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Marlon Jovi S. Valencia  
*Portland State University*

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How Online Social Media Persona Affects Personal Identity and Self

by

Marlon Jovi S. Valencia

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

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and

Philosophy

Thesis Adviser

Professor David J. Weber

Portland State University

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## **BACKGROUND**

There is much to be said about how a person chooses to identify and present themselves in a social setting. With the emergence of the Internet and social networking sites, the number of social settings has increased substantially. Anyone with a smartphone and a wi-fi connection can check to see if you are on sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, LinkedIn, or Twitter, and has access to your online identity you have presented. There is much to explore regarding the concept of personal identity. My project is aimed at the subject of personal identity by means of empirical and introspective data. While limited, this is still a monumental task since there are many things to consider when talking about the philosophical agenda as it pertains to personal identity. There are questions of personhood, metaphysics, practicality, persistence, and mind just to name a few. In this project and thesis, I will be focusing on the aspects of continuity of body and continuity of mind via our online social media persona. Before I set out to accomplish my goal, I must note that this discipline exists in another, much broader, context and that the findings presented here will not suddenly become the end-all answer to all the questions still lurking about in this long-standing field. Instead, my project is focused on the contemporary presentation of identity and how we choose to present ourselves via online composition as it tracks the changes of one's self over time.

As I understand and discuss it in this paper, one's personal identity is one's view of one self that evolves over the course of their lifetime. For many, there are aspects in themselves that one chooses to change but there are other aspects that one has no control over. These aspects may include such things like where one grew up, the color of their skin, as well as choices they make in life, such as how they spend their time and what they believe. Some

philosophers have been wrestling with the question of personal identity by focusing on the notion of re-identification. What are the conditions under which a person at one point in time is properly re-identified at another point in time? From the moment that we sign up to engage in social networking sites, we begin our tracking of changes over time. Platforms on the internet, such as Facebook in particular, require that we engage in online activities that carry these continuations of our identity. How exactly does our social media persona affect our personal identity and self? The argument I will attempt to make here is that our composition on the internet directly affects our identity to the point of both being synonymous.

Before moving forward, we must also define how I will be using the word persona. Within the context of this paper, persona is the performance that presented and perceived by others. A persona was originally used as a mask on stage to denote and differentiate characters in a play. The persona that I have highlighted here is our online composition.

My project deals with my decision to post on social networking sites and to reflect on how much of my identity is affected by these decisions. The most extreme form of presentation on such sites, in my opinion, is to post a video blog semi regularly on YouTube. For a little over a year, I carried a video camera and documented days of my life and presented them to the world. This project took a lot of introspection to view everyday life and place it in under the filter of personal identity.

In the history of personal identity within the field of philosophy, there has been countless debates as to what makes the same person exist from one moment to another. Theories of continuity of body and continuity of consciousness used to answer this question of continued existence over time are rivaled. Bodily continuity suggests that personal identity lies

in the fact that one occupies the same body from birth until death. Consciousness continuity suggests that our personal identity persists over time because we have memories of ourselves over time and these memories are all connected. There are things that immediately jump out to refute both of these theories. For example, for bodily continuity: the famous example of Theseus' ship in which all the parts of the ship are replaced challenges the continuity of body theory. Is it still Theseus' ship even though all of the parts have changed? For continuity of consciousness, the refutation lies in the inability to remember a link in memories. For example, there may exist a point in your life that you cannot clearly remember. Does this mean the chain of memory has been broken? The point to make here is that the answer can always be challenged and answered with both affirmation or refutation with either position having a foothold of being correct. With this in mind, I maintain that personal identity lies in the combination of bodily continuation and consciousness continuation through social networking sites of those who choose to partake in such sites.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOVI**

Within the scope of my project, I contend that a medium that can reveal one's personal identity exists on the internet. With the surge of social media and networking sites over the years, a snapshot of someone's identity is now almost always available at the fingertips. On a long enough timeline, we can see their evolution of the continuity of body and the continuity of consciousness. For myself and many of my peers, the journey into social media began very early.

Circa late 2004 / early 2005, at the ripe young age of 10 years old, I was called into the office on account of a "bulletin" that I had posted on MySpace. A friend had printed it out

because it was just that funny. Looking back, I could not tell you exactly what the post was about, but it warranted a stern talking to from administration. They did not find it nearly as funny as my friend did. I remember my teacher asking me what the appeal of MySpace was to a 5<sup>th</sup> grader. The response I gave is essentially the response I would give anyone now if they asked me why I am always sharing things on various social media sites. "It's cool, and I can share all sorts of neat things with my friends." Admittedly, we probably should not have had MySpaces, but the glamor of being accepted into the group of kids answering yes to the question "Do you have a MySpace page?" was enough for me to make and maintain one. I would spend hours upon hours making sure the things that I shared were an accurate reflection of what I liked and how I wanted people to see me. Some things never change; this is the same behavior that I continue to have more than a decade later.

The idea of personal identity was always an interest but became very important to me in terms of social media persona in high school. While this is not a unique phenomenon and can occur with many people, I was worried everyday about how I carried myself and how I was perceived within my community. I was constantly told that I was a pillar among my peers. Thus, I was worried about the persona that I gave off and how people might perceive me. I asked myself, "How can I connect with everyone and make sure people know who I am?" For me, the answer was to continue my presence on social media and shape the image of who I am with my presence on the internet.

The importance of this idea of persona and identity was strengthened from a position of morbidity. Throughout my adolescence, unfortunately I became well acquainted with the loss of my friends more than one should. I kept noticing that after these deaths, hundreds of people

would flock to their Facebooks and leave messages for the world to see. Their pages no longer were for them; there were pages for those who wished to reminisce. I allowed myself to check my Facebook from time to time to see what I would leave behind. How will the world remember me? How closely related was the identity that I was performing to the identity that only I knew? When a person passes away, they leave behind only memories of themselves. With the use of sites such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, we can relive these memories even past a person's last hour. More often than not our social media is an accurate representation of who we are.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOU, THE READER**

For the purpose of this section, I am presupposing that you also have some kind of online presence. The persona that appears on the social networking sites that are part of your online presence act as a kind of biography. If you notice, most everyone has some sort of presence on the internet. Your presence can range from a simple email address to a LinkedIn profile. In our society, we are conditioned to post on social media because it has leaked out into our everyday lives. We can see countless advertisements encouraging users to use their hashtag to promote a new product. We move to promote things that we enjoy and share our experience. Posting on such sites is obviously not limited to just product endorsement because as individuals we now have the means to showcase our unique interests and perspectives on anything we see fit. More often than not, the subject that we want to showcase online is ourselves. We yearn to be unique. We want all eyes to be on us.

The showcase is always positive. Very rarely will we ever post a picture that highlights an insecurity. For those of us who take selfies, we never take just one. There has to be a

selection and even then, we will ask our friends which one should be the one to post online. We are so fixated on making sure that we are presenting ourselves in the most positive light. Social media has been transformed into a way to deliver out highlights on a daily basis. Given all this, the challenge for many who are so steeped in this culture is to stop posting. But the suggestion I make is to not even consider this challenge. If this is the generation that is going to be glued to their phone, so be it. Take all the selfies you need to be able to comfortably post on Snapchat. Double post on Instagram if you feel the need to share. Tweet to your heart's content. Like every page that comes your way on Facebook. Social media is something that is uniquely yours and no one can take it away.

The internet opened with anonymity. We were conditioned to never give out our real name or where we lived. This is a stark difference in today's world and it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when this change occurred. Apps like Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, Tinder, OkCupid, are direct rivals to this idea of anonymity. While the concept of online dating and information sharing is not new, the openness of sharing intimate details is definitely a new concept. As a society, we have made the idea of being so open our personal information that it leads to the upkeep of several sites. As we know, Facebook is considerably different to something like Tinder and both of these sites are considerably different from LinkedIn. Different sites provide different outlets for sharing. We always want to share with our friends and family what we are doing. Social media has a great way of having us all be connected without having to actually occupy the same space. These social networking sites act as letters without a stamp. They act as phone calls without a landline.

We are more connected to celebrities than ever before. Famous people are not exempt



from this sharing. They too have a persona that is shared online and that is something that we are able to interact with. Their identity, as complex as it is, also tiptoes out of the screen as we see a glimpse of big personalities. In a way, social media has a way of humanizing movie stars. We have the same access to the sites that they use and hold the same capacity to share. The only difference is the size of the audience that is being reached.

Being online is also a privilege that we hold. Readily available access to the internet is not something that is globalized. I recognize that a majority of people who are involved with and have a social media presence are those who are fortunate enough to be able to partake and upkeep these sites. To reiterate, the position that I am arguing is that the persona of those who have social media is their identity and self. This is not to say that those who do not have these sites, nor the access to these sites, are without a persona that leads to their identity and self. Their identity is situated differently. We perform our identity. There are certain ways we present ourselves that reflect the characteristics we identify with ourselves. We perform our identities differently in different situations. The age of social media dictates that we perform on these networking sites more than we perform anywhere else. This is where our identity stems from.

### **THE YOUTUBE PROJECT**

It is my opinion that the biggest way of putting yourself out there, in terms of social media, is to blog. In particular, the best way would be a daily video blog or “vlog.” You get to share your day with an audience. You get to share your opinions and really highlight what you want to highlight. I set to do this over a year ago. I can admit now that the task of a daily vlog was too ambitious so I settled into the practice of posting a video on YouTube, about three

times a week. My main audience was people that knew I had carried around a camera, some friends from back home in Hawaii, and my parents. It was a small audience but it was enough to get the label of “vlogger.” I was the guy who was always documenting things and it became who I was, for better or for worse. Before I set out on this project, I was just Jovi. Now, I have become Jovi, the guy who vlogs. My identity has changed from “Jovi” to “Vlogger Jovi.”

I set out to vlog because I thought it would give insight to my identity. I shared what I was doing, what kind of classes I was taking, what I had for lunch, and all the mundane details about my life. The performance of vlogging regularly had transformed me into a vlogger. The performance of maintaining all my social media made me who I am. For me now, it is an accurate representation of who I am and what I am about. The most common question I got was “What’s the camera for?” to which I would reply “It’s for my thesis.” I thought about that answer a lot. Was it easier to answer the question this way or did I use it to avoid saying that I carry it because I am a vlogger? That title was not exactly true though. I believed I was so much more than just a vlogger. After a while I did end up answering the question with “I make videos” because that was the truest answer I could give.

Since March of 2016, I have created around 70+ videos for the public to see. It is my belief that all of these videos are an extension of myself. I have vlogs where I run around and share my day and offer insight to the things I do. There are videos where I set up my camera on a tripod and share my opinion on a certain matter. I have gameplay videos of me playing games that I am passionate about. I have silly videos where I lip sync to popular songs. All this to say that there was nothing that I had posted that I had felt like it was not an accurate representation of myself. I felt like the persona that I had put out was synonymous with the

identity I felt close.

There are things that I have purposely cut out. I kept noticing that every time I started to record while I was walking around, I would turn my head to make sure no one is watching. This began from a place of embarrassment. I did not want to be the weird guy talking into a camera in the middle of the park blocks. Over time I realized that is exactly who I was and there was no point in denying it. Talking to a camera is not something that is easily hidden, so I just owned up to it. By carrying around a camera and making all these videos, my persona of video maker became synonymous with the identity of video maker.

Every single page I have maintained will stay on the internet for as long as the internet exists. Anyone can access these pages and will have insight to my identity. They can make all the leaps and assumptions they want about what I presented but the presentation is pure. Everything was posted with a purpose and their interpretation is how they choose to see my identity. This notion is not exclusively bound to my YouTube channel, but across all pages that I post.

### **HIDDEN IDENTITY ONLINE**

What I have been saying so far rests on the assumption that all access to any given person's social media is public. This is clearly not the case. There exists some level of security in who gets to view certain pages on the internet. From a follow or friend request on Facebook, there is some amount of privacy. The insight to one's identity is protected, if only by permission.

There also exists the ability to make several pages on one site presenting a different persona all together. Recently there has been a rise in taking on an alternative account to post

about different things. This adds to my overall argument in the sense that an alternative account is also part of the identity of a given person. While there are limited eyes on someone's alternative account, the account still exists. The presence, while supposed to be hidden, is still real. Is such an alternative account truer to one's identity? I would argue that it does not serve as an alternative person; if anything, having an alternative account only aids in one's overall online composition and thus identity and self.

### **CONCLUSION: PERSONAL IDENTITY ONLINE**

What does it take for a person to persist from moment to moment, for the same person to exist at different moments? I stand by saying it is the ability to track and showcase the continuity of body and continuity of mind via our social media. The personas that we tend to put forth on sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and so on are our sense of self. We know that we are the same person from birth until death because we have this means to document and share with our friends like never before. We know that we exist in the same body, we know that we have memories that are linked from as far back as we can remember and by virtue of posting online, we are able confirm and file who we are.

I can admit now that I should have known from the start that a year was not going to be enough to track substantial changes to my identity. In this respect, in terms of how long ago I started my project, it was a failure. The true meat of my project would have been revealed should the YouTube project gone on for years. The data between now and a year ago is considerably less valuable than if I had tracked from high school to now. By continuing this work, I will be able to show the tracking changes, of body and mind, through social media.

Most everybody has some form of online presence. If you have ever sent out a single

email, you have some kind of standing in the online world. Not many people consider questions of personal identity and how it might relate to something that they are already doing. Whether we like it or not, we are a culture of online people. We wish to share the intimate details of our lives and we now have the easiest means of showcasing our continued existence.

Our online social media persona affects our personal identity and self by becoming one and the same with one another. The Venn diagram of one's identity and their online social media persona is a circle. There exist parts of identity that are hidden to the rest of the world but still able to materialize should we choose to let them loose. The ability to show them off on the internet is no different than a book about one's life. With social media, it is significantly easier to see what it means to persist from moment to moment and exist at different times.