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# **SELF-SELECTED IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN SOCIAL NETWORK SITES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Social network sites can provide a person with the freedom to represent themselves in various ways, thus exhibiting multiple variations of their identity. Research states that an individual's identity is self-monitored depending on the contextual situation that they are in. This ability is affected by their use of technology. We argue that social network sites are a particularly unique environment that can affect an individual's representation of their identity, thus increasing the likelihood of producing perverse social capital. Current research has addressed how productive social capital can be gained in social network sites; however, limited research has addressed the issue of perverse social capital, especially in social network sites. We examine how technology affects an individual's selected self-identity, as measured through their self-monitoring ability, and how this altered behavior leads to productive or perverse social capital in social network sites.

## **Keywords**

Self-selected identity, social network sites, perverse social capital, productive social capital

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research has shown that a person's ability to represent themselves is affected by their use of technology (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006; Utz, 2010). Social network sites (SNSs) such as Friendster, Myspace and Facebook, allow an individual to represent themselves, and maintain connections with their family and friends, as well as create new connections with other individuals. Individuals can achieve numerous benefits as a result of their relationships with others (Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998). Resources that provide benefits to an individual, such as support, information, and ideas, are embedded in the social relationships within a network. Through strong and weak ties, these resources can be considered a social benefit that is gained from the network (Johnson and William, 2008). Therefore, to enjoy the benefits of social capital, a person has to form relationships with others. In other words, only through social interactions with others can one realize the benefits of social capital (Lin 2001; Portes 1998). The contexts of SNSs can vary from work-related sites (e.g., LinkedIn.com) to dating sites (ie. Match.com). In addition, these sites can be oriented toward connecting those with shared interests such as music or politics (e.g., MySpace.com) or college student population (the original incarnation of Facebook.com). An individual may use the social network sites either to interact with people they already know offline or to meet new people. Moreover, these sites enable an individual to create a profile where they can freely craft their identity in any way that they prefer. This ability to manipulate a profile within SNSs can lead to an individual exhibiting multiple variations of their identity. This self-monitored behavior affects one's relationships (Ellison et al., 2006), and can influence the returns from these relationships (Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998).

There can be two forms of social capital produced within a social network: productive or perverse social capital (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004; Portes, 1998; Portes, and Landolt, 1996). While productive social capital is a useful resource that allows an individual to achieve various benefits (Clemson, 1980), perverse social capital can have negative consequences (Portes, and Landolt, 1996). The balance between bonding and bridging relationships lead an individual to achieve either productive or perverse social capital from the social network site. In this paper, we argue that an online social network is a particularly unique environment that can affect an individual's representation of their identity, thus impacting the type of social capital produced from the network.

Numerous studies have addressed the positive results of social capital within SNSs (Ellison, 2007; Donath and boyd, 2004). However, research has yet to address the possibility of and the occurrence of the negative consequences that can result from identity variation within SNSs. We integrate and build upon extant literature on social capital in order to develop a research model that sufficiently addresses the current gap in research. First, we discuss the appropriateness of using self-monitoring abilities to vary an individual's self representation by providing a focused literature review of applicable research on self-monitoring behaviors. Next, we define how social capital is gained within SNSs. Lastly, we examine how self-selected identity impacts the social capital available within SNS and develop a theoretical model for future research applications.

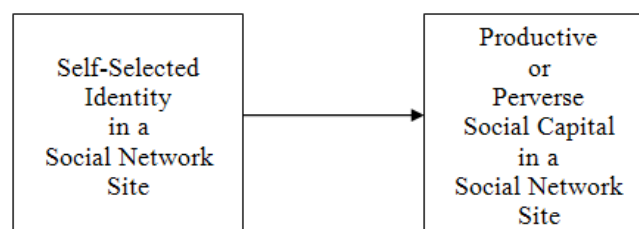
## Literature Review

### *Online Self-Selected Identity*

Research has highlighted the role of individual identities in social capital and behavior (Ellison, 2007; Donath and boyd, 2004; Kramer, 2006). An individual's identity allows one to understand how they would behave in a social setting and how they are connected to others (Kramer, 2006). Understanding how an individual identity representation is compiled is a complicated concept due to an individual's ability to possess multiple, co-occurring identities (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001). These varied identities, which are strongly influenced by variety of situational or contextual factors, can have an impact on the relationships that the individual has with others (Kramer, 2006). Consequently, the resources that an individual can access from these relationships are affected by the different self-representations. For example, a person who wants to create new connections can manipulate their self-representation and strategically emphasize some characteristics while deemphasizing others (Goffman, 1959). This form of self-representation management, or self-monitoring, "reflects the degree to which a person observes and controls their expressive behavior and self-presentation in accord with social cues" (O'Cass, 200, p.398). SNSs enhance an individual's self-monitoring abilities to build and connect with others (Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). Individuals shape their identity through their online profile and have control over how they represent themselves. This enhanced control over their self-representation allows individuals to manage their online connections more strategically. Utz (2010) stated that the opportunity that individuals have in how they can represent themselves in SNSs can impact their relationships. Depending on the strength of these relationships, individuals may be able to access various resources, or unintentionally limit these resources, due to the variation in their self-representation.

### *Social Capital within Social Network Sites*

Social capital can be broadly defined as resources that are acquired through the relationships with varying degrees of strength (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Coleman, 1988). Within a social network, an individual will access these resources through internal and direct relationships (strong ties) or external and indirect relationships (weak ties) within the network (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Social capital research has found that ties with family and friends provide an individual with emotional support and is related to individual well-being (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). This type of social capital has been described by Putnam (2000) as bonding social capital. Bonding social capital is found in close emotional relationships and is shared between individuals with common socioeconomic characteristics (Putnam, 2000). Alternately, creating new relationships provides a source of non-redundant information and is described by Putnam (2000) as bridging social capital. Bridging social capital reflects dense social networks with numerous weak ties and is often associated with individuals who have similar interests or goals but different social backgrounds (Putnam, 2000). Research in SNSs has suggested that individuals use social networks sites to maintain pre-existing relationships or create new connections (Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield, 2006). For example, SNSs can facilitate an individual's ability to maintain connections with their friends and families, make new friends, and create business connections. Individuals that vary their identity are impacting the relationships that they have within SNSs. These modified relationships can have unintended consequences. For example, individuals that have multiple weak tie connections, such as numerous friends in Facebook, may neglect the strong tie connections that they have within the network, thus creating perverse social capital. Therefore, we developed an initial research model to address this phenomenon, shown in Figure 1.



### Figure 1. Initial Research Model for Self-Selected Identity and Social Capital in Social Network Sites

Extant research on social capital has identified it as a resource with only positive outcomes (Adler and Kwon, 2002). This conceptualization, however, is limited. The investment in social capital, like any other financial investment, has many positive and negative consequences based off of the chosen investment (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Consequently, an “unbalanced investment or overinvestment can transform a potentially productive asset into a constraint and a liability” (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Powell states that “the ties that bind may also turn into ties that blind” (1994, p. 393), or more specifically, that the connections that create strong ties within a social network may also limit the opportunity for new connections to be made. Also, even positive social capital can have negative consequences when that social capital effect is analyzed in a broader aggregated view of the larger social network (Adler and Kwon, 2002). For example, Coleman (1988) discussed how close network ties among teenagers may have a negative effect on a community because they weaken control by adults and increase high school dropout rates. Social capital also has negative outcomes that can outweigh its positive effects for an individual (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Therefore, research should employ a balanced view of social capital which takes into account the possibility of either positive or negative social capital. Much of the research has discussed the positive consequences of SNSs on an individual’s social capital (Ellison, 2007; Donath and Boyd, 2004). For example, Donath and Boyd (2004) stated that SNSs enable an easy creation and maintenance of weak ties. Alternatively, Ellison (2007) described how OSNs play an important role in forming and maintaining bonding and bridging social capital. However, limited studies address the negative impact of social capital in SNSs.

#### Theoretical Model Development

##### *Self-Selected Identity and Social Capital*

Gosling et al. (2007) researched how Facebook-based personality impressions correlate with an individual’s actual personality, as measured by the Big Five dimensions. They found that there is a modicum of disassociated personality traits that show up in the Facebook-based personality, or in other words, individuals “engage in some self-enhancement” (p. 3). Gosling et al. provide a future research focus of examining how online social-networking site “authors use their profile to negotiate their identities in daily life” (p.3). Utz (2010) discussed how self-generated information on SNSs explained the variance in outside perceptions of an individual’s personality, rather than any other information generated elsewhere. This can be extended to the understanding that an individual can manipulate their personality perception through carefully crafting their identity as presented in SNSs. This added ability to vary one’s identity through SNSs can increase the number of friends that one has as the individual traits would appeal to a larger population. However, having a large amount of friends may not result in “deeper friendships” (Utz, 2001, p. 328). As social capital theory addresses, there is a significant difference between deep, long lasting friendships (bonding) as compared to weak ties or a large number of friends (bridging). The extent of how individuals can manipulate their identity to balance between maximizing the number of friends they have and maintaining the friendships they have can lead to either productive or perverse social capital. More specifically, the individuals that use the technology within SNSs to facilitate and enhance their self-monitoring capabilities can result in increasing the perverse social capital they receive from SNSs. For example, the more that an individual adjusts their behavior to fit within the norms of SNSs, the less strong ties they may have within the SNSs, thus reducing the productive social capital that they have access to.

##### *Self-Monitoring Abilities*

Research has previously established a relationship between individual’s self-monitoring abilities with job outcomes such as maintaining a wide range of connections, receiving more promotions, and increasing work performance (Kilduff, Day, 1994; Mehra et al., 2001; Snyder, 1987). However, technology can have an impact on how an individual portrays their personality (Lea and Spears, 1991, 1992; Spears and Lea, 1992, 1994). Within SNSs, individuals are able to transcend their typical day-to-day personality and carefully craft an identity that they feel is appropriate for the social setting that they are operating within. Computer-mediated communication provides individuals with an increased flexibility in how they represent themselves (Cornwell and Lundgren, 2001). Within SNSs, this type of high self-monitoring ability can impact the social capital available within the network. For example, individuals that take advantage of their technology-enabled self-monitoring ability in order to form a larger number of SNSs connections, particularly with individuals outside of their off-line social network, will have access to more information and external assets. Thus, we raise the following question:

*How does an individual’s online self-monitoring ability impact the social capital that is in a social network site?*

##### *Bonding Social Capital*

In an online setting, individuals seek to achieve a balance between representing themselves accurately and representing themselves as they would like to be (Ellison et al., 2006). This enhanced self-monitoring ability can increase the range of connections that an individual has access, possibly reducing the strength of the relationships that they have within SNSs. The bonding social capital within SNS is essential for accessing emotional and financial support when needed. This type of social capital is only present in situations where there are close, strong ties within a small bounded network. In SNSs, individuals typically widen their relationship networks, creating a broad dense network with weak ties. This type of network will have decreased availability for bonding social capital, thus, we raise the following question:

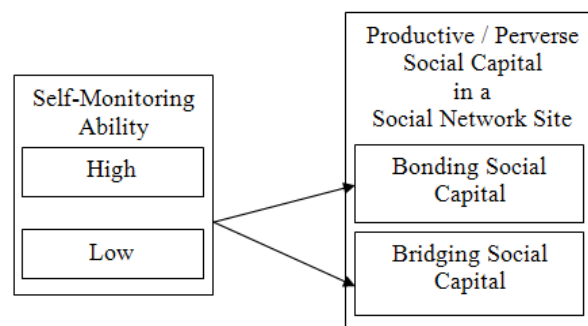
*How does an individual's online self-monitoring ability impact the bonding social capital that is in a social network site?*

### **Bridging Social Capital**

Research has shown that although strong ties provide for benefits from information, weak ties are more effective (Hansen, 2002). Strong ties are too costly to maintain and can result in a reduction in the flow of new, whereas, weak ties are less costly to maintain and provide access to non-redundant information (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Granvetter, 1982). In a study that analyzed the network of research and development scientists, Gabbay and Zuckerman (1998) found that effectiveness is highly dependent on a broad sharing of information that was mostly generated from the outflow of the information, specifically from weak ties. Putnam (2000) discussed the danger of close ties where individuals tend to stick within the existing network, resulting in a loss of flexibility. Although these ties reduce the exposure to external risks, they tend to reinforce group identity and lead to fragmentation and the slowing of information flow. Within SNSs, weak ties that are gained by an individual's self-selected identity can impact the social capital available within the network. For example, individuals that choose a self-representation that is more agreeable may result in increasing their weak ties and increasing the bridging social capital within SNSs. This will provide more access to information but may reduce the individual's ability to garner emotional or financial support when needed. Thus, we raise the following question:

*How does an individual's online self-monitoring ability impact the bridging social capital that is in a social network site?*

The questions raised in this study can be examined using the research model provided in Figure 2. This model allows for quantitative measures to examining the relationship between self-selected identity representations and both bonding and bridging social capital within an SNS.



**Figure 2. Proposed Research Model for Self-Selected Identity and Social Capital in Social Network Sites**

### **Method**

This study is part of an on-going research initiative. A survey methodology will be used to address our research questions. On the basis of our literature review, we designed a survey instrument based on measures from existing literature to collect data on self-monitoring ability, bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Additionally, we included items to collect information about demographic and other descriptive variables, including social network usage, gender, ethnicity, age, and income.

Measures of online social networks usage were adapted from Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007). Our items of Self-Identity Selection as measured through their self-monitoring ability adapted from Snyder (1974). Our social capital measures

-bonding and bridging social capital - which served as our dependent variables were created by adapting online social capital scale developed and validated by Ellison (2007). Bonding social capital and bridging social capital were assessed using ten items each from the bonding and bridging scale. Bridging social capital measure assessed the extent to which participants experienced bridging social capital, which is believed to be better-suited for linking to external assets and for information diffusion (Ellison, 2007; Putnam, 2000) as stated by Williams (2006), “members of weak-tie networks are thought to be outward looking and to include people from a broad range of backgrounds. The social capital created by these networks generates broader identities and generalized reciprocity” (n.p.).

Next, the survey was pre-tested using help from researchers in the academia. The goal of the pre-test was to ensure that the unit of analysis clearly defined for the study, to check if the instrumentation consistently reflects that unit of analysis, and to assess content validity. The survey is currently hosted in Qualtrics (<http://www.qualtrics.com>), an online survey hosting site, and was fielded in April 2011. We are currently involved in collecting data from students to empirically test our model and verify our findings.

## CONCLUSION

As more organizations are looking to social network sites as a valid source for information on potential employees, research needs to identify the real-world effects of the impressions that are being portrayed in online social networks (Gosling et al., 2007). Our research addresses this issue by identifying how individuals, through self-monitoring abilities, manipulate their identities to extract social capital from online social networks. This type of individually-controlled personality impression has been shown to have significant effects in social networks, such as Mehra et al.’s (2001) research on workplace performance. Further research is needed to understand the driving forces of self-selected identity and how technology can impact an individual’s innate self-monitoring behavior.

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