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The Fragmented Educator 2.0: Social Networking Sites,  
Acceptable Identity Fragments, and the Identity Constellation

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### Abstract

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been used to support educational and professional endeavors. However, little research has been done to understand the relationship between educator identity and participation in SNS or to examine the implications that institutional regulation of such media may have upon educator identity. Using grounded theory, in this study we developed a framework for understanding how a group of teacher education students viewed their developing identities within social networking sites as they began the life transition to becoming educators. The theory that emerged from this study proposes that educator identity consists of a constellation of interconnected acceptable identity fragments, which are each intentional, authentic, transitional, necessarily incomplete, and socially-constructed and -responsive. This view of educator identity contrasts sharply with previous views of identity by highlighting the complicated, negotiated, and recursive relationship that exists between educator participation in SNS and educator identity. Additionally, this perspective suggests that educator participation in SNS is neither fully representative of authentic identity (as prominent SNS models imply) nor dramaturgical. These findings yield important implications for educators, researchers, educational institutions, lawmakers, and SNS developers alike, because they lead to a more sophisticated understanding of identity and online participation that is essential for developing mechanisms to support moral and legal judgments, professionalism, and social interactions relative to SNS.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: AIF – acceptable identity fragment; SNS – social networking site

Keywords: computer-mediated communication; media in education; post-secondary education; public spaces and computing; virtual reality

## 1. Introduction

With the recent explosion of social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Pinterest, and LinkedIn, many researchers, educators, and students have come to use SNS regularly for a variety of purposes (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Stutzman, 2006; Veletsianos, 2011). As educators who believe that learning is a social enterprise (Vygotsky, 1978) use such technologies, it seems natural for them to take a keen interest in SNS to support learning in both formal (Cho, Gay, Davidson, & Ingraffea, 2007; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013) and informal settings (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Selwyn, 2009). Such interest has led many educators and policymakers to attempt to regulate and leverage such technologies. However, empirical literature focusing on the personal consequences of institutional influences on SNS and identity are lacking, even though the scholarly community has recognized some challenges that educators face when adopting social media for professional purposes (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012a). Specifically, if we consider social participation and literacies within social spaces to be connected with identity in a meaningful way (cf. Gee, 2009; Ivanič, 1998), then we need to understand how educators' participation interfaces with their sense of self and recognize that institutional regulation or leveraging of SNS for professional or educational purposes may yield problematic outcomes for the socially-connected lives of educators. To examine these issues, we pose the following question: *What is the relationship between educator SNS participation and identity?* We divide our paper into the following five sections: review of relevant literature, methods, findings, implications, and conclusion.

In short, it is important to investigate the relationship between educator SNS participation and identity because there are direct links between offline and online identities (boyd, 2008; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), and the existing literature does not explain how educator participation in SNS interfaces with their sense of who they are personally and professionally. We suspect that there are powerful forces that shape educators' participation in SNS thereby impacting their sense of identity (i.e. their sense of "who they are") and this study was design to investigate these issues.

Social networking sites (SNS) have been defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). It has recently been reported that nearly three out of four teens and adult internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 use an SNS (Lenhart, et al., 2008), and Facebook alone boasts over 800 million active users (Facebook, 2011), more than twice the population of the United States. Researchers propose that SNS have the potential to improve learning experiences in a variety of ways, including improving communicative efficiency (Towner & Muñoz, 2011), providing positive social transformations (Gallon, 2010; Levickaitė, 2010), facilitating openness (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010), and fostering learner participation, community building, and social presence (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Minocha, 2009). Despite such promising possibilities, scant empirical evidence on the applications of SNS in educational contexts exists (Greenhow, 2011; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013), which prevents researchers from being able to advocate for educational SNS use from a position of empirical certainty. Similarly, even though educators believe that SNS may have great value in educational settings

(ibid), many remain timid in their willingness to use SNS for learning (Aijan & Hartshorne, 2008; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010) or attempt to use SNS in ways that functionally align with how traditional teacher-centered technologies are used in instruction (Veletsianos, Kimmons, & French, 2013).

This timidity likely stems from a variety of factors, including recent examples in which students and educators developed unethical or illegal relationships via such media (e.g., Chilcott, 2011; Kimble, 2011; Sun, 2009) and the high level of scrutiny that communities regularly exert upon educators (e.g., Armstrong & Hollan, 1985; Fleming, Harmon-Cooley, & McFadden-Wade, 2009). Recent policy determinations and court rulings forcing educators to alter their participation in SNS suggest that there are cultural fears associated with students and educators interacting via SNS (Cunningham, 2011; Hinze, 2011; Preston, 2011; Schrock & boyd, 2011), but in such cases, little attention has been given to understanding the variety of reasons why educators might be interested in using SNS in their personal lives and how such participation relates to their sense of identity and social well-being. Further, when considering this relationship, we should recognize that educators' identities have many facets or components (personal, professional, social, etc.) that interact with one another in complicated ways.

The Facebook model of participation, which reflects the norm for most popular SNS, assumes that 1) participants have a unitary, authentic identity and 2) their authentic identities are expressed via the medium as evidenced in the use of real-world names, the replication of real-world relationships, the revelation of identifying information, the deletion of fake accounts, the memorialization of deceased members' accounts, and the use of the medium to influence real-world outcomes. Yet, as participants develop necessary literacies to use these spaces, it seems that they must begin to think of themselves and their relationships with others in new and

negotiated ways, like redefining the word “friend” (Beer, 2008) or thinking of themselves as “micro-celebrities” (Marwick & boyd, 2010), and such spaces may even be used as testing grounds to develop identity through exploration (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009).

The Communities of Practice model (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) also discusses notions of identity. In particular, according to the CoP view, identity is shaped by both individual participation and non-participation in the community, and community action and inaction shape identity development. This view of identity was developed pre-SNS times, but since then, authors have argued that identity formation is also taking place in digital habitats like SNS (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009), and SNS become useful insofar as they provide tools for optimal configuration of a community (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2010). Given the complexity of SNS participation, and perspectives of SNS as “sites of contestation” (Lemke & Van Helden, 2009) in which personal and professional contexts often collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2000), identity negotiation in SNS seems to be more complex than the perspective taken by a CoP view in which SNS only serve to support and enhance community development/processes.

To understand identity within SNS, Pearson (2009) has argued that SNS participation may be best understood in Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical sense: identity or the self is a dramatic effect based upon how we “act” (in the theatrical sense) in various contexts to achieve social benefit. However, this interpretation has not been empirically supported and relies on a non-unitary, fluid view of identity, which does not align with the authentic identity models that prominent SNS are designed around. Similarly, Turkle’s (1995) explanation of the self as a multiplicity or “having a sense of self without being *one* self” (p. 258, emphasis added) does not align well with current practices and views related to online participation. When Turkle was exploring online identity in the Web 1.0 world, internet communities were inhabited primarily by

early adopters who used sites like MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and discussion boards as mechanisms for exploring and sustaining multiple personae. Though such sites remain highly active, and millions of internet users create new avatars and personae for the purpose of identity exploration on a daily basis, the ability to do this relies upon a user's ability to separate the legion of one's virtual, exploratory selves from the real life or traditionally viewed unitary self. In the Web 2.0 world, however, one's ability to do this diminishes as anonymity declines, real life connections are replicated in the virtual medium, web resources are used for surveillance, and sites like Facebook and LinkedIn seek to present "authentic," unitary selves that are similar to the selves expressed in real life. Thus, though Turkle's findings on identity as fluid multiplicity and fragmentation may reflect participation in the early internet and in some remaining corners of the medium, dominant internet usage no longer seems to fit this narrative.

Little research has been done to understand the emerging relationship between identity, literacy, and social participation in SNS that rely upon a unitary view of identity (Kimmons, in press), however, as daily internet use has fundamentally shifted from the "Wild West" of anonymous participation to public or semi-public extensions of daily life. It seems important to understand this relationship, though, because negotiations and acquiescence of identity may be taking place within these spaces that are not well understood. Furthermore, as institutions (e.g., educational, governmental) seek to regulate SNS participation, there may be unintended and undesirable outcomes on educator identity.

To empirically explore and generate a theory on the relationship between identity and educator participation in SNS, in this paper we consider the unique perspective that teacher education students have to offer, because they find themselves in a unique transitional phase – seeking to negotiate a shift between the private life of a student and the more public life of a



professional educator. Since most current teacher education students will have begun using SNS prior to their entry to their professional programs, they stand to serve as valuable informants for understanding tensions regarding private/public lives, professionalism, and identity within SNS, and they may provide us valuable insight into understanding the interface between SNS participation and our identities as educators. Thus, we treat the process of teacher professionalization that pre-service teachers experience as a type of a transitional state for understanding the emergent form that our participants take as educators.

## 2. Methods

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: *What is the relationship between educator SNS participation and identity?* The sections that follow describe the methods employed to answer this question.

### 2.1. Participants

Potential participants were first-semester teacher education students who had a program requirement to receive training in social media professionalism. One researcher approached five courses consisting of approximately twenty students each and invited them to participate in this research. In total, 18 students elected to participate. All participants were female, due to a heavily imbalanced gender distribution in the elementary education program where the study occurred. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 28 (mean: 21.44; SD: 2.26), with sixteen students being 20 or 21, one student being 27, and one student being 28 years of age. Most participants were first-time undergraduate students who entered the program after completing high school. All participants used an SNS regularly (most participating via smartphones throughout the day), and when asked if they could willingly give up such participation, most expressed difficulty with

the notion. Participants were compensated with a \$25 gift card at the conclusion of the research study.

## 2.2. Data sources

Data sources consisted of (a) one-to-one intensive interviews, (b) peer focus groups, and (c) one-to-one follow-up interviews. The intensive interviews were conducted prior to participants receiving training in social media professionalism, the peer focus groups occurred following the training, and the follow-up interviews were conducted one to two months after the focus groups. Interviews and focus groups were guided by open-ended questions. The sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All 18 participants completed the initial interview, 11 participated in focus groups, and 15 completed the follow-up interview.

Intensive one-to-one interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. These were conducted in order to ascertain participants' perceptions of their own social participation in SNS, to interrogate their perceptions of their identity, and to examine how their perceived participation in such spaces impacts their own identity development and maintenance. Questions were semi-structured and intended to explore the topics in a conversational way (e.g., "Describe to me how you participate in social networking sites?" and "How do you try to present yourself in these sites?"). Constant comparative analysis and follow-up questioning led to adjustments in the semi-structured outline of questions as the study progressed in order to draw out important details, to gain clarifications, and to ensure that the interviewer understood participant accounts accurately.

Though not used as a data source, the social media training was used as a critical or teaching moment to spark ideas, controversies, and considerations. The training was delivered in an online format and consisted of the following:

- 1) a list of examples of teachers who had been fired or otherwise disciplined for “inappropriate” or illegal activity on SNS with links to news articles;
- 2) an explanation of federal, state, and district requirements for legal and safe SNS use with links to source documents;
- 3) an explanation of moral turpitude clauses in teacher contracts;
- 4) and a mastery-based quiz that provided hints for students having difficulty with specific questions.

The peer focus groups consisted of between 3 and 6 participants and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The purpose of the focus groups was to elicit group discussion on issues related to cultural norms in SNS use, professional expectations, and societal expectations of teachers. Because questions focused on societal and cultural issues, and we expected participant perspectives to differ, a focus group setting (and hence the opportunity afforded to us for group discussion) was deemed more appropriate than a personal interview as a data source. Questions used to explore these topics included: “Are teacher professional expectations compatible with your online social lives?” and “What do you think about the fact that teachers have certain professional expectations that apply to them in online spaces?” Focus groups were also utilized as an opportunity to member check findings from initial interviews and to gain clarification on emerging issues (e.g., “It seems that tensions may arise from connecting with your colleagues in SNS. Is that accurate? How do you deal with that?”).

Follow-up interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to examine what participants had been thinking about and what had changed regarding their SNS use. Questions used to explore these topics included: “What have you been thinking about in relation to your online social participation since we last met?” and “If you have

changed anything about how you participate in these spaces, have other people noticed?”

Probing follow-up questions sought to draw out desired information, and interviews ended with open ended questions like “You have shared a lot of information with me about how you use SNS, but what else do I need to understand that we haven’t talked about?” Interviews ended when participants claimed that they had no more to share and the interviewer had no more clarifying questions to ask.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

We employed grounded theory to answer the research question, because existing theories describing online identity did not fully capture the phenomenon. Grounded theory enabled us to not only describe how individuals express their identity online, but also assisted us in developing a theoretical framework of this phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and constant comparative analysis was employed to direct and inform on-going data collection for the purposes of clarifying participant reports. Data were read individually and coded in three steps: 1) line-by-line coding, in which *in vivo* codes were used, 2) focused coding, in which convergence in the data was sought, and 3) theoretical coding, in which “coding families” were developed to highlight the various dimensions of the phenomenon under study (Stern & Porr, 2011, p. 71). The goal of theoretical coding was to “weave the fractured story back together” from the pieces that were previously created by analytically breaking the data apart (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). The coding procedure was as follows: Researchers read through the data (e.g., an interview) and assigned *in vivo* codes to segments of text. Next, they compared pieces of data (e.g., a category to a category, an interview to a category, a code to an interview), examined whether they were similar/different, and generated additional codes/themes to capture similarities and differences. The researchers compared each new datum entering the analysis

(e.g., a new interview) to existing codes and repeated the process. The *in vivo* codes were then analyzed to generate the underlying idea of each statement. For example, the statement “It’s annoying the people who are doing that, because I have friends on Facebook who post like 10 things a day” was given an *in vivo* code “when people post too much, it's annoying” and a *focused* code of “annoying.”

Once focused codes were generated, theoretical codes emerged by asking the following questions: “What do the focused codes have in common?” and “How do these focused codes relate to one another?” In the example listed above, it was determined that *annoying* (along with the focused codes of *negativity* and *positivity*) were related to how participants viewed others’ participation in SNS and how they chose to polish their own participation and digital presence in response. Thus, the theoretical code that emerged from these focused codes was “polished/co-constructed identity.” This theoretical code alone, however, did not tell the full story, because it was clear from other codes that participants believed that they were sharing only a small aspect of themselves, that this aspect of themselves was not entirely indicative of their whole selves (i.e. authentic identity), that they were being honest in their representations of themselves, and that they act differently in different social contexts. By pulling in multiple theoretical codes and asking “how do these pieces fit together,” the theory of acceptable identity fragments emerged as an overarching theory of participation and identity and is described below.

#### 2.4. Rigor

Researcher reflexivity was a central and on-going element of this research in an attempt to keep all assertions, biases, and conclusions in check (Hall & Callery, 2011; Mruck & Günter, 2007). This was done through a bracketing process that relied upon preliminary reflection and on-going memoing after every data collection session. Additionally, the researchers sought to

articulate findings in a manner that emphasized understandability and fit, both of which are key elements in ensuring qualitative rigor (Kearney, 2007). Peer debriefers were used throughout the analysis of data in order for the researchers to remain reflective of their own practice, and data were compared across and between individuals and groups of individuals (i.e. focus groups).

### 2.5. Limitations

When considering the results of this study, readers should be aware of its limitations. First, this study focuses entirely on pre-service teacher identity and SNS participation and therefore may have little transferability to those who are developing professional identities in other spheres and along other career paths (e.g., faculty members, doctoral students). Second, only female pre-service teachers who were preparing to receive certification in elementary education were interviewed as part of the study. This was not intentional but rather reflected the demographic makeup of the college where the study took place, and though the findings of the study may have some applicability to secondary education and male pre-service teachers, it may be that teachers in that endorsement area or who are male may have a different experience in becoming professionals in online spaces.

### 3. Results

The emergent theory arising from this study suggests that teacher educators participating in this study view their identities as a constellation of interconnected fragments or, as we will refer to them, acceptable identity fragments (AIF). We arrived at the term “acceptable identity fragment,” because we recognized that participants:

- shaped their participation in these spaces in a manner that they believed to be “acceptable” to their audiences,

- viewed this participation to be a direct expression of “identity” or their sense of self, and
- felt this expression to only represent a small “fragment” of their complete identities.

The notion of an AIF grows out of the premises that educators (a) consider relationships with others to belong to different types (e.g., friends, family, colleagues) and (b) act differently when they are interacting with others of different relationship types or when relationship types in a given context are mixed. As Gretchen<sup>2</sup> explains: “I act a different way around my parents than I do around my friends.” Though such nuanced changes in educator behaviors from one social context to another may not be “drastically different” (Lynleigh) or indicative of multiple divergent personalities, these changes reflect the idea that educators may express their identities differently and intentionally limit or structure how they participate in different contexts. Thus, when placed in a social context with close friends, an educator will act differently than when with colleagues or when with a mixture of close friends and colleagues. In other words, the AIF suggests that participants in a given social context may limit their participation or expression of identity in a way that is appropriate to that specific context or is acceptable to the specific relationships they have with others in that context (Figure 1). The existence of the AIF means that educator identities within SNS are contextual and intentionally limited and structured. Participants believe that, when participating in SNS, they are expressing their identities in a limited, though authentic, manner (Table 1). In their view, such expression represents a genuine

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

fragment of their identities, or in Fiona’s words, her Facebook participation accurately reflects her life, “but not all of me.” In the sections that follow, we describe the six aspects of AIF that we discovered.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### 3.1. The AIF is Intentional

The AIF does not represent an indiscriminate snapshot of the participants’ authentic identities but is akin to a carefully constructed portrait, intended to convey specific messages. This intentionality may take a variety of forms, ranging from choosing not to post overly emotional or mundane information to manipulating shared images or altering tags and descriptions and may be used to convey a variety of messages. Table 2 provides examples of participants intentionally limiting the posting of emotional rants and mundane information in response to what they consider to be unacceptable behaviors on the part of their peers.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Reported behaviors of over-emphasizing the positive and ignoring the negative or mundane leads these educators to present themselves in a manner that is somewhat skewed, distorted, or polished, depending upon one’s lens of interpretation. Highlighting the underlying motivations for such intentionality, Helena explains:

There’s not a picture that I put up [of myself] that’s not been through Photoshop

[an image editing software]... There is an intense way that I want to appear.

There’s a certain vocabulary that I want to use. There’s a certain quality of thing I

want to post that ... hopefully puts me in a good light.



This “good light” may not indiscriminately reflect teacher education students’ perceptions of themselves but reflects an idealized or exciting version of the self. Yasmine explains part of the culture surrounding this desire to seem exciting as follows:

I think people on Facebook try to make themselves seem more fun or more exciting. ... [For example,] I went to Las Vegas ... and everyone was like trying to take all these pictures and put them up on Facebook. As soon as you got to the place, everyone would want to check in ... as soon as we landed. Everyone wants to say ‘I’m in Vegas.’ So ... you want to make yourself look more exciting.

Such hyperbole, however, can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Fiona describes her attempts at seeming exciting as a younger college student as backfiring, because she believed they led others to view her as a “party girl:”

A lot of my high school friends think that ‘Oh, [Fiona] goes to [university], she probably parties a lot. She probably does nothing, gets bad grades, because she drinks or whatever.’ And at first I feel like I can understand where they’re coming from, because my first years in college I did put up a lot of photos about myself going out having fun.

To avoid being misrepresented, some participants intentionally try to limit even the exciting or fun information that they post about themselves. Nora explains:

I wouldn’t want to be completely myself on Facebook, because I don’t want like two thousand people knowing about everything about me. So, I don’t think I’m completely seen on Facebook as how I am. You only see a little bit of who I am.

These examples, which are representative of the participants’ feelings, suggest that participants try to intentionally project a certain image on SNS that they feel is representative of

their authentic identities. At the same time, this image omits certain aspects of who they are. However, the types of things they omit, like mundane information, emotional rants, or negativity, are in response to “annoying,” “inappropriate,” or “immature” content that they perceive peers sharing.

### 3.2. The AIF is Authentic

Despite its polish as an intentional construct, the participants nonetheless view their AIF as true to and reflective of their authentic identities. Unlike an avatar or role playing persona that might serve as a method of exploration, experimentation, or play, participants view an AIF as a genuine aspect of identity. Thus, in portraying an AIF, participants do not feel that they are acting like a different person but are presenting a favorable snapshot of their perceived selves. When asked about role playing, identity experimentation, online anonymity, and related issues, participants unanimously viewed such behaviors negatively, using words like “creepy,” “dishonest,” and “juvenile,” and believed that all their portrayals of themselves in these spaces were accurate in the sense that they represented their identities, but were not complete, in the sense that they were not *full* portrayals.

Some participants did, however, report using MySpace for more “juvenile” practices when they were younger. Winter provides an example of such behaviors as follows:

My friends and I [in junior high] ... always kind of wanted to be in the popular group. ... I would sometimes make these [fake] people [on MySpace] ... to live vicariously through them, and sometimes I would pretend to be ... a really pretty popular girl, and I would mainly do it to mess with people. ... I made a MySpace of ... a really hot guy one time. ... I made pictures of him ... and we kind of made

up what we thought his life was about, and ... we had fun doing that. ... We had a blast!

These behaviors, however, ceased when participants moved to Facebook and as they entered their concluding years of high school. In their place, participants adopted behaviors that would more closely link their online participation with authentic identity (e.g., using real names, posting photos of the self, replicating real-life connections with friends and acquaintances), suggesting that the representation of an AIF favors authenticity and identification to the experimentation and playfulness of role-playing and that participants view the representation of an AIF as a more “mature” model of SNS participation.

### 3.3. The AIF is Transitional

Just as individuals pass through life phases representing identity experimentation, maturation, and professionalization (e.g., early childhood, adolescence), participants’ AIF shifts over time to remain relevant to participants’ developing identities. Thus, the way participants used MySpace as junior high students varies greatly from how they used Facebook as late high school and early college students, which also varies greatly from how they now use Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest as late college students. In each of these life phases, participants had different purposes for using SNS. Brinley explains:

I feel like in high school you go through stages. So, I went through a hippie stage in high school ... [that] was definitely portrayed on my MySpace. Now I’m a junior in college, so my phase now is a little more grown-up and at the same time, [as] I’m growing up it kind of follows me.

In participants’ views, MySpace was for experimentation and playing with friends, early Facebook use centered on connecting with friends and sustaining real-world relationships, and

later Facebook began to manifest academic and professional behaviors (e.g., connecting with classmates for academic efficacy, removing explicit photos and language). Evangeline explains:

It's amazing how much of a difference three months makes. Last semester and previous semesters I would post all of my pictures online and then this semester I actually ... put all my pictures [as] private, ... and now I don't even upload any more pictures.

There seems to be a tension, however, between the AIF as a transitional phenomenon and SNS that do not support life transitions. Many participants, for instance, discussed Timeline, a relatively new structuring method that Facebook uses to represent participants' profiles in an historical manner. In their view, Timeline's linearity, persistence, and assumptions of historical causality make it problematic or irreconcilable to a view of the self that is transitional.

Evangeline explains this tension as follows:

[Timeline] sets a certain philosophy of how you should think about time. ... Why do we have to think it's linear? ... The past is the past. ... You're no longer experiencing the past; ... you're not living in the past anymore. So, ... it's a different mind frame from what I would want to think of how time is. ... Is it really necessary thinking of yourself [linearly]?

Violet similarly laments: "I hate Timeline. ... It is the stupidest thing that Facebook has ever done. ... With Timeline, [other people] can go back to me being a freshman in high school."

Due to information persistence and such embedded assumptions about the relationship between time and authentic identity, participants find their AIF being influenced by aspects of their participation that no longer have bearing upon how they view themselves, because as participants go through transitional life phases, they do not necessarily take the time to comb

through all of their previous history to completely restructure profiles in a manner amenable to their AIF. Winter points out: “My profile pictures are really outdated. ... I have one of me jumping from when I was probably sixteen.”

### 3.4. The AIF is Socially Constructed and Responsive

As participants behave differently in different social contexts depending upon the types of people they are interacting with, the AIF that they present reflects their recognition and perception of others in the context. To illustrate, Evangeline recounts that prior to her entry into her teacher preparation program, she used Facebook as a method for raising political awareness and advocating causes that she felt were important. However, as she began connecting with her classmates, Evangeline quickly discovered that her previous behavior on Facebook was problematic given her new social context. In one instance, she described a law that she felt passionately about, provided a hyperlink to give her connections further information on the issue, and passionately posted, “Wow! If you don’t read this, just delete me! We can’t be friends!” Having been accustomed to only connecting with like-minded people on Facebook, Evangeline was shocked when a long-time friend asked her “what’s wrong with you?!” This led her to consider how others might be drawing conclusions about her identity based on her strong opinions, and she believed that many of her classmates soon thereafter began treating her like an “extremist.” Evangeline, however, did not consider her views to be extreme and explains: “I kind of see myself as an activist, but I think other people might see me as ... extreme ... I thought I was just acting like an activist. I didn’t think it was an extreme thing.”

In this instance, the way that Evangeline had previously participated on Facebook had been shaped by interactions with a supportive group of likeminded friends, which led her to feel comfortable to express and develop her passions and frustrations with relative openness.

However, as classmates entered the context, her previous behaviors became problematic in unanticipated ways, and, in response, Evangeline felt that she was required to restructure her AIF to prevent seeming “extreme.”

Winter highlights a similar example. When her father started using Facebook, she felt hesitant to accept him as a friend. In her words:

I wouldn't ... let him be my friend for a while. [Then] he said something [about it], so I felt bad, and I was like: 'It's really not that big of a deal.' And then I censored him from things, and he noticed that, too. So he asked me about that. ... So now I just kind of am more conscientious about what I'm posting.

In this way, a person's AIF in a given context changes as other people enter the context or as relationships change. In Evangeline's case, the effect that new professional connections had on her AIF was restrictive: she felt she had to be more careful and secretive than she had previously. In Winter's case, adding her father meant that she had to censor her behavior in new ways. Others expressed similar sentiments and believed that part of growing up meant becoming “more private,” more secretive, or less passionate about potentially divisive behaviors and opinions (e.g., politics, race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation), thereby making one more *acceptable* to others in the context.

### 3.5. The AIF is Necessarily Incomplete

As a fragment of the self, the AIF cannot yield a full picture of identity and should not be perceived as such. This is partially intentional and partially a limitation of any social context.

Fiona explains: “I want people to know me for myself. I don't want people to know me behind the screen. I want people to actually go out with me ... and get to know me.” For Fiona, this part of herself that people can see “behind the screen” is only meant to serve as a “teaser;” it gets

people interested in her, but she does not want to reveal too much, because she feels that you can only really get to know a person by being around that person in real life, and if you were to judge her based solely upon what she did online, you would not fully understand who she is. For Fiona, what she does online merely represents “snapshots of my life; they’re not what I am as a [whole] person.”

Gretchen explains some of her reasons for not showing her full self in an SNS as follows:

I don’t want the girls that are in my [cohort] to see some of my stuff that they might judge me for, because I have this Asian pride thing, but then most of the girls in my cohort are white, and so if I put anything like Asian jokes or anything like that, they won’t understand. So, I kind of feel like I shouldn’t bother them ... it shouldn’t show up.

Gretchen’s example illustrates that participants may prefer to not include even essential aspects of their identities in an SNS out of fear that others might draw incorrect conclusions about authentic identity. As a result, Gretchen seems to prefer to remain either a mystery or to be thought of as just like everyone else (in this case, non-Asian), because sharing intimate information about her identity makes her vulnerable to misunderstanding. Other participants mimicked Gretchen’s concerns, were very worried about what others thought about them, and shaped what they did online in response to such considerations. This suggests that participants recognize the incomplete and limited nature of their SNS-based AIF and would rather craft a restrictive AIF than provide a more open AIF, because they believe that the former is less likely to yield misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This also means that as participants connect with individuals from multiple social groups in the same context, the fragments of their identities

that they deem acceptable to all individuals within that context shrinks, which leads to more restrictive expression.

### 3.6. The Unique AIF of Educators

As participants began the study, they were divided on their beliefs regarding cultural and community expectations of teachers. Some felt that the tensions they were experiencing, related to personal and professional identity in SNS, were universal experiences that all people their age go through (i.e. as people mature and become professional, despite the field, they must confront issues of professionalization), while others felt that teachers were held to a higher standard and that teacher education students are scrutinized far above their peers in other fields. However, by the end of the study, participants' views had shifted such that all believed the latter: teachers and teacher education students are held to a higher standard than their peers in other fields. Upon questioning, the bases of this shift seemed to be 1) an increased recognition of reported instances where teachers had been disciplined for seemingly innocuous online indiscretions and 2) increased exposure to classrooms, mentor teachers, and the cultures of K12 education.

## 4. Discussion

These findings lead to a very different view of identity than the dominant perspective in the literature, which assumes that individuals have an authentic identity and suggests that they attempt to express these identities in varying degrees via social media (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Mohamed, 2010; Pearson, 2009). Facebook, for instance, is built on the premise that people have authentic identities and that those identities can be expressed and shared in online spaces by connecting people together as "friends." Human beings, however, may not ever find themselves in social contexts wherein they will choose to (or are even able to) express their full authentic identities and, instead, express a different AIF depending upon the situation. Though



this study employed grounded theory, we may gain value from comparing and contrasting this emergent theory with extant theories of social participation and identity.

For instance, this formulation of the AIF may initially seem somewhat similar to Goffman's dramaturgical (1959) view that "when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity [i.e. act] so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (p. 5) but it differs primarily with regard to "authenticity." In Goffman's view, identity is adaptable and constantly emergent as we "act" in contexts. In the AIF view, there is no "acting" occurring, but rather guarded revelation of fragments of the self. This distinction may be best characterized by the participants' clear insistence that they were not "acting" or "playing a part" when they used SNS but that they were always only themselves. Thus, identity was not an emergent phenomenon of the scene; it was a partially revealed ray of light focused through a controlled shutter.

Another surface comparison may be made to Turkle's (1995) work on identity as fragmented multiplicity, but Turkle's fragmentation is different from fragmentation in the AIF. In Turkle's view, the self lacks coherence and is fluid: "We do not feel compelled to rank or judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit" (p. 262). However, participants in this study were operating from what they believed to be a coherent sense of self and judged their SNS participation based upon alignment with that sense. Therefore, SNS participation aligned or "fit" with their unitary senses of self but was merely a partial manifestation. In this way, Turkle's fragments are disjointed, non-uniform, and even contradictory (p. 261), while acceptable identity fragments are non-contradictory (i.e. may be comprised into a singular whole) and share uniformity of substance.

Given these characteristics, it behooves us to consider the relationship that any given AIF has to authentic identity. For the purpose of our discussion, we understand *authentic identity* as *how a person holistically perceives the self* and rely upon a metaphor provided by Lemke and Van Helden (2009) to describe authentic identities as “highly adaptable constellations of identifications and affiliations” (p. 153). If we consider each social context that a person expresses an AIF within to be a single point in space (i.e. stars in the sky), then authentic identity is the plotted representation of the self (i.e. constellation) that a person utilizes to create a meaningful self-concept. Such a metaphor fits neatly with the view of identity proposed by New Literacy Studies researchers, in which social participation is seen as an act of *being*, not just *doing* (cf. Gee, 2009), and identity is constructed within literacy events (i.e. participation in social contexts). In this view, any single AIF is a component of authentic identity, but how it fits within the larger picture of authentic identity is subjective, and authentic identity cannot be extrapolated from any given AIF. By participating in SNS via an AIF, teacher education students are doing something that is important and meaningful to them, but if we, as outsiders, attempt to extrapolate conclusions about their authentic identities from these fragments alone, then the constellations that we construct will likely be very different from the authentic identities that they have constructed for themselves.

As we come to understand the AIF and its relationship to authentic identity within SNS, we can begin to see some clear implications for educators, educational administrators, and educational researchers that are of vital importance. Each characteristic of the AIF yields a variety of implications, which we will now outline.

First, if the AIF is intentional and authentic, then it seems important for educators to retain control of their SNS participation. If institutions seek to prescribe appropriate and

inappropriate uses of the medium, then it seems that this will prevent educators from being able to make meaningful choices regarding authentic self-expression and self-representation that are necessary to have a functional AIF. If educators can no longer use the space to intentionally present an AIF that they feel is accurate and authentic, then the medium will likely lose its appeal and lead to diminished use, which may have negative social impacts on educators.

Second, if the AIF is transitional and influenced by the medium, then an educator's digital footprint can be problematic for career aspirations. This is especially true as data is collected and logged over a long period of time and as many sites do not allow for transitional profiles (e.g., Facebook's Timeline and the difficulty of deleting participation history *en masse*). If developing educators are seeking to transition into a new life phase, then technologies must accommodate this, or they will be abandoned.

This also means that any judgments made about educators based upon their participation in SNS should consider life transitions, time-based contexts (e.g., behavior as a college freshman vs. behavior as a student teacher), and the embedded values of the media. If an SNS, for instance, asked an educator about favorite alcoholic beverage and then posted the answer to that user's profile, then this information would reflect the value of the medium rather than the value of the educator (i.e. the medium thought it was important to ask and to post that information, not the educator).

On the other hand, educators should seek to recognize the assumptions that SNS platform developers are making about human nature, meaningful social participation, relationships, and so forth and consider the impact that such assumptions may have on their participation and identity (or perceived identity). If, for instance, an SNS treats all relationship types as being of the same type (e.g., "friend"), then what might it mean to connect with college roommates, parents,

principals, and students all under this singular umbrella term? Similarly, since SNS are social spaces, educator behavior within them is influenced by the behaviors and expectations of diverse peer groups (e.g., friends, family, colleagues), and before behavior in any setting is evaluated, one should take into consideration the norms and expectations thereof.

And third, if the AIF is a necessarily incomplete component of a larger identity constellation, then any judgments of educators based on SNS participation must recognize that the relationship of the AIF to overall identity is subject to interpretation and may not reflect an individual's perception of how the AIF represents authentic identity. Fragmentation of identity, then, should be seen as a valuable response to complex social situations. SNS platforms should account for this, and as we make judgments about others based upon their fragmented identities, we should be cognizant of the complex relationship existing between the AIF and one's larger identity and dispel the myth of a simple authentic vs. inauthentic binary.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the relationship between educator SNS participation and identity and raised some questions related to the challenges and obstacles of participation in SNS (cf. Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012b). Using grounded theory, we noted that the way that developing educators view their identities may be understood as a constellation of interconnected fragments, referred to here as acceptable identity fragments. We encourage other researchers to examine and empirically evaluate this framework. The concept of acceptable identity fragments, and our understanding of educator identity online, can benefit from further empirical research that (a) employs more participants and (b) uses diverse methodologies. In particular, the field would benefit immensely from direct observations of SNS use to confirm, disconfirm, or refine the findings presented herein.

By moving beyond both a naïve view of authentic identity and dramaturgical interpretations of educator behaviors within SNS, we see clear implications for educators, educational institutions, law-makers, and SNS developers regarding educators' identity constellations and the construction of AIF online. These implications fall under several categories and lead us to consider power dynamics and how educator identities might be influenced by SNS regulation, utilization (e.g., classroom use), manipulation, or control. As educators and educational researchers, we should be proactive in seeking to understand the recursive relationship that exists between educator SNS participation and educator identity and ask hard questions of forces that seek to influence our digital participation and the resultant identity constellations that represent our complicated, fragmented, and authentic selves.

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