Examination of How One’s Perceived Online Identity on Social Media Affects One’s
Perceived Real-Life Identity

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies
School of Professional Studies
Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. John S. Caputo
Under the Mentorship of Nobuya Inagaki

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

By
Kelly M. McCarty

December 2012
We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

Thesis or Project Director

Faculty Mentor

Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University
MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
Abstract

Over the past few decades, the internet has become an important aspect of people’s social lives. It has created a place where individuals can express themselves and define themselves to much more than those they live around. A whole new world has been opened for individuals to connect and remain in contact with others. This has created new environments in which to play at identity. Social identity theory states that how one perceives his or her own identity is affected by the environment and those that individual is around. Participation in social media, therefore, should have some effect on how one perceives his/her own real-life identity.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction 5
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature 8
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology 21
Chapter 4: The Study 24
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions 31
Chapter 1: Introduction: The Problem or Goal and Definitions of Terms Used

Since the beginning, people have been looking for ways to communicate and reach others. Over the centuries, communication technologies have improved, and people have been using these communication strategies to identify themselves and differentiate themselves from others. Thus, communication has been pivotal in defining identity. Since the internet has become one of the major forms of communication with others, the use of social media has become one of the main forms people use to stay in communication with friends and family.

This thesis tests the idea that perceived identity on social media online has an effect on perceived identity in real life. To determine if this is true, regular users of social media filled out surveys to assess their attitudes and perception of their identity online versus real life.

The Problem/Goal

Importance of the study

Since the advent of the internet, people have been using it to do research and to keep in communication with their friends and family. Social networking has created an environment where individuals can have an easier time communicating with and keeping up with family and friends. Social networking itself has become a staple in many people's lives, and there are some who claim that they cannot live without it. They check it religiously, and they update it with their thoughts and actions regularly. Individuals' lives have been greatly affected by these online interactions, and it would be logical to assume that they perceive their identities as presented online. However, the research done on the topic has turned up mixed results. Some studies indicate that there is no effect on individuals' perceived real life identity. Conversely, other studies insist that there is a noticeable difference. One sure answer on the effects of social media and identity thereon has on real life identity has not been found.
Statement of the problem

It seems logical to say that one's socialization online will have an effect on real life identity and how one perceives it. Social identity theory states that any socialization will have an effect on perceived identity for an individual, and that the specific role and situation will dictate what part of the individual's identity will be most prevalent (Buber, 1970; Mead, 1934).

Online social media offers more stages on which people may play their roles and assert their identities and different aspects of those identities. People may decide who they add to their social networks, what networks to join or use primarily, and they may decide what they portray and what role they may play.

Taking all this into consideration, it is plausible to assume that a person's participation in social media have an effect on his/her identity due to the interactions and participation of themselves and others on their own pages. The research on this topic, however, has turned up some interesting results. According to some of the literature, social media and one's perception of his/her own online identity does have an effect on one's own perception of real-life identity. According to others, however, social media and the perception of online identity have no effect. There is no clear consensus on whether or not there is an effect.

Definitions of Terms Used

Through the following chapters, there are several terms used. Each term is defined as follows:

Social Media: Online sites used by people to communicate with others. This includes blogs (weblogs), personal web pages, chat rooms, and social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. YouTube is also a part of social media specializing in video sharing and video journals.
Identity: This is how one perceives one's self and role in any given situation and overall. This is the idea of who the individual is and how he/she sees him/herself.

Social identity: This is one's perception of he/she is in social situations as is dictated by him/herself and the people he/she is around.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis is in five chapters. Chapter two provides the theoretical and philosophical basis that forms the framework of this study, reviews the literature on the topic, and raises the research questions. Chapter three explains the scope of the study and discusses the methodology used for collecting data. Chapter four provides the results of the study, a discussion on how the findings relate to previous research, and implications of the results in relation to the research questions. Chapter five discusses the limitations of the study, recommends further research, and summarizes the study.
Chapter 2: Review of the literature

Introduction

The question of identity is one that has puzzled many at one point or another. To complicate matters even more, the advent of social media has brought on questions of what individual identity is and what identity is being communicated through online interactions.

The internet itself creates an opportunity for many different types of online communities, which help individuals to meet people, talk with those they already know, maintain a sense of connectedness in their ever-changing lives, and provides a way for them to present themselves as they wish (Cartarescu, 2010). Social media is the main portion of the internet that allows individuals to assert and perform identity. Much of the information provided online is user generated, and many individuals tend to trust their friends over non-user generated content, such as the ranking system of search engines like Google. These social infrastructures enable people to gather information about themselves and others at an alarming speed (Mateescu, 2010). Individuals are able to use these to share their thoughts, styles, creative endeavors, etc. Their identity is performed through these tools, whether it be in message boards, chat rooms, video sites, or gaming sessions (Besley, 2011).

There are several theories already formed to help explain how identity is communicated and affected by the individual’s communications with others. Some of the major players within this are Mead and Goffman (1934; 1959), who offer exceptional explanations for the communication of identity and perception of the self. Furthermore, different types of online social media offer the individual with other options when it comes to role play.

Philosophical/Ethical Assumptions and Theoretical Basis
To begin, all communication is based upon patterns and/or sounds that people have given meaning to. Our realities are created and understood by us through these conversations and other communication we have with those we are around. How we understand things affects our actions and expectations, which would, in turn, affect our interpretations of ourselves and others (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979).

I and Thou Philosophy

Martin Buber (1970), a German philosopher, discussed the I-You view. In this philosophy, there is no “I” without the “You.” Relationships with others are paramount to this view, and through these relationships, we learn more about ourselves and others. Each individual has different experiences and is free to discuss these experiences and opinions that are formed with such experiences. This does carry with it some risk; however, these discussions and learning to identify ourselves with others requires some self-disclosure. Through this communication with others, we cultivate relationships (Buber, 1970). This study assumes that communication is essential to building relationships.

Social Interactionism Theory

Identity, as G. H. Mead posited, is something we understand through communication with other individuals. As humans, we construct meaning through social interactions. The symbols we create are understood by us as others have indicated they are; they have no value otherwise. In the same way, we use others’ interpretations and symbols to define ourselves and construct our identities. Because of this, we actually know almost nothing about the self. It is ever changing. We understand it inasmuch as we understand others’ interpretations of us and who we are (Griffin, 2009; Mead, 1913). After all, “We are not born with senses of the self.
Rather, selves arise in interaction with others. I can only experience myself in relation to others” (Shepherd, 2006, p. 24). Any stimulus bears with it a reaction, and as such, individuals act in reaction to others. These actions carry within themselves meaning because people have given meaning to them in relation to others. The gestures that are acted out help define who each individual is and who others are. Meaning only comes about in interactions with others, and the same action may have different meanings depending on who is in the audience. This interaction helps the individual to play out his/her identity, and this identity only exists in the idea of the interactions. Because of this, identity is fluid and may change in relation to the type of communication being presented and the people who are witness (Mead, 1934). In the same way, we define our selves by our group identifications, which also affect behavior and communication (Harwood, 2006). People see themselves as objects that belong to many different groups, and these groups come about, as well, by interactions with others. As people begin to see themselves as these objects, they begin to play roles (Blumer, 2004).

*Role Play and Self-Presentation*

Goffman (1959) has also studied the sociological impact on communication and identity with relation to the performance of roles. The roles people play in front of others are like theater in that the individual plays the part as he/she is supposed to, according to societal expectations, and the audience plays along. These roles differ by the setting and audience. The plays enacted are rehearsed, and the audience only sees what the actor wants the audience to see. In some instances, the work behind it is kept hidden, while in others, the work is exaggerated. In any case, it is possible for the audience to be fooled when the player acts out of his/her given role and tries another, such as the role of an aristocrat when he/she is not, in fact, a member of that social
class. These roles, however, help individuals define themselves in relation to others, and allow them to play their identity in a way that suits them best.

Turkle (1995) has conducted many studies on the effect of the internet on identity, and she admits that the internet has offered individuals with the environment needed to try out different roles. Though this predated many of the sites used today, she had found that the idea of identity has changed from the idea of it being “forged” to something that can easily be changed and played at. The idea of an online personality can change from one environment to the next, just as Goffman suggested in 1959. One individual she describes even says that you can be who you want to be online. The parts individuals play online, then, should have a very real effect on who individuals perceive themselves to be in the real world. Indeed, Aboujaoude (2011) has seen such effects. He claims that more and more people are acting in real life the way they would online instead of how they should act in face-to-face interactions. He even questions if the internet is actually allowing the human’s true instincts to return, which in turn helps to change how individuals perceive their identities both online and in real life.

The Literature

The internet offers many different settings in which one could communicate their identity and play out specific roles. Each type, such as chat rooms, social networking sites, web pages, web forums, and blogs (or weblogs), has a unique form of communication, which differ not only on what type of information may be transmitted, but also in whether or not the communication is synchronous (or in real time).

Because of the unique environments the different types of social media offer, the settings are different and encourage different roles to be represented within them. The different types
also encourage different types of people or different types of information. For example, chat rooms are usually about one specific topic and are normally synchronous. Social networking sites, however, may be synchronous or asynchronous, may be just about keeping friends and family updated about what is going on, or may be for a specific topic or to bring a specific community together. All these options give the individual the opportunity to play many different roles at different times for different audiences, both the ones they know and the ones they don’t.

How individuals portray their identities online may change depending on gender, age, or even type of social media. One type of social media is the chat room. Chat rooms offer individuals with a synchronous area in which to speak to friends, members, and even random individuals.

In order to find out how chat rooms contribute to identity formation and portrayal, Thomas (2000) conducted research to see how children constructed their identities on a site called “The Palace.” For this study, Thomas observed and interacted with children who were between 8 and 16 years old and had been using the site for a couple years.

The site has users create avatars, which can be altered as the individual goes through different chat rooms and other places within the site. These avatars give users the chance to try different identity representations, and they may have different body types, genders, sizes, emotions, clothes, positions, and additions such as wings. When asked, the children had different motivations behind their choices for avatar. Their responses suggest they based their avatars on how they saw themselves, how they wanted to be when they got older, or how they envisioned their ideal selves.
As Thomas observed the children and interacted with them, she noticed that they tried different roles while in the chat rooms. Sometimes they were teachers, sometimes they were learners, and sometimes they were counselors. When a child was given the honor to become a “wizard” in the chat room, they were able to play the role of authority figure where they could kick out an individual if they were acting inappropriately. Through these interactions, the children were constantly negotiating their identities. Because of the nature of this type of site, the children were free to play with their identities to help them figure out their real-life selves. The children were able to see themselves in a new light as leaders, teachers, learners, and counselors. They were able to play roles that they could portray in the real world either in the present or in the future (Thomas, 2000). This site is still in use by many today.

In addition to chat rooms, there are many social networking sites available for individuals to use to keep in touch with friends, family, and more. Many of these sites offer synchronous communications, such as instant messaging, as well as asynchronous communications, such as updates.

Facebook is one such site. When signing up, one must answer personal questions, but the individual can choose which to answer, such as birth date, gender, location, hobbies, and even sexual interest. This in itself seems to indicate that identity is static, but there is the option to change these at any time if the individual decides to do so. This also indicates, as Ellis (2010) suggests, that individuals project their “real” selves on the site.

On the site, the individual communicates with others they have “friended.” Their status updates are used to post thoughts, events, and anything else the user wants. Others may post on
their walls, and they may give feedback on postings. This feedback gives users an idea of how others see them, which could have an impact on the individual’s perception of who they are.

The fact that individuals can post on their walls and get feedback on their posts indicates that individuals are constantly communicating parts of their identities, and the identity they show is constantly in flux (Ellis, 2010). All these postings can make some individuals wonder how trustworthy these representations of self can be, and how accurate these are to the individual’s identity. It can seem a bit daunting to those not used to using such a tool for communication, and can bring in questions of what is the real identity and what is fabricated (Boon & Sinclair, 2009). However, according to Mead, we are constantly negotiating our identities based on communications with others, and that this identity can be changed depending on our circumstance, environment, and current group. If that is the case, then there are multiple identities that are being presented on Facebook, some which are limited in appearance, and many others which are not presented at all (Griffin, 2009; Mead, 1934). Even so, Facebook allows you to create a social identity, and for many people, it is a primary reflection on real-life identity (Connolly, 2011).

However, a study done on MySpace users suggests that, while users do put what they consider their “real” self up, they do not put their whole selves. They have the tendency to focus on their friends and family, on people they already know. This would indicate that the users have a specific identity that they wish to perform on the site, and this identity would not change. Therefore, the users studied don’t consider their identities as constantly changing, but static (Leonardi, 2008).
This MySpace study showed that, although a social networking site gives the opportunity for a person to be free about who he/she is, there is still not enough anonymity to post the “whole” self online (Leonardi, 2008). Though Ellis’ study showed that individuals may use social networking to make new friends and to represent different sides of themselves, sides that they consciously decide to present to their “friends” on the site. This suggests that individuals can use this to change their image to be what they want their identity to be. However, they, as well as those in the MySpace study, seem to consider their identity to be relatively static. The users perceive the online identity to be an accurate representation of their real-world identity. This would indicate that the perceived online self would have little impact on the perceived real-life self.

Forums, pages, and blogs are other types of social media which offer asynchronous communications for individuals from all walks of life.

Yerbury (2010) conducted a study about how individuals perceived their identities and performed them on web forums using their forum posts and personal interviews. The participants were either full-time employees or university students who were asked to identify how they perform their identities online. These employees and students claimed that they knew their own identities, and they used the forums to let their opinions known and to let others know who they were. Several participants indicated that they create their identities through what they do even though they were aware of arguments which suggest identity creation is through what they say. The participants put a higher commitment on action than on verbal communications. So, even though many claim that we identify ourselves by communications with others, they state that they consider identity to be what they do, instead (Yerbury, 2010). This would seem to indicate that, as with the MySpace study, online identity has little effect on real-world identity,
and rather, the real-world identity dictates the online self. The individuals did not use the internet to help in identity formation. They stated that they already knew who they were, and their identity was completely set. Instead, they were using the internet and the communication technology to help manage their identity online.

To further discuss this point, O’Connor and Mackeogh (2007) studied identity performance on a women’s magazine web forum. They found that the women in the forum performed their identities in different ways, from their handles (online names) to their logos and their language. Some of the handles were to describe them directly, while others were the opposite of them. However, in this instance, as in the Yerbury study, the identities online were affected more by their real-life identity than vice versa.

Webpages are also a way for individuals to perform and communicate identity. Through self-disclosure, individuals are able to experiment with identity. Although self-disclosure has been studied within the confines of face-to-face interactions, it is a key point when considering personal webpages, even though the knowledge of who is viewing the page and who is to witness this disclosure is not known. In one study (Stern, 2004), adolescents used their webpages and self-disclosure to experiment with their identities and to manage these identities. Because of the nature of webpages, these spaces allowed the adolescents to change and update their information and designs to mediate their identities and identity performances. These changes could be made anonymously and allow the teenagers to reinvent themselves whenever desired. These actions helped the adolescents to figure out who they were and how to communicate who they were. This is one way that online social media affects the perception of real-life identity (Stern, 2004).
In online communities, such as on sites and in forums, it is important to note that individuals engage in identity forming activities. One such activity is the transfer of information. Through this activity, posters give others an idea of who they think they are. With this, however, is a risk. If the post is largely responded to, the original poster could react positively and impart more knowledge, or negatively and withdraw. Similarly, if the post is not responded to or gets a negative response, the individual may post again trying to get a larger response, or become discouraged and not post again. Both situations could have either a positive or a negative influence on how the individual sees him or herself, and their version of identity could play an imperative role (Ma & Agarwal, 2007).

In the above situation, individuals are getting verification of their identities as seen by others. When the identity is verified, then things go well. When the identity is not verified, however, some issues can arise. The individual may fight against others’ ideas of who he/she is, might withdraw, or may worry about future postings. The individual may also internalize that trait, which follows with Mead’s idea of identity construction being through interactions with others (Ma & Agarwal, 2007).

*Identity Shift*

While many studies indicate that the perception of online identity has little effect on the perception of real-life identity, others indicate that there is quite a substantial effect. One such study is that of Gonzales and Hancock (2008).

Gonzales and Hancock (2008) conducted a study of 32 males from introductory communication courses. They were assigned either the trait of introvert or extrovert, and were split into a private condition and a public condition. The trait they were assigned were the trait
they were to emulate throughout the study. Those who were in the private condition were told that their answers to four questions would be completely anonymous and would not be shared. Those who were in the public condition were told their results would be published to a blog to make study easier for a psychology graduate student, but would not be read by the experimenter.

The results showed that students who were told their results would be published in the public were more likely to use language more characteristic of their assigned trait and seemed to internalize that trait more. This indicates that strangers and those outside of their physical sphere of acquaintances have an impact on how people see themselves, and this impact is no less salient online than it is in person (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008).

However, Gonzales and Hancock’s study focused on identity free from the feedback of others. Feedback is present in almost all online settings when discussing social media. Walther et. al. (2011) conducted a separate study to expand upon Gonzales and Hancock’s previous study on identity shift in online environments by studying the effect of such feedback. When studied in isolation, Gonzales and Hancock did find that the participants were more likely to internalize the assigned trait when it was made public. Walther et. al. found, likewise, that the trait was more likely to be internalized. They also found that feedback supporting the trait had a big effect on whether the trait was indeed internalized. They found that feedback on the presented identity, or presented trait, led to more of a shift to represent the assigned trait. However, their study involved one-time static feedback. They would suggest that the effects of more long-term and dynamic feedback and conversation be studied in the future (Walther, et al., 2011).

Gonzales and Hancock (2009) suggest, too, that the asynchronous trait of many online communications could have a bigger effect on identity than even face to face communications.
One reason they give for this is that individuals have more time to internalize the traits others have assigned to them through such communication. Online communication could also bring up traits the individual had not thought they had, and in so doing, the feedback from others, even complete strangers, could have a strong effect on how the individual perceives him/herself in real life, not only online.

**Research Questions**

The literature seems to be divided on what has an effect on online and/or real-life identity when considering online communication. Some studies, such as Yerbury (2010) and the MySpace study (2008), seem to indicate that there is little to no effect on either, or the real-life identity perception has more effect on the online identity. However, there were studies conducted which state that there is quite an effect.

According to coordinated management of meaning, all our interactions carry meaning because the people involved have created meaning of the actions and words being presented. These meanings help individuals to perceive the world, others, and themselves. If this is the case, then perceived online identity as performed on social media should have an impact on perceived real-life identity (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979).

In the same way, social interactionism theory says that individuals learn about themselves and build their identities through interactions with others. Individuals cannot understand themselves or the world in isolation, and we are only defined as through others (Mead, 1934). As Goffman also stated, individuals play a role for their audience. Through the roles played, the audience forms an opinion of the individual, and that individual performs their identity (Goffman, 1959). If all this is taken into account, then social media give individuals another
forum in which to perform identity. This identity could, as some have stated before, as in the
MySpace study (Leonardi, 2008), that their identity is static, and the site is just for keeping in
touch with those they know. However, this identity could be one that can change on a whim or
give the individual an opportunity to play with who they lead others to be (Stern, 2004; Thomas,
2000).

Although the studies have provided mixed results, if coordinated management of
meaning and social interactionism theories hold true, then one’s perceived online identity as
performed on social media has an impact on that individual’s perceived real-life identity.
Therefore, two questions come to mind based on the current literature:

RQ1: Does one’s perceived online identity affect one’s own perceived real-life identity?

RQ2: Does feedback received online affect one’s perceived real-life identity?

In order to test these questions, a survey was chosen to assess individual’s behavior and
attitudes.
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Introduction

This study tested whether one’s perceived online identity has an effect on one’s own perceived real-life identity. This included what one chooses to present online as well as feedback received from others. Does how one present his/herself online have an effect on how they perceive him/herself in real-life? Does the feedback received from others have an effect on one’s real-life identity? According to Mead (1934), each communication encounter we have has an effect on how an individual perceives him/herself. This indicates that there is an effect on perceived real-life identity from online communications; however, how does one’s perceived online identity affect one’s real-life identity?

Scope of the Study

Many individuals use social media as a form of communication now. These individuals use social media to keep in touch with friends and family, and as theory states, to perform their identity, on a daily basis. It is the main focus of this study to identify how one’s perceived online identity on social media affects one’s own perceived real-life identity. Due to the large number of users, this study is limiting itself to social media users aged 18 and up who use social media.

Methodology of the Study

This study used qualitative and quantitative methods of a sample population. The study met with the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for minimal risk, so it did not require a full review. The participants, method of collecting data, and analysis follow.
Participants

This study used a convenience sample of adults 18 and over who use social media on a regular basis. This convenience sample consisted of those who work at or take classes at a south-eastern career college as well as those who use the social networking site Facebook. This was appropriate because this helps target individuals who are using social media on a regular basis and helps provide a variety of respondents (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010).

The south-eastern career college employs almost 200 individuals within its various departments, including: academics, financial aid, registrar, and student services. There are 1000 students attending the college, and these students were offered extra credit in their classes for participating in the survey.

To qualify for this survey, an individual must have been at least 18 years of age. The individuals must also use social media on a daily basis. Each participant was notified that the survey was completely anonymous and participation was purely voluntary.

Procedure

This study employed a survey to collect information on individuals’ use of social media and their opinions on the effect it has on how they perceive their real-life selves. A survey was appropriate because it is a good measure of how people see their behaviors and attitudes. It is an efficient way to get information from a large group of people. It is also a good way to see if there is a correlation between people’s use of social media and people’s perceived change in their real-life selves (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010).

The survey was created on an online survey creation website (surveygizmo.com). This website had survey creation tools as well as data analysis. This allowed the researcher to quickly and easily see the results and analyze them. The main goal of this survey was to see if
participants feel that their online identities, as they perceive them, has had an impact on how they perceive their own real-life identities. The survey included questions based on the Likert-like scale for more closed-ended questions, and more open-ended questions which gave the participants the ability to elaborate. However, the survey did not allow probing questions to ascertain why a participant responded in the way he/she did.

**Validity**

In order to maintain study validity, each question was asked in a couple different ways to reduce error and misunderstanding. Attitudinal questions were asked using a Liker-like scale to assess agreement with the statements, and opportunities to expand upon thoughts most pertinent to the study were given in attempt to improve validity of the study.

**Reliability**

The survey was written in a way to help ensure reliability and test-retest ability. The questions provided to help figure out if the participant perceives any effect of their perceived online identity via social media to their perceived real-life identity was asked in several different ways and incorporated different parts of social media, such as the individual playing their expected role online and the feedback received from what they post online. The scales used in many questions went from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” to give an idea of how much a statement identifies with the participant’s attitude and perception of the situation (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010).

An analysis of the survey and the results follow in the next chapter. Included is also a discussion of the results of the survey.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

A survey about social media use, identity perception online, and its effects on perceived real life identity was created and disseminated to about 100 people at a small southeastern career college and on the researcher’s Facebook page. There were 50 respondents to the survey, and 43 expressed that they used social media. Of those who used social media, 97.7% used social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. 51.2% used chat rooms. 34.9% used blogs. 32.6% used personal web pages, and 11.6% used other sites. Other sites listed included LinkedIn, Reddit, and role playing game websites. The average social media use was about once per day. The survey then went on and asked about whether the respondents presented themselves honestly on social media and if social media has affected their behavior online or in real life.

Data Analysis

Averages for the questions pertaining to perceived online identity and its effects on perceived real-life identity were calculated, along with how many individuals agreed with the statements, measured on a Likert-like scale. The replies give an idea as to how much participants agree with or disagree with statements used to measure perception of identity online, behavior online, and effects on both online and real life behavior.

Results of the Study

The survey asked individuals a series of questions on whether they agreed with the statements or not. The survey site, Survey Gizmo, calculated percentages based upon responses. Approximately 40% of the participants stated that how they present themselves in social media affects how they behave in reality. Similarly, almost 90% stated that they present themselves truthfully online, and that their identities remain the same online:
Perceived Online Identity and Real-Life Identity

Chart 1

I present myself truthfully on social media.

- Strongly Agree: 20
- Agree: 10
- Neutral: 5
- Disagree: 3
- Strongly Disagree: 2

However, only about 10% stated that they present everything about themselves online:

Chart 2

I don’t use social media to present everything about myself.

- Strongly Agree: 15
- Agree: 10
- Neutral: 5
- Disagree: 3
- Strongly Disagree: 2

Even with the power of social media, many do not think that social media has the power to present everything about themselves, and that has an effect on how much people feel they can include:

Chart 3

Social media has the ability to present everything about me.

- Strongly Agree: 10
- Agree: 5
- Neutral: 5
- Disagree: 3
- Strongly Disagree: 2
The first research question was, “Does one’s perceived online identity affect one’s own perceived real-life identity?” The data seem to indicate that there is little to no effect on one’s perceived real-life identity.

Feedback received online, the second research question, has also been estimated to affect how an individual sees him/herself online and in reality. However, just over 60% of respondents stated that there has been nothing said about them online that has affected their views of themselves:

Chart 4

![Chart 4](image_url)

Nothing has been said about me online that has affected my online behavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 5

![Chart 5](image_url)

What others say about me online affects how I act in real-life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also, about 44% of respondents say that what others say about them has no effect on their behavior:
When asked how their behavior has changed, if at all, they said they are online more often because of social media or they have become more social. One respondent has even stated that social media has helped him/her take a more positive attitude to help him/her move forward.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How I present myself in social media affects how I act in reality.</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't use social media to present everything about myself.</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I present myself truthfully on social media.</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see my identity, who I am, as remaining the same online.</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing has been said about me online that has affected my behavior.</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media has the ability to present everything about myself.</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone has made a comment about me that has changed how I see myself.</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone has posted an opinion about me on social media that I don't agree with.</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What others say about me affects how I act.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What others say about me online affects how I act in real-life.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What others say about me online affects how I act online. | 4.8% | 9.5% | 31.0% | 28.6% | 26.2%  
Who I am changes online. | 2.4% | 2.4% | 16.7% | 35.7% | 42.9% 

**Discussion**

Social interactionism theory (Mead, 1934) states that individuals identify themselves and see themselves through the eyes of others. Likewise, we play different roles in different environments, and the online world provides many different stages for role play (Goffman, 1959). Individuals need others in order to define themselves in given situations, and these relationships are paramount in identity creation and verification. Due to this fact, relationships and roles within these relationships become essential in identity (Buber, 1970). Given this, social media online and perceived identity online should have an effect on perceived identity in real life. However, the results of this study showed that individuals do not perceive any difference in their identities stemming from their participation in social media online. Furthermore, the effect of feedback received from social media seems to have little to no effect on perceived identity either online or in real life.

RQ1: Does one’s perceived online identity affect one’s own perceived real-life identity?

If this study is accurate, then people do not rely on social media online to define themselves. Rather, who they are in real life has a bigger effect on how they act online. This indicates that the online environment has little to no effect on real life identity, even through socialization using social media. The results show that social media has less of an impact on identity than real life interactions. This helps support Leonardi’s (2008) study on MySpace where she found that an individual’s representation or identity on the site had little impact on how they perceived their real life identities. One explanation for this is that many had stated they
do not present everything about themselves online. When asked what information the
respondents do not include when participating in social media, they listed things such as religion,
politics, family, work, and any other personal information. Many responded that they do not
include address and phone contact information as well.

In the same way, individuals stated that who they are, how they see themselves, does not
change when they are online. They present themselves truthfully, but they don’t present
everything about themselves, and who they are does not change online. The respondents also
indicated that how they present themselves online has no effect on how they act in reality. This
makes sense considering they stated that they present themselves truthfully on social media.

RQ2: Does feedback received online affect one’s perceived real-life identity?

According to Walther et al. (2011), feedback received from online interactions has as
much of an effect on individual’s perception on real-life identity as the participation online itself.
Several questions were asked to test whether this held true or not. All had similar results
indicating that the individuals who responded did not believe that feedback received online had
any effect on their perceived identities. The same individuals stated that what others say about
them does not affect their behavior. Although there are many who remained neutral on whether
or not what others said affected their actions, the majority of respondents stated that it had little
effect if any. They also stated that what individuals say about them has little effect on how they
act in the online environment. This would indicate that even the responses they get online would
have little to no effect.

Even though there has been little effect, some respondents have indicated that social
media has had some effect on their behavior or thoughts. One issue is that it affected how much
time they spend online and what they look up. Some have said that they pay more attention to
meaningless things than they had before, or that it has made them a little more materialistic in that they are aware of more products and spend more money. One respondent said that he/she spent more time just checking the Twitter feed without even thinking about it. One other respondent stated that social media has made him/her more sympathetic to others and to take nothing for granted. Similarly, one individual said that social media has made him/her more self-aware. Although the changes individuals have noticed are not much, they did notice some effect on how they see themselves and on their behavior.

A discussion on limitations, ideas for further research, and conclusions follow.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

The study consisted of a survey that was disseminated online through email and Facebook. However, the sample size was still very small. The number of respondents was very restricted. The small sample size was due to the fact that the research was limited to email and Facebook to disseminate the survey, and due to the fact that the study was limited to adults aged 18 and over to meet the institution’s IRB (Internal Review Board) requirements for minimal risk. This may affect the ability to generalize the results to larger populations. The study was also restricted to adults living in the United States because the ability to promote the survey to those outside the United States was greatly limited. The results may differ based upon participant age and nationality. Those of different ages or nationalities are growing up or have grown up in environments that may not be common for those who participated in the study, and this may affect how the individuals perceive their identities as well as the effects of social media on these identities. While the results may be typical for the participants, they may not be common of those from other backgrounds.

Further Study or Recommendations

For further study, studying identity effects on youth and those who have grown up using social media would give insight to the effects on those who currently fall below the age of 18. Ethnographic studies may help with identifying patterns and identity development of those who have been using social media since they were children because it includes direct observation instead of perceived effects and the researcher would be able to observe the events as they occur. These results could help psychologists map the development of minors and see how social media may help individuals figure out who they are and who they would like to be in the future.
Those of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities may view their online identities differently based upon their individual cultures and backgrounds. How these identities are affected may be different from others because of each individual's perception as guided by culture. This would address the study limitation of nationality.

Another study on the identity perception and the portrayal of individuals by gender may add to the knowledge base on the effect of social media on individuals.

Future studies should expand on this research to identify areas of difference and those populations most affected by social media use such as young people. This could give researchers a better idea of how identity is performed in online situations and what effects it has on different populations. Such research could have a profound effect on the field of psychology and open new doors for helping individuals define themselves and their place in society.

**Conclusions**

According to Mead (1934), as stated in Chapter 2, individuals make sense of themselves through how others see them and through communication with others. Their identities will change and shift depending on the environment in which they find themselves and the people around them. Likewise, Goffman (1959) developed his theory on how individuals present themselves in public. In different situations and on different stages, people act differently, playing a role they are expected to play for all those who are observing. This role play affects how others see the individuals and how the individuals see themselves. As social media has become increasingly popular, it has given individuals an additional stage on which to perform their identity and communicate with others. Because of this, participation in social media should have an effect on how one perceives his/her real life identity.
Perceived Online Identity and Real-Life Identity

Martin Buber’s (1970) “I-Thou” philosophy furthers this idea that one’s identity is formed in communication with others. According to Buber, there is no “I” without “thou,” so individuals cannot understand themselves without others. This indicates that communication with others would have an effect on the individual’s understanding and perception of him/herself. This, too, implies that communication in social media and the individual’s perception of online identity would have an impact on his/her perceived real life identity.

The study conducted on children in "The Palace" (Thomas, 2000) indicates that social media provides a great forum in which to play at identity and to help children work out who they are and who they want to be. Ma and Agarwal (2007) stated that roles played online doe have an effect on individuals. Furthermore, the study on feedback that extended Ma and Agarwal’s (2007) study found that feedback has a profound effect on one's own real life identity. The MySpace study (Leonardi, 2008), however, indicates that participation in social media has little to no effect on how individuals see themselves. Likewise, Ellis (2010) stated that an individual can be who they want to be on Facebook, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it affects the individual's real life identity.

My study seemed to agree with the MySpace study (Leonardi, 2008). Individuals reported that what people have said about them online has had little to no effect on their real life identities and that their participation online in general has had little to no effect on how they see themselves. This seems to contradict Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959) in their theory that socialization affects how individuals see themselves, and that the environment has an effect, as well. This also seems to contradict Buber’s (1970) philosophy that one cannot understand themselves without the other as applied to online networking. Perceived identity on social media should have an effect on how individuals perceive their real life identity; however, the
respondents to this survey seemed to be unaffected. However, since the study was limited in scope, a definitive answer as to how one’s perceived online identity affects one’s own perceived real-life identity has not been found. More research is needed to come to a consensus.
References


Connolly, P. J. (2011, January 17). Identity takes on a new meaning: IT is now charged with extending existing IDs or incorporating new ones. eWeek, 28 (2), pp. 17-19.


Ellis, K. (2010). Be who you want to be: The philosophy of Facebook and the construction of identity. Screen Education (58), 36-41.


