. A number of researchers found improved outcomes including increased student engagement and grades as a result of Twitter use (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs &

Meyer, 2010; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010; Junco, Elavsky, & Heiberger, 2013; Lin, Hoffman, & Borengasser, 2013). Additionally, researchers have begun to identify best practices for using Twitter resulting in specific suggestions for college student educator practice (Joosten, 2012; Schroeder, Minocha & Schneider, 2010). More broadly, Silius, Kailanto, and Tervakari (2011) focused on aspects of technology that students prefer or find most useful in engaging in online education. Numerous other studies provide more systematic study on other specific technologies and applications, such as Facebook. An exhaustive review of this research is not included here, as it moves beyond the scope of this study, but nevertheless an awareness of its range and focus is helpful in informing this study.

Beyond the classroom, there are a number of studies that have looked at college students' academic life through a broader lens. A number of studies have found that social networking sites aid in student acquisition of social capital, their adjustment to college and their subsequent retention (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013; Manago, Taylor & Greenfield, 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009, Yang & Brown, 2013). Additional studies have shown largely positive relationships between student social media use and engagement on campus (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Higher Education Research Institute, 2007, Junco; 2012b; Lanthier & Windham, 2004). This engagement also extends to political and civic participation (Kim & Khang, 2014; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009; Vitak et al., 2011).

Not all of the research has shown correlations between college student social media use and positive behaviors. A body of research also explores problematic behavior and phenomena associated with online participation. The Higher Education Research Institute (2007) provides a broad overview of first year college student social networking site use and found correlations between student internet use and higher levels of drinking, less satisfaction with social life, and difficulty in managing time and developing study skills. Other researchers have focused on other aspects of social media usage's negative associations (LaRose, Kim, & Peng, 2010). These include correlations between high social media use and lower grades and academic performance (Jacobsen & Forte, 2011; Judd, 2013; Junco, 2012a; Junco, 2012b; Junco, 2012c; Junco & Cotton, 2012; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010; Karpinski, Kirschner, Ozer, Mellott, & Ochwo, 2013; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), increased behaviors of addiction (Malaney, 2005), increased levels of stress (Gemmell & Peterson, 2006), and problematic drinking and misbehavior (Kolek & Saunders, 2008).

Some of these results have been mixed, however, as methodologies and data collection methods in online spaces are still maturing. For instance, a study by Pasek, more, and Hargittai (2009) found positive correlations between student social media use and academic behaviors and neutral correlations with grades and academic performance. This neutral correlation with grades was replicated by Kolek and Saunders (2008), but Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) found negative correlations. Additional research in this area with better and more representative samples and more controlled environments should lead to more nuanced understandings and further consensus over time.

What should be noted, however, is that the study results presented here are correlations and do not necessarily imply causation. Junco (2014) hypothesizes that the correlation between social media use and lower academic grades might be as a result of a third variable problem, such as student's ability to self-regulate. Students might have problems with self-regulation, and thus they use social media more and their grades suffer. Junco (2014) further notes that directionality is also not demonstrated in these studies and therefore one is unable to tell which causes the other. As of 2014, no causal links between these variables have been established through controlled experiments (Junco, 2014). Further research is needed.

***College student life online.*** Beyond the classroom and the academic experience, there is a small but growing body of literature that attempts to look at college student life holistically. One of the first major works published specifically focusing on college students and digital and social technology was *Connecting to the Net.Generation* by Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007). Although this work has begun to show its age, even within a relatively short period of time, it was the first of its kind to explore Web use and technology's influence on student development, learning, and engagement. Additional publications have furthered some of this work, including Roger McHaney's (2011), *The New Digital Shoreline: How Web 2.0 and Millenials are Revolutionizing Higher Education*, and Tanya Joosten's 2012 work, *Social Media for Educators: Strategies and Best Practices*. Both provide an overview of social and digital technologies, their impact on students and student behavior, and a number of strategies for leveraging their use to promote student learning and development both in the classroom and outside of it.

A number of other books have built on these initial works and given college student educators and administrators further guidance on how to market to and engage students online. Emerald Publishing has contributed full-length volumes to the literature as a part of their publication series, *Cutting Edge Technologies in Higher Education*. The goal of this series is to:

provide new research on important emerging technologies in higher education, including both teaching and administrative applications from a variety of methodological approaches. The series encompasses both theoretical and empirical developments and provides evidence from a range of disciplines throughout the world. (Emerald, n.d.)

Notable topics within this series include *Higher Education Administration With Social Media* (Wankel & Wankel, 2011), *Misbehavior Online in Higher Education* (Wankel & Wankel, 2012), and aspects of teaching and student engagement and retention utilizing social media and technology in general.

In addition to student engagement online, a number of other researchers have put an emphasis on identity formation in online spaces and its performative aspects: how students represent themselves and “act” online as opposed to in the physical world (Greenhow & Robelia, 2004; Zhao, S. Grasmuck, S. & Martin, J., 2008). As Selwyn (2007) states, social media and social networking sites “can act as an important site for the informal, cultural learning of being a student, with online interactions allowing roles to be learnt, values understood and identities shaped” (p. 4). The most recent work to approach this subject, along with the aforementioned focus on student engagement, is *Engaging students through social media: Evidence-based practices for use in student affairs*, by Reynol Junco (2014). The organization and thoroughness of this book testifies to the increasing coherence and volume of research on social and digital technologies’

impact on college students and the college learning environment. Although this research is still fragmented and nascent, Junco's (2014) work provides an overview and clarification of concepts that creates a bedrock for future research. A number of useful concepts and distinctions introduced by Junco (2014) are utilized in the present research study.

*Qualitative research.* The above-mentioned works are largely built off of quantitative research relating to college student engagement and outcomes. Qualitative research in this area is still nascent, but growing. One of the first and few works to address this was Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman's 2009 work, *Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture*. Through the intensive interviewing and observation of twenty undergraduate students on Facebook, Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) explored digitally and socially mediated aspects of college students' lives. Four themes, in particular, arose including student "observations about online campus culture, their awareness of their use, how their identities factor in their consumption, and how they understand themselves as voyeurs and producers of their own representation" (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009, p. 54). Many of these observations and themes also show up throughout this study and are addressed throughout this text.

Matthew Birnbaum (2013) followed up on Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman's research with an eight-month observational study of residence hall students and the "impression management techniques and standardized performances" they enact on social media, specifically on Facebook" (p. 155). Through his research, Birnbaum (2013) examined college student online cultures, behaviors, and special pressures,

identifying six “standardized fronts” students exhibit in attempting to curate impressions of themselves online: the partier, the socialite, the risk taker, the comic, the institutional citizen, and the eccentric. Also related to the topic was Chen and Marcus’ 2012 study that looked at college student online self-disclosure patterns as they relate to culture and personality factors, concluding that extroverted students with collectivist mindsets disclose more online than their peers.

In many ways the current study is also a descendent of Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman’s (2009) work. Many of the cultural observations noted in their research also surfaced in the data collected for this study. Although the present study did not purposefully seek observations about and aspects of presentation and impression management, they are noted in the results as useful in understanding identity online.

Where this research differs from the work of Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) is that it is less focused on the identities one may have, be had by, or perform. In contrast, the greater focus of this research is on selfhood—the conceptualization of the conscious experience of one’s internal life. Selfhood is a more fundamental psychological notion and, as defined later, “self” is subject to “identity” as object. One may *have* multiple constructed identities that are understood from the vantage point of one’s overall self. From one’s sense of self flows one’s identity (and potentially identities). Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman’s 2009 study focused more on culture and how traditional notions of college student identity development play out in digital and social environments, particularly in regard to students’ specific demographic characteristics and their related social identities (such as race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity). The current study also investigates some of these cultural and representational

aspects, but asks participants to dig deeper to explain how they conceptualize these as related to themselves.

Although qualitative research on college students' online lives and identities is still growing, there are two scholars of note who have researched these and related issues with different populations. The work of Sherry Turkle and danah boyd is repeatedly referenced throughout this text as their research, although not focused on college students per se, surface many applicable concepts and observations. Sherry Turkle studies human beings' relationship with technology, both the actual devices themselves and these device's effects on human beings' self-understanding and relationships. Turkle is most noted for her trio of books focusing on these topics, starting with *The second self: Computers and the human spirit* in 1984, continuing with *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet* in 1995, and most recently, *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* in 2012.

danah boyd is an additional researcher of note, publishing her book, *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*, in 2014. danah boyd was one of the first researchers to provide a comprehensive qualitative look into youth culture and practices in social media. Over the course of her study, boyd (2014) followed the lives of 166 teens over 3 years to provide a window into their experiences in what she termed, "networked publics." boyd (2014) describes these networked publics as "publics that are restructured by networked technologies... simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 5). Furthermore, boyd (2014) continues, "Networked publics are publics both in the spatial sense and in the sense of an

imagined community. They are built on and through social media and other emergent technologies” (p. 9). Although boyd researched the lives of teens in middle and high school, and not college students, her perspectives on emerging adults are still highly useful, as these teens become college-going freshmen. Similar to Turkle’s notable work, the work of boyd is also repeatedly referenced in this text.

## **Conclusion**

Whether one views social media’s ascendance positively or negatively, it is clearly having an impact on the way humans think, interact, and understand themselves. Social media are a constantly evolving set of technologies and ideologies that are changing the way we use the Internet and changing the way we interact with, acquire, and create information. Developed at the turn of the century, social media adoption has proceeded at an astonishingly fast rate. This aggressive adoption gave rise to a new generational cohort that has a dramatically different relationship with technology than its predecessors. These changes, and the speed with which they have been integrated into society and daily lives, have the ability to profoundly impact how one views student learning and development, particularly within the context of higher education. The current generation coming of age in United States’ colleges and universities presents a unique opportunity for researchers to understand how technology has and may change us in the future. As the line between formal and informal learning becomes increasingly blurred, researchers must look for new ways of understanding how students construct their sense of self and make meaning of and connections to other humans, machines and information. Although the literature in this area is still nascent, the emergent body of research holds promise. Rather than focusing merely what we *do* with technology,

research should instead focus on what the technology is doing *to* us. Understanding social media as not just an evolutionary but revolutionary change opens up new ways for realizing human abilities and potential.

### **Chapter 3: Postmodernity and a Changing View of the Self**

Before undertaking research into how students conceptualize identity and selfhood in digital and social contexts, it is important to understand differing viewpoints on the nature of identity and how it relates to human growth and development. Traditional theories of student development, including many of the popular theories of development employed by professionals in higher education, follow a general pattern of identity definition that moves from external to internal. Individuals at earlier stages of development often allow external parties or factors to define them rather than the individual having the ability to define oneself. In these theories, in order to progress developmentally, one must first create a single stable coherent sense of self before moving on to higher orders of development. Robert Kegan (1994) describes this stage-based “developmentalism” as “the idea that people or organic systems evolve through qualitatively different eras of increasing complexity according to regular principles of stability and change” (p. 198-199). The self, and its construction by the subject, is seen as a necessary component in this journey.

Many of these theories, however, were formed prior to the advent of digital and social technologies. Postmodern theorists describe a different reality than those that came before them. Under postmodern conceptions of identity, the construction of a stable unitary self is impossible and instead individuals are confronted with a multiplicity of identities that may be tentative, evolving, fluid, and only understood in relation to others. This postmodern conception of self is vastly different than its predecessors and aspects of it can be seen in the way social and digital spaces operate. In digital and social spaces, individuals may have multiple online identities. These identities may or may not

be related to one another and each may or may not correspond to varying degrees to the physical person behind them. In social and digital spaces, identity and perhaps self might be very different than previously thought.

This chapter begins with a discussion of young adulthood and traditional notions of identity construction that are frequently associated with this period of development. These traditional constructions of identity and self are then contrasted with more postmodernist viewpoints. More postmodernist viewpoints include non-unitary notions of the self as saturated, fragmented, fluid, networked and fused with technology. The chapter concludes with how concepts of self may be different in social and digital spaces as well as the potential implications for the current generation of traditionally-aged college students.

### **Young Adulthood and the College Years**

The traditional American narrative surrounding the college experience is a well-worn subject in media and popular culture. Within this script, twentieth century Western affluence has created a college environment that provides what psychologist Erik Erikson (1980) described as an “institutionalized moratorium,” or a societally sanctioned “intermediary period between childhood and adulthood... during which a lasting pattern of ‘inner identity’ is scheduled for relative completion” (p. 119). Although this might not be the dominant way in which people experience higher education in the United States, it is nevertheless a dominant script (Arnett, 2005). One’s time in college allows undergraduates the opportunity to explore, take risks, and make mistakes in a relatively safe and controlled environment. It provides the opportunity to try new things and experiment with new identities. This time is a unique luxury most often afforded to the

socioeconomically advantaged, but its influence can be felt in American culture writ large (Côté, 2000; Smith, 1994).

***Developing an identity and a self.*** These college years, as the crucible within which identity experimentation, revision, and creation take place, have been the central subject of numerous theories of college student development. As described in these theories, the learning that takes place over the four years of college is meant to allow a student time to explore and develop a sense of self and “inner identity” (Erikson, 1968; Erikson, 1980). Numerous theorists have discussed the centrality of this concept of identity. James Marcia (1966) made identity a goal of his theory, with the final stage of development being the achievement of identity resolution. More contemporary theorists who study college student development have also referred to the college period as one where students reach towards an “internal self definition,” an “internal identity,” or the ability to “self author” their lives (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001; Kegan, 1994). Chickering and Reisser (1993), who are known for identifying seven vectors of development, state that all of their developmental vectors “could be classified under ‘identity formation’” (p. 173).

Similar to the confusion discussed earlier about the nature of a student’s “digital identity,” concepts of identity in psychology are no less clear or uniform across theories. Chickering and Reisser (1993) point to Erikson’s (1968) acknowledgement that he uses the term identity in three ways:

At one time it seemed to refer to a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at another to an unconscious striving for a continuity of experience, and at a third, as a solidarity with a group’s ideals (p. 208).

Regardless of the exact definition of identity that one adopts, there are central features and concepts that recur across theories. These themed concepts include “continuity,” “coherence,” and the formation of a “singular” or “unitary” identity. The organization of experience under these concepts and in these forms is the core of how identity has been characterized in traditional student development theories.

If identity is an all-encompassing term, and a final goal of development, then what constitutes identity? Chickering and Reisser (1993) state, “In examining components of identity, we also need to consider the concept of self” and pose a series of questions, including, “Who or what is the self that observes, learns and decides? If the self is an integrated system, who is in charge of coordinating it? Who organizes the facets of personality into an integrated whole?” (p. 201). The authors’ response to these questions is that “there are no easy answers” and that “various parts of the self have been in vogue at various times” (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. 201). Although there might be differing usages of the term “self,” all of the questions Chickering and Reisser (1993) pose begin with “who” and refer to some type of regulating agent. This agent, sometimes called one’s self, has as object one’s sense of who one is, one’s consciousness, or one’s self-awareness. It is the organization given to consciousness, and is similar to what is expected of identity, a more actualized form of the self. The concepts of “continuity,” “coherence,” and being “singular” and “unitary” are applied in these theories as the ultimate goals for self-organization. For these theories, selfhood must be organized as a single whole in which concepts are related and connected.

**Entering postmodernity.** Many postmodern theorists have posited that the present time is a space of liminality between modernity, represented by the

aforementioned theories, and postmodernity (Bloland 2005; Gergen, 2000). Society is also in a transition as social and digital technologies begin to mature and enable new abilities and ways of organizing human work and action. The rapid ascent of digital and social ideologies and their impact on the way human beings function in everyday life has changed behaviors rapidly in the span of only a few years. There are numerous terms used to describe this historical disjunction, many of them extreme. Bloland (2005) identifies this as a “rupture” or “a series of decisive far-reaching breaks from the past” (p. 125). Baudrillard (1981/1995) refers to this time period as an “implosion” or a collapse of boundaries.

Reality, in particular, seems less clear than before. Futurist Ray Kurzweil (2005) believes society is approaching a “singularity,” or “a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed” (p. 7). The use of this and related terms is both emblematic of this line of thinking and illustrative. It is hypothesized that this historically situated change in society is a “rupture” because it represents a break from the past. Furthermore, there is an “implosion,” as opposed to an explosion, because ideas, images and representations collapse in on themselves yielding blurred distinctions. Vernor Vinge believes this disjunction is experienced as a “singularity” because, “it’s not possible before that point to talk meaningfully about the issues that are important AFTER that point” (Rucker, Sitius, & Mu, 1992, p. 103). Once it occurs there is no return to a previous way of being. It is a one-way direction.

The concepts of postmodernism are also a successor to western romanticist and modernist traditions (Gergen, 2000). The romanticist view, or the idealist view, of the

nineteenth century privileges a self with soulful passion and a reach towards the sublime. It fought (and still fights) the mechanistic rationality of modernism. Modernism privileges the individual actor-self and its application of reason to provide order and structure. Despite the differences between these movements, romanticist and modernist viewpoints hold a construction of the self that is coherent and unitary. Postmodernism does not. Postmodernism eschews the purity-in-unity sought by the romanticist and modernist traditions and replaces it with a diffused self, one without neat and tidy boundaries.

### **The Self: Saturated and Fragmented, Fluid and Fused**

In postmodernity, the self is increasingly fragmented. There are numerous contexts and one has the ability and need to switch rapidly between them. This switching is much like the rapid switching between apps and social media sites on a smartphone. With technology, one is constantly switching and coming in and out of contexts rapidly. Each of these spaces represents different identities and/or personas. It causes one to question whether previous theories of a bounded unitary sense of self still hold. One's self, rather than regulating between these different contexts, could be understood as being present in all of them in different ways and at different times or even simultaneously. Perhaps digital and social technologies have shown the way towards viewing selfhood as relative in different contexts and highlight the ability to "be" in multiple "places" at once. Why must unity be the ultimate goal of selfhood? Why cannot a developed self be different things in different places or might the collection of all of these various identities be the self?

Côté (2005, p. 109) refers to this as a "postmodern identity crisis," where "people

embrace and celebrate fluid identities... [and] contextual allegiances.” Smith (1994) notes this as “the especially problematic status of selfhood in our time” (p. 405). In a piece entitled, *The Fragmented Generation*, Seider and Gardner (2009) describe the current generation as forming their identities through a pastiche process of “fragmentoring,” piecing together the ideas, examples and ways of being from a multitude of individuals. All of these conceptions represent a very new disorienting reality, one that is perhaps doubly so for an emerging adult.

Kenneth Gergen has written on this extensively, referring to this new sense of self as the “saturated self” and, more recently, as the “relational self.” In 2000, Gergen described the saturated self as one where:

Persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction... where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold. (p. 7)

In 2011, Gergen referred to this self as a relational self and described it as an attempt to:

Construct an ontology that replaces the vision of the bounded self as the atom of the social world with relational process. From this standpoint, it would not be selves who come together to form relationships, but relational process out of which the very idea of the psychological self could emerge. (p. 112)

For Gergen, the postmodern self is not really a self, but a condition. The postmodern condition is a dispersion of the self. The postmodern self exists in a state of constant flux. It is the result of social saturation through technology and introduces different voices, values, systems, and modifications to one’s way of life. It occurs in and in-between relationships. These relationships are reconstructed in new ways, with varied complexity, and across the boundaries time and space. Our “bricolage selves,” or selves constructed from a disparate range of available representations and contexts, are

incoherent to modernist paradigms. These postmodern selves do not possess the unity modernist theories seek, nor do these postmodern selves, such as those put forward by Gergen (2000, 2011) seek this unity. On the one hand this may free an individual to play with new selves and identities in a way not previously envisioned. On the other hand it may present a disorienting reality for the modernist mind. The modernist mind attempts to grasp at something solid on which to rest a foundation of self, but the postmodern mind lacks these anchors. This might not be a new reality, but might have been the present reality all along. Perhaps social and digital technologies have only served to surface this in more evident ways.

A modernist foundation is revealed as increasingly tenuous in online spaces. Transcendent of physical space, digital technologies allow for the rapid proliferation of relationships between minds and the type and nature of these relationships has also multiplied. Relationships can range from the intimate to the tenuous. They can exist in virtual and/or physical spaces. Gergen (2000) writes that this saturation and its resultant fragmentation of the self, “corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships” and that these relationships “pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the... fully saturated self becomes no self at all” (p. 7). Similar to the ways individuals must keep up with a multitude of social media sites, each with their own identities, cultures, and networks of relationships, selfhood does not appear as stable as it might seem. Relationships are constructed differently in each of these spaces and are incommensurable and stand separately from each other. They each furnish “a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self” (Gergen, 2000, p. 6). As Jean Baudrillard (1987/2012) states, “we no longer exist as playwrights or

actors but as terminals of multiple networks” (p. 23). In other words, we are no longer solely in command of our own experience, per se, but we exist in relation to others in constant mutual identity construction and reconstruction, particularly in the multiple places, contexts, sites, and apps we inhabit.

**Identity fluidity.** In contemporary research, college students exhibit many of the behaviors of the saturated self in many of their daily interactions, although they may not possess it or understand it as such. For the contemporary college student, identities are more fluid and this fluidity is enabled in digital spaces by virtue of their being virtual, not physical. In research, Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) studied college students’ use of social media and technology and recognized the amorphous nature of their online identity presentations. The authors witnessed “the fluid alterations, adjustments, and adaptations of college students’ identities” and concluded that the online “‘profile’ is and isn’t the student user” (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009, p. 23). College students play with identity in an increasingly postmodern way. They construct multiple unique changing online personas, develop equally complex and differing relationships, and develop languages and play with discursive practices.

There are numerous examples of this online identity fluidity. Through virtual worlds, one can construct visual avatars, or on-screen “characters,” of any physical type. Constructing bodies and curating images allows one to play across multiple identity lines. This change is not limited to one’s physical features, but extends to one’s mental features as well. Less exotically, one can select specific images or post specific things to portray oneself in particular ways. I “friend” or enter into a relationship with others on social networks. I populate my online profiles with representations of a self that construct

whom I want to be as much as who I am. My “friends” then reconstruct these identities in relationship. The close family member views my profile differently than the casual acquaintance I met at a party. I also exhibit different discursive practices within each. On open networks, this constructing-relationship also extends to the complete stranger who subscribes to my updates and the media outlet that picks up a story out of my writings.

By engaging online, students “come to be aware that each truth about ourselves is a construction of the moment, true only for a given time and within certain relationships” (Gergen, 2000, p. 16). Lynk Watrman and Martínez Alemán (2009) found this in their study of college student behavior online when students were aware of their need to engage in “impression management.” Impression management is the active curation of how one presents oneself—one’s digital identity or reputation. This type of curation, however, may not just operate on a surface level, but perhaps extend much deeper into underlying developmental processes and psychological conceptualizations of one’s self. This study attempts to investigate both of these possibilities.

**Fusion with technology.** Identity in these new digital and social contexts also causes a breakdown of the “mind and body” binary. Technology is not merely allowing “mental selves” to propagate online, but it is also fusing and blurring with the physical. In this networked world, mind and body are connected in new ways. One is constantly connected to other brains both physical and digital, processing information, making choices, and determining paths. Gergen (2000) refers to this as the emergence of a “techno-being.” With the techno-being, “it is the very distinction between persons and machines that has become increasingly subverted” (Gergen, 2000, p. xix). One’s

reasoning and recall, one's very cognition, is not only mediated through technology, but is also increasingly becoming altered by it and fused with it. Neuroscientific research has shown that utilizing new Web technologies can actually change way the physical human brain wires itself (Prensky, 2001). These changes do not end at just the organic alteration of one's current physical brain, but are also increasingly integrating the synthetic with it. As Gergen (2000) characterizes it, technology has "increasingly become tissue to the body" (p. xix). This is achieved by the more intimate ways humans are wearing and even implanting technology on and within their bodies.

Bloland (2005) refers to this when he states that "the increasing fluidity of self is augmented by science and technologies that offer the possibility of even more radical modifications of what self can mean" (p. 131). Current trends in technology are leading towards "wearables" or devices that the owner wears on their wrist (e.g. a fitbit, Apple Watch, or Nike Fuelband) or on their face (e.g. Google Glass). When technology is taken one step further, it's not surprising to imagine how the boundary between the body and the machine might blur. This is already achieved on some level with advances in pacemakers and cochlear implants. Although once the realm of science fiction, the idea of a hybrid identity, of an augmented human, of a cybernetic being mixing the synthetic and the organic, is not as far a leap as one might imagine. Self proclaimed "cyborg feminist," Donna Haraway (1990), asks, "Why should our bodies end at the skin or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin" (p. 220)? Vinge (1993) describes this as a "post-human era."

## **The Self: Connected and Networked**

These “selves,” fused with technology, can also be understood as enmeshed in a network much like that created by social media. It is increasingly difficult to articulate where this network ends and the individual begins. Theorist George Siemens (2004) argues that older paradigms promote “the principality of the individual (and her/his physical presence – i.e. brain-based) in learning” (para. 11). What theories do not account for, however, is the “learning that occurs outside of people (i.e. learning that is stored and manipulated by technology)” (Siemens, 2004, para. 11). For Siemens, when we exist in a network, the nature of learning changes. While previous theories placed the learning inside the body, under Siemens’s theory, known as connectivism, learning can continue on in the network, outside the body, and beyond the individual. McHaney (2011) describes this as moving social constructivism to the “next level” (p. 167). Learning is not an individual act and “we can no longer personally experience and acquire learning that we need to act” (Siemens, 2004, para. 15). This learning process “occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements – not entirely under the control of the individual” (Siemens, 2004, para. 22). This new characterization of learning requires a new understanding of the self as one that is connected to and extended throughout a network.

Gergen hints at this new reality in his notion of the saturated and relational self, but recognizes that the limits of current modernist paradigms often make it difficult to describe. Gergen (2000) states, “It is as if we have thousands of terms to describe the individual pieces in a game of chess, and virtually none by which we can articulate the game itself (p. 160). This “game itself” is the entire network, the web that is created

between brains by social media and technology. This web consists of distributed connections that are uneven. The connections are dense in some places and peripheral in others.

The advent of new digital and social technologies invites humans to participate actively in a network with one another in new ways. O'Reilly (2005) likens this network to a brain, for “much as synapses form in the brain, with associations becoming stronger through repetition or intensity, the Web of connections grows organically as an output of the collective activity of all Web users” (p. 2). This new “brain” is a “brain of brains” where it is increasingly difficult to determine where one brain ends and the other begins. By engaging in this network, a collective intelligence is harnessed and new potentialities are created (Buckingham, 2003; Burnett and Mechant, 2011; Jenkins, 2006;). It is as if humans collectively become a super being, or a collection of selves within a self.

### **The Postmodern Self**

Technological change is potentially revealing the bounded unitary self as a temporal construct, a construct that has seemingly outlived its usefulness as we move into postmodernity. It is a paradigm of the Kuhnian (1996) type that might be in need of replacement. Like a mythical comfort blanket, the unitary self was a useful construct at a time when the amount of information a human was required to acquire, process and use was much less, when individuals existed in a pre-cybernetic, pre-networked human state. Selfhood is no longer shackled to the dualistic nature of modernist and idealist notions of how the world works (Gergen, 2001).

Although some might lament this change, as if this “new generation” has “lost” something, this change need not be viewed as positive or negative. Perhaps it is just

different. Junco (2014) refers to this as taking on a youth-normative perspective. This is in contrast to adult-normative perspectives that often assume a sentimental tone about humans pre-technology, as if there is something lost in the present day. This adult-normative perspective misses the new abilities and ways of being that are gained and/or revealed by these new digital and social technologies. It is perhaps more useful to look for the opportunities for new potentialities and possibilities they bring. Haraway (1990) states:

Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world. (p. 217)

Haraway's cyborg identity is about liberation. It rejects the modernist and romanticist traditions and imbues the new changes occurring on the Web as a liberating force. Old ways of thinking are "techno-digested" and rejected (Haraway, 1990, p. 205). This new understanding of the self, or the lack of a traditionally theorized sense of self, creates new possibilities that previously were not within reach. In the interim, however, this can create a confusing time of liminal disorientation as society moves from modernity into postmodernity.

***Evidence and implications for a generation.*** The current generation of college students, having grown up with digital and social technologies more integrated into their lives, may be experiencing this period of change more acutely. Their online "selves" may be more postmodern in nature, but offline, however, students still encounter modernist institutions and ideologies. This has the potential to be profoundly disorienting for an emerging adult. Gergen (2000) names this the "vertigo of unlimited multiplicity" (p. 49), or the experience of multiphrenia, "the erosion of the centered self;

the deterioration of truth, objectivity, and authority; and the emergence of new visions of relationship” (p. xiv). This analysis implies that current college students may exist in a liminal space between modernity and postmodernity, often without supports and guidance to help them navigate it.

Without these supports, many of this generation might have difficulty defining their life purpose and develop meaning. Numerous authors have addressed this phenomenon. Arnett (2005) cites lack of support as one of the reasons why the current generation is experiencing a delayed or prolonged period of “emerging adulthood.” Erik Erikson’s (1980) previously described “institutionalized moratorium” is being extended, often later into an individual’s early 20s. Robbins and Wilner (2001) referred to it as a “quarterlife crisis” and Henig and Henig (2013) addressed it in their work, *“Twentysomething: Why do young adults seem stuck?”* Robert Kegan (1994) describes a similar phenomenon as one where we are “in over our heads,” where our systems of meaning making are not equipped to handle “the mental demands of modern life.” Sociologist James Côté (2000; 2006, p. 91) situates the issue in a societal context, believing we are in a period that is “increasingly anomic,” or less normed, that “requires people to compensate for fragmented institutional contexts.” Seider and Gardner (2009), state that, “Nowadays young people get much less guidance from *the* community, or, more properly, the several communities in which they reside” (p. 3). This lack of guidance may also be occurring on the individual level, for, as Smith (1994) states, young adults may be “bereft of anchors to stabilize a view of self and world” (p. 408).

The challenge of developing these anchors also extends beyond the college student to the institutions they attend. As Bloland (2005) recognizes, “the postmodern

world is replete with multiple sites for knowledge creation, thereby threatening the role of higher education as the central source for knowledge production” (p. 129). To remain relevant, colleges and universities must examine how and what they deliver educationally in this new reality. Although what institutional reforms must take place is not the explicit subject of this study, the understanding of self is a foundational piece of knowledge that is necessary to inform this potential institutional change. Chickering and Reisser (1993) note that, “in earlier eras, the principal task of education was ‘socialization’... [to a] symphony [that] had a clearly stated theme and rhythm” (p. 208). The authors updated this stating that, “in the global society of the twenty-first century, where change is the only certainty, not socialization but identity formation becomes the central and continuing task of education” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 208).

Writing before the advent of the social and digital technologies, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) education for college students sought to help students navigate a world of change by creating a firm singular anchor of identity. Updating the author’s theory in light of the present reality of the twenty-first century, perhaps higher education’s mission is to develop students that are comfortable and adept at switching between contexts and relationships, identities and selves. Perhaps their anchor lies somewhere else, rather than in a single, unitary, “developed” psychological self. This study investigated both of these concepts and found that for contemporary college students, the answer lies somewhere in between.

## **Conclusion**

If society is truly entering a period of liminality between modernity and postmodernity as a result of advances in technology, then prior theories of human

development must be reexamined to determine their present day applicability.

Traditional theories viewed the developmental process as one where “the major achievement of normal development was a firm and fixed ‘sense of identity’” (Gergen, 2000, p. 41). With the rise of social and digital technologies, however, one must put these conceptions in a tenuous hold. They may apply in some instances and perhaps not in others. Researchers must begin to grapple with interactions across a digital network and how those interactions are increasingly more intimate, and perhaps fused with, technology. These changes present a window into new understandings and conceptualizations of self and identity.

The theories presented in this chapter represent a new way of thinking about selfhood and identity. The following study was undertaken with the recognition that although traditional theories may still be useful in understanding how college students conceptualize self and identity, they may not provide a complete picture as to what is occurring in digital and social environments. As such, this study is informed both by traditional notions as well as postmodern thinking. It instead aims to understand college students’ conceptualizations of self and identity from their own point of view and engages in grounded theory method to arrive at an understanding of these conceptualizations.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

The following study seeks to understand the impact of social and digital technologies on the development of traditionally-aged college students. Specifically it seeks to understand how concepts of self are constructed and identities are presented in social media-saturated contexts—where blurred lines exist between physical and digital spaces. Prior research into social and digital technologies and college students has been largely quantitative and outcomes-based, but has not developed a robust qualitative understanding of how this new environmental reality impacts students from their perspectives. The present research seeks to address this gap. This research constructs a conceptual schema for how self-construction might or might not look different for this generation of college students and how students' hybridized lives, both on and off-line, may impact this self. The findings of this study are intended to inform college student educator practice by providing an understanding of how contemporary college students see themselves in relation to the world—both physically and virtually. Implications for how to support these students in navigating and understanding this reality are later explored.

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological and research design of this study. It begins with the definitions of “self” and identity” used in this research. This is followed by a statement of a formalized research question and a discussion about the utility of qualitative methods in answering this question. Next, conceptual frameworks are discussed. Information about a pilot study is presented as informing the present research design and the identification of a population sample. The research design is then presented including the study's data gathering procedures, interview and

observation methods and procedure, and methods of data analysis. Finally, the chapter ends with discussions of researcher positionality as well as ethical considerations present within the study and its limitations.

### **Definition of Self and Identity**

It is important to understand the terms “self” and “identity” as they are used in this research. As discussed in previous chapters, these terms are conflated and often used in different ways to refer to a related set of concepts and phenomena. Erik Erikson (1968), an eminent theorist in the history of psychology, admitted to his own vague usage of these terms. Additionally, within college student educator discourse, the term “digital identity,” in particular, has been used to refer both to one’s self-presentation online as well as one’s psychological developmental identity. The current research is seeking to understand how living in hybridized digital-physical spaces, represented by social media, might impact student’s conceptualizations of who they are and how they present their identities.

In this study, and from this point forward, the term “self” is defined and operationalized as one’s sense of being. One’s “sense of self” is the conscious experience of one’s internal life. One’s “construction of self” is how one comes to consciously understand this sense of being. The term “identity” is the actualization of this self. “Identity” is what one *is* and carries with it a series of properties. One may have “multiple identities,” particularly in digital spaces, which may or may not correlate neatly with individual social media platforms or profiles. Although “identity” and “self” have been conflated in discourse, they are understood here to be separate but related. “Self” is subject to “identity” as object. Selfhood is a more primary ontological concept. Selfhood

is the understanding of one's "distinctness of being" from others whereas identities are instantiations of selfhood. Identities are co-constructions of individuals created with others. These concepts, which are further explored in this research, are central to the research question.

### **Research Question**

Traditional student development theories were created prior to the advent of the social Web, and subsequently do not account for how self-construction might be different in light of the advancement and pervasiveness of digital and social technologies.

Although the research undertaken here is grounded in this prior developmental theory, it is not bounded by it and seeks to interrogate some of the assumptions of traditional theory formulations. As digital technology and social media have become more pervasive and integrated into daily life, it is possible that new realities are emerging. These new realities might provide new opportunities for understanding one's self and the construction of that self. To that end, the central question for this research is:

How do college students conceptualize who they are and how they present themselves when they are engaged in digital and social media?

### **Qualitative Research**

The above research question entails a qualitative approach. As Junco (2014) notes, qualitative research is largely absent within the areas of social and digital technologies and college students. Although a number of quantitative studies looked at the relationship between social and digital technology use and educational outcomes, broad-based exploratory qualitative research is lacking. Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman's (2009) study is a notable exception and the work of boyd (2014) and Turkle (1984; 1995; 2012), although not specifically on college students, is also applicable.

Given the overall relative dearth of studies in this area, qualitative methodologies present an important area for inquiry to elucidate new understandings of social and digital technologies' impact on college students.

Qualitative research provides “a vivid, dense and full description in the natural language of the phenomenon under study” (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997, p. 518). It employs “a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 196). The phenomenon in focus for this research is the nature of self-construction and identity presentation in digital and social environments. The study seeks to understand the lived experience of college undergraduates in digital and social contexts (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and “grasp the very nature of the thing,” which, in this case, is college students' sense of self and identity (van Manen, 1990, p.177). Qualitative methods are best suited to this understanding and the results of this study seek to inform and provide a theoretical orientation for future research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

**Grounded theory.** The following study utilizes a grounded theory approach towards understanding the subject matter. As Junco (2014) noted, using a youth-normative perspective in research on technology and college students is preferable as it attempts to construct theory and conceptualizations from an emic point of view. Grounded theory, which arises out of the data provided by participants in interviews, is in keeping with a youth-normative perspective. This research is an attempt to have student voices lead the construction of theory. It arrived at its conclusions through an inductive

process that surfaced conceptualizations of selfhood and identity from the students own viewpoints and voices.

The grounded theory approach was initially developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and was first codified in their work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Grounded theory provides for a “generation of theory... of actions, interactions, or processes through inter-relating categories of information based on data collected from individuals” (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 249). This methodology consists of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing, qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). This approach was useful to the present study, as it does not assume a priori principles at the outset of research, but instead seeks to construct theory from the data presented. In this case, prior developmental theories are the a priori assumptions that are being held in suspension. Although these theories proved to be applicable in these contexts, they were not assumed, nor were the interviews and observations structured to necessarily find connections between the data collected and these theories. Through later analysis, connections to existing theory were found.

Grounded theory practice has a number of defining features that were useful in this research. Under grounded theory, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, and inform each other (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because this study involved multiple interviews over time, the ability to collect data, analyze it, and use that analysis to inform and structure subsequent interviews proved useful in the construction of theory. Grounded theory also utilizes a constant comparative method in which data and analysis are constantly compared and inform each other in an iterative cyclical

process (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Occurring throughout and after the interview process, formulations and directions for inquiry were constantly re-evaluated in this study. Interview protocols were revised as the research progressed. Participants were queried to check for researcher understanding. This approach was useful in providing a systematic, rigorous method that allows theory and research to inform one another.

In the present research, given the diverse ways in which students are immersed and interact online, a grounded theory approach allowed for the honing of theory out of a potentially disparate collection of data. Grounded theory was particularly useful as it “assumes diverse local worlds and multiple realities and aims to show the complexity of particular worlds, views and actions” (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 250). Student experiences online are diverse. Students use social media at different rates, they immerse themselves online to varying degrees, they are on different social media networks with different affordances, and they use and experience these networks and affordances differently. Grounded theory, as a methodology, was particularly useful in navigating the complexity of these variable factors.

Similar to how self may be constructed and how digital and social technologies play with and blur notions of reality, the grounded theoretical approach here also assumes that “any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). In digital and social spaces, an “exact picture” of what is occurring may not be possible given the scope of the Internet and the diverse physical world connections related to it. Additionally, relationships in social and digital spaces are contextual and relational. This research surfaced concepts and

theorizations that may be useful in understanding what is occurring, but could never hope to capture the full reality of what is occurring, if such a notion could be constructed at all.

Based on the data collected, a grounded theory approach, discussed in further detail later, was applied in the development of a potential theory of digital self-construction. In the later section of this chapter on research design, specific aspects of grounded theory approaches utilized in this study are detailed as a part of the research process. This includes grounded theory methods including iterative data collection and analysis processes, the utilization of memo-writing to identify gaps in and advance theorization, and saturation, or the continuation of research until no new concepts, categories, relationships or properties emerge.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research adopted a youth-normative perspective and grounded theory methodology in order to understand self-construction from the college student's point of view. It attempted to better understand the subset of young adults born after the invention of digital and social technologies who grew up with these technologies in their surround. For the purpose of this study, the term "this generation" refers specifically to American adults who are of 18-24 years of age. More specifically, "this generation of college students" refers to current college-attending undergraduate students within this category. This is a more narrow operationalized definition than that used in "generational research," which demarcates individuals as belonging to a generations based on certain historical markers and the age of their births. Generalizing across generations is problematic for many of the same reasons the term "digital natives" is problematic, and

therefore the use of the term “this generation” will be used in contexts more focused on demarcating a group of individuals by birth age and socio-historical context.

As mentioned previously, the terms Web 2.0, the participatory Web, social media, and social and digital technologies are often used interchangeably, although subtle distinctions in usage might exist. Despite social and digital technologies being treated as a monolithic construct in this study, there is great variability in technologies within this larger umbrella concept. Student experiences online vary in what specific technologies students utilize and how frequently they utilize them. This could have differentially impacted the way students make meaning and conceptualized selfhood. Additionally student demographic factors could have confounded the research. Identifications such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status can influence a student’s meaning making and the processes by which they achieve these ends and therefore they could have complicated data collection and analysis. Given the lack of broad research in this area, this study focuses on commonalities in the phenomena without deeper level inquiry into demographic factors. The influence of specific demographic factors on student meaning making in online environments, however, is an area that is ripe for further study, some of which is already occurring (Martínez Alemán & Lynk Wartman, 2009).

The way students make meaning of their lives was theoretically drawn from the constructive developmental theories originating from the work of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978; 1986; 1987) advanced a notion of cultural-historical psychology, one in which the development of “higher order” functions of the human mind must be understood in relationship with other humans and the cultural-historical and linguistic context in which they act. For Vygotsky, the development of the higher order processes

are intimately tied with thought, speech, and action. These processes are developed through a mediating agent, which, for Vygotsky, is a psychological tool. It is a tool that can include language, signs, or other mental techniques. Meaning making is structured by mediation, or the introduction of a third element between one's thought and a perceived object or communicating subject. This mediating system, however, both structures and is structured by the tool (or language) that one uses and is situated in a context (or historical time or place). Furthermore, the development of this tool, and the development of one's thought (or cognitive processes) structures and is structured by the tool. For example, in the case of social media, "Networks that occur on and through social media sites [are] shaped in part by the characteristics of those media" (Kane, et al., 2014, p. 280).

In this study, the mediating system is the new online space created by the participatory Web. It was proposed that this relatively new technology has changed the way we view ourselves and that this change has had an impact on the way humans develop, make meaning of their lives, and construct sense of self. As a basis for understanding human meaning making, this study also rested on the more modern constructivist developmental psychological theories of Robert Kegan (1994) and Marcia Baxter Magolda (2004). Both assume a constructivist developmentalism which Kegan (1994) describes as incorporating "*constructivism*, the idea that people or systems *constitute* or *construct* reality; and *developmentalism*, the idea that people or organic systems evolve through qualitatively different eras of increasing complexity according to regular principles of stability and change" (p. 198-199). Both Baxter Magolda and Kegan draw from the same paradigm and posit that humans go through stages of

complexity, reaching towards higher orders of consciousness and self-authorship. This study attempted to understand ways in which the online space influences the development of college students towards these developmental goals and ways in which the final goals of development under these regimes, which lead towards unitary constructions of self, might be brought into question.

Conceptually, this research was undertaken under the premise that changing the way one interacts with and makes connections with information could result in changes in the way one makes meaning, structures experience, and constructs self. Social and digital technologies allow for individuals to connect with, manipulate, and interact with information in ways not possible when information was shackled by physical constraints and access. Prensky (2001) noted that online behavior changes the way the physical brain wires itself, and thus there might be changes in the way one thinks and processes information. Kenneth Gergen (2000), referring to the effect of moving between multiple physical and virtual worlds, described a “saturated self” or a hybridized identity. The omnipresent influence of technology can be understood as changing the construction of selfhood through how individuals self-present, and relate to and with others. These relationships might be constructed in differing ways, with varied complexity, across the boundaries of time and space. Potential new relationship forms may be multiplying and accelerating in their formation as a result of changes in technology, media (both old and new), travel, and communications. Conceptually, this study rests on the premise that a hypothesized postmodern self might be impacting college students in unique ways.

## **Pilot Study**

A pilot study of this research project was undertaken in the Fall of 2012 involving a combined interview-observation of two college students. The pilot consisted of one-hour interview-observation sessions with each of these students. During these interviews, students were asked about how they currently use social media and how their use of these technologies has changed over time. A version of the pre-interview questionnaire used in the present study was distributed to the participants to capture basic demographic data and social media usage statistics. Additionally, piloting the synchronous ethnographic tour method of Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2008) utilized in the present study, students were asked to log on to their most frequently used social media network and narrate their navigation of it.

The research question used in the pilot asked: How does the current generation of traditionally-aged college students (ages 18 to 24 years old) synthesize and make meaning of their online and physical world lives over time and according to traditional theories of student development? In this research, an attempt was made to understand the impact of social and digital technologies on college students within previously established theories of student development. Utilizing pre-existing theories has both benefits and drawbacks in understanding the data. Pre-existing theories establish preset patterns from which one might more easily perceive deviations or unique situations. Conversely, however, utilization of theory might prescribe the interpretation of data towards the predetermined ends and conclusions of said theories. For the purposes of the pilot study, it was found to be helpful to build off the pre-existing theory base in an attempt to construct how these theories might look in online spaces. The present research

is informed by these theories but did not assume them. Instead, some of the premises of these theories were questioned and explored through the interview process and subsequent analysis.

Despite this, the pilot study was also helpful in illuminating a number of considerations that are taken into account in the structuring of the present study. First and foremost, the pilot study revealed the importance of selecting individuals who are relatively savvy in their use of and knowledgeable about digital and social technologies. The two pilot interviews conducted were with students who might be described as average users and individuals with little knowledge about the social and digital technologies beyond their personal use of them. Because of this, students were not able to articulate concepts and ideas with sophistication and more time was spent in the interview helping students probe these concepts than on focusing on their developmental experiences with the technology. As a result, and as discussed in the population and sampling section below, a purposive sample of heavy users was selected for the present study.

In executing the interviews, the administration of a pre-interview survey about participant digital and social technology usage and frequency was helpful as a time-saving device and to allow the interviewer to more quickly and relevantly focus in on the participants' experience. The instrument used to collect this data included a listing of popular social and digital platforms and options for indicating the participant's frequency of use, ranging from multiple times per day, to monthly, to never. Additional spaces were provided for participant inclusion of digital and social technologies not listed. This

practice was continued in the present research study and is outlined in further detail in the data gathering and instrument section.

During a portion of the interview, students were asked to log on to a laptop and check their social media sites as they would normally do throughout the day. This behavior was captured in video through screen recording software and participants were asked about their behaviors in real time. Observations of this type were immensely useful in surfacing issues and concepts that might otherwise not have occurred in a standard interview format. This observation method was continued in this present study, but due to the rise of mobile technologies, this was accomplished through watching the participants navigate on their own device. This was not video recorded in the present study, but audio recorded with interviewer-provided audio descriptions of what was occurring. Excluding video capture also ensured greater confidentiality for an individual's content.

### **Research Design**

This study followed lessons learned in the pilot study but took on a different, yet related research question. This research represented an exploratory qualitative inquiry into how traditionally-aged (18-24 year old) college students conceptualize self and self-presentation in digital and social environments. The following section reviews the study's research design including its population and sampling techniques, data gathering procedures, instruments and protocols utilized, interview and observation procedures, and methods of data analysis.

**Population and sampling.** Following the example of the pilot study, the sample for this study was drawn from the current generation of traditionally-aged (18-24 year

old) undergraduate college students. These young adults were chosen because they represent the population of interest and due to their time-based context of having grown up after the advent of the Web. Although these students were born during this time period, one cannot assume that they all had equal access to or are equally savvy in the use of social and digital technologies. Pilot interviews illuminated this distinction and justified the need to identify participants that were heavy users of social and digital technologies. Based on experiences in the pilot study, students who exhibit this behavior were more likely to have reflected on their online experiences and would be better able to articulate its impact on their meaning making.

Rogers (2003) developed a schema for identifying and classifying individuals based on their adoption of technology, known as the diffusions of innovations theory, which was useful in narrowing the population and sample of this study. Under this theory, Rogers (2003) identifies five categories of consumers who adopt innovations as they eventually reach market share saturation. Individuals who are classified as innovators (2.5%), are the first to adopt new technologies. Innovators are followed by early adopters (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%), and finally laggards (16%). Although Rogers' (2003) theory is about the adoption of technology, and not necessarily the extent to which it is used, this study utilized this concept in identifying participants. Specifically, it recruited heavy users of social media (defined as those accessing three or more social sites at least daily) in order to produce richer data for study and theorization.

Although the sample was not representative of the traditionally-aged college going population as a whole in regards to technology usage, theoretical sampling was

utilized to project a forward thinking stance as to where society, and this population, might be headed in the future. Patton (2002) describes these samples as “extreme cases” and participant selection was a purposeful attempt to “help manage the trade-off between the desire for in-depth, detailed information about cases and the desire to be able to generalize” (p. 101). This intentionally skewed sample of participants, who are higher than average users of social and digital technologies, might more strongly illuminate how the experiences of students who are low to average users might view themselves in the future as they become more immersed online.

Additionally, in order to provide a fuller understanding of the research question, this study intentionally focused on students at the end of their college career. The reason for this, as Martínez-Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2008) noted in their study, was that:

Testimonies suggested that the meaning and culture of Facebook use in the first two years of college life is developmentally specific. The purposes and patterns of use had evolved for juniors and seniors suggesting that the meaning and assertion of online agency, performance, and relationality had changed for our student participants. (p.53)

Because this study is about selfhood, a relatively advanced and complicated notion, and not just the developmental patterns of the students, third and fourth year students were specifically targeted. Third and fourth year students are beneficial for a number of reasons. They are able to reflect on their prior experience upon entering and transitioning through college while also being able to provide a more reflective summary of their college experience as a whole. Additionally, narrowing in on third and fourth year students made it more likely that the participants were at an advanced stage of development. Although age and class year status are imperfect stand-ins for developmental level attainment, they nevertheless provided a useful practical method of

screening. Ultimately, the sample for this study included 2 third year and 11 fourth year students. Three students fell on either side of this range (2 second year students and 1 first year graduate student). These outlying students were included in the study as a point of comparison.

The number of students selected for participation was based in grounded theory methodology. In particular, the sample size was determined by “theory based data selection” whereby only a portion of the sample was identified at the outset of the study (Cherry, 2000). For the initial round of interviews and follow-up observations, there was a goal of 8-12 participants. New cases were selected in light of information gleaned from these initial cases and continued until a point of saturation, where additional data collection yielded no new theoretical formulations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Ultimately, this resulted in 16 participants in this study. Selected students all attend a private mid-sized highly selective research university on a residential campus near a major metropolitan area in the Northeast. This institution is predominantly white, religiously affiliated, with an institutional mix of approximately 52% men, 48% women, and 32% of students identifying as people of color.

Participants were initially drawn from a sample of undergraduate students who were either currently enrolled, or who recently completed, a college course in social media (n=8) and from students who were identified by college staff as heavy users of social media (n=8). The course from which some students in this sample were drawn (n=6) is offered through a school of business, which might have biased the sample. Attempts were made to mitigate this bias through the identification of students outside of the course. This occurred by soliciting participant nominations from staff members on

the college's social media council as well as through a purposeful selection of participants representing a mix of genders and academic major backgrounds. Ultimately, less than 40% ( $n=6$ ) of the resultant sample was enrolled (or had previously enrolled) in the specific course mentioned. Two students, who had taken coursework in social media at the same institution, had not taken the specific course offered through the school of business. Further methods of participant recruitment are outlined in the next section along with the pre-interview questionnaire, which aided in the selection of a diverse group.

**Data gathering procedures.** In order to answer the research question, a series of interviews and observations were conducted with participants, forming the primary data sources for this research. Participants were identified through the means listed in the prior section on population and sampling. Participants represented heavy users of social and digital technologies inline with the bell curve of Rogers (2003) theory of innovation. Participants were drawn from coursework in social media and were identified by college staff for their heavy use of social and digital technologies. Additional participants were selected via snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they knew of any fellow students that fit the criteria for this study.

Initial data gathering occurred in a staged process and consisted of four components: (1) a brief pre-interview questionnaire, (2) a question and answer interview, (3) an observation of the student accessing social and digital technologies via their mobile phone, and (4) a second question and answer interview. These components are presented in the sequence in which they were conducted. The interviews and

observations all took approximately one hour each and participants were compensated for their time with a \$10 gift card for each interview and observation.

***Participant recruitment.*** As outlined in the prior section on sampling, participants were drawn from two pools: (1) students enrolled in a social media course, and (2) students identified by administrators as particularly engaged digital and social technology users. Outreach to the students in the course was accomplished in person by attending a class session, presenting a brief overview of the study, and asking for volunteers. Referrals by college administrators were accomplished by outreach to the college's marketing department and social media council, a cross-campus meeting group for administrators engaged in social media work on the campus. Via email, a brief overview of the study was provided and potential student participant names were collected. A follow-up email was sent to these students describing the study and asking about their willingness to participate. All students responding agreed to participate.

***Pre-interview questionnaire.*** After participants were identified, a pre-interview questionnaire was sent to participants via email. The pre-interview questionnaire served three purposes: (1) to evaluate the sample for diversity in demographics, (2) to ensure participants were, in fact, heavy users of social and digital technologies, and (3) to establish which social media networks, apps, and digital technologies participants use and how frequently they use them. As a screening mechanism, basic demographic questions in the pre-interview questionnaire asked for participant gender, race, academic major and year in college. Answers to these questions aided in the selection of a diverse sample. Ultimately all students were selected, but demographic answers informed future participant recruitment in which the researcher was able to ask for suggested participants meeting

specific demographic characteristics. Although there was not a specific mix of these factors prescribed by this research, judgment was utilized to find a relative balance of possible answers. These demographics are noted and provided in the next chapter on results.

Additionally, screening via the pre-interview questionnaire attempted to identify individuals that are “heavy” users of digital and social technology. In evaluating answers to these questions, it was difficult to establish a firm rule as to what answers qualify an individual as a “heavy” user. Different technologies privilege time-engagements differently and therefore a more chat-based application, such as Snapchat, may entail more regular engagement in virtue of its design as opposed to a social network, such as LinkedIn, which does not necessarily demand this same type or level of engagement. Applied heuristically, participants who answered that they use at least three digital and social technologies “multiple times per day” or “daily” were considered “heavy users.” The researcher compared student responses against this qualification to determine whether participants should continue in the study or if additional participants were needed. All students were accepted, and one potential participant was turned away before completing the questionnaire after it was determined they would not meet the criteria.

In providing context for the interview and subsequent observation, the pre-interview questionnaire that was developed in the pilot study proved useful. This questionnaire was used at the prior to the first interview to establish an understanding for the participant’s use of technology. In itself, this questionnaire was not a central instrument of data collection for this study. It was reviewed prior to the in-person

interviews and the interviewer and subject reviewed it at the beginning of the interview. It also served as a means for collecting participant demographics and social media usage patterns.

*Instrument.* The pre-interview questionnaire that was used in this study is provided in Appendix A. In this questionnaire, a chart identifies commonly used digital and social technologies and provides space for participants to add their own. These technologies are divided into three sections including: social media networks, collaboration tools, and content creation tools. Social and digital technologies can be used in many ways and these categorizations were an attempt to differentiate the types of tools by their common purposes. Follow-up questions were asked at the start of the interview to better understand how participants used these tools and if their usage aligned with these categorizations.

The chart also included forced choice answers about the frequency in which participants engaged with specific social and digital technologies. Frequency options included: multiple times per day, daily, weekly, monthly, infrequently, and not used. These answers were also discussed at the start of interviews for further clarification.

*Interviews.* Interviews were conducted in a quiet private space to ensure the comfort of the participants and interviews scheduled for one hour. Intensive interviewing techniques were utilized whereby questions probed for in-depth exploration of the topic (Charmaz, 2006). Because the concept of selfhood is an intimate and sometimes intangible subject, in-depth and repeated probing was necessary and follow-up questions were guided by participant responses. These interviews, both intensive and based in grounded theory, were “open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet

unrestricted” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 28). They did not assume a priori categories of development so as not to limit the field of inquiry, while still providing focus for the interview (Fontanna & Frey, 1994). Subsequent interviews throughout this process changed and were adapted according to the data as it was collected.

Follow-up interviews with prior participants and additional interviews with new participants were scheduled and conducted after observations and an initial analysis of collected data. This initial analysis informed the focus of these follow-up interviews and guided the construction of probes and further questions. Throughout interviews and analysis, the grounded theory method of memo-writing was employed. Memos capture initial conceptualizations, thoughts, connections, and aid in providing direction for further data collection and study direction (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) describes memo-writing as a “crucial method” because it “prompts you to analyze your data and codes early in the research process (p. 72). Memo writing is part of the reflexive process between data collection and data analysis.

Between each interview and observation, the researcher captured salient thoughts, conceptualizations, and quotes through memos that informed the next stage of data collection. In some cases, questions were devised or revised for future interviews in response to the data collected. For example, one student provided an analogy to describe their integration with technology. Given the utility of the analogy in helping the student describe their experience, in subsequent interviews students were explicitly asked if they could provide analogies for their experiences. In addition to aiding the question formulation process, memos also proved useful in the final analysis of the data. Memos

allowed the researcher's conceptualizations during the study process to be more easily recalled and included in the final written product.

Intensive interviews under grounded theory suggest the use of few, broad, open-ended questions to allow unanticipated stories and answers to emerge (Charmaz, 2006). The included instruments provide these broad interview questions along with suggested prompts that were utilized given the answers provided by the participants. Because the nature of grounded theory is that data informs theory and emergent theory informs further data collection, subsequent interviews with the participants deviated as theorization and emergent concepts dictated. Future questions were captured through the process of memo writing.

*Protocol.* Sample interview protocols are provided in Appendices B and D. Questions in the initial interview (Appendix B) built off of the pre-interview questionnaire and focused on student usage of social media. After establishing student usage patterns, participants were asked questions related to how they view and how others may view the students' presences on social media. From this base, initial questions were asked about the extent to which students conceptualized their online selves as the same or different from their offline selves as well as the students navigate the various digital identities they maintain.

The final, post-observation interview (Appendix D), reviewed similar questions to those broached in the first interview, but asked students to probe more deeply. This final interview asked students to define their notion of selfhood and provide an analogy about how they conceptualize selfhood and how their digital identities online relate to those they maintain offline. Furthermore, this interview probed the relationship between

students' online and offline lives and the extent to which they were separable or integrated. Finally, the interview concluded by asking students if they had predictions for the future of social media and advice for educators working with college students on social media.

***Observations.*** A separately scheduled follow-up observation built on the information collected in the initial interview. The interval between interviews and observations varied depending on student availability. Initial participant observations were scheduled 1-2 weeks after the students' first interviews. As data collection proceeded and analysis occurred, the scheduling time between first interviews and observations was shortened and some students underwent observation 1-2 days after their initial interviews. For the final participant in this study, the interview-observation-interview method was collapsed and all data collection occurred in one complete two-hour session.

Observations took approximately one hour. Participants were asked to demonstrate a typical session they might engage in online accessing social media. Referred to as "synchronous ethnographic tours" by Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009), this method of data collection involved the observation and narration of participant actions online. This narrative tour was punctuated by pauses whereby the interviewer sought clarification on what the participant is doing, why they are doing it and how they understand it. In practice, this was accomplished on the students' most frequently used device, which in this study was a smartphone for all participants.

***Protocol.*** The protocol for the synchronous ethnographic tour is outlined in Appendix C. Although this protocol captures the general flow of the observation

sessions, given the nature of this method, follow up questions were contextually tied to what was occurring in the moment. Sample probes and questions are provided, but actual questions during this process deviated from these prescribed prompts.

During the observation, students were given the scenario that they had ten minutes before class to check their smartphones. In this scenario, students were asked what social media app they may go to first. Students then opened the app on their smartphones and provided a narration of what they would accomplish in that online session. The interviewer asked follow up questions based on the students' behaviors and ensured that a common set of questions was covered for each app accessed. These questions included how students use the app, what they use the app for, who the students' followers and audiences were, what types of content students post on the app, what type of content they view on the app, and the nature of the relationships the students maintain on the app. This process was repeated for all social media apps that students stated they would commonly access.

The observation was concluded with a set of general interview questions about the observation experience as a whole. These questions included asking students about how frequently they reflect on their online experiences, how they navigate the contexts, cultures, and audiences of these apps, and how they conceptualize themselves and their identities in these spaces. Students were also probed on issues related to their initial interview responses and asked to make connections between what they stated in the earlier interview and what they experienced through the observation session.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis, although presented here linearly, was a reciprocal process that occurred throughout data collection. The use of a constant comparative

method, whereby data and analysis consistently inform one another, was used in the construction of theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). This process occurred throughout the study and between interview and observation sessions. The utilization of memo writing aided in this analytical process. Saturation occurred when no new concepts or theorizations emerged from the data. This saturation did not prescribe a set number of participants from the onset or a set number of interviews with participants. Saturation began to emerge approximately after the tenth participant began the interview and observation series. It was through the final interviews with additional participants in this study that emergent concepts were probed further and refined.

Interviews and observations were transcribed separately and were initially reviewed for emergent themes. This action helped inform subsequent interviews in the data collection process. Ultimately, the transcriptions were combined into one document per participant for more formal initial coding. The coding process was accomplished using the qualitative research software Dedoose. Transcribed interview data was coded through an iterative process whereby subsequent coding sought to build off prior codes to create broader categories and concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analytic process began with initial coding that was provisional and open (Charmaz, 2006). This initial coding attempted to avoid categorization and sought to identify actions that remained close to the data (Charmaz, 2006). Utilizing this method allowed for the identification of potential gaps and areas for further inquiry (Charmaz, 2006). This initial coding included in vivo coding, which attempts to keep codes in the language of the participants and identify areas where language use may suggest deeper or implicit meanings (Saldaña, 2013).

Initial coding was followed by focused coding, which was an intermediary step that involved the synthesis of initial coding into broader categories of meaning across the data, and the identification of categories deemed most salient (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). Focused coding is a “Second Cycle analytic process” according to Saldaña (2013) and was utilized to surface and make decisions about which initial codes were most salient. Focused coding then led to axial coding, which “relate[d] categories to subcategories, specific[d] the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassemble[d] the data [that was] fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). These axial codes were then utilized in the final stage of analysis, theoretical coding, which “integrate[d] and synthesize[d] the categories derived from coding and analysis” to construct theory (Saldaña, 2013, p.224). It was at the end of this study that full theorization occurred.

Grounded theory calls for the completion of a literature review to occur *after* the completion of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this case, however, the literature review included within this document was written before the start of the study and was then revisited after analysis occurred. Alterations were made to the literature review to include additional research on digital identities. Additionally, the literature review was updated with new research that had been published during the course of this study. Discussion of this literature and its relationships to the findings is included in Chapters Five and Six.

**Validity.** The present study used of a number of procedures to establish validity from the lens of (1) the researcher, (2) the study participants, and (3) external reviewers and readers. First, in addressing validity from the lens of the researcher, triangulation

was achieved through the comparison of data collected in both the interview and observation phases of the study (Anfra, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). This was further enhanced by the search for disconfirming evidence, or negative evidence that disconfirmed themes gleaned from analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The search for disconfirming evidence occurred in subsequent follow up observations and interviews with participants. Modifying questions asked of students as the data collection process proceeded tested tentative theoretical formulations and analyses through the search for negative evidence. In the later section of this chapter on reflexivity, the researcher also self-discloses perspectives, identities, and background information that may form potential sources of bias.

From the lens of study participants, validity and credibility was established via follow-up discussions and interviews. Through member checking, the researcher analyzed interview data as it occurred and subsequently these “data and interpretations [were taken] back to the participants of the study so they [could] confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 127). Member checking occurred between each stage of the interview-observation-interview process as the researcher reviewed notes and transcripts (if available) in preparation for subsequent interviews and observations. At the beginning of subsequent interviews and observations, concepts and answers from the prior sessions were reviewed with participants to check for understanding. Additionally, memos were used to capture initial theorizations in this research and these memos also informed follow-up questions. When overall data analysis was complete, participants were provided with an electronic draft of this research’s findings via email to ensure student voices were captured accurately and

that the emergent theorization was inline with how students might characterize their responses.

Overall, member checking was part of an iterative process that included a sharing of coding and categories with participants to check for agreement and for probing further into unclear concepts (Charmaz, 2006). Validity was established through prolonged engagement with the participants over the three interview and observation sessions as well as in collaboration with the participants in reviewing findings (Creswell and Miller, 2000). This reflexive method engaged the participants themselves in the theory construction process.

Lastly, from the lens of reviewers and readers external to the study, thick and rich descriptions are used to create “verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in the study” (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 129). This entailed the extensive use of primary quotes in presenting the findings as well as detailed descriptions of the data.

Additionally, peer debriefers, or external researchers, were utilized at multiple points within the research process such as between interviews, observations and coding. In this case, the researcher relied upon discussions with fellow doctoral researchers who were also conducting studies related to college students and social media. These researchers included Josie Ahlquist (2015), Adam Gismondi (2015), and Paul Eaton (2015). The researcher also blogged throughout this process and utilized blog posts as a means of exploring ideas and gathering feedback. As Creswell and Miller (2000) state, in reference to Lincoln & Guba (1985), “A peer reviewer provides support, plays devil's

advocate, challenges the researchers' assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations” (p. 129).

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are a number of areas within this research in which important ethical issues arose. Any study involving human subjects requires approval of an Institutional Review Board. The following study, along with sample instrumentation, was provided for formal review and received approval before interviews were conducted. At the beginning of each interview, participants were provided with a consent form that outlined the potential risks and benefits to participation in this study. At the start of each interview, accompanying this written consent, was a verbal review of the information presented in the consent form. Participants were provided the opportunity to ask questions to better understand the nature of the study and the types of information they were being asked to provide. Collected data was only used for the purposes of this study and any additional publications that might arise from this research. Participant names were changed and anonymized before being presented here. Recordings of interviews were kept on the researcher's local hard drive in order to maintain security. Only the researcher had access to these recordings with the initial exception of third-party transcribers. The identities of the individuals in the interviews and observations were not revealed to the transcriber. Researcher notes were kept during the interview process and were treated with the same confidentiality procedures as indicated above with any recordings. At their request, participants were given access to this recorded data and drafts of any written product. No participants requested this access.

Given the relative newness of social media research, ethical procedures were of increased importance in this study. Students were asked to share their social media browsing habits during the observation, which could have resulted in unintended disclosures of information. These disclosures of information could have been about the participant or other individuals who might have appeared in posts and news feeds. Because of this, extra sensitivity was given to the handling of data. Participants were asked to access social and digital technologies using their own devices and, when verbally relaying what was shown on screen, the interviewer did not identify individuals but instead indicated what was presented on screen or what actions are taken.

Creating a sense of comfort and ease with the researcher was important in conducting this study. Interviews and observations took place in a comfortable, quiet, and closed-door environment. Participants were allowed the opportunity to drive the answers to interview questions. The researcher, although probing, attempted to allow participants the ability to use their own uninfluenced voice. The researcher made attempts to not force or drive interviews towards predetermined ends. Additionally, the use of member checking and debriefers as outlined at the end of the previous section on data analysis helped ensure greater voice for the participants in the research and in the theory generation process.

### **Positionality/Reflexivity**

In approaching this topic as a researcher, and through the reality of researcher as instrument, I acknowledge how my own training in student development theory, experience as a professional in higher education, and my own personal interest and research in Web-enabled interactions and learning might have influenced the conclusions

I drew in this study. This could have impacted the validity of the findings. As a PhD candidate, and as an individual who has devoted his entire life to study and work at colleges and universities, particularly four-year institutions, I have developed some professional presuppositions that might have caused me to make assumptions about student behaviors and lives. I attempted to hold these assumptions in suspension during data collection while still allowing my knowledge to help inform the probing and interview direction. In analysis and framing of emergent concepts from data, I made attempts to explicitly ground observations in research-backed theory and explicitly identify when informal praxis might be informing my findings.

Additionally, during pilot interviews and coding, I recognized that I drew connections between what the students discussed and previously established words and concepts used to describe the online space and humans' interaction with it. In some cases, my more intimate familiarity with these concepts might have influenced my interview probes, and the conceptualization and coding process towards certain ends. In other cases, my familiarity enabled me to probe more deeply on concepts of interest due to my understanding of related phenomena. To the furthest extent possible I attempted to minimize this researcher bias. I drew from the above referenced concepts as a heuristic attempting to deny the temptation for them to lead my interpretation towards predetermined ends.

I identify as a gay, white, male from a relatively privileged socio-economic background. These identities might have influenced both my own perspective in the interview process as well as the participants' perceptions of me. Although the demographic backgrounds of the participants were not specifically a pre-identified area

for analysis, discussion of self-construction and identity play did surface issues specifically related to these characteristics and identities. It is a reality that should be noted and was mitigated to the extent possible.

### **Limitations**

As a qualitative study, this research is better situated to answer questions of “how” phenomena play out and provide a deeper level understanding than traditional quantitative methods that seek to discover correlations and reliable generalizable results. Qualitative research in this area is nascent, and as such, this study is meant to be initially exploratory and is not meant to be generalizable to all 18-24 year old college students or young adults as a whole. It allows for the surfacing of general principles and phenomena that might be occurring as a result of humanity’s increasing intimacy and engagement with social and digital technologies.

As mentioned previously, the sample for this study was drawn from a population of traditionally-aged college undergraduates. One difficulty with any sample of students using online technologies is that differing web usage patterns, including the amount of usage and the types of sites and technologies utilized by students, might result in the privileging of different ways of structuring self and experience. This is further complicated by the previously mentioned differences students might experience as a result of demographic factors and access to technology as a result of socioeconomic status and other factors. Given the broad variation in how students utilize social and digital technologies, it is practically impossible to account for all of this variation within one study. As these factors became salient in the discussion of the results and analysis, they are noted.

Additionally, due to the choice of utilizing innovators and early adopters in this research, this study is not meant to represent the broader population at this time. Rather, this research attempts to establish a beachhead in this area, opening up further areas for research and establishing concepts and findings that might help inform future study. Because the demographics of the students in this study represent a decidedly privileged group, more research is needed to understand how self-construction might take place and vary in regards to students and individuals who might have possesses different demographic factors such as race, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, although data were not collected on the socio-economic statuses of the participants, it also seems probable that the sample utilized in this study may be relatively privileged in this regard. Further study is also required on how this may impact student experiences. As this is one of the first studies of its kind, these factors were not deeply interrogated within the study unless prompted by data collected from participants.

Through data collection, interviews were conducted until the point of exhaustion and saturation, not according to a presupposed number necessary to answer the research question. Implications and potential areas for further research are identified in the concluding chapters that can serve as a guide for a future research agenda. Because this research is situated in a context of prior research on digital and social technologies in higher education and that research is fragmented, evolving, and lacking qualitative studies, the present study was necessarily venturing into uncharted territory. While a more developed research base might have better informed and provided direction to the methodology and conceptual underpinnings of this study, the lack of research represented an opportunity for a new understanding of the impact of digital and social technologies

on college student's development. This research was thus both limited and freed by the restraints of previous knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding chapter provided an overview of the theoretical and conceptual groundings of this study. This included the work of constructive developmental psychologists including Lev Vygotsky, Robert Kegan, and Marcia Baxter Magolda, and the conceptualizations of postmodern identity and selfhood as put forward by Kenneth Gergen (2000) and others. From this basis, the chapter provided an overview of the study's qualitative methods including its use of a grounded theory approach to data analysis and theoretical formation. A pilot study was reviewed and the data gathering procedures for the study, including interviews and synchronous ethnographic tour observations, were detailed. The analytical process was detailed alongside attempts made at establishing research validity. Finally, this chapter concluded with ethical considerations and the positionality of the researcher. The next two chapters, which provide the findings and implications for practice arising from this study, present real student voices alongside analytical narrative to provide readers with a better understanding of how contemporary college students conceptualize who they are and how they present themselves when they are engaged on digital and social media.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

This research aimed to explore how traditionally-aged college students in social and digital media spaces conceptualize self and identity. Although guided by traditional theories of development, it also attempted to understand how these concepts might be changing as a result of the new affordances allowed by technology. Data were collected over the course of one academic year from 2014 into 2015 through a sequential process with each participant undergoing two, one hour-long interviews and one, one hour-long observation. The following chapter discusses the sample and demographics of participants and reviews findings that resulted from analysis of the data. Data were collected, transcribed, coded and member checked through an iterative grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) resulting in the theoretical formulations found here.

The following chapter is organized by first discussing aspects of the sample, the demographics of participants in this study, and their levels of social and digital technology usage. After setting the stage for this research, findings are organized into two sections: (1) Curated Profiles and Digital Identity Online and (2) the Emergence of Digitized Development and Selfhood. In discussing digital identity, the findings revealed that students curated their online identities in order to portray idealized versions of themselves. Students also consumed the idealized presentations of others resulting in social media being viewed as a “game” or a “competition.” This effect had a number of consequences for participants. The second and final section of this chapter delves into conceptualizations of self and selfhood construction that students engaged in as a result of their use of social media. Participants provided a range of analogies for discussing

how their selfhood had become digitized and how the line between physical and virtual contexts was increasingly blurred. These findings set the stage for the next chapter, which discusses implications for college student educator practice.

### **Participants**

Overall, sixteen students participated in this study. The number of participants was determined after a point of theoretical saturation was complete—when no new information and themes were generated through the analysis of the data. During data collection, attention was paid to the diversity of the sample across a number of factors. A pre-interview questionnaire was utilized to collect this demographic information and was utilized as a guide in determining if a mix of different factors was present. Subsequent participants were recruited in an attempt to address homogeneity in the sample.

**Technology usage.** Because the aim of this research was to project a forward-looking stance concerning the future directions of both development and concepts of identity, the study aimed to collect data from heavy users of social and digital technology. As trends outlined in the previous chapters indicated, college students are increasingly likely to utilize these technologies more heavily in the future. Therefore, participants were selected as an extreme case sample that utilizes technology more than their peers (Patton, 1990). This was operationalized in the study as students who utilized three social media sites multiple times per day or daily. Table 1 below summarizes student responses to the pre-interview questionnaire that asked them to identify which sites they use and how frequently they use them. Shaded cells indicate the most frequent answers given by students per network.

Table 1

*Participant Social Media Use Summary*

<b>Social Media Networks</b>						
	<b>Multiple times a day</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>Monthly</b>	<b>Infrequently</b>	<b>Not Used</b>
<b>Facebook</b>	14	1	1			
<b>Twitter</b>	7	2	3		1	3
<b>Pintrest</b>		2	2	4	6	2
<b>Instagram</b>	11	3	2			
<b>LinkedIn</b>		3	7	2	1	3
<b>Snapchat</b>	11	3			2	
<b>Collaboration Tools</b>						
	<b>Multiple times a day</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>Monthly</b>	<b>Infrequently</b>	<b>Not Used</b>
<b>GoogleDocs</b>	2	1	5	7	1	
<b>Wikis</b>	1		1	1	3	10
<b>Content Creation Tools</b>						
	<b>Multiple times a day</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>Monthly</b>	<b>Infrequently</b>	<b>Not Used</b>
<b>Blogging</b>			4	3	2	7
<b>YouTube/Video</b>		1	1		6	8

The most used social media sites by participants, in order from most used to least used, were: Facebook (n=14), Instagram (n=11), Snapchat (n=11), and Twitter (n=7). It should be noted, however, although participants indicated use of these sites, the ways in which sites were used varied. Questionnaire responses were discussed at the beginning of interviews to establish rapport and explore the ways in which these sites were used. Follow up questions revealed that students interacted on these sites to varying degrees. Some students would merely lurk, passively consuming content, and others were highly engaged and active participants. The extent to which this impacted conceptualizations of selfhood and identity surfaced in the subsequent interviews and observations.

The questionnaire also included collaboration tools such as GoogleDocs, an online software productivity suite with social features, and wikis, collaborative technologies that allow for group creation and editing. These technologies, although not often considered under the heading of social media, do possess social features that are of note. This study asked about student use of these technologies in the event interesting use cases arose, but in no interviews did students mention using these in ways that impacted conceptualizations of identity and self. Therefore the data are presented here, but was not used in the analysis.

Similarly, students were asked about blogging and also about video production and sharing sites such as YouTube for the same reasons as those motivating the questions about online collaboration tools. A number of students indicated that they blogged, but that this blogging was accomplished as a part of a course assignment and did not represent a significant site of self or identity formulation. None of the students reported creating video content and sharing it through sites such as YouTube, although students consumed content from these sites. Again, given this study's focus on the social features of these technologies, and given the fact that they were not used in a "social" way, they are not a focus in the following discussion of results.

Table 2

*Participant Social Media Use Detail*

	<b>Multiple times a day</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>Monthly</b>	<b>Infrequently</b>	<b>Not Used</b>
<b>Addie</b>	Facebook Twitter	Instagram Snapchat	LinkedIn	Pinterest		
<b>Annie</b>	Facebook Instagram	Snapchat	Twitter LinkedIn		Pinterest	
<b>Ashley</b>	Facebook Twitter Instagram Snapchat		Pinterest			LinkedIn
<b>Cameron</b>	Facebook Instagram Snapchat	Twitter		Pinterest		LinkedIn
<b>Elizabeth</b>	Twitter Instagram	Facebook	LinkedIn		Pinterest Snapchat	
<b>Ellie</b>	Facebook Instagram Snapchat		Twitter	LinkedIn	Pinterest	
<b>Gatsby</b>	Facebook Snapchat	Instagram	Twitter		Pinterest	LinkedIn
<b>Grace</b>	Facebook Twitter Instagram Snapchat	Pinterest	LinkedIn			
<b>Hallie</b>	Facebook Snapchat	Instagram	Pinterest		LinkedIn	Twitter
<b>Liam</b>	Facebook Instagram Snapchat		LinkedIn	Pinterest		Twitter
<b>Logan</b>	Facebook Snapchat	Twitter Instagram LinkedIn				Pinterest
<b>Maria</b>	Facebook Instagram Snapchat	Pinterest LinkedIn				Twitter
<b>Meghan</b>	Facebook Twitter Instagram Snapchat	LinkedIn			Pinterest	
<b>Mesut</b>	Twitter Instagram Snapchat		Facebook LinkedIn	Pinterest		
<b>Natalie</b>	Facebook	Instagram LinkedIn			Twitter Pinterest Snapchat	
<b>Ryan</b>	Facebook Twitter Instagram	Snapchat	LinkedIn			Pinterest

**Demographics.** This study sought to take a forward looking stance regarding the impact of social and digital technologies on college students and therefore focused not only on heavy users of the technologies, but also on third and fourth year college students who were likely to have more experience with technology. This group may be further along in their developmental process and therefore able to reflect upon it more critically. Eleven of the participants were in their fourth (senior) year in college and two were in their third (junior) year. Although this study focused on third and fourth year students, two second year students were identified and selected for participation because of their heavy use of social and digital technology and to provide a point of comparison with their peers. Additionally, one graduate student, who was in her first year post-graduation, was also included in the sample.

Additional data on participant demographics were collected through the use of the per-interview questionnaire. The data are outlined in Table 3 below and are presented verbatim as students responded. Because most of these responses were collected via an open response, some answers, such as White and Caucasian for race, may indicate membership in the same or similar groups.

Table 3

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym:	Gender:	Race:	Major:	College Year:	Social Media Coursework?
Addie	Female	White/Hispanic	Biology	3	No
Annie	Female	White	Higher Education	5 - Grad	Yes
Ashley	Female	White	Elementary Education	4	No
Cameron	Female	White	Nursing	4	No
Elizabeth	Female	Caucasian	English	4	Yes
Ellie	Female	White	Mathematics	4	No
Gatsby	Male	White	Marketing & Theology	3	Yes
Grace	Female	White	Communications	2	No
Hallie	Female	Caucasian	Nursing	4	No
Liam	Male	Latino	Theology & Sociology	4	No
Logan	Male	White	Finance & Philosophy	4	Yes
Maria	Female	Hispanic	Marketing	4	Yes
Meghan	Female	Caucasian	Communications	4	Yes
Mesut	Male	Caucasian	Business Analytics & Finance	2	Yes
Natalie	Female	White	International Studies	4	No
Ryan	Female	Caucasian	Sociology	4	Yes

The gender identity and race of the participants were collected through open-ended questions that allowed for a full range of responses. Of the sixteen participants, four identified themselves as male and twelve identified themselves as female. Fourteen of the sixteen participants identified themselves as white or Caucasian and three of the participants identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Notably, although there was some variation in the sample, there is relative homogeneity in the sample with a majority of participants identifying as white and as female. This may have biased the sample and outcomes, an issue noted in the chapter describing the methods of this research. The homogeneity of the sample also provides an opportunity for further research into how demographic factors may influence student experiences online, an opportunity discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven. Given the relative lack of research in this area specifically focusing on college students, this study is positioned to provide a heuristic

understanding of what is occurring along with the caveat that further research is necessary.

As previously noted, the experiences of students with specific identity factors represent an important area for future study. In some cases, aspects of social identity surfaced during this research, but further research is needed. The general concepts surfaced here may help guide this future research and explore the extent to which the concepts in this study may apply to students of varying demographic characteristics. Readers wishing to explore these issues in more depth will find a beginning exploration and discussion of some of these demographic differences in Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman's (2009) work.

Part of the sample was initially drawn from students taking a course on the topic of social media offered through a school of business. The reason for this sampling technique was in part due to convenience but also to ensure students would be equipped with the necessary language, definitions and concepts surrounding social media in order to be able to discuss the technology in sophisticated ways. Snowball sampling and recruitment through other means was also undertaken to ensure a diversity of approach to the subject. Because of this, participant enrollment in coursework on social media was tracked to ensure no greater than 50% of the sample had this experience. Ultimately, eight of the sixteen students indicated they had taken a course specifically focusing on social media and six of those eight had had taken the same course from the same professor, although not necessarily in the same semester. Overall, students represented a diverse array of majors with a bias towards business and the humanities.

## Curated Profiles And Digital Identities Online

Participants in this study spoke at length about how they formed and constructed digital identities online, how they consumed the digital content and identities of others, and how their relationship to their own digital identities changed over time. Digital identities are the different representations and personas participants took on through different social media platforms and in presentation to different audiences. This section will delve deeper into this construction of digital identities, and particularly focus on how these identities are often constructed as overly happy and positive. Furthermore, it will highlight the importance of validation through social media engagements such as Likes or comments. This was a consistent theme arising out of this research: digital identities are often curated and represented as perfected images and that the consumption of others digital identities reflected on one's own feelings about themselves and their lives.

**Being seen by others.** Participants in the interviews and observations were highly aware that others were viewing them on social media. This awareness, in part, dictated how they behaved online, what they posted, and how they constructed digital identities. In many ways, this is akin to living a more “public life.” Addie reflected on this, stating:

If you're participating in social media and posting public content online, you have to be mindful of what you're doing, just like anyone that's in the public eye would consider how they're being perceived. You have to take that into account a little bit, but I don't think it overwhelms your life. It's not like you're walking around worrying about people following you or taking pictures of you or saying mean things about you. At least, I've never been the victim of any type of social media abuse. Not yet.

All of the participants echoed Addie's sentiment in some respects, recognizing that social media causes users to live a more “public life” and that there are ramifications

to what one posts on social media. This awareness impacted participant behaviors to varying degrees. It resulted in some choosing to set the privacy settings on their social media accounts to a very high level so that only approved friends and connections could view their content. Others merely moderated what they posted and the content they allowed to be associated with their digital identities.

Students have consistently received the message throughout high school and into college that they should be mindful and wary of what they post to social media. As will be explored later in this chapter, some students adhered to or believed this advice to varying degrees. Students reported that almost all of the messages they received were presented as rules and were often communicated out of fear— e.g. the student who had their college acceptance rescinded or the person who lost their job, etc. The messages were rarely presented from a nuanced and more contextual perspective, or, if they were, students did not interpret them as such.

The current generation of college students is thus attuned to being watched and cognizant of their need to be aware of their being watched. Another participant, Liam, echoed Addie's sentiments about the public nature of social media and likened it to giving a speech on a public stage:

Online it's there for everyone to see and everyone suddenly knows—that's assuming everyone's looking at that post at that time. But with every post you make you just probably have to assume everyone's going to be seeing it even though that's not the case... Similar to how if you're about to give a speech to a huge group of people, you're going to think about what you're going to say before you say it. You're not just going to go up there and just say whatever. It depends on the speech. So in that way it's like getting up on a stage. Where life is kind of like a stage. We're all in different roles. It's just different in that the spotlight is always directly on you in social media. I think that's what kind of makes me want to bring out the best parts of myself. Whereas in person, it's still on you but it's a lot less pressure because it's less people...

The idea that one wants to present “the best parts of themselves” online, as Liam recognizes in his public speech analogy, became a consistent theme throughout all of the interviews. This awareness of being in the public eye often caused participants to carefully select and curate what they shared online, to varying degrees. As Liam notes in the above quote, complicating this curation is the fact that not everyone sees particular social media content and not everyone sees it in the same way.

***Context collapse.*** Arising out of this notion of the public nature of social media was the idea of audience or context. Social media posts and communications may be intended for specific audiences but nevertheless are able to be consumed by many different audiences. Different social media networks have varying affordances in allowing users to choose intended audiences, but there is inevitably some audience overlap or what danah boyd (2014) referred to as “context collapse.” According to boyd (2014), “a context collapse occurs when people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses” (p. 31). Put more practically, a student may post a picture intended for their friends, perhaps containing an inside joke, and yet this content can be seen by others, such as a family member. This family member may comment on it or interpret it differently. The post is then taken “out of context.” Furthermore given the ephemeral nature of news feeds and post listings, social media users may not even know who their audience actually is. Boyd (2014) notes that “teens are often leading the way at figuring out how to navigate a networked world in which collapsed contexts and imagined audiences are par for the course” and the same extends to college students. (p. 30)

One participant, Addie, noted the complexity of collapsing contexts and the merging of audiences in her social media life. Addie shared:

The worlds can start to mix. People... a bunch of different people follow me on Twitter—my former teammates follow me on Twitter but so do nutritionists and then my friends from here and the mix is they're all there in one place. So now there's people I used to act towards in a specific way and they're seeing the same stuff that a whole separate group is seeing... I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. I just say what I was going to say anyway, but if you think about it that probably totally changed their perception of me... I think the complicated part is not so much that there's all these separate worlds that were probably there before. It's when they start mushing together and overlapping. That's the part where it might get a little weird because there's people who might have had no idea about half the stuff you did and then all of a sudden they look at one of your public profiles and they can see so much more than they ever knew about you before. That's not necessarily a problem but it's just, becomes a very different way of interacting with people and learning about each other. There aren't as many secrets I guess.

Addie has made a decision to present a relatively consistent presence, regardless of audience or any context collapse. As she states, she doesn't "spend a lot of time thinking about it." For Addie, although there may be some context collapse, there may not be many ramifications if it occurs. She curates her content in such a way that should it occur, any harmful impacts would likely be minimal.

For other students, however, this may not be the case. It may be especially acute for students with marginalized identities. For instance, study participant Liam grappled with his social media presence and the fact that he identifies as a gay male. Liam is connected to family on some social media networks but not others. Liam is also out to some family members but not others. Because of this, Liam chooses to post pictures of himself and his boyfriend on some social media accounts (those where his audience knows that he is gay) and not on others (those that include audience members to whom he

is not out). Liam recognizes that he and his peers hide or show aspects of themselves in selective ways due to the way these aspects may be marginalized. Liam states:

When I look at my counterparts who are openly gay, a lot of times I know that they're gay but on social media [they] would never show that. Or, rarely do I know someone who is very openly gay online but is not in person. Unless it's like an app. Grindr and stuff like that, where it provides an outlet.

Liam's statement highlights the ability to construct different digital identities with varying degrees of privacy and with different intended and real audiences. Although Liam does not describe his experience as such, his experience does hint at the ability to lead "multiple lives" in an online space—lives that are kept separate from each other and in which one can present as a "different person." In pre-Internet offline lives, one may have contended with some of these same issues, but it is the affordances of digital technology that make them far more complex. Context collapse, visibility, and the ability to create multiple online incommensurate digital identities are but some of the complicating factors.

When it comes to navigating context collapse, Liam grapples with this fact as he tries to be "authentic" online. For Liam, authenticity is seemingly defined as having a consistent identity across platforms. Something that Liam sees as important. Liam stated that he tried to:

be authentic in both my online and my offline kind of thing and it's different with gay people because we have the ability to hide whatever our sexuality but also be very open about our sexuality. Whereas someone who is black can't hide the fact that they're black or hide the fact that you're a woman. That's kind of changing too, with gender even.

Authenticity, and the desirability of authenticity, was a consistent theme in many of the participant interviews. These students struggled with the meaning of authenticity and related concepts such as showing vulnerability and being genuine. In the digital

realm, where one can more easily make choices about what to reveal and where one can control one's outwardly portrayed image to varying degrees, the idea that one needs to find congruence between the two became vitally important to these students.

*A selective view of "reality."* Overall, regardless of the topic, students reported being selective in what they show others. In many participant responses, the audience for social media posts determined the platform students used and/or how they used it. Of particular note was how social media impacted the relationship between college students and their older family members, such as their parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. College students, as emerging adults, exhibit similar behavior to that of teens, but to a lesser degree. Teenagers have always sought spaces of their own, a notion consistent with danah boyd's (2014) study. This extends to social media where teenagers and college students carve out peer spaces that exist separately from the prying eyes of the "adult world." One participant in the study, Ashley, provided a demonstration of this in the way she approaches Facebook, a space she increasingly sees as "adult-oriented."

Ashley stated:

Facebook, I feel like, is more adult-oriented now. So many parents are on it. So many grandmothers are on it. So many older people now. I feel my generation and generations below me go into it filtering what they post because they know that so many more people are on it. And they're not always genuine because they know so many people are on it and looking at their pages. Whereas with Snapchat, there's no adults on it that I know of, so they post whatever it is on their stories: doing crazy things, drinking and doing whatnot and not caring. It's so instant with the posts on Snapchat... I don't really think about it that deeply, what I'm posting. Whereas with Facebook I definitely think people think about their actions more.

Consistent with other participants in this study, other social networks have supplanted Facebook as a more important site for peer communication. Although Facebook remains the most used, college students are using the social network differently

than they may have in the past and differently than how their parents and older adults use it. As Ashley reflected on her online usage, she highlighted how Facebook has become less of a college student social space and one that has a much broader and diverse audience. Because of this, Ashley is not only selective in what she shares, but also where she shares it. Being aware of the concepts of audience and context, Ashley knows that Facebook includes older adults and family members within its audience whereas Snapchat is more exclusively used by her peers.

The person who posts on social media is not the only one impacted by context collapse and audience convergence. Consumers of these posts are also affected in how they construct reality and understand what is occurring. Ryan provided an illustrative example of how her social media presence, and the inclusion of her mother in the audience, changed the nature of their conversations. Ryan stated:

My mom, when we became friends on Facebook... she was getting a steady stream of pictures of me having a great time and everything. It was funny to see just the way that our conversations changed on the phone after. She's always concerned or worried or everything, but I feel that seeing these pictures, it's kind of like, 'Okay, things are good.' But it doesn't necessarily mean that's the case. My generation that has grown up with it knows that your friend may look like she's having a fun time, but maybe things are not going well. But I feel, my mom, it took awhile to realize that.

Through consuming Ryan's Facebook posts, Ryan's mother constructed a narrative that everything in college "was alright," and that Ryan was having a good time in college and adjusting well. As Ryan rightfully points out, however, social media posts represent offline realities to varying degrees. They represent moments in time, and are consumed asynchronously—out of order and selectively by the consumer. This ability for narratives to be constructed out of social media posts, and the ability of the posting individuals to construct narratives, is the topic of the next section. For college students,

being seen by others puts enormous pressure on them to present selective perfected images and to construct digital identities where they appear to be always happy and living exciting lives.

**Curating perfected images.** Not initially anticipated and yet consistently present within this study was the notion of crafting and curating “perfected” images online. Perfected images are constructed digital identities that only portray the positive, the happy and the exciting. Perfected images omit the mundane and the “negative” to provide a portrait of a life in hyper-reality. All participants in this study stated that they engaged in crafting a perfected image of themselves either currently or in the past or know of many peers who do so. The logic behind the perfected image is that one needs to appear “cool” and that external validation is important in determining success and self-worth. Explored in depth in the remainder of this section, the pursuit of a perfected image was pervasive amongst study participants and their peers. Although the nature and importance of this pursuit appears to change developmentally over time, it has real effects on those constantly consuming the perfected images of others.

Needing to present a perfected image or front is not a new phenomenon and is something that already occurred offline before the advent of social media. Caring about one’s appearance and being proud of one’s accomplishments is a relatively commonplace behavior. When that care turns into vanity, or that pride turns into hubris, however, the effects can be damaging. Even further damaging to college students is the impulse to compare oneself to another to determine worth. Social media, perhaps given their reach and constant ubiquity, seems to amplify the deleterious effects of this phenomenon.

Social media produce a heightened effect. Natalie provided an excellent summary and noted social media's specific effects when she stated:

Obviously when you're in person, you always have to be the person you actually are, to a certain extent... At a party, you can be internally miserable, but to a certain extent you have to react and be a person. As far as your conscious effort, people say that on social media, people care too much about your presence on it. I think that, in general, we all care about our presence. To a certain degree, that's okay. You're going to dress nice today. That's okay – you care about yourself. That's a sign of caring about yourself. That's awesome. You work out. You care about your health. That's awesome. I guess there's a line. And maybe social media's above it, or in-between it, or around it, I don't know.

It is this last statement of Natalie's that is perhaps the most illustrative. She mentions there being "a line" and that social media cross this line in some way. The "line" can be inferred to be the point at which caring about your appearance changes from a positive self-behavior to a negative one. Social media's ability to amplify messages makes this situation even more pernicious. Participant Hallie noted social media's amplifying effect when her professor began discussing social media posts as a "highlight reel." Hallie stated:

We had this whole conversation in class... my professor... he was pretty insightful... he asked us think about the highlight reel. Do we use social media as a highlight reel of our lives, and how many times out of ten would you say that you wouldn't post something because it's not a highlight. And all of us were like, 'Oh, all the time.' He was like, 'Go through your day. How many things would you post, and how many wouldn't you?' ...I would just encourage [educators] to ask their students about recognizing—not necessarily changing it— but recognizing that what they post and what other people post isn't 100 percent of their lives. Because there's a lot of times when you think that people have the best life ever, because of what they're posting, when in reality they're going through a lot. Probably many similar things that you are, but because they're posting all this fun stuff, you think that their lives are perfect.

Hallie's quote echoes that of Ryan's at the end of the last section, when Ryan's mother assumed Ryan's positive social media posts accurately reflected how Ryan was doing at college. The reality, as Halle points out, is that the image and content college

students post to social media are typically only the “highlights” or the positives. Students do not reflect vulnerability or insecurity and instead often seek to obscure them. Compounding the effect of needing to portray perfected images and the effect of consuming them is the importance of “Likes.” The Like, which was discussed at length by many participants, had a significant impact on the way these college students constructed their identities.

***The importance of Likes.*** Facebook (n.d.), the largest social network in the world as of the time of this writing states that the “Like” button allows you to “give positive feedback and connect with things you care about.” It further explains, “Clicking Like below a post on Facebook is an easy way to let people know that you enjoy it without leaving a comment. Just Like a comment, the fact that you Liked the post is visible below it” (Facebook, n.d.). Facebook is not the only social network to have a “Like button.” Many other social networks have analogous if not the same concepts in their lexicon. Although the definition of a Like seems relatively benign, through the interview process participants described a far more complex phenomenon that occurs as a result of this seemingly innocuous action. For many participants, receiving Likes and posting content and portraying a life that is “worthy” of Likes was extremely important. The accumulation, or lack there of, of Likes had a much deeper psychological impact causing participants to purposefully craft digital identities in particular ways.

Many participants reported being consumed with accumulating Likes on their content. Receiving a Like was interpreted as a commentary on the individuals themselves and often served as a form of external validation. Many participants

recognized that they cared about receiving Likes far more than they believed they should.

One participant, Ashley, stated:

I think I definitely care too much what other people think, which I'm trying to work on. When I post an Instagram for example, I'm definitely thinking if a person Liked it: 'I wonder what that person was thinking. They liked it. Or clearly they liked the picture.' If I'm scrolling through, 'Oh, that person didn't Like my picture, I wonder why? They're clearly on Instagram.' I definitely think about it more than I should.

Many participants echoed Ashley's sentiment that she "thinks about it more than she should." They recognized that a preoccupation with Likes seemed irrational and that their needing to get validation through this method didn't make sense to them. And yet, despite this, participants often felt caught up in it or compelled to seek them. Mesut recounted two situations where he changed his behavior due to a desire to receive and appear to have received many Likes. He stated:

There's been two or three occasions where I've put something up and then deleted it 20 minutes later. And then after that, I've thought... 'That was so stupid. Why did I do that? I shouldn't care about that. I usually don't care. I don't know why I care right now.'

Mesut continues:

And I've noticed that sometimes I will think of something to tweet on my personal Twitter and I won't tweet it because in the back of my mind I'll be thinking, 'This isn't gonna get very many favorites.' And a couple of times I've sat back and I've thought about it and I think, 'Why do I care about that? Because it's my personal Twitter, I'm just throwing out a tweet to my buddies and stuff.' But I feel... in the back of my mind there's a certain standard of interaction that I get on every single tweet that I don't want to make sure I don't drop below. But at the same time I don't care about my personal Twitter that much, so why would I care what I tweet?

Mesut's remarks were common amongst participants. Some stated they did not care about Likes, but those that did often questioned why they cared so much about receiving them. Additionally, Mesut's example of posting and then deleting the post

when it doesn't receive "enough" Likes (often within a certain arbitrary period of time) was a common behavior noted by a number of participants. This behavior reveals the importance of others seeing the accrued Likes. Likes are not just personally validating in and of themselves, but their validation is heightened when it is perceived that others can see them. Grace recognized some of this behavior in her peers:

I know so many people who will be like, 'If I don't get 100 Likes, I'm deleting my photo,' and they do. I catch so many people all the time deleting pictures if they don't have a certain ratio in like, 20 minutes... But it doesn't really matter.

Being seen by others as receiving Likes on one's content heightens the importance of crafting the perfect image. It is not merely the content one puts out themselves, but also how that content is engaged with by others. This behavior also hints at another important aspect underlying the psychology of the Like—Likes do not mean anything when they are not viewed in comparison to others. In other words, what qualifies as "a lot of Likes" is relative. What is more important is that one receives more Likes than others. Participant Addie highlights this fact in the following quote:

'How many Likes did your post get? What does that mean?' Where, then I almost feel like... and then it becomes... that doesn't... that number in itself doesn't mean anything unless you compare it to other posts. Then you get in that whole thing where people start comparing themselves to other people. That really isn't the best route to go down. Is that what you should be doing whenever you have a piece of content and it doesn't do as well as someone else's? What does that say about you? I personally don't think that that should be something you take personally. 'Wow everyone on the Internet hates me.' I don't think that should be the reaction but I don't know that everyone else feels the same way. I know people that have deleted posts because they don't get enough Likes. I know people who Unlike a photo on Instagram because it suddenly now has a hundred Likes and they're mad about. That doesn't make sense to me. You're thinking about it too much.

This comparison, and the comparison social media seem to encourage, reveal a complex set of rules that are often unspoken but are nevertheless seemingly universally

understood. Under this schema, social media are less about sharing and communicating with others and more about being seen and competing. Students however, find themselves walking a “tightrope” when they craft images of themselves online. If one appears to care too much or try too hard, one may appear fake. If one doesn’t care and doesn’t try hard, one may appear “uncool.” As Liam states:

I mean sometimes it’s like a dance in that I need to keep up and continue being perfect online. Kind of show a good representation of who I am. I can be funny, but not too weird. It’s like a, keeping a balance almost, that tightrope. You’ve got to be good. But it’s almost like doing a dance that you can’t be too much of something, can’t be too beautiful on Facebook because then you seem fake.

This “dance” is a delicate balance that is formed entirely by an internalized set of rules that no one has intentionally created, no one has stated, and yet seem to be collectively created and universally understood. On its surface, it seems at best to be exhausting and at worst, harmful. In essence one is in a bind regardless of how one performs this dance and the dance must be kept up constantly. After discussing it as akin to a dance, Liam used another interesting term to describe social media—that they are a game and a game to be won. Liam further stated:

I think it’s more of an external thing because I would be happy just using Facebook just for pure contact. I think I enjoy it now because it’s a game. It’s posting things. It’s not an extension of myself. If anything it’s just an impulsive thing to just look through and check out the news but I definitely don’t think it’s me, you know like my account is me and I need this to keep going. If the Likes feature and stuff like that were shut down, I’d be fine with that. But again, it’s a game. It’s a fun thing, you know? Yeah, it’s definitely not completely me, but that’s because it’s a game and I like to win.

For Liam, social media are something to be won. His digital identity is not an “extension of himself” or an integrated part of his life, but something that is separate. The relationship between one’s online and offline selves and the level of connection between one’s online and offline selves is explored in the next section relating to a

potential new sense of self arising out of social media. In Liam's case, the two are largely separable, but for other participants, the blending is far more intimate and the identities and selves are far more integrated. Regardless of this integration, the consequences of being online and needing to craft a perfect image were felt by a number of participants. Logan, another participant, highlights some of this impact when asked about what he loses as a result of being on social media. Logan echoes Liam's discussion of social media as a game and states:

Because that's the biggest thing I lose... a sense of what am I really about. Before Facebook or before Myspace... I wouldn't care about these things—how many Likes I'm getting. I'm positive when I started Facebook I didn't care how many Likes I was getting because I know that I was posting way more... Now if I'm going to post something and it's only going to get four Likes, or even if it's just not even something I'm comfortable sharing, why post it? It's just become more of a socially, you know, it's a game... I guess I've lost my sense of freeness in a way... In the real world you have to constantly think about how you're being perceived and whatever. But social media does it, but in almost a false way. Think about how you're going to be in a way that is actually going to be appreciated by others through Likes or whatever. The validation is very skewed because someone who has tons of friends or someone who has just very strong networks gets better Likes. I don't know. It's just stupid in some ways.

As Logan states, "It's just stupid in some ways." Logan recognizes that it should not matter to him, but it does. Many participants echoed Logan in believing that the pursuit of Likes shouldn't matter and yet they inevitably found themselves caught up in it. Being caught in these patterns of behaviors has consequences. Logan described the game as one that is "exhausting." He continued:

I don't do the self-promoting. I don't do the Like. I don't need people to know what I'm thinking and I don't find my validation through that or through Likes. I mean it's nice to see I got a couple Likes on a photo but I would never do it because that's my goal... I almost find it draining to really focus on that part of myself.

Although Logan stated that he did not find validation through Likes, he exhibited some contradictory behavior in still wanting to participate in “the game.” This behavior was common amongst participants who seem to be struggle with this aspect of social media. They believe they should not care and yet social media seem to have a seductive quality that encourages competition and comparison despite the students’ best efforts to resist it.

***Deciding on the perfect photo.*** In order to maintain this perfected image of themselves, multiple participants described the amount of time and care they put into selecting, editing and filtering the “perfect photo” to post online. This was especially true with the social network Instagram, currently one of the most popular social networks for emerging adults, and one built specifically for the sharing and viewing of photos (Duggan et al., 2015). Instagram has its own set of socially-created unwritten rules about the types of images one should post. As Logan states, “If I’m on Instagram, I’m definitely conforming to the model of Instagram which is: you’ve got to take a really good picture, you’ve got to filter it perfectly and you’ve got to have a good caption.”

What Logan highlights is that there are not only unwritten rules of presentation and posting for social media in general, but there are also platform specific rules. The need for Likes and engagement, however, remains the same regardless of platform. Pictures, in particular, because of their visual nature and ability to capture a moment in time are of heightened importance. The behavior as it relates to crafting an overall perfected image remains the same. When posting pictures, there is great care taken in selecting the one perfect picture to convey the exact message one wants. Hallie discussed her experience:

There's definitely times when you're out, and you take a picture, and you're like, 'Oh, this is going to be so good on Instagram. People are going to think we had such a good night.' Then you're like, 'Oh, that's kind of dumb.' But then you post it anyways. Did I have to post a picture of me and my boyfriend at [this special location]? Did everyone need to know that I went to [this special location]? No. But, did I think it was cool? Yeah. And did everyone comment on my picture, 'Oh, my God! He is so sweet! He took you to [this special location]!' And I was like, 'I know!' So, I don't know. I would have to say I kind of [care], but I don't think that I try to, too hard. It's not all I think about, but there are times when I'm like, 'Oh, this is a good one. I'm going to put that one up.'

Another participant, Mesut, described a similar situation when deciding what picture he should post. Mesut stated:

On Instagram... there's pictures I've taken that I think are really cool. Or I'll be trying to decide between a picture I feel like I want to post on Instagram, and I'll be talking with my brother about which one should I post, and I'll be like, 'I kind of want to post this one,' and he'll be like, 'Yeah, but that one's going to get more Likes.' It's kind of a stupid reason to not pick the one that I want to post, but at the same time, I'll end up posting the one that he says is going to get more Likes.

This phenomenon doesn't end at pictures but also extends to the comments one posts. As Liam describes, "Because I don't want to waste time, people's time with just...a regular comment. It needs to either be witty or it needs to add something to it." Threaded throughout all participants' responses was the extent to which other people's reactions to social media content dictated what students would choose to post. The content students posted needed to appear exciting, engaging, worthy of Likes, worthy of being read, and worthy of being seen. Action on social media required a purpose. Explored in the next section, inaction also has a similar effect.

***Perfection by omission.*** Beyond actively posting the positive, another aspect of social media that amplifies the effect of perfected images is the omission of particular posts. Participants expressed that they felt they should not post the full range of expression they may experience—omitting any references to being sad, having self

doubt, or other behaviors that might be considered as showing vulnerability. This omission, often purposeful, has the effect of amplifying the posts one does make—that individuals are happy and living exciting lives all the time. Additionally, because social media posts are selective, they result in the de facto omission of the mundane. In other words, because one doesn't post their everyday happenings, the content that gets posted provides only a partial picture of one's offline life. This selectivity, achieved either actively or by omission, is described by Mesut as such:

You always hear people talk about the thing with social media is people only show what they want the outside world to know about them. They can create an image of themselves the way that they want to be seen by other people, and that might not necessarily be how they are in real life. I feel I don't think I portray any kind of image of myself that isn't true to who I am, but I also share bits and pieces. I don't give the full story.

Students reported that while they still believe they are portraying themselves accurately online, their sharing is selective. This selectivity almost always skews towards the “positive” and required participants to remain a façade despite how they may be feeling in their offline lives. The range of expression for college students' public posting online is therefore far more limited. Participant Ryan discussed how she handled social media when she was having a bad day:

If I'm really not having a great day or whatever, you go on Facebook [and] your profile picture is still that smiling one. Your cover photo is you at some exciting place, but you're like, today sucks. I guess, sometimes, it feels dishonest. I wouldn't, if someone puts something on my wall that looks funny, I'm not going to answer like 'Hey, normally I find this funny, but it's a tough day so I didn't laugh, but I saw it.' I'm still going to have to be like, 'hahaha.' I probably won't even open it, because it'll just be—I'm not in the mood. I'll Like it or comment, 'that was funny.'

Social media are not seen as a space where one can or should express feelings of being down, sadness, or anything that can be perceived as “negative” in general. If one

does post this type of content, it can be seen as fishing for sympathy or an attention seeking behavior attempting to elicit a certain response. A dangerous consequence of this behavior is that it isolates those who might be down or depressed and further exacerbates the situation when they do not see a complete range of emotions displayed online. Annie, while on a school retreat, discussed how people used social media while on study abroad and how it can mask feelings of homesickness and depression. Annie stated:

People obviously post pictures of going to all these beautiful places and having this great time. And we kind of unpacked the fact that actually, abroad can be really lonely and miserable sometimes, and no one ever talks about that because they're just posting on Facebook about going to Prague and whatever. So, I started seeing that then, and I think I've just kept seeing it, and I've kept doing it, too, because I've got to keep up.

Amplifying the effect that Annie describes are the comments and engagements of others. Receiving Likes and comments of, “You look like you’re having a great time,” further reinforce to the individual that they must keep up this appearance that everything is fine whether that is true or not. This need to keep up an appearance also extends to omitting parts of oneself that may not be as readily accepted, such as not conforming to a standard or appearing “weird.” Logan discussed how he omits some of his behaviors, particularly as it relates to some of his struggles with issues of mental health:

But I still wouldn’t feel comfortable putting it out on my story if it was so weird, even though it’s more authentically me. I wouldn’t want to be putting it out there because I don’t want to be judged for it. I don’t want people who might be following me to see it... I’m more just self-conscious about it in a way that doesn’t let people really know me fully and also there’s a huge part of my mental health that will never make it up on any of these sites... The greatest extent I can think of with people knowing how stressed I am is me posting a funny picture of finals... When... in reality, I’m pulling out all my hair.

Logan admits that his self-consciousness leads him to omit behavior or content that he might be judged for, regardless of whether these feelings are more genuine and

accurate to how he may be feeling at a given time. According to the “unwritten rules” of posting, this is not allowed. The creation of a perfected image is thus furthered not only through active posting and action, but also by omission.

**Consuming perfected images.** The effect of maintaining a perfected image, and the psychological toll that it may take, is furthered by the act of consuming others’ perfected images. This consumption reinforces the effect by making it appear that every one else is happy and living exciting lives and, therefore, if one is not also experiencing life this way, something may be wrong. Furthermore, social media can have the effect of altering others’ views of reality. The “highlight reel” doesn’t portray the fullness and richness of life and therefore those that may consume these highlights may make false assumptions. Participant Ryan described this earlier in the chapter when she recalled that her mother assumed everything was “okay” at college because of what Ryan posted on social media. As has been established in this chapter, however, not everything is as it may seem. Ryan also discussed this disconnect between how friends from high school viewed her college life and the reality she experiences. Ryan stated:

High school friends that I lost touch with, but see over breaks, I think what they picture going on at [College]. It's a beautiful place. Tailgates. Any picture you take here looks incredible. It looks like you're in a movie... It is an idyllic place to go to school. It's great. But I think people have a bigger—I don't know how to describe it. They jack it up to be more of a crazy thing than it actually is. You know it's funny to talk to friends who I haven't talked to in awhile, because what they see online is all fun things, but [College] kids [also] work really hard. We stress more than anyone else. We're actually pretty nerdy. I think people think it's just all fun stuff that's happening.

Ryan highlights how her high school friends interpreted her life through her social media content, something that only gives a partial and not entirely accurate view. The danger presented to students here is that they can feel compelled to try to live their life as

it is seen on social media—an impossible reality. The effects of consuming other people’s lives and having one’s life interpreted through social media by others can be damaging. It can also lead to a “fear of missing out” on what’s occurring.

***Fear of missing out.*** There are a number of negative impacts resulting from consuming the perfected images of others. Multiple students mentioned the concept of “FOMO,” also known as “Fear Of Missing Out,” as a stressor resulting from their being active on social media. The Oxford English Dictionary (2015) defines FOMO as “anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on a social media website.” Consuming perfected images of others is a significant cause of FOMO-type behavior. One participant, Natalie, described her experience with FOMO as follows:

When you see other people—what other people are doing—I mean it’s kind of... like FOMO. That person is doing this really cool thing. I wish I was doing that. So it kind of makes me think, it makes you compare yourself to people very easily.

Natalie’s discussion of her experience of FOMO highlights, once again, how social media encourages comparison with others, typically in an unhealthy way. This is especially true in relatively closed environments and cultures such as those of a residential college campus. Campus peer cultures act as crucibles within which social media comparisons are intensified. The visibility that social media afford college students means that they may feel they are under increased scrutiny to present themselves in a particular way. As Natalie further describes, fear of missing out, or fear of not appearing as engaging in the hidden cultural expectations of a campus, can cause anxiety. Natalie states:

I think there would be a – quote unquote – fear of missing out. I feel people don't think you're 'in the scene' or whatever you want to call it. I think, especially in college, there IS a scene. It's very much so, definitive, and you being in that social-media-presence scene, like taking pictures at the bar.

As Natalie describes, fear of missing out can also manifest itself as fear of not appearing like you fit in. This was another recurring theme threaded throughout participant interviews in this study. As students approach the end of their college experience, however, the need to fit in and the experience seems to lessen. Most participants recalled that while they used to care much more about this, it has become increasingly less important to them as they have grown throughout college. This is an important marker of growth and development where students are changing from being owned by social media to owning social media on their own terms. Participant Logan recalls:

If people are traveling somewhere or if people have pictures from a party that I wasn't invited to or something, I used to care more about that. I used to be like, 'My God! I'm missing out.' Now... I'll find friends who are going to let me be myself and not in a way that social media necessarily allows.

As Logan established himself at college and began to form a friend group out of choice rather than out of convenience, he consciously chose to surround himself with people who appreciated him for whom he was, not how he appeared to be. This evolution over time, from being externally defined to internal definition was a repeated pattern that was evident in a number of participants' journeys. Mirroring classical theories of development, participants passed through an expected period of struggle in emerging adulthood. By their third and fourth years, they were beginning to form more solid senses of who they were and how their social media portrayals fit into their lives. This was also evident in these reflections from Addie who was discussed her roommate

exhibiting FOMO behavior. When it comes to consuming the content of others, Addie stated:

I lived my own day. I don't need to also live your day. I think that also, that kind of plays into the whole FOMO aspect. I guess [my roommate] experiences a lot of FOMO in general. I guess that's one of those things where you're consuming other peoples' lives through social media. I guess that might appeal to some people, in a sense, not that they're necessarily upset that they missed the event that someone else was at because that person posted at it, but you get to experience what you were doing and what your friend was doing based on their post. So in a way it's like you're passing on that experience. Maybe that appeals to people. I don't have that need...I don't wonder what people are doing, necessarily. Some people do and that's really appealing to be able to look through and see, even if it's not so much FOMO as in you're jealous of them, but it's like FOMO as in, if I don't check I'll miss out on all those other things that are happening.

Addie makes an important distinction between using social media to stay connected and up-to-date on the lives of friends and comparing or competing with those friends to portray the “best life.” This struggle, and learning to make this distinction in a healthy way for oneself, was highly present across most interviews conducted. It represents a central developmental struggle that played out over social media—a struggle that can have broader psychological effects.

***Psychological impact.*** The previous sections discussed the creation of perfected images, the pursuit of Likes and the comparative behavior that frequently emerges. The toll that this behavior can take on students was evident in one participant in particular, Logan, who was able to articulate it in a way that revealed how this behavior can lead to dissatisfaction with college and life in general. By constantly comparing oneself, one becomes less happy and fails to recognize the positives in one’s own life. As Logan shared:

I’ve just learned that I’m extremely comparative. I compare myself way too much to things that are on social media, especially LinkedIn... it’s become so unhealthy

for me to almost, hope to see someone have a new job. I can see if it's any better than mine and what they've done to get there or whatever.

For Logan, LinkedIn was his platform of choice, and comparisons took the form of career success, but for other students this comparison may take on other forms. One participant mentioned how students she knew used the app Facetune, which allows individuals to stretch, shape, and airbrush their appearance in order to fit societal norms of beauty—even if the results were not actually possible in a physical world. Another student recounted depression that can occur when one sees friends going out, partying, and having a good time when they are not included. The effects of comparison, while not new, take a different form over social media. Logan continues:

Yeah it's exhausting. I mean I do it all the time and it's what causes my unhappiness... It's just things where the comparisons get so intense and I feel like I'm just a constant failure and especially because I'm not really happy with what I'm doing. So I'm like why, I don't know, just why am I comparing? It's only making it worse.

Although Logan can recognize his behavior, he nevertheless has difficulty removing himself from it. Although many participants were held captive to this mindset to varying degrees, many stated that they either felt it on occasion, or that it was more acute during the start of their college careers and lessened over time as they developed and matured. Although it was not the express intent of this study to examine changing developmental patterns over time, they nevertheless were revealed in analysis.

**Developmental patterns over time.** Because this study's sample included primarily students in their third and fourth years of college, it proved useful in surfacing developmental patterns and changes over time. Although an expanded study is needed to look at developmental change before and after college, the following findings presented consistent enough themes that warranted their inclusion here. They also provide context

for the time period under study in this research: the college years. Examining pre-college and post-college behavior gives further insight to what is happening *during* college.

In broad terms, the developmental journeys that participants described had them moving from external definition to internal definition. To use a term borrowed from the work of Marcia Baxter Magolda (2001), students in the study were emerging from a “crossroads” as they began to make important decisions, on their own terms, about how social media should fit into their lives. This journey began in their teenage and high school years where they often sought the approval of others, and moved through college where a crisis point was reached whereby students began to make changes in their behavior. The participants in this study, at the end of their college journeys, were immersed in and emerging from these struggles. They were beginning to make decisions about social media on their own terms. The following is a sketch of this journey.

***The pre-college years.*** Participants in the study reflected on their use of social media in their pre-college years and also recounted their experiences with adolescent younger siblings and family members. In all cases, adolescence was a time when peer influence ruled and receiving validation was extremely important. In many cases, the experiences of participants’ younger siblings were even more telling, given that today’s teenagers are even more immersed in social media than the participants themselves were. Aspects of teenage social media use found in danah boyd’s (2014) study of adolescents were also found in this study, particularly a preoccupation with or addiction to being seen and interacting online.

One participant, Annie, recognized the differences between her social media use and that of her teenage sister. Annie described her sister’s social media use as

“egocentric” but also recognized it as a natural part of adolescence. Contrasted with where social media fits into Annie’s life now, her sister’s use is overly focused on the external. Annie recounted an example of a conversation she had with her sister about an Instagram photo. Annie’s sister stated, “Oh my God, Annie, you only got 20 Likes on your photo. I got 160. I am so much better than you.” Annie, who is at a very different place than her sister, responded, “You know what? I don’t care at all. I really don’t care.”

This prototypical conversation highlights the difference in social media use between the adolescent mind and that of an emerging adult. Teenagers’ are preoccupied with external validation. The crafting of a perfected image and the pursuit of Likes is of critical importance. Appearing to be in the in-group, or being perceived as “cool” by one’s peers, is extremely important. Getting 160 Likes means something far more to Annie’s sister than to does Annie. As discussed in the earlier section, this preoccupation with perfected images and Likes is still important to college students, particularly during their first and second years, but during the teenage years it is of hyper-importance. As Annie reasons:

[My sister is] just so in her own mind. That’s why she makes us take six versions of a picture before she Instagrams it. Because she’s like, ‘I have to put out this perfect photo.’ And I’m just like, ‘I just don’t care about what other people think that much.’ But that’s also just how-- I mean, I’m sure I cared what people thought when I was seventeen, but now I just don’t, because I’m an adult.

College is a critical time in which this movement from external to internal definition occurs and social media behavior changes along with it. Part of this change is a reorientation of one’s approach to social media and how social media fits into one’s life and peer group. The early years of college mimic much of what can be found in the high school years. A number of participants mentioned the frenzy that occurred to establish

new friend groups in college when they were admitted to an institution, went through orientation, or began their freshman year. Maria reflected on this frenzy. When Maria was admitted to college, she joined the class of 2015 Facebook group and participated in the widespread behavior of connecting with others online. Reflecting back on this time period as an upperclassman, Maria stated, “All of a sudden you have so many Facebook friends—people who you talked with maybe once, and you thought you'd be friends, but you aren't.” What seemed of critical importance at the time, collecting connections and friends, is no longer as important to Maria as she establishes and normalizes friend groups and becomes more aware of and comfortable with herself.

Peer group, peer culture, and audience thus have an important role to play in how college students approach social media. These contexts, concepts and roles also change over time. As Elizabeth states:

I have a 17 year old sister so I don't identify with a lot of what she's posting, but her friends interact with it. She gets tons of viewer interactions and stuff so I think there's something to be said about that, that it's just different audiences.

Reflecting on her own change over time, Elizabeth continues:

I think that's natural with maturity. You know, people on Facebook are doing the whatever—I don't know what it's called but where it tells you the status that you posted to the date three years ago or whatever. They're all embarrassing. It's like, ‘Ooh, we're going to a crazy party!’ and you're in the seventh grade. So, I mean, a part of it, I think, is just maturity. Things that I thought were fun or humorous five years ago, I probably don't anymore... But it's still my voice. I can read it and be like, ‘oh my gosh, of course I said that when I was 18’ or whatever.

Elizabeth reflected that although her usage has changed over time, her social media presence and posts still represent her, albeit at a different time, place, and maturity level. During the teenage years, the impulse to share, without knowledge of the consequences, appears to be high. Much like the participants that discussed social media as a game,

teenagers seem to only view social media through this lens. As participant Maria reflected:

I think when you're younger, you're more prone to sharing, and you don't really necessarily discern what should be posted online and what shouldn't. So, I think now I'm a little more aware of it and don't want to over-share, and don't want everyone knowing exactly what I'm doing.

Maria's quote demonstrates a shift from seeing social media as a game, with little connection or consequence in the offline world, to one that is more integrated. Maria also highlights the importance of educating students about their digital reputations and identities during high school and in their early college years. Although adolescents may not be concerned with future employment or how they are viewed outside of their immediate friend groups, college students, particularly third and fourth year students, are much more acutely aware of this. One participant, Liam, articulated this particularly well:

I started to realize a lot more as I grew older—especially getting all those presentations either in high school or even here in college—was what you put online, everyone sees. I didn't really know what that meant until later on, especially with job searches and stuff... I don't know what social media was really used for in high school... people just naturally post so much less now than they would when they were younger. I don't know why that is. Maybe less impulsivity... I'm sure around Facebook now kids are crazy about the Likes. All of a sudden there's 500 Likes on this profile picture and that's tough for them because that immediately creates this social hierarchy of who's most popular. In high school all you want to be is... popular. It's just something that you think about—the popular kids and the not so popular kids. Whereas in college it's not necessarily about popularity, it's about, I don't know. Popularity just suddenly turns into competition in a way of social competition, academic competition, everything. But yeah so that also affects what I just had to post.

For Liam, there is a subtle shift in the way Likes are interpreted as individuals mature. Whereas in high school, Likes are about establishing social hierarchy and “popularity,” in college Likes are about competition and achieving success. Although

there are still connotations of popularity, this behavior becomes more aspirational: projecting who you are and who you want to be. Some participants decided to continue to engage in this behavior while others have opted out. Gatsby provides a somewhat contrarian viewpoint:

I think back in high school... I was in the mindset of like, 'How you put yourself out there on social media is how you'd be viewed' type of deal. I think I've definitely moved away from that more so in college right now. So I would say I've posted less because I have less of a concern with how I'm viewed via my Facebook account.

The pre-college and early college years have a lot of parallels as college students develop gradually over time. A significant break, however, occurs as students enter into their third and fourth years and seeing and being seen become less important, sharing becomes more selective and intentional, and students become much more acutely aware about how social media have effects both online and off. The post-college years examined in the next section, hint at a further extension of this change, and perhaps elements of regression.

*The post-college years.* Because it was not a focus of this study, only one participant was included in the sample that had recently graduated from college. Annie, whose experiences are presented here, entered into graduate school immediately after receiving her undergraduate degree at the same institution. Annie's experiences are from a singular perspective and therefore readers should note that further research is suggested on how students make meaning of social media post-graduation. Her experiences, however, are in line with what one may expect of a recent graduate and help provide context for many of the findings presented here.

As Annie graduated from college, she was confronted with life changes most emerging adults face when leaving the protected confines of a residential campus. Friend groups are dispersed, new patterns of behavior must be established, and greater independence is required. In recounting this transition, Annie noted that she and many of her peers used social media as a means of maintaining connection through transition. As Annie states, “I think it's a really great way to stay connected with people who you don't see all the time as you get older. I mean, now everyone's kind of distant... I use it for... trying to stay up to date.”

For Annie, beyond a means of maintaining ties with college friends, aspects of the perfected images maintained in college continued into post-graduation life. There was perhaps, even, a regression. Social media play a key role in hiding some of the struggles experienced in transition and also in reinforcing confidence in oneself and this new “adult role.” As Annie reflects:

It's very different now that I'm an adult and I'm graduated from college and all of my friends are not with me anymore. I'm a very social person so I like being able to reach a lot of different people, and I think in college it was very easy for me to do that physically and be with lots of groups of people. And now, the only way to do that is social media apart from my small circle of people who are still in [the vicinity] with me physically. I think it's also a way of letting people know you're doing okay. Like, post-grad life isn't awful. Look, I made this beautiful egg sandwich this morning because I am surviving as an adult! And I think that's the way a lot of my friends use it, too. I also think it's a lot of fronting. I know I have friends who are really struggling with being on their own and they hate their job but they'll post something like, ‘Oh my God! Work friends with drinks! This is so fun!’ And I'm like, I know that you're just doing this so that people will feel they're great [and] everything's fine. So I do it, too. I'm not struggling, but not always happy.

Annie continues:

I mean you play into the culture of it. Post-grad culture is making sure that everyone knows that you're okay and happy because everyone is actually struggling but no one wants to admit that. And that's the theme that I've been

finding over and over again when I actually talk face-to-face with someone. But I'll see my friend's Instagram and she looks like she's having the best time... and just loving her apartment, her roommates and her life. Then I talk to her and she's miserable. I've definitely had moments of misery but you know, of course I'm going to project a front... look how happy I am!

What Annie's experience seems to suggest is that the behavior of projecting perfected images and the omission of struggles and the mundane, continues into postgraduate life. Annie's experience hints at a form of regression and that perhaps the relationship of individuals and their portrayal of themselves in social media are somewhat cyclical. As one progresses through periods of relative stability, social media become less about projecting images to others and more about how it functions for one's self. As transitions occur, and doubt and uncertainty reappear, social media may again become a front for hiding struggle. This effect may lessen over time or as one gets more adept at navigating transition, but the process seems to follow a cyclical flow.

### **Emergence Of Digitized Development and Selfhood**

Whereas the previous sections focused on aspects of self presentation, digital identities and the way in which development forms and is influenced by these identities, the following section provides an overview of findings as they relate to digitized development and potential new conceptualizations of self. Digitized development is how developmental processes play out when individuals are immersed in in virtual, digital environments to varying degrees. Digitized development was evident in the previous section as students moved from external towards internal definition in relation to their digital identities. The affordances these technologies allow, however, might change the way development looks. In some cases, higher degrees of technological integration may even challenge previously held developmental models.

Under the digitized development heading, concepts of selfhood are of particular interest. In digital/social environments, one is able to manifest oneself and live one's life, or potentially multiple lives, in new ways. This is particularly important as students develop concepts of self that span physical and digital worlds. Although this study did not surface a specific new model of development or selfhood, student responses nevertheless hinted at new conceptualizations that may be emergent. This emergence has implications for how one may understand development in the future as we all become more digitized.

Presented in the remaining sections of this chapter are student thoughts, responses and reflections on how new digital and social environments may be changing the way they understand themselves. Questions addressed include: How might social and digital media be changing how we understand who we are? Is there one real self or are there multiple? How does one reconcile and what is the relationship between one's online and offline self? How do these physical and virtual worlds relate, blend, and overlap with one another? And finally what is the "real" self, if one real self can be said to exist at all?

Because of the deep nature of these questions and the fact the vocabulary for discussing these issues is often lacking, one of the great strengths to the approach taken in this study is that multiple interviews were conducted, over time, to delve deeper and deeper into the subject matter. As students had more time to reflect on their answers, and the nature of the questions, many produced more nuanced and informative answers to the questions during the third interview. The results, however, demonstrate a phenomenon that is still emergent and unclear. For this reason, the results presented here provide a

glimpse into digitized development and digitized selfhood, but subjects are still grappling with how they understand it.

**In real life versus true self.** Participants were asked a number of questions related to whom their real self was and if they have one true self. Furthermore, participants were asked about their online digital identities and how they relate to their overall sense of self. In some cases, students stated that their online and offline selves remained relatively separate. In other cases, students stated that their online and offline selves were far more integrated and inseparable. When one participant, Liam, was asked about whether or not his online identity was a true representation of himself, he answered no, that it was merely the “highlight reel” described in the previous section. Asked, “If I just saw your social media profile, would I know you?” Liam replied:

You wouldn’t know all of me, that’s not true... You’re only seeing the highlighted parts and the good part... the parts when I’ve been most happy. In all the photos I’m smiling. I’m not upset, angry, [or] any kind of other emotion other than happy. I don’t think that’s a true testament to who I am.

Social media for Liam are only a partial representation and a representation of a true self that exists in the offline world. A number of participants expressed that their offline selves were primary and that their social media and online selves were personas and were secondary. For these students, the physical offline world was primary, and the online world merely a representation. Participant Natalie reflected this line of thinking when asked about whether her online life represented the whole of her self. Natalie replied:

I’d say as far as online and offline, I think online doesn’t get the whole person. Ever. It can’t. Like, it shouldn’t. I think that would take away completely from human experience versus social media experience. But I don’t think you could ‘know’ me from my social media.

For Natalie, technology cannot and should not be representative of her whole self. The physical world, and getting to know someone face-to-face is extremely important to Natalie and something that a number of participants asserted.

Other participants, however, presented a reality that was much less clear. Their answers went beyond the idea of social media as merely representations and revealed hints of a much deeper ontological claim, that selfhood, online and off, are inseparable. For these participants, the relationships between online and offline were much more blurry and complex. Participant Meghan represented an evolution along this line of thinking. Meghan stated:

I think I am monitoring or controlling so much of what other people can see or what people are...I guess kind of manipulating what they would think about me. So, I don't think it necessarily captures me entirely as a person. It captures who I want myself to look like as a person or how I want to be portrayed to others. It's hard. Maybe one day there'll be enough platforms out there, and we'll be so connected to social media that it will capture the entire me. I definitely think it's a part of me as a person. I can't separate myself from it just because it's so connected to every part of my life but it is...there's that manipulation there or that control over what side of myself I'm able to show to others or demonstrate to others. So, it's hard to determine what's the real me when it's on so many different platforms. I'm posting so many different things or coming across in different manners. Yeah, I don't know if it's even possible to capture everything.

As technology becomes more consuming, Meghan hypothesizes that it is possible to that social and digital technology may become so integral to the way one lives their life that the boundaries between the physical and virtual worlds of technology may no longer hold. Meghan illustrates that she, and perhaps we, are in a liminal period where the lines between human and technology are increasingly difficult to demarcate. These hints present in the answers of a number of participants in the study provide glimpses into what digitized selfhood may look like.

**Digitized selfhood.** Digitized selfhood is the term that was developed from the research to explain how participants began to view their integration with technology and the resultant implications for how they understood themselves. While it is difficult to establish a true ontological claim to digitized selfhood, students presented some aspects of this emergence in interviews. Their answers, in part, relied on the extent to which they integrated technology into their lives. For students who demonstrated a higher degree of integration, there was a tendency to describe selfhood as one where reality, the idea of a singular real self, seemed to break down. It was through analogies, presented at the end of this section, that students were best able to grapple with these concepts.

***Heavy usage versus integration.*** An important finding that arose during the study was the spectrum of technological integration students exhibited. Integration goes beyond just heavy usage and is the extent to which digital and social technologies become a prominent inseparable feature of daily life. The more integrated one is, the more prominent and inseparable the technology is. All students in the study were heavy users of social media, but not all integrated it deeply into their lives. While heavy social media usage is necessary condition for technological integration, it is not sufficient. Just because one uses technology a lot does not mean they use it in such a way that it integrates with one's self on a deeper level. It was students who demonstrated a deeper level integration who began to talk in ways that revealed something more fundamental about their understanding of self.

Many students discussed how technology was an “extension” or integrated part of themselves. It was common in a number of participant answers to describe technology in this way. Participant Liam used these exact words in describing his relationship to his

smartphone: “It’s bad, but I feel like my phone is an extension almost of myself in that I’m always checking for emails or any kind of update.” While Liam’s quote still discusses technology as an external tool rather than an integrated part of his being, he nevertheless highlights the centrality this type of technology has taken in the lives of many college students.

At frequent points in the interviews, given the number of sites, apps, networks and personas that students were juggling, it seemed germane to ask students how they kept track of it all. Most students reported that it became second nature and that it was not “additional work,” but a normal part of their routine. Participant Meghan had some interesting thoughts to share on the topic:

When you actually reflect on it, it seems like it would be so overwhelming to manage all these different accounts and manage how you're portraying yourself, but I honestly think that it just—it's what we've grown up with. Our generation, especially us college students now, and even more so the kids who are in high school now, it's just so much more a part of who we are. There are so many connections between the online and offline self. There's just so much overlap that it, I mean, it just has become this second nature thing. I'd say there's differences between the online and the offline self, but just because we are so connected all the time it's almost as if it doesn't seem too difficult to manage.

For Meghan, social media have become a “part of who she is.” The connections between online and offline are blended to the point of inseparability. While she still recognizes there may be differences between the two, these differences seem to be increasingly blurry. It is this integration, where lives are literally lived online and off, and neither is seen as primary, that reveals an environment that is opening up the new possibility for selfhood. Recalling Haskins (1957), quoted in an earlier chapter, “human nature and physical environment” are changed for the integrated student (p. 193). It

follows, then, that an understanding of development and selfhood may also be changing as this integration deepens.

***One self versus multiple selves.*** One aspect of digitized development and selfhood that was probed further was the idea of having a unitary self versus the ability to have multiple selves. As discussed in an earlier chapter, traditional theories of student development hold that one of the main goals of development is to reach towards a single stable sense of self. The online space, and the more integrated one becomes with it, allows for the creation of multiple digital identities and personas. Might this affordance lead to something deeper?

Participants in the study did not reveal this deeper-level concept of multiple selves, but still discussed how different social media channels and accounts allowed them to reveal different aspects of themselves and create and “live” alternate lives. One participant, Gatsby, who indicated he did not integrate technology deeply into his daily life, described the differences across his online accounts as a function of what was shared through them not as a result of a deeper-level sense of multiple selves. Asked whether or not his online accounts were a reflection of who he is, Gatsby had this to say:

I think I'm the same person that I project on social media but I don't think if you were to look at each social media account separately you would get the same person because I don't put the same amount of information into all of them. For example, with Snapchat I don't put as much information as I would on Facebook just by the nature of the application. So I don't think if someone were to look on my Snapchat, someone were to look on my Facebook, unless they saw my face obviously, they'd be like, 'oh it's the same person.' ...So if you were to look at those two, there are maybe some similar pictures but it's not necessarily the same things I'm putting out, informational to both.

For Gatsby, the multiple digital identities and offline identities he presents are not necessarily different or incommensurable, but a function of the different affordances of

each platform combined with way in which he uses them and posts to them. Although there may be a form of digital identity play at work for Gatsby, it falls short of demonstrating multiple selves—the projector analogy is that of a singular self.

Another participant, however, demonstrated a much more exotic example of identity play and manipulation. This impacted how he understood himself. Mesut had an interesting and unique experience to share about his identities online. Mesut is interested in a career related to social media and technology and, because of this, he frequently experimented with the technology to understand how it works. In particular, Mesut was interested in what type of accounts and social media content would receive more engagement from others. To experiment with this, Mesut created multiple separate social media accounts on the social network Instagram. These accounts represented Mesut to various degrees, some being completely fictional individuals and some blending aspects of Mesut himself. When discussing these experimental accounts, Mesut had this to say:

These experimental profiles were very interesting to me. But I started pouring so much time into it, I feel like, I guess now that I think about it, it almost was like I was kind of, when I got really deep into it during the summer, it was like I was leading two different lives. I was trying to figure out how to represent myself and figure stuff out on the profile that none of my friends know about. Then there's the real me, which I was kinda keeping up with, but that's kind of established, so my focus was on this different representation, which is interesting. And I remember having a conversation with my brother about it. I was like, 'Dude, do you ever even log into your personal Instagram anymore?' And he was like, 'Yeah, I haven't been on in a couple days.' And usually, I'd be checking it five times a day.

Mesut's experimentation with social media profiles had him living, or at least representing, multiple identities at once. Digital technology's ability to allow one to so easily create personas, and social technology's ability to allow these personas to interact with and establish relationships with others is part of what makes these situations so

unique. Whereas it was possible to live a “double life” in the past, without the aid of technology, it is these new affordances that take this ability to another level. Although this stops short of being able to make a claim of multiples selves, the ability to represent multiple identities and the possibility that those identities may alter or bend one’s sense of self does seem possible, if not probable.

*The “real” you?* Being able to represent multiple digital identities lead to a discussion with participants as to whom they considered their “real” self or selves to be. The use of the word “real,” itself, is problematic as it contains a built-in assumption about what constitutes reality, but the line of questioning proved useful in surfacing the relationship between the participants’ multiple identities and representations. A more accurate term may be to consider what constitutes the “whole you” as opposed to the “real you.” Nevertheless, students provided some interesting responses.

One participant, Ellie, highlighted aspects of identity described in the previous section—that digital identities are partial highlight reels and can often omit certain details. Ellie stated:

I would think that the real me is the in-person me, and then my social media ‘me’s’ are not that they are false ‘me’s,’ just incomplete. It’s just the best parts. The parts that I would want to showcase. That’s not really representative of the complete or real me. It’s leaving out so much of the story. I would think that the in-person—the good, the bad and the in-between, the kind of mundane—would be the real me. The other ones are just incomplete ‘me’s.’

Placing the “real me” in the physical domain was a common reaction from participants in the study. Another common reaction was the notion of digital identities as being curated, and therefore although they are a representation of an individual, they cannot be said to *be* the individual. Digital identities were partial for these students, but they also spent time thinking about how they relate to their other aspects of self. Harkening back to the

ideas presented in the previous section of this chapter regarding authenticity and being genuine online, Logan stated:

I took a class on authenticity and I'm very into this topic, but I think there's definitely a real me, but how it gets presented... depends on the audience and the filtering in my own head that happens. So, I don't think, I wouldn't say Facebook is a lie for me or, you know, LinkedIn's a lie. But it doesn't encompass everything that I am. And also, of course, I paint things in a certain way. Sometimes on Instagram with filters or, you know, everything is a little bit falsified and only the best moments are highlighted so, in that way, it's not my real me.

In their responses, students struggled to describe the relationship between their online and offline identities, and how this related to their overall self. Almost all stopped short of saying their online identities are different selves, but did reveal that they considered it a part of them. Particularly as students were more integrated with technology, this line seemed to blur further. Liam, who described social media as separate, had this to say:

I don't know, I think there's just one real me but through social media I kind of see... I don't highlight everything. I'm not sad or angry on Facebook. I'm only happy... I'd say it's a different person but it's only a part of me. You know, not completely me. I don't think I could ever have completely me on Facebook or on Instagram... So I guess I am different on Facebook and Instagram because that's not completely me. There's only one me.

Another participant, Meghan, was not as sure as Liam in his response about social media being separate. For Meghan, something would be lost without the inclusion of social media in her life. For Meghan, it was much more integrated, she stated:

So it's hard because I feel like I use social media, or I use my online accounts, to influence what people will think of me in person or in the real world. I don't really know who the real me is! I don't know, yeah.

When pressed further about who the "real me" was, Meghan continued:

So I mean, I guess the real me would be a combination of my social media self and then what I present to the rest of the world in person. I don't think I would be completely me if I completely took out all of the social media platforms.

Although students leaned on the side of describing their digital and social lives being a separable part of themselves, overall their answers revealed that this relationship was far less than clear. For some students, their real self was offline and online was merely a representation. For others, the line between these two began to merge. This spectrum from separable to integrated digital and physical self and selves was evident throughout the interviews, but students had a more difficult time describing it. This is perhaps due our lack of language in this area to describe what is happening, but also revealed that students are still negotiating their understanding of it.

**Analogies.** To help in describing the relationship between their online and offline identities and selves, students were asked to provide analogies. These analogies proved useful in helping students describe their experiences in a more accessible way. Through analysis and exploration with participants, these analogies began to surface a spectrum ranging from separability to integration. Presented in the table below, these analogies are visually represented according to roughly where they fall on this spectrum. It should be noted that student answers and descriptions provided a degree of variability and the placement of analogies on this spectrum should be used as a heuristic as opposed to understanding them as fixed in their placement.

Table 4

*Analogies of Digitized Selfhood and Digital Identity  
Integration and Separability of Physical and Digital Worlds*

<b>More Separate</b>	<b>More Integrated</b>
Projector	Chameleon
Outfits (Coats, Hats, Masks)	Octopus
Parallel Tracks	Horcruxes

*Distances and placement on this spectrum are relative and some analogies may exhibit more or less degrees of separability or integration.*

The spectrum of analogies representing more and less degrees of integration of digital and physical world self and selves follows with the extent to which students analogies demonstrated integration of self across digital and physical environments. Students who described experiences that allowed them to walk away from social media with little consequence are represented at the left end of the spectrum. These students stated that they could cease social media use with little consequence to themselves outside of a loss of convenience and a communication platform. Their digital selves were something separate from them. Those represented by analogies at the right, who described a highly integrated experience of digitization and selfhood, described social media as an integrated part of their being. Loss of social media was something that, although surmountable for many, would lead to a greater loss of self. These analogies tended to take on a part-whole pattern.

An interesting emergent phenomenon in interviews was the extent to which the researcher could begin to predict the type of analogy participants would describe. After a few analogies were given, this spectrum pattern began to emerge. Reflecting on prior student responses, interviews revealed analogies in line with how students used and described their use of technology. Participants who described social media as

communication platforms, and participants who indicated they did not immerse themselves in online cultures, were more apt to provide analogies that indicated less integration. Those for whom social media were an essential feature of expression and who had highly developed digital identities provided analogies further towards the integration end of the spectrum. In general, these analogies also represented a spectrum from disparate-parts to part-whole analogies. Those with less integration viewed social media platforms and their digital identities as separate spaces. Those with higher levels of integration tended to view these as part of a whole self.

***Lower integration analogies.*** Demonstrating the least integration were students for whom social media were primarily a tool. For these students, digital spaces are not necessarily spaces integrated into selfhood, but spaces where their online actions are represented and rebroadcast through technology. Presented here, these analogies ranged from highly separate digital and physical spheres to those where the relationships between the two are increasingly blurred.

*Slide projector.* One participant, Gatsby, described his experiences online as being akin to a slide projector. The slides in the projector advance showing snapshots of his life. These images, essentially what one may post on social media, were slices or representations of his offline life. Furthering the analogy, Gatsby stated that these images were often filtered, or modified in such a way that they did not necessarily represent a direct correspondence with the offline world. Gatsby stated:

I would definitely say it's more snapshots, probably with a filter on it because in some way it is a little bit biased... a filter on it but nothing that would change the ultimate nature of it.

Gatsby's analogy paints social media as incomplete sets of pictures represented by a machine. A machine that, as Gatsby stated, he could walk away from with little or no consequence. Gatsby could turn it off at any time and move on. This ability to walk away and move on at any time demonstrates a low level of integration with technology. This technology has little to do with Gatsby's sense of self and there is no loss to his disengaging from it. Technology, or the machine, is a representational tool and a mediating agent.

*Outfits, coats, and masks.* Other students mirrored Gatsby's assertion that social media were a representational tool and provided analogies that described social media as outfits, coats, and masks. Depending on the context students found themselves in; they may switch outfits or representations of themselves to fit. Mimicking the offline-online world, as students move through their day they may switch from being the student-in-class, to the student-athlete, to the emerging-professional. With social and digital technologies, however, the number of outfits, coats and masks one must switch between or wear increases exponentially as contexts and audiences multiply. Students are also called upon to switch between these contexts with increasing speed as they navigate these spaces offline and as they switch between apps and sites online via their smartphones. These analogies also revealed aspects of the multiple digital identities students possess as discussed earlier in this chapter. Meghan describes:

Different masks, or the different faces I'll put on for different social media platforms. It's not necessarily that I'm a completely different person, but it's just different. Or it's like putting on a different shirt I guess, or changing your outfit. If I'm going to an interview or something I have a professional outfit on. Or if I'm going to be going out to dinner with my friends it's a totally different outfit. And I guess my personality kind of fits with what that outfit is supposed to be.

Students giving analogies of different masks or coats followed this analogy provided by Meghan. In each case, a change resulted in a switch between audiences. Harkening back to the previous discussion on context collapse as described by boyd (2014), it is often difficult to wear the appropriate outfit for the appropriate audience as the contexts begin to blur. Although one can attempt to control this, it is exceedingly difficult to maintain these boundaries. When probed on this analogy further, Meghan came up with a secondary analogy that demonstrated a slightly different approach to digital and physical contexts.

*Parallel tracks.* Meghan's second analogy took another representational form describing her experience as parallel tracks akin to the two rails of a railroad. Each rail, one representing online and the other offline, move forward in parallel. What occurs on one rail is related to what is occurring in the other, but they are still separate and distinct. Unlike the slide projector analogy and the outfits, however, the two rails are a more integral part of Meghan's being. Meghan stated:

I feel like they're pretty coherent, well, not coherent, but they kind of parallel each other at this point, just because I feel like my online and offline self are so connected... I'm so connected throughout the day, like every single day, and I've just been so connected through social media for so many years now that it just kind of seems like it's one big part of myself. There are just so many overlaps that it doesn't seem problematic to me.

Meghan's analogy of parallel tracks is interesting as it retains the representational separate-sphere quality of the slide projector and the outfits, but allows for bidirectional influence between online and offline spheres. Meghan also asserted that both tracks were important features of her self. Unlike the slide projector, the second rail was a more important part of Meghan's selfhood and integrated being. Unlike the outfits, one could

not control for audience and context as easily as each rail influenced each other in different and unknown ways. Meghan continued:

[The tracks] are separate—between my online and offline self. At the same time I feel over time they might be getting a little more blurred just because I feel like I'm using more and more social media over time... It's harder to separate everything. I don't know if that makes sense, but I think there's definitely a difference between offline [Meghan] going to class and studying in the library or just hanging out with friends, versus the online [Meghan] who's posting pictures or trying to present myself in a certain light, or mold myself into a certain person for other people to see. So I would say they're kind of getting more and more blended together over time, but I don't know.

For Meghan, the relationship between the two rails has blurred over time. This is perhaps indicating Meghan's growing awareness of the convergence of her physical and digital worlds. It could also be a growing awareness of her development towards a unitary self across contexts. Regardless, this convergence is beginning to reveal a deeper integration with technology and a growing sense that the online space is an important part of selfhood.

***Higher integration analogies.*** Higher integration analogies continued this trend towards conceptualizations of selfhood that spanned and converged physical and digital worlds. Students who exhibited this higher level of integration began to see social media environments as important parts of themselves. Furthermore, these parts were increasingly inseparable from their overall self, although participants continued to stop short of making deeper-level ontological claims about selfhood.

*Chameleon.* Continuing on the integrations spectrum, participant Logan described his experience being online as akin to being a chameleon. Depending on the platform, audience and context, Logan would change colors or outward facing identity to fit. Unlike previous analogies, the chameleon is an integrated whole and not separate

outfits, parallel tracks, or a projector. Logan still maintained a coherent self that modified to fit the circumstances. Logan stated:

I have this one identity but it kind of molds a little bit to match what is necessary for each social network. Not necessarily lying about myself it's just that I kind of fit my identity into that specific one I guess.

For Logan, he passes among online and offline contexts in a more nuanced way. He maintains a sense of self that is able to pass through different networks, contexts and audiences. There is not a multiplicity of selves for Logan, but there is a convergence across the two spheres. The analogies of participants who represented more integration all provided analogies of that followed this more holistic form.

*Octopus.* Similar to the chameleon, Addie described her relationship with social media identities as being like the arms of an octopus. Different extensions, or arms of the octopus, represent the different contexts that Addie extends into. There is a core to the octopus, which is related to each of these extensions, but no one extension holds the key to the whole of the self. Addie described it as follows:

I think it's most like an octopus or something else with tentacles. Because they're all a part of the same organism and they can interact with each other, but I could lose one or two of them and be fine... If you took Instagram away, that was gone, whatever you lost, it would just find a way to exist somewhere else. Then you'd find a different way to recreate whatever benefit you got from that platform. Somehow you'd do something similar whether it's in real life or on another social media platform. I don't view any of the online stuff as entirely essential. I just think it's really useful.

For Addie, although social media sites and identities were important extensions of her self, she could still survive and move forward if one were missing or replaced with another. Similar to how social media platforms may come or go in popularity or in importance for an individual, an arm of the octopus may grow or shrink as the organism grows and develops. The relationship between the arm and the center are what hold the

key to how this analogy differs from others. It is an integrated part-whole. Addie continued:

I think it's kind of like the octopus because I think [they are] related. There's nothing wrong with them kind of merging or communicating with each other—like Instagram and Twitter—there's a lot of the same stuff in both places and there's a lot of the same people in both places. They kind of talk to each other every once in awhile. They're not totally separate entities and I think they are, they are, you're seeing some part of me. It wouldn't be the same as if you actually knew me in person. You only saw my tweets. Those are not exactly the same, but you're getting a glimpse of something that is a real, genuine part of me. I don't ever try to pretend to be someone else on social media. I do filter stuff. I do think about what I'm posting. I don't just post anything. I try to post things that I think represent me well and I think that other people would be interested in seeing. So I don't, I mean I don't think I'm pretending to be something else... but I also think that if you chopped one of the arms off, the octopus would still be okay. If we took it all away, I'd be fine.

Issues of audience, context collapse, and the increasingly blurry boundaries between the offline and online worlds are highly present within Addie's description of herself as octopus. She recognizes the nature of digital identities to only provide one type of information and a singular view. And yet, Addie also recognizes that they all function together as a part of her experience. This integration and digitization leads Addie to conclude that, "They're not totally separate entities and I think they are, they are, you're seeing some part of me." In part, Addie is referring to being genuine and their being a correspondence between online and offline features, but Addie is also asserting there is something "real" going on. Perhaps it is an overstatement to read deeper level selfhood into this statement, but there are features of integration that hint at a selfhood that is different from the participants with lower integration patterns.

*Horcruxes.* A final participant who provided a more integrated analogy was Grace. Grace made an analogy to a concept from the Harry Potter series of books by J. K. Rowling (2005). In the books, Harry Potter must collect a series of horcruxes—parts

of the soul of Potter's nemesis, Voldemort. When Voldemort was last in danger of being defeated, he split his soul into seven fragments and placed these into physical objects known as horcruxes.

Grace's horcrux analogy follows that each context and/or social media site is represented by a horcrux. These sites are parts of the whole that make up Grace. Some individuals may possess (or interact with and view) some of these horcruxes and not others. Some individuals may possess (or interact with and view) some of the same horcruxes as others or hold different ones. Grace described it as follows:

It's like a piece of you and each social media outlet is a different piece of you, and what your interests are. So Facebook is what events you go to, what school you go to, kind of what you're doing in that moment. Different albums and events that describe you. And then Twitter's your news, so what companies, what celebrities you follow, [and] different things like that. And the Instagram's what I put out, my personal content, what I think is good, or what I want people to see, or just what I want to post, because I want to post it.

Describing social media sites as features of one's self follows the part-whole analogies represented previously, but seems to belie a much more intimate connection to one's self. It also describes a dispersion of self that is similar to what Gergen (2000) conceptualized. The self is literally dispersed through the horcruxes. For Grace, more so than any of the other participants, social media sites are far more integrated into a whole self. This integrated, digitized, whole self represents an emerging view of human beings' relationship with technology.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided the results of this study including aspects of digital identity and digitized development and selfhood. Surfaced here, social and digital technologies represent a significant feature in the lives of contemporary college students. While in

college, students are grappling with aspects of digital identity including their digital reputations and the unique issues of real and perceived audience and contexts. Students are also grappling with how to interpret, internalize and make decisions regarding their digital identities—decisions and experiences that may have consequences for their happiness, self-esteem, and satisfaction with college and life in general.

The natural developmental process of moving from external towards internal definition was readily present throughout the interviews conducted in this study. Earlier on in their college careers, and continuing into their third and fourth years for some, the achievement of validation through social media had a profound influence on how college students saw themselves and in their compulsion to compare themselves to others. This was further compounded but the tendency of individuals on social media to promote only the “highlights” of life. Consuming these perfected images and then feeling pressured to do the same turned social media into a competition and game—a game that was far too easy to fall prey to regardless of where one was developmentally.

The students’ analogies presented here also surfaced important ways students viewed the relationship between their online and offline lives and the extent to which these could be seen as a whole or as separate parts. Although no participants described a digitized selfhood that crossed the line into a wholly new conceptualization of selfhood, their experiences do provide glimpses at how selfhood may be complicated with the introduction of virtual environments. This complication provides a portrait of selfhood that, while still unitary in these instances, may represent more complicated ways of being. These complications begin to move beyond just audience and context differences and hint at new ways selfhood can be understood as one that is saturated with technology and

relative to others and within oneself. The implications and suggestions for college student educator practice arising out of these findings are addressed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 6: Implications and the Educational Potential of Social Media**

In order to be good partners for this generation of college students, it is incumbent upon on educators to empower students to guide the focus of educational interventions around digital and social technology. For this reason, the following chapter presents analysis alongside real student voices to help understand the implications of this research and what students want and need from educators. Throughout the study, students were asked what they learned about themselves as a result of their use of technology and what they wish they had known. Participants were also asked what advice they would give college student educators working with students on these topics. Punctuating these next sections on implications for practice are direct quotes from students. These quotes give life to the implications presented here. In many ways, students proved to be the best guides for what they want and need.

Presented in the following two sections, implications for practice are first divided into those relating to digital identities—presentations of oneself online and one's understanding of the effects of those presentations for self and others—and digitized development—a deeper understanding of selfhood and how developmental patterns may be altered or instantiated differently online. Presented first, educating for digital identities requires educators to take a proactive stance in helping students navigate digital and social environments. There are guideposts and rules governing digital identity and reputation that educators can help college students learn, understand, and ultimately contextualize for themselves. Presented second, helping students navigate digitized development requires college student educators to learn more about technology themselves and act as partners with students in order to understand how technology is

changing society and our views of ourselves. This partnership is mutual, as technological change occurs at such a rapid pace that educators and students alike are often grappling with its implications simultaneously. The line between teacher and student is blurred.

### **The Potential Of Social Media For Learning and Development**

Before discussing the implications and opportunities for practice arising from this study, it is important to first recognize the important role social media play in the learning and development of college students. For students in this study, social and digital technologies were important tools that helped them gain confidence in themselves and explore their interests. Since one of the main aims of a college education is to create communities of actively engaged lifelong learners, social media present an opportunity for furthering the aims of higher education.

One participant, Liam, remarked that engaging online helped him gain confidence and connect with others more easily. He stated:

I think social media helped me, a little bit, gain confidence in that as I was connecting with more people I felt more a part of a community. I had before but it was cool to just have everyone all in one area, so that was great.

Coupled with gaining confidence, a number of other participants described how social media helped them explore their interests and acquire knowledge. Social media sites represented important avenues for career exploration and in aiding students in determining and following their passions. One participant, Addie, discussed the educational potential of social media, stating:

I've had really positive interactions through social media and that's been really helpful for me, personally and professionally. There's a lot to be gained and there's a lot you can learn. I just follow people who are experts in their field. I'm really interested in sports and nutrition. I follow people who talk about that stuff. I have just learned so many new things just from following them. It's kind of cool because it's constant learning. It's not like you have to say I'm going to take a

class on nutrition now. You can keep up on the cutting edge of research because you follow someone who is always talking about that. So it only takes you a couple seconds a day to read their tweet but now you learned something new that you wouldn't have otherwise. That's also not inherently social, but it's just another way to consume information. It's there. It's easy. It's convenient. I think there's a whole realm of educational possibilities that, at least for me, that I've experienced ways to learn from people on social media. We should totally try to teach people things through social media. Just because without trying to, I've learned so many things. Why is this not something that everyone wants to do?

Echoing Addie, Grace also talked about how social and digital technologies enabled her career exploration and allowed her to maintain connections and build networks with others:

I think I've gained a sense of interest... of realizing who I am, what I want to do. It's definitely helped me shape what I want to do for a career. I guess you could say it helps with interaction because it brings a lot of people together. I've been able to communicate with a lot of people that I'll never, I never would have been able to communicate with if Facebook wasn't around. I think that's really important... My mom says when we used to go to camp every summer, run a camp, she would always be like, 'Oh, when I went to summer camp I would never see those people again. It's so cool that you guys friend each other on Facebook and are able to talk, and see each other at meets and stuff.' So I feel like that aspect has been really cool.

The responses of these students were largely indicative of the feelings of all participants in this study. Students implored college student educators to focus not just on the negative aspects and impacts of technology, but to realize and help guide students through the positive and productive values of these tools. As will be discussed in the subsequent implications for practice, educators must ensure that they approach social media with an open mind, absent any preconceived notions about how their impact may be negative. Instead, it is important to frame these technologies in terms of their potentials. Students want and desire to engage online and use these experiences to

further enhance their lives. College student educators can help students take advantage of these opportunities and help students in achieving their life goals with them.

### **Educating For Digital Identities**

An important implication of this research is the need to help guide and educate students on their digital identities. Digital identities are the personas and collection of data that students put out into the digital domain. Individuals possess an overall digital identity, but also multiple digital identities in the sense that each social media site has the opportunity for identity construction. Additionally, adding a layer of complexity, how and what individuals read and interpret regarding this data forms identities that are relative to relationships, contexts, and audiences.

A number of students in this study stated that they struggled with aspects of their digital identities. These struggles present opportunities for educators to act as guides and enter into partnership with their students. In particular, there are four areas of focus for educators that can aid students through this navigation process. These include: (1) educating on the rules of reputation, (2) stressing the importance of reflection, (3) encouraging the reset of one's relationship with social media, and (4) navigating issues of authenticity, being genuine, and showing vulnerability.

**Reputation and rules.** Given the highly visible and viral nature of social media, paying attention to one's digital reputation is of increasing importance. One's digital reputation is how others see one's digital identities. It is the reputation one gains because of what one posts on social media. Educating students on the importance of digital reputation is critical, particularly for adolescents and emerging adults who are in time

periods in their lives where the consequences of what one posts today may not be readily apparent.

In a collaborative effort between this author and Erik Qualman, the 2015 work *What Happens On Campus Stays On YouTube* attempts to address these issues of digital reputation. Subtitled, “The NEW rules for your reputation on campus, online and beyond,” the work presents a series of guidelines for students on how to protect themselves from making bad decisions on social media and in online environments. For young adolescents, the presentation of rules is of critical importance and developmentally appropriate. Translating these practices into the black and white notions of what to do and not to do carries resonance.

Students can be taught rules of reputation without necessarily understanding what they mean or why they are important. In other words, students may not have the developmental capacity to understand why they may or may not wish to post something, but they can still follow rules of reputation without this understanding. For instance, college students in this study received the message that having alcohol in one’s social media pictures is bad. As Grace, one of the participants, notes:

I'm very quick to untag a picture if I don't want it up or certain things I don't want on my profile. If there's any red cups anywhere in a picture, I make sure that's not anywhere on my profile. Because, actually, my neighbor didn't get a job because she was holding a beer, and she was 24... So, I make sure to very much have a clean image.

Although we cannot determine how Grace understands this rule, at the very least she has learned it and follows it. At lower orders of development, students may follow formulas or rules in constructing their digital identities. At higher orders of development, students will understand that contextual factors, relationships, and differing worldviews

and beliefs can impact the consequences of their actions. If someone is consuming alcohol responsibly, this may be perfectly acceptable from a digital reputation standpoint. The less developed, rule-based student, however, would not be able to make these kinds of distinctions. As emerging adults enter and work through college, these rules remain important as students begin to contextualize them for themselves.

As discussed in briefly in the findings, students have consistently heard messages throughout their high school years and continuing into their first years in college about the importance of digital reputations. Students have heard the message that what you post to social media can have future consequences, but many do not recognize the importance of this until the consequences become more real. In college, particularly as students enter the last phase of their college career, the reality of getting a job and leaving the more sheltered environment of college becomes more present. The consequences seem more real. It is important that college student educators continue to stress the importance of maintaining a positive social media reputation and help students learn to contextualize these rules for themselves. One of the study participants, Mesut, reflected how his understanding of digital reputation has evolved since high school. Mesut stated:

I feel in high school I was always told... be careful what you put on your Facebook. Be careful what you put on your Twitter. Blah blah blah. People might see it. But it's crazy. I had never took that seriously. I thought no one's going to look at my Facebook page... It's crazy how serious that is. Just being conscious about the content you put on social media platforms. Especially as going forward, more and more people are leaving their profiles public... A lot of times I'll look at high school seniors' Twitter accounts or Instagrams and I'll look at their captions and I'll just think, if a college administrator looked at this caption, I can't imagine anyone thinking yeah, let's let him into our school... Especially given the virality concept, and just how real that is, imagine putting up a stupid tweet and then waking up in the morning and there being 5,000 retweets. Then you're thinking, 'Oh no, anyone can see that now.'

Mesut had heard these “rules of reputation” throughout high school and yet they did not become real until he neared graduation. Although many students have heard these messages they may not have internalized them. The findings of this study revealed that many students were at a crossroads between external and internal definition. The externally defined students, those who look to their peers for validation and participate in peer cultures online, may find these needs to be more immediate than worrying about their digital reputations. They may not understand the complexities of real versus perceived audiences and what boyd (2014) referred to as context collapse, when social media content presented for one audience is taken out of context and seen by others. One study participant, Meghan, stated that this is still a problem for many of her peers and suggested a remedy that college student educators could enact:

I think a lot of people still don't understand how they reflect themselves on social media, or they're not aware of how that can negatively impact them. I feel it would be so helpful to have, even if it's just a seminar or someone coming into freshman year and talking about social media and how the way that you reflect yourself can really help or hurt you down the line... Even just going to a job interview you can almost assume that someone has Googled you or looked you up. I feel looking someone up online or seeing their content online completely shapes your first impression of them... So it would just be really helpful for there to be a class or something that goes through that, or a guidebook or handbook or something that tells students what's appropriate and what's not.

Meghan, a graduating senior in college, is acutely aware of how her digital reputation affects her future employment and job prospects. It is a reality that, despite receiving messages about its importance, may not seem imminent to first and second year students. Given the public nature and affordances of social media, it is of vital importance that students pay attention to what they post and how current and future audiences will interpret it. College student educators should be mindful of this reality when constructing first year and second year success initiatives. Despite having heard

this, entering college students may not have heard it enough. Gatsby, recalled receiving these messages upon his entering college:

All the freshmen had to go listen to a speaker [to] scare us in a way about social media usage. People will find these pictures. Things like that. Which yes, was scary for a lot of freshman, but I think it was good. In a way, when we were freshmen three or four years ago, that was needed. I don't know if it's something that's going to continuously need to be needed because I think people are being more aware. People are more aware now of implications of social media earlier just because they've been hearing it for so long.

Gatsby recalls the messages as being “scary,” but they need not be entirely so. Providing a balanced perspective for students on both the positives and negatives associated with being online allows opportunities for agency. The reality of digital and social technology is that it will increasingly become a necessary tool for information gathering, networking and work. To provide only a one-sided, negative, rule-based perspective fails to teach students about important concepts of audience and context. It also hints at messages coming from an adult-normative perspective as opposed to one that takes a youth-normative perspective into account.

One reaction students may have to these messages about reputation is to set their privacy settings as high as possible and to resort to social networks that privilege privacy over broader social conversations. The recent rise of the social network Snapchat, in which messages automatically “disappear” after a set period of time, is likely due, in part, to this desire for privacy. Moving in the opposite direction, towards less social alternatives, however, decreases the likelihood that the positive effects of social media could be realized. A number of participants noted that social media helped keep them informed, find important contacts for jobs, and seek the advice of others. Presented in a

later section on the positive effects of social media, these opportunities may not be presented in digital reputation sessions rooted in fear.

Instead, educational interventions about digital reputations should strive to promote a balanced approach to the topic. They should present the opportunities unlocked by social media as well as the pitfalls. For instance, social media have tremendous benefit to college students looking to establish their professional reputations and seek jobs. Not only the domain of a Career Services office, these conversations about how to present oneself in a way that opens doors are important. One participant, Ryan, discussed her struggles in constructing a digital identity for employers:

I feel it's harder to construct the identity that a job wants to see. The personal it's just like, I can be myself. But I feel when I'm doing things with LinkedIn or Twitter, I'm constantly thinking about, 'What does a potential employer want to see?' It just takes a lot more thought than, 'What do I want to share?'

Ryan desires guidance and college student educators can provide this. College student educators need to balance rule-based approaches with those that help students contextualize and make choices about what they want their digital reputations to be. Helping students understand what they want their digital reputations to do for them and not just attempt to avoid what they do not want them to do is an important lesson for future professional success. Part of this process is encouraging students to step back from social media and reflect on what their goals are. Addressed in the next section, a number of students in this study stated that they had not engaged in a goal setting process or were left to figure it out on their own. This presents an opening for college student educators to partner with their students.

**The importance of reflection.** Along with teaching students the “rules” of reputation, it is important for college student educators to encourage college students to

reflect on their social media usage—both *how* and *how frequently* they use social media. Reflection is a useful developmental practice that allows individuals to pause and make sense of their lives and behaviors in new ways. Reflective practices are particularly useful when it comes to technology. Given the “always on” and “always present” nature of social media, along with the immersive experiences of smartphones and personal technology, many college students in this study expressed they had not been asked to explicitly state their goals until prompted to do so by the questions in this study. Participant Cameron provided the following important perspective on the immersive nature of social media and social media’s tendency to promote doing before thinking. Cameron stated, “Because it is something that you do every day, but most people don't think about it. Which I think is really interesting. Most people are just like, ‘Oh yeah, I spend four hours a day on social media, but whatever.’”

Providing space to reflect on social media use is especially important for students, as they are rarely if ever called upon to consider social media in this manner. Few people are doing it and individuals are rarely called upon to do it. This reflection should cover a number of important topics including (1) the amount of time one spends on social media as opposed to other activities, (2) how social media fits into one’s life, (3) the benefits and drawbacks of its usage, and (3) how one is seen by others versus how one wants to be seen.

As discussed in the findings of this study, creating a perfected image of oneself through social media curation and consuming the perfected images of others can have damaging consequences on individuals. The impulse reflected by the participants in this study was to always portray the positive and exciting in their lives. Students felt

discouraged from sharing what could be perceived as negative and felt pressured to mask issues of mental health—an important consequence for college student educators to note. This selective sharing, in turn, led others to feel pressure to conform to these perfected images. The cycle is self-perpetuating. For this reason, one participant, Liam, referred to social media as a “game,” a “competition,” and a “dance.”

When prompted to reflect on their social media use throughout the interview process, students noted that each interview caused them to reflect more deeply on their social media use and their presentation of themselves. The time between interviews also provided an important site for further reflection. One participant, Meghan, noted these effects, stating:

I've never honestly reflected on my social media usage or how I portray myself between different platforms. I kind of just—I've had all my social media accounts for so long that it just seems second nature to me, you know, switching between Instagram and Facebook, Twitter, going back and forth. So I've definitely become more reflective on how I'm portraying myself. Even just in these past few weeks when I'm posting pictures or something, or, I don't know, changing my profile picture or something. It's just funny because I've never really thought about why I wanted to do certain things on social media before, and now it's, I don't know, I've realized more, or I'm more aware of my decisions in what I'm posting.

Meghan reveals a phenomenon that was common to a number of participants in the study: individuals share on social media and rarely step back to reflect on why they're doing it and why they share what they do. Usage of social media is influenced by unwritten rules that individuals acquire and internalize over time. For this reason, encouraging students to step back from their social media usage and reflect on how they use it and how it fits into their lives is important. Social media can be exciting at first. In addition to connecting with others, one can share and get feedback from others with instant gratification. However, before engaging in social media for the first time,

however, participants rarely expressed that they thought about their goals for its use and rarely thought about the other ramifications of their engagement with social media tools.

As discussed in the findings of this study, social media can have a profound influence on how one views one's self, how one views others, and how one constructs a reality from what they consume. The effects are found both through one's digital reputation as well as psychologically. One study participant, Cameron, discussed the importance of reflecting on these issues and the importance of encouraging these conversations amongst students:

We talked about social media and how it affects your perceptions of yourself and how other people perceive you. And I think that's such a great topic, that I think is relevant for every single person who goes [to college]. I would say for every single person who goes here... I think those are still very valuable conversations to have. Because it really does make you think. It makes you think like, 'Is this really who I am, is this how I want to reflect? Is this how I want to project myself?' I don't know. So I would say, I think it's so important to talk about.

Taking a step back and reflecting on one's relationship with social media and one's goals for their use are an important part of encouraging healthy social media behaviors. Because this step is not often taken, and instead individuals "jump in" to social media use without these thoughts, the process of engagement becomes second nature and reflexive. While this may function well at first, the cumulative effects of social media use over time can turn negative. Logan, a participant in this study, stated that social media were a large source of his disappointment with college and with life in general. For Logan, particularly early on in his social media use, he became competitive on social media.

Social media can lead to the comparison of one's life to that of others and the measurement of one's worth in relation to others. When one only consumes the perfected

images of others, and one feels pressure to portray a perfected image oneself, the effect can become a downward spiral. One feels pressure to constantly portray an exciting life even though no one's life is always perfect. An individual posts to social media attempting to achieve this status. Their posts, in turn, spur this behavior in others. One participant, Logan, connected his lack of clear goals for social media use with his dissatisfaction:

Well I think the biggest problem I faced with social media is... What are your goals from social media? What are you there for? Is it to get updated on your friends? And then is that what's happening? ...Is it only furthering the comparison that's happening? Since that's what's, I assume, causing my greatest dissatisfaction at [college]— seeing my life in comparison to others. Maybe it's time to reevaluate.

A number of students expressed dissatisfaction with social media over time and that they changed their use of these technologies as they changed and their needs changed. This is part of the natural developmental process as students moved towards their more externally defined adolescent years and towards their more internally defined adult years. Even though this process may be “natural,” it does not follow that it is necessarily easy to work through. Reflection on social media usage levels and goals is an important behavior for everyone to engage in regularly and college student educators are positioned well to help in this regard.

**Resetting one's relationship with social media.** Coupled with reflection, college student educators should also encourage students to reset their relationship with social media. One way to accomplish this is to take a break from it—remove a social media site from one's phone on a temporary basis, deactivate a profile for a defined period of time, or have a trusted friend reset one's password. With the exception of one participant in this study, all students stated they had taken a break from their social media

use at one time or another. Some students gave it up for the Catholic Lenten season, others decided to take a break during finals, and some decided that they just needed the break.

Students stated that taking a break from social media allowed them to reset their relationship with these platforms, reflect, and establish new patterns of behavior. Given the seductive quality of social media and their game and competition-like aspects, taking a break was a healthy action that allowed students time for renewal. Participant Logan described it as a “social media cleanse.” The idea of a cleanse, that one needs to remove unwanted toxins or negative build up, is an apt analogy for the way students approached taking a break from social media. Students reported that social media can be engrossing and sometimes switching it off or walking away was the best approach to changing their behavior. One student, Liam, stated:

I’m starting to realize that I just click on things and I don’t know why I click on things and I’m just like, ‘Why am I going through this? I have a lot of stuff to do.’ But I actually practiced some self control last night and just shut off my phone when I wrote my paper.

Social media use can become a reflexive action and one that students felt compelled to participate in. For a generation that already experiences a high degree of stress and pressure in their lives, social media add another layer. Students are called upon to live multiple lives and maintain ever more representations. When asked about what she lost as a result of being on social media, Natalie stated:

As far as loss, like I said, time. But it is an emotional stressor, at the very minimal level... You always think, ‘Oh yeah, I have all these pictures. I should probably upload them at some point.’ Vomit. To-do list. So even adding something onto your to-do list. You’re ‘to-doing’ your social. So in some senses, it’s another thing to do. Another thing to keep up. Another thing to be updated.

For Natalie, social media became just another form of work that was layered onto her busy schedule. A number of participants mentioned social media as “time wasters” without many immediately perceived benefits. This was especially apparent for a few participants who mentioned how their use of social media changed while they were studying abroad. Study abroad represents a scenario where student breaks from social media occurred de facto as a result of lack of access to the Internet and smartphones. Ironically, study abroad is often a time period when students may want to use social media more—to share exciting pictures, maintain connections with friends, and explore the new space around them. And yet, being abroad and lacking a constant connection through social media was a very positive experience for some participants. Meghan stated:

When you're so immersed in social media all the time you miss out on a lot of things or just living in the moment... I noticed that a lot more when I was studying abroad last year. I didn't have internet. I didn't have data. So I couldn't be constantly sharing pictures on Snapchat or posting photos on Facebook. I had to kind of learn to live without that. I realized how much I was missing out on... just appreciating what was going on and not having to tell everyone else about it, or prove to other people what I'm doing or show them how cool whatever I'm doing is. I think you miss out on a lot of stuff going on around you because you feel like you always have to be connected to other people at all times. That's a big negative.

When students were not able to access their social media, the impact of the ‘competition phenomenon’ associated with its use was also eliminated. For Meghan, this was a positive implication of taking a break and one that altered her usage of social media upon her return to the United States. It allowed her to be in the moment and enjoy opportunities for what they were rather than enjoying these activities in comparison to others. Meghan also noted that there was a loss to her not having access to social media.

She felt as though she “missed out” and was not staying informed or connected to important people and events in her life.

Meghan’s observation underscores an important theme discussed in these implications, that a balanced approach to social media use is best. Social media carry many positives as well as negatives. Learning to integrate it into one’s life in a way that maximizes the benefits while minimizing the negative aspects is an important developmental evolution that students need to make with their social media use. Rather than encourage students to give up social media use entirely, college student educators should encourage this more balanced and tempered approach. Another participant, Mesut, underscored this need to stay connected when he decided to break from his giving up social media for Lent in order to take an action important to him. Mesut stated:

So, during Lent, I tried not to do [social media], and I really just didn't go on it. I lasted two weeks before I went on and did whatever. It was a buddy of mine, back home, had some health issues. There was an account where you could donate money, a link.

Mesut’s decision to break Lent and log on to social media sites for social good demonstrates the way in which giving up social media entirely may not be a realistic option. Given how one uses social media, even taking a break may be impossible. At a minimum, college student educators should be encouraging students to step back from their usage and review their usage from an outsider perspective. The technique employed in this study, of the synchronous ethnographic tour, is an option that accomplishes many of the same goals as taking a break from social media.

The synchronous ethnographic tour technique, of having a student view their social media sites and content while someone probes and asks questions about it, encouraged students to step outside of themselves and view their use of social media

through the eyes of someone else. Having another individual ask open ended questions about motivations behind posting, emergent patterns in behavior, and what social media profiles say about their users encourages reflection and acts similarly to one's taking a break from social media. It encourages a reexamination of one's goals and use of social media. Participant Liam summarized this, encouraging others to:

Understand why you're using social media. Why are you engaging in this app? Why are you letting it consume so much of parts of your day? Is it to connect with friends? Just helping get an understanding of why you do it. I think limiting your amount of time on social media is a good thing to talk about.

Perhaps it is not necessary to limit your time on social media, as Liam suggests, but instead, students should use that time towards more productive or goal-driven ends. Helping students reorient their online time towards these ends can help students feel like they *own* social media as opposed to their being *owned by* social media. In the process, students may feel more complete, more present, and more real in their portrayals online and in social media.

**On authenticity, being genuine, and being vulnerable.** Showing vulnerability, and being authentic and genuine in their online interactions is something that all student participants stressed as important to them. Although many are or had previously been caught up in the validation trap of constantly seeking Likes on their social media posts, students also desired to appear genuine and/or authentic in their interactions. In many ways, this impulse was a reaction to the “game” and “competition” of social media. When probed further and asked to define these words, one participant, Logan, provided a definition that fit with what many of the other students described in their interviews. Logan stated:

I don't know, authentic for me would mean who I am without thinking about what other people are thinking of me. So, I guess I'm always thinking about what other people are thinking of me on these sites. There's no way I could be authentic. But, also my passions, and the things that make me who I am are not always shown on all these sites, or if any.

Authenticity, or the freedom from feeling the need to perform for others on social media, was something students in their third and fourth years in college began to think about with increasing frequency. Following the developmental trajectory from external to internal definition, students felt more free to "be themselves" and share more of their lives without being concerned with what others may think. Learning to be vulnerable by sharing a social media self that is more authentic is something with which student participants struggled. In this sense, authenticity and vulnerability are uniquely tied together for college students. As Liam describes:

I don't know, I think people lose the ability to be more authentic and real because we're so used to portraying ourselves as these perfect beings on social media. That can definitely affect vulnerability, which is a problem I think we're coming into with this generation. We like to be private about all of our problems and feel if we express those it's a sign of weakness or you have a problem, you're different from us.

As discussed earlier in the findings, Liam was a participant that acutely struggled with issues of comparing himself to others. For Liam, it was difficult to show vulnerability online through sharing his feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with college. The dominant narrative Liam experiences is that sharing this vulnerability is the antithesis of "fitting in." It reveals that there is a "problem" and it is a "sign of weakness." An interesting aspect of this condition is that it was nearly universally felt, or at least understood, by all of the participants. It is an important issue for college students of which college student educators should be cognizant. Participant Elizabeth made an

analogy to how this is akin to the self-consciousness one may feel in going to the gym, a public space she likened to posting online. Elizabeth shared:

I think it's the whole complex of going to the gym. You're so worried that everybody's watching you and making fun of how strong you are. But everybody's also doing the exact same thing and just paying attention to themselves and being self-conscious about their selves. So I feel everybody's just so concerned about how they're appearing.

One's appearance on social media was something that almost all college students were concerned about and yet no one was talking about. This trap, which has the potential to have tremendous negative impacts on self-esteem and feelings of self worth for college students, is something of which college student educators should be mindful. These feelings are normal, yet are going unspoken. Bringing these issues out into the open and letting students talk through them has the potential to reduce the shame and stigma surrounding them. Student participants preparing to graduate college had largely already worked through some of these issues on their own, without the guidance of other adults and professionals. Participant Cameron, reaching the end of her college career, shared:

I think everybody gets caught up in that because you want to be like everybody else. You want to be like what other people are putting out. But it comes to a point where you're like, I'm 22 years old, is this really what I want? Is this what I want my life to be like? And I like to think, personally, that that's not how I feel, and I know that's not how my friends feel, and that's why we're friends. We don't give a crap about being dressed to the dime every single day and running forever and being so happy. So, at least, I feel like my—I hope this is what people get from me—that I'm not this perfect person that is always happy and always being the perfect human being. So, I don't know, I think it's really hard with being a girl and being here, I think it's really hard to not get caught up in that. Everybody gets caught up in it but it gets to a point where you want to make sure that you're still being yourself, which is hard.

While Cameron echoed the feelings of many other participants, she also makes an important note about how it is especially hard for her being a woman, presumably

because of the self-esteem and body issues women already face through internalized societal messages and pressures. This revelation highlights how this phenomenon may differentially impact certain demographic groups more than others and in different spaces from the dominant social media platforms. Previously, Liam, a participant who identifies as a gay male, made similar statements about the function of the gay-male-specific social media app, Grindr. Grindr provided an outlet for closeted gay males to explore their gay male identity, but was also subject to the policing and pressures found in social media in general. How different demographic groups experience these pressures is worthy of further study and college student educators should be mindful of how demographic identity can impact one's experience of digital identity overall.

College student educators have traditionally had an important role to play in helping facilitate students' identity exploration as they grow and develop through college. In the age of social media, this exploration takes on the additional dynamic of how students make sense of their digital identities. As explored in this section, learning to be vulnerable, and achieving a peaceful place of feeling authentic and genuine in one's online interactions is an important part of this development. Participant Ashley, giving advice to educators working with students and social media, stated:

I would definitely say that social media is a way to hide your true self and feelings and that although I don't think everyone should be off social media, I think people need to be aware of that and reflective of that when they're on it. I also think a huge part of social media is hiding your vulnerability. I think in society today people look down upon people who are vulnerable and try to hide their vulnerability as much as possible, and they think social media helps people hide their vulnerability because they're hiding behind it in ways. I would just say having discussions about being vulnerable. I think the only way that people can become more comfortable in their being vulnerable is having conversations with others about being vulnerable. So I think that that could be something that college administrators could start and help students realize in social media, and just in college life in general, we need to stop trying to hide our vulnerabilities and

instead be reflective of them and realize what they need and how you can connect to others through them.

Ashley highlights much of the advice to college student educators echoed throughout this section on educating for digital identities. Students should be mindful of their digital reputations and learn the consequences of their actions online. However, students should also not become beholden to how they may be perceived or viewed by others on social media. One way to combat this trap of seeking validation online is through reflection. Educators should promote reflection among college students and challenge them to articulate their reasons and goals for being online. Taking a break from social media may be one avenue for facilitating this reflection, allowing individuals to reset their relationship with the technology. Through this reset, students may begin to explore what it means to be visible in the online space and work through issues of showing vulnerability and learn to feel more genuine in the relationships they undertake.

### **Helping Students Navigate Digitized Development**

It is important to educate students on the complexities of digital identity, self-presentation, and visibility, but educators must also do the work necessary to help students navigate digitized developmental processes. This next section provides advice for educators on how they can be best prepared to partner with college students in this journey. This partnership requires that college student educators understand how social and digital technologies work and be ready, willing, and able to speak with students about their experiences with technology on the students' own terms. Furthermore, although the concept of digitized selfhood, or the way in which virtual environments are shaping and proliferating notions of one's self, was not explicitly surfaced in this research, educators

must be mindful that the affordances of technology may be changing the traditional developmental patterns previously seen in college students.

**Understanding the technology.** In order to be effective partners with this generation of college students, at the most basic level educators must be informed of, aware of, and up-to-date on the latest trends in social and digital technology. The recent revisions to the *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Professionals* (2015) identified this knowledge as a foundational level competency for educators. It encourages professionals to, “Remain current on student and educator adoption patterns of new technologies and familiarize oneself with the purpose and functionality of those technologies” (p. 33).

As this research has highlighted, this competency is of critical importance to educators who much first seek to understand the environments in which their students live and interact. While it does not require that educators be active on all social and digital media platforms, it does require that educators at least familiarize themselves with the affordances, functionalities, and cultures of these apps. The best way to accomplish this is through active experimentation or through asking students to provide help and guidance in understanding how social media sites are used. This basic level knowledge can help educators appreciate the complexity that their students must navigate and gain an appreciation for the developmental opportunities provided by these technologies.

Because college student educators themselves are often online and learning to navigate these spaces at the same time as their students, educators need to be cognizant that they may be subject to the same developmental learning curves that their students experience. Although the behaviors presented here were developmentally situated in

emerging adulthood, it is likely that adults may experience these same patterns to a lesser extent. One participant, Liam, highlighted this fact when he asserted that faculty and staff members make some of the same mistakes online and are subject to the same psychologies as their students. Liam stated:

Well I think the starting point is educating [faculty and staff members] to begin with, because I think they are equally caught up in the idea of social media... and having an understanding... of what social media means to themselves is extremely important before they're able to actually communicate that. Because [I] guarantee they're all on Facebook. They all have their own social media sites and people can find them... If they're not acting in accordance with the information they're giving, that's not good.

Liam's advice highlights how learning about social media is something that can best be occurred in partnership with students. Because all members of society are subject to learning these new technologies as they evolve, partnering with students for mutual learning and benefit is of increased utility in this instance. Advancements in social and digital technologies show no signs of abating and the rate of change is likely to keep pace or even increase in the coming years.

**Discussions across generational lines.** Because of social and digital technology's rapid ascent and near ubiquity, college students have experienced a period of developmental growth that is different than those of the generations before them. Although many traditional values and theories of development still hold, the way in which these are instantiated in digital and virtual contexts results in a qualitatively different experience. For educators of an older generation, this can sometimes require reeducation and reorientation to their work. Reynol Junco (2014) advocates that educators approach this situation from a youth-normative, as opposed to an adult-normative, perspective. As discussed in a prior chapter, a youth-normative perspective

takes an emic approach to understanding social and digital technology use by college students and attempts to situate it from the student's perspective and values system.

It is important to note that social media and digital technology is now an important and lasting engagement tool in the lives of our students. Social and digital technology are not passing phenomena; rather, they are a new reality and new way of doing that requires us to explore, understand and adapt. All of the participants in this study echoed this sentiment. Having grown up with the technology they see it as an important and necessary feature of their lives going forward. Participant Meghan commented on this future going forward:

I feel there's going to be so much more interconnectedness through social media. It's already becoming more and more prevalent in the classroom, even, and just adopting Twitter for classes, or blogging or different things. I think it's going to become a requirement, whereas right now it's more of an option if you want to engage with social media. That's your choice. But with technology just advancing so fast with so many new platforms coming out, I just think it's inevitable that you're going to have to be connected through social media. Even now it's expected for job searching. So I think it would just be bizarre if someone were looking for me online and didn't find anything. It's just kind of expected.

For this generation, social media are a requirement and a fact of life. It will be with them in some form as it evolves into the future. Therefore, it is incumbent upon educators to embrace this phenomenon and help students navigate it in such a way that it maximizes its positive effects while reducing its potential negatives. In order to achieve this, college student educators must understand how social media fit into the lives of college students and how college students may develop different patterns of behavior and habits as a result. Although social media have their drawbacks, and may not be required or helpful in every instance, educators should be open to the productive value of the technology.

*The positive effects of social media.* A number of students discussed the positive and productive ways in which social media and digital technologies fit into and enhanced their lives. As one participant, Mesut, highlighted, “Society, everybody is moving into, essentially, the Social Media Age... when you can create and engage audiences, it's kind of like, the sky is the limit. You can do anything with it.” Although this study explored aspects of selfhood and identity construction in social media spaces, it is also important to highlight the positive effects of the technology. Student participants mentioned that social media helped them to connect and communicate with others, seek and learn new information, and that it spurred them to action.

Two participants in this study mentioned how their posting pictures while studying abroad enabled them to reconnect with friends from their past as well as connect with individuals with whom they previously had not had a deep connection. These connections were all facilitated through social media. Participant Ryan stated:

When I was studying abroad I shared a lot of pictures. I was lucky to do a lot of cool things. People that were kind of acquaintances or who I didn't really know, in my class, would just be—this is kind of creepy—but, ‘I followed all your study abroad pictures!’ And we'd just start talking about it. I feel it sparked conversations with people I otherwise wouldn't talk to. Which I think is cool, when people aren't afraid to be like, ‘I was stalking you.’

Another participant, Hallie, echoed Ryan's experience:

Actually, a girl who I went to middle school with just messaged me, and she's going to Norway with her parents. She saw on Facebook that I spent four months there a year ago. She was like, ‘Hey, if you have any suggestions for me? Like, where I should go?’ That's always kind of cool. I wouldn't have talked to her. I don't have her number. So without Facebook, she wouldn't have reached out, and I wouldn't have been able to give her some pointers of what to do when she was there.

These connections, facilitated through social media, would likely never have occurred in the past when connections and friendships were limited to the physical

domain. Unlike previous generations, where the experiences shared and the connections made would have likely been lost over time, this generation is able to use and connect with others dispersed over time as well as geography. In the cases of Ryan and Hallie, this represented some of the positive effects of their social media usage. It also stresses to educators the importance of teaching students about networking and making connections. As college students graduate and leave the confines of their college experiences, social media can present an important space for maintaining and leveraging connections. It can also spur exploration.

One participant noted that being on social media had this effect for him. While previously in this study it was noted that the need to present a perfected image online had a number of negative effects for students, one participant, Mesut, stated that it also had a very positive effect. It encouraged him to try new things and gain new experiences he may not have otherwise entertained. Mesut stated:

I feel I try to engage in more fun things or try and make more of an effort to go have a different experience. Not necessarily because of the reward of, 'I'm gonna get to Instagram this,' because I don't always end up doing that. At the same time, that'll be in the back of my mind. It's almost an extra little push to make me go do something like that just because. Why not?

Mesut continued:

So in that regard I feel it made me explore different opportunities and different—kinda almost a different career path than I thought I wanted to do.

So although social media competition can have negative effects, it can also open up new avenues for self-discovery and exploration. For Mesut, his desire to get the perfect picture and portray an exciting life actually caused him to take advantage of new opportunities. Rather than being stuck in the online world of social media, Mesut sought out new experiences offline.

For some students, being online can be an important site of exploration and expression in and of itself. Students who may not have previously felt comfortable interacting face-to-face in the offline world can gain confidence and courage online to interact with others and explore. Although there may be a tendency from an adult normative perspective to decry that this this generation has lost the ability to communicate face-to-face as a result of their being constantly glued to their smartphones, it is also possible that those that are would not have otherwise been social according to the rules of the offline world. Participant Addie had an important observation about this to share:

I always think, though, there are people who are like that. Who are entirely absorbed in some online world and don't have real face-to-face interaction. They probably wouldn't have had it anyway. They're probably more comfortable in that space and that's probably better. People who have a lot of social anxiety or something like that. This actually helps them. Just because they're not communicating face-to-face doesn't mean that communication is not significant to them. So yeah, maybe there are people who are afraid to leave their house or who are afraid to talk to other people, but they get to interact in a way that's meaningful to them whereas before everyone would have just shunned them from society. There's a whole spectrum, but I still think just because you're not communicating face-to-face doesn't mean that communicating is not important to you.

If what Addie states is true, and this research seems to support, being immersed online is not necessarily to the detriment of one's offline life. The online space provides important outlets and new methods of communication that were previously unavailable. From a youth-normative perspective, being immersed in social media is just another form of expression, and not necessarily better or worse than the previous methods to which one had access.

Remembering the positive and productive value of social media is important for college student educators when they must constantly work with the effects of social

media. These effects may be negative or may only seem negative when viewed from an adult normative perspective. All participants in this study stated that social media were important to them and that the positives far outweighed any negatives that may result. The online world provides an important counterbalance and space for connection in students' worlds. As participant Meghan stated:

I feel [that] when I am overwhelmed or stressed with school or whatever it may be, it's my online self that really helps to keep my sanity, or it's staying connected through social media or different online accounts that balances everything out.

If college student educators can help students craft an online space that allows for this balance, then they will have served students well in navigating this new environment. Although this may be difficult to achieve, given that educators are often learning about social media alongside their students, it also presents an exciting opportunity. Through research and further study, educators can become more informed about how to best partner with students to maximize these positive effects while minimizing the negative impacts.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented implications for practice arising out of the data collected in this study alongside the voices of students who indicated what they want and need from educators in navigating the complexities of life with digital and social media. Given the proliferation of digital identities that contemporary college students are called upon to manage and make sense of, college student educators are well positioned to help and learn alongside their students in making sense of it all. As technology usage becomes more of a fact of modern life, this education will evolve but remain necessary. Students need to understand their digital reputations and the ramifications of their behaviors both

online and off. Furthermore, as students navigate digitized development, students need guides and anchors to help them make sense of it all. When it comes to navigating digital and social technologies, educators and students must learn to become good partners.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Digital and social technologies are integral features in the lives of traditionally-aged college students. In comparison with other demographic groups, students ages 18-24, are more likely to own laptops and smartphones (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013) and more likely to engage on social media at the highest rates (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011) accessing it multiple times per day (e.g. Junco, Heiberger & Loken 2011; Junco, 2012b; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Although research into the impact of these technologies on the college student experience is growing, there is a relative lack of qualitative research into how students learn and develop in these new environments. The contributions of danah boyd (2014) and Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) are notable exceptions, but in the fast changing world of technology, more research is needed and this research must continuously be revised and updated.

Digital environments are central to the lived experience of college students today and educators must keep pace with this technological change. In recent revisions to the *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Professionals* (2015), the authors upgraded “Technology” from a thread present throughout all the competencies to its own stand-alone competency. The authors noted that since the competencies were last revised in 2010, the pace and integration of technology into the educational space has advanced to the point that, as a core competency, educators must now “remain current on student and educator adoption patterns of new technologies and familiarize oneself with the purpose and functionality of those technologies” (p. 33).

This study, which attempted to elucidate some of the impacts of technological change, supports this need now more than ever.

An important site of change is how college students grapple with their identity and the proliferation of their identities as a result of this technology. A number of postmodern theorists have posited that social and digital technologies are changing conceptualizations of self and identity. In particular, a number of theorists have noted that aspects of identity and selfhood have become “saturated” (Gergen, 2011), “fragmented” (Seider & Gardner, 2009), and “fluid” (Côté, 2005). Selfhood and identity under these theories are far more complex than when they existed only in the physical world. Students may possess identities that are anonymous, pseudoanonymous, or display varying ties to students’ physical world being (Junco 2014).

Heavily influencing the experiences of college students online are the affordances provided by technology—the new capabilities and opportunities for action that are enabled (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, and Borgatti, 2014). Four of these affordances that boyd (2014) identified included “persistence: the durability of online expressions and content; visibility: the potential audience who can bear witness; spreadability: the ease with which content can be shared; and searchability: the ability to find content” (p. 11). It is affordances such as these that make up the unique nature of digital and virtual spaces. When individuals are able to act in new ways, it seems reasonable to assume that these actions may lead to different behaviors and thus different developmental experiences and constructions.

This study was undertaken in an attempt to understand this change, from a psychological and developmental perspective. It asked the central question:

How do college students conceptualize who they are and how they present themselves when they are engaged in digital and social media?

Approached as a qualitative study and analysis, this research included 16 participants aged 18 to 24 years old who were primarily in their third and fourth years of college. Attempting to project a forward-looking stance, individuals were selected for inclusion that exhibited high degrees of social media use. Given the ever-increasing use of these technologies it was hypothesized that selecting a more extreme use sample would provide insights into how technology may be impacting college students into the future.

Students in this study participated in a series of semi-structured interviews and observations. The observation was conducted as a synchronous ethnographic tour, a technique utilized by Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009), in having students enact a typical session online while being probed about and providing narration during their activity. Data collected through these interviews were then transcribed and coded in an iterative process according to grounded theory methodologies. The results, presented here, included concepts of digital identity, digitized development, and digitized selfhood.

The following concluding chapter provides an explanation of digital identities, digitized development, and digitized selfhood as they emerged in this study. Building on these concepts, a broad overview and interpretation of the findings is presented along with the limitations of this study. This chapter reviews the implications for practice for college student educators presented in the prior chapter and conclude with a discussion of future directions for research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Part of the excitement that social media hold is the possibilities and new opportunities for action they afford for students. One of the aims of this study was an

attempt to surface how student selfhood, identity construction, and development appear in digital and physical environments. As mentioned previously, a number of postmodern theorists have noted the “particular problem of selfhood in our time” (Smith, 1994, p. 405). Côté referred to it as “postmodern identity crisis,” where “people embrace and celebrate fluid identities... [and] contextual allegiances” (Côté, 2005, p. 109). Kenneth Gergen (2000) stated that now, “Persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction... where anything goes that can be negotiated” (p. 7). Gergen (2000, 2011) termed this new selfhood the “saturated self” and the “relational self.” Gergen (2011) believes that new theory construction is required to:

Construct an ontology that replaces the vision of the bounded self as the atom of the social world with relational process. From this standpoint, it would not be selves who come together to form relationships, but relational process out of which the very idea of the psychological self could emerge. (p. 112)

Although students in this study did not exhibit wholly new conceptualizations of selfhood as anticipated by these theorists, the data gathered from participant interviews and observations did hint at the possibility that this is changing. Students possessed a number of digital identities, or representations of themselves, that they constructed and re-constructed online. These identities were tied to overall conceptualizations of self to varying degrees. Traditional developmental patterns emerged whereby students demonstrated being defined by their peers and beholden to their social surrounds as mediated by, and subject to, the affordances of digital and social media. These students exhibited aspects of conventional, third order thinking under Kegan’s (1994) developmental schema. A number of students in this study were also at what Baxter Magolda (1999, 2000) refers to as a crossroads, or moving towards a self-authorship or Kegan’s (1994) fourth order. These students began to define what they wanted their

digital lives to be and began to understand how their digital identities, and issues of audience and context, were related to their overall sense of self. For these students, their sense of self exists more relationally, in mutual construction and reconstruction with others.

**Digital identities and digitized development.** Three conceptual distinctions that arose out of this study are of critical importance in understanding the lived experiences of college students online. These concepts were the students' "digital identities" and their "digitized development" with the potential for "digitized selfhood." These three concepts, and understanding the difference and relationships between them, are key to understanding digital constructions and overall concepts of selfhood and identity online. As mentioned previously, terms currently used informally around these topics are frequently used inconsistently and are imprecise. The following discussion of these distinctions, and their relationships to one another, helps bring clarity and is critical to a more sophisticated understanding of the phenomena. In short, students possessed multiple digital identities that they understood differently according to their level of sophistication in navigating digitized development. This digitized development resulted in various constructions of selfhood.

***Digital identities.*** Students in this study described the multiple digital identities they possessed and how they navigated these identities. Digital identities are the different representations and personas participants took on through different social media platforms and in presentation to different audiences. A unique artifact of these identities is that they exist entirely within the virtual digital realm of cyberspace. Because of this unique property, digital identities have a tenuous relationship with their offline

equivalents. Students' digital identities may or may not correspond uniquely to offline identities. Furthermore, the properties of these digital identities may or may not correspond with those of offline identities. There is variance in identity presentation and the construction of identity both online and off.

For example, students in this study had multiple social media accounts. Many students possessed a Facebook identity, an Instagram identity, and a LinkedIn identity, amongst others. Each of these sites and apps had their own affordances and cultural rules around what content should be posted and how one should represent themselves on each. For instance, on Snapchat, students reported that their audience was primarily their peers and that because these posts were ephemeral and would disappear after a defined period of time, students would post more "in the moment" content. If students went out for the evening, they may share photographs of themselves getting ready, grouped with friends, or take selfies of themselves in silly poses or giving funny faces. On the contrary, because Facebook posts are more permanent and often their audiences often include older adults and family members, content posted to these sites included the batch uploading of pictures from experiences after they occurred. Finally, and most dissimilarly, students used LinkedIn to share career-related posts, most often in the form of industry-related articles. In each of these spaces, students in the study reported that although these digital identities all represented the students themselves to varying degrees, the digital identities represented different aspects of themselves. Students described their relationship to these various digital identities as varying by degree when providing analogies for their online lives.

The digital identities students had on differing social and digital media platforms also corresponded to the students' offline identities and features to relative degrees. For instance, one participant was gay and out offline and yet presented differently online. Knowing that his online audience on particular social media networks included his parents and family members, to whom he was not out to, this student posted different content to different platforms. The result of this behavior is that one could view the student's Facebook content and never encounter content that revealed he was gay. Looking at the student's Instagram account, however, one would find images of him and his boyfriend. Many students reported that different aspects of their offline identities were presented or not presented to varying degrees depending on the platform and audience. This also extended to student personality features, such as students that expressed they were more extroverted online (or that their personality was more amplified online) as opposed to how they presented offline.

In addition to having different social media platforms represent different digital identities, students described having multiple digital identities on a single platform. Digital identities need not correspond in a one-to-one relationship to a specific social media platform; rather one social media profile can have multiple identities. This was evident among participants when they described their different audiences on social media. For example, the mother of one of the participants, although consuming the same social media posts as the participant's friends, interpreted them differently. The student noted that the conversations she had with her mother on the phone, after her mother joined Facebook and saw the student's Facebook posts, changed. Her mother saw only the happy and positive posts the student made to social media and the mother assumed

the student was happy and having a great time in college. This view of the student through social media, however, was selective. In the offline world, the student was experiencing a broader range of emotions than what she revealed online. Whereas the students' peers understood that social media provides only a selected view of one's life, the student's mother did not yet fully appreciate this context. Part of this differing interpretation of identity presentations occurs because identities exist in mutual construction with the people that "consume" them. Construction is a relational process. How one experiences the digital identity of another may be different than how the originator of the digital identity believes it to be constructed. In other words, intent, audience, and context matter in making meaning of digital identities.

Student participants discussed the many social media platforms they engage in and how they navigate among their digital identities. In this sense, the proliferation of relationships and digital identities as described by Gergen (2000, 2011) and others was highly evident. Students described how they navigated different platforms with relative ease, almost as second nature. What students came to appreciate in this process were the complexities of communication with different audiences and across different contexts. The possibility for context collapse in these situations was noted by danah boyd (2014). Context collapse is a phenomenon whereby social media content is posted and intended for one audience but is consumed and interpreted by others outside of this audience. As a result, content can be taken "out of context."

For example, a number of participants in this study stated that they did not post photographs of themselves with alcohol in their hands, or, if they did, they posted them to networks with disappearing posts, such as with Snapchat, or to networks where they

could select the consuming audience through privacy settings, such as Facebook. Students stated they would never post these pictures to LinkedIn, a site that exists for professional networking and work purposes, since it would not be appropriate to the audience. Students were aware that future employers were in their social media audiences and were wary of developing a digital reputation that could damage future job prospects.

Navigating context collapse and real versus intended audiences is indicative of the way in which social media have proliferated and complicated relationships. Furthermore it demonstrates that one's digital identities and self-presentations are context dependent, relative, and constructed in relationship with others. Although this multiplicity of identities and these contextual complexities did not translate into a deeper notion of multiplistic selfhood for participants, the effects did have an impact on student behavior—specifically in the curating of their digital identities and reputations. In curating these identities, participants in this study discussed how they construct their digital identities both consciously and in a *de facto* way.

Consciously, individuals may choose to post particular content to present themselves and mold their digital identities in specific ways. Amongst the college students in this study, this curation of identity was skewed towards portraying the positive in one's life. It included posting pictures of the subjects surrounded by friends, eating beautiful or exotic foods, or on a particularly scenic vacation. This curation also occurred *de facto*, whereby students omitted the everyday occurrences in their lives that might be considered mundane or not fitting the “exciting” front they were attempting to achieve. Birnbaum (2013) noted a tendency for college students to present these fronts

when on social media. In Birnbaum's (2013) study, student fronts conformed to a number of personas including the partier, the socialite, the risk taker, the comic, the institutional citizen, and the eccentric.

The phenomenon of posting and consuming perfected images of oneself and others was a consistent research finding across all participants. Students described being on social media in this way as a game and a competition. This competition, which previously existed in the physical world before the advent of digital and social technology, is instantiated differently and amplified online. In the online space, images are more easily shared, spread, and visible. These affordances make digital competition particularly pernicious. Digital competition is a self-perpetuating cycle. One consumes the idealized content of others, which, in turn, pressures one to post their own idealized content. This content is then also consumed and the cycle continues. The metric for success in this game is the number of Likes, comments and engagements one receives on their social media content. Receive more Likes and this validation becomes a vague indicator of self worth. The more Likes one receives, the more successful one is. This cycle, which was described in part by danah boyd (2014), was also the subject of a recent podcast of *This American Life* on National Public Radio (Glass, 2015). It is a common phenomenon among teens and, as evidenced from data collected in this study, continues into the college years.

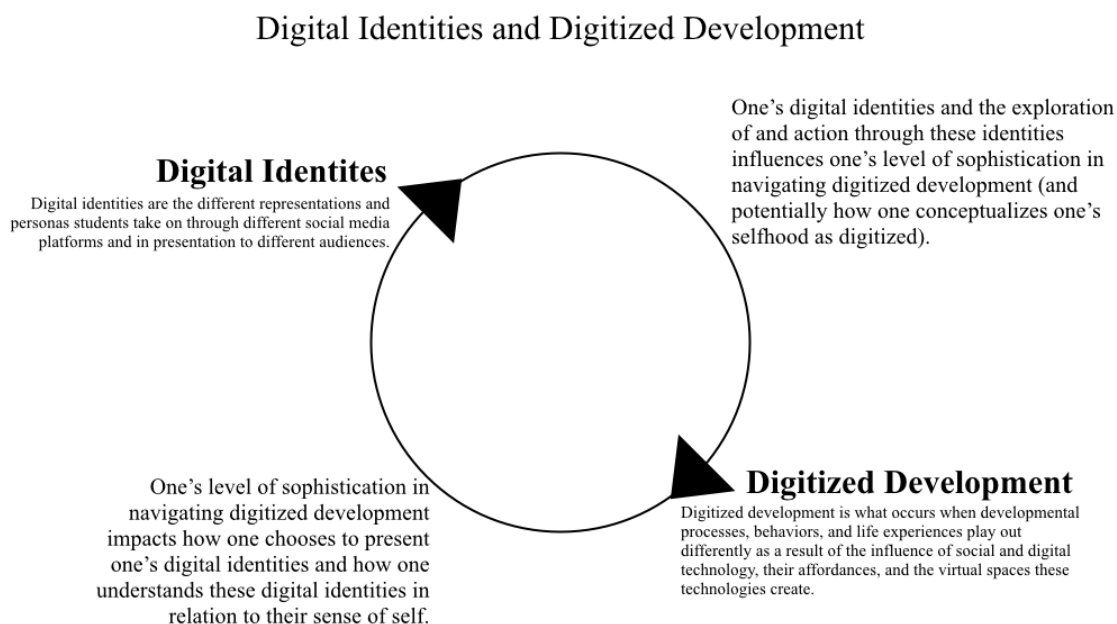
All participants mentioned this phenomenon and that either they experienced it firsthand or witnessed this behavior in their peers. When pressed to explain why one would participate in this game, many students struggled to identify an answer. Considered developmentally, one can read a narrative pattern into these experiences. As

students moved from earlier stages of development, where they were more externally defined, and towards their own internal self-definition, in which they made conscious decisions about social media, student engagement in gamesmanship and competition behaviors decreased. The students in this study, primarily in their fourth year in college, had already begun to break away from this behavior.

This finding represents an important implication for college student educator practice as it suggests educators have an opportunity to help students move through this process in a more orderly way. Some participants mentioned that engaging in the competition game contributed to their levels of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with college and life in general. There was a sense of “fear of missing out” that was propagated by social media that increased anxiety for some participants. Educators can help students who are trapped in this behavioral cycle to break away. This includes helping students work through the effects of the “social media game” while also challenging students to move beyond the game. This plus-one staging (Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito, 1998) can help students move through development by challenging them to change their relationship to social media. As King (1998) stated, “consistently meeting students’ immediate needs is not always an educationally sound strategy; there is value in ‘mismatch,’ or in creating an environment which challenges the student to adapt and respond in increasingly more adequate ways” (p. 48). If educators better understand the impact of social and digital technologies on college student development, they will be better positioned and able to partner with students in their educational journeys. These cross-generational learning partnerships are key in helping students understand their lives both online and off (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004).

The notion of digital identities is complex because these identities must be understood in context. They are relative—relative to the affordances of the platform used, relative to the individual and relative to relationships and how others experience them—and they are tenuous—they are constantly changing and being constructed and reconstructed through time as they are experienced. At their core, digital identities represent the multitude of ways one constructs identity online and how others construct and make meaning of these identities. Digital identities are related, to varying degrees, on how an individual sees their overall identity and sense of self. Digital identities are also tied into the process of development influencing how students construct their own and consume those of others. This cyclical process is outlined below in Figure 1. Development under this schema has become digitized—psychological processes occur within and are influenced by the affordances of digital and virtual spaces and one’s level of development influences how one acts and makes sense of these spaces.

Figure 1



***Digitized development.*** Digitized development is the psychological development that occurs in and spans physical and virtual spaces. The term *digitized* is used as opposed to *digital* to recognize that digitization occurs in degrees. Individuals may blend their online and offline lives to varying extents. Although this digitization is related to one's degree of online engagement, it is not necessarily caused by it. In other words, an individual may engage heavily online and yet not integrate this experience deeply into their development and conceptualizations of self. Digitization is about *how* the technology is used as opposed to *how often* it is used. Individuals may be online frequently and yet be able to walk away from social media at any time with few consequences or effects. Other individuals who are online may integrate it into their sense of being and self at such an intimate level that they find the two to be inseparably related. Technology usage is necessary, but not sufficient for digitized development to occur.

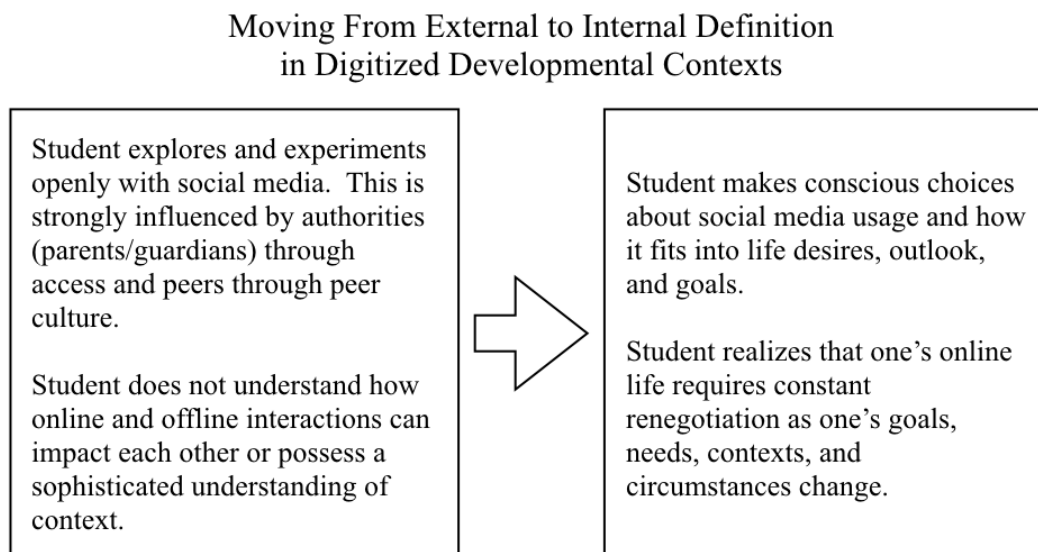
Digitized development is thus what occurs when developmental processes and life experiences play out differently as a result of the influence of social and digital technology, their affordances, and the virtual spaces these technologies create. In this study, development was digitized when social media platform affordances influenced behaviors that amplified or retarded student development. In this environment, traditional theories of development are still useful, but they must be applied in new ways to account for the different affordances technologies provide.

Digitized development and students' levels of sophistication in navigating it was evident in student responses when they discussed their changing relationship with social media over time. In their pre-college and early college years, participants reported being

highly subject to external influences. Students at these earlier stages of life were more likely to participate in the games and competition for Likes described in the previous section. As such, students exhibited the behaviors that were defined by those external to them in a way that was consistent with Baxter Magolda's (1999, 2000) theory of self-authorship. Robert Kegan (1994) would characterize these behaviors as consistent with second-to-third order thinking, where students are not yet critically examining their circumstances. With social media, students are not reflecting on using it, rather, they are subject to and play the social media 'game' without reflection.

As the students in this study moved through their collegiate experience, they indicated the development of a stronger internal voice, and as a result, operated more independently. This internal definition was reflected in many of the participants' changing use of social media as they moved away from a more competitive mindset. These students, representing a majority of the students in this study, demonstrated characteristics of transitioning through Baxter Magolda's (1999, 2000) "crossroads" moving towards defining what they wanted their involvement with digital and social media to be. This apparent move towards self-authorship and fourth order thinking (Kegan, 1994) allowed students to begin to use social media on their own terms. These students stopped posting to social media to pursue Likes, decided to take breaks from social media to reset their relationship with the technology, and became more acutely aware of how their digital identities create digital reputations. This process continued through students' third and fourth years and into post-graduation life. This movement, from external to internal definition is outlined in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2



This classic developmental pattern of moving from external to internal definition is highly applicable in situations involving digitized development. How participants in this study understood and constructed their digital identities was related to their level of sophistication in navigating digitized developmental contexts. Outlined in Figure 2, the concepts of digital identity and digitized development are inter-related and their relationship is reciprocal. Depending on one's level of sophistication in navigating digitized development, one may construct, make meaning of, or understand one's own digital identities in different ways. Furthermore, one may understand these digital identities as more or less integrated into one's concept of self. A highly digitized individual sees digital identities as an integrated part of their being and digitized development begins to hint at new constructions of selfhood. Students who reached towards self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2000) and fourth order thinking (Kegan, 1994) represented high levels of sophistication in navigating digitized development.

*Digitized selfhood.* Related to digitized development is the notion of digitized selfhood. Digitized selfhood is an emergent phenomenon that began to appear in this research. The term “digitized” is used in the same way in which it is discussed in digitized development above. It indicates a degree of integration with technology that varied by participant. Selfhood, as opposed to identity, is a deeper-level meta-understanding of who one is. Using the words of Robert Kegan (1994), selfhood is subject to identity as object.

When exploring notions of selfhood, students were asked about the extent to which their online and offline lives were integrated or separable. Put more plainly, the questions asked were: “Who is the *real* you? Is there one *real* you? Are there multiple *real* ‘yous?’” Revealed in the findings, students indicated that their selfhood is hybridized online and off to varying degrees. Some students exhibited a higher degree of digitized selfhood to the point that their online lives were increasingly inseparable from their offline selves. Students on the opposite end of the spectrum indicated that their notions of selfhood were barely digitized at all and that they could walk away from social media and digital spaces at any time with no loss of self.

Providing a range of analogies, students at one end of the spectrum described their experiences as being akin to a slide projector, and to the changing of outfits (including coats, hats, and masks). For these students, their posts to social media were representations of themselves. Sometimes these representations would be distorted through filtering, and sometimes they required students to tailor their representations to their intended audiences. Students who provided these analogies indicated that social media were not an important site for their self-construction. They could walk away from

social media at any point, and although they may miss the communication, connections, and information sharing affordances of the technology, it would hold little consequence for their sense of self. Students did, however, demonstrate the navigation of multiple digital identities. These identities, although not functioning on the deeper ontological level of selfhood, did demonstrate aspects of what Côté (2005) referred to as fluid identities and contextual allegiances. Students had to navigate issues of audience and context, changing representations appropriately. This was evident in the idea of social media requiring one to “change outfits” to suit the platform and audience.

Towards the middle of the integration spectrum, one student provided the analogy of parallel tracks, where the online and offline spaces run in parallel. In this analogy, these tracks influence each other, but the spaces remain largely separate. The participant noted, however, that the boundaries between these tracks were increasingly blurry, perhaps indicating aspects of what boyd (2014) termed as “context collapse.” Another student described an evolved form of the outfit analogy, likening themselves to chameleons that change color to fit with the audience and context in which they find themselves. Gergen (2000) similarly used a chameleon analogy in discussing a pastiche personality, where one exists as a “social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation” (p.150). These students in the middle of the integration spectrum represented selfhood as something that spanned physical and digital contexts and one in which the boundaries between those two contexts were increasingly difficult to maintain. For these students, walking away from social media would have more deep

impacts on their sense of self. Digital identities were evolved from mere representations into something more central to the students' conceptualizations of themselves.

At the other end of the spectrum, students exhibiting a high degree of integration with technology provided the analogies of an octopus and of the horcruxes from Harry Potter (Rowling, 2005). These analogies differed from others in that they were of a part-whole form. Digital identities were a part of the whole of selfhood and could not as easily be separated. Digital and social environments and students' identities and actions in these spaces were important to how the students understood themselves. These environments were so important, that it would be difficult for students to remove themselves from these sites without a deeper loss of self. It was these students that provided portraits of selfhood that most aligned with those hypothesized by postmodern theorists. The self is "relational" and, as Gergen (2009) asserts, "the assumption of an internal or mental world invites alienation, loneliness, distrust, hierarchy, competition, and self-doubt; favored is a society in which people become commodities and relationships are devalued" (p. 61). For students presenting these analogies, concepts of online versus offline, internal versus external, and my mind versus other minds, are constraining.

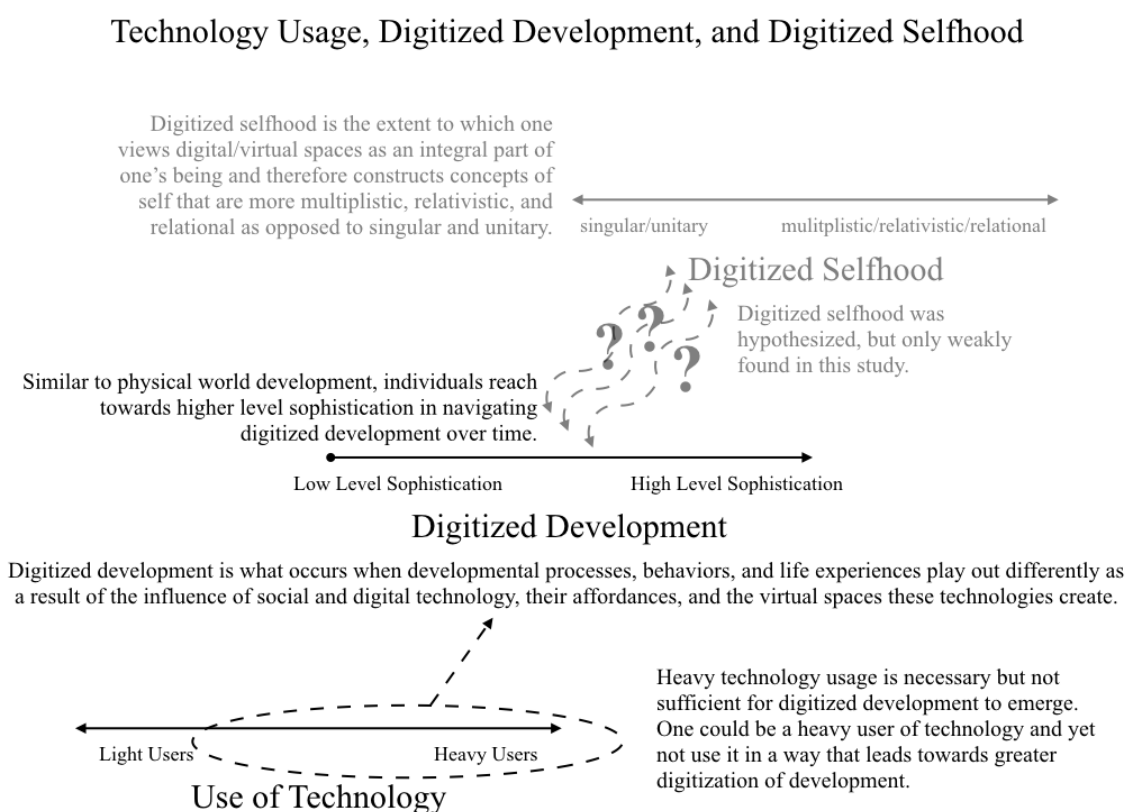
Digitized selfhood is important because it moves towards the multiple, dispersed, saturated, and relational self that was hypothesized by Gergen (2011) and others. Social and digital media hold the promise of moving "beyond the body" where human meaning making is created through "co-action" and in relationship (Gergen, 2011). In this sense, entirely new conceptualizations of selfhood and identity become possible. Although this reality may have existed prior to the advent of digital and social media, it is surfaced and

more easily discovered when humans become unbounded as a result of their relationship with technology. These conceptualizations of digitized selfhood also hint at fifth order consciousness, a postmodern developmental stage described by Robert Kegan (1994). Fifth order individuals are able to reach towards meta-understandings of context and relationship-systems and they understand the differences and similarities between these complex webs of meaning (Kegan, 1994). Because these notions of selfhood were still emerging amongst the participants in this study, and given the participants' relative age and maturity, it is difficult to solidly identify fifth-order behaviors. The student analogy that comes closest to this theorization is that of the horcruxes from Harry Potter. Under this analogy, identities are able to be dispersed, "held" by others, and possess different meanings in context. Although this research did not firmly establish fifth order consciousness, the data provide hints as to how social and digital media may play into these constructions in the future.

**Summary.** Overall this study was successful in surfacing how social and digital technologies resulted in dispersed identities, representations, and contextual and relational-based constructions. Learning to navigate these identities was an important part in the developmental and educational process for college students. Furthermore, as outlined in Figure 3, this research uncovered relationships between technology usage and digitized development. In order for digitized development to emerge, an individual must first integrate technology into their lives at a more fundamental level that goes beyond the use of technology as a mere tool. The heavy usage of technology is necessary, but not sufficient for concepts of digitized development to emerge. When digitized development did emerge in this study, it appeared in students who began a journey towards a more

sophisticated worldview about how digital and physical worlds operate and how they interact with one another. Students reaching towards higher levels of sophistication in navigating digitized development had a more complex understanding and appreciation of the affordances of social and digital technologies and exhibited more complex conceptualizations of issues related to context, audience, and relationships.

Figure 3



From this group, there were some participants that began to view selfhood, itself, as increasingly digitized. More digitized conceptualizations of selfhood revealed notions of a self that were more relational, more relativistic, and more dispersed—spanning digital and physical world contexts. Although this study did not reveal conceptualizations of relational and saturated selfhood that functioned at a deeper

ontological level, it did demonstrate that the complexities of online life require a re-examination or at least an appreciation for the reapplication of developmental theories in ways that account for an increasingly digitized sense of self.

Given that trends indicate that human beings will increasingly use digital and social media technologies, it is possible that more students will indicate that digital and social technologies and environments are more intimately tied to their senses of self and represent important areas of self-construction. It is also possible that digital and social technologies, and their ability to emancipate human beings from physical world constraints, could aid in the development of higher orders of human consciousness—postmodern identities that are more contextual and relational. Although this study was not conclusive in validating these trends, it does provide initial research in this area from which further studies can provide a more complete picture. As technology evolves, so do human beings.

**Limitations.** As noted in the chapter on methodology, this study was undertaken with some acknowledged limitations. Given that it is a qualitative study including a relatively small group of student participants, the results presented here have been generalized to theory and this theory is not necessarily transferable to all college students fitting or outside of the sample demographics. Although these concepts may be transferable, further research is required to reach a broader consensus. Additionally, given the homogeneity across specific demographic factors present within the sample, future researchers should take note that different subpopulations may be experiencing and using digital and social technologies differently. As this study is part of an emerging line of research, replicating it with different student populations would be beneficial.

Furthermore, to provide a more complete picture of students' developmental journeys, an expanded study spanning pre- and post-college years could provide a more full understanding.

An additional limitation of the sample was its focus on heavy users of social and digital technology. This selection was intentional as the research attempted to project a forward-looking stance. As rates of technological adoption show no signs of abating, the students in this study were at a more extreme end of the technology usage spectrum and therefore may be more indicative of where society is heading as opposed to where it is currently. The rapid pace of technological change is itself a limitation in this study as nearly as soon as it is published, new technologies may be emergent with new affordances and rising generations of college students may be using it and conceptualizing of it differently. It is for this reason that research into digital and social technology is both exciting and difficult to conduct.

### **Implications for Practice**

A number of implications for practice arose out of this study. Presented in the prior chapter and summarized here, these implications highlighted the need to be good partners with students in their educational and developmental journeys with digital and social media. In particular, it is important for college student educators to help educate students about their digital identities and the ramifications and impacts of these identities. Furthermore, educators need to help students navigate the new complexities of digitized development in the virtual and social spaces created by technology.

In helping educate students about their digital identities, it became evident in this study of the continued need to educate students about the rules of digital reputation.

Digital reputation is how others view and make judgments about someone based on how they present and what they post to social media. This is of particular importance to graduating students who are entering the workforce and seeking jobs. As addressed in the 2015 book, *What Happens On Campus Stays On YouTube*, by Erik Qualman and contributing authors, there are rules that can be taught to students about digital reputation. These rules govern how to appropriately conduct oneself online so as to minimize potential negative effects in the future. As students develop, these rules, which may at first be taken as immutable truths, began to become more contextual and nuanced. College student educators should encourage this behavior by both teaching the rules and providing space for students to explore and own the rules on their own terms. Additionally, educators should be mindful of presenting educational interventions on digital reputation with a balanced approach as opposed to one that motivates from a place of fear or shame.

As a part of this process, students should also be encouraged to engage in reflection about their social media use and behaviors. As mentioned in the previous section, students struggled with issues of self-esteem and self-worth resulting in their participation in gamesmanship behaviors and competition online to portray perfected images and idealized lives. Engaging in reflection about social media use and one's goals in being on social media is something that few students explicitly took the time to do. Although many students naturally began to reflect on this as they moved from developmental periods of external to internal definition, encouraging and providing space for this reflection may help students move through it in a more orderly way while also minimizing some of the negative impacts of competition online.

Alongside reflection, the notion of taking a break from or pausing one's social media use for a defined period of time is also useful for students working through these developmental issues. Almost all participants reported that they engaged in this type of moratorium at some point in their collegiate experience. This pause allowed students to reset their relationship with social media and encouraged the type of reflection advocated here. College student educators can design interventions that couple social media moratoriums with reflection to potential great effect. These interventions should also include the opportunity to discuss issues of reputation and explore concepts of what it means to be genuine and authentic online and how to show vulnerability. Students frequently mentioned these concepts in this study. Participants desired to be authentic and genuine online, presenting themselves as they are and not how they perceive others want them to be. Students also struggled with issues of showing vulnerability online when attempting to be genuine and authentic in their interactions and posts. College student educators, who have encountered these issues before in the offline space, can aid students in this process.

Working in partnership with students and being good partners is key to how college student educators can be most effective in helping students understand, use, and make sense of technology at a critical time in their development. Although authors such as Baxter Magolda and King (2004) have long called for these types of partnerships, when it comes to technological change, these partnerships become even more critical. Technology is omnipresent and changing so rapidly, educators and students must come together to make sense of it. Together, educators and students must cross what Prensky (2001) noted as the digital divide and be conscious of what Junco (2014) termed adult-

normative and youth-normative perspectives. Students use and experience technology differently, and behaviors may be divergent based on one's own levels of immersion, development, and experience. Navigating and making sense of technology should be a group effort attempting to figure out where technology fits into our lives and how we can use it to achieve desired ends.

The partnership between educators and students also requires that educators learn about and stay current with trends in technology and how college students are using this technology. As addressed in the recently revised *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Professionals* (2015), it is incumbent upon educators to constantly refresh their knowledge on these topics. In this process, students can be educational partners in educating the educators. As students in this study noted, they need and desire this partnership and are best suited to help educators understand the technology. This powerful partnership holds the promise of combining the life wisdom of adult educators with the technological savvy of students heavily engaging on social and digital technology.

### **A Future Research Agenda**

The experience of college students is changing as a result of technological use in ways that are not yet fully appreciated. A number of researchers have already contributed to an understanding of the impact of these mediums on contemporary college students, yet more is needed. Reynol Junco, through his numerous quantitative research studies and his 2014 work, *Engaging students through social media: Evidence-based practices for use in student affairs*, has set the stage for much of this research. Danah boyd (2014) and Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) conducted in depth

qualitative studies, on adolescents and college students respectively, that provided broad portraits and insights into the life of emerging adults online. Furthermore, recent doctoral graduates, such as Josie Ahlquist (2015), Adam Gismondi (2015), and Paul Eaton (2015) have all contributed to knowledge in this area through their own areas of expertise.

Building off this prior research and expanding on the present study, there are a number of areas that represent fertile ground for further inquiry. In particular, this study aimed to surface the experiences of contemporary traditionally-aged college students and their developmental experiences online. During the course of this research, it became evident that in order to provide a more robust portrait of this journey, research is needed across the age-based spectrum. This portrait should include the experiences of adolescents, as researched by danah boyd (2014), through emerging adulthood and into the later stages of life. By researching this more broadly defined spectrum, a better appreciation can be gained for how social media use and the conceptualization of identity and selfhood may evolve over the course of a student's life. Repeating aspects of this study for different age groups would provide the opportunity to compare and contrast these experiences. Furthermore, expanding this study into a longitudinal one, perhaps following up with participants at defined points in their post-graduation life could illuminate changes in patterns of behavior.

In addition to looking across a broad cross-section of age groups, this study highlighted the need to research traditional aged college students' trajectories from pre-college to post college, and all years in-between. Students in this study, primarily third and fourth year students, reflected on their early college careers and the change they experienced over time. Examining this evolution by expanding the study to include first

and second year participants as well as subjects in their pre- and post-college years could provide a more complete understanding of student's developmental change over time. In particular, it may allow for more robust testing, application, and potential reconstruction of traditional theories of development as they are instantiated in the online space.

More specifically in relation to the findings of this study, further research needs to focus on the aspects of digital identity and presentation of self that lead to comparison and competition online. Students in this study described how they would often fall prey to keeping up positive appearances online. Furthermore students reported that this impulse negatively impacted their self-esteem and satisfaction both with college and life in general. More probing of this phenomenon and its effect on students is needed to help college student educators and mental health professionals who may be working with these students in the future.

One of the acknowledged limitations of this study was the broad way in which it looked at college student conceptualizations of selfhood and identity that, although it noted demographic differences, did not focus on these as a specific unit of analysis. An aim of this study was to provide broad-based research to enable others to dig more deeply into how student subpopulations may be experiencing social and digital technologies. The concepts that surfaced here, although subject to limitations, were intended to provide a touch point for future research.

There was evidence in this study that students of different demographic groups experienced identity presentation differently. In particular, one student who identified as a gay male described how his not being out to his parents complicated his identity presentation online. He also described the online space as an important place for identity

exploration. This is congruent with the research of Martínez Alemán and Lynk Wartman (2009) who found differences in identity presentation along gender and racial lines. Digital and social media are important sites for the exploration of these identities. Given the ability of virtual spaces to allow for the anonymous and pseudo-anonymous presentation of identity, they represent fertile ground for this type of exploration and play. Future research can focus more squarely on specific sub-populations that may provide further context that the present study could not hope to address.

Finally, given the rapid pace of technological change, studies such as the one presented here need to be frequently replicated. One of the premises nested in this research was that technology is causing human beings to evolve and subsequently it is opening up new avenues for action and agency. Repeated study of these topics is necessary as any research undertaken in this area represents a mere snapshot associated with a rapidly moving target. Future research could aim to replicate this study and look for changes over time as technology continues to evolve.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to understand how contemporary college students conceptualize identity and construct selfhood online throughout their use of digital and social media. Although more complex forms of a new selfhood were not found, the findings did uncover social media as important sites for student identity construction and exploration. This study also uncovered the rules of the hidden game college students participate in when on social media, consisting of portraying perfected images, accumulating social media Likes and engagements, and both seeing and being seen by others. The effects of this game had a profound influence on how the college students in this study constructed

their digital identities and portrayed themselves online. Students reported that moving from external definition to internal definition, and thereby owning social media as opposed to being owned by it, was an important part of their digital identity development. These developmental patterns played out in different ways online, yet they largely followed the same trajectory as what may traditionally occur offline.

In terms of overall selfhood construction and its conceptualization, students provided a number of ranged analogies that revealed varying degrees of integration with technology and the varying degrees in which virtual spaces have become important aspects of how they understand themselves. These analogies stopped short of demonstrating entirely new conceptualizations of self, but hinted at the potential of developing conceptualizations of postmodern selfhood. Research must continue to probe how the new affordances provided by technology may be providing new spaces for human development to be expressed and the emergence of postmodern developmental patterns.

Overall, this study indicates that social and digital environments represent important spaces for college student learning and development. There is no doubt technology will continue to exert an outsize influence on emerging adults into the foreseeable future. As college student educators begin to research and understand the impacts of digital and social technology on students better, practice must evolve to keep pace with technological change. Educators can be important partners with students in this educational process. The line between teacher and student is blurred and both partners must learn to navigate the online world simultaneously—simultaneously making mistakes, learning, growing, and evolving.

## References

- American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (2015). *ACPA/ NASPA professional competency areas for student affairs practitioners (2nd ed.)*. Washington, DC: Authors.
- Ahlquist, Josie. (2015). Developing digital student leaders: A mixed methods study of student leadership, identity and decision making on social media (Doctoral dissertation). California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). (1998, June). *Powerful partnerships: A shared responsibility for learning. A joint report*. Washington, DC: Authors.
- American College Personnel Association (ACPA). (1996). *The student learning imperative: Implications for student affairs*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Alexander, B. (2006, March/April). Web 2.0: A New wave of innovation for teaching and learning. *EDUCAUSE Review*, 41(2), 33-44.
- Amichai-Hamburger, Y., & Vinitzky, G. (2010). Social network use and personality. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26, 1289–1295.
- Anfara, V. A., Brown, K. M., & Mangione, T. L. (2002, October). Qualitative analysis on stage: Making the research process more public. *Educational Researcher*, 17(7), 28-38. doi: 10.3102/0013189X031007028
- Arnett, J. J. (2005). Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the new way of coming of age. In J. J. Arnett & J. L. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 85-116). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Asselin, M., & Moayeri, M. (2011, June). The Participatory classroom: Web 2.0 in the classroom. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 34(2), 1-7.
- Baudrillard, J. (1995). *Simulacra and simulation*. (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981).
- Baudrillard, J. (2012). *The ecstasy of communication*. (B. Schutze, & C. Schutze, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work published 1987).
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1999). *Creating contexts for learning and self-authorship: Constructive-developmental pedagogy*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). Evolution of a constructivist conceptualization of epistemological reflection. *Educational Psychologist*, 29(1), 31-42.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B., & King, P. (2004). *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Birnbaum, M. (2013). The fronts students use: Facebook and the standardization of self presentations. *Journal of College Student Development*, 54(2), 155-171.
- Boland, H.G. (2005). Whatever happened to postmodernism in higher education? No requiem in the new Millennium. *The Journal of higher education*, 76(2), 121-150.
- Bower, M., Hedberg, J. G., Kuswara, A. (2010, September). A framework for Web 2.0 learning design. *Educational Media International*, 47(3), 177-198. doi: 10.1080/09523987.2010.518811
- boyd, danah. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klinger, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 71(2), 195-207.
- Brenner, J. (2013, August 5). *Pew Internet: Social networking (full detail)*. Retrieved from the Pew Research Center website:  
<http://pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/March/Pew-Internet-Social-Networking-full-detail.aspx>
- Brenner, J., & Smith, A. (2013, August 5). *72% of online adults are social networking site users*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center website:  
<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/social-networking-sites.aspx>
- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Bull, G., Thompson, A., Searson, M., Garofalo, J., Park, J., Young, C., & Lee, J. (2008). Connecting informal and formal learning: Experiences in the age of participatory media. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 8(2), 100-107.
- Burnett, C., & Mechant, G. (2011, May). Is there a space for critical literacy in the context of social media. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 10(1), 41-57.
- Cabellon, E. T., Junco, R. (2015). *The digital age of student affairs*. In E. J. Whitt & J. H. Schuh (Eds.), 1997-2014, glancing back, looking forward. New Directions for

- Student Services, Issue 151 (pp. 49-61). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. doi: 10.1002/ss
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chen, B., & Marcus, J. (2012). Students' self presentation on Facebook: An examination of personality and self-construal factors. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 2091-2099.
- Cherry, A. L., Jr. (2000). *A research primer*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thompson.
- Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- comScore. (2014). The U.S. mobile app report. Retrieved from <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Presentations-and-Whitepapers/2014/The-US-Mobile-App-Report>
- Côté, J. E. (2000). *Arrested adulthood: The changing nature of maturity and identity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Côté, J. E. (2005). Emerging adulthood as an institutionalized moratorium: Risks and benefits to identity formation. In J. J. Arnett & J. L. Tanner (Eds.), *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century* (pp. 85-116). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Plano Clark, V. L., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selection and Implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 236-264.
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000, Summer). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into practice*, 39(4), 124-130.
- Dahlstrom, E., Walker, J. D., & Dziuban, C. (2013). *The ECAR study of undergraduate students and information technology, 2013*. Retrieved from EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research Website: <https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERS1302/ERS1302.pdf>
- Dalton, J. C., & Crosby P. C. (2013, February). Digital identity: How social media are influencing student learning and development in college. *Journal of College and Character*, 14(1), 1-4. doi:10.1515/jcc-2013-0001
- Dash, A. (2002, November 13). *Introducing the microcontent client*. Retrieved from <http://dashes.com/anil/2002/11/introducing-microcontent-client.html>
- DeAndrea, D. C., Ellison, N. B., LaRose, R., Steinfield, C., & Fiore, A. (2012). Serious social media: On the use of social media for improving students' adjustment to

- college. *Internet and Higher Education*, 15, 15-23.  
doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2011.05.009
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DiNucci, D. (1999, July). Fragmented future. *Print*, 53(4), 32, 221-222.
- Downes, S. (2005, October). E-learning 2.0. *eLearn Magazine*, 10, 1-6. doi: 10.1145/1104966.1104968
- Duggan, M., & Brenner, J. (2013, February 14). *The demographics of social media users—2012*. Retrieved from the Pew Research Center website:  
[http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP\\_SocialMediaUsers.pdf](http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP_SocialMediaUsers.pdf)
- Duggan, M., Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A. and Madden, M. (2015, January 9). *Social media update 2014*. Retrieved from the Pew Research Center website:  
[http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/01/PI\\_SocialMediaUpdate2014.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/01/PI_SocialMediaUpdate2014.pdf)
- Eaton, Paul. (2015). #Becoming: Emergent identity of college students in the digital age examined through complexivist epistemologies (Doctoral dissertation). Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.
- Ebner, M., Lienhardt, C., Rohs, M. & Meyer, I. (2010). Microblogs in higher education—A chance to facilitate informal and process oriented learning? *Computers & Education*, 55, 92–100.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook “friends:” Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143–1168.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2011). Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices. *New Media & Society*, 13(6), 873– 892.
- Ellison, N. B., Vitak, J., Gray, R., & Lampe, C. (2014). Cultivating social resources on social network sites: Facebook relationship maintenance behaviors and their role in social capital processes. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(4), 855-870. doi: 10.1111/jcc4.12078.
- Emerald: Cutting edge technologies in higher education*. (n.d.). Retrieved from  
<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/products/books/series.htm?id=2044-9968>
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Facebook. (2007, May 24). *Facebook unveils platform for developers of social applications* [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/press/releases.php?p=3102>
- Facebook. (n.d.) *Like*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/help/452446998120360/>
- Flowers, L., Pascarella, E., Pierson, C. T. (2000). Information technology use and cognitive outcomes in the first year of college. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(6), 637-667.
- FOMO. (2015, June). In Oxford English Dictionary Online. Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67372#eid302919296>
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (1994). Interviewing: The art of science. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (1st ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gemmill, E., & Peterson, M. (2006). Technology use among college students: Implications for student affairs professionals. *NASPA Journal*, 43(2), 280-300.
- Gergen, K. J. (2000). *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Gergen, K. J. (2001). Psychological science in a postmodern context. *American Psychologist*, 56(10), 203-813.
- Gergen, K. J. (2011, January-March). The self as social construction. *Psychological Studies*, 56(1), 108-116. doi:10.1007/s12646-011-0066-1
- Gismondi, Adam. (2015). *#CivicEngagement: An exploratory study of social media use and civic engagement among undergraduates* (Doctoral dissertation). Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Glass, I. (Producer). (2015, November 27). *Status update* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/573/status-update>
- Gray, R., Vitak, J., Easton, E. W., and Ellison, N. B. (2013). Examining social adjustment to college in the age of social media: Factors influencing successful

- transitions and persistence. *Computers & Education*, 67, 193-207.  
doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2013.02.021
- Greenhow, C., & Robelia, B. (2004, June). Informal learning and identity formation in online social networks. *Learning Media and Technology*, 34(2), 119-140. doi: 10.1080/17439880902923580
- Greenhow, C., Robelia, B., & Hughes, J. E. (2009a, May). Web 2.0 and classroom research: What path should we take now. *Educational Researcher*, 38(4), 246-259. doi: 10.3102/0013189X09336671
- Greenhow, C., Robelia, B., & Hughes, J. E. (2009b, May). Research on learning and teaching with Web 2.0: Bridging conversations. *Educational Researcher*, 38(4), 246-259. doi: 10.3102/0013189X09336675
- Haenlein, M., & Kaplan, A. (2010). Users of the world unite! The Challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
- Haraway, D. (1990). A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, Technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. In L. J. Nicholson (Ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (pp. 190-233). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Haskins, C. H. (1957). *The rise of the universities*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Heiberger, G., & Harper, R. (2008). *Have you Facebooked Astin lately? Using technology to increase student involvement*. In R. Junco, & D. M. Timm (Eds.), *Using emerging technologies to enhance student engagement*. New Directions for Student Services, Issue 124 (pp. 19-35). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Henig, R. M., & Henig, S. (2013). *Twentysomething: Why do young adults seem stuck?* New York, NY: Penguin.
- Higher Education Research Institute. (2007, September). *College freshmen and online social networking sites* [HERI Research Brief]. Retrieved from <http://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/briefs/brief-091107-SocialNetworking.pdf>
- Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Williams, E. N. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 15(4), 517-571.
- Howe, J. (2006, June). The rise of crowdsourcing. *Wired Magazine*, 14(6). Retrieved from <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>
- Hughes, D. J., Rowe, M., Batey, M., and Lee, A. (2012). A tale of two sites: Twitter vs. Facebook and the personality predictors of social media usage. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 561-569. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2011.11.001
- Ito, M., Horst, H., Bittanti, M., boyd, d., Herr-Stephenson, B., Lange, P. G., Pascoe, C. J., & Robinson, L. (2008, November). *Living and learning with new media:*

*Summary of the findings from the digital youth project* [White paper]. Retrieved from <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/files/report/digitalyouth-WhitePaper.pdf>

- Jacobsen, W., & Forte, R. (2011). The Wired generation: Academic and social outcomes of electronic media use among university students. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14(5), 275-280. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2010.0135
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H., Purushota, R., Clinton, K., Weigel, M., & Robinson, A. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century* [White paper]. Retrieved from [http://digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS\\_WHITE\\_PAPER.PDF](http://digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF)
- Joosten, T. (2012). *Social media for educators: Strategies and best practices*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Judd, T. (2013). Making sense of multitasking: The role of Facebook. *Computers & Education*, 70, 194-202. doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2013.08.013
- Junco, R. (2012a). In-class multitasking and academic performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 2236–2243.
- Junco, R. (2012b). The relationship between frequency of Facebook use, participation in Facebook activities, and student engagement. *Computers & Education*, 58, 162-171. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2011.08.004
- Junco, R. (2012c). Too much face and not enough books: the relationship between multiple indices of Facebook use and academic performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 187–198.
- Junco, R. (2013). Inequalities in Facebook use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 2328-2336. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2013.05.005
- Junco, R. (2014). *Engaging students through social media: Evidence-based practices for use in student affairs*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.
- Junco, R., & Cotton, S. R. (2012). No A 4 U: the relationship between multitasking and academic performance. *Computers & Education*, 59, 505–514.
- Junco, R., Elavsky, C. M., & Heiberger, G. (2013). Putting twitter to the test: Assessing outcomes for student collaboration, engagement and success. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(2), 273-287. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01284.x

- Junco, R., Heiberger, G., & Loken, E. (2011). The Effect of Twitter on college student engagement and grades. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27(2), 119-132. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2010.03.024
- Junco, R., & Mastrodicasa, J. (2007). *Connecting to the net.generation*. Washington, DC: NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
- Kamenetz, A. (2010). *DIY U: Edupunks, edupeneurs, and the coming transformation of higher education*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti. (2014, March). What's different about social media networks? A framework and research agenda. *MIS Quarterly*, 38(1), 275-304.
- Karpinski, A. C., Kirschner, P. A., Ozer, I., Mellott, J. A., & Ochwo, P. (2013). An exploration of social networking site use, multitasking, and academic performance among United States and European university students. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 1182-1192. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2012.10.011
- Keeling, R.P. (Ed). (2004). *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*. Washington D.C.: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and American College Personnel Association (ACPA).
- Keeling, R.P. (Ed). (2006). *Learning Reconsidered 2: Implementing a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*. Washington D.C.: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I), Association of College Unions International (ACUI), National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) and National Intramural-Recreation Sports Association (NIRSA).
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). Critical media is not an option. *Learning Inquiry*, 1(1), 59-69. doi:10.1007/s11519-007-0004-2
- Khalaf, S. (2013, April 3). Flurry five-year report: It's an app world. The Web just lives in it. Retrieved from <http://www.flurry.com/bid/95723/Flurry-Five-Year-Report-It-s-an-App-World-The-Web-Just-Lives-in-It>
- Kim, Y., & Khang, H. (2014). Revisiting civic voluntarism predictors of college students' political participation in the context of social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 36, 114-121.
- King, P. (1978). *William Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development*. In L. Knefelkamp, C. Widick and C. A. Parker (Eds.), *New Directions for Student Services*, Issue 4 (pp. 35-51). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

doi: 10.1002/ss.37119780405

- Kirschner, P.A., & Karpinski, A. C. (2010). Facebook and academic performance. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(6), 1237-1245. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2010.03.024
- Kolek, E. A., & Saunders, D. (2008). Online disclosure: An Empirical examination of undergraduate Facebook profiles. *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 1-25.
- Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., & Associates. (1991). *Involving colleges: Successful approaches to fostering student learning and personal development outside the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kurkela, L. (2011, May). Systemic approach to learning paradigms and the use of social media in higher education. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 6(51), 12-20. doi:10.3991/ijet.v6i51.1616
- Kurzweil, R. (2005). *The singularity is near: When humans transcend biology*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Lanthier, R. P., & Windham, R. C. (2004). Internet use and college adjustment: the moderating role of gender. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 20, 591-606. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2003.11.003
- LaRose, R., Kim, J. H., & Peng, W. (2010). Social networking: addictive, compulsive, problematic, or just another media habit? In Z. Pappacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity community, and culture on social network sites* (pp. 59–81). NY: Routledge.
- Lin, M. G., Hoffman, E. S., & Borengasser, C. (2013, March/April). Is social media too social for class? A case study of twitter use. *TechTrends*, 57(2), 39-45.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Majchrzak, A. (2009, March). Comment: Where is the theory in wikis? *MIS Quarterly*, 33(1), 18-20.
- Malaney, G. D. (2005). Student use of the internet. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 33(1), 53-66.
- Manago, A. M., Taylor, T., & Greenfield, P. M. (2012). Me and my 400 friends: The anatomy of college students' Facebook networks, their communication patterns, and well-being. *Developmental Psychology*, 48(2), 369– 380.

- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, 551-558.
- Martínez Alemán, A. M., & Lynk Wartman, K. (2009). *Online social networking on campus: Understanding what matters in student culture*. New York: Routledge.
- McHaney, R. (2011). *The New digital shoreline: How Web 2.0 and millenials are revolutionizing higher education*. Sterling VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Science Foundation. (2006). *Informal science education program solicitation (NSF 06-520)*. Retrieved from [www.nsf.gov/pubs/2006/nsf06520/nsf06520.htm](http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2006/nsf06520/nsf06520.htm)
- Nielson, J. (1998, September 6). *Microcontent: How to write headlines, page titles, and subject lines*. Retrieved from <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/980906.html>
- O'Reilly, T. (2005, September 30). *What is Web 2.0: Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software*. Retrieved from <http://oreilly.com/Web2/archive/what-is-Web-20.html>
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2007). *Participative Web and user-created content: Web 2.0, wikis, and social networking*. Paris: Author.
- Parks, S. D. (2000). *Big questions, worthy dreams: Mentoring young adults in their search for meaning, purpose, and faith*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Pasek, J., more, e, & Hargittai, E. (2009). Facebook and academic performance: reconciling a media sensation with data. *First Monday*, 14(5). Retrieved from <http://www.firstmonday.dk/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2498/2181>
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pempek, T. A., Yermolayeva, Y. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2009). College students' social networking experiences on Facebook. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 30, 227-238.
- Pew Internet Project. (2014). *Internet user demographics*. Retrieved from the Pew Research Center website: <http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/internet-use/latest-stats/>
- Prensky, M. (2001, September/October). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-5. doi: 10.1108/10748120110424816
- Qualman, E. (2015). *What happens on campus stays on YouTube*. Equalman Studios: Cambridge, MA.

- Robins, A., & Wilner, A. (2001). *Quarterlife crisis: The unique challenges of life in your twenties*. New York, NY: Putnam.
- Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Ross, C., Orr, E. S., Sisic, M., Arseneault, J. M., Simmering, M. G., & Orr, R. R. (2009). Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25(2), 578–586.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rowling, J. K. (2005). *Harry Potter and the half blood prince*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Ryan, T., & Xenos, S. (2011). Who uses Facebook? An investigation into the relationship between the Big Five, shyness, narcissism, loneliness, and Facebook usage. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(5), 1658–1664.
- Rucker, R., Sirius, R. U., & Mu, Q. (1992). *MONDO 2000: A user's guide to the new edge*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Seaman, J., & Tinti-Kane, H. (2013, October). *Social media for teaching and learning*. Retrieved from the Pearson website:  
<http://www.pearsonlearningsolutions.com/assets/downloads/reports/social-media-for-teaching-and-learning-2013-report.pdf>
- Seider, S., & Gardner, H. (2009, April). The fragmented generation. *Journal of College & Character*, 10(4), 1-4.
- Selwyn, N. (2007). *Web 2.0 applications as alternative environments for informal learning — A critical review*. Paper presented at the OECD CERI- KERIS International Expert Meeting on ICT and educational performance, Cheju Island, South Korea. Retrieved from the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development website: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/39458556.pdf>
- Schroeder, A., Minocha, S. & Schneider, C. (2010). The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of using social software in higher and further education teaching and learning. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 26(3), 159–174.
- Sheldon, P. (2013). Voices that cannot be heard: Can shyness explain how we communicate on Facebook versus face-to-face? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 1402-1407. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2013.01.016

- Shirky, C. (2005). Ontology is overrated: Categories, links and tags. *Clay Shirky's Writings About the Internet*. Retrieved from:  
[http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology\\_overrated.html](http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology_overrated.html)
- Siemens, G. (2004, December 12). *Connectivism: A Learning theory for the digital age*. Retrieved from <http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm>
- Silius, K., Kailanto, M., & Tevakari, A. (2011, September). Evaluating the quality of social media in an educational context. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 6(3), 21-27.
- Skues, J. L., Williams, B., & Wise, L. (2012). The effects of personality traits, self-esteem, loneliness, and narcissism on Facebook use among university students. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 2414-2419.  
doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2012.07.012
- Smith, A., Rainie, L., Zickuhr, K. (2011, July 19). *College students and technology*. Retrieved from Pew Research Center website:  
<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/College-students-and-technology/Report.aspx>
- Smith, M.B. (1994, May). Selfhood at risk: Postmodern perils and the perils of postmodernism. *American Psychologist*, 49(5), 405-411.
- Smith, S. D., & Borrenson Caruso, J. (2010). *The ECAR study of undergraduate students and information technology, 2010*. Retrieved from EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research Website:  
<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERS1006/RS/ERS1006W.pdf>
- Steinfeld, C., Ellison, N. B., & Lampe, C. (2008). Social capital, self-esteem, and use of online social network sites: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29, 434-445.
- Stoller, E. (2012, September 12). Digital identity development [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/student-affairs-and-technology/digital-identity-development>
- Stoller, E. (2013, February). Our Shared Future: Social Media, Leadership, Vulnerability, and Digital Identity. *Journal of College and Character*, 14(1), 5-10. doi:10.1515/jcc-2013-0002
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, W., & Howe, N. (2000). *Millenials rising: The next great generation*. New York, NY: Vintage.

- Turkle, S. (1984). *The second self: Computers and the human spirit*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Turkle, S. (2004, January 30). How computers change the way we think. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Computers-Change-the-Way/10192/>
- Turkle, S. (2012). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books.
- Valenzuela, S., Park, N., & Kee, K. F. (2009). Is there social capital in a social network site? Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14, 875–901.
- Vander Wall, T. (2007, February 2). *Folksonomy coinage and definition*. Retrieved from <http://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html>
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Ontario, Canada: University of Western Ontario.
- Veen, W., & Vrakking, B. (2006). *Homo zappiens: Growing up in a digital age*. London: Network Continuum Education.
- Vinge, V. (1993). *The coming technological singularity: How to survive in the post-human era*. Paper presented at the VISION-21 Symposium. Retrieved from <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/vinge/misc/singularity.html>
- Vitak, J., Zube, P., Smock, A., Carr, C. T., Ellison, N., & Lampe, C. (2011). It's complicated: Facebook users' political participation in the 2008 election. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 14(3), 107-114.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The Development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language* (A. Kozulin, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). *The historical meaning of the crisis in psychology: A methodological explanation* (R. Van Der Veer, Trans.). Retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/crisis/index.htm>
- Wang, Z., & Tchernev, J. (2012). The “myth” of media multitasking: Reciprocal dynamics of media multitasking, personal needs, and gratifications. *Journal of Communication*, 62(3), 493-513. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1460->

2466.2012.01641.x.

- Wang, Z., Tchernev, J. M., Solloway, T. (2012). A dynamic longitudinal examination of social media use, needs, and gratifications among college students. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 1829-1839. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2012.05.001
- Wankel, L. A., & Wankel, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Higher education administration with social media*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Wankel, L. A., & Wankel, C. (Eds.). (2012). *Misbehavior online in higher education*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Web 2.0 Conference*. (2004, June 2). Retrieved from <http://Web.archive.org/Web/20040602111547/http://Web2con.com/>
- Windschitl, M. (1998). The WWW and classroom research: What path should we take? *Educational Researcher*, 27(1), 28–33. doi:10.3102/0013189X027001028
- Woodard, D. B., Jr., Love, P., & Komives, S. R. (Eds.). (2000). *Leadership and management issues for a new century*. New Directions for Student Services, No. 92. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Yang, C., & Brown, B. B. (2013). Motives for using Facebook, patterns of Facebook activities, and late adolescents' social adjustment to college. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 42(3), 403– 416.
- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S. and Martin, J. (2008). Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 1816-1836. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2008.02.012

### Appendix A: Interview Survey

Below you find a list of frequently used social and digital technologies, networks and applications. Please indicate which of these you use and how frequently you use each. If you use a site or application that is not listed, please include it in the blank spaces provided. Feel free to ask any questions as you complete this survey. We will also review this at the start of the interview. Thank you.

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_ Year in College (circle one): 1 2 3 4 5+

Have you taken formal college coursework in social and/or digital media? \_\_\_\_\_  
If so what were the titles of the course? \_\_\_\_\_

#### Social Media Networks

	Multiple times a day	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Infrequently	Not Used
Facebook						
Twitter						
Pintrest						
Instagram						
LinkedIn						
Snapchat						

#### Collaboration Tools

	Multiple times a day	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Infrequently	Not Used
GoogleDocs						
Wikis						

#### Content Creation Tools

(Please indicate the extent to which you use these tools to create and share your own content, do not passive consumption activities such as reading/viewing.)

	Multiple times a day	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Infrequently	Not Used
Blogging						
YouTube/Video						

## Appendix B: Interview 1 Protocol

*The purpose of this research is to better understand how you understand yourself in different contexts, particularly the relationship between your online lives and offline lives and how you make sense of them.*

*In this interview I will ask you a series of questions about the contexts you inhabit. Broadly speaking, contexts are the spaces in which you act and interact with others. For instance, Facebook may be considered one context. Instagram could be another. The physical world can have contexts too. For instance, your life at school may be one context. Within this context, you might even have sub-contexts such as an athletic team, in the classroom, or as a part of a student organization.*

*I want to understand how you view your sense of self in and across these contexts. By self I mean the broad abstract understanding of how you hold everything together and how you understand things as in relation to you, rather than the particular identities, qualities or features which make you up. (Although these may influence how you understand yourself.) This concept of self may be difficult to describe or understand, but through these questions I will help guide you towards exploring this.*

*First I want to establish some baseline information and understanding about what kinds of technologies you interact with on the Web today. You completed the brief survey about your Web usage and I'd like to review that with you.*

1. How often, when and where do you access social media applications during your daily routine?

[Repeat for each site listed.]

2. When did you create an account on this site?
3. Can you tell me more about this site and how you use it?
4. How do you primarily access this site? Via mobile or on a desktop?
5. Who do you follow on this site?
6. Do you use your real name on the site or a fake name?
  - a. Why?
7. Do you have your profile set to public or private? OR What level of privacy settings do you have?
  - a. Why?
8. Do you maintain more than one account on any of these sites?
  - a. If yes—Why do you do this?
9. Have you ever “taken a break from” social media or deactivated an account?
  - a. If yes—Why did you do this?
  - b. If no—Have you hear of others doing this? Why do you think they would want to?

*I'd like to transition now and talk about your self and your life on social media.*

1. If someone were to describe you, based off of only what they see and interact with on social media, how would they describe you on [insert social media platform]?
  - a. Why would they describe you this way?
  - b. Do you actively work to create this perception? Why/why not?
  - c. Who are your audiences?
2. If I were to place all of your accounts side-by-side, would I be able to tell you are the same person or might I think they are from different people? And Why?
3. Do you think you're the same person on different sites?
  - a. How are you the same or different?
4. Do you think you're the same person online and off?
  - a. How are you the same or different?

Thinking about how you mentally manage all of these contexts and your different perceived selves on these sites...

1. How do you "hold it all together?" How do you make sense of it?
2. Who is the real you? Is there one real you?
3. If you were to give an analogy for how you understand your self or selves on social media and online and off, what analogy would you give?

SNOWBALL SAMPLING QUESTION:

Do you know of any students that you think would be a good fit for this study? Would you feel comfortable referring them to me?

PSUEDONYM QUESTION:

I will not be using your real name in the final written product. What name would you like me to use for you?

Back up Q's:

1. Do you intentionally post or not post things in order to shape others' perceptions of you?
  - a. Why?
2. What have you learned about yourself as a person in using social media and web technologies?

Do you think your profile is like a job/friend interview?

## Appendix C: Observation Protocol

*Remember that the purpose of this research is to better understand how you understand yourself in different contexts, particularly the relationship between your online lives and offline lives and how you make sense of them.*

*In this observation, I want to get a sense of how you interact online and more specifically, how you switch between apps and sites on the go. In the first interview we discussed inhabiting a number of contexts. I want to know more about how your switch between these contexts and how you understand your self in these contexts.*

### [FOLLOWUP QUESTIONS BASED ON PREVIOUS INTERVIEW]

1. Is there anything you've reflected on or thought of since we last sat down together?

*Let's look at how you interact with the web. Imagine you have 10 minutes before class and you decide to check your social media accounts. Walk me through a typical session you'd have online and as you click and check items, I will ask you questions about what you do.*

### [Repeat the following for each site accessed]

1. What do you use this app/site for?
2. Who do you interact with on this app/site? What groups?
  - a. How do you know them?
3. What types of content do you post to this site?
4. What types of content do you consume on this site?
5. How would you describe yourself as a user on this social media site?
6. If you had to describe yourself on this app/site as others view you, what do you think they'd say?
7. What types of relationships do you have on this site?
  - a. Do you know all of these connections?
  - b. How do you know them?
8. How important is this site to you? In other words, if I were to take your access to it away, what would you miss, if anything?

*Now I'd like to take a step back and talk about this online session you just had and how you understand what you did and why you did it.*

1. How reflective are you about what you post on social media and how you are viewed?

2. How does it feel to “hold up a mirror” to yourself and your social media accounts?
3. Do certain apps/sites have different cultures?
  - a. How do these cultures influence how you behave?
  - b. How do these cultures influence who you are?
4. Are there different “yous” in each of these contexts? In other words, do you have different identities and selves on different sites and apps?
  - a. If I follow all of your social media accounts, would you say that I *know* you?
5. How do you keep track of and make sense of all of the different social media accounts, roles, personas and cultures you maintain?

Back up Q's:

1. What have you learned about yourself as a person in using social media and web technologies?

## Appendix D: Interview 2 Protocol

*Returning to the purpose of this research, remember I want to better understand how you understand yourself in different contexts, particularly the relationship between your online lives and offline lives and how you make sense of them.*

*In this interview I will ask you a series of questions about the contexts you inhabit. Broadly speaking, contexts are the spaces in which you act and interact with others. For instance, Facebook may be considered one context. Instagram could be another. The physical world can have contexts too. For instance, your life at school may be one context. Within this context, you might even have sub-contexts such as an athletic team, in the classroom, or as a part of a student organization.*

*I want to understand how you view your sense of self in and across these contexts. By self I mean the broad abstract understanding of how you hold everything together and how you understand things as in relation to you, rather than the particular identities, qualities or features which make you up. (Although these may influence how you understand yourself.) This concept of self may be difficult to describe or understand, but through these questions I will help guide you towards exploring this.*

### [FOLLOWUP QUESTIONS BASED ON PREVIOUS INTERVIEW]

1. Is there anything you've reflected on or thought of since we last sat down together?

*In this interview we are going to talk about how you broadly understand and define your "self."*

1. Are you reflective of your online experiences?
2. Do you think your online accounts are a reflection of who you are? Your "self"?
3. Who are you? How would you define your "self" or your understanding of who you are?

*You may have described the roles you play, or the different qualities or identities you have. I want to know more about how you make sense of these, whether they are the same or different in different contexts, and how you manage all of these aspects of your self.*

1. Has anyone made assumptions about you based on your online accounts?
2. Do you have any examples of when your online life influenced or impacted your offline life or vice versa?
3. Do you think it is desirable or problematic for you to view your online and offline selves as a whole or as distinct? How so?

4. Do you think of yourself as the same or different in different contexts?
  - a. How are you the same or different in different contexts?
5. Do you think you have an online self that is different from your offline self?
  - a. How are you the same or different online and off?

*Transitioning to how you handle multiple accounts...*

6. How do you keep track of and make sense of all of the different social media accounts, roles, personas and cultures you maintain?
7. How important are these sites in maintaining your relationships, both online and offline?

*On any given day, you may interact with a number of individuals in different contexts. You might interact with them in the classroom, in an informal conversation, or online via Twitter, through Facebook or Instagram.*

1. How do you think others view you in these contexts? In other words, who are you in these contexts?
2. Are you the same or a different person in these contexts? How so?

*Finally, unlike previous generations who didn't have access to this technology, you are learning about yourself in new ways.*

1. What have you learned about yourself as a person in using social media and web technologies?
2. If you were to project where social media are going in the future... how would you describe what it would look like?
3. One of the audiences for this paper is college administrators. If you had to give advice to these people on how to work with college students on social media or what they should teach college students about social media, what would advice would you give?
4. Returning to my research question. I want to know about how you come to an understanding of yourself, who you are, how you understand who you are. Do you think, by engaging on social media, you have...
  - Gained something?
  - Lost something?

EMAIL FOR FUTURE FOLLOW UP?