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## Scholars and faculty members' lived experiences in online social networks

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## ABSTRACT

Research into faculty members' use of technology and social networking sites has largely focused upon pedagogical practice, at the expense of understanding user experiences with these technologies. Through phenomenological interviews with three faculty members, we investigate their lived experiences with social networking sites. Results point to a tension that exists between personal connection and professional responsibility, revolving around the essences of faculty members establishing personal and professional boundaries, maintaining appropriate and meaningful connections, structuring participation so that others see them in a certain light, and using their time efficiently. These findings highlight the synergies and tensions between online social networks and faculty identity: While social networking sites can be used for professional purposes, faculty members may resist or reject the values embedded in such tools, which they feel may impact the ways that they perceive themselves, their teaching, and their research.

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## 1. Introduction

With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies in recent years, we have witnessed the birth, maturation, and global adoption of several popular Social Network Sites (SNS), including such prominent services as Twitter, Facebook, Orkut, and MySpace. According to [Boyd and Ellison \(2007, p. 211\)](#), SNS are unique in that they provide a host of “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.” A recent survey in the United States by the Pew Internet & American Life Project ([Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011](#)) reports that 39% of adult Internet users (30+ years of age) currently use SNS and that on a typical day 1-in-4 adult Internet users visit a social networking site. Higher education faculty members have also adopted SNS in growing numbers. [Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane \(2011\)](#), for instance, found that amongst 1921 higher education faculty surveyed, over 90% were at least aware of the major SNS like Facebook and Twitter, and over 50% of all surveyed visited Facebook in the previous month, with over 40% posting something to Facebook in that time. Additionally, 45% of reporting faculty use Facebook for professional, non-classroom, purposes, with 11% using the SNS on a daily basis to pursue professional goals (Moran et al.).

Adoption rates suggest that faculty members are finding value in SNS. Current empirical literature however provides little information

on faculty experiences and participation in SNS, is inconclusive on what it is about SNS that faculty find to be valuable, and leaves questions about what barriers and issues faculty face when adopting such technologies into their practice. Important questions to consider are: Why and how are faculty using SNS for professional purposes (teaching, research, service)? How are different SNS used to support different purposes? How do faculty view their own and others' SNS use? How does SNS participation impact the scholarly profession? And, how does the scholarly profession influence, structure, and guide SNS participation? These issues gain increasing importance as SNS use becomes more common in professional, educational, and scholarly settings and as factors in the larger culture related to networks, participation, and sharing stand to shape the on-going development of the scholarly profession ([Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012](#)). Since scholarship, culture, and educational institutions are in a constant state of change and development in response to a variety of factors ([Siemens & Matheos, 2010](#)), it behooves us to consider how instructors and faculty members are influenced by and use SNS.

To understand faculty participation in social networking sites, we examined the lived experiences of three faculty members with SNS through in-depth interviews. This investigation was guided by the phenomenological question: What is it like for faculty to participate in an online social network? We begin this investigation by examining literature relevant to this issue. We then discuss the method we used to understand faculty lived experiences. Next, we present the findings of this investigation and discuss the essential elements of faculty online social networking. We conclude with a discussion of faculty participation in SNS and offer recommendations for future research.

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## 2. Review of relevant literature

Universities, and the scholarship that occurs within them, reflect the values of their time. In the words of Siemens and Matheos (2010, 99), “universities have always intersected with the society in which they are domiciled and have, to a certain extent, changed with society, culminating in the contemporary post-modern university.” Such changes occur in response to a variety of stimuli, including economic, political, technological, social, and cultural forces (Siemens & Matheos, 2010). As such, the personal lives, experiences, and beliefs of faculty members influence institutional reform, and cultural and technological forces impact the scholarly profession in a variety of ways (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012).

Scholarly activity includes a multiplicity of endeavors including teaching, research, and service. Regarding teaching endeavors, a recent survey conducted by Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008) found that only 8% of reporting faculty use SNS for classroom purposes and that the vast majority of faculty (74%) do not have any intention of using social networking sites in their classrooms. This finding contradicts two other findings from the same study: faculty members believe that SNS would be useful for improving both student–student interaction (56%) and student satisfaction (32%). Why does this discrepancy between beliefs and practice exist? First, the discrepancy implies that the adoption of an SNS for classroom purposes is not simple nor straightforward, but that there are complex factors at work beyond pedagogical benefit that prevent or at least problematize SNS adoption in formal educational settings. Second, the two affordances of SNS that are identified above are student-centered (rather than faculty-, content-, or skill-centered), suggesting that the factors problematizing adoption likely have more to do with the faculty member or the institution rather than with the students themselves.

Such student-centered beliefs about the value of SNS in the classroom are somewhat supported by existing literature and may to some degree reflect a perceived generation gap between faculty and their students. Though adults may generally be familiar with SNS and use them in growing numbers, these numbers pale in comparison to the much higher percentage of teenagers and young adults who have embraced these technologies. Similar to teens, nearly 3-in-4 young adult Internet users (18–29 years old) use SNS, with 45% accessing them daily (Hampton et al., 2011). Though this popularity of SNS amongst students probably has little to do with the pedagogical benefits afforded by SNS, a recent survey of college students discovered a positive relationship between Facebook use and some desirable student outcomes like life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, and political participation (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), reflecting the accuracy of student-centered faculty beliefs expressed in the Pew study. Beyond these benefits, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2009) take the discussion one step further and find that professor–student relationships and perceptions of one another may be improved by using Facebook in a manner that promotes self-disclosure, which further suggests that faculty may not be fully aware of all of the pedagogical benefits that an SNS might have to offer.

Beyond using SNS for instructional purposes, others have argued that online social networks have much to offer the scholarly profession by positively influencing research, community outreach, and career advancement. Briggie and Mitcham (2009) explain that networking technologies may help to embody research practice by fostering network creation between researchers, subjects, and the environment. Arguing that modernist approaches to inquiry have generated a disconnect between observed phenomena and their socio-cultural contexts, Briggie and Mitcham note that networking technologies can fundamentally change how researchers view themselves, their subjects, and the community they are expected to report to and serve. Similarly, others believe that SNS can and should be applied to shaping how faculty members perform research. These ideas naturally lead to a discussion of the uses of SNS for scholarly

purposes (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012) and the affordances and pitfalls of scholarship that is more social and digital (Greenhow, 2009; Weller, 2011). In investigating use of Twitter for scholarly purposes for example, Veletsianos (in press) found that scholars use the network to (1) share information, resources, and media relating to their professional practice, (2) share information about their classroom and their students, (3) request assistance from and offer suggestions to other scholars, (4) engage in social commentary, (5) engage in digital identity and impression management, and (6) network and make connections with others. As faculty members increasingly turn to “participatory technologies and online social networks to share, reflect upon, critique, improve, validate, and further their scholarship” (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012, pp. 768), understanding faculty members’ experiences in social networks is crucial both due to the pervasiveness of such technologies and due to their widespread impact on a variety of cultural phenomena worldwide.

Amongst these discussions of potential SNS influences on scholarship, much is also being said about new and emergent literacies and how to use said technologies for desirable outcomes (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Jenkins (2007) explains that though technology access has been a major consideration in recent years, the real concern facing industrialized nations is a lack of know-how relative to using technologies to support learning and other positive goals. This leads many to be concerned with emergent problems like digital inequity, in which differences between the haves and have-nots have less to do with the technologies available to a group of people and more to do with how they are using the technologies to improve their situations (Hargittai, 2008; Jenkins, 2007). Thus, a growing participation divide has emerged with the growth of participatory technologies like SNS, which allow people to construct, share, and connect in new ways, because not everyone enjoys equivalent literacies or the social connections necessary to effectively benefit from them (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008).

Additionally, concerns outside of scholarship arise that nonetheless influence scholarly adoption of SNS and other tools. First, privacy issues have recently surfaced at the forefront of many debates and legal battles, as Internet giants like Facebook consider how to use collected user data to support business interests (Boyd, 2008; Boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009). Additionally, homophily, or the tendency of only connecting with similar or like-minded people, in SNS have brought up questions about the value of online environments for promoting positive social outcomes, as such tools may merely replicate social ills existing in the real world, such as segregation, and may only serve to further isolate people of opposing viewpoints and life experiences from one another (Thelwall, 2009). Combine these concerns with a growing cultural interest in lateral surveillance (Andrejevic, 2005), or using technology tools like Google Search and Facebook for observing others without their awareness, and a certain level of uneasiness seems warranted as academics consider how and when to incorporate SNS for personal or professional purposes. After all, from their inception SNS have been socio-cultural phenomena that people are only now attempting to co-opt into teaching, research, and other professional contexts; it is no surprise, therefore, that their consideration would entail a certain level of interest in the potential socio-cultural baggage that may come with them.

These larger socio-cultural issues help us understand why faculty might be hesitant to use SNS in professional or pedagogical settings, which might include concerns regarding social boundaries between teachers and students and the maintenance of the scholar’s professional image. Tufekci (2008) describes how some activities that play a role in career advancement, for instance, like social grooming, presentation of the self, and so forth, are becoming more and more prevalent in online spaces, and one might conclude that faculty are wise to consider how pedagogically or otherwise valuable activities, like online connections with students and willing self-disclosure, might

adversely influence institutional hiring and promotion decisions. This awareness may be reflected in the finding that a growing majority (52%) of adult SNS users have multiple SNS profiles (Hampton et al., 2011), suggesting that users may be seeking for more contextualized spaces for structuring self-disclosure and relationship building. These conjectures, however, have not been empirically established, and little research has been performed to understand what the lived experiences of faculty members are in online SNS. By seeking to understand the lived experience of faculty engagement with SNS, this study aims to establish a frame for understanding issues of faculty adoption and use of SNS through the eyes of faculty members as they attempt to navigate the professional, pedagogical, and personal pressures of their lives.

Though some have analyzed SNS use from critical and positivist perspectives, this study shies away from such approaches for two reasons. First, such theoretical frameworks tend to maintain a progressive or moralistic tone to the research endeavor (e.g. adopting certain SNS use would be laudable for certain purposes or to achieve certain goals). Such tones would be detrimental to this study, however, because they could influence researchers to guide subjects toward certain conclusions rather than explaining their own motivations, intentions, and beliefs about the experience. A second problem with critical and positivist approaches for the current study stems from these views' overemphasis on the system, network, or institution, while skimming over subjects' explanations of their own actions and experiences. In contrast, this study focuses on participants' own stories so as to better understand their experiences in social networking sites.

### 3. Method

This study is an interpretive analysis of faculty members' subjective lived experiences within social networking sites. In the words of Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström (2008, p. 250) when analyzing a phenomenon, it should be understood that “there is a general form of the phenomenon ... an essential meaning or essence to the phenomenon, which makes the phenomenon what it is.” Without its essence, an experience would not be what it is. We use Creswell's (2007) phenomenological framework to discover the essential themes of meaning that exist across participants, gaining a level of intersubjectivity regarding identified themes. In generating our findings we look for “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67) and of lifeworld phenomena that are complex and embedded in day-to-day life.

#### 3.1. Research questions

The following research question guided this study: What are faculty members' lived experiences of adopting, using, and rejecting SNS?

#### 3.2. Participants

Three faculty members at a United States university participated in this study. At the time of writing, all participants were employed in positions that required them to divide their time between teaching and research duties. The university that employed the participants was categorized as RU/VH (Research University with Very High research activity) by the 2010 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. The three faculty members were given pseudonyms, and a brief description of each follows:

- Barry is a tenured associate professor who received his doctorate approximately ten years ago. Barry uses Facebook occasionally and claims to have a “personally neutral to negative outlook” toward that SNS. “I don't really find it as intuitive as everyone else seems to,” he explains and does not consider Twitter to be

valuable, though he has had some mild success using Ning, another SNS, for professional purposes.

- Cassandra is a former elementary school teacher and was hired as a new assistant professor two years ago at the time of writing. Cassandra predominantly uses Facebook and desires to use it as a professional space, though she claims to have some difficulty maintaining a strictly professional atmosphere within it. She has tried Twitter and previously used sites like MySpace and Classmates.com, but she says that “probably 99% of the time [Facebook is] the only thing I use.”
- Julie is a fairly new assistant professor. Julie uses Facebook as a major communication medium for connecting with her family members, students, and colleagues. She has used MySpace in the past and explains that “I check Facebook maybe once every two days, and I am friends with my students; I'm pretty comfortable with that.”

Faculty members were contacted whom the researchers knew to have at least experimented with SNS. Faculty whose research centered around issues of technology integration and new media were not included in this study, since it was deemed that their perspectives would be shaped by their research and that such faculty members might categorize and analyze their personal experiences, thereby interfering with the phenomenological goal of collecting *descriptions* of lived experiences. Rather than seeking a randomized sample, we sought informants who experienced SNS in their natural world and who 1) had some experience with SNS and 2) were not involved in research related to SNS.

#### 3.3. Data sources

One researcher interviewed all informants in person. This approach allowed the subjects to relate their experiences in their own words, without unnecessary interpretation (or categorization) on the part of the researcher. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted around sixty minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A). The protocol allowed the interviewer to probe participants for lived experience descriptions and clarifications. Field notes taken after conducting each interview also served as a data source.

#### 3.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed following the phenomenological method suggested by Dahlberg et al. (2008). First, two researchers independently read the whole data set (all transcripts and field notes) and created memos. Once each researcher acquired a sense of the whole data set, each analyzed the data in parts: Each interview was read individually, and memos were created for each one. Finally, the complete data set was read a third time, and memos were created a final time. Line-by-line coding was then conducted on the transcripts and meaning units were identified. The meaning units and corresponding supportive statements were then transferred to a spreadsheet, and the researchers met five times to discuss these and collaboratively analyze data in search of common themes. In total, fifteen meaning units were identified and these were clustered into general themes based upon similarities. The researchers continued the analysis across and between the transcripts and memos until no more patterns could be identified. At that point the researchers felt that the data had been *saturated* (i.e. further reading and analysis of the data failed to generate any additional insights), and the resulting themes represented the essence of the experience.

A-priori codes were not used in this investigation because Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest these may obstruct analysis and expansion of new ideas. Based on our previous understanding of professional SNS use, it was anticipated that certain ideas would arise surrounding



issues of privacy, boundaries, and types of connections between faculty, students, and others. The interview guide was constructed to probe faculty members in these areas while maintaining openness and flexibility to explore experiences as deeply and self-directed as possible.

### 3.5. Rigor

Phenomenology-specific and qualitative-specific measures were taken to ensure that the phenomenological account reported here is epistemologically valid and reliable (Cilesiz, 2010). These measures were:

- **Epoche (or bracketing).** Throughout the duration of this investigation, we engaged in what phenomenologists call the epoche (or bracketing) process. This process refers to the researchers' conscious and systematic attempt to contain their own experiences in order to allow the phenomenon to be understood without their preexisting beliefs, biases, and understandings of the phenomenon. Important instances where epoche occurred were during the interview, analysis, and writing stages.
- **Thick descriptions.** Polkinghorne (1983) argues that the validity of a phenomenological study lies in its description: in the clarity and elegance of the account so that readers can recognize the account as the essence of the experience themselves. To this end, we use thick descriptions to describe our informants' lived experiences. A second reason we use thick descriptions when presenting our results is it to enable readers to evaluate the degree to which these results apply to their context and "determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred" (Merriam, 1995, pp. 58).
- **Imaginative variation.** Once we developed a description of the experience and its essences, we engaged in a process Giorgi (1997) describes as imaginative variation. In this process, we examined whether the invariant characteristics of the phenomenon that we had found at that point in time were indeed essential. We did this by changing and excluding experience descriptions and asking ourselves whether the resulting description captured the experience. Non-essential themes could have been excluded, because their exclusion would not have changed the experience. For the purposes of this paper, we found that excluding any of the derived themes would have drastically changed the description of the phenomenon. Hence, this process enabled us to deduce that the derived themes are essential to the experience.
- **Member checks.** Study informants were given a copy of the findings and the researchers' interpretations and asked to provide feedback on whether these captured their experience. Two informants responded and both stated that the account presented an accurate depiction of their responses.

## 4. Findings

All three participants used Facebook as a context through which they described their SNS experience. Our analysis indicates that faculty SNS use is characterized by a personal–professional tension. When using a SNS, faculty members negotiate their participation in a way that allows them to show sufficient personalized concern for the people they are connected with and to also maintain the self-established aura of professionalism that is essential for them to be effective at their jobs. Participants also seem to be highly aware of their own actions and the potential impact they may have on the thoughts, words, and actions of others. For this reason, they either (a) are careful to ensure that their participation may be safely scrutinized by a variety of people or (b) limit their visible participation. Though some faculty may feel that they have moved to a position in which their personal relationships are in harmony

with professional expectations, they recognized that careful alignment of the professional self with the personal self can only be achieved through intentional self-structuring. Faculty experiences in SNS and the personal–professional tensions inherent in this experience can be described through the four constituents of: establishing personal and professional boundaries, maintaining appropriate and meaningful connections, structuring participation so that others see me in a certain light, and using my time efficiently. These are described next.

### 4.1. Establishing personal and professional boundaries

Study informants noted the necessity of intentionally establishing and maintaining professional and personal boundaries when sharing information about themselves. On the one hand, Barry explained: "I think that it's okay for students to not know everything about their professor." Similarly, Cassandra said that "I don't want a high school kid, even if they were in my class when they were nine, having access to my life." From this perspective, these professors are careful in determining what to share and whom to share it with. On the other hand Julie noted that "there's nothing in my personal life that I wouldn't feel comfortable with my students knowing."

Nonetheless, all three informants are conscious of boundaries, recognize the necessity of having clearly established boundaries, and carefully consider whether or not to connect with students and other faculty/staff. Part of this has to do with the fact that the people faculty members connect with online and how they connect with them will influence what goes on within the SNS and, for that reason, some prefer to keep private things private. As Cassandra explained: "I had to sit down and figure out who do I accept" so that her network of connections "didn't morph into something" that she didn't want. Even when our informants openly connect with others on SNS, they are careful to make boundaries clear both for themselves and those they connect with. Julie explained that though she connects with her students, she uses the SNS to teach them about necessary professional boundaries, and that though she may feel that her own boundaries "are so clear that there's less need to pronounce them," her students need the guidance of establishing certain boundaries if they are at a stage in life that includes certain behaviors, like "dating" or "partying," that might be potentially problematic for professional growth (e.g., securing a job). As Julie explained: "I don't have anything in my life where if somebody posted something of me it would be a problem. I'm also not looking for a job."

Failure to consciously establish boundaries is perceived to lead to problems for faculty members. As Cassandra explained: "one of my regrets [in starting to use Facebook] was that I made it this hybrid space ... and sometimes it's really annoying." By failing to establish clear boundaries at the outset of how and with whom she would interact, she felt that her experience within the SNS environment had become something she didn't want or anticipate, which required an inordinate amount of time for her to continue to successfully function within the environment. This lack of clearly established boundaries makes navigation of an SNS difficult for faculty members, such that their use of the tool becomes more stressful and leads to diminished participation. In her words: "I think that I created the conundrum that I live in now."

Participants also seemed to understand that learning to successfully establish boundaries, though difficult at first, improves with time. Whereas participants initially needed to create "all of these silly rules" with regard to whom to accept as a friend and whom to reject, these rules become second nature to the point that they "don't even have to think about it anymore." As Cassandra explained: "I've gotten really good at saying 'ignore' ... and saying: 'You know, I know you were a student of mine when you were in second grade, or you were a parent of mine when your kid was in second grade,

but this is a space that is, you know, a professional space.” This development suggests that Barry, Cassandra, and Julie have learned the literacies necessary to navigate such sites such that they no longer have to focus on the rules of boundary setting and can function effectively without analyzing every potential connection in relation to boundaries.

#### 4.2. Maintaining appropriate and meaningful connections

Barry, Julie, and Cassandra are committed to both personal and professional connections with others. They have a deep concern for many people, which directs how frequently and through which medium they choose to interact (or not to interact) with others. They believe that SNS as communication tools are useful for establishing and maintaining certain types of connections with certain people but that the nature of the SNS directs whom they connect with and how they connect with them. As such, an SNS like Facebook, for instance, which relies upon “friendships” and status updates posted to every “friend,” may turn out to be too personal for some connections and too impersonal for others.

Because they’re aware of the terminology used to define SNS, faculty members have difficulty understanding why some people may want to connect with them through it. So, if Facebook defines connections as “friends,” faculty have a hard time understanding why former students or classmates from the distant past might want to connect with them as “friends,” especially when they themselves are attempting to use the medium in a “friendly,” but nonetheless “business,” context. Though faculty members may not be willing to accept such persons into their “friendly business” network, they still feel a sense of concern for them, even though they may choose to ignore their requests.

For this same reason, faculty members are careful in how they seek (or do not seek) to establish relationships with others. Regarding whether or not teachers should seek to establish relationships with students, Cassandra explained: “I don’t want [students’ social networks] to be a space where they censor themselves, because they think their teachers are going to be looking at what they do, because ... I know how that feels ... my only apprehension is what does this mean to do this kind of social networking with younger people?” Faculty deliberately choose not to connect with some people because of their own self-awareness of their own positionality to the other and how that might influence their use of the tool.

Though this may be a more universal statement about SNS use in general, Barry, Julie, and Cassandra only communicate either directly or intentionally through public status updates with a small subsection of their actual networks, when they do at all. As Barry explained: “I would say probably 90% of people on my friends’ list on Facebook I don’t correspond with.” And, even when they use public announcement-type communication methods for sharing information, they will typically have a very select sub-group of their overall network in mind as the audience of their announcement. As a result, faculty who wish to use SNS in any professional way find themselves torn between having a diverse audience of people whom they care for to varying degrees but which have very different reasons for having a connection to the faculty member. In this situation, faculty may find themselves in the sticky situation of becoming a mediator between groups of people whose only common connection may be the faculty member.

To illustrate, Cassandra described several occurrences of when she posted status updates to Facebook, which she felt were innocuous, but which created a debate between people that she cared about from different phases in her life. She discovered quickly that though she may have only intended to share an Internet resource with her university colleagues, it happened that childhood friends, church members, and various others had divergent opinions on the resource and, since they had no direct connection with one another,

had no qualms with attacking ideological opponents through her in an uncivil way:

I posted a link to either the interview or the article about the interview. And so ... there were like six or seven people who liked and then there were some comments and a conversation that sort of started after. Well, some of them were faculty here, and some of them were people from back in [former state] and some of them were people that I went to church with and so it kind of ... took on this like ‘oh my gosh I haven’t heard from you in forever and so ... why do you even have something to say about this?’ ... I didn’t like it at all, because it was it was sort of like I knew how to talk with one group of folks, I knew how to talk with the other group of folks, but, then, when they’re all kind of jumbled in there together ... it was just weird.

This led Cassandra to carefully consider future posts by weighing “how much energy I want to put into the fallout” and made her feel that she needed to self-censor herself in order to make sure that everyone who connected through her ended up having “a good day.”

Faculty also view this public forum-type approach to sharing information as being impersonal as a medium for sharing information with those whom they care for the most. There is a sense that when a person posts something publicly that, in Barry’s words, “people are almost aware of who responds and who doesn’t respond to that,” and if you don’t respond, then it is akin to saying “I don’t have time for you.” But, at the same time, faculty connect with people they care for the most (e.g. family members, close friends) via other, more direct media like email, phone calls, or text messages, and though they may share information through the SNS to elicit feedback or to generally share, they will often not use the medium to share information with those they care for the most, simply because it is not personal enough. As Barry explained: “What I definitely prefer is someone thinking about me enough to be like, ‘Hey, here are some pictures,’ or ‘Hey, [Barry], here are some pictures [we] thought you’d like of our trip’ or ‘our new kid.’ For me that actually feels much more personal than ‘I posted a bunch of pics.’”

In addition to this direct interaction, faculty members can see SNS as a means of checking up on people that they care about, whether it be friends, students, family members, or colleagues. Though Barry, for instance, admits to having actively sought out only two or three people on Facebook, he mentioned a former romantic partner that he would like to be able to find through SNS that he hasn’t been able to connect with. In his words: “We left on friendly, good terms. There’s nothing crazy about the breakup, but I’d like to know where she is just from a purely like I care about you perspective, and I haven’t found her on Facebook or anything else and so, you know, that alarms me a little bit just in terms of just making sure that she’s okay.” Such strong concern for others leads faculty members to both connect with people and communicate with them in intentional, specific, and reflective ways.

Julie described a situation in which a student from a university at which she had applied for a job posted to her public wall about how excited she was that she would be coming there to teach. For the professor, this was a big problem, because she had a very strong personal connection with her current students, and she was afraid that if they read this on her wall before she told them about the transition herself, then it would have constituted a breach of trust between her and her students. She quickly deleted the post and the next time she met her students she felt compelled to tell them “how important it was to me that I share it with them [face-to-face], and if they’d heard anything that you know that the timing was what it was.” Like Barry, Julie felt that the medium was not personal enough to convey the message that she wanted to give her students, which reflects that not only did her relationship with her students transcend the SNS tool, but also that the proper

communication that she was trying to have with them could not be entirely achieved via the SNS.

#### 4.3. Structuring participation so that others see me in a certain light

Our participants see their activity within SNS as an extension of their professional and personal identities and believe that others will draw conclusions about who they are based upon their participation and connections. Though this theme may seem like a truism, it is an important and unique aspect of the phenomenon, because faculty members exercise a limited amount of oversight and control over how others perceive their SNS participation and connections, which means that though faculty believe that their SNS use reflects them as a person and professional, they may not feel that they are in complete control of that image.

Though faculty control what they share (or do not share) online, they do not always know how others will view this activity. If they decide to share personal photographs, for instance, they are not sure how this will lead others, from various backgrounds, to view them as competent professionals, and if they do not, then they wonder whether others will be able to connect with them on a personal level. As Barry explained: “When I had no pictures up there and like no pictures of my wife up there, people wonder why.” Thus, both action *and* inaction are seen as potential reflections of the self. Similarly, when debates or contentions between people within one’s network arise, Cassandra believes that “it would be a bad reflection upon me to not say something.” In this way, a healthy SNS presence reflects faculty members’ skills and concerns, and lack of healthy presence is seen as a reflection of incompetence or poor management.

Though faculty members feel that their own action and inaction reflect upon their identity, they also understand that the action and inaction of their networks of connections impact their presence and identity. Thus, an innocuous posting by a professor can quickly turn into something problematic by someone with whom that professor has a connection. Cassandra for instance explained that she must first consider “who could possibly comment ... and how can I respond back to that?” If faculty members fail to anticipate how people within their networks will interact with others through them, then they might feel accountable for any uncivil or inappropriate interactions between their connections and view these communications as a reflection upon themselves, prompting action to correct the problem. In Cassandra’s words: “it’s my page, and if you write something I don’t like, I’m going to delete it.” Constant oversight and management, however, is difficult to maintain and can lead to stress and grief and, as a result, faculty members may seek a certain level of predictability in their connections as a preventive measure to having to constantly weed out the problematic interactions.

When Barry, Cassandra, and Julie share information through an SNS, they tend to have both an intended audience and a desired goal in mind. For both of these reasons, faculty sometimes determine whom to accept connections with on the basis of 1) affinity to the audience type that the faculty member generally targets (e.g. family, colleagues, etc.) and 2) civility or social presence. While the first consideration may reflect less distance between the potential connection and the faculty member’s current situation (regarding educational attainment, profession, etc.), the second has more to do with personal character and sociability. As Cassandra explained: “There have been some people that I went to graduate school with recently that are not very stable. ... When they try to add me, I decline/ignore, because ... I try to think about who you were in class with me and with other people and there’s no way I want that garbage. I don’t want to deal with it. ... And it doesn’t even have to be nice ... it’s just how do you treat people and interact with the world.” This suggests that faculty members believe that the people they connect with have a certain level of power in determining how others view them and, thereby,

are accepted only if they can be trusted to act “with a certain level of civility” and predictability.

To summarize, it appears that faculty feel that they must manage their space within an SNS, because that space reflects upon them as people and professionals. Thus, they can end up being mediators between people that they are connected with from diverse spheres or life situations, but they “don’t know how to mediate it if [they] don’t anticipate it.” Cassandra for example, described her difficulty in getting people from two divergent groups to communicate civilly with one another: “How do you get these two groups of people to talk to each other, you know? Who are my really staunch conservative friends and who are my super liberal friends, and is there a way to have conversation together?” In this way, faculty seem to view their online identity as evidenced by the interactions that people have through them, which rather than allowing them to exercise control over their own identity, can shift them into a mediator role between groups of diverse people who are collectively and continuously producing and re-creating the faculty member’s online identity.

#### 4.4. Using my time efficiently

Cassandra, Barry, and Julie acutely feel the stresses of teaching, writing, and publishing, and have an awareness of how easily their work can encroach upon their home lives. As a result, they appear to be critical of technological tools that are inefficient, do not improve work activities, or make work activities more ubiquitous. Online social networks can especially be seen as problematic, because they can be used to merge personal and professional activities, and are commonly used outside of the office. As Barry explained: “online access, email, and social networking add to the complexity of those who struggle with the home-work balance and the ... technology pull.” When reflecting on any technology therefore, faculty members carefully consider whether a tool’s utility merits the costs to use it.

For some faculty, the question of whether or not to use an SNS is answered with a resounding “no.” In Barry’s words: “my hunch is that [increased SNS use] would only add to the kind of struggles I’m [concerned] about in terms of time on computer and time away from personal contact.” For such faculty, SNS use can detract from real-life interaction and experiences and may provide little more than entertainment value. Barry continues: “there are a few people I would follow on Twitter that I’d get a kick out of what they say. But for me, the trade-off of that one interesting thing versus all the [expletive] is not really worth it.” In this view, since interactions within SNS generally take on a ludic, unpredictable form and are not clearly focused upon professional goals, SNS usage would be inefficient for pursuing professional goals.

Another aspect of this issue is that faculty members are commonly in direct connection with students who demonstrate poor time management skills and a lack of task-oriented behaviors, but which are also heavy users of SNS. As a result, faculty may be clearly aware of the potential addictive or unhealthy behaviors that can go hand-in-hand with inappropriate or unreflective SNS usage. In describing students who overuse SNS to the detriment of real-life experiences, Barry related a story in which he observed students who were attending a speech by the President of the United States but were actively engaging in social media rather than listening and experiencing the moment: “There were some people ... 15 feet behind President Obama giving a speech, and they’re like checking people, texting people like, ‘Dude enjoy the president for like 5 minutes!’ That kind of stuff just amazes me, you know!” He explained that he viewed this as a sign of addiction, in which an SNS can detract from real-life experiences, and he argued that if faculty are observing students using SNS in unhealthy ways, then those same faculty should at least be leery of impacting their own lives in negative ways through SNS use.

On the other hand, Julie views SNS as potentially efficient platforms for communicating with students and colleagues. Rather than



sending out a question to a mailing list, for instance, faculty can post questions or desires for feedback within an SNS, which might feel less intrusive to them than sending a bulk email, and receive instant feedback. They can also connect with students through an SNS in a manner that is more personal and familiar to the student. Depending upon the professor's goals, this may or may not make sense in practice, but according to Julie: "my position [as a professor] is building a community of teachers that I talk to ... where you can share, and so it makes total sense [to share through an SNS]." So, if developing a community is the faculty member's goal, then it seems that some view SNS use to be an efficient method for achieving this goal, while other goals (like sending individual emails) may not be efficiently achievable through an SNS.

Nonetheless, faculty are concerned with constraints upon their time and do not willingly seek out new technological tools that will make their lives more cluttered or less efficient. With regard to SNS use, Cassandra says "it definitely takes away time," but the real question for her is whether or not this time with an SNS would be used in a valuable way to achieve a desired goal. As Cassandra describes: "... at the end of the day, it's become more about time and time management... I keep thinking I should be writing or looking at data, and I'm doing this!"

## 5. Discussion

The SNS experience of faculty members culminates in a tension between personal connection and professional responsibility. As faculty attempt to negotiate their participation on social networking sites, they encounter issues of establishing boundaries, maintaining appropriate and meaningful connections with others, structuring participation for perceived presentation to others, and using their time efficiently. Julie, Barry, and Cassandra are highly aware of their actions and the expectations placed upon them in relationship to their professional and personal commitments. As such, they attempt to leverage technology tools to maintain their personal lives without negatively impacting their work as professionals. These findings are significant because they demonstrate the tensions that may arise from the use of technologies that collapse personal and professional contexts and audiences. While research in educational technology has generally focused on the study of technologies used predominantly for professional purposes (e.g., Learning Management Systems), increasing numbers of faculty members use social networking sites not just for personal endeavors, but also for professional undertakings. As such, SNS represent unique research sites that we can study to understand the practices, roles, and behaviors of faculty members in networked societies. What is the meaning of these findings for social networking, faculty members, and faculty members' digital practices?

Our results indicate that faculty members actively attempt to manage their use of the SNS or structure their participation it, such that the SNS fits within the professional culture that they are in and the ideals that they value. Interviewees alluded to instances when the SNS was not fully adapted or was adapted haphazardly, and in those cases, tensions arose between the faculty member's values vs. the online social network values. The implication of this finding is that social networking sites are not neutral – they were popularized as entrepreneurial ventures and carry with them ideologies (e.g., on Twitter, public sharing is the default). These ideologies, or ways of seeing the world, may be in contrast to faculty members' values. Thus, we believe that individual control of SNS features is crucial and recommend that technology designers provide fine-tuned controls for users to manage their participation and identity. At present, participation and identity management depends on digital literacy skills and individual users' ability to understand how networks work and function. Faculty members' and scholars' participation in online social networks can also be supported by providing users with audience controls (e.g., Google+ allows individuals to share

information with individuals placed in distinct groups called circles) and opportunities for easily switching between activity streams (e.g., from professional to personal streams). Such tools may allow academics to interact with diverse audiences in the ways that they themselves find valuable. Imposing particular modes of participation (e.g., requiring users to use their real name) may conflict with faculty members' values, leading to SNS underuse or rejection.

Results also indicate that faculty members learned how to manage their participation and persona by observing how others acted within the SNS and, through their positive and negative experiences, became better at this skill over time. Higher education institutions can be proactive in providing the support and training for scholars to understand participatory cultures and the opportunities, challenges, and perils of networked participation. We suggest that doctoral preparation programs and faculty training initiatives should strive to prepare academics for mindful participation in online social networks. For instance, doctoral preparation programs could introduce online social networks as learning spaces for academics' professional development or research settings for future research endeavors. On the other hand, faculty member training initiatives could help scholars understand participatory cultures and the social and digital skills and literacies required for effective networked participation.

This research also highlights the influence of educational technology on the academic self. Research on technology use in education has generally focused on issues such as pedagogy, instruction, and institutional adoption. Yet, the influence and pressures of technology adoption on the academic self have not been examined. One small-scale study on the topic (Hanson, 2009) indicates that faculty members appear to be concerned with the increasing use of e-learning in their institutions because of a perceived threat to their expertise and academic identity. In this study we find that faculty members also face deep concerns regarding their identity, but rather than feeling "displaced" by technology (as in the case of Hanson's study), they develop processes and rules to guide their participation in online social networks. We suggest that research focusing on technology adoption in higher education should examine the academic self more deeply, taking into consideration the professional and personal values of faculty members, because individual faculty members can act as agents of change, supporting or hindering technology use in education.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, we used the phenomenological method to understand faculty members' lived experiences in social networking sites. Results from this report can assist (a) researchers, in their drive to understand the roles and uses of social networking sites in educational and academic settings, (b) institutions, in responding to the implications of online social networks for higher education, (c) professional development initiatives, in developing training programs that are sensitive to the realities of the academic self, and (d) individual faculty members, in reflecting on the uses and purposes of online social networks for their teaching and research practice. Nonetheless, the emergent nature of scholars' and faculty members' participation in online networks requires further investigation. Answers to the following questions can guide future research and practice:

- What is the impact of online participation on professional practice and identity? If threats to professional practice and identity are identified, what are the steps that individuals need to take to minimize them?
- How do faculty members use different social networking sites for professional purposes?
- How does participation in online social networks relate to faculty member position, age, discipline, gender, and other personal characteristics?

- To what extent do institutional requirements and policies vs. personal preferences guide or structure faculty members' participation in online social networks?
- To what extent, and with what success, have online social networks been used by faculty members as Personal Learning Networks?
- If faculty members do not clearly espouse professional goals that SNS can efficiently help them to achieve (e.g. building a community of learners), then is there any value for these scholars to use SNS in a professional manner?

Further research on the topic of faculty members' and scholars' participation in online social networks can not only assist researchers in understanding this emergent practice, but can also generate knowledge on the productive use of these technologies for teaching, research, and professional practice.

## Appendix A

### Semi-structured interview protocol

- Which social networking sites have you used (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace, Match.com, etc.)?
- Tell me about how you found out about [SNS] and started using it.
- Tell me about how you currently use [SNS].
- Tell me about how your use of [SNS] has changed over time.
- Tell me about your connections (i.e. 'friends,' 'followers,' etc.) in [SNS].
- What are your communication methods and norms?
- How do your connections in [SNS] differ from real-life connections?
- Tell me about what [SNS] adds to your life. How is your life different as a result of using [SNS]?
- Tell me about your best/worst experience(s) using [SNS].

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