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**A Culture of Communication: A Critical Examination of Modern
Implications of Social Networking Sites**

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A Culture of Communication:
A Critical Examination of Modern Implications of Social Networking Sites

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Barry University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the completion of the Honors Program

by

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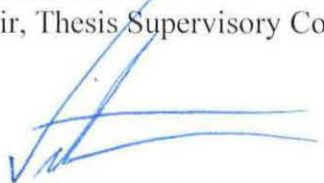
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In a world where “selfies” are a necessity for any outing, tweeting is no longer just for the birds, and no personal details are safe from the most creative Facebook stalkers, it has become almost impossible to ignore the importance and influence of social networks. While social networks offer an invaluable resource, as they allow us to overcome the limits of geography and time to maintain relationships, they are also a very dangerous tool if used improperly. Although many may assume that these social networking profiles reflect the lifestyle, thoughts, and beliefs of their owners, experience using social networks shows this is not necessarily the case.

In this paper I will argue, using a critical textual analysis and ethnographical observation, that using social networking in the way it is currently used by young adults (in which social networking profiles portray an unrealistic, censored version of their lives which often reads as a highlight reel) has resulted in unmerited shame that negatively influences relationships, identity, and self-esteem. Throughout the paper I will also propose that we change the way we portray ourselves on the internet and how we perceive others’ social networking profiles in order to facilitate a more open and accepting environment in which we no longer feel the need to censor ourselves.

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me for hours on end during your office hours (when I'm sure you had better work to do), and have taught me more than I imagined possible. You were my first introduction to philosophy, and have truly changed my life for the better. As a mere freshman, I remember going home and telling my family how much I enjoyed your classes, and I aspired to be more like you; as I enter grad school to pursue a PhD in philosophy, that could not be more true today. Thank you for taking in the "twelve year old" me, for putting up with me in class every semester of my undergraduate career, for making me laugh and sometimes cry, and most importantly for having faith in me. You once told me that I was young, that I did not need to worry about moving mountains just yet. While I still struggle with pushing that boulder up the mountainside, you've showed me that I can conquer any mountain I encounter, and for that I am eternally grateful. I wish you a lifetime of love, happiness, and all the cats your heart desires.

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Introduction and Statement of Purpose

Due to developments in modern technology, the means by which we communicate are constantly shifting; while communication was once something done simply through face-to-face interaction, we now have a wide variety of means by which we can communicate regardless of distance, including (but not limited to) telephones, text messages, e-mail, letters, social networking, video chats, and instant messaging services. Perhaps one of the most influential of these technologies is social networking. Although social networking websites do a great job of combating the problems of language and geography in order to facilitate conversation and perpetuate (or, in some cases, allow for the genesis of) relationships, they are also problematic in that their use has caused a monumental shift in the nature of said relationships. As social networks are something that much of society interacts with daily, it is pivotal to discuss their nature and the repercussions of using said websites. Through discussing ways in which online behaviors can be altered, society can more readily aid flourishing with regards to relationships and personal identity.

My paper aims to discuss the ways in which social networking as it currently stands is detrimental to self-esteem, promotes shame, and degrades relationships. There is much philosophical discussion on each of those individual elements, as shame, self-esteem, friendship, and identity are pivotal themes in the realm of ethics. Furthering on this work, my paper aims to shed light on social networks and their moral repercussions. The bulk of the paper draws from philosophical discourse to guide the discussion, although texts from the fields of sociology and communication will also be referenced.

Through my analysis, research, and discussion, I hope to explain how social networks can be detrimental as currently used by young adults, thus examining the issue from an angle

previously untouched in the field of philosophy. This research will help further the understanding of the impact of our online interactions, allowing social network users and society as a whole to take the time to critically examine the nature of social networks and discuss how we want to proceed in using said websites in the future. In this paper I argue that social networks, as they currently stand, evoke shame and cause self-esteem to plummet in young adult users, and can cause relationships to suffer greatly. I will argue that because individuals in the aforementioned age range tend to use social networks to display a glorified picture of their identity, in which only the highlights are revealed, an unfortunate stigma develops under which individuals believe that they must continue to post positive sentiments in order to compete with others. However, the paper will also propose a revised system of social networking, under which individuals can engage in a shared life, truly resulting in a friendship of virtue.

This topic is extremely relevant to society, as it impacts the way we communicate and interact with one another, often on a global scale. As social networks have the potential to strengthen connections between individuals, they can be a tool of great power, but are only of help to us if they are used correctly. The paper will examine the way in which societal norms impact our online posts, calling for a change in norms under which individuals become more tolerant of the pluralistic society in which we reside. It is my hope that this paper will help facilitate a larger discussion under which philosophers and laypersons alike can analyze the nature of friendship, identity, and communication.

Literature Review

The articles used in research for this thesis project examine the myriad of issues that social networking impacts, including shame, self-esteem, identity, and relationships. Nine articles were examined for use on this thesis project, which pertain to each of the aforementioned topics. In the following section, they are subdivided into the relevant categories, under which they will be further discussed. In addition, there is one final category which covers “Outside Research,” in which articles from outside of the field of philosophy will be considered.

Shame

Deigh, John. “Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique.” *Ethics* 93, no. 2 (1983): 225-245.

John Deigh’s article, “Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique,” discusses a typical Rawlsian characterization of shame, in which individuals differentiate between shame and embarrassment through the notion that shame results in a loss of self-esteem that is absent in cases of embarrassment. Deigh, however, rejects this thesis, questioning the idea that shame actually results in this loss of self-esteem. He begins his paper with an examination of the definition self-esteem, restricting self-esteem (for purposes of his discussion) to a view one has of his or her current “doings and development” (pg. 227). He goes on to add several qualifications to his definition, including that self-esteem must be active and have direction, necessitating that an individual with self-esteem have values or ideals by which they conduct themselves. In my paper, however, I reject this as a necessary condition of self-esteem, classifying it instead as general feelings of positivity in regards to one’s self future, and/or current sense of worth in life. I disagree with Deigh

that self-esteem need center around solely the accomplishments one has (or will have) achieved, and instead see self-esteem as something more focused on character and personality. While he does consider values and character as part of self-esteem, he considers them in light of said values making one well-suited to pursue goals, something with which I disagree.

For the purposes of my paper, I will use Deigh's discussion of self-esteem and how it is impacted by shame as a starting point when considering how the use of social networks changes the user. I believe that using social networks such as Facebook, on which individuals tend to post the highlights or best parts of their lives, causes people to feel both shame and lower self-esteem, as they feel that they do not measure up to others or are less good people, or that they should be somehow competing or performing at the same level as their peers. Social networks allow individuals to project an unrealistic image of themselves to the world, thus causing us to be ashamed of our own accomplishments (or lack thereof), which in turn harms self-esteem. I will use Deigh's discussion in considering objections to my opinion, as he believes that shame and self-esteem do not go hand in hand.¹

Guenther, Lisa. "Shame and the Temporality of Social Life." *Continental Philosophy Review* 44 (2011): 23-39.

Lisa Guenther's article, "Shame and the Temporality of Social Life," begins by discussing the origins of shame and makes the bold claim that shame multiplies until it essentially outlives the individual who felt it in the first place. However, Guenther is

¹ While I do agree with Deigh that lower self-esteem does not necessarily result from shame, I believe that it often does, which is a notion that Deigh rejects entirely.

quick to acknowledge that shame is important, and that it arises out of interest, often functioning as a defense in the social arena. Based on these ideas, Guenther explains the “phenomenological accounts of shame from Sartre, Levinas, and Beauvoir” (pg. 24), explaining how they define shame as a way of feeling like one is being critically examined by others, thus causing negative feelings and a desire to escape. As Guenther points out, shame can function not only negatively, but as a tool that “disrupt[s] the complacency and self-satisfaction” we feel.² Guenther presents Sartre’s shame as ontological shame, Levinas’ as ethical provocation, and Beauvoir’s as political provocation, ultimately concluding that in our society shame is inevitable but that “this does not mean that we are doomed to remain stuck in the repetition of the same.”³ Rather, shame provides opportunities to change in the future.

While I do agree that shame occurs because we care about others and what they think/feel, and that it can be a useful tool, I believe that it is unnecessary and ultimately ineffective in changing individuals and the social dynamic that comes about in social networking. Rather than causing people to actually go out and do good things out of a genuine desire to be a better person, the shame that results from using social networks often (although not always) causes people to feel a need to put on a façade in which they try to present an unrealistic image of themselves to the world. It causes many individuals to feel as though they do not measure up to others, resulting in lower self-esteem, and perpetuates the cycle of people posting only the highlights of their lives in order to compete. I will use Guenther’s article to discuss the potential for shame in real life interaction, as I concede that “oppression is not the last word on shame but only one of its

² Lisa Guenther, “Shame and the Temporality of Social Life,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 44 (2011) : 23-39.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

ambivalent possibilities” but will argue that shame is not an effective tool in regards to social networking as it currently stands.⁴

Velleman, J. David. “The Genesis of Shame.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2001): 27-52.

J. David Velleman’s discussion of shame presents several ideas of the genesis of shame, including those of Augustine and Williams. As Augustine states, shame is a loss of voluntary control over bodies (at least in the case of Adam and Eve); as Adam and Eve gained the capacity to act on free will, they felt shame because they were able to disobey. Williams presents a similar account, saying that shame lies in exposure, or in being at a disadvantage because of a loss of power or control. Velleman, on the other hand, says that to feel shame is to feel vulnerable to a particular negative assessment. He believes that we must present ourselves in a certain way so as to be eligible players in the social sphere, and that when we present ourselves poorly we may feel shame. In his article, Velleman points out several different occasions when we may feel shame, including when there is a failure of privacy, or when we feel shame in how we are perceived by others (rather than just feeling shame in self).

While Velleman has many good points in his article, his ultimate claim that this shame is possibly a good thing and that we should be mindful of how we present ourselves to others is more troubling. I agree that shame can be used to do good, but as I will explain regarding the Guenther article on shame, I do not think that its place lies in

⁴ Ibid.

social networking (at least as it currently stands). One of the important points of my paper is that society majorly dictates how we present ourselves and what behavior is or is not acceptable; Velleman supports this, stating that cultural norms can be changed by members of society. However, I will take this in a different route; rather than proposing a change in how we present ourselves, as Velleman suggests, I believe that society needs to adapt its views in order to be more accepting of the behaviors and flaws of others. I will use Velleman's work to show how problematic shame can be, as it causes individuals to censor themselves in ways that they should not need to (but feel compelled to do because of the norms of society).

Personal Identity

Turkle, Sherry. "Identity Crisis." In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, 99-109. New York City: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1995.

In "Identity Crisis," Sherry Turkle discusses the modern notion of identity in light of Internet usage. In her discussion, Turkle addresses the notion of a split self, wherein personality is simultaneously multiple and coherent. Through having the ability to play off of different aspects of one's self in an online profile, Turkle holds that individuals are able to portray parts of a broken down identity while still maintaining a whole self offline. This unified self can be fragmented by will, as one chooses different facets to highlight online; for example, Turkle discusses her own upcoming website, wherein she highlights her research, curriculum vitae, and various links to other content she enjoys (such as the homepage of the city of Paris). Turkle holds that online profiles

prove that the self can be divided and whole simultaneously, a notion which is seemingly controversial when examined at face value. However, through various discussions of identity, including an examination of Jungian notions of the personae, Turkle convincingly shows that the idea of a split and whole self is possible. Much like in the offline world, wherein people engage in various roles based on their surroundings and the situation at hand, Turkle shows that the same idea of fragmented personality can be transferred to an online profile.

Use of Social Networks

Eede, Yoni Van Den. “‘Conversation of Mankind’ or ‘Idle Talk’: A Pragmatist Approach to Social Networking Sites.” *Ethics and Information Technology* 12, no. 1 (2010): 195-206.

Yoni Van Den Eede’s “‘Conversation of Mankind’ or ‘Idle Talk’: A Pragmatist Approach to Social Networking Sites” analyzes social networking sites as conversational practices, asking how they change our lives (both positively and negatively). Eede begins by discussing how society thinks that social networking can be either “an emancipating force or a damning threat,” explaining that we have a tendency to want things to be one way or the other; as such, he discusses how people want to know which of the two it is, ultimately arguing that it may not be that simple. Basing his paper on the works of Richard Rorty, Eede tries to find a pragmatic solution, discussing social networking sites in a conversational manner in order to determine if they can be considered good or bad.

During one of the final sections of his paper, Eede remarks that the way social network users discuss the value of social networking is up to them, and that ultimately we cannot eliminate the evil that comes with these websites. However, in being conscious of

this conversation, and of the continuing conversations that we engage in while using social networks, we are furthering dialogue, which (according to Eede) holds value in and of itself. Eede ends his paper by claiming that “suspending a final judgment- while not giving up judging- might make us better judges.”⁵ In my paper, I agree with him, particularly when giving suggestions about how social networks should work, that this conversation is pivotal. I will argue that social networks can be good and bad, and that making a definitive choice about which they are isn’t necessary. Instead, as Eede argues, I will explain a need for continual conversation about the merits and drawbacks of social networks, as having said dialogue enables us to recognize and solve problems with social media, as well as helping us to maintain the good aspects of social networks.

Vallor, Shannon. “Flourishing on Facebook: Virtue Friendship & New Social Media.” *Ethics and Information Technology* 14, no. 3 (2012): 185-199.

Shannon Vallor’s article examines social networks through an Aristotelian theory of the good life, discussing complete friendships of virtue and how they relate to our online lives. She discusses the four main dimensions of virtue friendship, “reciprocity, empathy, self-knowledge, and the shared life,” ultimately explaining that while social networking supports these four characteristics in some uses of social networking, it may run into problems in regards to the shared life. One of the most interesting aspects of Vallor’s article is her discussion of shared lives versus sharing about lives; she argues that social networks are often used to share about lives rather than as a shared activity,

⁵ Yoni Van Den Eede, “‘Conversation of Mankind’ or ‘Idle Talk’: A Pragmatist Approach to Social Networking Sites,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 12, no. 1 (2010) : 195-206.

something that will be an important point of discussion in my paper. I believe that if social networks are used as a shared activity, through which individuals can facilitate conversation, engaging in exchanges similar to face-to-face ones when said interactions are impossible (whether due to time, distance, or other constraints), then they can be very beneficial to our friendships and lives as a whole.

Although I agree that social networks can aid friendships, especially when used as a supplement to face-to-face interaction, I believe that they often do not. It seems as though Vallor overlooks the ways in which social networks are currently used, not recognizing that individuals often post the highlights of their lives rather than their complete, true selves on many social networking sites. When social networks are used like this, it negates the potential for a true friendship, as people are becoming friends with or maintaining relationships based on a false notion of who someone is. I will argue that as these websites are currently used, they are actually detrimental to friendship, as they set unrealistic standards and evoke an unnecessarily competitive environment. However, I will refer to Vallor's ideas in the section of my paper where I discuss suggestions and the potential of social networks, as I believe that they can improve friendships if used correctly.

Outside Research

Brey, Philip. "The Epistemology and Ontology of Human—Computer Interaction." *Minds and Machines* 15 (2005) : 383-398.

In his article, “The Epistemology and Ontology of Human—Computer Interaction,” Philip Brey considers the many functions of the computer as they relate to human usage. Recognizing that the primary function of computers has historically been epistemic, as computers rely on cognitive functions of their users, Brey notes that modern human—computer interaction has gone far beyond mere cognitive processing. Instead, computers now help extend the normal interaction found in everyday society, something which allows us to experience our world more fully than was previously imaginable. As such, this article adds a crucial element to the potential for social networks, as it implies a heavier responsibility for the creators of social networks. Since social networks are primarily computer or technology based, they are a significant piece of the cognitive experience, one which should be designed to facilitate interaction with peers and the world at large. This requires utilization of tools such as comment boxes, user forums, and status posts, tools put into place by social network designers to control the online experience. While this does provide creators with a lot of power, it also requires a great deal of responsibility, as social networking designers ought not take advantage of their users through the elements they incorporate in their websites.

English, Tammy and Carstensen, Laura. “Selective Narrowing of Social Networks Across Adulthood is Associated with Improved Emotional Experience in Daily Life.” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 48, no. 2 (2014) : 195-202.

Tammy English and Laura Carstensen’s article considers the use of social networks across age groups, explaining the changes that come in online friendships as users age. Using the socioemotional selectivity theory as a guideline, English and

Carstensen present a study that surveyed 184 participants using a Social Convoy Questionnaire. In this survey, participants were asked to consider their “friends” or contacts on social networks and place them in one of three circles based on the closeness of the friendship between the participant and fellow social network user. Based on these rankings, subjects indicated the emotions associated with each ring of connection, depicting the emotional experience that they exhibited with said persons. Results showed that as age increased, the number of peripheral or less close relationships on social networks decreased; in addition, older users showed an overall more positive affect or interpretation of the emotional tone of their social networks. This article was instrumental in consideration of the overall experience of social networks, as it helps support the notion that social networks as they are currently used by young adults are a force that is often detrimental. Although there are many facets that play into happiness and well-being, it is quite interesting to see that overall, regardless of external life circumstances, the older users still found themselves engaging in a more positive experience on social networks than did their younger counterparts. This suggests a need for further examination of the use of these websites by young adults, providing an important starting point of discussion for this project.

Forest, Amanda, and Wood, Joanne. “When Social Networking is Not Working: Individuals with Low Self-Esteem Recognize but Do Not Reap the Benefits of Self-Disclosure on Facebook.” *Psychological Science* 23, no. 3 (2012) : 295-301.

In this article, Amanda Forest and Joanne Wood considered social networking users who exhibit low self-esteem, discussing the potential benefits of self-disclosure on

one particular social networking platform, Facebook. Considering self-disclosure to be a necessary element in intimacy and relationships, Forest and Wood hypothesized that self-disclosure is a potentially beneficial process for individuals to maintain relationships. However, through three studies of undergraduate Facebook users with low self-esteem, Forest and Wood determined that users with low self-esteem could see the potential for self-disclosure but could not engage in said practices on Facebook more often than not. This is a valuable addition to the discussion at hand as it suggests that many social networking users do engage in the self-protecting practices that I have hypothesized. Although not all users do refrain from fully disclosing their news, life events, etc., on social networks, this study shows that a significant portion of the population is unable to fully engage with their social networking peers, as they fear devaluation from their peers and as such pull back from the communication platform. In light of Forest and Wood's findings in conjunction with the philosophical literature on self-esteem, I have been able to further my discussion on social network behavior, critically examining the significance of self-esteem in promoting (or hindering) full disclosure and openness on said websites.

Thomaes, Sander; Bushman, Brad; Stegge, Hedy; and Olthof, Tjeert. "Trumping Shame by Blasts of Noise: Narcissism, Self-Esteem, Shame, and Aggression in Young Adolescents." *Child Development* 79, no. 6 (2008) : 1792-1801.

Sander Thomaes, Brad Bushman, Hedy Stegge, and Tjeert Olthof provide an intriguing assessment of social interaction among young adults in their article "Trumping Shame by Blasts of Noise: Narcissism, Self-Esteem, Shame, and Aggression in Young Adolescents." In this article, the authors discussed an experiment wherein 163 young

adults were tested to examine how self-views influenced aggression. The experiment showed that overwhelmingly there was a connection between shame and aggressive behaviors; in particular, narcissistic individuals were shown to reflect on the self, using that image to guide social interaction, and often engaged in self-protecting behaviors when they saw shame as a potential result of peers' behaviors. This article provides concrete data to supplement the various philosophical accounts of shame, wherein philosophers had a tendency to hold that self-esteem and peer evaluation were intrinsically linked. To this extent, the article is useful to the discussion at hand as it shows that many younger individuals become so concerned with their social standing that feelings of insufficiency and self-doubt arise, feelings which later impact behavior between peers. Although this conversation was not conducted in light of social networks, it is readily applicable to said resources, as it provides some potential insight as to why young adults may act as they currently do while on social networks. While not all social networking users fall into the narcissistic category that this article linked to self-protecting behaviors in light of shame, there may be a deeper link between self-evaluation and behavior (particularly with regards to public displays) that explains the behaviors of the aforementioned users.

Research Questions

The main research question of my thesis is “In what ways do social networking websites impact their users?” With this research question, it is important to note that social networking websites are not inherently harmful or beneficial; rather, it is their use and implementation by the users that results in social networks impacting individuals. In particular, I aim to discuss the emotional repercussions of social networks, focusing on the development of shame and negative self-esteem as a result of using social networks. Keeping this in mind, the main research question can be subdivided into two further questions:

- (1) How do the interactive elements available through social networks influence individual identity?
- (2) How do the interactive opportunities available through social networks impact real-world relationships between individual users?

In regards to the element of shame, three separate questions come into play. They are as follows:

- (1) What is the genesis/origin of shame?
- (2) How do social networks evoke shame?
- (3) How does this shame in turn impact self-esteem?

As the paper also discusses relationships and personal identity, it will question many things, listed below:

- (1) How, if at all, do our offline identities differ from our online identities?
- (2) How do our self-projected identities change our relationships?

To reiterate, the main purpose of this research is to examine the ways in which social networking impacts young adult users. Because of this, articles on shame, identity, and social networks in general were used, many of which also go further into detail on the topics of self-esteem and friendship. It is necessary to note that this paper is limited in that not much research has currently been done on this topic in the field of philosophy (although, as was previously noted, articles from other fields have been included as they help further the discussion). As such, a patchwork style of research was used to examine critical topics, which will be discussed in further detail in the Methodology section.

Methodology

As this paper is a philosophical examination of a critical ethical issue, it requires a unique methodology distinct from the typical surveys or questionnaires. As such, I began the research by narrowing my scope to a select type of social networking sites. Generally, social networks may be used for one of five purposes: (1) to reflect the personality and identity of the user who created the account, (2) to act as a parody account (such as an average individual making an account that has posts similar to what a celebrity like Beyoncé would post), or (3) to reflect the identity of a purely fictional being (such as is popular with roleplaying accounts on social networks such as Tumblr) (4) to gather consumer data (5) to expose consumers to products suitable to their data profiles. For the purposes of this paper, only the first category will be examined, as it is the only one that truly reflects the identity of the user who creates the account; this is essential to the paper, as one of the main goals of the research was to see how social networks impact identity. In addition, dating websites will be excluded from the discussion, as the paper focuses on the nature of general relationships as opposed to their romantic counterparts.

Following the determination of the social networking sites that will be used, I examine philosophical articles that discuss shame and identity, particularly considering philosopher David Velleman's paper. This begins my conversation, as his paper sparked the idea that the way in which we present ourselves is greatly controlled or altered by the shame we feel. As was previously mentioned, I found it necessary to use a patchwork approach in which I examine individual elements of the topic at hand and then consider how each of these separate issues comes into play with regards to the larger conversation on social networking (as there are virtually no articles that examine the topic in its entirety). Finally, I also found articles that

discuss social networks themselves, again using the articles I did because of limited resources, as social networking is a relatively new phenomenon that has not been studied extensively in philosophy. To select these articles, I searched the most reputable journal indexes in the field, Philosophers' Index and JSTOR. In collecting resources from the fields of sociology and communication, I referenced EBSCO, one of the top research indexes for those topics.

A Culture of Communication:

A Critical Examination of Modern Implications of Social Networking Sites

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a drastic increase in the use of social networking websites. While these websites offer an invaluable resource, as they allow us to overcome the limits of geography and time to maintain relationships, they are also a very dangerous tool if used improperly. Many academic discussions of the online realm fail to focus on the use of social networks by young adults in particular, and as such provide a general overview of usage which neglects a very peculiar phenomenon that has plagued this generation's youth. Observation shows that in today's society, as teens use these websites, they have a tendency to censor themselves, portraying an unrealistic version of their lives – essentially a highlight reel. This detrimental behavior, as it currently stands, causes individuals to be unable to share their “real” selves (if they choose to adhere to the norms and use social networking websites in this typical way). In this paper I argue that using social networking in this way has resulted in unmerited or unwarranted shame that negatively influences users' self-esteem; in addition, I will argue that the current use of social networking can be quite detrimental to both identity and relationships with others. I will also propose that we change the way we portray ourselves on the internet and how we perceive others' social networking profiles in order to facilitate a more open and accepting environment in which others no longer feel the need to censor themselves.

Social Networks

Before beginning our discussion, it is pivotal to clearly define what websites I am including in the term “social networks.” For the purpose of this paper, a social network, or social media website, refers to any website that facilitates communication, assists in the transmission of

information, and connects individuals throughout the online world. Examples of popular social networks include Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram, to name a few. Typically social networks include a profile in which one can construct their identity, or an imaginary identity, to display, using a combination of pictures, status updates, messaging systems, and other means to interact with fellow users. Social networks often include the use of an avatar or profile picture that represents the given user. This paper will focus strictly on social networks in which individuals construct a profile through which they interact with others, and will exclude dating websites, as the aim of this paper is to discuss how online interaction impacts general relationships as opposed to romantic ones. In addition, the paper will focus on the behaviors of young adults (from high school to their late 20s), as they most readily exhibit the behaviors described. Although older individuals may demonstrate similar behaviors, there is also a notable difference in the use of these websites amongst older and younger generations, one which suggests that the problems described below may not be universally present in older users.

Although social networks vary in their uses, they are all ultimately used as a means of expression of one's person, whether real or fictional/constructed, by which one can communicate and interact with other individuals. Most social networks include some sort of posting feature, which may vary from network to network. Twitter, for example, allows "tweets" or status updates limited to 140 characters; hyperlinks, images, and videos may also be posted. Instagram, on the other hand, is generally a platform upon which individuals may share photographs or brief video clips, including (if they choose) a short caption of the image. Both Tumblr and Facebook allow for longer text posts, sharing video clips, links to websites, photos, etc. All of the aforementioned websites include some sort of feature that allows individuals to "like" or

“favorite” the posts of others, as well as a messaging system for direct messages from one user to another.

Censorship of Self at the Click of a Button

As profiles on social networking websites are constructed by the users, the personas depicted may either mirror the personality of the user at hand, be a parody account, or be reflective of a completely fictional/imaginary person.⁶ For the purposes of this paper, only those that portray the identity of the user who owns the profile will be considered. On these accounts, one must question which “self” is being portrayed. As individuals have the opportunity to post statuses, pictures, etc. from their profiles, they also are able to control how much (or how little) information is actually revealed. This suggests that the online and offline selves may be separate.

In recent years, as social network use has become more prevalent, there has been a rise in individuals who selectively post on networks based on the norms of society. Especially as older generations begin to interact with younger ones on websites such as Facebook and Twitter, and employers have begun to scan applicants and employees’ profiles, individuals have begun to censor themselves or restrict what they post on given networks. Facebook has taken note of this, providing a new feature by which one can “block” an entire list of people (be it friends, family, people who go to a certain school, etc.) from seeing a post. This allows individuals to decide who sees what information, but many have found even that to be an insufficient means of privacy, as technology is not infallible and a glitch in the network could result in someone seeing a post that was not intended for their eyes. As such, many have gone to even greater lengths to censor

⁶ In regards to making a parody account, an individual may, for example, make a fake account in which she uses the image/identity of Beyoncé and posts things similar to what she believes Beyoncé would post, rather than posting things that reflect her own identity. An account of a fictional or imaginary person may be used, for example, as some means of role-playing with other individuals, or may simply portray an entity that the creator designs and wishes to represent.

themselves on social networking websites, posting only statuses deemed as appropriate by others. These posts tend to be ones that are more positive, depicting accomplishments such as good grades, promotions, engagements, etc. If they are negative, they are often done in a clever or funny way that elicits more “likes” than would a traditionally negative post, such as one complaining about a low grade on a test; those posters who go beyond this norm, “complaining” or posting things with explicit language/content, are subject to increased societal disapproval, and may be reported to the proper authorities on said social networks, resulting in removal of the posts if they are found to be impermissible.

The motivation for this censorship of self is twofold; in one regard, individuals censor themselves in order to protect certain aspects of their identity from their peers, family, employers, or other individuals (much like they do in offline interaction through things such as dressing in a particular manner, curbing the use of inappropriate language, etc.), and on the other hand individuals censor themselves in order to make themselves look better than they actually are. In the first case, individuals often seek to avoid disapproval, or to circumvent negative consequences in regards to their careers. In the latter instance, many individuals seek to come across as more successful or otherwise better than they actually are. As such, they fail to reveal negative aspects, such as failed exams, breakups, emotional trauma, etc., in efforts to seem like they are flourishing as much as their peers seem to.

This censorship of self is not to say that the identity shown on social networks is false; on the contrary, the events depicted are overwhelmingly true, but tend to be similar to a highlight reel, in which individuals only share the best moments of their day. In this regard, the online self has become merely a fragment of the poster’s real identity, in which others fail to receive a

comprehensive understanding of the person behind the profile.⁷ For example, I know of an individual (who, for purposes of this discussion, will be referred to as Jamie) who currently suffers from depression and an anxiety disorder. As a result of these mental illnesses, Jamie frequently has feelings of inadequacy, is overwhelmed by debilitating waves of anxiety wherein she is bedridden for days at a time, and is often plagued by difficult personal problems. However, looking at her profile, one would assume that Jamie does not have any of the aforementioned difficulties, as her profile shows no mention of hard times; rather, Jamie's profile is filled with statuses about internship opportunities, upcoming publications, and photos of friends. Even the more negative posts, such as rants about overwhelming amounts of school work or statuses about family problems such as illness, fail to suggest any overarching problems.

This means of censorship, wherein the individual hides an aspect of him or herself for personal reasons as opposed to for societal pressures (i.e. because of work, family members, etc.) is distinctly different from the aforementioned censorship of self, particularly due to the level of choice involved. When interacting offline, we often decide to change our behaviors based on the group of individuals we are surrounded by, thus acting in ways appropriate to the setting at hand. For example, if I am in class I may choose to dress more presentably than I would if I were going to a club, and I may refrain from wandering about the room as I would if I was at home. These acts are not necessarily censorship of self, but rather are a planned, precise means of control in which individuals attempt to be shown in a respectable light. However, this differs greatly from what occurs on social networks, as often the content individuals refrain from posting is not

⁷ This is by no means meant to imply that one has a right to a comprehensive profile. However, it is important to note that incomplete profiles can be harmful to both the poster and the viewer, as the user has to portray an inauthentic version of self, and the viewer is deceived by only being shown what is in essence only part of the story. While, in the case of the example of Jamie, she is by no means obligated to share the details of her personal struggle, the absence of the true ability to reveal them without negative judgment is quite detrimental. In having the freedom to disclose her problems, through a revised social network structure, Jamie would be given back her autonomy, as she was once again able to freely make a decision as to whether or not she revealed the good as well as the bad.

anything inappropriate for that context but instead it is withheld to avoid negative assessment from peers. For example, I may refrain from posting a negative status about my grades, something which I would readily discuss with the same friends I have on a social network in offline interactions; while the topic itself is not something I restrict prima facie based on the context (as I would with my manner of dress or behavior at work), it is something that I may refrain from including in my profile in order to come across as being able to measure up to the accomplishments of my friends.

As Sherry Turkle discusses in her essay entitled “Identity Crisis,” individuals online are able to construct profiles surrounding any number of aspects of their personalities, thus portraying a persona which serves as “a chance for all of us who aren’t actors to play [with] masks. And think about the masks we wear every day.”⁸ By this, Turkle means that individuals play various roles in everyday life, and that they can explore any one of those roles, create a new one, or use a combination of roles, to interact with others online. This mirrors life offline, wherein we may wear certain “hats” based on our settings and the tasks at hand. For example, a woman may act as a mother to her children, a lawyer while at work, and a wife when alone with her spouse at the end of a long day, but it would not necessarily mix these facets of her persona in every setting. The “unitary view of self” is often impractical, and instead individuals experience a breakdown of identity wherein they engage in an online society while attending to selected aspects of their personas.⁹ However, when an individuals’ choice is removed from the equation as was previously discussed, and he/she is forced to engage with others with only the

⁸ Sherry Turkle, “Identity Crisis,” in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1995), 99-109.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

aspects of his/her personality that are liked by others, a dangerous cycle is entered wherein personal identity suffers.

The way by which individuals censor themselves on these social networking sites is extremely detrimental, as it evokes shame (and as a result, lowers self-esteem), harms interpersonal relations, and through extension, perpetuates the idea that users must censor themselves on social networks. In one regard, the societal norm of censoring one's self on social networks threatens authenticity, as individuals are forced to constantly monitor their personal thoughts and experiences, selectively choosing which aspects are acceptable in the eyes of society. This thwarts personal expression, blocking individuals from truly expressing themselves and exploring their personalities in detail, thus stifling personal growth and development. At a time when youth are just discovering who they are in relation to the world, this added layer of societal pressure to conform and censor is quite dangerous, as it places limits on self-discovery that can lead to a less robust understanding of self.

A Society of Shame

As individuals buy into a system of censorship and try to compete with the posts of others, they begin to feel shame if they are, for some reason, unable to match the accomplishments of their peers. Constantly viewing posts that brag about 4.0 grade point averages, summer internships in AIDS clinics in Africa, or research publications cause individuals to reflect upon their own success, and if they are unable to measure up they often feel shame and inadequacy. As J. David Velleman points out in his essay, "The Genesis of Shame," "to feel shame is to feel vulnerable to a particular negative assessment, as less than a self-presenting person."¹⁰ By this, Velleman means that we feel shame when we come across as

¹⁰ J. David Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame," in *Ethics: Essential Readings in Moral Theory*, ed. George Sher (Routledge, 2012), 626-642.

somehow less than we believe we are supposed to. Velleman continues by explaining that shame “has no place for an assessment of the self in terms of ethics, honor, etiquette, or other specific dimensions of personal excellence...judgments are associated with shame because they often serve as grounds for relegating aspects of ourselves to the private realm.”¹¹ In other words, Velleman holds that shame results from private aspects entering into the public; as such, things that are meant to be public, such as behavior on social networks, or things that are readily observable (conduct in class, the outfits you wear to the grocery store, etc.) do not and should not, under Velleman’s view, evoke shame.

Although Velleman is right in identifying shame as a vulnerability to negative assessment, he missteps in assuming that this vulnerability only comes out of failures of privacy and unintentional self-exposure. While both contribute greatly to feelings of shame, shame can also originate in feeling as though you cannot present yourself as you believe you should be able to. His discussion is quite narrow in that he proposes that shame comes about through failures of privacy; to that extent, he rules out any situations which are intentionally public matters, thus making it impossible to feel shame in a myriad of situations in which it seems as though people actually do in everyday life, such as when an athlete fails to win a game against an opponent who is notoriously worse at the sport. Velleman recognizes that shame involves assessing yourself as less than self-presenting, but fails to recognize that it may include being unable to be self-presenting in comparison to others. He comes close to acknowledging this when he claims that “which failures of self-presentation actually cause a subject to have or to feel this vulnerability can be modified by social norms,” as he understands that society may dictate that certain things are shameful to publicize and should be kept private instead.¹² This may include not only things

¹¹ Ibid., 633.

¹² Ibid., 635.

like sexual conduct or foul language, but could extend to negatively-themed posts on social networking sites or posts that simply reflect accomplishments that seem minute in comparison to others'. For example, if one sees dozens of posts depicting peoples' grade point averages being a 3.5 or higher, he may feel shame in posting about a 3.0 grade point average, as he is unable to compete with or reach the same level of success as others (or even as he believes he should be able to). Likewise, if my friend Alex (name has been changed) won a tournament of the popular card game, Magic the Gathering, he may feel foolish publishing that when his newsfeed was filled with posts about graduate program acceptances, job offers, and the like, as he may feel that his accomplishment would be frowned upon if his peers thought he was too old to be playing such games.

In examining the phenomenological analyses of shame presented by Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Simone de Beauvoir, we gain a very different definition of the concept. In Sartre's account, which depicts shame as ontological provocation (something provoked by being or existence, in this case, of others), shame arises through feeling as if there is some Other that acts as a spectator on one's actions. Whether or not this Other actually exists is irrelevant, as merely the sensation of being monitored causes one to understand that his appearance is subject to criticism. As Sartre explains, "I am ashamed *of myself before* the Other."¹³ In other words, Sartre believes that one feels shame towards themselves when his actions or appearance are observed (and often criticized) by a second party, which he refers to as the Other. This explanation of shame focuses on how one's actions evoke negative judgment from others, thus resulting in shame in the agent in question.

¹³ Lisa Guenther, "Shame and the Temporality of Social Life," *Continental Philosophy Review* 44 (2011) : 23-39.

Levinas provides a very different account of shame as opposed to Sartre, instead explaining it as ethical provocation in which shame is evoked because of a need for an ethical or moral system. Levinas' shame arises from "a feeling of remorse and responsibility for the suffering of others, whether or not I have done anything personally to cause this suffering."¹⁴ In other words, as other individuals are in pain, Levinas believes that one may feel shame because of their care for others. However, this definition of shame seems inadequate, as it sounds more akin to guilt or sympathy than it does to shame. As it focuses solely on the existence of others and their suffering, and neglects the situation of the one actually feeling said shame, it fails to encompass the true depths of the emotion. His account is twofold; in the first, Levinas goes as far as to include the knowledge of the burden of "having-to-be," but this burden is still entirely too centered on the problems of the world as a whole rather than on the individual.¹⁵ In other words, his first account centers on the idea that we must exist, as individuals in the world, and have a sense of shared burden. In the second account, shame is a sign of "ethical provocation by the Other," in which Levinas returns to the initial ideas proposed in which he feels remorse because of the problems of mankind, which come into being because of the freedom and power of the individual.¹⁶ Essentially, his second account of shame proposes that shame arises because we feel as though we are somehow responsible for the pain of others, as that pain stems from our ability to act (and interact with others) based on varying systems of ethics. Because of this freedom to act, Levinas believes that we may feel shame as our behavior negatively impacts (or potentially impacts) others.

¹⁴ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

The third account of shame discussed is that of Beauvoir, shame as political provocation. This account says that “shame is lived in the body,” and that “the very exposure that opens the problem of shame also makes possible the only adequate response: solidarity with others who both hold open the future for me and—for that very reason—are capable of blocking it.”¹⁷ This shame arises because we feel, to a certain extent, an ethical responsibility and political solidarity that may be disrupted by our actions, thoughts, etc. For example, one may feel shame when he quickly chooses a political candidate for mayor without researching the candidate’s views or beliefs, only for the candidate to turn out to be corrupt and detrimental to society. While this, like the accounts of Sartre and Levinas, can certainly be one reason that shame develops, it neglects to consider the more minor, personal situations in which we may become ashamed (something that the other two accounts focus on almost entirely).

It is my belief that a combination of all the above accounts may be necessary.¹⁸ Like many other emotions, shame is quite complex, not arising out of strictly one situation or another; as such, using a combination of the proposed definitions allows a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted emotion. Perhaps the simplest way to define shame is to consider it as a knowledge or belief that one should (or could) do or be either more or something better than he currently is, whether incited by judgment of Others (be it real or perceived) or by self-reflection.

As both many philosophers such as Velleman and Lisa Guenther concede, shame has great potential to impact our actions. Velleman makes this apparent throughout his conversation, as he discusses how individuals must monitor the way they present themselves, and based on the shame they feel they may be able to reassess their presentation in order to prevent social

¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

disapproval. Guenther, on the other hand, turns the potential of shame outward, explaining that “we only have a future...if we respond to the ontological, ethical and political provocations of shame in a way that shifts the focal point from preserving our own self-relation—our place in the world...—towards a responsible relation with others.”¹⁹ Both suggestions for the use of shame, however, are not mutually exclusive; there is no reason for shame to be unable to impact both our personal conduct and the way we interact with society. As such, it seems as though the best use of shame is to allow it to serve as a reminder to monitor conduct not only on a personal level, but on a grander scale as well. Taking into account the times in which one feels shame provides the opportunity to alter behavior in order to prevent feeling said shame in the future, thus adapting to the needs of society and of the individual.

Although I can allow that shame has potential to impact our actions for the better, it seems as though it does not have a place in the realm of social networks, as it merely functions to devastate self-esteem, hinder relationships, and cultivate a society in which individuals enter into an endless cycle of censorship and unnecessarily competitive behaviors.²⁰ This idea is supported through the studies of psychologists Tammy English and Laura Carstensen, who found through experiments comparing the use of social networks in younger and older users that “there was a better emotional tone associated with the social networks of older adults.”²¹ In these experiments, English and Carstensen used surveys and questionnaires to collect data from participants over the course of a week regarding their social network usage, a procedure which was then repeated with the same participants five and ten years following the initial data

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For example, shame may change an individual for the better if, upon seeing one’s body and realizing that it is not even remotely close to where the individual wants it to be, he feels shame that inspires him to live a healthier lifestyle (if only to eradicate the shame that he feels towards himself).

²¹ Tammy English and Laura L. Carstensen, “Selective Narrowing of Social Networks Across Adulthood is Associated with Improved Emotional Experience in Daily Life,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 48, no. 2 (2014) : 195-202.

collection. In younger individuals' social networks, wherein a more negative emotional tone resulted in a more negative overall affect of users, negative feelings such as shame helped further a detraction from "overall emotional well-being."²²

The notion of social networks evoking shame was also discussed in a recent study on the impact of social networks on narcissism and shame, wherein researchers found that young adolescents "tend to interpret social situations in terms of how they reflect on the self, and they engage in self-regulatory strategies to protect self-esteem when they need to."²³ In this study, several youth were asked to use a website designed for the purposes of this experiment wherein they could see the accomplishments of their peers and compare themselves to said rankings on a game. In cases where individuals did not measure up or out-perform their peers, the study showed that most users felt shame (based on feelings of embarrassment, inadequacy, etc.) which led to acts of "shame-induced aggression [which] can likely be viewed as defensive effort to maintain self-worth."²⁴ Through being behind their peers, these participants tended to exhibit more aggressive behaviors when they felt ashamed that their accomplishments were insufficient, furthering my claim that the shame social network users feel is detrimental.

Feelin' Good: Self-Esteem in Relation to Social Networks

Social networks have long been considered something which could "serve as a 'social lubricant' that helps people who struggle with relationships—the shy, the lonely, and people with low self-esteem—connect with others in a comfortable environment."²⁵ Before discussing how

²² Ibid., 200.

²³ Sander Thomaes, Brad J. Bushman, Hedy Stegge, and Tjeert Olthof, "Trumping Shame by Blasts of Noise: Narcissism, Self-Esteem, Shame, and Aggression in Young Adolescents," *Child Development* 79, no. 6 (2008) : 1792-1801.

²⁴ Ibid., 1797.

²⁵ Amanda L. Forest and Joanne V. Wood, "When Social Networking is Not Working: Individuals with Low Self-Esteem Recognize but Do Not Reap the Benefits of Self-Disclosure on Facebook," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 3 (2012) : 295-301.

self-esteem is impacted through the use of social networks, however, it is necessary to define self-esteem and how it develops. John Deigh defines self-esteem as “what one makes of oneself or does with one’s life,” specifically as it pertains to one’s “doings and development.”²⁶ He goes on to add several qualifications to his definition, including that self-esteem must be active and have direction, necessitating that an individual with self-esteem have values or ideals by which they conduct themselves.²⁷ Deigh’s notion of self-esteem focuses on successes or failures of conduct; when one does good or commendable things, his/her self-esteem should, under Deigh’s account, be more strong, whereas when one fails to act in accordance with his/her goals and reach success, low self-esteem tends to result.

However, I reject this as a necessary condition of self-esteem, classifying it instead as general feelings of positivity in regards to one’s body, future, and/or current sense of worth in life. I disagree with Deigh that self-esteem need center around solely the accomplishments one has (or will have) achieved, or (as Deigh discusses) his/her “doings and development,” and instead see self-esteem as something more focused on character and personality. His notion of self-esteem entails that “one regards one’s aims and ideals as worthy and...believes that one is well suited to pursue them.”²⁸ While he does consider values and character as part of self-esteem, he considers them in light of said values making one well-suited to pursue goals, something which I believe is inadequate to use as a definition, as it implies that individuals who aren’t pursuing goals and being successful cannot have self-esteem (which, through observation of society, is not always the case). In other words, as Deigh holds that self-esteem is necessarily

²⁶ John Deigh, “Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique,” *Ethics* 93, no. 2 (1983) : 225-245.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

act-centered, he rules out many individuals who may not be pursuing goals (and thus, under his account, building their self-esteem), a notion which is quite problematic.

Deigh goes on to explain that self-esteem can be lost through developing an unfavorable self-assessment due to “a change in either one’s regard for the worthiness of one’s aims and ideals or one’s belief in one’s ability to achieve them.”²⁹ Although society typically regards shame as signifying the loss of a positive self-assessment, Deigh rejects this notion, explaining that in cases where self-esteem is lowered, individuals may be disappointed in themselves but not ashamed. Especially in cases where the agent in question fails at something that doesn’t matter to those he is in a relationship with, such as failing at a tennis tournament when peers are apathetic towards the sport, Deigh sees no reason for shame to arise. As such, under Deigh’s view shame arises when there is a significant failure that is relevant or pertinent to others. For example, if I failed a philosophy exam in the class of a professor I’d had for several courses, under Deigh’s view I would feel shame, as I had experienced a failure in a situation in which I should have excelled. The presence of interested company (in the case of the failed exam, my professor) is what incites shame, and Deigh holds that it is a separate notion from self-esteem. However, Deigh fails to consider that one may feel ashamed when he fails to accomplish something he is supposed to, even if no one else is invested in this accomplishment; for example, if a man studies for an exam for hours on end and is confident in the content, but receives a failing grade as opposed to the expected A, he may be ashamed of his shortcomings. While he will also feel disappointment, there is a certain degree of shame that comes, especially when considering what the reactions of others *would* be if they knew and/or cared about the given failure.

²⁹ Ibid.

If we reject Deigh's notion of self-esteem and instead adopt a broader definition, under which self-esteem is essentially an all-encompassing feeling of positivity upon self-reflection as opposed to an act-centered development, then it is easy to see how shame arises when interacting with social networks as they currently stand. As one scrolls through endless posts, the vast majority of which have been carefully constructed to reflect a more positive image than is realistic, it is almost inevitable that he will feel his self-esteem drop if he is unable to compete. If, for example, a teenager sees that most of his peers are out with friends on a Friday night, he may feel inadequate, wondering why he too is not out socializing. This lowered self-esteem causes him to feel ashamed of himself, as he does not feel he can compare to the (often false or hyperbolized) positive image of others, which results in a never-ending cycle of inadequacy in which the agent feels the need to censor himself to measure up, but knows that the identity he creates is not all-encompassing. In addition, as others censor themselves and fail to post things that depict any shortcomings, failures, or downfalls, those looking at others' seemingly perfect posts may experience a drop in self-esteem, as they know of their own struggles and wonder why no one else expresses similar issues.

Through providing individuals with a safe, comfortable outlet through which they can communicate with others, "it seems possible that [social networks such as] Facebook could help people with low self-esteem lead more fulfilling social lives by providing an opportunity for self-disclosure, which is considered crucial to the development of intimacy."³⁰ While this is a noble aim of social networks, in that many believe they boost the self-esteem of individuals, studies have shown the opposite to be true. For instance, as psychologists Amanda Forest and Joanne Wood discuss, many individuals using social networks are "especially fearful of disapproval or

³⁰ Forest and Wood, *Psychological Science*, 295.

of being devalued” and as such develop a “self-protective orientation [which] seems to guide many behaviors” on these websites.³¹ As Wood and Forest’s studies suggested, although many found social networks (Facebook in particular) as a “safe, appealing place for self-disclosure,” those with low self-esteem were more hesitant to self-disclose information on said websites, thus perpetuating a level of distance between users and furthering the low self-esteem of said users.³²

From Followers to Friends: Social Networks and Relationships

Peers on social networks are often labeled friends (like on Facebook) or followers (like on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram), implying a much closer relationship than is actually available in reality. However, there is a limit to how close individuals may truly be, especially in cases where they censor themselves as previously discussed. When choosing to only reveal a certain portion of an identity, the ability to truly form a deep relationship is lowered, as individuals become friends with the illusion of a person, falsely assuming that it is the true essence of that individual. This is not to say that people must reveal every solitary detail of their lives in order to have a friendship; on the contrary, the act of oversharing is often equally detrimental to a relationship as is sharing too little information. However, it is pivotal to be open and honest in order to have a successful relationship, as communication is a crucial element of friendship that allows it to become more sustainable. If one chooses to censor himself, removing any negative (and often human or natural) elements from view, it hinders the ability to have an honest, complete friendship. Although friendship is possible on social networks, a true reflection of identity is just one of many pieces missing from the puzzle that enables friendship to occur.

As Shannon Vallor discusses, Aristotle’s original notion of a friendship of virtue can be seen in part in online friendship. Aristotle’s account of friendship requires four central themes:

³¹ Ibid., 296.

³² Ibid., 300.

reciprocity, empathy, self-knowledge, and the shared life. Although the first three elements are present in online friendships, the shared life is yet another element missing from social networks. Reciprocity, which must be “nurtured and habituated in order to reach the full expression of... ‘normal’ ...sociality in thought and behavior,” requires that the individual be “oriented in others,” resulting in a constant “social give and take” in which both persons in the friendship make efforts to maintain the relationship.³³ This is evident in social networks, as both individuals must interact with one another’s accounts in some way in order to successfully use the websites. As Vallor describes it, “one of the distinguishing features of new social media...is their ability to facilitate reciprocal exchanges of a socially gratifying sort.”³⁴ Although individuals on many websites may simply follow an account without being followed back, those accounts which mutually interact with one another develop a stronger bond, in which both users can consider themselves in some level of a relationship, similar to those offline.

Empathy, like reciprocity, is also evident in social networking. Empathy refers to “the emotive/perceptual capacity to feel *with* another sentient being, to co-experience...the joys and sufferings of another.”³⁵ Displays of empathy on social networks look different than in offline interaction, as one cannot, for example, express support through a hug or an affirming pat on the back as they could in real life. However, they are still evident through means of commenting, likes, personal messages, and posts to others’ profiles. As individuals post things that would typically elicit empathy, such as complaints of stress, news of promotions, or other successes, they are often met with an influx of “likes” in which people nonverbally express support and encouragement. Comments of congratulations or concern, or posts reflecting similar themes, are

³³ Shannon Vallor, “Flourishing on Facebook: Virtue Friendship & New Social Media,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 14, no. 3 (2012) : 185-199.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

commonplace, showing that empathy is often expressed in social networks. Although it does look different than offline interaction, it is done in a way that is often more easy to complete than offline interaction, as individuals can express empathy to loved ones who they cannot or will not see in person with the simple click of a button.

The third aspect of Aristotle's definition of a friendship of virtue that is evident in social networks is self-knowledge. This essentially reflects a "lifelong process of cognitive and perceptual development in which I come to have increasingly more accurate, holistic, and effective representations of my being in relation to the world."³⁶ This boils down to a "matter of understanding properly where I fit in the world" which is facilitated easily through social networks.³⁷ Although Vallor contends that not all friendships on social networks do assist in self-knowledge, she reveals that many people go online to reach out to others, whether because they are marginalized or isolated in their own community or because they simply find online interaction to be more convenient; through this interaction, they are able to gain a newfound understanding of their place in the world, regardless of limits imposed by geography or offline society. This self-knowledge looks different than that imagined by Aristotle, but that is not surprising, as social networks are a relatively recent invention that was unfathomable to those of Aristotle's day. So long as the friendships experienced online include "exploration of shared cognitions about a shared life," it seems as though they can still fit in to Aristotle's view of self-knowledge as it relates to today's technological society.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., 193.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 195.

Although social networks do allow for three of the four aspects of friendship discussed, they fail to account for a shared life, which is described as living together and is a “social achievement that embodies the highest forms of friendship and community...which grounds the concept of eudaimonia or ‘human flourishing’.”³⁹⁴⁰ Through continual action and interaction, friendships are able to facilitate a community in which individuals are able to reach a level of human flourishing in which they truly reach happiness and contentment. However, this concept of shared life seems to be absent in social networking, as individuals are mainly focused on their own lives as opposed to living as a community. Instead, as Vallor explains, social networks allow for “sharing *about* lives,” in which individuals communicate information about their own lives rather than “performing together the activities that make up a life.”⁴¹ Although this varies based on the website, I believe that Vallor is overall correct in assuming that social networks merely enable sharing about lives as opposed to living a shared life. Much of social networking involves maintaining previously established relationships, expressing oneself, and quickly checking up on loved ones, as opposed to using the websites as a tool to create and promote friendship and a collaborative life. As such, the nature of social networks must change if they are to truly enable friendship to flourish. As they currently stand, the friendships in social networks (even those established offline and continued through social networks) often rely on inauthentic

³⁹ One potential criticism of the application of Aristotle’s views to this argument is that Aristotle insisted that we need to live together, or (at the very least) near one another in order to live a shared life and have a friendship of virtue. However, it is necessary to note that the nature of communication and interaction is vastly different than it was in his time. For example, whereas Aristotle’s group of friends would have been a smaller, more local group, limited to those he encountered at home or in his travels (which were limited due to primitive transportation), friendship circles today can stretch worldwide, thanks to changes in technology in regards to travel and communication. As the nature of communication has evolved, so too must Aristotle’s theory if it is to be a candidate for modern consideration and discussion.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 196.

⁴¹ Ibid.

lifestyles, facades, and dishonesty, none of which facilitates the eudaimonia that is necessary to friendship.

The Future of Facebook: How Should We Use Social Networks?

With all of the problematic effects of social networks, it seems to be instinctual to abolish them rather than attempting to resolve the myriad of problems that accompany them. This causes us to call to question the debate of the nature of social networks- are they good or are they detrimental? As Yoni Van Den Eede discusses, social networks are often seen as either an “emancipating force or a damning threat” despite the fact that it is difficult to categorize the technology as being completely one or the other.⁴² Eede discusses that social networking sites enable a (sometimes nonverbal) conversation to occur, in which individuals can speak on a one-to-many or many-to-many basis as opposed to a traditional one-to-one interaction.⁴³ Although this conversational nature of social networking websites is sometimes beneficial, it can also be detrimental; as such it is necessary to converse about social networks prior to making any concrete judgments. As such, Eede proposes using a “technique of suspended judgment” under which we can assess the benefits and drawbacks of social networks, then making a claim based on a comprehensive understanding of the technology.

As was previously mentioned, social networking sites enable a conversation that Eede describes as a “conversation of mankind” in which people can find “new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking.”⁴⁴ It often gives a voice to the voiceless, and helps enable individuals to overcome barriers of geography, time, and language, in order to initiate and maintain friendships that are vital to our very existence. However, many argue that social

⁴² Yoni Van Den Eede, “‘Conversation of Mankind’ or ‘Idle Talk’: A Pragmatist Approach to Social Networking Sites,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 12, no. 1 (2010) : 195-206.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

networks merely facilitate idle talk, in which individuals are controlled by the everyday, mundane happenings of daily life rather than truly speaking about things that matter on a grander scale. Under this view, much discussion is merely talking for the sake of talking, continuing a conversation unnecessarily. For example, having a conversation about a meme or BuzzFeed quiz posted to a Facebook profile may be categorized as idle talk, rather than truly meaningful discussion. Based on this idea, it still seems difficult to classify social networks as either good or bad. Rather, the nature of social networks is neutral, and their value purely depends on how we use them. As such, it is pivotal to reassess how we actually use these websites; the remainder of this section of my discussion aims to do just that, providing suggestions in regards to the appropriate use of social networks.

The first, and perhaps most important adjustment that is necessary to change social networks into a positive force is to become more honest with regards to what we post. This includes having both positive and negative updates, ones that give a holistic and authentic depiction of the identity of the user as opposed to a controlled, censored image.⁴⁵ Through refusing to project a false identity, much of the shame and damage to self-esteem will be eradicated, as individuals are able to see that others struggle similarly (and, through association, that it is acceptable or normal to be imperfect). This, however, is impossible without a restructuring of social/cultural norms in regards to social network use and interaction.

Returning to the works of Velleman, we see that “a society may dictate privacy for things that aren’t naturally shameful, [and] it may permit publicity for things that are. And if a society rules that particular bodily upheavals aren’t incompatible with competent self-presentation, then

⁴⁵ One may argue that this notion is impermissible, and that individuals should only project the good aspects of their lives as opposed to the bad. However, this objection will be discussed in further detail in the penultimate section of the paper.

they are unlikely to undermine the subject's status as a self-presenting person."⁴⁶ In other words, society is able to set the norms and standards by which we establish what is and is not acceptable. As such, calling for society to reassess its own beliefs will allow for more successful interaction on social networks. We live in a pluralistic society, one in which there are a myriad of differing viewpoints and ways of life that come into play. Through changing social norms to be more accepting of behavior that differs from one's own, the potential to feel shame drastically decreases. This does not ask for individuals to be happy about behavior that they disagree with, or even to change their own behavior to match that of others on social networks. Instead, it merely means that we should accept the lifestyles of others and respect them, so long as their actions do not harm any other individuals.⁴⁷

One additional way in which we must change social networks is to allow them to become a shared activity in which individuals interact with one another, mutually engaging in social networks, as opposed to merely reacting to one another. In order for social media to become a shared activity, a restructuring of the networks is necessary; such sites must "provide...direct avenues for shared activity...by providing the kinds of informational and emotional reciprocity that maintain the will to live together with our friends, and to continue to pursue excellence in concert with them."⁴⁸ This can take place in many forms, such as facilitating conversation through chat rooms, providing innovative opportunities for social media and offline life to

⁴⁶ Velleman, *Ethics: Essential Readings in Moral Theory*, 635.

⁴⁷ It is also important to note that this does not ask for individuals to simply support every single post they see on social networks, or to act as cheerleaders in a sense, being unconditionally supportive. Instead, they should be able to give constructive criticism when appropriate, engaging in an honest, open conversation with their online friends much like they would in the offline world.

⁴⁸ Vallor, *Ethics and Information Technology*, 196.

connect, etc.⁴⁹ In addition to restructuring of the networks themselves, users can reassess the means by which they use social networks, making a conscious effort to “explore one another’s most fundamental values, beliefs, hopes and commitments, strengthening the friendship bond and enabling the self-knowledge that is critical to living a virtuous life with others.”⁵⁰ It is important to note that this use should simply supplement face-to-face interaction, being used as an additional means to talk to others as opposed to being used as the only way by which people communicate.⁵¹ Through changing social networks in this way, friendship is greatly enhanced, and individuals are likely to feel less shame and low self-esteem as they interact with people with a newfound realization of the true identities of their social networking peers.

Examining research from the field of Human-Computer Interaction, many believe that “current computer systems are able to simulate virtual and social environments that extend the interactive possibilities found in the physical environment.”⁵² As opposed to other tools like thermometers or calculators, computers are unique in that they serve myriad of purposes, including allowing us to interact with others across the globe. Specifically, a computer acts as “a cognitive aide that enhances our own cognitive powers.”⁵³ As such the creators of social

⁴⁹ Chat rooms, admittedly, are an older means of online communication, one that has unfortunately gone out of style. It would be extremely beneficial for the more popular social networking websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to reestablish the use of chat rooms, as it would further facilitate communication and help grow a strong online community on those networks. In addition, one might argue that there are already meet-ups on various sites, in which users join in real life to socialize and deepen the online friendship through face-to-face interaction. However, most of these meet-ups are user-initiated, as opposed to being implemented and promoted by the websites themselves. This results in a narrower network of individuals having access to the meet-ups, as they may not be in the geographical location of the meet-up or may not be a part of the group who is making said plans. Because of this, if the social networking sites themselves sponsor meet-ups that are available to all users, and are promoted in a clear way on the sites, a broader range of individuals will have the opportunity to interact offline.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Of course, in cases when individuals face geographical barriers that make it impossible to have offline interaction, solely using technology to continue the friendship is permissible. However, in situations where individuals can interact offline without an undue financial or temporal burden being imposed upon either party, the social networks should be used to simply supplement said offline interactions.

⁵² Philip Brey, “The Epistemology and Ontology of Human—Computer Interaction,” *Minds and Machines* 15 (2005) : 383-398.

⁵³ Ibid., 392.

networks have an obligation to include features which promote productivity, allowing us to get the most out of our computer usage. The features programmed into websites like Facebook or Twitter, including comment boxes, the ability to post statuses and like other posts, and search functions, become tools that rely on our sensorimotor abilities and capacity for abstract thought; as such when designing social networks, companies should keep in mind the target population of users, so as to most readily meet both their needs and capabilities to interact with the digital interface.

Objections, Objections!

Despite all the potential of social networks in light of the proposed revisions, there are still some outstanding objections that must be considered. The first of these comes in questioning what guarantees that a user should have a right to post what they want as I have proposed, as many people may want to post offensive, or hurtful things that others find distasteful or impermissible. Since I argue for the need for freedom of expression on these social networking sites, one might argue that this creates a problematic arena in which individuals may take their posts too far or post things that, while expressing their honest opinions and feelings, harm others. In cases where the information posted is actually harmful to others (such as when it targets a group or threatens one's life), it is necessary for fellow users to express their concern, having a mature, calm conversation about why said post is problematic.⁵⁴ If this conversation ultimately fails, and the threats or otherwise harmful posts continue, then fellow users may report said posts or the profile in question to the website itself; most websites, including Facebook, Twitter,

⁵⁴ This may be a touch unrealistic of an expectation, as teens and young adults are not typically known for their maturity or calm rationality. However, through creating an atmosphere in which this is the tolerated and expected way to act, wherein we do not permit individuals to be immature or volatile in their interpersonal interactions, it is possible for young adults to coexist peacefully on social networks. The key here lies in education and in leading by example; in other words, as adults, who are (usually) more rational, demonstrate the proper decorum, acting as moral exemplars for the youth, their behavioral patterns will hopefully be adopted.

Instagram and Tumblr have easily accessible pages in which said reporting can be done.

However, when posts are merely something one dislikes, but do no actual harm, the reader needs to permit the post to occur; he may either hide the post in question, remove the poster from his friend list or unfollow him, or simply scroll past the post rather than reading it. Although there is a lot of grey area in regards to what is or is not harmful, users on social networks must understand that there is a difference between not liking something and something actually being wrong. In cases where they are uncertain, they should follow the aforementioned protocol, engaging in a discussion of the content of the post, and if necessary can report said post, which will then be assessed by an unbiased third party to see if it should or should not be removed based on harmful content.⁵⁵ This solution seems to be the most beneficial, as it further encourages a society built upon the notions of tolerance and acceptance, in which individuals can truly engage in open conversation about trying topics rather than avoiding said discussions.

The second objection is in regards to the proposed change in social network conduct, in which I suggested that individuals cease to censor themselves. One might argue that a person should have a right to censor themselves if they want; some people are struggling with very intense or personal situations, and do not want to broadcast them to the world, and as such may choose to show only one side of their identity. This is completely understandable and permissible. Ultimately, they should be able to post what they want, so long as it doesn't harm others. With the right for one to post what he wants comes the right to refrain from posting

⁵⁵ It is pivotal to note that if reporting a post does occur, it should be done on legitimate grounds, as opposed to out of spite. It is impermissible for individuals to report every post that they dislike or find questionable. However, if there is serious concern and the individual has attempted to discuss the problems of the post in a mature, responsible way, and still finds no solution to the problematic post (and finds it necessary to remove said item due to its harmful nature), then the individual may report the post.

things as well. The key here is that one should not feel obligated to not post something that they otherwise would, due to unfair cultural norms in regards to posts on social networking sites.

In addition, there is room to argue that perhaps posting negative things on social networks is actually problematic, as it allows individuals to wallow in the negatives as opposed to having an optimistic outlook. To expound upon this idea, one might say that posting positive things could actually boost self-esteem and overall wellbeing, thus promoting an atmosphere in which individuals are more likely to succeed thanks to this positive outlook. Although there is a lot of good that comes from discussing positive elements of one's life, it is also necessary to discuss the unfortunate, yet realistic, negative aspects as well. In offline friendships, people constantly go to one another for advice in regards to troubling situations, seek to console each other when one friend is distraught, etc. This builds a stronger, healthier relationship, as individuals are not made to hide the negative aspects of their lives and can instead openly discuss them, growing stronger from said conversations. The same situation should be permitted on social networks; although it may be a problem to post solely negative items on these websites, as that may perpetuate a terrible mindset that is unhealthy to have, there is nothing wrong in posting a negative thing occasionally and then receiving feedback and encouragement that help in combatting said situation.

Finally, one might argue that much like Velleman says, we should be putting our best foot forward, projecting this good identity to others. It may be unfair, but a lot of what people think of us is based on appearance, and the nature of appearance has shifted, as perception isn't just based on face-to-face interaction. Now, much of interaction is online, and as such judgment has a new arena in which to occur. Because of this, one might claim that individuals should censor themselves in order to present an identity that society (including family, friends, and

employers) will find acceptable. While this may be what is practically necessary, it is not what is actually morally correct, as it unnecessarily limits autonomy and forces an individual to subscribe to a certain lifestyle (or, at the very least, pretend to) that he otherwise would not choose. In other words, the removal of choice, wherein an individual is pressured to post any certain set of topics (be they positive, negative, personal, impersonal, etc.) is impermissible. Rather, users should have the option to post what they feel comfortable posting, free from the scrutiny of others. It may be time to reassess standards of society, the means by which we judge people in the first place, so as to allow for true freedom on social networks. It is wrong to assume that one lifestyle is necessarily better than another. Just because I want to post about, say, how upset I was that someone cut me off in traffic, doesn't mean that you have to like that I'm complaining. It does not mean you have to post it, either, or even see it, but I should still be able to act as I wish so long as it does not harm anyone else. While individuals already can, technically speaking, post what they want on social networks, the ostracization, criticism, and otherwise negative feedback that comes along with posting what one wishes make it so that actually posting things freely is an unfeasible option, one which does more harm than it is worth. This is problematic, as it creates a society in which individuals feel obligated to portray plastic, perfected versions of themselves, ones which will be well-received by others and will stand up to the competition of those images portrayed by peers on the networks.

Conclusion

Despite many objections, it seems as though a revised means of social networking holds much potential to further deepen our relationships and help society grow. As it currently stands, social networking is exceedingly problematic, as it can evoke shame, cause self-esteem to drop, and may ruin the very relationships on which social networking depends. Like most technology,

social networking can be used for good or evil, as individuals have the choice in how they interact with it. Because of this, users must be cognizant of their conduct, respecting other users while simultaneously being true to themselves. If said behavior is able to occur and users are willing to change the norms by which social networks are currently regulated, social networks can become an invaluable tool that allows society to thrive.

We must take seriously the concerns that arise from social networking, particularly with regards to the more vulnerable youth of society. As someone who was quite recently a young adult, I remember quite vividly the turbulence and turmoil that came with growing up. It was difficult enough to find myself amidst a sea of constantly fluctuating influences, navigating my way through social circles, extra-curricular activities, hobbies, and making choices about my future; when adding online pressures and conflict into the mix, the journey became all the more difficult. Today's youth are perhaps the most constantly connected to technology out of the generations past; as such, we have a group of individuals who are always online, whose identities are often shaped greatly by interactions on social networks. In light of this shift in social interaction, it is imperative that we take seriously the problems that come with social networks, in the interest of protecting the youth for years to come.

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