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Identity negotiation on Facebook.com

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IDENTITY NEGOTIATION ON FACEBOOK.COM

by

Lee Keenan Farquhar

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in Mass Communications in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

July 2009

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Judy Polumbaum

ABSTRACT

This study examines identity presentations on the online social networking site, Facebook.com. The two-phase research design includes a period of participant observation of a sample of 346 college students and recent graduates followed by an interview period with a sample subset of 48 interviewees. The study analyzes key performance components on the site using a symbolic interaction perspective, to determine common characteristics of Facebook profiles, importance of performance components, and categories of identity performance.

Identity performance components are broken into two general categories, static and dynamic. Dynamic components, those that are updated frequently and drive much of the activity online, are far more important in terms of identity performance. Dynamic components on Facebook found to be important in this study are status updates, use of bumper stickers and pieces of flair, giving gifts, and photos.

Analysis of these components supports the symbolic interaction literature in general and the works of George H. Mead specifically. The Facebook news feed allows Facebookers to continually observe identity performances of others as well as to give and receive feedback on performances. This continual flow of information allows for the development of a generalized other, used as the basis for anticipating reactions from others to potential activity. Based on these anticipations, in an effort to reduce misinterpretations, Facebookers develop exaggerated performances that serve to distinguish in-groups from out-groups.

Abstract Approved:

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor
of Philosophy degree in Mass Communications at the July 2009 graduation.

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Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who has helped me along the way. This list is far too long to present here, but you know who you are. The kindness, friendship, and instruction offered by classmates, the J-School faculty and staff, faculty and staff outside the department, and everyone else whose path crossed with mine during my time at Iowa will not be forgotten. Thank you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In *Born Digital,* John Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2008) define a Digital Native as an individual born after 1980 who has grown up never knowing anything other than the digital world. For the most part, this is a study about Digital Natives. These Natives never had the experience of moving from 8-track tapes to audio cassettes to CDs to MP3s. There were only MP3s.

The rest of the population who currently spend time in the digital world and were born before 1980 are considered Digital Immigrants. Digital Immigrants had to re-learn how to do things digitally.

I was born in 1980. I am not exactly sure where I belong in this dichotomy. Perhaps my position in a gray area is an advantage in terms of this research.

By Palfrey and Gasser's definition and descriptions, however, I probably am an Immigrant. My first music experiences were listening to my parents' vinyl records of the Oak Ridge Boys, Alabama, and Beach Boys. My first cassette tape, which came in 6th grade, was a single of MC Hammer's *Pray.* I have fond memories of listening to my siblings' Garth Brooks tapes on my Sony Walkman as I walked beans near Sutherland, Iowa, during the summers of my middle school years. My first CD, *Alan Jackson's Greatest Hits*, came in high school. I learned to type on a QWERTY keyboard as a freshman in high school.

Growing up on a family farm in the Midwest may have placed me a little further behind the curve than urban peers in adopting new technologies. However, since high school, I would say that I have more than caught up. Majoring in journalism and mass

communication in college and graduate school and having specifically studied new

technologies for the last six years, I can relate to a lot of activities described by Palfrey

and Gasser as Native activities.

Further, perhaps because I straddle the Immigrant-Native divide, I do not quite

buy the dichotomy. Actually, I suspect it was set up by members of the Immigrant

population who think they understand the Natives and, far worse, presume to know what

is *best* for them.

This is a trend evident throughout human history; each generation defies the

generations preceding it and looks down on the activities of subsequent generations. In

the particular context of my study, when Immigrants (old fogies) examine Natives (new

guard), concerns revolve around information disclosure and privacy concerns. Palfrey

and Gasser (p. 7) say in their introduction:

> Indeed, many aspects of the way in which Digital Natives lead their lives are
> cause for concern. Digital Natives' ideas about privacy, for instance, are different
> from those of their parents and grandparents. In the process of spending so much
> time in the digitally connected environment, Digital Natives are leaving more
> traces of themselves in public places online. At their best, they show off who they
> aspire to be and put their most creative selves before the world. At their worst,
> they put information online that may put them in danger, or that could humiliate
> them in years to come. With every hour they log online, they are leaving more
> tracks for marketers – and pedophiles, for that matter – to follow. There's more
> about them for admissions officers and potential employers – and potential dates –
> to find. The repercussions of these changes, in the decades to come, will be
> profound for all of us. But those who are growing up as Digital Natives are on
> track to pay the highest price.

Media critics, parents, and politicians often echo these sentiments. Social network

sites (SNSs) regularly appear in news accounts not merely as a new technology trend, but

also in more sensational forms as vehicles for showcasing and investigating misbehavior or criminal activity. Among the increasingly familiar examples of the SNS-and-crime genre are stories about underage college students getting caught drinking by campus officials or police who have come across uploaded pictures of the carousing (Cieslak, 2008); cautionary tales about potential employers searching online identities as a sort of reference check (Nussbaum, 2007); and reports of online sexual predation, the issue inspiring the show *To Catch a Predator* (MSNBC.com, 2008).

A report recently released by the Internet Safety Technical Task Force (2008) concluded that the three most prevalent Internet risks to minors are sexual solicitation, online harassment, and problematic content. The Task Force, though, suggested that unlike the typical case in episodes of *To Catch a Predator,* the majority of risk comes from other minors and young adults rather than much older males. The mass often focus on sexual solicitation and, more recently, cyber-bullying in relation to online social networking – and these clearly happen – although the Task Force suggests that posting personal information is not, in itself, a factor for Internet risks. Rather, risk is connected more to behaviors such as interacting with strangers and using the Internet as a harassment tool.

One might think media coverage and scholarship would deter individuals from even taking part in SNSs, or at least influence them to avoid talking with strangers on the sites and to limit exposure of private information. Yet college undergraduates seem to ignore the warnings, to the continued bafflement of those Digital Immigrants. What is missing here? What is driving the use of SNSs as conduits for social life?

I joined the SNS world about five years ago while getting my master's degree. At the time, Facebook was still limited to college and university students. Initially, I had little interest in getting deeply involved, let alone in doing research on social networking. My first experiences involved filling out the "about me" section, listing favorite movies, books, and hobbies, and providing a little background information. I didn't own a digital camera, so the only pictures I might upload came from my girlfriend's camera. My profile was minimal, and since my undergrad and high school friends also were just getting into SNSs, I had very few contacts and logged on only rarely. My infrequent sessions typically consisted of a few minutes every month or so perusing any new pics uploaded by others, seeing if I had any friend requests, and searching for friends from my undergrad and high school years. For my profile photo, I used a picture of Frank Stallone that I found on Google Images. I thought this would show a good sense of humor, which I attempted use in all aspects of my profile.

Meanwhile, my girlfriend convinced me to join MySpace, a site open to the public. Checking in with two social networking sites seemed especially pointless, given my low friend counts.

Before long, however, with my more computer-savvy friends in the vanguard, all of my friends, most classmates, and even some instructors seemed to be joining the Facebook community. Facebook was quickly becoming a staple of college student Internet use (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Indeed, as I finished my master's program and started on my doctoral work, concerns about privacy and online social networks were growing. Now that I was a graduate teaching assistant, I began to take on a higher level of self-monitoring regarding

information or image uploading. I learned the hard way – getting digital photos of myself from friends who owned digital cameras, I uploaded some new profile pictures, choosing for my main profile image what I considered to be a run-of-the-mill shot of me leaning on a table at a restaurant. After I posted it, however, friends sent comments asking why I had posted such a "provocative" pose. One friend asked if I was "on the prowl." Clearly the picture was sending messages I had not intended, so I changed to a more conservative image.

This experience made me much more conscientious of my performance and certainly raised my awareness of having as audience following my performance and making judgments about my presentation. As some of my students began requesting friendship, my level of self-monitoring moved even higher. I typically ignore friendship requests from students.

Not just colleges and universities, but all grade levels of education are now dealing with such privacy dilemmas, developing policies, and trying to train employees how to best use, or not use, SNSs (Mellon, 2008). These days, educators are apt to use caution given the stories of student excess in the media, but older generations seem to remain on a different page from students.

This is where my scholarly interest lies. Why would college students continue to upload apparently foolish, degrading, embarrassing, or even incriminating images and text if so many people could see it? This puzzle was my dissertation starting point.

Between the two largest SNSs, MySpace still has more unique visitors and a large membership pool overall, but Facebook is continuing to grow while MySpace's popularity may have peaked. Facebook counted 104 million unique visitors in April

2009, up nearly 250 percent from April 2008, while Facebook's biggest competitor, MySpace, counted 55 million unique visitors for April 2009, down about 9 percent from April 2008 (Compete.com, 2008). Often lost in all of this competition is the fact that many Facebook members also have accounts on MySpace. More recently the service Twitter, which provides a constant stream of updates from members in a user's network, has also seen a rise in popularity. In what appears to be a direct response to Twitter's growth, Facebook has shifted its format to provide a greater feel of immediacy by allowing constant updates from members.

Beyond the technicalities of their use, SNSs represent a larger transition in social life toward mediated communication among pre-teens to early-20-somethings; these technologies increasingly are part of their social lives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Scholars are naturally curious about the ramifications of this relationship. Some have begun to apply social-psychological theories that have only recently been applied to these "new media" realms, asking intriguing questions such as: What happens when humans engage in digital life? How are relationships changed? What remains the same? These are the sorts of questions that drive my research.

Specifically, this study focuses on young people's (college aged) interactions via SNSs. It looks at both how new technology brings different dimensions and results to human relationships and also at what has *not* changed about how humans interact.

Research suggests SNSs have a much deeper meaning for young generations than the rest of society realizes (boyd, 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). As one research subject put it, "If you're not on MySpace, you don't exist" (ibid., p.1). Part of the appeal for users in their late teens and early 20s is that online life belongs to them, providing a place

where the adults in their lives rarely tread (Choi, 2006). Conversely, *not* being online is associated with lowered social standing (boyd, 2004). Life in an SNS ostensibly revolves around performing for one's peer group (Campbell, 2006; Choi). High school and college students often seem blithely unaware that along with the peers they think they are addressing, unintended audiences may be viewing—and certainly have access to—their personal information.

This study examines what I call identity performances in an SNS and I have chosen the site Facebook.com for my virtual and actual fieldwork. By identity performance I simply mean a presentation of self, but the term also reflects my view that identity is not stable or singular, but rather shifts based on social context. Facebookers craft their identity performances through a variety of components for a variety of audiences, and those performances are manifested in the selection and emphasis placed on specific types of images and text. Performance is a negotiation between performer desires and audience expectations and reactions.

My study examines and analyzes groups and individuals behind these performances as well as the resulting online manifestations. Further, I attempt to identify norms and sanctions guiding online behavior, meanings invested in these identity performances, and the role of digital technologies in these presentations and in their users' continual negotiations of identity.

How This Study Will Proceed

In Chapter II, I contextualize Facebook, detailing its membership and describing the general format of the site. I provide the basic information regarding what the site is and how it works, as a prelude to moving into deeper theoretical discussions.

In Chapter III, I lay out my main theoretical framework for the study of online identity performance, drawing on symbolic interaction, especially the works of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. I also explore literature on identity, both online and offline.

Chapter IV presents another theoretical layer, introducing definitions of social network and reviewing the phases of scholarship on the Internet and the online community. I identify three general themes of scholarship: initial cyber-enthusiasm, critical response, and current social-psychological approaches to online networking. I also discuss the relationship between technology and social life.

Chapter V presents the study design and methods. I discuss methodological approach, my sampling and participants, and procedure for analysis.

Chapter VI presents the first section of results, covering the users and the uses of Facebook. Here I describe the basics of Facebooking and move through descriptions of the commonalities and differences in Facebookers' networks, the average Facebook session, and themes or categories of presentations.

Chapter VII highlights a set of Facebook elements that are most revealing of identity and performance of self. This includes a detailing of Facebook bumper stickers, flair, gifts, and other applications that serve as identity pegs.

Chapter VIII focuses on intersubjectivity through a presentation of Facebookers' interpretations of *other* Facebookers. Study of how Facebookers observe and interpret other users' performances illuminates Facebook norms and salient identity characteristics. At the end of this chapter, I discuss the findings of this section in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter IX focuses entirely on identity performances through uploaded photos and illustrations. This chapter recapitulates many of the issues and themes discussed in Chapter VIII, but the extra time, energy, and meaning assigned to visual elements seemed to demand an additional chapter. This chapter has two parts, a categorization of uploaded photos and a discussion of photos chosen as profile photos – generally the first element one sees when viewing a profile.

Chapter X provides further theoretical discussion and conclusions, reflections on strengths and weaknesses of my study, and suggestions for future study.

CHAPTER II

CONTEXTUALIZING FACEBOOK

Facebook claimed around 200 million active users as of April 2009

(Facebook.com, 2009). Around 85 percent of all college students are said to be users

(Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006). After nearly saturating college populations,

Facebook decided to broaden its user base by allowing first high school students and later

non-students to join. The result has been a steady increase in Facebook membership since

2005 and a moderate decline in the popularity of Facebook's biggest competitor,

MySpace (Compete.com). I chose Facebook for this study due to its strong connection

with the college environment, its continuing rise in popularity, and my pre-existing

familiarity with the site.

History and Development of Facebook

Mark Zuckerberg created thefacebook in 2004 while enrolled at Harvard, but the

site quickly spread to Yale and Stanford and eventually to colleges and universities

throughout the U.S. (Phillips, 2007). Eduardo Saverin provided Zuckerberg's earliest

financial backing, and the site got its first significant support – reportedly $500,000 USD

– in 2005 from Peter Theil, co-founder of PayPal (Yadav, 2006). Shortly after,

Zuckerberg's creation received investments of $12.7 million and $27.5 million from

Accel Partners and Greylock Partners, respectively (Yadav). The domain name

Facebook..com was purchased in 2005 for $200,000. In August 2006, Facebook agreed

on a three-year deal with Microsoft to create and sell ads on the site. Facebook's

saturation of the high school and college populations is attractive to companies looking

for the youth market (Yadav, 2006). In late 2007, Microsoft announced that it purchased

1.6 percent of Facebook for $240 million, giving the site an implied value of around $15 billion (Microsoft.com, 2007). However, *Businessweek's* 2008 estimate valued the company between $3.75 billion and $5 billion (Ante, 2008).

Facebook's service is largely supported through advertisements placed along the periphery of each page on the site; Zuckerberg, still CEO, confirmed in May 2009 that advertising remained the company's primary revenue source and said Facebook expected to increase sales 70 percent that year (Oreskovic, 2009).

Facebook's own materials as well as the business press indicate a broader strategy, however, to "monetize" the service. As one commentator puts it, the company intends "to leverage its platform to bring in external services" in a strategy that amounts to serving as "a pipe that gets a cut in all transactions..." (Iskold, 2007). In a clear invitation to outside entrepreneurs, the company's online fact sheet touts "a development platform that enables companies and engineers to deeply integrate with the Facebook website and gain access to millions of users through the social graph... providing unparalleled distribution potential for applications and the opportunity to build a business that is highly relevant to people's lives."

Indeed, what business journalists are calling "the Facebook economy" is premised on development of new "applications"—many selling "virtual" goods but others marketing real products and services—by entrepreneurs seeking to piggyback on Facebook's success. Only a small proportion of these external applications have hit the jackpot, but predictions are that much more is possible (Blakely and Copeland, 2007).

Whereas Facebook's own language emphasizes the value and importance of the site to its users and the business press celebrates the company as a gateway for

opportunity, other observers perceive larger dynamics of political economy at work behind a benign facade. Ryan Bigge (2006), for instance, argues that SNSs such as Facebook have a "self-disguising apparatus" for commodification of the audience, both individually and in the aggregate. He notes that users produce a stream of commodifiable content which business interests can monitor, repackage and sell; marketers are especially desirous of the huge databases of user preferences the site supplies. Citing Andrejevic's work (xxxx) on the blurring of "labor and leisure," Bigge says the commitment and effort that engagement with Facebook requires is a form of "enforced volunteerism" that amounts to unpaid work—users and the networks they create, without monetary compensation, are what constitute the value that benefits the company and the corporate world more generally.

Indeed, indications are that the most successful business strategies for making money off Facebook are the most invisible. Applications that exploit what CEO Zuckerberg calls the "social graph"—connectivity webs among users—as well as applications that are fairly simply and unobtrusive take hold best (Blakeley and Copeland, 2007). Meanwhile, even as Facebook's largest demographic continent remains college-aged, with 18-24 year olds constituting just over 40 percent of users at the start of 2009, the rapid spread among users with established consumer habits and resources (with the 35-54 age group growing fastest) raises the stakes for marketers (Corbett, 2009). Although my study of Facebook emphasizes the user perspective, examining individual identity constructions as well as network dynamics, I am mindful that these actions and interactions (including users' self-perceptions of individual agency as well as my own

observations as a researcher of individual and group behaviors) transpire under a much larger umbrella of macrosocial interests and forces.

Activity and Key Components

The profile is the heart of Facebook activity. Simply due to the design of the site, Facebookers spend the bulk of their time either viewing and commenting on others' profiles or editing and updating their own. The core of social networking is the interactions between people through their profiles.

Friendship is a key component, requiring a friendship request from one party and an acceptance from the other. A Facebooker who receives a friendship request can accept the friendship, deny the request, or ignore the request. Ignoring the request leaves the requesting party waiting in limbo without notification while the requesting party is immediately notified if the request is accepted or denied. When two Facebookers become Facebook friends, their two profiles are linked automatically, so that what is publicly visible on one account becomes accessible to the other and vice versa.

For most Facebook profiles basic elements include a main profile picture, the Facebook news feed, background information, a set of uploaded images or photos, and a section called "boxes."

The main profile picture located at the top left corner might be considered a first impression since it is usually one of the larger elements of the profile. The profile picture may be a portrait of the Facebooker or a small group of friends with the Facebooker. Some Facebookers choose illustrations, pictures of nature, or some other image that they feel represents some aspect of their personality. Some Facebookers keep the same picture up for long periods while others change often.

The Facebook news feed is frequently referred to as the Facebook "wall" and is where much of the Facebook interaction takes place. The wall acts as a public message board and provides updates on friends' Facebook activities. Basically, it gives the user a message anytime anyone in that user's network does anything on Facebook (uploads pictures, becomes friends with someone, posts a message, etc).

The background information component is relatively straightforward. It is usually filled out at the onset of Facebook membership. This component offers information about the Facebooker such as age, sex, birthday, hometown, activities, interests, an "about me" section, education, and contact information. Users seldom update this information.

Use of the photo section varies greatly in terms of the amount of time and energy spent. Some Facebookers don't upload any photos, some have only a handful, and some have thousands of pictures for others to peruse. This area certainly seems important in terms of presenting oneself to others online.

The Facebook *boxes section* includes mini-games, a showcase for specific interests, and some other time-wasters such as brain teasers and perusing images or video to show on the profile page. These elements are all add-on applications from third parties that have agreements with Facebook.com. The amount of time and energy spent on the applications also varies greatly, with some users completely avoiding the games while others spend hours on them. Some applications are not games but rather places to showcase interests. Many Facebookers' boxes sections are covered with "bumper stickers," which are short messages and images resembling real-world bumper stickers. The topic of these stickers can be anything from politics and religion to sex and beer to love and friendship. Bumper stickers and similar applications often enable others to

contribute to a user's presentation of self. Facebookers may give bumper stickers to other Facebookers as well as choosing their own.

Facebook profiles can be thought of as an online embodiment of real persons using the site (boyd, 2004; boyd & Heer, 2006). I use the term *embodiment* to refer to the individual's representative in a computer-mediated interaction. In the case of Facebook, the representative is the user profile. The profile is the online representative of the Facebooker. As technology continues to develop on SNSs, the online representative is beginning to contain more visual elements, but the online embodiment could also be found in purely text-only communities (boyd & Heer). This online embodiment, therefore, is a virtual embodiment (a concept that feels like an oxymoron). In the virtual world of Facebook, though, this embodiment serves an important role in that it is present even when the Facebooker signs off. Other users can still interact with it.

Online embodiment is quite different from the offline body of the individual. No tangible body, no immediate connection to the flesh exists on Facebook. This makes for a kind of freedom in identity performance, even as online embodiments may match offline realities for the most part (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). One of this study's concerns is on the relationship between online performances and offline friendships, and this relationship plays out in large part through the Facebook profile.

It is through this handful of Facebook components that the digital embodiment of the self becomes realized (boyd, 2004). Having digital representatives is an important step in moving social life online. With this addition, the SNSs move from the mere transmission of messages (similar to an e-mail) to a site that houses interaction (boyd &

Heer, 2006). The profiles have conversations with each other; when we talk to someone

online, we are talking to his or her profile (boyd & Heer).

CHAPTER III

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As computer technology grows even more enmeshed in daily existence (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), we begin to deal with deeper matters of its use. boyd (2004, 2008) analyzes the role SNSs play in the daily lives of teens. Turkle (1995, 2004) analyzes how technology shapes the individual's sense of self. Hodkinson (2006) and others examine how subcultures can thrive online even when non-normative behaviors thereof are continually rebuked in daily interactions. In all these cases, the daily living of the individual with the technology is crucial. It is not that we live separate lives, one in the technology, one in the "real" world. Rather, it is that we live lives with a mix of interaction-types (Altheide, 1999; boyd, 2004). The study of Facebook can help illuminate this intersection. Since most Facebookers have overlapping online-offline networks (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), it makes sense to look at how social life works online, what is the same online and offline, and what, if anything is different.

In this chapter, I lay out a basic explanation of pragmatism, symbolic interaction, and the views of George Herbert Mead as constituting a fruitful theoretical approach to studying Facebook. Second, I discuss concepts from Erving Goffman about the presentation of self in relation to Facebook. Third, I present scholarship on varying influences upon identity (media, social groups, and the individual) and their relevance to SNSs. Lastly, I discuss perspectives on the relationship between technology and society, crafting my view based on works of scholars with varying perspectives, especially Mumford (1934).

Pragmatism and Symbolic Interaction

The nature of truth, meaning, and reality are important for this study and any research focusing on the technology and society for at least two reasons (Chayko, 1993). First, the scholar must show that Facebook *counts* as a real site of research. Second, on a deeper level, each scholar must have a clear ontological and epistemological orientation before entering the field.

George Herbert Mead (1936) believed that meaning comes from experience and consequence. The pragmatist tradition in which Mead worked opposed the pure truth found in realism, which was the convention during Mead's time (Goodman, 1995; Joas, 1991). Mead spurned scientism, or adherence to scientific method as a route to definitive conclusion on the premise that absolute truth or meaning is "out there" waiting to be found; and he also objected to idealism, or the view that truth is "in the mind." Rather, Mead believed meaning and truth were socially constructed. Similar to Mead, William James believed that anything that has a consequence can be said to be real (Goodman). Through experience with the world (including other people), an individual builds meaning. The consequences of dealings with the objects of the world give those objects meaning.

In the case of Facebook, there is an interesting mix of people, places, and other objects the users see every day and people, places, and objects the users only see through the screen. Facebookers do not interact with Facebook items physically. Facebook items are virtual and sometimes animated creations. However, they still have consequences and therefore are grounds for truth and meaning in the pragmatist tradition.

Objects are an important concept in Mead's (1936) view of the world. Objects can be anything: a dog, a plant, another person, the self or an identity, the past, or the future. On Facebook, a user observes how others are acting toward an object, toward others who are interacting with the object, and toward oneself in handling the object. A user examines what happens to oneself and the world when experiencing an object. Through this type of interaction, a user develops meaning for the object. There is no meaning in and of the object itself, nor essence or meaning for the individual outside of the consequences it brings about. Put more concretely, a Facebooker interacts with someone, observes how others interact with that person, observes how others view the interaction, and assesses the outcomes of all of this. The user then begins to attach meanings to that other person, that interaction style, and the interaction environment. Any given meaning, of course, is fluid and will undoubtedly change over time.

Mead sees time too as a socially defined object. The past and the future exist nowhere but in relation to the present. Further, since the "truth" of the past and future is socially constructed, it is subject to changes. The past and the future are continually reconstructed in the present. Thus, the meaning of an object changes as the individual moves into the future, and, since her view of the future is also an object, its meaning also changes. Mead believed that each generation creates its own past.

Further, having control over the meanings and truths of the past is a powerful position, for it defines in part how we think of the present (Wieting, 2002). Due to the power associated with it, controlling how populations think of the past is a point of continual struggle, and multiple pasts are generated within each generation. The history of ideas illuminates these points. For example, the view that the Earth is flat that changed

later into a spherical-Earth view, and the "truth" of the Earth's position in space also transitioned from the geocentric theory to the heliocentric view. In each case, humans knew the truth of the world in each generation, and the subsequent generation had a slightly (or radically) different truth of the (literal) world. Other examples include the differences between how generations view their nation's history or how family members construct a family's history. This is not to say that one truth is right or one is wrong, but merely that there are no such universal truths.

Again, it is worth mentioning that whatever has a consequence can be said to be true (Goodman, 1995). If everyone on the planet believes the planet is flat and acts accordingly, then that could be considered true for it bears certain consequences. This is why, for Mead (1936), hypotheses must continually be revisited. What we knew before or how we thought of the world last week has been modified by what we learn today. Mead (1932) calls this dynamic the *emergent*. New and unforeseen events force us to rethink our views of the past, thereby creating a new past that explains the emergent. Online, the concept of the emergent may be even more important as we have less physical connection to the past (houses, roads, oceans, etc).

The most prominent element defining the past on Facebook is uploaded photos. In many cases, if not for digital cameras documenting the events, the truth of the past would simply rely on memories of those who were there. Facebook gives these events broader salience. Even those who did not experience the events firsthand can now partake in them. Further, more Facebookers have the opportunity to frame or define the image in any number of ways, and other Facebookers have the opportunity to comment on the images, providing either support or adjustments for earlier definitions. Facebookers might

go so far as to argue that a picture needs to be taken off the site entirely. This would be, in terms of the present discussion, an attempt to deny negative aspects of the past. This denial of past actions is an action in and of itself.

Mead's Social Act

Defining action is an important early step in studying Facebook. Mead's definition of the act states that all action has social meaning. Mead's social act consists of four stages: *impulse*, *perception*, *manipulation*, and *consummation*. These are the stages a Facebooker would go through in any action on the site. The impulse has often been mistakenly thought of as innate drives (Lewis, 1991). These have also been erroneously linked with Mead's concept of "I", often tied to the Freudian ego. However, an impulse can be anything from hunger pangs (physiologically driven) to socially constructed desires. Though Mead suggested that these impulses often arise from stimuli in our immediate environment, a Darwinian take on the animal and its environment, the human doesn't merely react in an instinctual manner. Reaction is based on past experience and perception of the options.

The impulse of, let's say, a desire for high status and prestige on Facebook results in a perception of the options. This is the second stage of the social act. What sorts of activities or symbols acquire prestige from others? What was successful in the past? How did the past status symbols work out? What activity will provide prestige in the future? All of these are filled with social meanings. The ability to define what provides status and prestige, in this example, is a powerful force. This holds for the ability to define *any* object's past, present, or future. How the individual acts toward an object is based on his interpretations of its past (and his past interactions with it) and his anticipation of future

consequences. If an activity is viewed as unpopular or silly, it might fulfill the individual's need for status or prestige, and he therefore might choose different activities and presentation symbols. For a more concrete example, think of the Facebooker's list of friends as a status symbol. Facebookers start with very few friends and commonly grow their network sizes rapidly until they reach a threshold of acceptability. In short, having only a few friends on Facebook is a negative status symbol. Thus, partially to avoid this negative symbol, many Facebookers accept almost everyone who asks to be their friend. Facebookers appear to pick up on the meanings of their network sizes. Fitting this set of meanings into Mead's social act, the Facebooker desires prestige and status within the site, looks and talks to others, and borrows ideas for what appear to be successful tactics in gaining acceptance on Facebook. To restate, the perceptions of the world are initiated by an impulse and based on social meanings.

Next comes the manipulation stage. In my example, the Facebooker actively requests and accepts friendship from dozens – perhaps hundreds – of others. These friendships also have a slew of social meanings and consequences. The Facebooker has ideas about past connections from grade school, junior high, high school, or college, incorporating interpretations of existing relationships and existing offline contexts (is this coworker or classmate someone to be considered a social friend?). Further, there are customs and traditions surrounding initiation and development of friendships. First, to outright *ask* someone to be a friend is not the norm among adults in society. Second, to pursue a Facebook friendship with strangers or those who are not well known might be considered moving too fast. Again, the manipulation stage is processed with past and anticipated consequences in mind, and these meanings are always subject to change.

Finally, we come to the consummation. In the current example, consummation would be successfully growing and maintaining a large network, typically in the hundreds. Consummation in general is the fulfillment of the impulse, there always in reference to the past events and anticipation of future consequences.

As with the example of status and prestige through network size, any number of Facebook symbols could be used to illustrate Mead's stages of the act. For example, the impulse for a particular type of friendship or social acceptance within a certain group would lead the individual to perform certain actions. The perceptions would be based on the norms and meanings of society in general and the Facebook community specifically. Will it work to simply start a conversation with anyone? Whom can one approach? What do specific groups value? Next, the manipulation stage brings in relationship development theory. How is the conversation started? How does one need to request friendship so that the other person will accept? What topics are ok to talk about? Finally, consummation comes with friendship, mere (successful) conversation, or inclusion in a group.

Presentation of Self

Individuals tend to desire social acceptance. They seek this acceptance by presenting themselves in the best light possible. According to Goffman (1959, 1967) their presentations are continually adjusted throughout the day, based on their environment (home, work, church, nightclub, etc) and the reactions they get from others (shame, praise, etc). Goffman clearly is drawing on the symbolic interaction tradition, particularly Mead's social self and generalized other. Goffman, though, advances the theory by adding his concepts for performance and interpretation. The individual assesses the

effectiveness of his actions and guides future actions based on the *cues* he gets from other people (Goffman, 1969; Mead, 1932, 1936). The performer also gives cues to the audience. Some of these cues are intended by the individual; this is called information or cues *given* (Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1969). Some cues are unintended or are unconsciously provided, or *given off* in Goffman's terminology. Given cues are controlled messages sent from one person to another. Given off cues are often, in face-to-face interactions, nonverbal and include blushing, eye twitches, sweating, and so on. Since cues given are complete contrivance, recipients of cues tend to put a lot more stock in cues given off. That is, cues given off tend to have higher *cue validity* in the minds of the interpreter.

An interesting line of research has examined what is essentially Goffman's cue validity in terms of online social networking. Research shows that people tend to seek out information online that is not directly from the presenter (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, & Westerman, 2008). That is, we might believe what other people say about a person is more valid than what the person herself is saying. Cues given and given off, and cue validity, are clearly important to this study's examination of presentation of self on Facebook. How does a Facebooker attempt to have high cue validity with so much of her profile using cues given instead of cues given off? What are ways to include or manage cues given off?

Another set of concepts central to Goffman's take on identity performance is *stage type*. Front stage includes those social environments when we are performing at a high level. Our performances in the *front stage* are highly restricted. That is to say, they are especially governed by our social environment. *Back stage* includes environments with fewer restrictions on how we can perform. The difference between the two stages

can be exemplified by a waiter who spends his night moving from the back of the house (kitchen, food preparation area) to the front of the house (patrons at tables, food eating area). In the back of the house, the waiter has greater freedom to act. He can openly talk about the patrons, mock the food being served, and so on. He takes off his "waiter cap" and can "be himself". In the front of the house, however, the waiter must be "on." He must be respectful, in servitude, and so on. There are expectations based on his environment and the roles taken by both server and patron. Extending this scenario further, I believe the back of the house represents both back stage performances (in terms of his relation to the patrons) and front stage (in terms of his performance of self to fellow staff and his supervisor). In most situations, I believe the individual has to adapt to at least moderate social demands. Even if the individual were to sit with his best friend, there are still at least some social demands in place. In my conceptualization, then, one is only in *purely* back stage moments when she is alone. On Facebook, it would appear that the acting individual is *always* performing in the front stage. Unless the privacy settings are adjusted so that no one else can see the Web page, it is a social act and therefore is considered, under my conceptualization, partially front stage.

danah boyd (2008) offers an interesting twist on performances and interpretation. She suggests that since most of our experiences with performance and interpretation of others' performances occurs offline, we might not possess the cognitive ability to effectively control and interpret online performances, even though we have the technical ability. Given the high Facebook usage rates of college students and the involvement levels of the potential participants, it might be overly presumptuous to suggest that they are not adept at giving and interpreting performances online. However, some scholars go

so far as to suggest the reverse, that due to the time spent online and on cell phones, the Facebooker generation is losing the ability to perform in face-to-face interactions (Bugeja, 2005).

Perhaps both interpretations are valid. In the tradition of Mead, social meanings and norms are fluid. Facebook may simply be a case where the younger generation is shifting to a new way of doing things and thinking about the world, and I think Mead would say that this is the way social life always has been and always will be, whether the focus of the youth is motion pictures, Elvis Presley, cell phones, or Facebook.

Drawing on symbolic interaction literature in general and the works of Mead and Goffman specifically, two main research questions provide an apt starting point for my research. The first focuses on identity performance, the second on the reception of performances given.

RQ1. How do SNS users perform and negotiate their identities online?

RQ2. How do SNS users interpret online identity performances of others?

Intersubjectivity

Mead's theory of the *social self* is one of his more popular topics (Goodman, 1995) and is useful in this study given that the concept of self is realized through observation, anticipation, performance, observance of reaction(s), subsequent anticipation, subsequent performance, *ad infinitum*. Mead (1936) believed that the self emerges through this continual chain of action. Individuals play many roles in many circumstances (see also Goffman, 1959). In each case, an actor internally assesses how she has been viewed, is being viewed, and will likely be viewed in relation to a potential act.

The self is an object of meaning just as a table or a tree is an object. In terms of the self, however, she takes on the role of the other and observes herself. That is to say, the individual objectifies herself. This is *intersubjectivity*, and it is the core of Mead's theory of the social self (1932; 1936; 1938). Rarely does an individual actually ask others what they think of her. She does not need to, and the question would be inappropriate in most social situations. Rather, she perceives and interprets, over time, how others typically react to certain objects, including her own self and actions. From this series of perceptions and interpretations, she forms a *generalized other* in her mind.

In Mead's view, the individual has a sort of internal conversation with the generalized other each time she contemplates an action even without giving it much explicit thought. This process helps explain how individuals act on social norms. Norms, when internalized, can be thought of as a generalized other in relation to society, a subculture, or a specific group (Becker, 1973; Campbell, 2006; Goodman). The norms of Facebook, for example, would be internalized under a generalized other. The successful consummation of an impulse, then, would depend on a mix of how accurate the individual's generalized other is and, to a large extent, how quickly an individual can adapt to the emergent.

Identity

From the symbolic interaction perspective, my research will focus on individual and group influences on how individuals see themselves and each other. The self concept, in the tradition of Mead and Goffman, comes through experiences with those around us. I am mindful, however, of larger enveloping discourses about identity that attempt to encompass broad categories of people. These larger discourses revolve around

constructions of gender, nationality, religion or race, for instance, and are played out

often in the media. The media provide another set of resources for individuals to use

when adopting social meanings and norms, developing generalized others and

interpreting others' responses to actions.

Jenks (2005) suggests larger discourses of identity found in the media serve as

"soft" resources in the makeup of any individual's identity. Others (e.g. – Wallerstein,

1988; Alcoff, 2006) believe that larger discourses about identity play a bigger role in our

daily existence than we like to admit. These discourses foster shared knowledge, common

ideals, and identities among large groups and even nations (Anderson, 1983).

Presentations on Facebook surely incorporate larger discourses of identity into

individual identity performances. The media can become a powerful influence when the

bulk of one's waking hours are spent with them (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Spending four

to eight hours a day with another person would likely have similar results; that person

would become quite influential. As Facebookers spend about three hours per day on the

site (comScore, 2007), the site itself could be considered an important factor in its

members' views on identity. However, any influence on identity coming from Facebook

could instead be attributed to the social groups found within the site. The point here is

that the media and other institutions are sources of much basic symbolism and meaning,

while the individual's experiences in social life (on and off Facebook) provide the fine

shadings specific to each person's identity construction.

In many social groupings, identities form the basis of in-groups and out-groups

(Sherif & Sherif, 1964). In their desire for social acceptance, people tend to align

themselves with particular groups while trying to avoid identification with other groups

(Cochran, Beeghley, Bock, 1988). The differences among groups are commonly exaggerated, usually to the detriment of non-desired groups so that the chosen-identity group seems even more correct. People also choose groups on the basis of a need for ontological security, or what Laing (1969) explains as people's desire to wake up in the morning knowing who they are and how they should act—starting the day *not* knowing would lead to great anxiety and impossibly difficult social interactions. Hogg and Reid (2006) similarly suggests that categorizing the self and others is all about uncertainty reduction; everyone wants everyone to know how they should treat and be treated by everyone else. The social groups and possible identity categories on Facebook would most likely act in similar ways. Online, our identity performances tend to be exaggerated due to overcompensation for the lack of nonverbal or visual cues and possible unfamiliarity with the medium (Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007; Smith & Kollock, 1999), and our performances within our reference group might become especially exaggerated online in an effort to look like the "best" group member (Campbell, 2006).

At the individual level, people internalize higher discourses and mid-level influences, construct mental guides for their own behavior, and present—or represent—their individual identities back to the social world. The construction of mental guidelines can be thought of as Mead's generalized other. Individuals make choices about whom and what they want to be, how they want to be seen, and which presentations will be most effective for achieving desired outcomes through anticipation based on the generalized other. Thus, for each individual, the varied sources of identity culminate in an ongoing presentation of self.

The study of online identity construction raises some novel questions. One active area of research attempts to isolate the differences between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and face-to-face (F2F) interactions. Scholars have pointed out that CMC offers greater control over presentation (boyd, 2002, 2004), lesser control over the audience due to the reach, an inherent archiving ability of digital information (Negroponte, 1995), and the abovementioned lack of non-verbal cues (Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Though the lack of verbal cues is ostensibly overcome in many cases through video, uploaded photos, or emoticons, the value of the nonverbal cue has always been that it gives off, using Goffmanian's term, unintended and therefore extremely useful information. Emoticons are highly controlled by the presenter and therefore are simply another form of information "given" (again, from Goffman). An emoticon is simply another way of typing "I'm happy right now." or "I'm blushing." These are clearly strategic messages that do not actually require the performer to be happy or to blush. Additionally, video still isn't as fluid as live, F2F conversation. There is always the option of erasing a video and re-recording it. Photos would fall under information given in that they too are framed, possibly edited, and selected from a group of options.

At the center of this process is control. If the information going to the audience is controlled, and the audience *knows* it is controlled, the information has lower cue validity. However, research also suggests that SNS users find other sources of unintended cues with (perceived) higher validity, including, for instance, assessing a person through viewing her SNS friends (Walther et al., 2008)—i.e., judging individuals by the company they keep online. Overall, however, there is a lack of uncontrolled cues online, and those

that do emerge are likely to be over-relied upon by the audience (Smith & Kollock, 1999).

Another potential identity difference between online performances and those occurring offline has to do with the likelihood of identity performance errors. Offline, it is not unusual for an individual to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. Online, however, people have more control over performances, and reception takes place in a less discerning, and thus more flexible and forgiving, environment (boyd, 2002). Users can purport to be anything or anyone (Turkle, 1995). Further, they can purport to be various anythings or anyones—they can have multiple selves. This ability to completely fabricate an identity might not be so important on Facebook, however, since research suggests most SNS members live continuous versions of their perceived "true" selves online as well as off—with key online interactions conducted among those with pre-existing offline networks of social ties (boyd, 2004; Choi, 2006; Ellison et al, 2007; Garton et al, 1997; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Minar & Hedlund, 2001; Wellman, 2002a, 2002b; Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Though the connection to offline relationships may prevent "fictitious" presentations of self, there remains the possibility of exaggerated presentations or performances that lead to an exaggerated group norm (Campbell, 2006).

The literature suggesting that Facebookers would learn how to perform their own identities from their interpretations of other Facebookers, interactions outside Facebook, and presentations in the media lead to my third research question:

RQ3. How do SNS users' interpretations of others interact with their own identity performances?

CHAPTER IV

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

This chapter first addresses the larger role of technology and society, moving through various perspectives and ways of assessing any given technology. It then reviews three phases of scholarship on virtual communities and online social networking and looks more closely at recent scholarship in the specific areas of networked individualism, isolating effects of technology, and the collapse of context.

Underlining the discussion is the perennial issue of mediated versus real-world experience – in the SNS context, the online-offline dichotomy (Altheide, 1999; Backstrom, Huttenlocker, Kleinberg, & Lan, 2006; boyd, 2004; Choi, 2006; Cotterel, 2007). Some scholars believe the online-offline split is a false dichotomy (boyd, 2004; Choi), and I agree. Certainly, members of the Digital Native population do not think of identity as split between online and offline (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Networks of friends on SNSs are almost always attached to offline relationships (boyd, 2004, 2008). Furthermore, an expansive social network may be a prerequisite for, not an effect of, online social networking (Lampe et al, 2006). The online-offline overlap appears to be operative with Facebook. Most Facebookers note that they first got started through a friend showing them the site. Initial friendships at least are usually people that the Facebooker knows offline.

Altheide's (1999) concept of a *technological seam*, which I will expand upon shortly, provides a useful way to understand the online-offline nexus.

The Technology-society Relationship

Perspectives on the relationship between technology and society range from deterministic (Beniger, 1986; Ellul, 1964) to social constructivism (Winner, 1986). Technological determinists generally argue that technology shapes societal possibilities, that technology begets more technology, and that (over)reliance on technology is detrimental to humanity. Social constructivists hold that, for the most part, socio-cultural institutions provide the structure within which people operate, an approach attentive to both the constraints of institutional forces and the potential of individual agency. I am not wedded to either approach; in fact, I accept both that technology begets technology and that institutions and the social world structure technology's uses. In other words, I accept the potential of individual agency in a highly controlled world.

The Internet in general and Facebook specifically illustrate the interactions of technological, institutional, social, and individual dynamics. We can see the impact of technology in the structure of the web or the design of the computers, for instance; the influence of institutions in the formative role of capitalism; the influence of societal norms and group affiliations; and individual ability to make decisions.

Scholarship informing my approach to the relationship between technology and society includes the work of Beniger (1986), Ellul (1964), Winner (1986), Mumford (1934), and Altheide (1999).

According to Beniger (1986), humans have always been moving toward greater levels of control over nature. A key point in human history was the industrial revolution, when resource and information flows began to move faster than "human speed," he says. Production, regulation, and management of these resources – which include humans

themselves – came under control by forces outside the human. That machination-industrialization process, according to Beniger, was the real start of the modern information revolution still underway.

Ellul (1964) focuses on how technology shapes social life, summing up the relationship as "the technique," or a striving for bigger, faster and stronger technology within a system premised on rationality, universalism, monism, productivity, efficiency and autonomy. He announces the emergence of the "rationality of the technique," with humans over-reliant on technology in the name of progress. This is similar to Beniger's view that society is constantly moving toward greater control. In both cases, technology begets technology to its own end. Humans, in an effort for greater control over nature, end up turning the keys over to technology.

Langdon Winner (1986) tempers the deterministic view, arguing that technology is subject to the politics of the society in which it is embedded. In his view, a handful of technologies have inherent political tendencies—the most obvious being nuclear power and weaponry. Winner believes these select technologies properly correspond with centralized authority, since the decentralization of power over them would have potentially devastating effects. In most cases, however, politics are not inherent in technology. Rather, social, economic, and political forces in the environment shape the production, development, and uses of new technology, and those in power are likely to shape it to their own ends. A modern example is demographic exclusion created by the "digital divide," in which the potentially democratic technology becomes inaccessible to those who cannot afford the startup costs (buying a computer, Internet access fees, electricity bills, office space, etc). Though initial production of the Internet may not have

been designed for exclusion, exclusion results in a the competitive marketplace

configured to create "haves" and "have-nots" (Robins & Webster, 1999).

Louis Mumford (1934), one of the first to take a serious look at the relationship

between technology – which he called *technics* – and society, offers a conceptual view

remarkably applicable to the modern computer-mediated environment and especially

suggestive for the purposes of my study. Mumford maintains that moral, economic,

social, and political decisions are determinant in the relationship, but that continual

negotiation takes place in the development of technology as well as in their daily use.

This view sets the stage for Altheide's (1999) much newer notion of the technological

seam, which he sees as a site of continual negotiation among the technology itself, the

norms of socio-cultural institutions, and everyday usage. A technological seam exists

where the use and placement of a technology is continually negotiated by the users

(Altheide). Instead of viewing online life as a separate animal, Altheide views it as part of

the ongoing world of relationships, interactions, and presentations of self. This view

suggests that people are always socially "on," be it online or on the street. This is a

departure from earlier scholarship that suggests a sharp divide between "real" and online

life (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). I prefer Altheide's approach, which hinges on how

people fit technology into their existing lives.

Altheide's formulation arises from his study of adoption of computers in schools

in the 1990s. Teachers and administrators didn't know what exactly to do with this new

technology, but nevertheless thought it necessary to improve students' learning, so

teachers negotiated the technological seam in their own ways, Altheide says. Students,

meanwhile, also negotiated the implementation of the new technology, often using it as a

means of rebellion—stealing the mouse balls was quite the rage. Having gone through high school in the late 1990s, I remember clearly having new computer labs and also having teachers who knew very little about how, exactly, to use them. We learned how to type on a keyboard, but that was about it. I would wager that discussions continue in schools everywhere about how to best implement the latest technological tools and gizmos.

Following Altheide, I regard online life not as a distinct arena, but as part of the ongoing world of relationships, interactions, and presentations of self. The technological seam is a place where individuals on SNSs go back and forth between their offline and online words as they fit technology into their lives. Neither technology nor socio-cultural institutions nor individual agency are a sole determinant of these negotiations; rather, the three form a triad of sources of mutual influence. These three forces engage in constant negotiation.

Drawing again on Mumford (1934), the relationship between technology and society entails tensions in several key realms that remain important in studying SNS negotiations. Mumford identifies these areas of contention as *consumer vs. citizen* (also considered isolation vs. community), *transmission vs. constitution*, and *centralization vs. decentralization* (also considered authoritarian vs. democratic).

In looking at consumerism vs. citizenship, the concern is whether technology such as Facebook is moving individuals toward consumption and isolation or toward expanded citizenry and community (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004 Mumford, 1934). Bugeja (2005) and Bakardjieva (2004) argue that technologies are dramatically altering our sense of community, physical touch, and social connection, and suggest that digital

technologies, particularly computers, are creating a world of isolated, solipsistic individuals. Robins and Webster (1999) suggest commercial interests are defining online interactions more than the interactions themselves. To "live" online, you need a computer, a power supply, an Internet connection, and membership in an online social group, all of which serve commercialization of the Internet. Even the ostensibly communal nature of Facebook is the property of media owners who profit greatly from the work of users.

More optimistically, Rheingold (1993; 2006) believes new technologies are enabling and promoting positive links among geographically and socially expansive arrays of people. Wellman and colleagues (Wellman, 2002a; 2002b; Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002) and others (boyd, 2004; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006) suggest that, given the substantial offline component to Facebook, online interactions do not necessarily divorce people from physical contact or a sense of social connection.

Scholars have differing views on whether technologies are merely carriers of meaning or creators of meaning, transmission vs. constitution in Mumford's terms. Borgman (2004) and Aarkhus and Katz (2002) see digital technologies as secondary tools of communication –e-mail, for instance, is little more than a message delivery system in their view. In contrast, boyd and others (boyd, 2002, 2004; boyd & Heer, 2006) argue that developments such as SNSs do not simply transmit meaning; rather, they are sites of meaning creation. In Turkle's view (1995; 2004), computers enable the creation of the online self. A middleground, that I tend to favor, is the view of Miller (2001), who sees Internet technologies as having transmissive *and* constitutive abilities. Some components, namely e-mail, primarily deliver messages, while others, including chat rooms and the

Facebook profile pages, allow for deeper development of the self, the other, and relationships.

Mumford's question of centralization vs. decentralization refers to technology's capacity to shape, reinforce, or counteract configurations of social and political power. Though some early enthusiasts praised the democratizing potential of the Internet (Rheingold, 1993), many critics believe digital technology is moving humanity away from democratic governance and toward centralized authority (Barney, 2000; Poster, 2004). These latter scholars dispute the idea that the Internet's glut of information is improving democracy; to the contrary, they believe information overload has necessitated the creation of metadata and accompanying centralized structures of monitoring and management of information flows (Dronfest & Brickley, 2001). Facebook certainly has all sorts of metadata – data *about* data – used to sort and manage the vast amount of information on the site.

Lessig (2001) suggests forces of centralization and authoritarianism are winning the battle online due to three layers of control, which he categorizes as *code*, *content*, and *physical controls*. Control over access to and use of what Lessig believes should be public resources is achieved through code developed by corporate programmers; control over content is exerted through laws governing copyrights, piracy, privacy, and so on; and physical controls include the limitations of the electromagnetic spectrum.

At the same time, some technologies have decentralizing and democratic tendencies that move the locus of power away from centralized authority into the hands of disparate users. Some scholars see mobile technology as having this potential. Rheingold's (2002) concept of the *smart mob* – a continually linked, easily congregated

and disbanded group – might be another example. To the extent that SNSs such as

Facebook are driven by a critical mass of users who provide the bulk of the content

(Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006), they also might exhibit this tendency.

In a bit of telling wistfulness, Howard Rheingold (2006, p.47) has written had he

only known Barry Wellman earlier, he could have "saved the field about a decade of

debate" by using the term *social network* instead of *virtual community* in his

groundbreaking study (1993) of online life.

For many, the term virtual community (or online community) conveys the idea of

replacing the offline, face-to-face community (Rheingold, 2006). However, social

networks have always been at the heart of communities, even those that are purely offline

(Wellman, 2002a, 2002b). Instead of the term community, though, some suggest calling

the offline version a *neighborhood*. Wellman (2002b) prefers to view it as a *physically*

bound social network composed of a system of social ties. The movement of this network

to online realms does not change it; the only difference is the lack of physical boundaries

(other socially constructed or technologically driven boundaries still exist). The

phenomenon can be seen as an extension of the trend away from F2F communities that

occurred when transportation advances enabled humans to travel great distances over

short periods of time.

Scholarship on Online Interaction

Research on online social formations can be divided into three phases. The first

phase, that of relatively blind cyber-enthusiasm (Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 1993;

Turkle, 1995), is passé. The second and third phases, however, continue to thrive.

Cyber-enthusiasm on online social formations gave us the label virtual community, as in *The Virtual Community* (Rheingold, 1993) and *Life on the Screen* (Turkle, 1995). This perspective, decidedly deterministic in tone, predicted how the wonders of new technology were going to reshape our thinking about place, communities, other people, and ourselves. Other scholars at the time were writing pieces on the technology itself, defining the bits and pieces and explaining how computers "work" (Chesebro & Bonsall, 1989; Negroponte, 1995). Though Rheingold and Turkle are often set up as straw-man arguments (and many later scholars were happy to place them in that role), the concepts put forth by Turkle and Rheingold were the primary focus for about a decade, and at least for historical purposes, their work is still among the first read by newcomers to the field.

The second phase of scholarship, an era of criticism still ongoing, is a direct response to cyber-enthusiasm with its wide-eyed claims like Turkle's (1995) suggestion that everyone can be anyone (and multiple "ones") online. This literature revolves largely around a critical assessment of online communities, particularly regarding identity politics. While scholars acknowledge that identity may indeed be more fluid online and that online communities may indeed shift power balances, they remind us that the Internet is no utopia (Hargittai, 2007; Nakamura, 2004). Race and gender stereotypes thrive online, especially when individuals "play" with identity. Some scholars note that, for instance, stock gender roles get exaggerated when individuals switch gender online (Nakamura; and even Turkle herself, 2004). Others see Rheingold's glowing praise of the democratizating power of the online community as far too enthusiastic, noting the online community is rarely without a power hierarchy (Howard & Jones, 2004; Skog, 2005).

Additionally, some scholars examine what we lose when life goes online (Bakardjieva, 2004; Bugeja, 2005). Overall, this phase may be seen as the academy checking itself, and rightly so, giving the field much-needed balance.

The third phase of scholarship, an era of sociological and social-psychological approaches, is the newest, and currently the most vigorous, which is logical given its emergence coincides with online social networking powerhouses such as Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Major lines of research in this most recent phase include work on identity (boyd, 2008), impression management (Smith & Kollock, 1999), social capital (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Wellman & colleagues), the online-offline split (boyd, 2004; Choi, 2006; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006), and use of online communications in everyday life (Altheide, 1999, 2004; Wellman and colleagues). Especially influential in informing my perspective are boyd's work (with colleagues, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2004) focusing primarily on the social aspects of SNSs, and Wellman's (with colleagues, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 1999, 1997) on networked individualism.

Key streams of research

Research areas of particular relevance to my study of Facebook are networked individualism, isolating effects of technology, and the collapse of context. Networked individualism and isolating effects inquire into the notion of individuals operating at the center of vast social networks with minimal interaction with other members. Research on the collapse of context is concerned with ramifications of a large, diverse social network online for the individuals in the center.

Networked individualism is a concept developed by Wellman and his colleagues (with colleagues, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 1999, 1997). While prior notions of community have the individual rely on a relatively small group of others for many or most needs, the networked individual relies on any given person for only a few needs, perhaps only one. The idea is that at the center of a vast social network (filled with family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, strangers, and potentially all others), the individual (or the ego) partakes in strategic interactions in selective ways (Rheingold, 2006). The ego has multiple options for the fulfillment of most needs, greatly reducing the reliance on any given member of the ego's network.

Networked individualism stems from two sources: strong ties and weak ties (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Maintenance of strong ties – close friends and family – provides rapid information flow among the densely connected inner-circle, but suffers from a lack of diversity (Frank & Yasumoto, 1998). Weak ties – loosely connected, distant friends and acquaintances – provide slower information flow but diverse information (Granovetter, 1977; 1983). Literature on social capital – "those aspects of social structure… that can be used by the actors to realize their interests" (Coleman, 1990, p. 305) – sheds light on the values of networked individualism in this regard: through maintenance of both strong and weak ties on SNSs, the user gets the best of both sources of connection and leverage (Burnett 2000; Frank & Yasumoto; Granovetter, 1977, 1983; Pickering & King, 1995; Portes & Sensenbrenner).

But studies have also found that the networked individual eventually begins to shed the number of strong ties in favor of weak ones. As strong ties lose out to weak,

outcomes for the individual also have social consequences including atomization that, in Putnam's (2001) view, has potentially devastating results for society.

There is no scholarly consensus, though, on whether the Internet and digital technologies are fostering isolation or merely creating different forms of connection (Bakardjieva, 2004; Borgman, 2004; Bugeja, 2005; Jones, 1998; Lampe et al, 2006; Wellman studies). The debate echoes Tönnies' (1974) concepts of gemeinschaft versus gesellschaft (community vs. society), as well as bearing on discussions about the general relationship between technology and society.

Bugeja and Bakardjieva especially are strong believers in the idea that new technologies are having negative effects, particularly on the youth – the segment with the highest usage rates (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Bugeja, through mostly anecdotal evidence, discusses how SNSs and digital and mobile technology are driving an interpersonal divide, and Bakardjieva suggests that these technologies create *immobile socialization,* or connectivity without physical movement. They set up the scenario of being able to get whatever you want on your laptop without leaving the couch, which they say is a bad thing, eroding people's physical touch, sense of the world, and understanding of larger issues in society. The most dystopianistic authors view Wellman's networked individualism as a major danger to the world at we know it.

From a more optimistic perspective, other scholars suggest online life allows positive escape from problems of everyday life (Hodkinson, 2006; Howard & Jones, 2004). It may even be superior to offline realities: the small-town community traditionally upheld as the ideal in fact might be filled with narrow-mindedness and a disdain for those who are "different," newer technologies allow individuals to make

connections with others who are more tolerant of various viewpoints, or those who share a common viewpoint (Purcell, 2006). The online world offers an alternative to the old way of being born into a community with a given set of neighbors and having no choice but to deal with them. Though there may be advantages in learning to work with someone even if you do not get along, there are also advantages to "getting out" and experiencing something new through channels that online media presumably provide..

Wellman and his colleagues acknowledge that both sides have valid points. There are drawbacks and advantages to adopting or refusing a new technology, such as SNSs, and these elements are negotiated within each group or network (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004). It is, according to Wellman, foolish to lump all online groups together and equally foolish to place any given group entirely into a positive or negative camp.

Research in the third area, collapse of context, stems from inherent differences between offline and computer-mediated communication. As discussed earlier, online self presentations are highly controlled, with information mostly *given* rather than *given off*, in Goffman's sense (1959, 1967). In F2F encounters, by contrast, people tend to give off a great deal of information (twitches, eye movements, blushing, breathing patterns, etc). But in the offline setting people are able to control their audiences. If you do not want someone to see you cry, you can walk away or just not leave the house. Online poses the opposite tradeoff: heightened control over the presentation but lack of control over the audience (Campbell, 2006; George, 2006; Hewitt & Forte, 2006).

In the symbolic interactionist perspective, meaning is tied to the reception and consequences of the reception rather than to the presentation (Mead, 1938) and the

collapse of context makes this a much fuzzier process. On Facebook in particular, as described by boyd (2002, 2004), it is a predictable that computer-mediated presentations typically are devoid of their original context by unknown and unintended audiences. Facebookers have almost complete control over what they say, but not how, when, or by whom the message is interpreted. Even if users design their presentations based on anticipation of certain, expected responses, they cannot anticipate with confidence the responses of unknown audiences (George *et al*). In a group setting, an acting individual anticipates and responds to the reactions of those around her. In dealing with multiple groups, she has the potential to be sanctioned for behaviors that are normative for one group but seen as deviant by the other group. Mixing merely two types groups (i.e. – friends with coworkers) can cause high anxiety for the individual at the center of both groups. Trying to negotiate between the two groups so as not to offend any one group can be difficult and, at times, impossible. Offline, thankfully, our social groups tend to stay separated by time and place. However, multi-group scenarios are a highly likely possibility online, a phenomenon I have described this elsewhere as a *polyopticon* (Farquhar, 2008). This new twist social structure is increasingly evident on an SNS like Facebook, where friendship lists include classmates, siblings, parents, aunts and uncles, friends, love interests, professors, coworkers, RAs, and even complete strangers.

The list conjures up rather different scenes in real-world settings versus virtual ones. In the middle of a web of connections is the individual who knows everyone. The groups may have very different views on how the individual should present herself to the world. Among disparate physical settings, the individual smoothly transitions in whatever ways necessary to meet the norms of the given group. Online, however, no physical or

temporal separation exists: on Facebook, the groups can all view (and judge) the individual at essentially the same time. The view with different affiliations might make very different interpretations of pictures uploaded to the profile, the "about me" sections, or the games an individual plays on Facebook (some of which can be a bit crude). Nobody can please all groups.

This is the situation in SNS interactions: participants must try to perform normative behaviors for multiple groups holding different norms. Research has shown that in offline scenarios, the presence of multiple groups creates strain on the individual caught in the middle (Krackhardt, 1999). It is a real possibility, then, that Facebookers may feel the strain of having to deal with an even greater multitude of groups judging others' online actions according to different sets of norms. The degree of the potential strain, however, is reliant on the acting individual's awareness of the audiences, either through seeing them or receiving sanctions for action. In the case of Facebook, since the audience is unseen, the individual must receive messages from audiences so that she is aware that the audiences are, in fact, watching her.

With debates over networked individualism, isolation, and collapse of context in mind, my fourth and last research question addresses the relationship between offline life and online life:

RQ4. How do SNS users' online identity performances interact with offline performances?

Summary of Research Objectives

The overarching goals of my research are to describe, explain, and understand how and why individuals negotiate their identities with specific regard to the role online

social networks play in the process. The literature from the symbolic interaction tradition, with specific focus on the concepts of Mead and Goffman, is the primary basis for my research questions.

To recapitulate, in the symbolic interaction perspective, the individual seeks acceptance from relevant social groups as well as society at large. In an effort to achieve this acceptance, he or she observes successful presentations, watches reactions to and from others, internalizes norms regarding objects and activity, and bases potential activity on anticipated reactions and consequences. Further, these meanings and norms are in constant negotiation and, thus, shift over time. That is, as the social group moves through time, its value, norms, and interpretations of behavior may shift. Individuals lead and respond to this shift as part of the overall process of observation, reaction, and anticipation processes. The entire process is fluid, continually providing a possibility for group members to redefine meanings.

Presentation of self and identity may indeed be even more fluid in many online forums based on anonymity, but Facebook's connections to offline relationships, often connected in a physical community, also constrains identity presentation in different ways. On Facebook, moreover, most members in a friendship network know each other offline, which inhibits them from swapping gender, presenting themselves as purely contrived characters, or significantly breaking away from their offline presentations.

Clearly, Facebook tries to enforce a single identity for each person: one of its explicit goals is to reduce false identity presentations (Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008). Symbolic interaction, though, sees individuals perform roles according to context. As an individual moves from one context to another, the role performed changes,

even if only slightly. In light of what boyd (2004) calls collapse of context, Facebook acquired new social complexities.

Instead of being able to move physically from one context to another, members of the Facebook community are enmeshed in overlapping contexts. Awareness of diverse social onlookers may constrain individual action. Facebook offers, though, opportunities for networked individualism, or strategic maneuvering within a network, in which individuals interact selectively with a wide range of others as opposed to relying heavily on only a handful of others. This pattern is commonly associated with a drop in deep or intimate relationships and an increase in acquaintances or what Granovetter (1977, 1983) calls weak ties, which as he notes, also offer their own "strength."

This study, aims to explore and analyze the social processes involved with construction and interpretations of identity on Facebook. Empirically, I hope to convey what users do, what they think about and do not think about, how they interact, and to explain how online and otherwise-mediated presentations of the self inform or influence participants' identity goals and how individual identity is continually managed through interaction with many other actors. My next chapter lays out my plan of research.

CHAPTER V

METHODS

Dozens of ethnographic studies have already been done on online groups (boyd, 2004; Turkle, 1995; Thomsen, et al, 1998; Walstrom, 2000; Waskul, 2002; Waskul, Douglas, & Edgley, 2000). These studies serve as a reference as to how to go about transferring offline "real-world" ethnographic concepts and procedures to "virtual" worlds (see especially Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Miller & Slater, 2000). My research builds on prior ethnographic work, specifically that addressing identity, performance, and symbolic interaction (see especially the Waskul studies). An innovation in my study is what I call the "guided tour" of self.

Ethnography is a logical method of inquiry here because the approach focuses on social acts and interactions from which, according to symbolic interaction, people derive meaning. My ethnographic research includes observing Facebookers' identity performances and turning to Facebookers themselves for illumination of these performances. Ethnographic methods allow the researcher freedom to adjust to and with participants in the pursuit of understanding. Miller and Slater (2000, p. 10) say: "Ethnography is inherently pragmatic." I conducted my research both online and off, meeting and talking with many participants face to face as well as via computer, as other scholars have done (Miller & Slater; Paccagnella, 1997; Thomsen et al, 1998).

My study made use of participant observation followed by interviewing and guided tours (boyd & Heer, 2006). Throughout the process, I assessed data in a manner inspired by Gilmore and Crissman's (1997) two-step procedure of observation and interviews. Initially, I focused on the central components of a Facebook profile, including

the profile picture, other photos, self descriptions, the "about me" section, and publicly displayed messages between participants. As I moved into the interview and guided tour stage, I increasingly emphasized areas highlighted by the participants themselves. This yielded six key domains for description and analysis as follows:

First, symbols: a symbol is anything that conveys meaning. On Facebook, symbols are most often text and images, but occasionally include video and audio presentations. The meanings of symbols were largely reliant on participants' discussions of the messages. The observation phase focused, then, on collection of symbols and the formation of initial researcher reactions.

Second, how participants link symbols to the social world. Once again, formations of initial reactions to symbols, and, in this case, their link to the social world, were made during the first phase of this study. The second phase was used to test these initial reactions and fill in the gaps regarding the link between symbols and the social world. The key issue in this question was finding those symbols that are the most important to the participants in dealing with their social groups.

Third, roles assumed, or how Facebookers incorporated symbols into their performances. Some symbol combinations formed multiple or varying roles for the same Facebooker.

Fourth, behavior setting, often the source of differences between a behavior intent and the interpretations (or meaning to actors vs. viewers). The setting of action on Facebook were within the site itself, such as a message sent from one Facebooker to another and came from offline contexts as was the case with uploaded pics. In the case of uploaded pics, the settings of action and interpretation were clearly different. They were

also different, though, in purely digital contexts. For example, a message could be sent from Facebooker A to Facebooker B within a particular interaction context and then taken out of context and sent to Facebooker C. In this example, the action setting (interaction between A and B) is different from the interpretation setting (C) even though it is all, technically, within the site itself. This example illustrates the meaning of an action setting. Setting is much more than physical location. Setting includes, in this study, the full context of an interaction.

Fifth, assessment used to process data was of processes or changes occurring over time. One of the central tenets in symbolic interaction is that meaning is fluid and continually negotiated. One of the benefits of ethnography is that it allots the time and frequency of interaction necessary to track shifts in meanings. On Facebook, these shifts showed up in trends or fads.

Sixth, the participants' views of changing meanings. Here, too, ethnography was useful in its emphasis on views of the participants themselves.

Costs and Benefits of Online Ethnography

Ethnography itself offers a handful of advantages and disadvantages, with the bedrock assumption being that experience leads to understanding (Machin, 2002; Van Maanan, 1988). First, when studying an online group, it is only logical to use online methods that put us in that environment (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998).

Second, participants in a study such as this presumably enjoy interacting online (Waskul, 2002). Facebookers were likely tech-savvy and possibly had a higher level of comfort (perceived safety, perhaps) in this sort of interaction (Miller & Slater, 2000). Further, online interactions have developed a norm of turn-taking (Crichton & Kinash,

2003). The benefit here was that participants – who were most likely already used to this norm – were comfortable with the flow of the interaction used during interviews, and they were therefore more likely to give more responses (Crichton & Kinash).

Third, online interactions draw on the characteristics of digital data. Most importantly, they are inherently archivable (Negroponte, 1995). Recording, coding, sorting by themes, and presenting are all made easier with digital data (Thomsen et al, 1998). The online portions of my research no doubt benefited from the characteristics of digital data.

Fourth, costs (time and money) for both the researcher and the participants are greatly reduced when conducting research online (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). Along with savings of time and money, the researcher has a much greater reach (Lindlof & Shatzer). Some participants in this study were graduates from the university and no longer in the region. Similarly, participants had greater access (Crichton & Kinash, 2003).

There are, of course, disadvantages to purely online ethnographies. First, one characteristic of online interactions is that they lack nonverbal cues (Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). This reduces the information flow in both directions and greatly increases the possibility of misinterpreting the other's intent (Lindlof & Shatzer). Further, we tend to over-exaggerate what little information we do get (Smith & Kollock, 1999). This has the potential to lead both sides down an unfruitful path. The participant may have negatively projected the researcher's identity in a way that inflates difference (status, power, sex, race, age, and so on) or the questions might be misinterpreted and therefore not draw out the "right" answer (Lal, 1996). Similarly the researcher might grossly "miss" the participant's intended identity. The solution to this problem in this study was the multi-

method approach that included offline encounters (Miller & Slater, 2000). Certainly, there is still a possibility of miscommunication in face-to-face interactions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This, however, simply must be admitted and, wherever possible, be limited by duration and frequency of interaction.

Another characteristic of digital data tied to a lack of cues is the asynchronous nature of computer-mediated interactions. This allows for a much more highly controlled presentation by the participant to the researcher, as well as from the researcher to the participant (Thomsen et al, 1998). In some cases, this performance can be even more informing than talking face to face with the participant – though every interaction involves a performance of some sorts (Goffman, 1959). The value of online interactions is bolstered when coupled with offline interactions. They become informative both in terms of understanding the individual through their discussion of other content and through differences (if any) in their performances in each setting. Thus, online and offline methods are encouraged by the literature (Leander & McKim, 2003; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Paccagnella, 1997).

Procedures

In planning my data collection and analysis, I found Williams and Copes' (2005) work on straightedge culture, particularly regarding their building-block approach, extremely helpful. Their study used participant observation to inform subsequent interviews, with initial contact with potential interview participants developed during the participant observation period. I began, as do most online ethnographies, with participant observation (Gilmore & Crissman, 1997; Waskul studies; Williams & Copes), using a researcher profile separate from my personal Facebook account, starting with a sampling

procedure to be explained shortly, I made connections with potential subjects through "friendships," links, and access to profiles; and the profile connected me to additional participants indirectly through Facebook's "people you may know" function, which lists individuals who are already connected with several of a user's friends.

I used the observation stage as preparation for the next stage. My objective was to identify a set of participants who were willing to meet F2F at a computer in a public area and give guided tours of their "average" daily online activities, including their views on their own performance of self. This is the part I call a guided tour of the self, which I envisioned to be much like a tour of one's home.

Along with guided tours, I also conducted interviews both online and offline). These were largely unstructured, with only a small set of guiding questions at the onset (Waskul, 2002). The idea here was to interact with the participants in a number of environments and benefit from such corroboration (Paccagnella, 1997). Additionally, underscoring symbolic interaction's premise of social construction of meaning, I included friends of friends whenever possible. This snowball sampling accounted for both presentation and interpretation of any given message that travels between the two participants.

In both interviews and guided tours included, I addressed the following topics: (1) basic demographics and membership history, (2) reasons for joining, (3) frequency and duration of site visits, (4) to whom they talk online and offline, (5) the relationship between their online network and their offline interactions, (6) presentations of self and the expected interpretations of these presentations, (7) interpretations of others' presentations, and (8) participants' own thoughts about identity in an online forum.

Beyond these elements, each interview evolved further, largely steered by the interests and the emphases of the participants themselves.

Following such a trajectory of methods, each component added material as a basis for understanding. I used the observation period to view overall network dynamics, assess my own initial reactions, and begin to discern themes; while the interview and guided tour portions offered individualized perspectives not otherwise accessible.

Subjects, Sampling and Recruitment

Facebook.com is the SNS setting for this research. Specifically, I chose to focus on the Facebook sub-network linked to a large Midwest US university. It was the logical choice for a handful of reasons. First, Facebook involves a majority of the college student population (Lampe, Ellison, Steinfeld, 2006). Using the university setting as a base of operations allowed a level of connection with potential participants through a shared affiliation to the university (the Facebook sub-network for the university listed 37,346 members as of 4/23/2008); I could easily travel to meet with and interview potential participants; and the participant field was confined to a manageable set of users.

Prior to contacting any potential participants, I created a researcher profile that included a description of me, my intentions, my larger research interests, informed consent information, and my contact information (see Appendix A). The profile also included a recruitment statement asking for willing individuals to contact me.

I thought through ethical considerations of the sort many online ethnographers have discussed – what should and should not be done, what needs consent, and what is considered public behavior (Cavanau, 1999; Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Waskul, 2002), and incorporated them into my procedures and consent

information. Areas of concern include: lurking, issues of boundaries, social presence, and group entry and membership. I adopted the following basic ethical guidelines (following Mann & Stewart, 2000):

1. Data can only be collected for specific, legitimate purpose.

2. Participants have access to materials collected about them.

3. My online profile will include information explicitly identifying me as a researcher with intent to monitor actions within the site.

4. Consent must be sought prior to any inclusion of materials in the manuscript/dissertation.

5. Identities will be obscured through blurring photos and using pseudonyms.

Having my profile, I initiated contact with potential participants through common membership in three large, common-interest groups and three small, specialized groups within the university sub-network through friendship requests, initiated according to a process of drawing two random letters and using a Facebook function to search the groups based on those letters. The larger goal in picking these six groups was to contrasts members in a set of general interest groups with members in groups focused on specific topics. My assumption was that members in the larger groups would be more diverse than the members of smaller groups, while the smaller groups might highlight some distinction.

The three larger groups were the "class of 2009" group (n=323 members), another group of university attendees claiming "native" status devoted to the same state (n=4721 members), and a group devoted to the university's popular head football coach (n=2223

members). These seemed broad enough to encompass a diverse array of members, and also reflected some common interests among university undergrads.

The three smaller, specialized groups were titled, "The Office is the best show on TV, period" (n=58 members), "Addicted to National Public Radio" (n=29 members), and "Roald Dahl's Stories are Scrumdittlyumptious." (n=16 members), chosen for their distinctive focus areas and assumed similarities among members (or at least the dimension of greater-than-normal interest in a topic).

Membership in the six selected groups served as the initial point of contact with potential participants. Recruitment of specific participants from the large groups began through searching group lists based on two randomly selected letters. For the smaller groups, recruitment included the entire list of members. Each potential participant was sent a "friendship request" from my researcher profile. Participants who accepted the friendship requests were contacted for interviews, online chat, e-mail exchanges, and guided tours (see Appendix B for initial interview requests and Appendix C for second round of interview requests).

About one third of the participants who agreed to interviews, chats, or e-mail exchanges were willing to suggest other members of their social network for recruitment. The following exchange with Davey is an example of this snowball recruitment:

3:17pmLee: do you chat a lot on Facebook?

3:17pmDavey: i talk to my friend Heather a lot. she sits on facebook all day at work haha. outside of talkin to her, from time to time i say hi to someone, but not usually

3:18pmLee: huh... maybe i should recruit Heather for the study... think she'd be cool with chatting?

3:18pmDavey: i told her i was doing this interview with you and she said she wanted in... haha

3:19pmLee: i was a little worried that some people might get a little "weirded out" by chatting with me or by me just contacting them out of the blue. cool. i'll send her a message

3:19pmDavey: cool

3:19pmLee: great... thanks for the tip

Participants, such as Heather, recruited through snowball sampling provided important data regarding interpretations of and presentations for the initial recruits, such as Davey.

Interviews

Each of the interviews began with a discussion of how the participant got started with Facebook. This was intended to both elicit background information and put the participants at ease by having them answer an "easy" question (not hard to remember or difficult to talk about). From there, the interview focused on the "average session" for the participant. The intention here was to have the participants talk about what was most important to their Facebook experiences, with what aspects they spent most of their time. Usually, my prompt for the participant was worded as, "Tell me what you would do during an average session on Facebook." This discussion guided the rest of the interview. Focus was shifted to the areas of importance for each participant. I was already familiar

with most aspects of Facebook, but hearing each participant discuss it in his or her terms informed my overall understanding of each component.

The interviews used the same set of questions (Appendix D) to start. The responses to these questions helped to shape initial impressions made through the observation phase of the research design. Further, these responses guided subsequent interaction with the participant. The guided tour was based on areas highlighted by the participants and those that piqued researcher interest. When taking place in face-to-face interactions, the guided tour portion took place on the researcher's laptop as the participant controlled the mouse. The participant could, then, guide action through the components he or she used most often, offering description for any and all areas.

After discussing the elements of self-presentations, participants were asked to assess the presentations of others (Appendix E). This often turned out to be more informative about the participants' views than were discussions of their own presentations. Along with forming overall views of entire profiles, participants were asked to comment on a large set of photos and other images, such as profile decorations. I pre-selected the profiles and sets of images after having viewed thousands of examples over the months of my observation phase. The selected pieces were those that exemplified a group of images that commonly came up during my observations, those that were unique in some way, and those that I simply thought would provoke discussion by participants.

All interviews ended with a reminder of my contact information in case the participant thought of something else to say at a later time. Additionally, at the end of

each interview, I asked the participant for suggestions of other Facebookers who might participate in the study.

Differences Between Online and Offline Interviews

Face-to-face interviews tended to be shorter than the online versions. Initially, I thought this was merely due to the necessary turn-taking that took place in online chats. Additionally, Facebook's chat utility and the Internet connections sometimes caused technical delays. However, review of early interviews of both the online and face-to-face varieties made it clear that the face-to-face interviews were shorter because the interviewees simply did not open up as much. Their answers were simply short responses to the specific questions asked and respondents were less likely to provide conversational flow from one topic to another. The participants in online chats, however, opened up much more. They gave elaborate answers and often commented on how the interview process gave them a time to reflect on their own Facebook use.

Facebook's chat function tracks the time of each post and there are, therefore, time lapses between some posts. Frequently during interviews, problems arose with Internet connections and Facebook's chat function. Additionally, online interview participants were continually shuffling through pages of Facebook both as part of the interview and as part of their own routines with the site. The combination of this multitasking and technical delays is reflected in the time record. Even when the process was prolonged, many interviewees expressed enjoyment of the experience.

During the third hour of our online interview, Davey, a recent college graduate, offered the following sentiments that echo what several others said.

3:07pmLee: so... this is taking a bit longer than i thought... let me know if you

need to bail. we could always chat again later. cool with chatting a bit more?

3:07pmDavey: i don't have shit to do man. i just have to get an overnight bag

packed before like 530

3:08pmLee: oh... cool.

3:08pmDavey: i actually think this is fun. ive never thought so deeply about

facebook

3:10pmDavey: can i just interject something here?

3:10pmLee: sure. please

3:10pmDavey: i think it's cool that the thing you are researching is also the tool

that you are using to research it... if that makes sense...

3:11pmLee: i think i get what you mean

Interview settings also had effects. Most of the face-to-face interviews took place

in a semi-public area of the university library. Others were in local coffee shops.

Discussing some topics in these places might have made the participants uncomfortable.

Further, merely speaking about certain topics aloud to a relative stranger might have

inhibited some participants.

Participation increased when I started offering online interviewing to potential

participants. Doing online interviews also made scheduling much easier by decreasing the

time between recruitment and the actual interview. Shortening this process lowered the

dropout rate. Scheduling face-to-face interviews often took quite a bit of correspondence

to settle on a time and place. Online interviews, however, offered many more options

regarding time of day. Some participants were interviewed over their morning coffee while others took part as their days were winding down. Additionally, participants did not have to be in the geographic region to take part. Some recent graduates of the university had moved away for new jobs and would have otherwise been unable to participate.

There were a handful of participants, such as Davey, who were especially informative. Though I can not find too many similarities among these participants or differences between these participants and the less useful ones in terms of presentations, those participants who were still taking classes at the University and those who had not yet acquired full-time employment reported more time available for interviewing, spent the most time in interviews, and, apparently, spend the most time on Facebook itself.

My observations began in May 2008 and continued through April 2009. Over the summer, many students at the university return to their parents' homes and would have been unavailable for F2F meetings. So the interview and guided tour stage of the research design began in August 2008, at the start of the new academic year.

Defining Key Terms

To help explain on how, exactly, I assessed presentations on Facebook during the observation stage, I have listed some of the key concepts I had in mind going into the site. These concepts were used in early categorization of components and presentations.

SNS = Social network(ing) site. These are semi-public networks based on profiles with articulated lists of friends and an array of hyperlinks, which serve to form the web of users.

Action = Anything that can be observed. On SNSs, an action is anything from updating one's status, posting on someone else's profile, or playing a game. Further, past activity continues to serve as action, such as the case of self descriptions.

Symbol = Anything that conveys meaning. All observable elements of the Facebook profile are symbols. They all contain (social) meaning.

Object = Everything in the world that has social meaning. This includes trees, cars, strangers, and even our own identity. These all have symbolic, social meaning.

Generalized Other = This is the total result of past experiences with a group. It combines within the mind to serve as a sort of ideal group member. The generalized other could be considered a mental representative of the group. Potential performances are bounced off of our generalized others in order to see how the group is likely to respond to potential actions. The generalized other is the key to anticipation, and anticipation is the key to successful action within the group. In this way, the generalized other can be thought of as a set of norms and the threat of sanctions.

Norm = Shared values by members of a social unit to what conduct "ought" to be done. These will be understood both through participant observation and interviews.

Deviance = Conduct that violates sufficiently valued norms.

Sanctions = Social punishments that can take the form of shame, embarrassment, exclusion, lowered status, and so on.

The Presentation of Self = This is the purely performative aspect of identity.

Identity = This includes both the performative element and the self-concept within one's own mind.

Role = In many cases, an individual will adopt a role based on the social environment (social meaning). Roles might include stereotypical performances, specific power imbalances, and so on. These roles change from interaction to interaction and group to group. A Facebooker, then, may take on a handful of roles within her profile. Additionally, the Facebooker will have varying skill levels in recognizing the role another person is taking on.

Behavior setting/frame = This is the setting in which the original actions occur. In the case of an uploaded photo, the behavior setting might be a living room, a park, a bar, and so on. In the case of an online exchange, the original back-and-forth would establish the setting, along with being housed on Facebook itself.

Interpretation setting/frame = This setting would differ from the behavior setting for all except those who took part in the behavior setting. The interpretation of an uploaded photo in this case is done outside the actual setting. Further, this frame might also include very different norms and values.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This is the first of four chapters presenting key findings of this study. I endeavor to include the words and writing style (sometimes called "textspeak," which often includes improper spelling, punctuation, and grammar) of the participants themselves whenever appropriate. The interview exchanges presented in this document are taken without correction or alteration from the digital record provided by Facebook's chat function. Thus, any typographical errors within those exchanges occurred intentionally or unintentionally during the actual interviews. The findings themselves are shaped by the structures of the interviews.

Chapter VI focuses on the users and uses of Facebook., presenting material on participants' reasons for joining the site, basic functions on Facebook, common Facebook experiences, and the most popular components.

Chapter VII details information flow on Facebook, outlining several key components that users manipulate and combine to form identity performances, detailing these elements in terms of identity pegs, in-groups, and out-groups, and concluding with a discussion of the presentation of self.

Chapter VIII explores intersubjectivity on Facebook by having participants interpret the presentations of other users. It concludes with a discussion of the internalized norms, the subsequent anticipations of users, and the resulting exaggeration of performances.

Chapter IX focuses entirely on the pictures on Facebook. The photos uploaded and the pics highlighted as profile pics drive a lot of activity on Facebook and are integral

to identity performances. Chapter IX places images in categories, as defined by Facebookers, and outlines the general interpretations of each category.

Facebook Users and Uses

By the time my data gathering had finished, participants who accepted my friendship request numbered 346 in total (53% female, n=185; 47% male, n=161). Forty-eight of them (28 female, 20 male) agreed to at least some level of interviewing. The ages of participants ranged from 21 to 34 (mean=23.06, median, 23.5, mode=23); most were juniors, seniors and recent graduates from the university. The sampling method employed – using the site itself to request friendship, recruit for interviews, and develop snowball sampling –resulted in participants who tended to be heavy users. That is, the participants in this study appear to have very high involvement levels (time spent on and level of devotion to the site). Thus, results may differ with less involved users. Additionally, all participants were connected to Midwest U.S. colleges and universities. Given that many of the norms on Facebook have at least some offline bases, it is possible – if not likely – that Facebookers in other regions of the United States and users in other nations would have slightly to greatly different online attitudes, behaviors, and norms.

Getting Started

All Facebookers in this study said they got started using the site through offline acquaintances. This normally occurred when older friends who were already on the site showed Facebook to newcomers. Evidently, the younger crowd looks up to the older crowd, regardless of age (college vs. high school; high school vs. junior high; and so on). Currently, Facebook and MySpace are so immensely popular with high school and junior high students that they are most likely first learned about in elementary school. This is

important because, at least at this stage of SNS development, it suggests online communication at least initially builds on offline life.

Participants in my study joined Facebook relatively later in their life, younger ones getting started in high school or early in college while some older participants were clued in by coworkers or graduate school classmates. The three participant accounts below highlight the key reasons for joining: relationship maintenance, showcasing photos, and simply becoming a part of a social phenomenon, or "the newest thing," as Kathy put it.

4:05pmLee: well, first things first... when and how did you first get started with facebook?

4:05pmHeather: HAHA I was at work as a Student for the College of Medicine, one of my co-workers was on it and I asked her what she was doing, she told me not to bother unless I had alot of time to blow... this was like 4 years ago..

4:05pmLee: ha ha. and you joined it to do... what exactly?

4:07pmHeather: I use it to keep in touch with my friends, and to let them know\see what kind of trouble Ive been getting into.

8:03pmKirstin: basically it was about 3ish years ago, and i got it bc i grew up in iowa and i had moved to indiana, and decided that i wanted to keep in contact with my old friends from home

8:03pmLee: i see. did you also join myspace or any other social network sites?

8:04pmKirstin: yeah i have a myspace, used for the same purposes but thats it. i use facebook more though. just b/c its easier to upload pictures and such.

6:56pmKathy: I got facebook my sophomore year of college so 2004, bascially because it was the newest thing. I like computers and trying out new programs. It was easy to communicate with my friends and plan things for the weekends. Basically one of my friends asked me if I had an account yet and it just went from there.

Describing the Friends List

Since most Facebookers got started on the site through friends, it was only logical that their networks consisted largely of offline friends from college and high school. Most people's networks have more than 100 friends and some are in the thousands. The average network size for this study was 418.5. Typically, network size depends on the size of the Facebooker's high school (larger enrollment translates to more Facebook connections), involvement in university groups (sports teams, Greek houses), and the Facebooker's propensities in accepting or declining friendship requests.

Alexandria, a sophomore at the university, offers the typical network description. She also exemplifies the common switch in thinking from wanting to accept every friendship request to becoming more selective in accepting Facebook friends.

I currently have about 850 friends made up of friends from high school, family members, work friends, teachers and college friends I've met in several situations. My college friends are composed of people from my freshman year, sorority, clubs I'm involved in and some random people I've never even met. Lately, I've been thinking about de-friending the friends I don't really know because I don't

really care to see those people's Facebook pages. When Facebook first started, it was all about having a lot of friends. Now I've realized that there are so many people that I just get frustrated looking through all the people when I don't really care to see many of them.

I was surprised at the number of Facebookers who can easily describe their networks in great detail. Davey was one such participant who quickly categorized the intimacy of his relationships.

2:32pmLee: so you have 513 Facebook friends... do you know all of them?

2:36pmDavey: i would say that 95% of them i have actually met. 90% ive seen more than once. 75% ive had a beer or two with. 60% i have hung out with multiple times. and the progression gets lower and lower as the level of intimacy increases...

2:36pmLee: well put. i'm sure that's about the same for a lot of facebookers

2:37pmDavey: some of them are people from classes and such that i just need info from then never talked to them again

Davey has a similar network to many other participants. Most Facebook friends have met face to face. However, very few actually considered each other "good friends." This pattern seems logical. In offline-only networks, people tend to have only a few intimate friends and a lot more people that they would consider mere acquaintances. Some participants – such as Bethany, a junior at the university – broke their networks into distinct categories.

My primary group of friends is comprised of about nine people. The majority of these people I met while in college, either from living in the dormitories or joining the same sorority, friends from middle school, and family. After that, I have a core group that extends to people I am slightly less close to but maintain daily communications with. This consists of about twenty-five people, also all college friends from similar involvement, as well as friends from work and cousins. Even though these are the people I consider my immediate network, I would also include an additional fifty people whom I interact with multiple times throughout a week and would call at any given moment. These people are from the aforementioned areas, high school friends, and a majority from of the organizations I participate in and classes taken.

Participants seemed very aware of their networks regarding intimacy levels. Another example of this is Steve, who divides his Facebook networks by sub-networks and frequency of interaction.

I have 473 Facebook friends. 235 of my friends are from [university], about 50 percent. Out of my 235 "friends" at [university], I only talk to 20 on a consistent basis. I can stay updated on my other 215 friends via wall postings, pictures and status updates. I did not create a Facebook profile until midway through my freshman year of college because Facebook wasn't available until that time. The rest of my friends are people I knew from high school. They either went to my high school or one of the surrounding high schools. I also have about 15-20 friends from my church. Most of the kids I'm friends with I played church basketball with. I only have five cousins that I am friends with. Neither of my parents have an account, nor do my aunts or uncles. I was actually quite surprised when students in class mentioned their parents or aunts and uncles had an account.

Alexis, an upperclassman at the university, had one of the broadest ranges of friends in her network. She is clearly an active undergraduate student and her network size reflects that.

Of my 1,303 friends, 687 friends are within my own network at college. The majority of my friends at [the university] on facebook are people I have met

through my three years in college, mainly through being in the Greek system. Others are people that I work with, have had classes with, or lived with freshman year in the dorms. Also I am friends with people that are involved in the same activities as I am, such as PRSSA, Homecoming Executive Council, and Dance Marathon. Another big portion of my friends are people from my high school. I have friends from people in my grade I graduated with, people from the younger grades, as well as the grades above me, due to being in activities with them, or knowing them through my older brother. I am also friends with about fifteen of my family members who are on facebook as well. I am also an events coordinator for a bar, so I am friends with the Social Chairs, every semester, to help keep in contact with them and plan events for the Greek houses.

On the other end of the involvement spectrum, we have Thomas, an admittedly passive user. Thomas has 93 friends, which ranks him toward the bottom of the network size list.

I'm not a die-hard user by any means. On Facebook, I have 93 friends. The people that are on my friends list are mostly people from college, and high school. I don't go on to Facebook and just add people that I have talked to once or twice, for the most part I have to be a legitimate friend of that person. Everyone on my friends list, I have talked to on more than one occasion. I'm a very passive Facebook user.

Most Facebookers have at least a few family members in their online networks, usually cousins and siblings. Often, connections to family members of similar ages are seen as no different than being connected to close friends. Some, though few, Facebookers have parents, aunts, and uncles on the site. Not unexpectedly, users express concern about giving parents such a window on behaviors of the college-aged.

Farrah, an undergrad at a small, liberal arts college in the Midwest expressed concerns about giving the wrong impression to family members who don't know her that well.

8:20pmLee: a lot of people are starting to have parents or family on FB. how would you feel about it if yours started an account?

8:22pmFarrah: my aunt has an account and I have mixed feelings about it. It's nice to send her a message if I want, but almost all my pictures are of me when I'm out partying, so I don't want her to get the wrong impression that that is all that I do, but that's just when I bring my camera with me. no one takes pictures of themselves in class or at church.

8:22pmLee: sure

8:22pmFarrah: I wouldn't really care if my parents got it though. It's nice to keep in touch with them. They know me better than my aunt does, so I don't think they'd get a wrong impression of me even if they saw the bar pictures.

Others expressed concerns about having parents see "what they've been up to." Farrah's point about when people take out cameras applies here. Vacations (including Spring Break), weddings, tailgating, sporting events, and nights out with friends are the most common settings for pictures on Facebook. Many of these times and places are parent-free. Thus, for parents to see these images is clearly crossing contexts.

Having established background elements, each interview proceeded to the "average session" on Facebook, and more broadly, to areas of the site with which the Facebooker spent most of his or her time. These average session discussions provided meanings and explanations of components in the words of the participants themselves, enabling me to identify key activities and themes.

It is difficult to summarize the average session for all users. My subjects checked Facebook anywhere from once a week to dozens of times per day. Further, the sessions themselves varied from a few minutes to a few hours. In fact, a handful of participants simply kept Facebook constantly open while they worked on their computers. This translates to about eight hours per day during weekdays in addition to their weekend use.

Davey, with whom I conversed online for nearly four hours, by far the longest of any single interview, estimates he spends anywhere from five to ten hours per day on Facebook.

2:09pmLee: you seem pretty active on Facebook? how often do you sign on? how long are you usually on at a time?

2:11pmDavey: well right now i don't have a job so i can sit here and look at stuff for like an hour at a time. I would say that i usually check it between 5 and 10 times a day. It's just a good way to take a break from whatever im doing. when i was in school i would check every so often just to get my mind a break from papers and tests and stuff like that...

Davey mentioned that, many times, he would simply minimize the Facebook window while he worked on other things. Others hop on and off Facebook in short, periodic sessions throughout the day. Kathy is one such Facebooker. Kathy also uses a separate Facebook profile as part of her job (recruiting college students to work or intern for a company), which seems to be happening more frequently, based on anecdotal reports from participants.

7:07pmLee: so how much or how often do you go on Facebook?

personally, not in a professional capacity (though it might be a bit of both)

7:10pmKathy: I have a separate account for business. So I check my personal

account probably once a day on average. Depending on what has happened since I

was last on I could be on for 10 min. or I could be on for up to 45 min. I would

say I'm usually on for about 15-20 min. daily.

7:11pmLee: i see... can you walk me through your usual Facebook session? like...

what do you go to first, what things do you look at? what do you "do" on

Facebook?

7:13pmKathy: Well when I log in it takes me to the home page. From there I

check any messages or notifications that I may have recieved. Then if I have a

friend with a birthday I usually send some birthday wishes or a sticker. I also

reply to any wall posts. Then I just go through my news feed and check out any

updates my friends have made that I find interesting.

Most of the participants are closer to Kathy's use and involvement levels than to

Davey's. Regardless of involvement level, though, most users mentioned a set of

common activities.

Key components of Facebook included, for instance, the Facebook news feed,

status updates, self description sections, photos, pieces of flair, bumper stickers, and

giving gifts. Davey elaborated on what he did for hours a day on Facebook.

2:12pmLee: could you walk me through an average session on facebook? what types of things do you check first, what do you look at, who do you talk to... what parts of the site get the most of your attention

2:19pmDavey: well, if i have any notifications. i check those. if someone writes on my wall i usually reply in kind. unless it's something dumb like a web link or whatever. then i check my friends list. and i will usually read every single person on the front page's status updates. i like it when people have funny and original status updates. usually take a look at most of the profile pics too. it's funny to see my buddies joking back and forth on here. then i would say that i usually go back to the main page and see if anyone i am good friends with had any activity... nothing really special. but i would say my favorite thing to do is read status updates and look at peoples pictures...

Age, length of membership

Most participants have had accounts on Facebook and MySpace for around five years. Commonly, a friend, classmate, or coworker introduced them to the site, launching them on a set of common experiences with Facebook. An interesting trend is how views towards and uses of Facebook change with tenure. Many participants said they began SNSs with a relatively unbridled enthusiasm. They friended everyone they could and held no qualms about uploading very personal information and photos. As they became more SNS-savvy, though, these users began to taper their enthusiasm. Derek, a senior at the university, talked about such diminishing involvement in Facebook.

I have had an online account for three years now and find myself checking it less and less each year. Facebook is the only social networking site I belong to. I use the network for quick communication rather than a social tool. I'm not one to spend countless hours browsing around for the latest gossip on whose doing what with whom. I used to do that, but not anymore. Facebook has helped me build a social circle of friends and bridge the gap of online relationships and real life ones. When I look around at other people's profiles that have over two thousand friends, it stuns me to think that someone could know that many people, let alone talk to all of them.

Most Facebookers in this study could be placed into one of three stages of Facebook use. I have labeled the first stage the *Boom Stage*, a period that begins upon the start of membership and is characterized by active, rapid network growth, acceptance of nearly all friendship requests (even from strangers), high activity surrounding applications, high levels of photo uploads, and the most overall activity of any period. The Facebooker in this stage is enthusiastically checking the site multiple times per day and has at least one lengthy session each day. In the past, this stage occurred in the early college years, but with the increasing popularity of the site among younger populations, the boom stage occurs for most incoming Facebookers around junior high or early high school.

The second stage, the *Plateau Stage*, is a period where the network size stays about the same. There is a periodic "weeding" of strangers from the network but this is minimized by accepting new Facebook friends every now and then. Typically, the Facebooker in this stage settles into his or her Facebook routine. There isn't a lot of trying new things on the site. The Facebooker has already tried several applications and figured out which ones he or she enjoys. Most college students are in this stage, particularly

juniors and seniors, while freshmen and sophomores might "settling into" the site and, depending on when they joined, entering this stage.

Lastly, Facebookers enter a *Decline Stage*, with a moderate to rapid fall off in their Facebook involvement in terms of time and energy spent on the site. The period of decline typically comes shortly after college, though some college seniors in the study reported getting tired of the site. Some logical factors are responsible. First, many graduates get jobs that take them away from face-to-face interactions with a lot of college friends. Having fewer face-to-face social events with members of one's Facebook network reduces the photos taken/uploaded and the posts/comments generated about offline gatherings. Jobs can also, of course, cut down on free time. Lastly, some participants simply reported getting "tired of Facebook."

Joey, a graduate student, echoed Derek's view about using Facebook less over the years. For Joey, the transition was not only in time spent, but also in the types of activities he does on Facebook.

> 2:21pmLee: so you've been on for a long time. do you think your usage has changed much? like... the things you do? the people you talk to?
>
> 2:21pmJoey: yeah
>
> 2:22pmLee: how so?
>
> 2:22pmJoey: I mean when I first started I just registered because someone said to me "hey, register for this". and then after a while, it was mostly for messing around facebook poking, random wall posts, which still happens. now, it's

actually a pretty useful communication tool. it's quick and easy, but I don't really waste time on it as much as I used to.

Maddie, a 21-year old undergrad, has already started to see her enthusiasm diminish even though she hasn't been involved with Facebook as long as some of the above participants.

10:41pmLee: do you think the popularity of FB will go down overall? is it something that is big early in college and slowly diminishes as you get older?

10:42pmMaddie: I think FB will be around for a long time but the thrill of it definetly diminishes over time

10:42pmLee: i see. Are you as active as you were when you first started? do you think you'll ever stop using it entirely?

Maddie: No not really....and yes...ive went weeks without getting on.

yes it is a defiant possibility i will stop using it

10:43pmLee: wow. that seems unusual for most FB'ers to go without it for a couple weeks, especially from someone who used to check it so often

10:44pmMaddie: it's just not how i want to communicate anymore. The most valuable thing to me about it is being able to communicate with family out of state that i don't talk to that much. And getting big news

10:45pmLee: i see. so do you think some more "distant" relationships might drop off a bit if you stopped using FB completely?

10:46pmMaddie: Yeah probably

10:46pmLee: any worries about that? or is it just a... sort of... natural progression?

10:46pmMaddie: No, no worries....if i was worried about it i probably would always keep face book around

As the novelty of Facebook wears off and other things intervene, some, like Maddie, come to see Facebook as just a phase that is not difficult to get past.

10:25pmMaddie: …i'm sort of burned out with facebook

10:26pmLee: oh... that sounds interesting. what do you think led to the burnout?

10:27pmMaddie: I'm not sure exactly...probably the fact that i would rather communicate on the phone or in person

10:27pmLee: but you were really into it a couple years ago? like... how much did you go on? Yeah. or what did you do more?

10:28pmMaddie: Probable like 10-15 times a day my freshmen year

10:28pmLee: wow. that does seem like a lot

10:28pmMaddie: Yep. Lol yeah but that's when it was new and exciting. Now, there are just better ways to send a message, like texting. Also, I'm just not as into the applications and time wasters as I was. I just have better things to do now.

Maddie's laid-back approach to "distant" friendships was shared by many participants, a sort of "easy come, easy go" style of relationship maintenance that Wellman and colleagues (2002a, 2002b) suggest is a possible outcome of networked individualism.

Maddie's outlook regarding Facebook relationships and use of the site itself are echoed by Ron, a recent graduate from the university. His loss of interest is linked with a loss of offline interactions, and these factors seem mutually reinforcing.

4:28pmLee: and how many times would you say you post on someone's wall in the average day (or week, if it's not that often)

4:29pmRon: honestly, these days, 3-5 times a week. used to be more, but i'm losing interest

4:30pmLee: why do you think you're losing interest?

4:32pmRon: I only really use Facebook to crack jokes with people. Since I graduated college, I dont interact with as many people in a given week as I used too that are my age, and it's hard to crack jokes when suddenly, you never see a particular person anymore

4:32pmLee: sure. do you think a lot of people sort of... drop off a bit... when they leave college?

4:33pmRon: Plus, the 12-15 close friends I consistently post on, I just text message it via phone more now

4:33pmLee: sure

4:33pmRon: yes, i think it drops off when they graduate

4:34pmLee: do you think you'll ever completely stop using it?

4:35pmRon: it's hard to tell. I'll probably use it less and less as time goes by, but no, i'll still use it sparingly for the forseeable future. It's convenient for simple

converation, simple information passing and curiosity gets me sometimes. I like
to see if I can find out what people are upto I used to be close aren't anymore

The norm of accepting everyone

As noted earlier, most Facebookers begin with the idea that they should accept
every friendship request sent their way. Since the newcomer has relatively few
connections, this seems like a logical move, especially since it turns out that having
"enough" friends is an important status symbol on Facebook. As one participant put it,
"the number of friends is only a big deal if you don't have many friends." Most think
"normal" Facebookers must have at least around 200 friends. For newcomers, then, it is
advantageous to accept every friendship request until they reach the threshold for
normality.

With some, however, this norm of acceptance carries on regardless of network
size. Mandy, a junior at the university with a friendship network nearing 500, joked about
getting to know everyone at the university before coming to campus and accepting
friendship requests under false pretenses.

> Before I left the great state of California to come to back to my roots in the
> Midwest, I **<u>LITERALLY</u>** added every single person in the group "Class of 2010
> rocks!" I envisioned recognizing every one of the people when I came to school.
> 'Oh hey Bobby Smith! I remember reading you love Jamaican food….I love
> Jamaican food.'
> Recently I have been getting a few friend requests from abroad and I just
> discovered the reason. I googled my name and what popped up was "TALLEST
> WOMAN IN GERMANY," and I am allegedly that person but by my small
> stature you can instantly recognize the falseness in such a thought. But hey, I add
> every person, so I now have some German friends that can be thrown into my pile
> of friends I never talk to.

Facebookers in this study enjoyed how enlarging friend networks enhances the voyeuristic nature of the site, since through the network they can watc the activities of pre-existing friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike. Most Facebookers, however, get friendship requests from people they have actually met (even if the meeting was short and only occurred once). Dayle talked about such friendships and added that his friends list has stopped growing.

> Early on, I befriended most people I met in classes, and everyone I hung out with. I found this really useful, as it helped me remember people's names and made it a lot easier to find out information about my classes if I needed it. It also helped me meet new people. For the most part, I no longer add friends. My guess is that this has as much to do with me as it does my relationship with Facebook. I have a group of friends I am happy being around. However, I also don't like or enjoy many of the sharing features of Facebook. It uses news feeds to push status updates, profile changes, and relationship changes to everyone who knows you. This creates a sense of gossip and public pronouncement about everything that is done on the site. I balance this sense of dread over changing anything with my own interest in the constant feed of other people's changes, and how addicting watching it can get.

Some users have a relatively passive approach to "friending," seldom initiating new friendships themselves. Alex, a graduate student at the university, said, "I don't make friend requests, but I do accept almost everyone who asks." Caitlynn echoed this approach but added her concerns about privacy.

> I am currently friends [with] 758 people. In the world of Facebook I don't generally 'friend' people, I wait for them to request my friendship. Initially when I joined Facebook I would accept anyone who asked to be my friend—even people from other schools that I had never met face-to-face. Now however I have deleted all of the "friends" I hadn't actually ever met and I restrict my Facebook friendships to: college classmates, high school friends, co-workers, family and some acquaintances. I screen my Facebook friendships because I have a lot of

personal information on my profile—especially photos—that I don't feel comfortable with just anyone looking at.

Sean shared Caitlynn's concerns for privacy, but still readily accepts strangers as Facebook friends. "I'm always concerned about who is looking at my profile, but I'm about 99 percent likely to add someone if they ask me," he said. It seems contradictory that Sean has concerns about his students, his employer, and strangers seeing his profile, but also accepts almost every friendship request. Additionally, Sean doesn't know what his current privacy settings are and guesses they are "whatever you start with." The only people he reports *not* adding as friends are people he knows and "vehemently doesn't like."

Sean's open acceptance of almost anyone in addition to a general concern for privacy was echoed by many of the participants in this study. Overall, the concern for privacy is not well-connected to thoughtful consideration of friendship requests. In practice, privacy concerns appear more related to what information gets presented and what photos get uploaded.

Gratifications

I often felt prompted to ask interviewees, "What are you getting out of all of this?" The answers included keeping touch with friends, wasting time, people-watching, and flirting with and getting to know dating prospects. One of the more devoted Facebookers, Ashley, talked about why she checked Facebook dozens of times per day.

> More often than not, even when I have nothing to do on Facebook, I usually just sit and wait for something to happen. An example would be someone popping up on Facebook chat or something coming up on my mini-feed. I log into Facebook

whenever and where ever I can because I feel that if I'm not on the site that something important will happen and I will miss out.

Dating and (the pursuit of) intimate relationships are important aspects of

Facebook use, sometimes inspiring snooping. Mandy talked about how *creeping*

(Facebook jargon for spying) on her love interest has become routinized.

> I visit my crush's profile because I want to know two things: 1.) If any girls wrote on his wall that I should be aware of and 2.) If he has new pictures. Writing this I feel totally awkward and creepy but while doing my habit I know no one is watching so I do not view it as a stalking. After the 5 minutes of drooling over the man of my dreams I move on. YOU GOTTA LOVE IT!

Many Facebookers simply like to people-watch or see without being seen. Kirstin

compared looking at others on Facebook to watching reality TV.

> 8:55pmLee: do you think a time will come when you get tired of FB? or maybe
>
> EVERYBODY gets tired of FB?
>
> 8:55pmKirstin: i think the only way that would happen if someone invented
>
> something like facebook that is better somehow -
>
> but i dont think that people will get tired of facebook.
>
> 8:56pmLee: other than wasting time... what is the big drawing power of FB? why
>
> is it so addictive?
>
> 8:56pmKirstin: prolly b/c of pictures - thats my drawing point -
>
> 8:56pmLee: uploading one's own pics? or LOOKING at other people?

8:56pmKirstin: i like to look at others pics even if i dont know them - everyone is snoopy and its a way to "snoop"

8:57pmLee: ha. sure

8:57pmKirstin: i like reality tv - b/c its a look into other peoples lives - facebook is sort of the same way for me. see how other people live and what they do crap like that -

8:58pmLee: sure... a lot of people would agree in the voyeuristic nature of FB

8:58pmKirstin: yeah :)

8:58pmLee: see other people without being seen!

8:59pmKirstin: yup its entertaining

8:59pmLee: but everyone KNOWS they are being snooped on, so it seems weird

8:59pmKirstin: well i guess its just how much do you want to be snooped on. is how much you allow to be on your page -

8:59pmLee: sure

8:59pmKirstin: i have people on my myspace that have pictures, but make them private from everyone –

Similar to watching strangers, some Facebookers enjoy watching acquaintances and friends live out relationships online. Jamie even compared checking up on relationship statuses with reading a daily newspaper.

4:38pmJamie: i think self descriptions is something good to have for if you are making a new friend and you are also facebook friends, and its a good way to get

to know some basic stuff about someone i think it may be more useful for single

people who are looking for a chance to be not single lol

4:39pmLee: i see. do a lot of people look for potential dates on Facebook?

4:40pmJamie: oh i am sure that they do. i have a lot of relationship status changes

on my mini feed it seems

4:45pmLee: do you think people put much stock in relationship status changes on

FB? is it a big deal to be in a "complicated" relationship?

4:46pmJamie: i don't put much stock into the "complicated relationship" but i do

put stock into seeing when people i know are dating have their relationships end

on facebook

4:47pmLee: ah... is that how people announce a break-up these days?

4:48pmJamie: oh thats what it seems. i do hear about some of them before

facebook breaks the news. but for the most part facebook is the first one to tell me

4:48pmLee: like a morning newspaper

4:49pmJamie: yeah pretty much lol

4:50pmLee: do you think FB has any negative influence on relationships?

friendships?

4:50pmJamie: yeah i do. because some people are not smart about what they say

or who they say it to and once its out on facebook it seems things spread like

wildfire

Many Facebookers, regardless of their stage of use on the site, regard Facebook as

their most effective scheduling tool. Many participants in this study check their profile

and notifications on Facebook more than they check their e-mail accounts or even phone

messages. Scheduling of social gatherings, planning study groups, and managing work

schedules were commonly cited activities on the Facebook wall (posting public

messages) and the Facebook chat function.

Miller described how Facebook interactions help him manage both academic and

social scheduling.

> I use Facebook to make arrangements with my friends or class mates online about things that'll happen in the future offline. I organize with group members when and where we could meet to work on a project. Instead of calling a friend about a party this Friday, I message him on Facebook confirming a time and place to meet before hand.

Lastly, across Facebook stages of use, relationship maintenance remains

important. Those who began their Facebook membership toward the end of their high

school years or at the start of their college life see maintaining relationships from high

school as one of the bigger draws of the site. They also see a likelihood of losing touch

without Facebook.

> I usually talk [on Facebook] to about ten friends from back home which I don't keep in close contact, but I do enjoy hearing from them. It's different now that we live separate lives compared to high school, but without a social network like facebook we would probably lose all contact. - Derek

> I prefer to keep in touch with all of the people I feel a strong emotional attachment to via the phone or in person. This means that most of my time spent exchanging messages on Facebook is with new acquaintances from college or with old friends from high school. One thing that all of my Facebook 'friends' have in common is that they are all based off of pre-existing relationships. A good

chuck of these friends probably would lose touch over the years without Facebook. -Roger

Facebookers also use the site to keep track of all the new contacts that come with the first years of college. Many of these contacts – classmates, members of a campus group – are maintained for strategic purposes; more serendipitous additions and/or for convenience, such as dorm floormates or simply people met in a bar. Regardless of the initial contact point, Facebook serves as a convenient roster of contact information.

Max, a senior at the university, talked about this. Max is a resident assistant in the dorms at the university, so his network size is perhaps larger than it would be otherwise. Further, he viewed his contacts made due to his RA position as more of "work acquaintances," maintained for purely strategic interactions like scheduling shifts, asking work-related questions, and so on.

More than half of my network are college friends I have accumulated over the years, whether they are classmates, floormates, and coworkers, it is nice to remain cordial and friendly with these individuals. If I were to miss a day of class for some reason, it is helpful to be able to easily contact someone in the class to find out what I missed. Also, if I need to adjust my work schedule, I can usually count on getting in touch with people through Facebook almost as well as simply calling around.

Tabitha and Kathy also used Facebook extensively during their early undergrad years to manage new contacts and reconnect to old ties. Both think the site works well as an organizational tool – a kind of master planner and contact database.

Facebook has been a convenient tool for reconnecting with classmates that moved away back in elementary school or a coworker from a part-time job in high

school. About 170 of my friends were made while attending college. These connections were made through classes, student groups, work, and friends of friends. I wouldn't say that I call on each one of these people on a regular basis, but it's nice to have that connection in case we see each other in the physical world. – Tabitha

6:57pmLee: did you connect with old high school friends at other colleges?

re-connect, i should say. or was it primarily with you and your friends at Central?

6:59pmKathy: Somewhat... but I had kept in touch with the high school friends

that I wanted to keep in touch with via phone or email. When I first got it I used it

mostly as a way to keep in touch with Central friends and as a good way to

procrastinate. lol

6:59pmLee: ha ha. sure. is that how you'd categorize it now? a way to keep in

touch and procrastinate? any sort of... overall views of Facebook?

7:02pmKathy: Now I mostly use it to keep in touch with friends from Central.

Since we're all on different schedules now its the best way to keep in touch. I still

prefer the phone for my closer friends, but facebook is great for the people I don't

get to talk to as often. I don't procrastinate so much any more, once in a while I

suppose I do. I'm actually going to be using Facebook in my new job, as a

recruitment tool. I think that most people see Facebook as a good way to waste

time. Similar to MySpace. Except dumbed down.

For some, Facebook is a way to bridge geographic distance. Many use the site to

keep up with family members who are far off, and college students who spend a semester

or two traveling abroad use Facebook for college updates, job hunting updates, and

periodically touching base with family back home.

Sean and Annabelle, both juniors, talked about keeping up with close family as

well as more distant relatives, what sociologists might call weak ties.

> I stay in touch with my immediate family a lot through the chat function. I also
> have a few cousins on [Facebook]. We chat every once in a while. Actually,
> Facebook let's you keep up with more 'average acquaintances' better than
> otherwise. - Sean

> I have around 10 family members that have Facebook who I'm friends with and
> have access to their profiles. Most of them are my cousins that I do not see very
> often and live far away. This gives me an outlet to be able to talk to them and see
> what they are up to. For me there are about 20 people that I usually talk to via
> Facebook, look at their pictures, chat with, and send applications like bumper
> stickers. Compared to a lot of other people I know I do not have a lot of friends
> on Facebook. But I feel as though I have a good amount of people that I know as
> my friends even if I do not talk to all of them. - Annabelle

Dade and Jamie, seniors, used Facebook to maintain ties to friends and coworkers

met during travel. Dade maintains ties to contacts at a former internship in California,

both for personal friendship and for potential professional networking. Jamie keeps in

touch with friends from abroad whom he met while they were studying in the U.S.

> I worked two summers all the way out in Carlsbad, California, so Facebook has
> been an essential tool in terms of networking with fellow interns and employees I
> came to know well during my work experiences. - Dade

> well i have a lot of friends that i am able to stay in contact with, I have a few
> friends that were exchange students and have gone home to Europe, and without
> facebook i couldn't talk to them. there are also people, who's e-mail addresses i

don't have, and it is really nice that i can just go to their profile and send them a message when i need to talk to them. – Jamie

Beyond using Facebook as a tool for organizing and maintaining ties, a handful of Facebookers use the site and others like it to develop friendships or potential friendships. When I entered college (1999), incoming freshmen were simply given the name and phone number of the expected roommate. Now, online connections offer much more detail about the roommate and can supply a basis for better, or at least more controlled, first impressions Facebookers and MySpacers commonly search out college roommates ahead of time. Roger was one who moved in with an online-only friend.

> Recently, I have transferred to a new college. This is when Facebook has become the most useful to me. Since a lot of people from my High School went to my old school, it wasn't as important for me to branch out and meet a brand new circle of friends at the new school. Since I knew essentially nobody at the new college, I had to rely on Facebook to help organize and remember all the new friends I was making. It also played a key role in getting to know my roommate and floormates ahead of time. After we found out we would be living together he [my roommate] 'Facebooked' me and we developed a friendship over the summer so by the time school came around it seemed as though we had known each other before. - Roger

Facebook vs. Other SNSs

About three-quarters of participants in my study joined Facebook after having accounts with other SNSs, most often MySpace, and thus already familiar with online social networking. This was due in large part to other sites allowing non-student access much earlier than Facebook., which broadened its market to include non-students later. Quite a few interviewees volunteered comparisons of Facebook to other sites, again, most often MySpace, which they considered inferior.

3:03pmGina: I got started [on Facebook] a couple years ago. I wanted to stay in touch with friends. MySpace was too public. It's almost like porn. There are way too many creeps on MySpace. Facebook seemed more user-friendly.

The "user-friendly" comment was made dozens of times about Facebook, and especially so by participants raising the comparison to MySpace. Participants felt that Facebook was more minimalist, which they liked; MySpace, they said, was too "busy."– Facebook was seen as quicker and simpler than other sites, including blogging sites such as LiveJournal. Chloe, a recent graduate now living away from most of her social circle, made this contrast.

8:10pm Chloe: I wasn't the first to get on board, but not the last either. it was either freshman or sophomore year (04/05 or 05/06). i believe some of my friends sent me links, because before facebook we shared things over livejournal.

8:10pmLee: were you pretty "into" livejournal?

8:12pmChloe: definitely. i wrote consistently for a good amount of time, but i bored of it after a few months. but i did check it religulously, to see what my friends were up to.

8:14pmLee: so livejournal was more of a blogging site, right? do you and your friends still do a lot of that on FB?

8:16pmChloe: livejournal is for blogging, yes. and no, not really, actually. my friends who frequently blogged on livejournal still blog on livejournal.

8:16pmLee: you don't still check LJ religiously?

8:20pmChloe: i don't check LJ much anymore, mostly because the friends who blog on it usually use it for angst. also, i don't really need to know all the little details of what my friends did before class or had for breakfast. i just like to keep in touch, and know how they're feeling. i can do that on facebook. i mostly use facebook to keep up with people. i love the news feed. i also like to post messages on walls of friends every once in a while, either because i saw something that reminded me of them or because their status message says something i want to comment on.

The initial buzz around social networking drew in users like Sean, a graduate student who considers himself an early adopter. Sean initially joined several SNSs, enjoying the newness of the technology and the experience of connecting to people he'd not otherwise meet.

I had lots of accounts. Friendster, MySpace, Facebook. I got started in MySpace as a way to meet potential dates. I used my network to get dates. You know, people who know people. When I first started MySpace, I would check it three or four times per day. I'd send and receive like 25 messages if I thought someone was cute or if someone thought I was cute. Eventually it would jump to an AIM chat. Now that I have a steady boyfriend, I don't really use MySpace much. I check Facebook about once per day, though." Later on, Sean added, "MySpace was more about online. For Facebook, I usually meet everyone in person first. I stay in contact with most of my [Facebook] friends in the area by actually meeting in person. MySpace was never really like that for me. Maybe it was because it was so new. It seemed cool to be chatting with people from all over.

Ashley, a junior, talked at length about the overlap and differences between her

MySpace and Facebook networks.

My networks consists of the websites Myspace and Facebook. I have had
Myspace since 2006 and I have had Facebook since 2006 both during my senior
year in high school. On Myspace I have 182 friends. When Myspace first started
out I had a numerous amount of friends just because it was a new thing and
everyone had a profile. Along with my regular school friends, I often ended up
adding fictional television or movie stars that had a "fake profile" I did that just
because it was funny. Myspace is well known for enabling bands to participate on
their site, so I had many bands as well. Many bands that aren't even performing
today were on my friends list. Recently I have gone through and eliminated
people that I never talk to, see, or know aren't even a human being. A lot of my
friends stopped using Myspace when we got to college, so I deleted the unmanned
profiles also. As of right now I have strictly close friends and a handful of family
members on Myspace that I keep around for good measure. On Facebook I have
520 friends. The number on Facebook is larger because more people use that site
and I have many people I have met through college on my Facebook friends list.
From time to time, I go through and "trim the fat" and get rid of people I haven't
talked to in a while, or people I know just primarily through a classroom setting.
When Facebook first reared its head into the world, I was one of the first people
in my high school to have it, so during the first couple of years I had over a
thousand friends because I was more of a connecting tool for other people to get
into the groove of the site.

Ashley added her thoughts on MySpace and seemed to feel a sense of loyalty to

that older affiliation even though she now finds it less useful than Facebook.

When I log into Myspace, I know that I will hardly ever have comments or
messages. Rarely do I log in to find any new comments or something to check.
Although, it is guaranteed about once every week I will receive a message from
some creeper guy wanting to be my friend. Myspace is a tool I use for online
blogging to my friends. I use the blog to update my friends and I feel it is more
personal than blogging on Facebook. Myspace has really died out these past
couple of years, but I still continue to use it because I feel that it got my foot in
the door for social networks and that I should be loyal. Along with blogging on
Myspace, many of my friends and I post surveys that have random life questions

in the "bulletin" section. This is a fun way to pass the time and check in on what people have to say to the world's most ridiculous questions.

Creeping

Others also mentioned MySpace creepers, a term used by Facebookers for unwanted strangers who look over pictures and personal information. Sometimes, a creeper is a stranger who requests online friendship along with making some sort of sexual innuendo. Creepers tend to be men who view and comment on the profiles of young women. This tendency on Facebook mirrors findings elsewhere that show female adolescents receive the vast majority of solicitations (Wolak et al. 2008).

Creeping, of course, is not known to the person being viewed unless the creeper makes contact. Creeping is similar to lurking in that both are seeing without being seen. However, they have different connotations. If the viewer knows the person he or she is viewing well, the behavior typically is thought of as innocent, one friend checking on another by lurking. If the viewer is a relative stranger, however, looking over photos and information would be considered creeping. A lot of female Facebookers worry about creepers, and many males on Facebook worry about being thought of as creepers.

> I never look at attractive looking women in pictures in attempt to befriend them. One, you most likely won't get added, and two, the woman in the picture will think you're a "creeper" for attempting the request. I recall an incident where I found another person with the exact same name as me. She happened to be a girl who went to school in Wyoming. When I tried to add her simply because we had the same name, she freaked out rejected my friend request and sent me a rude message. After this I learned my lesson of trying to add completely random people whom you have no connection with. – Kory

Even worse than creeping is Facebook "stalking", which Jamie talks about.

4:24pmLee: do you think people spend a lot of time on FB looking at pics?

4:25pmJamie: i would say that they do. i don't think that its the thing people spend the most time doing but i would say looking at pics ranks in the top 3 of things people do. well... maybe top 5

4:27pmLee: ha ha. could you give me the top 3 or 5? or at least the #1 thing?

4:29pmJamie: i would say, #1 "Facebook stalking", #2 wall posts, #3 bumper stickers, #4 Status updates #5 looking at/ commenting on pics, and

4:30pmLee: oh.... i NEED to hear more about facebook stalking. what would that entail?

4:31pmJamie: oh i don't think i take it to the most extreme level, but i know that i do "facebook stalk" but i think everyone does. what i do, is i will look at what people will say to people on others walls. i will look at what people comment on each other's photos. oh, and i usually check on status updates and responses. it's cool to look into people's lives.

4:32pmLee: yeah... the mini-news feed really helps that out a lot

4:32pmJamie: yeah. which is why if there is something that i don't want the whole world to see i will send it in the form of a message

4:34pmLee: do you think a lot of strangers check out people's (yours included) FB pages?

4:34pmJamie: oh i don't know. im sure that there are some people that do. there are definitely some creepos out there.

Since so many Facebookers enjoy the voyeuristic nature of the site, some see the distinctions among innocently viewing friends' information or harmlessly lurking to something more sinister like creeping or stalking as simply a matter of interpretation. Davey like most male participants, tended to be dismissive about these behaviors.

2:38pmLee: do you ever worry about lurkers or anything like that? like... privacy, personal information, that sort of thing?

2:40pmDavey: not so much. as far as personal info im fine with puttin my cell phone number and whatnot on here. i really don't have much fear about putting info on here. and i also refuse to let my actions be dictated by fear. as far as creepers on facebook. Im not a hot 21 year old blonde haha, so i don't think many people will be creeping around my page!

2:41pmLee: fair enough. do you think 21-year-old blondes worry about that sort of thing?

2:43pmDavey: hmm, empathy. I would guess that on some level they do. they must not to terribly worried about it, otherwise they wouldn't be on here? i mean im sure that they do have some concern but i would think it's that much wouldn't think its that much, sorry

To summarize some key findings, almost all Facebookers first learn about the site through friends, classmates, or coworkers. Also, these offline groups generally serve as the bulk of the Facebooker's network. Additionally, the unwritten norm of accepting most-to-all friendship requests, especially for newer members, results in a heightened

period of activity and a boom in network size. This boom comes, for most Facebookers, from making dozens, or maybe hundreds, of new friends. Some Facebookers even utilize networking sites to find potential dates along with cataloging all of their new friends.

After this initial period, usually occurring around the freshman and sophomore years, there is a flattening and eventual reduction in activity during the last undergraduate years. Furthermore, Facebookers usually start combing through the friendship lists at this stage and cutting out people they don't really know. Once the Facebooker enters the working world, Facebook activity really takes a hit. At this point, activity drops to sparse, strategic interactions, and lengthy Facebook sessions become extremely rare.

Overall, usage patterns follow the normal patterns of life. There is a large set of friends from high school that form a base. This was base for the Facebookers in this study. College ushers in a flurry of new friends, and these friends are represented in the bump in network size on Facebook. Further, social life hits a peak in college, so Facebook activity suffers when graduates stop seeing friends daily or semi-weekly.

Even after activity on Facebook dies down, the site appears to remain extremely useful for maintaining social ties. This is true for both high school ties that, in the past, were often weakened or lost during college as well as maintaining college friendships after entering the working world. Almost all Facebookers commented on how the site is a great way to keep up with old high school friends, family that they are unable to see on a regular basis, and others who for whatever reason, have dropped off from face-to-face encounters.

CHAPTER VII

FACEBOOK IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCES

This chapter focuses on elements of Facebook central to identity performance. Again, I have attempted to use the wording of the participants whenever possible, both through direct quotes and by conveying their language choices, labels, and definitions.

Identity gets played out most prevalently in information flowing through the Facebook news feed. This feed supplies a king of headline service that the Facebooker sees immediately upon logging in. The system prompts users to write their own status updates, respond to status updates, and navigate to other features, most often to pages for popular applications such as bumper stickers, flair, and gift-giving. Less frequently, Facebookers are prompted to make changes in otherwise static elements, such as the About Me sections of their profiles.

Static and Dynamic Elements of Facebook Presentations

In trying to document the various elements that drive activity, I developed two categories of Facebook content, which I labeled *static* and *dynamic*. Static components are created early on and rarely change. Static elements include the sections about personal interests, background information, and applications such as small-scale video or strategy games which are played but do not generate system-based prompts that other users to the content. The static elements, then, rarely drive activity and content development and are most useful in first encounters with pending or potential friends. Dynamic elements are at the heart of Facebook activity and are most revealing of identity questions. They make the site interactive, giving it a feeling of being alive and abuzz.

Dynamic elements are highlighted by the status update, an easily adjusted statement from the Facebooker that ostensibly reflects the user's mood or current activity. Status updates typically start with "So-and-so is…." The user then fills out the sentence. Typically, the status update is intended to elicit a response. Most of the Facebookers interviewed update it whenever they sign on. Additionally, they review the status updates of others, and sometimes respond to ones they deem interesting. Beyond status updates, photos, bumper stickers, pieces of flair, and gifts drive a lot of Facebook activity.

My interviews made it clear that most Facebookers pay little mind to static elements such as background information, hometowns, jobs, and education history, and are much more attuned to dynamic elements. The main ones include the following:

The news Feed

The Facebook news feed generates the most user activity. The news feed provides an ever-growing list of events for the Facebooker. Whenever anyone in a Facebooker's network does (almost) anything, a notification is posted on the news feed. The news feed is a public forum where Facebookers can exchange relatively short messages, post status updates, or get notified of activities that require them to navigate to other pages. Typically, the messages sent via the news feed (also called the Facebook Wall) are not overly personal or about anything too serious. This is to be expected, of course, since the news feed is public. Personal messages usually get exchanged through Facebook's private-message utility.

Status updates

These are simple messages posted by the user, often done immediately upon signing in and, for some, updated periodically throughout a session. These messages are

short, often showcasing the Facebooker's sense of humor. They frequently prompt other users to post comments, which show up directly below the status update.

Photos

Facebook allows users to upload collections of pics, as Facebookers call them. With the popularity of digital cameras and cell phones with built-in cameras, Facebook works well for many users as a storage device. Naturally, albums upon albums are on showcase in the profile pages of Facebook. A single pic or image is selected by each user to serve as the profile pic, the image appearing next to each interaction on Facebook as well as the first image seen when viewing a profile page.

Flair, bumper stickers, and gift-giving

There are thousands of applications on Facebook. These are typically third-party add-ons that include access to games, items for exchange between Facebookers, or items that serve as Facebook profile decorations. Pieces of Flair, bumper stickers, and a variety of gifts are the most common applications. Pieces of Flair (a term that comes from the film, *Office Space,* in which wait staff are required to wear buttons called *pieces of flair*) are virtual buttons that are placed on the Facebooker's profile. Bumper stickers are similar to flair (though not round like a virtual button). They have short, simple messages just like their real-life counterparts. Lastly, gift-giving is a popular activity on Facebook. All Facebook gifts are virtual, of course. Gifts vary from drinks to penguins. They are commonly connected to humor and are linked to either the personality of the giver and/or the recipient or are part of an ongoing inside joke between the two. The games involved with Facebook are usually done individually with little interaction between Facebookers. One popular game, MobWars, has users completing activities, receiving points, and

increasing their standing in the (virtual) mob. The game appears to be similar to the

popular *Grand Theft Auto* video game series.

Whenever changes are made to static (rarely) or dynamic (frequently) elements,

these changes are presented first in the news feed, often called the Facebook Wall. This is

essentially a shared bulletin board of all recent activity among members of the

Facebooker's network. In addition to the wall, the site itself generates notifications for

users that may instigate activity. In many cases, the Facebooker's personal e-mail account

is sent a message whenever someone requests friendship, sends a message, writes a

message on the wall, and so on. Furthermore, when the Facebooker signs in, notifications

continue to pop up. Little red flags appear on the user's profile, directing attention to

specific applications or components. If the Facebooker performs an action in response to

the initial action, the recipient of this action will then receive a notification and may

generate further activity. Anytime anyone on the site does anything, people in his or her

network are notified and provided a links to this latest activity.

Caitlynn, a senior, talked about the importance of notifications in guiding her

average session.

> In the past three and a half years, the time I spend on my profile has dramatically
> changed. Freshman year in one session I could literally spend hours each day
> looking at my friend's profiles, pictures, writing on people's walls, etc. Today,
> however, my profile is rather simple, I deleted any applications that I have added
> over the years. I have a wall, photos, information and groups and probably spend
> only 15 minutes each day (if that) on the website. Typically, I check for new
> messages and notifications. If I have a message I will respond to it and then see if
> I have any other notifications (i.e. photos tagged, wall posts or photo comments).
> If I do have a notification I will check that and take the necessary reaction (i.e.
> untag a bad photo of myself or respond to what someone has posted on my wall).
> After responding to my notifications if I have one, I will check my friend requests

[another notification] and choose whether or not to accept. That usually takes about five minutes. I spend the next ten minutes kinda browsing. Oh, and if I have a few minutes to spare I will check if anyone I am interested in chatting with is online. Of course there are always the lazy Sundays when I spend an hour or so checking up on my high school friends or random people, but generally I don't have a lot of time in my day to spend on Facebook. - Caitlynn

Bethany, a junior who admittedly spends "an above average amount of time" on

Facebook (although not quite at Davey's 10-hour-per-day mark) described her activity as

follows:

When I am on Facebook, I usually am checking new occurrences, such as events or messages, and wall posts. Occasionally, I'll check for updated information, such as statuses, profile information, or tagged photos. I frequently write on walls or tag pictures of friends in my network. I am usually looking at profiles, walls, or pictures of myself or my friends. All of the things I do while on Facebook tend to revolve around keeping up communication with my network of friends or viewing what they are currently up to. I tend to write comments about conversations or occurrences from face-to-face interactions to these friends. This is why I am usually going to the same places repeatedly, i.e. my and my friends' profiles.
       An example session on Facebook usually consists of tending to new occurrences on my Homepage, i.e. events, messages, or notices. After this I will typically wish a friend a "happy birthday" if notified it's someone's birthday. The next thing I will do is check my own profile to see if anyone has written on my wall or tagged photos of me, etc. Lately, I've found I more often check to see who is also on Facebook to chat. If I'm on for a longer amount of time, I'll search around more. This can vary from checking recently updated statuses to recently tagged friends to perusing for Bumper Stickers. However, the majority of my actions revolve around my network of friends and maintaining a connection with them through Facebook. - Bethany

At a certain level of use, the Facebookers' sessions evidently become routinized –

habitual users could immediately walk me through a typical session step by step. Less

involved users had to think longer about their sessions longer and had more meandiering

descriptions. Sam, for instance, struggled to answer when I asked what he does when there are no notifications to guide his Facebook activity.

> Well, the main thing that I do is to see if I have any new notifications. if I don't have any notifications, I usually sign out and go to a different website… sometimes when I am bored I will explore Facebook to see what other people have been up to. I don't know. I suppose I would look at the wall feed, which has all my Facebook friends latest activities. Also I might click on the recently updated profiles to see if anyone has interesting statuses or profile pictures. [long pause] I also like to look at my high school friends' profiles to see what they have been up to since I rarely see them anymore. I noticed that I use Facebook as a tool to more or less keep in touch with my friends without actually seeing or talking to them. [pause] I guess I don't hang around too long if there aren't any messages from people or friend requests or I haven't been tagged in a pic. - Sam

Others, though, were easily able (and more than happy) to walk me through as average session. Steve, an upperclassman , stressed the role of notifications as well as status updates.

> When I sign on to Facebook the first thing I do is check my wall or inbox if I have been notified that I have a new wall posting or message. If there is no notification, then I proceed to double-click the "friends" tab and look at all the recently updated statuses. Most of the time, the statuses are the same or pretty boring like "I'm tired of school." However, if a status is unique or interesting I'll click on that person's profile for more information. For example, three weeks ago on a Saturday afternoon my one friend's status said, "I had an awesome time last night, met one of the hottest girls at [university]." Therefore, I had to click on his profile to see if this "really hot girl" had posted on his wall or been tagged in any pictures with him. She hadn't, so I checked back later that night and saw she wrote on his wall about how it was nice meeting him. I clicked on her profile but it had privacy settings, and from her small picture she looked pretty cute but I follow the motto that pictures can be deceiving. I immediately called my buddy and had multiple questions to ask him. How did he meet her was it randomly at the bar or did he know her from class or work? Does she have any hot friends that I can be introduced to? Did you guys hook up or mess around? Etc.
> I also look at other people's pictures, but only sometimes. I dislike how people need to document their entire weekend via posted pictures on Facebook,

which is why I never post any pictures. Nevertheless, when I am bored checking people's pictures from the past weekend can be entertaining. –Steve

Information flow via the news feed

I sign in and look at my home page, which has recently become a "news feed" by the Facebook powers-that-be. The news feed pretty much then dictates where I turn my online attention. The feed notes new photos either uploaded or "tagged" of my friends, new relationship updates, and changes people have made to their profile information. With this in mind, I'll usually look for any interesting new updates and then check out the profiles of those who have made a substantial change happen. - Kyle

Some Facebookers described the news feed as "running headlines" about their

social life. Kirstin chatted with me on Facebook about the news feed (what she calls

updates, not to be confused with *status* updates) and said she gives the most attention to

those who appear the most.

8:37pmLee: Do you watch the chat utility to see who is frequently online?

8:37pmKirstin: (i never pay attention to the chat feature honestly) i think this is

the first or 2nd time i've used it. you can tell who is on the most by the news

feeds, looking at who updates their page often. i have friends that switch up their

pages daily and are all updated. and then i have friends that pop up once in awhile

- or hardly ever - and i rarely pay attention to those pages honestly

8:38pmLee: i see. do you update things a lot?

8:38pmKirstin: prolly once a month or so

8:38pmLee: huh... so those that are online the most get the most attention?

8:38pmKirstin: ill put up new information, or if i pick up a new interest i put that up

8:39pmLee: that's definitely a reason to be on FB! stay "in"

8:39pmKirstin: yeah lol - basically i forget sometimes that i have other people to look at. so i look at the updated pages and thats bout it

8:40pmLee: do we have any friend in common who updates his/her profile daily? could we go to their profile?

8:40pmKirstin: whoever pops up on that first homepage is usually who gets my attention

8:40pmLee: ok. do you think you update yours enough to stay on the top of people's lists? or do you get lost among the huge lists

8:41pmKirstin: im prolly in the middle there. there are some months or days when theres just nothing to update

8:41pmLee: i see. did you find anyone who updates a lot?

8:41pmKirstin: I see [friend] all the time - shes always updating things

8:43pmLee: ok... i'm there too. it seems she has a lot of pics too

8:43pmKirstin: her profile pic changes like every other day. and her status is always changing. and her interests and things are always changing

8:44pmLee: hmm... why do you think that is? i would think one's interests would be pretty steady. i could see the pics updating, as well as the daily "status", but not the info page

8:45pmKirstin: well she's prolly like me .. sometimes ill remember that i like

something or hate something and add it on while i'm bored. or ill find a new band

that i like and add that on

8:45pmLee: is boredom a big reason for FB's success?

8:45pmKirstin: lol yeah i would honestly think so.

8:45pmLee: is it just a big time-waster?

8:45pmKirstin: for me sometimes it is.. i could waste an hour just browsing

through things people have updated. but then again, keeping up to date on peoples

lives.. is that a waste?

8:46pmLee: i would say not, but i guess i need FB to mean something (hard to

write a dissertation on wasting time). ☺

8:46pmKirstin: lol. true true. but there are plenty of times when im just bored and

not much else to do, so i go on facebook. gives me and friends things to talk about

sometimes. like who's married who, and who had thier baby, and who moved

where.. things like that

8:48pmLee: why do you think [friend] changes her profile pic daily? is it based on

moods?

8:49pmKirstin: I think she just changes it b/c of whatever is going on in her life..

like [other friend], he's a new bf, and so she has a pic of him and her

Davey mainly reserves wall writing for birthday well-wishing, joking around, and

scheduling events.

well, i like to write on peoples walls on their bdays. i don't catch everyone but i try. i only really trade wall posts with a handful of different people. from time to time there is some random message from someone i haven't talked to in a long time. but usually we go back and forth maybe 2-5 times depending on what the topic is. like if im planning to go to chicago and meet up with my buddy ohare there might be 4 or 5 posts with questions, directions, ideas, that kind of thing. other wise i might post a wise ass comment on someones wall then they hit me one back, if i feel like the joke they told merits a response and i have something better to add ill post another, but if not i just let it go and that's that.

Related to scheduling events and keeping up with friends, the wall is well suited for sending short, simple messages and quick exchanges. Kathy describes these uses.

7:14pmLee: tell me more about your wall discussions... with whom do you talk... friends? family? "old" friends?... what do you talk about?

7:16pmKathy: Usually friends, sometimes family. Any events that are coming up, plans to meet up somewhere, new life events (wedding, job, baby, etc.). Usually I talk to family the most right after or right before a holiday or a get-together of some kind.

7:16pmLee: so... a lot of scheduling-type conversations?

7:17pmKathy: Sometimes, actually its mostly catching up with what's new. Or what they have going on.

7:21pmKathy: By updates I mean the events listed in the news feed on the home page - new relationship info., groups they joined, messages they have posted, new pictures they put up.

7:21pmLee: sure. and a lot of things on the wall are, like... quick "catching up"

kinds of things? for example... on Aug. 3, Chloe [NAME] wrote "Good! How's

everything with you?? How's the new job?"

sort of... catching up if you haven't spoken in a while?

7:22pmKathy: yeah, exactly. Or, 'it was nice to see you again. when are you going

to be back in the area?", things like that

In summary, the news feed (or wall) serves as the primary source of information

flow on Facebook. Anytime anyone does anything on Facebook, it appears on the news

feed of everyone in his or her network (unless they have adjusted settings so as not to

receive it, which few do). The news feed was initially controversial due to the apparent

loss of privacy. Even though everyone in the network had access to the Facebooker's

activity prior to the news feed, it would have been unlikely that everyone in the network

would have gone to any one Facebooker's profile to view each action. The news feed

gives the updates to everyone without forcing them to peruse every profile. There was,

then, technically no shift in privacy settings, but the site itself made each person's actions

better known. Currently, the backlash has subsided. In fact, most Facebookers in this

study follow the news feed religiously. They long for updates on others. It drives their

activity.

Information flow via status updates

As mentioned earlier, status updates are a dynamic component of Facebook and

instigate a lot of conversation. These updates are often mundane announcements about

one's current mood or activity, but usually phrased in a way that prompts responses from others.

> My main method of interaction is through status updates. The handful of friends that I talk to update their statuses, or I update mine, and then we comment back and forth about them. – Alex

The tool is versatile and comes in various flavors. Categories of status updates are listed below with example(s). Each status update, which is located at the top of the user's profile page, lists how long ago the status was updated and has a link readily available for anyone interested in writing a comment on the status.

Current Activity and Schedule

Initial Status Update: "Callie is watching tv then heading to bed gotta work at 6am."

Initial Status Update: "Farrah is laying out in the sun! Might as well enjoy being unemployed!"

Response from Vanessa – "u suck!! not fair!"

Response from Abby – "hahaha for some reason that was really funny to me (and true) when I read it Vanessa! ;)"

Current Mood and Current Activity

Initial Status Update: "Ann is lovin life and havin a cocktail."

Initial Status Update: "Caroline IS SICK!!! YUCK!!"

      Response from Breanne – "feel better"

<u>Universal Experience</u>

Initial Status Update: "Doloris is not so fond of being called mean names at work!"

      Response from Molly– "...Just at home then?"

      Response from Calvin – "me neither...but the money is good, i get to use

protection and my pimp is kind."

            Response to Molly from Doloris – "I LOVE being called mean names at

            home!!! ;-)"

Initial Status Update: "Gabe would rather mow three times a week than scoop snow. Is it

spring yet?"

      Response from Blair– "me too gabe... where is this global warming stuff when we

could use it?

            Response to Blair from Gabe – "Really, I always knew Al Gore was full

            of !@#$..."

<u>Friendship publication</u>

Initial Status Update: "Ashlee is so excited to see Gayle! its amazing how some

friendships never end, even though you haven't seen them in years, I guess some

friendships do last forever"

<u>Life Announcement</u>

Initial Status Update: "Brad is an Uncle!!"

> Response from Trista – "Congrats!"

> Response from Jack – "congrats bud"

<u>Humor</u>

Initial Status Update: "Davey has set a new record for laziness today..."

> Response from Clint – "Breaking your own record...nice"

>> Response to Clint from Davey – "gotta keep raising the bar, stay sharp or get sloppy!! of course in this arena maybe it's the other way around, stay sloppy or get sharp haha."

Initial Status Update: Laura is loving her new phone.

> Response from Brianne – "Do you love it better than cheese?"

>> Response to Brianne from Laura – "Can u love anything more than cheese?"

Initial Status Update: "Maeleigh is so lucky to have a sexy husband to take care of her when shes sick."

> Response from Korina – "Oh la la! :) Is he wearing a nurse outfit, too?

<u>Seeking Support</u>

Initial Status Update:"Angie Is praying I make the right choice!"

Response from Ashley – "you still deciding about doing the manager thing?"

>Response to Ashley from Angie – "Yeah! Ugh I don't know y I'm making this so difficult!"

Initial Status Update: "Vince is thinking: Why did I get married?"

>Response from Sharon – "Whoa now.."

>Response from Katie – Yeah man I agree with Hannah ha

>>Response to Sharon from Vince – "Long story short, my marriage is in the shitter, we seperated yesterday."

>>>Response from Sharon – "I'm really sorry to hear that. I've been through it... I hope everything works out for you."

Second Status Update: "Vince is I need friends now more than ever!"

>Response from Katie – well i am here for ya anytime.....i mean that!"

Vince's example of a deeply personal status update was uncommon, but every now and then, a Facebooker uses the site this way. In such cases, the friends return emotional support in comments. Whether such comments instigate offline activity such as phone calls or trying to meet face to face is another question. Most updates and comments, though, stuck to mundane activities and witty comments. I asked Sean, who didn't know Vince, to comment on what Vince wrote.

>When someone changes their status to something provocative, fires of messages usually start flying. An example would be a switch from 'in a relationship' to 'single' or 'it's complicated'. Also, people might say something very intriguing

on their status that just makes you want to ask more or comment. In this [Vince's] case, he is clearly looking for social support. You don't post something like that just to let people know what's up. He seems to really be in a low place. I would think he'd just call a friend or brother or sister. You don't really see something like that on Facebook very much. – Sean

An example of updates prompting offline activity was given by Mandy, who

tracks a hospitalized friend through Facebook.

… next I head over to my friend Helga's profile because she has been admitted to the hospital for depression and bulimia and I want to see how she is doing. I read her statuses and make sure she is doing okay. Her statuses sometimes say, 'I hate life' and I then know I should call her and check in on her or send her an encouraging text message. – Mandy

About me section

This component is static. Users typically fill out this section at the onset of

membership and rarely update it thereafter. It is highly useful to strangers and first-time

viewers of a profile to get an idea about personalities, but seldom viewed by those who

already consider themselves offline friends.

This is the portion of the Facebook profile that might include personal contact

information. It is typically the first place Facebookers cut down when they are looking to

reduce risk posed by strangers or "creepers." Regarding privacy issues,. Steve said, "I

have limited information on my profile because I feel if people truly want to get to know

me then they can call instead of "creeping" on my profile." Gabbie said, "People don't

need to know every detail of my life. You wouldn't put all that information on a business

card, so why would you tell all that information about yourself online?"

Nonetheless, some Facebookers do update their self descriptions every now and then, and some focus on this section as part of their impression management efforts. In such cases, all of the interests in books, movies, hobbies, and so on will have a common theme. For instance, Laura, "the cat-lady-in-training," filled her profile's About Me section with lots of interest in books, book clubs, cats, and her work at a library. This page was central to her presentation. Others, such as Gina, saw little point in presenting such identity-ridden information online. Gina commented, "Who really cares about all your favorite books and movies? You either know the person or you don't."

Self-presentation via bumper stickers, flair, and gift-giving

Bumper stickers and flair serve as "profile decorations" for Facebookers. They are quick and simple expressions of the self. They are like a poster hanging in a teenager's bedroom. They are often simple and direct, but convey a deeper symbolic belonging. They say "I belong to this group", whatever the group may be. Below are examples of pieces of flair that serve as identity pegs (Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007).

Figure 1. Five pieces of flair based on religion

Figure 2. Five pieces of flair based on sports teams

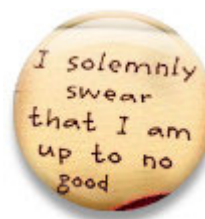(*High School Musical* fans)   (*Sex and the City* fans)

(*Twilight* book / movie series)   (The Rolling Stones)

(The movie *Dodgeball*, humor)   (*Harry Potter* fans)

(Chuck Norris, Humor)   (Coffee lover)

Figure 3. Eight pieces of flair based on popular culture

1:31pmAmber: The bumper stickers are a fun time-waster. The are usually about current events, have movie jokes, or are just stupid things.

1:31pmLee: What do they mean?

1:32pmAmber: They are just "I miss you" or "I'm thinking of you" types of things. It's about the same as sending someone an individual e-mail just saying 'hi'.

Bumper stickers, pieces of flair, and other types of gift-giving applications are related. A bumper sticker usually involves an image and a written message, like a greeting card. Bumper stickers are collected as a set of images on a Facebooker's profile. Most bumper stickers are passed from one Facebooker to another. Others are selected by the Facebooker for self-presentations. A few examples of bumper stickers are included below.

Figure 4. Ensemble of pieces of flair

Most of the bumper stickers above contain elements of humor, and sex is a frequent topic. The stickers sent from one Facebooker to another commonly contain some inside joke or shared interest. Also, stickers that send expressions of friendship and love are very popular.

I like to look at people's applications, namely the bumper sticker one because I find that the most interesting. I think that is where you can really "get to know"

someone via their Facebook. I think that if someone sends me a bumper sticker, it is saying what they think of me and my taste or likes. – Thomas

Many people use bumper stickers or the almost-identical application "Pieces of Flair" to convey personality. Facebookers also get bumper stickers and flair from good friends. Joey and many other Facebookers talked about how awkward it would be to receive these expressions of friendship from strangers or mere acquaintances.

2:42pmLee: do you do much with applications? flair? bumper stickers?

2:43pmJoey: yeah, bumper stickers from time to time sometimes the bumper stickers sort of go along with inside jokes

2:44pmLee: i am still trying to figure out the interest or popularity with these some seem funny, but i don't know why people spend so much time with them is it mostly inside stories/jokes with friends?

2:44pmJoey: It's really kind of a timewaster activity for me it is. I have made bumper stickers myself on occasion, with funny pictures I've seen online

2:46pmLee: and you send them to friends? or do you post on your own profile?

2:47pmJoey: yeah. some I put on my own wall, but rarely

2:47pmLee: would it be weird for a stranger to send you one? would there be any circumstance where that would be normal? like... i'm guessing you don't know all of your 513 friends REALLY well. would it be weird if someone who was just an acquaintance sent you one?

2:52pmJoey: can't think of an occassion where it would be normal for a stranger or even an acquaintance to send me a bumper sticker would probably weird me out a little.

Like the involvement levels with photographs, the time spent with bumper stickers sees a sharp rise early on, a plateau after a year or two of membership, and then a decline around year three. Farrah expressed the common view of getting tired of applications.

8:41pmFarrah: I sometimes send bumper stickers and things, but those extra applications are really annoying after having them for a little while.

8:42pmLee: so tell me about your bumper stickers. do you put them up yourself? or do people always send them to you?

8:42pmFarrah: Bumper stickers are from people and I put some up myself. I was big into bumper stickers at one point, but it got old.

8:43pmLee: why did the stickers get old?

8:43pmFarrah: I don't really know... I just got sick of looking for them and sending them to people. I guess I found better things to do with my time... thank god'. I mean, there isn't too much of a point to them.

Humor, perhaps the most common presentation characteristic in all areas of Facebook, appears in almost all profiles. Not taking oneself too seriously, evidently, is a serious concern. Perhaps the need for lightening the mood comes from posting so much

information and so many photos about oneself. Chloe, who had a couple dozen bumper

stickers and pieces of flair on her profile, talked about the pieces that most reflected her.

8:52pmLee: do you do much with the applications? gifts, flair, bumper stickers

i see you are a ravenclaw

8:52pmChloe: oh, that applications. i do like the idea of applications, and i like

quite a few of them. but i think the FB market is oversaturated with them. i love

having applications that say something about you, like the ravenclaw thing for

me. but i don't like adding applications that don't have anything to do with me as a

person. i added a lot when they first came out, and then later went back and

edited.

8:53pmLee: so... what does ravenclaw, futurama, and pokemon say about you?

other than opposition to slytherin, of course. are the friends you interact with most

on FB into these things too?

8:55pmChloe: well ravenclaw talks about my personality [In the Harry Potter

book series, a Ravenclaw "values intelligence, creativity, wit, and wisdom"

(Wikipedia.com, 2009)]...and that i like harry potter. futurama and pokemon show

that i'm a giant nerd (and that i like those shows/games). i don't think my friends i

talk to much are on these applications.

8:55pmLee: and video games, as i look more at your favs

8:55pmChloe: i don't really use the applications much, i just have them as profile

decoration mostly. many of my friends are on the movies app but i don't interact

with them on it.

Giving gifts, another application on Facebook, is similar in many ways to bumper stickers and flair. This application, of course, has one Facebooker give a gift to another Facebooker. Users don't give gifts to themselves, as they could with flair or bumper stickers. Gifts are almost always exchanged between friends, most often very close friends. Giving a gift to a Facebooker commonly involves an inside joke and is considered by most to be the equivalent of "Hey. Just thinking of you." An interesting twist on gifts is Facebook's recent inclusion of gifts that cost actual money. Usually, the fee is quite small ("10 gifts for a buck" was a recent sale), but it marks an important transition. If gift-giving becomes commercialized, the amount of dollars spent on a virtual gift might become of symbolic importance. As it currently stands, the few Facebookers in this study who have received paid-for gifts didn't put much stock in them. They certainly didn't think any more of them than the free gifts. However, if a gift were available on Facebook for $20, Facebookers would perhaps put more stock into it. They may, though, think that the person who bought it was foolishly wasting money. It appears, then, that there are differences between the symbolism involved with expensive offline ("real") gifts and paying money for virtual gifts. I found this very intriguing and it certainly has potential for future study as Facebook continues to develop commercial ties.

Female participants in this study expressed concerns of (typically male) strangers sending them flair, bumper stickers, and Facebook gifts. This is similar to creeping, in that stranger sends some sex-related image or comment to the female Facebooker. Once again, the meaning is all about the context of the relationship. If the person is a relative stranger who the female met somewhere, it might be considered appropriate (even

desired). However, if the female was not as "into" the male as the male was "into" her, the gift would likely be labeled creepy. If the female didn't remember or ever meet the male, it would almost always be labeled creepy. Male participants made no mention of receiving unwanted flair, bumper stickers, or gifts. These items are exchanged at a higher frequency among females than they are among males. Males are much more likely to send items that include humor (often crude) while females tend to send more messages of friendship expression (and humor). Beth, a recent graduate, talked about who sends flair and gifts and why.

7:42pmLee: what do people get out of flair and gifts on FB?

7:43pmBeth: it's fun. just something fun and silly to send back and forth between friends

you can say anything you want, such as 'hey i'm thinking about you'

7:44pmLee: i see. so it would be weird if a stranger sent flair to someone?

7:44pmBeth: i think so, yes

7:44pmLee: and they serve as sort of "thinking of you" greeting card types of things?

7:44pmBeth: that's one

7:45pmLee: oh. what are some others?

7:45pmBeth: it can be flirty, teasing, etc

7:45pmLee: i see.

7:45pmBeth: you can also post your own shows people what you are interested in

7:45pmLee: i see. are bumper stickers the same overall idea?

7:46pmBeth: i think so. i don't use that app

7:47pmLee: oh. is it the same for the "gifts" that get sent? are they the same type

of thing as sending flair? i suppose some of the gifts cost money

what are the gifts about?

7:48pmBeth: i'm not really sure. i've only used it a couple of times. most of the

people i know are into that app. if i was dating someone i might use it more

7:53pmLee: you were saying that you'd give more gifts if you were dating?

so it's used a lot for flirting? or for showing interest?

7:53pmBeth: yes. i would say flirting

So while gifts and flair are appropriate for elevating or building an intimate

relationship, they are certainly not appropriate for *initiating* one. Overall, gifts, flair, and

bumper stickers serve as profile decorations (when placed up by the individual),

expressions of friendship, and flirting among new acquaintances. They key to successful

giving of these items is understanding the context, reading the cues from the other person,

and anticipating the reactions of the recipient.

In-groups and out-groups

Much of the imagery on Facebook clearly deals with *in-groups* and *out-groups*.

The best way to align with a desired group is to both do those activities valued by the

group and disavow out-groups and the activities of those out-groups (Sherif & Sherif,

1964). The visual components of Facebook represent actions or views and are relatively

direct presentations that link to specific reference groups. Facebookers tend to exaggerate

their identity performances, possibly in an attempt to ensure that the correct identity

interpretation occurs. Many Facebookers believe that they can get a good understanding of another person, even a complete stranger, simply through his or her Facebook profile. Maddie acknowledged these exaggerated performances and admitted that although she was suspicious about the validity of Facebook presentations, she still relied on them for some information.

10:30pmLee: do you think you can get a good idea of another person from FB? like... do you think it can help to understand someone's personality?

10:31pmMaddie: No i don't believe so....but i guess i still rely on it to some extent for information

10:31pmLee: what information can/do you get?

10:31pmMaddie: what people put on their profiles is pretty cliché, so you can get an overall set of interests or values, but it doesn't really reveal the uniqueness of the person

10:31pmLee: sure. what are the cliches? anything come to mind as a cliche profile, or something that people commonly put on?

10:32pmMaddie: Hmmm...well i feel like what people write in their "About mes" they generally copy the idea from someone else

10:33pmLee: hmm. like their interests, hobbies and such?

10:33pmMaddie: not always though

10:33pmLee: so some people are more thoughtful and original?

10:33pmMaddie: I'd say so. A lot just put common popular things up though.

10:34pmLee: i see. so tell me more about the cliches if you can. what types of cliches are out there? like, what are some typical profiles out there?

10:38pmMaddie: Well I'm guilty of these things too....but people will put seasons as an interest, also mood states (ex. being happy) as interests, and foods. There are a lot of people who like romantic comedies, the Cubs, and the [university sports team]. Girls are worse at this than guys I think. So many profiles of girls look absolutely identitical to a thousand other girls. Ditsy blonde, tan, drinker, partier.

10:39pmLee: i see

Lastly, the identity groups referenced by Facebook imagery should not be confused with Facebook groups, which are simply hyperlinked collections of Facebookers based on a common link to a topic. Facebook groups provide identity pegs in that they are listed on the Facebooker's profile, but membership in a Facebook group typically does not involve interaction with other group members. That is, members of the Facebook group "Roald Dahl's Stories are Scrumdittlyumptious" do not actually talk to each other. However, membership in the group serves as an identity marker for the people with which the member does interact. This is how most Facebook groups operate. They express the interest(s) of the Facebooker, but they do not actually serve as a common bond with other Facebookers who are for all intents and purposes considered complete strangers.

The key to successful Facebook presentations lies in the negotiation of images and text chosen. The Facebooker must pick the groups with which he or she chooses to

align, know what those groups value, and present accordingly. Roger talked about his

early experiences with Facebook and trying to keep up with the crowd.

> The main purpose of using Facebook when I started was to be the coolest or have
> the coolest stuff on your profile. Facebook, in high school, was mostly used as a
> status symbol Everyone was concerned about who had the most friends, who's
> profile was 'cooler', and to see who was talking to who. You had to keep up with
> all of your friends.

So what makes a "cool" Facebook profile? The most common identity pegs are

indicative.

General Sports: Sports is an ideal identity peg. In sports there are good guys, bad

guys, and clear distinctions between the two. Having a general sports theme

automatically calls out to other Facebookers. Facebookers using this peg list participation

in various sports competitions, place sports in their interests, and have pictures of

competition.

University Sports and Chicago Cubs: Aligning with specific sports teams,

especially university, local, and regional teams, is a sure-fire way to create a bond with a

lot of Facebookers. It is also an easy identity peg to maintain. Simply putting up a few

bumper stickers, posting some pieces of flair, and including the teams in the interests

section identifies the profile as a fan. Further, part of the norms for many fans is a strong

dislike (perhaps outright hatred) of rival sports teams. New York Yankee fans are

supposed to hate Boston Red Sox fans. Oklahoma University fans are supposed to hate

University of Texas fans. Facebookers rely on presentations of hating out-groups a lot.

This puts off any fans of the rival teams, but, of course, that is the goal.

Greek Membership: This identity peg is especially tricky. Membership in a specific Greek House would certainly draw friends from within the House, but rivalries may be present with other Houses. Further, many non-Greek students have opposition to Greek life in general. However, defining successful impression management is up to each Facebooker. If the Facebooker wants to appeal to a specific House and most other Greek members (though perhaps not all), using such affiliations on the profile page is important. To some degree, if the Facebooker belongs to a Greek House and hangs out with fellow members, then the membership is bound to be shown in the uploaded pictures. However, Facebookers can also choose flair, gifts, and bumper stickers that identify them as Greek.

The university: The common link in the sub-network is affiliation with the university. This is a certain way to find a common bond with thousands of others in the sub-network. This was the reason that I chose to go with Facebook in the first place. I thought my University link would open access to potential participants through our common connection.

Old high school groups: A common activity on Facebook is reconnecting with friends from high school. Mere attendance at a school serves as a strong connection between individuals, particularly the smaller high schools in the Midwest United States.

Binge drinking: Partying and the celebration of alcohol get presented in the Facebook photos more than anywhere else on Facebook. Though the culture of drinking on college campuses has carried over to Facebook, the disproportionate number of drinking pics on Facebook is due, at least in part, to the norms surrounding digital cameras. As many Facebookers mentioned, no one takes pictures when they go to class, church, work, or any number of places that are part of his or her regular routine.

However, whenever a group of friends are out at a bar, the digital cameras come flying out. Thus, these are the pictures that get uploaded the most. Additionally, they normally have social value in that the same friends that are in the pictures are likely on Facebook too.

Family: Images and text about family not only serve as a link to the family itself but also to a larger group of Facebookers who value family. These identity pegs most often come out with newlyweds and new mothers and fathers.

Political view and civic duty: The bulk of this study was completed during the 2008 Presidential race. Political presentations on Facebook, then, may have been inflated. Political affiliations in this study leaned liberal, which stands to reason given then-Senator Obama's popularity on college campuses. Regardless, love for one party and hatred (or near-hatred) for the other party was the most common identity presentation. This also showed up with some Facebookers posting links to liberal or conservative news stories, politicians' web sites, and activist groups. Somewhat tied to the political presentations, though not always, was the group of Facebookers who identified with self-labeled "Hippie culture." These presentations usually involved symbols of marijuana, links to news stories about marijuana legislation, environmentalism, war protest imagery and information, and music information and imagery.

Scholarship: Some Facebookers, mainly graduate students in this study, focused their imagery and text in a serious, scholarly presentation. Here, lists of favorites and hobbies included academic texts, research areas, and independent or foreign films. The photos in these presentations were often very limited, usually including some pics from travel (usually not on a sunny beach). There are very few, if any, pics containing alcohol.

Interview participants quickly identified the "scholarly" Facebookers. First, personal

information in most profiles includes level in college. Second, most of these profiles look

about the same.

Lastly, there are thousands of specific interests that serve as identity pegs on

Facebook. Popular culture provides the bulk of these interests. For example, Laura's love

of Harry Potter is so pronounced that it would no doubt catch the eye of other Harry

Potter fans. Other examples include specific video games, television shows, and movies.

Each of these helps shape the overall presentation. The work of the Facebooker is to

effectively (and convincingly) combine several identity pegs into a coherent identity

presentation.

Presenting the Self

RQ1. How do SNS users perform and negotiate their identities online?

RQ2. How do SNS users interpret online identity performances of others?

In Goffman's terms (1967; 1969), Facebook performances are given, not given

off. That is, Facebookers control nearly every aspect of the presentation. There are no

blushes, eye twitches, or even emotions (unless the performers *want* to show the

emotion). There are some identity-related texts and images on Facebook about the

individual that are outside of the individual's control (such as the images friends upload),

and these have been shown to serve as important cues to identity (Walther, Van Der

Heide, Kim, & Westerman, 2008). However, participants in this study did not report

making use of this *given off* information. Goffman's (1959; 1969) view of performance

stages also relates to performances on Facebook. For the most part, Facebook represents

a front stage performance. That is, the Facebooker must be "on" in terms of his or her identity. Moreover, the Facebooker might be required to perform for multiple audiences, what boyd (2002) has called the collapse of context. A handful of Facebookers expressed concerns over having their varying social circles coming together within Facebook. Most Facebookers, though, were able to overcome any performance anxiety resulting from polyoptic surveillance simply by tweaking their privacy levels for some or all social groups.

The performative aspects of Facebook rely heavily on the use of identity pegs (Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007). Statements given as self descriptions that list favorite movies, hobbies, and careers send clear messages to other members of those groups. Since so much of the content given in the About Me section has ties to popular culture (books, movies, TV shows, retail outlets, etc), many of the identities, if taken purely from the static components, would be read as commercial. Identity pegs are also, of course, prevalent in the dynamic elements of Facebook. The news feed offers Facebookers a continuous stream of identity performance observations and opportunities. Status updates and comments posted on the news feed often call out to the individual to fulfill an identity (friend, humorous, kind, and sympathetic). These opportunities provide a relational context, indicate appropriate behaviors, and set the Facebooker up for successful identity performance. Posting comments on status updates and images and exchanging gifts, flair, and bumper stickers are public acknowledgements of the relationship in the context of Facebook itself. Further, these interactions include inside jokes, stories, and meanings that fit within the specific relational context. Thus, whereas all of the static elements appear to rely on identity pegs (which are broad group identity

symbols such as sports teams, university affiliation, and religious views), the dynamic

elements rely on both identity pegs – particularly in terms of gifts and flair – as well as

relationship-specific meanings. The key to successful communication on Facebook, then,

is to balance the broad, generic symbols of one's groups with displaying identity pegs

with continually observing, interacting with, and being responsive to others regarding

relationship specific identity performances.

CHAPTER VIII

INTERPRETING THE OTHER

Each participant talked through the areas that they used to make impressions and how the person being reviewed measured up.

No one is completely represented [online]. There is always something missing. There is always a certain level of self-censorship, but I think I'm honest for the most part. I guess I should add *Project Runway*, but I don't want people to think that's all that I'm into. – Sean

This section focuses on direct responses that participants gave when looking over entire profiles of other Facebookers. During each interview, I asked participants to review another Facebooker's profile and give their overall impressions. Below is an example of one such exchange.

8:57pmLee: could you go to April's profile? do you know her?

8:58pmVanessa: i would say that i know her pretty well..

8:59pmLee: if you didn't know her, how would you go about making an assessment of her? what would you look at? talk me through it. what types of impressions would you form?

9:00pmVanessa: um well whenever someone adds me to facebook i always look at their pictures first, i'm not really sure why but that's just what i always do. and then i look to see our friends in common, and like what their info is

9:02pmLee: ok... what do her pictures tell about her? what should i notice that displays who she "is"

9:03pmVanessa: her pictures just basically show what she looks like.. who she hangs out with(like if we have common friends) you notice that she's really smiley and looks happy

9:04pmLee: ok. is having friends in common an important criterion for accepting/denying someone?

9:05pmVanessa: well if i dont know the person like by their name... i usually look to see who our common friends are and then i might realize who they are

9:05pmLee: i see. and if you didn't have any in common?

9:05pmVanessa: i usually dont accept people that i don't know who they are by their pictures

9:06pmLee: ok... last part you mentioned... what does April's info tell about her? there seems to be a somewhat sad aspect to her "about me" section. about love lost, getting hurt, etc

9:08pmVanessa: It just tells what she likes and i can understand why you would think that she is sad in her about me section... seems like she's been let down a lot

9:10pmLee: ok... do you think, based on her profile, you could describe her in a few words?

9:11pmVanessa: yeah.. i would say that she seems nice and happy, she seems friendly with all of the people in her photos and a bit reflective in terms of her info section

Facebookers employ impression management tactics. They do not post unflattering pictures and rarely talk about negative aspects of their life on the site. A

phrase that I keep coming back to is, "Nobody cries on Facebook." Facebookers know this and openly talked about it in interviews.

However, when asked to judge strangers' profiles, many participants seemed to forget that they were not getting complete representations. The most common areas used to make judgments were the profile pic, uploaded photos, the self descriptions, and the Facebook wall. I asked Amber to look over the profile of a stranger, Bill, and talk about her impressions.

> Engaged. Wow. Every guy at [university] is either engaged or gay. He seems very popular since he has over 1000 friends, and he has all these messages from lots of different people. He has a lot of really stupid stuff, like certain bumper stickers, party photos, and stupid messages. He really likes to party. He writes about it in every possible message. Just look at his wall postings. He talks about partying with people even when they aren't talking about partying. He seems immature. I don't think I'd be friends with him. You can tell so much by his pictures, too. All pics are groups, which makes it look like he is always with a bunch of friends. He loves his alcohol. He definitely tries to give a "fun and friends" impression.

Laura, the self described "cat-lady-in-training," thinks strangers do not get much from a Facebook profile beyond simple impressions. Her view is that Facebookers cannot really know the other person unless they know them offline first. Here is our exchange about her friend, Michelle.

> 6:52pmLee: i see we have a couple friends in common. if you would, please go to michelle's profile
>
> 6:53pmLaura: yep, im there

6:54pmLee: ok... work through michelle's profile (photos, info, wall postings, etc). let me know what aspects show her personality. (Do you know her well?)

6:54pmLaura: all of her status updates are completely and totally "michelle" she is so creative and funny they totally show that

6:55pmLaura: she also does a really good job of capturing herself in the info section

6:56pmLee: what about the self-descriptions, interests and such capture her?

6:56pmLaura: when she says "i'm kind of an old lady and a little girl at the same time" it is totally michelle and you don't really understand what that means unless you know her

6:56pmLee: do you think a stranger would "get" any of her personality? if so, from where? the profile pic is certainly unusual

6:57pmLaura: possibly....i think it is impossible to really "get" someone from a facebook profile. i know her profile is perfect because i know her

does that make sense?

6:58pmLee: yeah... i think so. so could a stranger get anything out of her profile that would reflect michelle?

6:58pmLaura: when i look at a profile, i usually try to see how well it actually represents a person that i already know, rather than try to use it to find out what a person is like.:a stranger would know that she is creative and interesting and obviously has a lot of friends. a lot of different people comment on her profile, so that shows that she is someone that lots of people like to communicate with

Impressions of other Facebookers seem to be strongest when those impressions are negative. Additionally, participants seemed much more confident in their discussion of others when the impressions they formed were negative. I asked Gina to form an impression of Abby. Her description started off positive, but Gina quickly turned to a negative assessment as she got into Abby's pictures and list of interests.

> Based only on her profile pic, she looks sweet. She has a nice smile and face. She has a cross necklace. She likes [university] football, or at least tailgating. She doesn't seem like she's trying too hard. Overall, though, she looks like a stupid drunk a lot in her pictures. She's in college and looks like a typical attention-seeking girl. Ugh. Lots of pictures of just herself, which just seems vain. Lots of good-looking people have pics up of only themselves. That's just total vanity. She also has a long list of 'likes', which is just annoying. Too many interests tells me that she's just trying to have everyone like her or she doesn't really know who she is.

The difference between "successful" and "unsuccessful" profiles is based, of course, on the goals of the profile owner. Success would equate to viewers getting the impression intended by the presenter. However, participants tended to view successful presentations as having a consistency and avoiding unflattering behaviors (based on general social norms).

An example of an unsuccessful presentation comes from Callie. Participants felt that she was mixing way too much party, drinking, tailgating, and sexually provocative poses with what they thought were overly haughty quotes. Her party pics were seen as crude by participants.

Figure 5. Girl doing keg stand in party pic

These two quotes on her profile page also created negative reactions.

As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the one thing left to us in a bad time. – EB White

Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after. – Henry David Thoreau

Her inclusion of what one Facebooker called "an air of sophistication" with an otherwise unsophisticated performance just did not mix well for viewers, and came across as false. Perhaps she thinks of herself as this nice mix of fun and seriousness, but the profile itself does not convey that identity.

One of the more successful presentations comes from Dean. He was seen as hardworking, intelligent, and a bit geeky. Chloe talked about his profile in the following exchange.

9:04pmChloe: okay, so you see the profile pic. we assume it's dean in the photo.

9:04pmLee: sure

9:04pmChloe: he's underneath some sort of machine, so we know he likes technical things. we can see his networks, and if he's in a relationship. we can see his news feed, which shows what he's been up to lately. he's been working on designing a new injection system for the power plant. ok, so he's doing mechanical designing. he seems really smart. he hates sarah palin, that's good.

9:08pmLee: ok... so what would be Dean's overall "impression" how could you capture him in a few words? and do you think you could capture yourself in a few words?

9:14pmChloe: oh boy, in a few words?

9:14pmLee: or a sentence? basically... something shorter than a profile

9:14pmChloe: he's a big science nerd, you can definitely tell that much. yeah also, he has the "Addicted to star trek" app; but he doesn't add many pics; so maybe not too introverted because he has enthusiastic wall posts, but not really too social either. he seems really nice, a bit shy, really geeky, but overall a very nice person.

Davey, one of my more informative participants, had a profile that produced mixed results. Many Facebookers liked him straight away. He made use of humor, posted lots of buddy pics, and seemed to be very outgoing. However, some aspects of his presentation did not sit well with all participants. Overall, Gabbie thought Davey was trying way too hard on his profile, using poor attempts at humor.

> He tries really hard to be funny. It's over-the-top and he ends up looking stupid. It's clear that he's a drinker and politically to the left. He is older than me, based on the graduation dates. I really don't like his music. He has so much info about himself. Why would you want people to know all of this stuff? I don't think I'd be friends with this guy if we met on the street. He seems like he's trying really hard to be a non-conformist in the eyes of most, at least not a typical college guy. He's trying not to like the things that everyone else likes. All of his favorite shows and movies have a plot and he likes reading enough to check out cool books.

Once Gabbie noticed his flair section, her opinion of Downey improved slightly. "Ooh! Flair! That's pretty cool. He looks like he has pretty normal flair pieces. He's a Cubs fan, a partier, a Hawkeye fan, loves sports, prolly [sic] pretty smart. Really big Cubs fan." The flair appears to be very informative and was clearly important to Gabbie. An interesting line of thinking came out during my interview with Gabbie. She seemed to realize that many pictures of her are *not* representative of whom she is, but when viewing others, such as Davey, she seems to extrapolate a lot from a handful of photos. This indicates to me that she knows that *everyone* gets meaning from the pics and she therefore tries to manage others' impressions through untagging herself from any "unflattering" pictures and being "very conservative" in the pictures that she uploads. An example of a profile that seemed to accurately represent its owner was of Laura, the librarian.

6:35pmLee: your self description includes the words "cats, quiet, shy, books, librarian"... the profile seems to be building a bit of what some might call a stereotypical librarian

6:35pmLaura: yeah, we try to fight the stereotypes, but when we really look hard we realize that most of them are actually true. i'm sure I definitely come across like the stereotype. in a way, i fit them, but i think people probably would probably elaborate on things in their mind even more than my profile shows.

6:35pmLee: indeed, that might be the case. so before you landed your job, were you concerned at all about potential employers looking you up online?

or do you worry about it still?

6:37pmLaura: i am careful, but not overly cautious. my profile is set so only my friends can see and most of the other online stuff i have is for friends only as well

6:38pmLee: i see

6:38pmLaura: it is not something i worry about too much some of my friends are people who I worked with at a previous library, so they see my whole profile

6:39pmLee: ok. so nothing has ever come up (pic, comment, wall posting, etc) that you thought might not look so good to other people? you said you are at least a little bit careful... do you have a certain person in mind when judging whether something is "ok" or "not ok" for FB?

6:40pmLaura: some of the things from grad school (pictures and stuff) is a little incriminating, but i figure it is buried far enough under everything else

6:40pmLee: sure.

6:41pmLaura: i did do a presentation at work last week about facebook and myspace and i showed my profile. i think i deleted one comment off my wall and that was it

6:41pmLee: what was the comment?

6:41pmLaura: but i still would feel weird if my parents looked at it :)

6:42pmLee: or what was the topic?

6:42pmLaura: umm, let me think

6:42pmLee: ha ha. what would you not want your parents to see?

6:42pmLaura: pictures of me at a bar. i think i had made a comment on one of my friends photos about me looking drunk (even though I wasn't) and it was in my history thing or whatever it is on the profile and so i deleted that because i didn't think it was appropriate for work.

6:45pmLee: so some bar pics might not be great for the parents

6:45pmLaura: nope, even though i am 26 sadly. they are both ministers

6:45pmLee: ah. well i think not wanting one's parents to see bar pics is pretty universal, regardless of age

6:46pmLaura: true

Laura's profile seems to be giving the impression she intended. Sean did not know Laura nor had he seen her profile before our interview, but he seemed to be able to form the interpretation Laura evidently intended to cause, even though he didn't necessarily like her presentation.

Her profile picture [Figure 37] is annoying. She must not like how she looks or something. I don't know why else you wouldn't put up a picture of yourself. She is close in age to me, so that's a plus. She seems like a librarian, based on her profile pic of a girl with a bunch of books and her personal information that's all about the books she loves. Her interests and hobbies are juvenile and a little *chic flicky.* They make her seem somewhat feminine, like her liking of *Bridget Jones Diary,* but she seems totally book-oriented, and they are all popular books or books below her age, like *Harry Potter*. She seems comfortable with herself because she admits that she is a cat lady. That also makes her seem more like a librarian.

Ron was a key informant about interpreting Facebook profiles. He moves easily from one interpretation to another, and saw patterns to how Facebookers perform certain identities. His awareness of his own presentation goals and those apparent goals of others came through in my first exchange with him.

5:14pmLee: are there parts of your profile that you think are especially "you?"

5:14pmRon: i guess favorite quotes, thought right now there are no where near as many as there used to be (again, fear of corporate america)

5:15pmLee: sure

5:15pmRon: you can get a feel for people by their quotes if they take it seriously

5:15pmLee: do you think most people are honest with their presentations on FB?

5:16pmRon: most? yeah, but it's only skin deep but yes, i do

5:16pmLee: not sure i know what you mean by "skin deep?"

5:18pmRon: if you ask me to list my favorite movies, tv shows, music, books, quotes, and my job, then you'll get a rough idea of who i am. but, you can't know me until you, KNOW ME

5:20pmLee: so you think strangers or potential friends (if you want to look at the sunnier side) mainly look to self-descriptions for an idea of who the other person really is?

5:21pmRon: sure, or just plain curiosity. But yeah you can learn something about the person by reading them no matter what they put for sure

5:22pmLee: could you give an example?

5:23pmRon: sure. lets say I took it seriously and I wanted to put my best foot forward. I might say : I'm a 24 year old young professional in Kansas City. I love sports, my friends, and my family, and i'm always up for a good time... that sounds like a typical one, and obviously it's true, so there, you learned some BASIC shit about me. But if someone bypasses that and simply says, 160 lbs of twisted steele and sex appeal... you know they pry have a corny sense of humor if they put "how can someone sum this up on one page" I would think, frankly, they take themselves too seriously

5:25pmLee: i see. any other areas of FB that would give you an indication of "who" someone is?

5:25pmRon: if someone uses it to quote the bible three or four times, i think, mega Christian. if they quote dave mathhews band several times, i think... pot head. you get my drift

5:26pmLee: sure. so the self-descript and the quotes might go a long way to tell you about the other person. and they have to really stick to it in order to get the impression they want? like... 3-4 bible quotes

5:27pmRon: well i dont know LONG WAY, but yeah, give you a foundation

5:27pmLee: ok. so i see we have a ton of friends in common... i'd like to try something out. can you go to Emily's profile?

5:30pmLee: ok... what types of impressions would you get from her (and, more importantly, WHAT makes you get these impressions?)

5:31pmRon: ok (sidenote, we dated briefly in high school hahaha). you're gonna have to let me pee real quick... brb

5:31pmLee: ok

5:34pmRon: still there homie...?

5:34pmLee: sure. so... back to your ex. unless you'd prefer to try this with someone else

5:35pmRon: shes not my ex

5:35pmLee: oh. sorry

5:37pmRon: Emily doesn't have a lot of stuff, but on what she does have... i'd say, a lot of fun, doesn't take herself too seriously

5:38pmLee: what makes it seem like she's fun and not too serious?

5:39pmLee: is it the profile pic? the self-description? her other photos?

5:39pmRon: her pfofile pic is her and another girl riding a purple dinasour in a kiddie park

5:40pmLee: sure... that does seem fun and not--so-serious

5:40pmRon: her other photos seem to be her and friends getting drunk

5:40pmLee: ah. any other impressions?

5:40pmRon: and the one piece of "info" she has is a quote talking about not taking life too seriously...

5:40pmLee: ok

5:40pmRon: which means, it's important to her to stress she doesn't take life to seriously

5:41pmLee: that is an interesting way to put it. why does she need to emphasize it so much? how can you tell if someone is being "honest" with their profile?

5:42pmRon: 1. i'm guessing she needs to emphasize it because not taking life seriously is something she "thinks" about a lot, and people kind of use FB like a diary. 2. Honesty, to me, is found in consistency. If someone has a self description of "always happy, never take anything too seriosuly" but then their quotes are all lyrics from songs about getting your heart broke by a guy and how the world can suck, well, i would guess she's full of shit when she says nothing gets her down

Facebook's dynamic components provide the continuous updates that Facebookers, based on symbolic interaction, need in order to take on the role of the other, anticipate reactions to potential action, and give successful performances. The key point between observation and presentation is this taking on the role of the other or what Mead (1936; 1938) calls intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity on Facebook

6:46pmLee: have your parents shown any interest in facebook (or perhaps even the internet in general)? or are they tech-savvy?

6:47pmLaura: they can barely check their email.....they do know that i have accounts though

6:49pmLee: so do you reflect much on the potential audiences when talking on facebook? do you expect many of your friends will read most comments? that was poorly worded. let me know if you need me to rephrase

6:50pmLaura: sometimes i think about what people will read, like when i change my status and stuff.....last week my car got hit in the parking lot so i posted on my status about it. i thought i'd get tons of responses, but only like two people reacted to that, so either nobody reads stuff like that, or they just didn't care. i don't update much, so people probably tend to ignore my profile.

Laura's exchange (above) illustrates an attempt on her part to anticipate the types of status updates will illicit "tons of responses" and her explanation of why so few responded is her attempt to reconcile her incorrect anticipation with other plausible explanations for the lack of a response. Truth be told, after viewing thousands of status updates, I too would have anticipated more responses to a car accident. The status updates are commonly meant to be intriguing and talking about a car accident should illicit some questions, concerns, and well-wishing. Most likely, there were dozens of other Facebooker updates shortly after Laura posted her status update. Facebook lists updates on the news feed with the most recent first. Thus, with a flurry of other updates immediately after hers, Laura's update would get pushed toward the bottom of the page, perhaps onto a second page. Many Facebookers do not check through pages upon pages of "old" updates (even if those updates are merely minutes old). Regardless of what led to the lack of responses, Laura's exchange is a clear example of basing action on anticipation. This is at the heart of Mead's (1932, 1936) intersubjectivity. To restate,

Laura took on the role of her audience and was able, then, to better anticipate reactions. After the reactions came in, Laura attempted to reconcile her mis-anticipation with what she "knows" about Facebook, her friends, and society. Her future anticipations will be informed by this experience.

Another Facebooker, Vanessa, talked about how she monitors the images and messages she puts on Facebook. She also noted that some Facebookers have little or no standards for such images. In the exchange below, notice how aware Vanessa is of potential audiences, intended, unintended, and unknown. On a side note, I found myself using and reading others use the words *ha ha* frequently. This, I believe, was an attempt by both parties to keep the conversation light. There was a threat, especially in face-to-face interviews, of the discussion becoming too serious in tone. Once an interview got too serious, the discomfort of participants, and perhaps myself in their eyes, became all too clear. A simple *ha ha* during a chat kept things light and participants responded to it well. Here is Vanessa's exchange.

8:26pmLee: i notice you have about 600 pics up is that a lot?

8:27pmVanessa: haha kinda

8:28pmLee: any pics ever NOT make the FB page?

8:28pmVanessa: yeah

8:28pmLee: what would make a pic get cut?

8:29pmVanessa: i don't put pictures up that i dont want other people to see... if i dont think that it's anyone's business to see the picture

8:30pmLee: ha ha... um... not entirely sure what that means. any example?

8:30pmVanessa: haha like if it's an inside joke between just us friends... or i dont like a bunch of pictures of me and my friends drinking . i just dont think it's necessary

8:31pmLee: so is your network more than just college friends? (if you are worried about drinking, i'd assume that it was more than just your drinking friends)

do you have family on FB? or coworkers? or some other group that you'd worry about seeing you drinking?

8:32pmVanessa: the majority of people that i have on facebook are college/high school friend.. but i do have some family members and a lot of coworkers

i have just heard things about potential employers checking facebook pages so i just dont want anything on there that i wouldn't want them to see

8:33pmLee: do you think about that a lot when posting messages/pics?

8:34pmVanessa: i think about it often. i mean i know that i have some pictures on here that probably shouldn't be... but i haven't gone through and deleted any yet, and i have a privacy thing on my profile so people can't look at it that aren't my friends

8:34pmLee: sure. have you seen a lot of stuff on other people's profiles that are a bit... well... inappropriate? or just poor choices?

8:35pmVanessa: yes

8:35pmLee: anything come to mind? examples?

8:37pmVanessa: i would just say pictures. i mean when i look at it i sometimes think it's funny otherwise i think people just act a little ridiculous sometimes. like, posting a pic of yourself in a dress, not sitting like a lady, throwing back a shot.

why would anyone post a pic like that of themselves? who would they WANT to

show that to?

Once again the Facebooker is basing choices off anticipated reactions. In

Vanessa's case, though, the choice is to *not* act in certain ways. The choice is to withhold

certain performances. In making these decisions, Vanessa took on the role of coworkers,

family, and those in her network who were mere acquaintances. It is difficult to test the

accuracy of her anticipation since it resulted in inaction regarding specific performances.

The reactions to the performances she did include on her profile have been, she reports,

very positive. Positive reactions would affirm her decisions and deepen her confidence in

her anticipatory skills. The keys to successful anticipation are to know the norms of the

group and to be able to perform a consistent identity that adheres to those norms. Some

Facebookers, like Heather, try to focus more on the presentations they want and less on

bending to please all groups. Heather was one of the more confident participants I

interviewed. Her identity presentation centered on her "laid-back style." This

presentation, of course, still relied upon anticipation and symbols. Additionally, Heather

touched on the important fact that it is difficult to "play" with identity on Facebook since

there are so many ties to offline relationships.

4:42pmLee: ah... seems like you keep a close watch on the impression you send

out on Facebook. is that a fair assessment?

4:46pmHeather: Yeah, I guess you would say that. I'm looking for jobs etc. I don't want to look like all i do is party. But that's not to say that the impression being shown isn't me. Because it totally is me.

4:46pmLee: i don't doubt that. but, just to play devil's advocate, how can you tell someone is being "true" on FB?

4:50pmHeather: Oh there is absolutely no way at all.. it's just that if your not being yourself and trying to portray someone your not.. you better not let those who really DO know you have access to see your profile... you'll just look like a joke to those who know you best. which, i mean.. it is what it is.. but I guess I wouldn't want to look like a moron in front of my close friends and family

4:56pmLee: no prob. so, if some stranger were to look at your profile, do you think they could get the gist of you as a "laid-back, humorous person?"

5:01pmHeather: Um, I have a really funny sense of humor. They would either get it or not.. so Maybe? Probably not? I would think they would get the laid back part though.

5:04pmLee: is there any part of your profile that you think is especially "YOU"

5:06pmHeather: my status updates. Me being funny, me being pissed, me singin annoying rap songs, I don't bother everyone on my friend list with seeing them all the time.. but a few people get to see them..

5:07pmLee: ha ha. seem confident in your laid-back identity.

5:07pmHeather: I totally am.

5:07pmLee: most people i've talked with don't have such a clear understanding of themselves. ha ha.

5:08pmHeather: HAHA most people you talk to arent OLD

5:14pmLee: ha ha ha. do you think there are a lot of age differences on FB?

5:15pmHeather: TOTALLY. I have cousins that are 14 and aunts (who are here to spy on their kids) who are in their 50s. I have three aunts on here. they are only wanting to make sure their young kids are safe. but yeah, chilbrith I guess bares the right to spy... (Please believe if it were my mom though at their age, I would be annoyed about it, but they are just looking out for the kids)

5:19pmLee: have you noticed a difference in your own use over the years?

5:20pmHeather: other than more often? not really. I guess I use it a lot more though because of the chat application. so.. yeah I guess that is a difference..

Norms and Anticipation

Facebookers learn some of their group norms from offline interactions with the group. This includes general topics that the group discusses, opinions and views the group values, and behaviors that are held in high regard. However, there are Facebook-specific norms that come out through observation of and interaction with other Facebookers.

The most prominent Facebook norm is reciprocity. For every Facebook action there is an equal and opposite reaction (sort of the third law of Facebook). This norm applies to every type of action among Facebookers. If someone requests a friendship, it is the norm to accept (especially in the early stages of membership). If another Facebooker sends a message, it is the norm to reply. If someone comments on a status update of another, that comment normally receives a reply. If one Facebooker sends a gift to

another, the normal response is for the recipient to send a gift back. One participant who

talked about the norm of reciprocity and the perpetual cycle of interactions was Mandy.

She felt that her group's interactions followed a regular pattern and she talked about how

she finds herself getting sucked into the conversations.

> It's somewhat like a perpetual cycle, because my friends are the ones that write wall posts about what we'll do next weekend, post pictures of what we did that weekend, and then write comments about what happened over the weekend. Then, all of these new notifications pop up on the homepage, prompting other friends to write responses, which causes the original poster to then comment on the response made by their friends, and so on, and so forth. But, there seems to be some underground, unwritten rule, that if you can somehow justify a friend request, you're obligated to accept their online "friendship." (There seems to be some sort of twisted, "I don't want you to be mad at me for saying no" complex.) Therefore, I just accept these people's friend requests, knowing that we'll rarely, if ever, talk to each other. They offer no real benefit to my enjoyment of the site. When old high school acquaintances add me, I'm tempted to say, "We didn't talk during study hall, we both know we're not going to talk to each other on here, so what's the point?" I think perhaps I have a slightly narcissistic outlook on Facebook, in that if the "friend" cannot somehow benefit me directly, I don't add them. I don't get any gratification out of seeing how many friends I can get, or how many people from my past I can hunt down. I seek out, and only befriend the people that I will actually communicate with. Yet, like I said, I hardly ever turn down a friend request. Whether or not I'm the exact targeted audience for Facebook is irrelevant, because they've achieved their marketing goal: I access the site on a regular basis for social networking purposes, and not only do I see myself using it in the future, but I reluctantly admit to enjoying it.

Mandy hit on an important point of Facebook's corporate strategy. The site gets

so many hits because it prompts its users to return to the site. Further, the norm of

reciprocity among the site's users only bolsters Facebook's attempts to keep users

involved.

Beyond reciprocity, though, there are other norms among Facebookers in general.

There are norms surrounding the types of things that must be on a profile. Having only

one or two photos uploaded is considered abnormal. Having less than 50 friends is abnormal. Not having any applications, bumper stickers, or pieces of flair is (slightly) abnormal. Simply put, there is a norm surrounding how active a Facebooker should be on the site. Vanessa talked about managing impressions in relation to these norms.

8:38pmLee: what type of impression do you think someone would form about you based on your FB profile?

8:39pmVanessa: well... i dont have all that much information about myself, but i would say that people would see that i have a good time with my friends and that i'm very sociable

8:40pmLee: based on your pics? or anything else?

8:40pmVanessa: um... well i would say my quotes section explains a lot about me

8:40pmLee: like what?

8:41pmVanessa: just about my close relationships with friends.. and how i am like how i have faith and what i think is funny

8:42pmLee: do bumper stickers tell anything about someone?

or applications?

8:43pmVanessa: haha i think bumper stickers tells a lot about someone. they are practically required for Facebookers.

8:43pmLee: required? what does, say, "Date like a man so you don't get played like a bitch" say about you? ha ha

8:44pmVanessa: yeah. i would say that they are required among my friends anyway. haha well... i think it explains someone because the friends that send

them to you, think of you once they see the sticker. i mean that's how me and my friends are.. we'll look at stickers and if we think of that friend, then we will send it to them

8:44pmLee: that sticker is similar to "the only thing a girl should chase is a shot". it seems to present a strong, independent woman, perhaps?

8:45pmVanessa: yeah, i think it says that i sometimes put my emotions out there too much to where i get hurt, so it would be better to date like a guy because they dont have to worry about getting hurt, most of the time

8:46pmLee: you lost me in there... 1-put emotions out there too much, 2-it would be better to just date one guy? 3-dating a lot of guys gets you hurt?

8:47pmVanessa: haha sorry... i mean like... i get too attached to guys so maybe it would be better to date like a guy because sometimes they seem to be more distant than girls, so they dont get attached and they dont get hurt, didn't really mean that i should date more than one person at one time

8:48pmLee: ah. got it

8:48pmVanessa: haha sorry

8:48pmLee: and so people give each other the stickers? or did you put some up yourself?

8:49pmVanessa: i put some up myself, but i have gotten a lot sent to me also

8:50pmLee: sure. anything more about stickers you think is notable for me? or is it not a big deal for the most part? what does it mean to get one from someone?

8:51pmVanessa: oh i love bumper stickers.. that's the application that i use the most on Facebook. umm i think it just means that the person thought of you when they were reading it and they thought it described you so they sent it to you

8:51pmLee: i see. ever get a sticker from someone that you didn't know that well? or a sticker that was like, "why the hell did this make you think of me?"

8:52pmVanessa: haha no i haven't actually... most of them describe me perfectly

8:52pmLee: so, mostly from really close friends that know you really well? what would it mean to get one from a stranger?

8:53pmVanessa: yeah i mostly get them from good friends, and idk what i would do if i got one from someone that i didn't know... i'd probably kind of weirded out

The last sentence in the above exchange highlighted an important point in terms of norms on Facebook. If one Facebooker does not know (at all) another user, the first Facebooker should not initiate contact out of the blue. This seems to be a combination of offline norms of social distance and interactions as well as a heightened defense against creepers on Facebook. Facebookers are overly cautious when interacting with complete strangers on the site. They are still, though, more than willing to post a lot of photos and information about themselves to a broad audience. It is simply the direct one-to-one interactions that are avoided.

The last norm I'd like to discuss is what some Facebookers call *hyperfriendship*. Basically, the computer-mediated environment heightens the frequency of interaction and intimacy level among individuals that could otherwise be considered acquaintances or weak ties. Facebook in general allows people to exaggerate all performances. As one

Facebooker put it, "You can say things to people on Facebook that you'd never say to their face. I mean, they can't really do anything if they don't like it." These exaggerated performances often involve humor. Jamie talked about how things would be different if Facebookers had to talk face to face.

> 5:04pmLee: what about FB lends itself to so much humor?
>
> 5:06pmJamie: i think because you can hind [sic] behind the internet you can let your inhibitions go a a little bit more and go for the "facebook humor"
>
> 5:09pmLee: huh. do you think a lot of FB's content wouldn't be the same if it were a face-to-face conversation?
>
> 5:11pmJamie: yeah i do
>
> 5:14pmLee: like? any examples? or typical things that get said on FB?
>
> 5:15pmJamie: oh there are a lot of things that i will say to my friends in a joking manner that i don't think i would say to them face to face. some especially dirty topics wouldn't be said face to face. other things would be like, about people's moms, girlfriends, sisters. stuff like that. people just feel more confident or something when they are chatting or posting messages. there isn't a person across the table to say, 'uh, that's dumb' or 'i wouldn't say that if i were you.'

The lack of immediate, negative reactions to questionable Facebook actions may, indeed, increase the likelihood of exaggerated performance. Additionally, as we have seen, presenting an obvious, consistent identity is important to Facebookers. Subtlety is more difficult for some online.

Though most Facebookers combined norms and develop generalized others, one Facebooker, Stephen, based his presentation decisions on a single person. Stephen had his niece in mind when he made decisions about posting messages and uploading pictures.

4:16pmLee: i see. so the pictures drive a lot of your conversations... do you upload a lot yourself?

4:16pmStephen: no, I'm not a fan of taking pictures, especially of myself. Most of my pics have been uploaded by friends.

4:17pmLee: anyone ever upload pics that you weren't a big fan of?

fan of the pic, that is (not the person)

4:18pmStephen: nothing bad, if I don't like a pic it's because I'm self conscious about my weight and think I look bad in the pic. Never doing anything wrong or embarassing in the pic.

4:20pmLee: sure. how frequent and how long are your average FB sessions?

4:20pmStephen: I'm pretty conscientious about what I do when cameras are around. usually short bursts, 5 or 10 minutes here or there.

4:20pmLee: well that's a good thing. worried about uploads? or just documenting unbecoming behaviors?

4:21pmStephen: Both. While my profile is set to private I do have family members who can see the profile and it's mostly image management

4:22pmLee: ha... i'm seeing your sociology background now... impression management is central to my dissertation. so... do you think a lot about who might be viewing your profile when writing/adding content?

4:23pmStephen: Yeah, it's something that I tried to teach my students, but it's difficult to tell an 18-20 year old that what they do now they may not want coming back electronically when they are 30. To a certain extent yes

4:24pmLee: do you think of anyone in particular when you think about your "audience?"

4:27pmStephen: my niece

4:29pmLee: ok... so you tone down any suspect content for your niece? i'm sure she's big into social networking

4:29pmStephen: yeah, mostly in my status. yeah, she's a frosh in high school

4:30pmLee: sort of a social "must" for teens. do you talk to her about image management and the potential impacts of facebook?

4:30pmStephen: I think so, but she has limited access to the internet at home. My sister doesn't let her use the computer all the time. No, I leave that up to my sister

Exaggeration of Characteristics

The symbols of Facebook are usually quite direct in their connections to specific groups. For example, there are the thousands of pieces of flair about sports teams and pop culture. However, simply showcasing, say, a single image is not enough in the minds of participants. The profile must be *littered* with such images if the group identity is to take

hold. The same strategy is used regardless of the identity chosen. There is little room for subtlety.

I was able to develop categories of exaggerated identity performances based on pics, wall messaging, self descriptions, and bumper stickers or pieces of flair. These categories and their descriptions are given below.

The Average Partier: The Facebook partier is a common identity, and the one that typically first comes to mind for older generations when they think about online social networking. In fact, most of the interview participants simply referred to these types of presentations as the "average undergrad." The partier profile is filled with buddy pics and drinking pics. Further, symbols of drinking and nightlife are employed in all areas of the profile. They are especially pronounced pieces of flair and bumper stickers. Figure 6 shows popular partier flair.

Figure 6. Three pieces of partier flair

Figure 6 also illustrates the use of humor in the partier identity. Juxtaposing drinking messages with what looks like public service announcement images from a bygone era is

extremely popular with Facebookers. Along with flair, bumpers stickers, and pics (for examples, see the Chapter IX section which focuses on party pics and their meanings), Facebookers who perform a partier identity spend a lot of time sending messages about nightlife, talking about past events, and planning future evenings out. Sex is also a common topic for Facebookers presenting this identity. As one Facebooker put it, "sex, alcohol, and humor are the big three." Performers in this group often have elements of family, work, academic endeavors, and other identities, but these other elements are overshadowed by the extensive array of partier messages. Overall, this group of performers spends the most time and energy on Facebook, and they tend to be, in this study, in their first few years of college.

The Atypical Undergrad: This type of presentation is direct opposition to the Average Partier identity outlined above. Participants considered these presentations the atypical undergrad. These Facebookers choose to highlight other areas of their life on Facebook. Performers in this group have usually gone through earlier stages of boom and have now settled into a more "mature" performance. These performances focus on family, studies, early career developments, and social life away from alcohol. These performances are still connected to buddy pics, the publication and celebration of friends and family, and humor, though. They simply perform identities in a way that avoids alcohol. Many Facebookers in this group have made the transition to this identity from the partier identity in an effort to avoid giving potential employers unflattering impressions. Additionally, these Facebookers are becoming more family oriented as they age, marry, and have children.

Sports and Athletics: A faction of Facebookers chooses to highlight their favorite sports, teams, players, and personal athletic endeavors. Sports is a popular presentation category on Facebook. Though elements of fanship are involved in most Facebook profiles, members of this category make these symbols the central focus. Examples of symbols used in this identity presentation are given in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Sports identity examples

Overall, the Facebookers who presented a sports and athletics identity tied in less humor and buddy images than other groups. In fact, these Facebookers spent very little time with uploading or commenting on pics. Compared to the average Facebooker, these users spent less time in general on the site.

Scholarly and Sophisticated: Recent graduates and graduate students typically make up this group, but some undergrads also present these images. These presentations include very little in terms of pics, bumper stickers, and flair. The defining characteristic in these performances is not as obvious as other types, but, rather, it comes with the selection of quotes, presentation of interests, self descriptions, and what few pics have

been uploaded. Two images from a profile that exemplifies this group are shown in Figure 8.
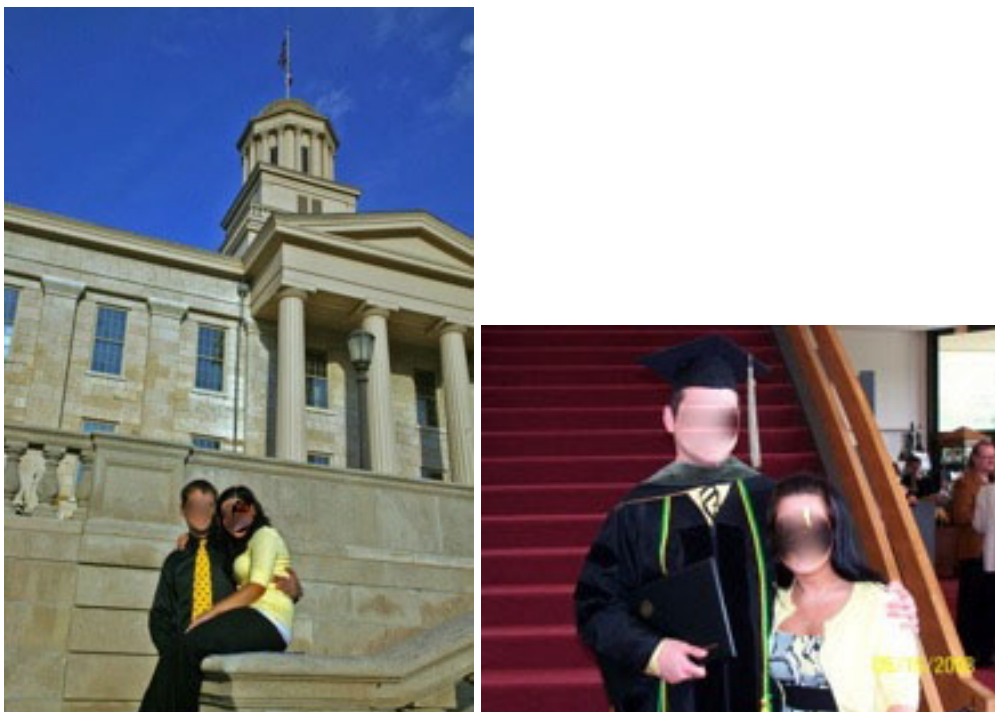

Figure 8. Scholarly and sophisticated identity images

In both pics of Figure 8, the Facebooker is wearing formal attire and, according to interview participants, has an air of seriousness or sophistication. These images were combined with interests in "writing music, studying, and reading," lists of accomplishments, "haughty" quotes, and a self description focusing on personal and professional goals. Overall, most Facebookers were both impressed with his accomplishments and thought this Facebooker took himself too seriously.

Political Zealot: Zealot is most likely too strong of a word, but that is how the interview participants viewed Facebookers who used their profiles as stages for political debate. One such Facebooker, Sean, liked the way he could present his political views on

his profile, but didn't think that most Facebookers are knowledgeable enough to fully

understand the political issues. Here is Sean's response when I asked him how others

would view his profile.

> People probably think I'm snooty. They would think I'm boring because they wouldn't know what I'm talking about. I don't like things that most people like. They would probably be perplexed by the groups I'm in and background information I have up. People might think I'm funny. People have told me I'm kinda funny before. They would probably notice that I'm well educated. They might notice that some of my groups have real substance to them. – Sean

Sean's groups were mostly based on the Democratic Party, Barrack Obama, and

the Obama's Election and Presidential Inauguration. His most common activity over the

months of observation was posting messages about politics and links to news stories

about politics. His primary interaction with other Facebookers was through commenting

back and forth on political news stories and message threads.

Overall, the concern for being misunderstood seems to lead many Facebookers to

giving exaggerated performances of identity. This may simply be a characteristic of

online presentations in general (Nakamura, 2004; Smith & Kollock, 1999)**.** These

exaggerated performances are subsequently observed in the continuous stream of

Facebook activity, interpreted and internalized as norms, used as a basis for anticipation

of future reactions, and realized once again in performance.

RQ3. How do SNS users' interpretations of others interact with their own identity

performances?

In summary, the news feed and system prompts to profile pages provide a seemingly endless set of performances which a Facebooker can view. Most Facebookers in this study were able to identify and categorize performances with relative ease. This was, evidently, due to having seen so many presentations as well as the highly exaggerated nature of Facebook identity presentations. Participants favored consistent messages in the identity presentations of others over mixed messages (such as sophistication and partying).

CHAPTER IX

FACEBOOK IDENTITY PERFORMANCES THROUGH PICS

Photographs and other uploaded illustrations are so important to Facebook identity performances they warrant their own chapter in this study. Photos (referred to simply as "pics" by most Facebookers) are a dynamic element that drives a lot of activity on Facebook. Uploading pics is merely the first step. After that, the person who uploaded the picture goes into a process of pic labeling, posting initial comments, tagging others who are involved, grouping pics in an album, and perhaps selecting one as the featured profile pic. Many pics receive not only comments from the uploading Facebooker but responses from other Facebookers, who comment most frequently on pics involving humor, parties, weddings, babies, and family. The tagging of others – hyperlinking an individual in the pic to that person's profile –at times causes conflict on Facebook.. The tagged person's name also shows up when the cursor scrolls over the person's image within the pic, and potential conflict is realized when an unflattering pic is uploaded and the individuals within it are tagged. Though tagged individuals are notified and have the option to untag themselves, it can be quite time-consuming to sort through potentially thousands of pics for unflattering images.

Mandy talked about when she is most likely to spend time looking through pictures.

> Out of the five or-so times a day that I use my Facebook, usually one of these sessions happens because I'm bored. If I'm not just checking the site routinely like I described above, I spend anywhere between 20-40 minutes on the site just as an entertainment tool to fight boredom. When this happens, I follow my usual routine, except I look at two additional browsing tools.

The first is the photo album page. This is probably my only use of

Facebook in which I would mildly admit to being a "facebook stalker." I like to

casually look through the photo albums that other friends have put up. Normally,

I've already seen the pictures that my "real friends" have put up, because

something about their status, notifications, or mini-feed has already alerted me to

their new album. What I mean more specifically about this photo album browsing

is that I'll look through pictures of distant friends or acquaintances, just because

the photos look interesting (and cuz I'm bored). Old high school friends, co-

workers, and people that I've lost touch with over the years fall into this category.

I'll click on their photo albums and normally click through the pictures without

leaving any types of comments. I associate this with people who look at celebrity

photos online… there's no real purpose, sometimes it's just interesting to see

what people are up to. – Mandy

As with other Facebook elements, the amount of time and energy spent on photos

varies greatly from one Facebooker to another. Some have uploaded thousands of

pictures while others have only a few. At least some Facebookers are selective in the pics

they upload. Davey, who uploads only every now and then, talked about what makes a

pic worthy of being uploaded.

2:53pmLee: do you upload most of your pics? or are you tagged in others? do you

own a camera?

2:53pmDavey: yeah i have a cam, but im not good about using it. most of the pics

i am in i would say were tagged by others. i do have a few albums tho, so i do

upload some, but it's been a really long time. if i have pictures on my cam that i

think are exceptionally funny or unique ill post them...

2:54pmLee: what constitutes an exceptionally funny or unique pic?

other than your profile pic, of course

2:55pmDavey: i drove to california over spring break for a funeral. and on the

way i stopped in a town called cornville in AZ. first, do you know of the band

called TOOL?

2:56pmLee: yeah

2:57pmDavey: ok. i have been a huge fan of theirs for like 12 years. their front

man Maynard Keenan has a vineyard in cornville where he also lives. so i stopped

through cornville and went to the winery, then at lunch at the town cafe, called the

grasshopper. there is only like 480 people in the whole town. i think thats unique

to have been there. and met the dusty old woman who waits tables at the

grasshopper, that kinda thing

2:59pmLee: i see

2:59pmDavey: i like peoples vacation pictures

2:59pmLee: yeah, that seems to be a popular subset of the uploaded photos

Tagging and untagging individuals in pics is often seen as a necessary chore.

Kimberly, who considers herself a passive, conservative Facebooker, talked about how

she approaches being tagged in pictures.

If someone has tagged pictures of me I go through them and untag any pictures that I am drinking in or pictures where there is a lot of alcohol around me. This is required for my sorority, but I also do it because I don't want that to people other people's perception of my. I think it is really unattractive when girls look like alcoholics in all of their pictures, and that is not the image I want to portray myself as. – Kimberly

The fact that sororities (and presumably fraternities too) have policies requiring the untagging of photos illustrates the importance of pics in managing impressions. Chloe also talked about tagging, untagging, and views on managing impressions through pictures.

8:28pmLee: how often to you upload photos?

8:32pmChloe: i usually put them up as soon as i get them onto my computer.

8:34pmLee: do you take a lot of pics?

8:35pmLee: and what's the word on the profile pic? you going for a "stylish" look?

8:36pmChloe: yes and no. i took a lot of pics when i was in college. less now that i'm all by my lonesome. the profile pic is from a costume party a friend of mine threw last year, "dead celebrities". i was going for audrey hepburn, who is super stylish, so it seems like it worked :)

8:38pmLee: ha. guess so. do you give much thought to what people think about your pics? or your messages?

8:42pmChloe: hm, actually no. i usually like to keep my profile pic recent, but i haven't had any good pics taken of me lately. i pick a photo i like, not one others

will like. when i send wall posts, i'm only thinking of what the person whose wall it is will think, even though i know it will show up in others' news feeds. however, if its something more personal, then i do think about others, and send it in a message instead of writing on their wall.

8:43pmLee: anything ever get posted on your wall or someone else's wall that seemed a bit.... shady? or inappropriate? or tagged in any pics?

do you think "what others think" is a big deal for other FB'ers?

8:47pmChloe: i can't think of anything inappropriate that i've seen on a wall, though a friend of mine once posted a photo of me that i untagged. it was from a halloween costume in which i was a geisha, but it was while we were still getting ready, so i was basically in undies and fishnets. other than that, i dont untag photos.

8:47pmLee: i see

8:48pmChloe: i don't know, you're probably looking for another answer, but i don't think "what others think" is a big deal on Facebook. i think facebook is a place where people can express themselves and have fun with it, and i don't think they think about what others are seeing.

For Chloe, impression management was an issue only in terms of the person with which she was directly interacting or when a photo or message crossed a certain line of discretion (getting dressed to go out for Halloween). Though Chloe claimed that she does not focus on what others think about her pics or messages, she is clearly contradicting herself regarding the untagging of a picture. This was a common theme among

Facebookers. Though they typically suggest that they feel completely uninhibited in what they post or upload, they usually refrain from certain topics and images. Additionally, they continually untag themselves from "unflattering" pics. Jamie talked about holding back on certain types of images, not because they are unflattering, but, rather, because they "are simply not meant for certain audiences."

> 4:19pmLee: it seems that you have a decent amount of pics up. do you upload pics a lot?
>
> 4:20pmJamie: well not a a whole lot, it seems like pictures build up over time on my camera, and then i eventually up load them
>
> 4:21pmLee: do you just toss them all on no matter what? or do you pick and choose certain pictures to upload?
>
> 4:21pmJamie: well for the most part i put most up, but there are some that i don't put up
>
> 4:22pmLee: what would make a picture worthy of NOT putting up?
>
> 4:23pmJamie: oh, if its something from a family birthday, or something like that, there are pics i take that i feel are more for my family, and i just don't think all my friends want/need to see them

Most of the Facebookers in this study do not adjust their settings in a way that keeps images from certain portions of their network while allowing other groups in their network access. Additionally, it is less likely that a Facebooker will upload an unflattering pic than it is that an unflattering pic of them will be uploaded and tagged by

another Facebooker. Some social circles have gone so far as adopting an unwritten standard of conduct when uploading and tagging photos.

4:30pmHeather: I generally put up anything that portrays who I am.. Im a really laid back person, who, 90% of the time is in a great mood. So I like to put those up. Ones that I wouldnt? Hmm.. I have a pact with some of my friends that none of us will post pics that are unattractive.. you know bad angle.. something in their (my) teeth.. etc.. so...

4:30pmHeather: ps.. sorry.. I told you there might be connection issues.. Sucks,.

4:30pmLee: ha ha ha. no worries. that's a funny pact. anyone ever break the pact?

4:33pmHeather:Yeah, this one crazy chick I met while I was out with a different group of people than I normally go out with.. she put two or three up that... hmm.. didn't pass the attractive test... knee caps were broken and the pics came down... I kid.. but yeah, she removed them.

4:34pmLee: did anyone seriously talk to her?

4:35pmHeather: I dont know, I think our mutual friend did, she was really annoying, didnt know me or this other girl and started just pointing the camera in our faces and snapping... not cool..

4:36pmLee: those damn, small, digital cameras... they're EVERYWHERE!

4:36pmHeather: HAHA very true, you never know when they are going to pop out of nowhere and get you.

4:38pmLee: any other woesome pics taken/posted in the past? i know a lot of people have worries about getting tagged in something... well... uncouth

4:40pmHeather: Not really. Again, Im totally laid back.. but also really

conservative. You will not catch me getting myself into situations that could be

considered uncouth, so therefore, no pics!! I like to keep it that way!

Sean's group of graduate students also has an unwritten pact. Sean is like many

Facebookers in that his own impression management desires are undermined by his

failure to adjust or even know his privacy settings. He attempts to manage his impression

by taking a minimalist approach. Since he cannot always control the audience, he feels it

is wise to manage the message.

> I don't know of any privacy settings or what my settings are. I guess whatever
> [settings] you start with. I just don't upload pictures a lot. People I hang out with
> wouldn't post any risqué pictures. There is an unwritten rule among my friends.
> The risqué photos don't exist. We all avoid uploading pictures of any of us
> drinking. My group of grad student colleagues is very cognizant of our employer
> and student audiences. As an advisor, I had to talk to a frat group about posting
> drinking pics. Most of them are pretty good about monitoring that, too. – Sean

Impression management, though not usually called as such, came up frequently in

my interviews, especially when discussions focused on photos. Gabbie was one of the

more diligent "untaggers" of photos. Additionally, she was one of the more concerned

Facebookers about impression management in general. In the case of Gabbie, both the

message and the audience is controlled through privacy settings and by simply not

uploading many pictures.

> No one sees my pictures but me. When I was younger, I uploaded almost
> everything that was in my camera. Now, though, I'm more mature. Also, I untag

my name in pics all the time. I think it's rude to tag someone in a pic if it is unflattering. That pic might be the only impression someone has of you. I just don't think people think when they are uploading everything from their camera and tagging everyone. They don't think about all the people who might see them. – Gabbie

Davey talked about some of the meanings tied to pics, such as humor, friendship, and having a good time. He felt as though, in terms of managing impressions, it is important to send a message of having lots of friends held the popular view that having solo shots comes across as vain.

2:45pmLee: your pics seem to be the regular "buddy" pics (2+ people all leaning in, sometimes with alcohol and/or tailgating involved)... any thoughts on your photo? any specific "image" you are shooting for?

2:47pmDavey: hmm, specific image no, i think it's more interesting to see people having fun in their pictures, and fun happens with more than two people and booze! funny faces are good, but i don't like to make funny faces myself, my face is funny enough already.

As I was spending months perusing images – I can't even begin to count how many I have viewed in the 10 months or so this project has been underway, probably in the 10,000s – a handful of categories developed.

The buddy pic: By far, the most common pic uploaded is the buddy pic. This involves two or more individuals leaning in for a photo. In many cases, this also involves alcohol, but the distinguishing characteristic is that the alcohol is not the focus of the

picture. Most Facebookers in this study thought that these pictures showed that the person was popular, friendly, and outgoing.

As Davey put it, "the fact that im in pictures with people is proof positive that i actually do have friends outside of facebook! having pics of just myself would look like i'm totally self centered." Examples of the buddy pic are easy to find. I've included a few below as examples.
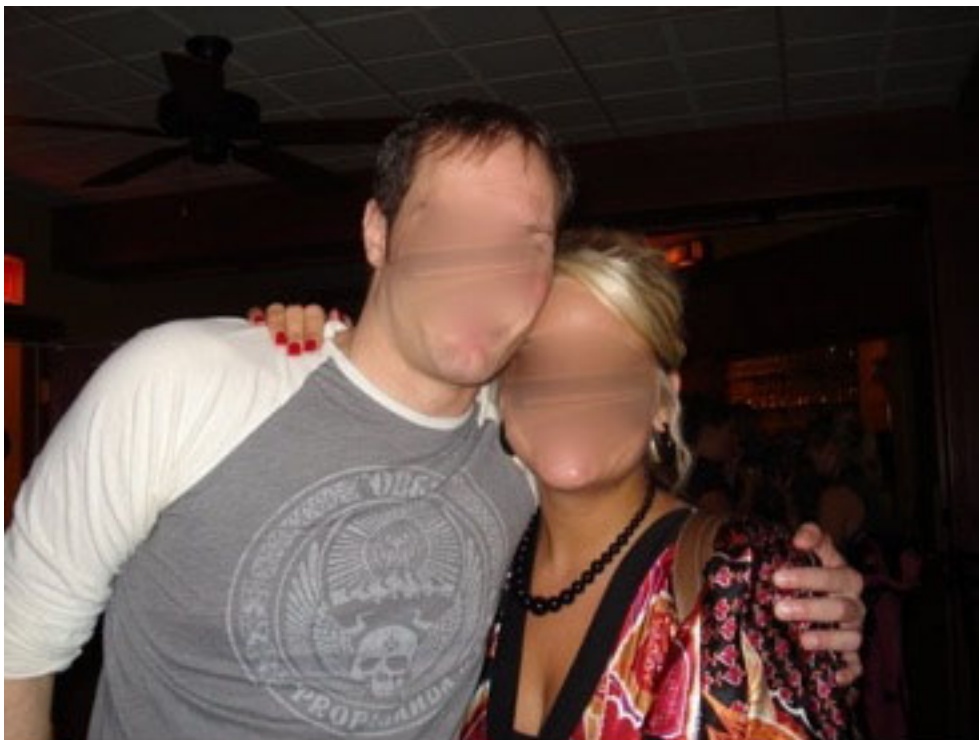

Figure 9. Three women pose for a buddy pic

Figure 10. Man and woman lean in for buddy pic

Figure 11. Three women sitting on grass in buddy pic

Figure 12. Three women posing on boat for buddy pic

In each of these images, we have the individual who uploaded the pics centered with at least one friend. In Figure 12, the photo was edited by the Facebooker to include the quote, "A life without friends is like a year without summer." Beyond the basic meaning of the buddy pic, these images all serve as a public announcement of friendship. Much of Facebook involves what I call the publication of friendship. Questions that often received informative responses were, "What if you weren't Facebook friends with this person? What would that mean?" Most individuals responding to these questions seemed to be thinking about the symbolism of Facebook friendships for the first time. Most felt that it would be a powerful slighting if one of their good offline friends de-friended them or denied friendship on Facebook. Buddy pic images take it one step further, publicly showcasing the friendship. Nearly every Facebook profile includes buddy pics. The few

profiles that don't have them are very minimalist; some simply have not uploaded any pics.

      Drinking and party pic: Much of the characteristics of a buddy pic are included in the drinking or party pic. These images typically include two or more individuals, sometimes with an arm around each other, and often have the subjects leaning into the frame. The key difference is the inclusion of alcohol. This sends a slightly different message to the viewer. Most interviewees thought that these images portrayed a "partier" or someone who is "very sociable" and "really into nightlife."

Figure 13. Two women posing with shot glasses in party pic

In Figure 13, the two individuals are placed in the periphery of the frame while the two shot glasses serve as the bridge connecting the two. This picture is clearly staged, with both subjects posing for the camera. Most Facebookers thought this picture portrayed a message of having a good time with an old friend. The two subjects were not given a negative assessment for their drinking, though.

Figure 14. Two women embracing at beer table in party pic

In Figure 14, the individuals are once again placed in a secondary position to the alcohol (pitchers of beer in this case). The connection between the two subjects was seen as friendly and viewed by some as "drunken hugging." Merely holding drinks or standing beside them – as is the case in the previous two images – did not send a strong "party"

message to most Facebookers in this study. Interestingly, pics of individuals actually

consuming alcohol portrayed more of the "partier" message. We see this type of message

in Figures 15 and 16.

Figure 15. Woman in crowd taking shot in party pic

In Figures 15 and 16, shots of alcohol are being taken by the subjects. In Figure

15, an individual is finishing a shot amongst a cheering group of onlookers. This subject

was seen as a "big partier" by almost everyone who looked at the image for part of this

research. The facts that the subject was in a bar, doing a shot by herself, and "working the

crowd" made many interviewees think this was not her first or last shot of the night.

Overall, this image received a negative assessment by the Facebookers in this study. Ron

though the above image made the female "look like a drunk."

Figure 16. Four women taking shots on Halloween in party pic

In Figure 16, four subjects are standing at a table in a bar on Halloween (given the

costumes). All four glasses are atilt and the far-right subject appears to have a glass of

water (or some clear liquid) in hand for "chasing" the shot. These subjects were seen by

interviewees as having a "big night on the town." The pic was not viewed as negatively

as Figure 15 since most viewed this foursome as having reason to celebrate (Halloween).

Special occasions, for the Facebookers in this study, provided justification for drinking.

Regardless, the above foursome was seen as a group of partiers.

The final two examples (Figures 17 and 18) from this category of pics involve a more extensive setup by the photographer. In these cases, extra effort was (presumably) given for the celebration of alcohol. The pics take on an almost-artistic quality.

Figure 17. Woman with line of bottles in party pic

Figure 18. Group toasting in party pic

In Figure 17, a young woman stands atop a kitchen counter with a line of

Jägermeister bottles behind her. Given the amount of time it would take to drink all of

these bottles, it is no surprise that the message sent is one of partying. Further, the bottles

are so prominent in the room that it appears the individual is quite proud of said drinking.

It no doubt is a conversation-starter whenever guests enter the kitchen. Lastly, the

connection between the individual and (presumably) her bottles makes a stronger

statement than simply posting an image of a line of empty bottles. Most Facebookers had

mixed feelings about this picture. On one hand, the girl is not actually drinking the bottles

(who is to say that *she* is not a guest in the house). On the other hand, the clear

celebration of long-term, heavy drinking received slightly negative assessments.

In Figure 18, five glasses are being raised in the toasting position, with the camera

in an elevated position. The glasses take a central position in the frame, with the

individuals again occupying the periphery. Facebookers viewed this image as less

"partying" than others due to the lack of a central individual and because the image

appears to be a picture of a toast or celebration (which again ties to the "justification"

argument made earlier for Figure 16). Lastly, the artistic quality made some Facebookers

think this crowd was merely having a good time and that the toasters weren't "heavy

drinkers."

Skin Pic: A surprisingly large number of pics uploaded showed subjects in very

little (sometimes no) clothing. Interpretations of these images went in one of two ways.

Either the image was seen as what one Facebooker labeled "intentionally ironic" and was

positively accepted as an attempt at humor or the image was seen as vanity. Commenting

on her overall impression of "vain" pictures, Gabbie said, "The person is attractive, but

they know it, and they love to see themselves and be seen by others. It actually makes

them less attractive."

Attempts at humor tended to place the human body in unusual or non-normative

situations. Males tend to use this type of skin pic much more than females do, at least in

the minds of the interviewees in this study. Two examples are given below.

Figure 19. Three men posing topless in toy store in skin pic

Figure 20. Man in swimsuit and cowboy hat in skin pic

In the Figure 19, three males are posing in a toy store with plastic helmets of police and firefighters. Interpretations of this image tended to be positive. Clearly, it is unusual for three men to be topless in a toy store. The rule-breaking aspect of the image led most interpreters to think it was moderately humorous. Again, (an attempt at) humor is appreciated by most Facebookers.

Figure 20 shows a man in a very small swimsuit next to a t-shirt that reads, "Getting Weird." The man has an unusual facial expression that was seen as one of humor, delight, and confusion. In this case, the pairing of the body next to the t-shirt was evidence enough for most Facebookers that this was intended to be humorous. In both Figure 19 and 20, Facebookers mentioned that the subjects certainly had confidence in their bodies, but that the unusual surroundings reduced or removed any vanity from the message.

The next set of images was deemed at least somewhat vain by interview participants. Each of the images has the individual at the center of the frame, and each of the two pics includes only one subject.
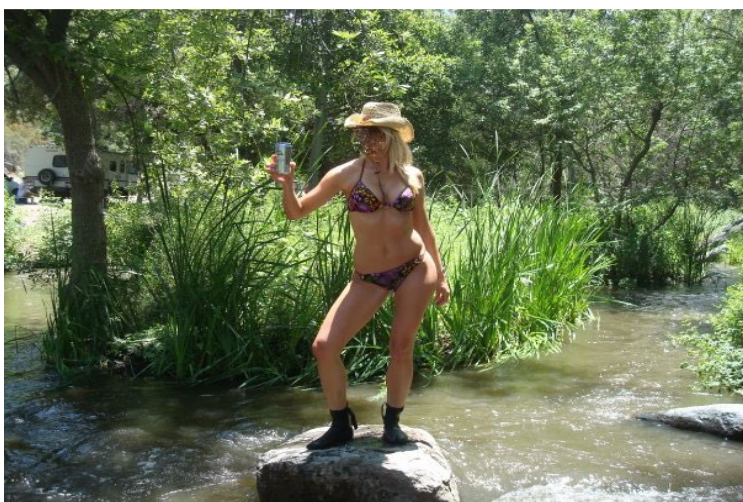
Figure 21. Woman on rock with beer in skin pic

Figure 21 shows a bikini-clad woman alone on a rock which serves as a pedestal. Facebookers viewed this as having a thread of vanity as it was uploaded by the woman in the picture, it was a solo shot, and, according to one Facebooker, "she clearly is an attention-seeker."
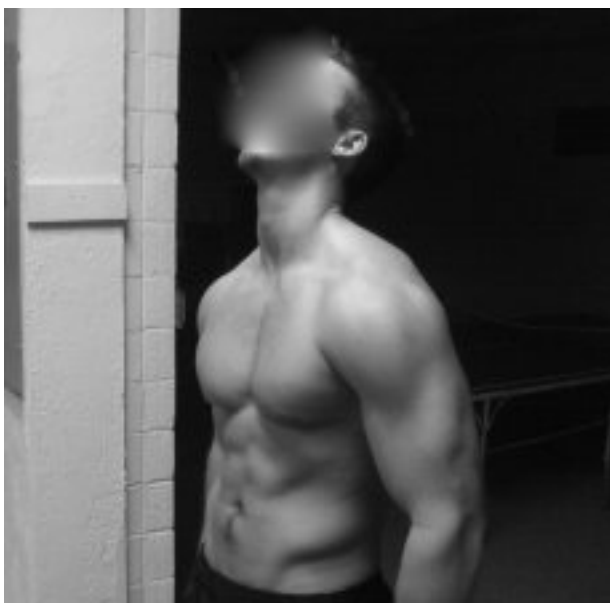

Figure 22. Man posing topless in skin pic

Figure 22 has an even stronger focus on the body. The use of black and white coloring by the Facebooker serves to enhance the subject's muscle definition. Facebookers took a strong disliking to this image. Most said they respected the subject's physique but wondered what the purpose of posting such a picture was. Most viewed this image as "vanity." References were also made regarding the high number of solo shots in this subject's photo album. Interpretations of solo shots in general were more negative

than those of group pics. Typically, if an individual posted more than a handful of solo shot pics, they were seen as being "a little too camera happy" and "self centered."

Funny face pics: As mentioned earlier, nearly all attempts at humor are well-received on Facebook. Many Facebookers therefore include humor in the presentation of self through the pictures they upload. Funny face pics was the one area of photos where the use of solo shots was not detrimental to the impression formed. In these images, the individual has either an unusual facial expression or some sort of prop that adds an element of humor. Two examples of this are given below.

Figure 23. Man and woman posing in funny face pic

Figure 24. Woman with disco balls in funny face pic

The point here is not to lecture the reader on the nature of humor but to discuss

the role of humor in presenting the self on Facebook. Each of the above pics (Figures 23

and 24) received positive assessments by participants. In each case, the subject was seen

as "not taking him[her]self too seriously," "pretty funny," and, interestingly, participants

tended to view those who used humor in their presentations as nicer. Evidently, if the

individual shows that she does not think too highly of herself, she gives the impression

that she will not look down on others. The link between humor and kindness came up periodically throughout the components of Facebook.

Artistic, beautiful, thoughtful: Quite a few images on Facebook are considered by the participants in this study to be attempts at adding "an artistic side" to the impression. Many of these images are taken from nature. They include things like sunsets over water, flowers, and scenic overlooks. Examples of this are given below.

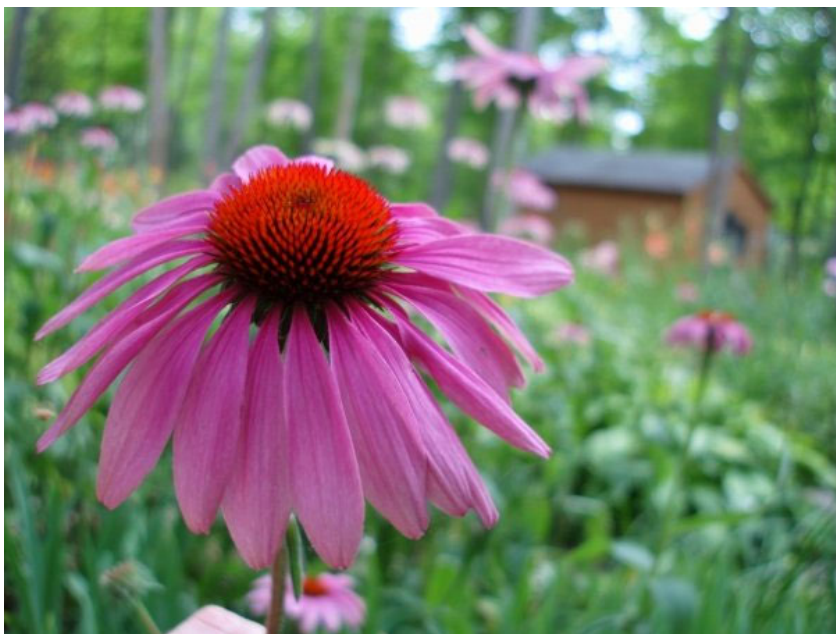*Figure 25.* "Home" in sand in artistic pic

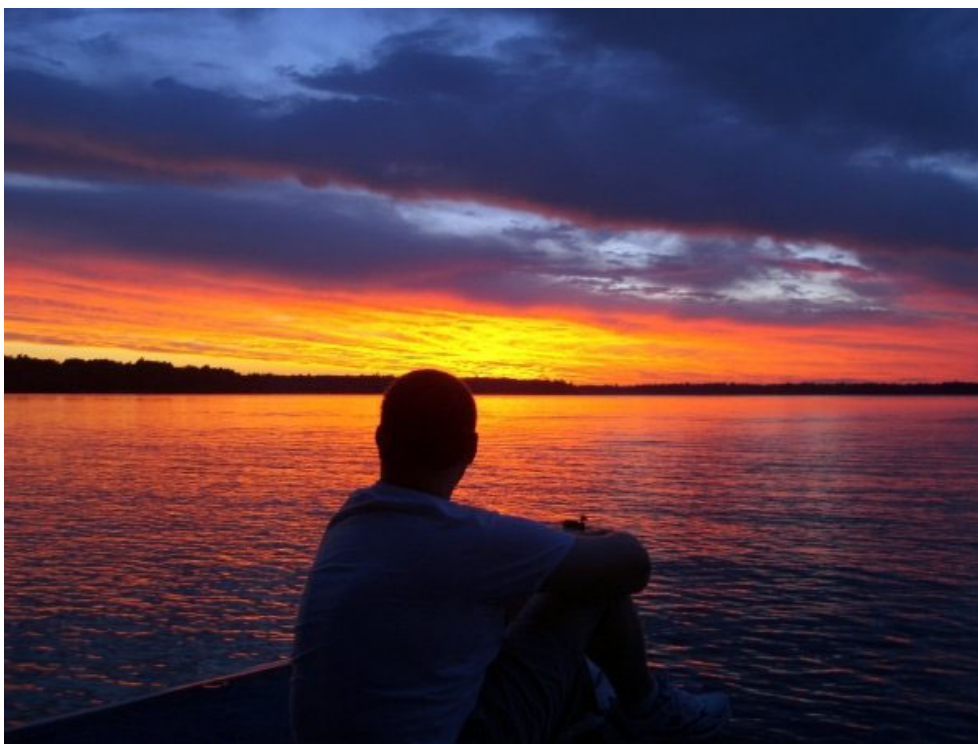*Figure 26.* Pink flower with blurred background in artistic pic

Figure 27. Man on dock at sunset in artistic pic

I'll discuss these three images as a group since they received very similar comments. All three of these images received both positive and negative assessments. The positive side included traits such as "thoughtfulness" and "artistic" while the negative assessments described them as "trying to be too artsy" and "trying to look so worldly." It would be difficult, then, to know exactly how to successfully use these types of images. Success or failure of these types of images seems to be determined by the specific social group as opposed to the larger Facebook community.

Family pic: Family pictures almost always received positive comments. Most family pics on Facebook involve new babies and weddings. Typically, these pics gave the impression that the person was loving, caring, kind, and nurturing. The following two pics (Figure 28 and 29) got almost identical responses from participants. In both cases, glowingly positive assessments were given.

Figure 28. Woman and infant in rocking chair in family pic

Figure 29. Woman playing with infant on couch in family pic

Other family pics typically come from weddings and holiday gatherings that bring students home from college. Again, these are usually positive, though many Facebookers say that they would merely skip over them. An example of each of these two types – wedding and holiday gatherings – is included below.

Figure 30. Family at holidays in family pic

Figure 31. Wedding party in family pic

Stylish pic: Stylish pics enhanced impressions of the Facebooker. These pics usually involve some staging of the photograph and editing before uploading. Two examples of stylish images are given below.

Figure 32. Three women in shades in stylish pic

In Figure 32, a staged picture is enhanced through setting it in black and white. The style enhances the contrast between the dark sunglasses and the smiles. Facebookers had very positive reactions to this image. First, the picture is essentially a buddy pic. Thus, it presented the individual as social, popular, fun, and friendly. Further, the altering of the color scheme gave participants the impression that the individual was "artistic" and "stylish."

Figure 33. Man in suit with camera in stylish pic

Figure 33 is a man taking a self photograph wearing a cream-colored suit with a black undershirt. Overall, the image received positive assessments from participants. One Facebooker described this image as "a little too self centered, but he looks good." Others seemed to agree. The fact that he took the picture himself, though, gave some participants the impression that the individual was narcissistic.

In general, stylish pics enhance impressions. They were most successful for participants when they involve others (buddy pics). Lastly, photoshopping pics was

normally appreciated so long as it was not done to every picture. In that case,

Facebookers thought the person was trying too hard to impress people.

      Sporty pic: Pics that show off athleticism were typically seen as positive.

Participants felt that these types of images indicated a "healthy," "balanced," and

"motivated" personality. Two images that exemplify this category are included below.

Figure 34. Woman crossing finish line at marathon in sporty pic

Figure 35. Man shooting jump shot in sporty pic

In both of the above images, we have a larger shot of a group of athletes. Participants felt that sporty pics run the risk of vanity if the image is a solo shot or staged. In both cases, the individual was seen as healthy, strong, motivated, and, of course, athletic. Overall, this category gave mostly positive impressions of the individuals.

Vacation pics: Backpacking through Europe and vacationing in a tropical locale are common times for taking pictures. These pictures subsequently get uploaded on Facebook. For most Facebookers, these are relatively meaningless images in and of

themselves. The primary identity-related information comes from the comments by the posting individual. Vacations to "non-sandy-beach" locations were seen by participants as adding a "worldly" or "intellectual" characteristic to the traveler, whereas sunny beaches add "fun" to the identity.

Profile Pics

When Facebookers receive a friendship request from a stranger, photos are often used as a way to judge the unknown person. Specifically, the profile pic is viewed first. It is located in the top, left corner of the Facebook profile, so the eye is naturally drawn to it. Additionally, it is usually the most prominent image on the initial profile page. Other photos are accessed through a series of mouse clicks. Additionally, the profile pic is included alongside every message sent by the user. In this way, it represents the Facebooker beyond the actual profile. As a result, the profile pic is viewed much more frequently than other uploaded pics. It is an important component of managing one's impression and presenting one's identity.

Facebookers such as Davey use shock value and (twisted?) humor to express personality.

Figure 36. Profile pic of Davey

2:22pmLee: Tell me about your profile pic.

2:22Davey: haha yeah. I was a film student, and i messed around with make up FX a little, so i decided i would freak people out a little. i got some good reactions.

2:23pmLee: And did it get a lot of reactions? joking around seems to be a common theme on facebook.

2:23pmDavey: yeah. lot's of people sent me messages about it. and yeah, joking is a common theme for me anyway!

Davey was clearly looking for a reaction and response from his network.
Throughout my discussions with him, Davey enjoyed talking about all of the ways he
tries to use humor or unusual messages and pics to get people's attention. He says he's
the same in real-world interactions and believes his profile pic shows that he doesn't take
himself too seriously, is not afraid of pushing the envelope or being outlandish, and likes
to entertain people.

Laura, who holds a graduate degree in library and information science, is a
member of the Tuesday Night Harry Potter Appreciation Group on Facebook, and
describes herself as "a slightly naive, vegetarian, cat-lady-in-training", felt the following
profile pic conveyed her personality and career perfectly.

Figure 37. Profile pic of Laura

6:17pmLee: i notice you have a illustration as your profile pic... any background
to it?

6:17pmLaura: it is the cover of my favorite book, "The Library" by sarah stewart and david small. it is a picture book about a woman who spends her whole life reading

6:18pmLee: seems appropriate for such an avid reader, and it even has a cat in the picture.

6:18pmLaura: i'm not quite as hooked as she is, but, yeah, i do relate to the character in a lot of ways.

Laura's choice of this image has clear connections to how she views herself and wishes to be seen by others. The image is quite direct – a woman with her nose buried in a book, towing a wagon of books with her cat – but also includes a more subtle identity presentation. Laura's friends in the library, perhaps, would recognize the image from the book and perhaps even know the character. It is kind of an insider presentation. Fellow avid readers might get much more out of the image than would other Facebookers. Of course, Laura was more than happy to explain the image to me and, presumably, anyone else who asked about it. In this way, the profile image instigated further presentation of self in conversation about the lesser-known book, character, and relation between the character and herself. So few profile pics contained such direct and indirect identity presentations.

Symbolic Interaction and Facebook Pics

By choosing which pics to upload, which to highlight as profile pics, to which to add comments, and which to leave out, Facebookers employ impression management. Clearly, some pics are not presenting a favorable self to the participants in this study.

Those Facebookers who present images that show them as vain or drunk to participants in this study may be performing for more-accepting groups, ignoring negative responses, or are simply unaware of how their images are being interpreted. From my interviews with participants, it seems that, through privacy settings adjustments, Facebookers can tailor their performances for specific audiences. Thus, the performances that were seen as vain or drunk are likely to have generated either positive reactions or simply no reactions. The sheer number of pics uploaded on Facebook limits the ability for members of groups to see and comment on each image.

The profile pic chosen by Facebookers is often selected with a specific reaction in mind (as was the case with Davey and Laura). Since the profile pic is connected with each message sent on Facebook, it certainly can be considered a front stage performance. As I mentioned in the last chapter, the most public of Facebook performances involve multiple audiences. Therefore the Facebook profile pic must conform to the values of all social groups within the Facebooker's network, lest he or she be subject to social sanctions.

In general, participants so easily dissected Facebook images that it appeared they had seen enough to know (or at least have a strong opinion about) the most common categories, the types of people who presented each type, and a statement indicating their valence for the image and person. This is an important element in terms of in-groups and out-groups (Sherif & Sherif, 1964). The images of both in-groups and out-groups should be easily identifiable so that the performer risks no confusion of alliance. In this way, Facebook pics can be though of as identity pegs, both bringing the presenter into the in-group and setting him or her against the out-group. The out-group, though, is not as

vehemently opposed in Facebook pics as it is in other Facebook identity pegs, such as pieces of flair. There is little interaction between in-group and out-group members in terms of pics.

It is a rare thing for a pic to receive a negative comment from another Facebooker. Usually, there are unwritten standards regarding images which would limit the likelihood of a "bad" picture getting uploaded in the first place. Also, if there is a concern from another Facebooker who is *in* the pic, the other person simply untags himself or herself. This lack of negative response to images would, in terms of Mead, be interpreted as confirmation of a successful presentation. This would, then, strengthen the Facebooker's confidence in that type of imagery. If this cycle of "bad" pics getting no response continued far enough, it would likely result in one of the closer friends – who would have the type of relationship that could support a confrontation – speaking up. However, this cycle of non-responsiveness may be contributing to the plethora of images that are interpreted negatively by so many within and without this study.

CHAPTER X

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Producing a dissertation is a personal journey as well as a scholarly venture, and in this case, given that I have been completing my university education as my very object of inquiry – Facebook – has been evolving largely in the higher education context, the personal dimension has been a constant presence. My own involvement in Facebook underwent some curious transformations for the purposes of studying Facebook, as I took off my ostensibly ordinary user hat to don the researcher hat. As I conclude my study and my doctoral program, I now find myself in a transition to yet another Facebooking period and encountering new dynamics that go along with this stage.

I currently have three Facebook pages: one started at the university where I did my master's degree university, the one I began during my doctoral program, and one specifically designated for my research. The profile from my master's degree is dormant and my researcher profile will soon be deleted. However, I intend to transfer the profile from my doctoral program to the sub-network affiliated with the new tenure-track faculty position I am about to begin at another university. My personal networking activities certainly have taken a backseat during this research project, and I intend to resume such personal interactions upon leaving my doctoral program. Meanwhile, my personal profile has recently attracted a new wave on friends, mostly consisting of former high school friends. It appears that as I near my high school class's 10-year reunion, dozens of classmates (dozens being the bulk of the class in a rural school in the Midwest) are looking to reconnect with old friends. As I will be unable to attend my class reunion, I have been happily accepting the new Facebook friendships. Another tendency emerging

on my personal profile and to some extent in the researcher profile is my cohort's transition from college life to family life. It seems that every time I log into my personal profile, dozens of new moms are discussing sleepless nights, funny faces, and changing diapers. This, of course, gives the researcher side of me all sorts of ideas regarding future research and "motherhood" identities.

After spending over a year working with Facebook and talking with its users, I have a greater appreciation for the site and its users. I still see much of the activity on Facebook as wasting time—but even users who will admit this clearly see themselves as wasting time *together*. After all, in offline life friends "waste" plenty of time in nonessential activities such as watching TV, chatting over coffee, or any number of otherwise unimportant events. From users' perspectives, the extended social-ness of Facebook seems to be its most important quality.

In this conclusion, I return to my four research questions and review main findings in relation to relevant literature. I also review my results in relation to literature on the relationship between technology and society. Finally, I discuss strengths and weaknesses of this study, with an emphasis on possibilities for future research.

Social Life on Facebook and Symbolic Interaction

The main concepts of symbolic interaction as explicated by Mead and Goffman explain core assumptions of social life and meanings: Individuals seek social acceptance. Individuals use lessons learned from past experience to anticipate potential reactions to their behaviors. These core assumptions fit with face-to-face interactions, phone conversations, e-mails, or any other social activity. Social life on Facebook follows, for the most part, similar patterns to social life elsewhere. Facebookers rely on specific

symbols and symbol combinations in an attempt to manage impressions of their audiences. Facebookers tend to present exaggerated performances so as to avoid misinterpretations. Social life on Facebook is no exception.

Mead wrote that: "The self appears as a result of the assumption of various roles, first of one person, then of another, then of another. Out of this procedure one comes gradually to see one's own role as it is demarcated from those of other persons whose roles one has temporarily assumed. Thus, self-awareness is achieved, for, by distinguishing its own role, its own part from the role of others, the self becomes conscious of itself as distinct from other selves" (1936, p.xxxi). Facebook is just one place to study how individuals define and perform the self in the social environment.

Identity Performance and Negotiation Online

Research question one focused on the intentions of presenters, the areas of Facebook that serve, in the minds of the participants, as places to showcase identity, and the important symbols in identity performances. These places were categorized as either static or dynamic. Dynamic components were frequently updated, viewed, and commented upon. Dynamic components drive the action on Facebook. They are the most important areas for identity performance.

The findings of this study greatly support past findings in the symbolic interaction tradition and enrich our understanding of Mead and Goffman's key concepts and claims. In often vivid ways, Facebook manifests processes central to symbolic interaction, including observation, internalizations of norms, development of and response to generalized others, performances, feedback, and subsequent performances. In terms of specific identity constructions within the Facebook context, my study helps show how so-

called Digital Natives craft a nuanced self from a host of larger cultural symbols as well as through fulfilling roles in interpersonal or small group communications.

Noteworthy findings about Facebook users' observations, expectations, and performances come through in identity pegs as well as interpersonal conversations – often on public message boards. My results support work by Williams and Copes (2005) and Waskul and Lust (2004) on role expectation, fulfillment, and violation, as well as support Waskul's (2002) suggestion of the norm of reciprocity. In this study, reciprocity seemed to belong generally to Digital Native culture – the norm is the same for cell phone calls, texts, e-mail, and social networking – but also is enhanced by the structure of Facebook itself. Findings also lend weight to Kendall's (1998) suggestion that CMC users privilege offline, "real" identity over online performance and that users tend to believe in a single, continuous identity. Facebookers privileged offline identity as "more real," although not separate; my informants did not perceive themselves as being a different self online or having split offline/online identities.

Interpretations of Others Online

My second research question two focused on the reception and interpretation of performances given by other Facebookers. The Facebook news feed provides a stream of information, actions, and reactions by others. This glut of information is digested by the Facebookers, who, for the most part, break information into what Palfrey and Gasser (2008) call *chunks.* The process of chunking relies heavily on the Facebookers quickly identifying presentations. Thus, giving exaggerated performances through using loads of identity pegs and cues allows others to process an entire profile by looking at only a handful of items.

Individuals seek acceptance by presenting themselves in the best light possible. Goffman (1959; 1967) suggests that these presentations are continually adjusted throughout the day, based on environment (home, work, church, nightclub, etc) as well as reactions from others (shame, praise, etc). Facebook offers little in terms of shift in environment, but Facebookers in this study certainly made attempts to adjust their performances based on reactions from others (including anticipated reactions). Participants were able to quickly recognize identity performance intentions of other Facebookers.

Mead's (1938) generalized other was evident as well. In the most prevalent pattern, Facebookers anticipated reactions without having a specific person in mind, but guided rather by a general set of internalized norms. These norms include basic assumptions about meanings associated with Facebook friendship, sending messages, presenting certain symbols, and so on. These assumptions are used to anticipate reactions from others. In another pattern, a small set of participants did not rely on a general conglomeration of Facebook norms, but instead based action on the anticipated reactions of a specific person who stood in for a group of others. These Facebookers always thought of, for instance, a parent, niece, friend, or boss when making *all* Facebook decisions. This small subset of Facebookers who relied on specific others (as opposed to generalized others) were typically participants who had the most concern about privacy, upsetting loved ones, or jeopardizing professional aspirations. Not surprisingly, those with specific others in mind had much more conservative profiles than those who used generalized others to anticipate reactions.

The component of Facebook that participants commonly used for observations informing their views of the generalized other was the news feed. The continuous stream of updates and postings from others in the Facebooker's network provided constant feedback to a user's own actions and also opportunities to observe reactions to other people and objects.

Identity pegs (Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007) and Goffmanian cues (1959, 1969) come in a handful of forms on Facebook. Static elements such as self-descriptions and lists of favorites provide some identity pegs that signal fellow group members, perhaps prompting interactions. Dynamic elements such as status updates, bumper stickers, pieces of flair, other types of gifts, and uploaded pics are cues given by the Facebooker in an effort to manage impressions and frame potential interactions. Very few of these elements are (even partially) outside the control of the Facebooker. Uploaded pics and symbols placed on the profiles of friends can be said to serve as Goffman's (1967) information *given off* in that profile owners have less control of these (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, & Westerman, 2008). However, participants in this study placed little importance on these less-controlled items in assessing others, instead emphasizing performance components that were entirely controlled by users.

For the most part, information presented on Facebook was accepted as more-or-less accurate, or what Goffman calls having *cue validity*. Results were slightly puzzling though, since Facebookers were quick to point out that their own profiles were not complete or entirely accurate representations of themselves and yet most felt they could get a pretty good understanding of other persons based solely on viewing their profiles.

In terms of Goffman's (1959, 1967, 1969) *front* and *back stages*, Facebook operates almost entirely in the front stage, a realm filled with cues, norms, and contexts about the environment, relationships, and personal presentations. The only example of backstage performance is the case of a Facebooker who blocks his or her profile from all other users. Without complete blockage, the profile must be considered social and having potential audiences that extend beyond the anticipated audiences of the user (via outsiders gaining access through unblocked Facebookers). Most Facebookers, then, are always performing.

Interpretations of Others and Identity Performances

This third research question focused on identity presentations in light of Mead's generalized other and based off anticipation of potential reactions from others. The self concept, in the tradition of Mead and Goffman, comes through experiences with those around us and, in modern times, with the mass media. Presentations on Facebook showed a combination of popular culture imagery and nuanced, interpersonal presentations based on past events, inside jokes, and past conversations. The findings of this study, then, support identity literature that suggests individuals pull ideas about identity from the media (Alcoff, 2006; Jenks, 2005, Wallerstein, 1988) as well as relying on group, interpersonal, and personal contexts for the shaping of a nuanced self (Cochran, Beeghley, Bock, 1988; Sherif & Sherif, 1964). Identity pegs were key to presenting the self to larger, pop culture groups as well as offering an arena for providing a personal, nuanced touch through giving comments alongside these images and combining these symbols in a certain, unique presentation style.

As suggested in the scholarly work in reference groups, differences between in-groups and out-groups were exaggerated in identity performances; moreover, Facebook evidently encourages exaggeration of nearly all aspects of identities. Various scholars have found that interacting via computer promotes such exaggeration (Geidner, Flook, & Bell, 2007; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Hogg (2005) suggests that an exaggerated performance in a digital environment represents an attempt at uncertainty reduction, and my finding that Facebookers were clearly trying to let everyone know what "type" of person they were through their symbols supports this idea. Exaggerated presentations send clear signals to groups and other individuals about how users expect to be treated. Further, my study supports findings that within a specific group, an individual attempts to be the "best" group member (Campbell, 2006). Exaggerated performances not only show others how to categorize and what to expect, but also are attempts at positioning within the group.

My study did not reveal tendencies toward playing with identity or identity conflicts between offline and online presentations. Due to the overlap of Facebook social life and offline social life, presenting a "new" identity on Facebook was simply not possible for most Facebookers. As Palfrey and Gasser (2008) suggest, Digital Natives do not make such distinctions between online and offline selves, and my informants supported the conception of a single self. Other online arenas may well allow or encourage much more identity play, but Facebook, it seems, is not the place for this.

Online Identity Performances and Offline Performances

Facebook has almost complete overlap with the world of offline relationships. In many cases, such as the wall, Facebook is an important tool for connecting online life with offline events of the past or future.

The status update creates an immediate connection between what the Facebooker is doing (or supposed to be doing) offline with what they are doing online. The other Facebookers can then respond accordingly. Status updates often trigger other Facebookers to post comments and replies, but they rarely get into serious topics or anything outside the immediate mood for that matter. For more serious topics or to discuss anything beyond the immediate, Facebookers are more likely to use the Facebook wall or private messaging.

I categorized wall interactions as updating, rehashing, and scheduling. The updating aspect of the wall involves messages between Facebook friends who have not seen each other in a while. This is most often between friends from high school who have drifted apart and are now, through Facebook, catching up. These Facebook conversations are similar to bumping into the person on the street. The relatively superficial discussions of location, occupation, marriage status, children, and so on get sent back and forth until the updating is complete. Then, the two part again (though still connected on Facebook) until they wish to get updates again. Gina talked about how Facebook encourages even more of these re-connections because the site is so convenient. For Gina, nearly all relationships are more active on Facebook.

I'd talk to [friends from high school] a lot more on Facebook than I would if I saw them in a grocery store. It's just more convenient on Facebook. You don't have to waste twenty minutes in a grocery aisle. There is a lower commitment level on Facebook. It's weird, I recently had a class reunion. People who were never friends in high school are talking on Facebook like they were best friends. It's kinda the same for everyone. A relationship online is more active than it is in the real world. There are a lot more invitations birthday parties and graduations.
– Gina

So many of the interactions on the Facebook wall were about events that just happened, events that are immediately ongoing, and future plans (usually surrounding social gatherings in the upcoming weekend). I labeled these interactions as scheduling and rehashing of events. Photos are central to the rehashing component and the wall is central to planning of events. Additionally, Facebookers send private messages for some events. However, the public planning of events is another way of publicly announcing friendship while also showing the world the social skills and desirability of the Facebookers involved, sort of a "look how fun I am to be friends with" presentation.

The photos – taken offline, of course – are a way for Facebookers to rehash old stories and give commentary on the most recent events. They serve as triggers for conversation. "Wow! Last weekend was fun!" and "You looked so beautiful in your wedding dress!" are common types of comments on photos. Further, they return the Facebook presentation to the flesh, so to speak, in that pics mostly focus on the physical body of the performer. That is, it is difficult to perform physical characteristics (gender, race, even body type to some extent) on Facebook if all of the uploaded pics contradict that message.

The applications such as bumper stickers and pieces of flair are purely digital in their creation. They do, however, play a role in offline relationships simply from the fact that such a high percentage of Facebook friends have offline connections. Thus, to give someone a gift (which is usually displayed publicly) on Facebook is the same as announcing a friendship to everyone in the social network. To slight someone on Facebook is to slight someone in the "real" world. In this way, there is no difference. The interactions need not be distinguished as *online* or *offline* since they are so similar in meaning.

The concept of *technological seam* provides a useful way of understanding the point of articulation between offline "real" life and online virtual life, and one of the more interesting technological seams to emerge from my interviews and observation had to do with Facebook's place in intimate relationships. Facebook has a section devoted to relationship status providing a choice of options that includes *Single, In a relationship, Engaged, Married, It's complicated,* and *In an open relationship.* If a Facebooker switches from one to another, a flurry of activity ensues. The role played by Facebook in relationships varies, of course, based on the involvement levels that the Facebookers have in the site. Younger (late teens through early 20-somethings) Facebookers tend to put more stock into Facebook messages about significant others. Further, couples on the site may have a public argument, called a "Facebook Fight" by some participants, with public presentations of bickering back and forth on each other's walls, uploading of intentionally unflattering and hurtful pics, and spreading of negative messages about the other person to shared friends in the network. Again, this typically happens with younger

Facebookers—probably it is more common in high school or even junior high. Heather talked about how she has moved beyond the point where she gets into Facebook Fights.

5:26Lee: it seems a lot of my other participants talk about relationships + facebook. any thoughts? do you think FB has potentially influences on relationships and/or friendships?

5:27pmHeather: I think its TOTALLY lame for couples to 'FB fight' i.e. change the status to single because they are pissed, just to get a rise out of thier bf\gf or post nasty messages about the other person.

5:28pmHeather: I think it can influence if you take it seriously. like OMG. DID YOU SEE WHAT SHE POSTED?!?! That BITCH...HAHA

5:28pmLee:but you don't take it seriously? or your friends just don't post things that warrant calling them a bitch?

5:32pmHeather:HAHA well, that too.. but no I really try not to. I mean, I'm not going to lie, I have taken it seriously. specifically someone lied about something and he slipped up and got caught via someone he didn't know I knew posting something. He was SHOCKED I found out. and it ruined our friendship. I called him out on it.

5:33pmLee: uh.... you're gonna have to run that by me again. so... some guy lied (presumably about being with a girl/guy) and you caught him via message/photo?

5:35pmHeather: sorry.. without getting into the whole story. This friend lied about hanging out with a girl. there was no reason to lie about it. He was busted when a female posted a pic with a caption that blew his story to pieces. He didn't know

that I knew her [on Facebook], therefore didn't think he would get busted. but he

did. And in taking FB seriously, I asked him why he left out the detail, and once I

realized he was lying to me.. our friendship was over. is that better? Im NOT good

at explaining

5:47pmLee: i see

Facebook, Society and Technology

Although symbolic interaction provides the basic underpinning for my study and

the framework for analyzing results, my findings also are suggestive in various ways with

respect to the literature on interactions of society and technology.

In considering an individual's strategic interaction patterns within a network or

relationship, my study provides some caveats to the concept of *networked individualism* –

the idea of an individual relying on hundreds or thousands of weak ties to fulfill needs as

opposed to depending on of a handful of strong ties (Wellman studies). I did not find that

participants in this study avoided deep relationships; to the contrary, many Facebookers

spend their Facebook time interacting with immediate family and close friends. The

notion of networked individualism seemed most applicable in dealings among friends

from younger years (elementary, middle, junior high, and high school); Facebookers used

the site to restore and maintain relationships with friends of the past who otherwise might

be forgotten or beyond reach. But whether these weak ties fulfill important needs or not

remains to be studied.

Most of the literature suggesting *isolating effects* of digital life is anecdotal, and

my study did not produce any systematic proof for this line of scholarship. Rather, I

found that much of Facebook's activity focuses on the planning and recapping of offline,

real-world events. In response to scholars who suggest the Internet and digital technologies are creating isolated individuals (Bakardjieva, 2004; Bugeja, 2005), it could be argued that Facebook is fostering genuine social interaction, not diminishing it. On the other hand, the great amount of time participants spend on Facebook might be seen as a draw on offline activity. My informants occasionally brought up Facebook's potential for escapism – usually stated as wasting time or getting away from work – and gave some support to prior scholarship (Hodkinson, 2006; Howard & Jones, 2004).

Facebook users largely surrender control over the audience while taking greater control over the presentation—what boyd (2002, 2004) calls collapse of context, a reverse from offline settings, where individuals tend to control the audience more than the presentation (Campbell, 2006; George, 2006; Hewitt & Forte, 2006). I anticipated that the resulting opportunity for increased surveillance, or what I have called the polyopticon (Farquhar, 2008), would put a strain on Facebookers affecting their presentations of self. More specifically, I expected that individual Facebook users would have difficulty performing for more than one – perhaps several – audiences or groups simultaneously and experience contradictions in negotiating impression management.

However, Facebookers seemed fairly sanguine about the challenges of pleasing multiple audiences who might have multiple norm sets. The adjustability of privacy settings is one line of defense against a polyoptic structure. Additionally, the vast amount of information flow on Facebook appears to give the Facebookers a feeling of getting lost in the crowd. Further, although Facebookers may receive comments offline or warnings about possible online behaviors, they rarely get negative online responses to postings and thus assume their presentation can play to whomever is out there.

Contrary to Turkle's (1995; 2004) arguments about the *multiplicity of self* that online expression makes possible, I found that Facebookers strive to have a singular self, and do not think about having multiple selves. They simply say, "I'm being me." Most Facebookers do have a fairly consistent presentation, but some present mixed identity messages. The "mixed" aspect of a presentation comes when norms of one desired group conflict with the norms of another desired group.

Of the Facebookers who took part in this study, the very first profile I encountered exemplifies the most common reason for conflicting elements of identity. Ashley, this first participant, seemed to be in a transitional period in her life. Her Facebook profile was littered with images, text, and comments from others that focused on her marriage and new baby. However, the profile also contained dozens of references to alcohol and binge drinking. Facebookers who did not know Ashley thought this was odd and confusing. Upon further examination of her profile and chatting with members of her social network, it appeared that Ashley's "wilder" days were during her undergrad and that she was now in a different time in her life (family, career). The profile, however, presents quite the conflicting messages to onlookers who do not have the offline, lifelong connection with her.

The issue of mixed identity presentation is mainly an issue only for strangers. However, there are some elements of presentation that Facebookers wish to keep private or hidden from certain members of their social group. Parents of Facebookers in this study were not an issue because Facebook simply doesn't appeal to as many individuals that age. Many participants were very happy with this. They clearly did not want all of their presentations of self to their friends getting sent to their parents or family. Those

Facebookers who did have family members (siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins) were very aware of the potential for their profile images and information to get back to parents. I frequently notice the high schoolers in my life and their parents discussing what should and should not go on Facebook. Even if the parents do not have an account of their own, information gets back to them from their other children, nieces and nephews, siblings (aunts and uncles of the high schooler), and various others. This type of scenario is what I discussed earlier and what boyd considers the collapse of context. Facebookers are unable to act simply in the context of their friends. They must also act in the context of their family, coworkers, teachers, students (for those who are teachers), and any other group with potentially conflicting norms.

Finally, the tensions inherent in the technology-society interaction that interest Mumford did not emerge as particularly important in my study—probably because the symbolic interaction tradition, which directed my attention to social-psychological phenomenon, does not really meld with macro-social perspectives. Nevertheless, the Mumford's questions do suggest interesting ways of looking at some of my findings.

For instance, Facebook seems to support elements of both *constitution and transmission*, supporting Miller's (2001) view of the Internet having both transmissive and constitutive abilities. On Facebook, for instance, friendship is constituted through any and all messages between the two parties. Thus, any transmissive element is, by definition, also constitutive of friendship. The constitutive nature of Facebook communication is further supported because all messages observed in this study were (semi)public. Messages lose purely transmissive qualities when the connection between the two individuals is made public. Facebook also fosters constitutive dynamics in

construction of identity. Users employ impression management tactics and shape their presentations to certain ends. At the same time, from the point of view of performance observers, what may be merely confirmatory to those who know the performer may be constructive of something entirely new to those who don't.

Mumford's discussion of centralization vs. decentralization is clearly important to the study of Facebook as an institution and corporate entity. Lessig's (2001) identifies layers of code, content, and physical controls surrounding the Internet in his contention that centralized power is winning the battle online. Ultimately, it is corporate managers who control the Facebook site overall; at the same time, since users are the main content creators, central authorities must defer to certain demands of users in order to retain the very basis of Facebook's value in a commercial marketplace.

The picture looks different from the perspective of users themselves. Among Facebookers, there is no formal center. The network is a web and some users might have more or less powerful strategic positions based on a social network analysis, but in terms of this study, users of the site had equally minimal power in relation to each other as well as to the network itself. This does not mean, though, that users are immune to issues of power; rather, the primary power imbalance – stemming from the nature, ownership and commodity power of the site itself – remains largely invisible to users on a day-to-day or commonsense basis.

Sometimes, however, the veil is lifted, and Facebook provides some interesting instances precisely because of its dependence on recruiting and maintaining users. During my data collection period, some commotion regarding Facebook's authority over and ownership of the content uploaded occurred. The legal and technical jargon surrounding

the user agreement was central to the issue. Lawyers and programmers had drafted the user agreement and it was under fire for being overly complex and generally confusing to non-experts. Facebook, in an effort to maintain users, began to promote an open forum for Facebookers to voice complaints and even suggestions about the terms of use. The discussion was couched in terms of Facebookers having their say, rather than for what it really was—(re)negotiation of the contract between the company and its users.

Mumford's concern about consumerism vs. citizenship often comes up in discussions of youth and new technologies, especially entertainment and social media. The question here is whether Facebook drives consumerism or enhances citizenry and community (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004). Citizenship is not the first thing on Facebookers' minds, at least not most of the ones in this study. Participants would not say that consumerism is on their minds either, but with the frequent use of pop culture symbols, advertising, and the implementation of virtual gifts, themes of commercialism certainly are more salient than any ideals of democracy.

Among the vast majority of Facebookers in this study, there was no indication of enhanced citizenry via use of the site. Further, those who did pursue political discussions or "serious" topics were often seen as taking themselves too seriously. The findings in this study, then, support Bugeja (2005), Bakardjieva (2004), and Gergen (2002) in that Facebook was detrimental to the sense of civic duty. Most Facebookers avoid political discussion due to either a lack of interest in the topics or in an impression management technique. As Gabbie put it, "I avoid political opinions on my profile since they automatically turn off the other [political] side. FB is a social site, not a political one."

However, a major exception arose during my study—related to the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, when Facebook was abuzz with links to political news stories and blogs. Links to Obama's *Yes we can* video were widely circulated on Facebook, and users who said they ordinarily ignored politics were engaged to greater and lesser degrees with the race. This blip suggests that, under certain circumstances, Facebook indeed can be a galvanizing political force.

However, the results do not bode well for depth and endurance of political involvement. Although Facebookers from all perspectives were drawn into campaign discussions, what they contributed the political discourse was often of dubious quality. As Alex put it, "There are lots of political statements [on Facebook] without depth. People just rant and don't really know anything." And after the election, politically driven content dropped. A handful of participants in this study, who follow politics closely, would periodically upload links to political news stories, but the discussion board topics have returned to normal trends.

The norms and culture of Facebook – with its focus on the self, preoccupation with the minutiae of daily activities of the network, and the norm of not taking oneself too seriously – place one's immediate social network over society. That is, larger social issues, politics, civic engagement, and the like are likely to suffer under the culture of Facebook. However, it appears that as Facebookers gain years of experience on the site, they begin to see a drop in involvement. Also in this period, Facebookers in this study showed signs of shifting to a more serious stance on the matters of democracy and citizenship. Perhaps, then, Facebook's appearance of triteness is merely linked to the youth culture in general than it is to the site. Teenagers and those in their early twenties

have historically shown low turnouts at elections and a low sense of civic engagement. Facebook merely falls into that already existing culture and then perpetuates it. Again, though, it appears that Facebookers move through this stage as they enter their mid-twenties.

Facebook activity often highlighted consumer activity and the site itself offers advertisements in the periphery of each page as well as the option to purchase Facebook gifts for other users. I do not believe that the nay-sayers are completely right, though. Facebookers do have a sense of (offline) community. They use the site to interact in many ways, but, for the most part, they find time to meet face to face and be social within the physical community. Facebookers, even if they are frequently checking the site, still find time to unplug.

Facebook obviously is becoming more commercially driven. Advertising is one thing, but the move to having virtual gifts for sale seems to be following CyWorld's use of *acorns.* CyWorld is a social networking site that originated in Korea; users buy virtual money, called *acorns* with Korean Won. Many participants in this study thought that Facebook would likely continue to develop extra services for a fee but didn't think the site would ever charge for membership. Such a change, participants believed, would lead to another (free) site taking over the market.

Digital Natives in contemporary society

One of the concerns Digital Immigrants have about Digital Natives is that the Natives are losing skills in offline, face-to-face communication as they are becoming adept at CMC communication. Facebookers in this study were not as skillful or comfortable in formal, offline settings as they were in online chats, but the sheer amount

of uploaded images suggest they are still quite skillful in offline, informal settings. This finding points to a possible trend of reducing offline formalities and increasing online meetings, interviews, and all other interactions. Facebookers' minds work quickly with online-only settings and appear to multitask well in mixed (simultaneously online and offline) settings. Most Facebookers in this study saw their communication skill set as advantageous over those others who aren't comfortable with digital technology, presumably Digital Immigrants. If the trend is, indeed, a shift toward digital communication, the Natives are in a strong position, especially given that as the generation ages, they will move into positions of power in social, political, and cultural institutions.

Another trend, also connected to positions of power, is the shifting perspective on judging one's past. We have already seen a snippet of this progression in politics between President Clinton's issues with marijuana inhalation to the admission and general acceptance of President Obama's experimentation with cocaine. It appears that society, Digital Natives in particular, care less about events of the past and more about the immediate. This trend on Facebook of living in the moment seems to be supported by the site itself in that the stream of updates continually buries past action with dozens to hundreds of more recent activities. Additionally, past uploaded pics get lost in the thousands, perhaps millions, of images available on the site. Again, it is all about what the most recent status updates.

Lastly, a growing concern by dystopianists is the apparent shifting definition of *friendship*. Since Facebook appropriated the term friend as a way to label and understand the connection between two individuals on the site, the term was used in many ways by

Facebookers in this study. Often, users differentiated between what they called "real" friends – a smaller group of individuals that spend time together offline – and their (mere) "Facebook" friends – the rest of the social network that gets little offline attention. So, yes, the term friend is loose in meanings, but the relationships themselves are relatively the same as they have always been. This appears to fit with the symbolic interaction tenet of shifting, socially (re)defined meanings.

Tied to the shifting definition of friendship, the collections of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of friends on Facebook appears to be a great shift away from having a small group of really close friends. However, I would argue that these vast networks have always been in place, but they simply have not been so perfectly (digitally) organized in one place. Chayko (1993, p.172) suggested, "there is no reality apart from what social actors make of it." In the past, social networks also consisted mostly of acquaintances that were present but lacking in communication. Now, thanks to SNSs, these acquaintances lie in waiting as available-but-untapped resources. Most Facebookers in this study still mentioned spending the bulk of their time with a relatively small number of close friends. Technology of the time, it might be argued, allows one to maintain more friendships. In the past, it was more difficult to visit at any length with all of one's close friends in one day, but Facebookers in this study liked the convenience that the site provided in terms of interacting with loved ones and close friends.

The short-term consequences of having larger social networks are perhaps most seen in the indifferent attitude shown toward "Facebook friends" by some of this study's participants. Additionally, though the expansive networks allow hours of interaction and observation opportunities, the interactions tended in this study to remain at superficial

levels. That is, serious discussion was rare even though there were more discussions than the participants would have had with their networks otherwise. A short-term benefit of these expansive networks is the increased mobility of social movements, an example of which found in this study was the 2008 Presidential Race. Facebookers utilized the site for discussion and as a means of rapidly disseminating news stories and information.

The long-term consequences of being involved in expansive networks of "Facebook" friends may be a lowered sense of responsibility or commitment to any given friend. Additionally, the structure of Facebook itself is set up so that there is a preoccupation with mundane status updates and photos. Further, the sheer amount of superficial information on the site paired with the norms of reciprocity and not taking oneself (too) seriously might lead to a lowered critical thinking ability or an inability to engage in deep, thoughtful conversation. However, Facebookers in this study tended to "get over" Facebook after a number of years on the site. This declining of interest in the site, it appears, would reduce the chance for any long-term change in thinking about friendships, attitudes about news and politics, and behaviors such as civic engagement.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Future Research

The symbolic interaction tradition, specifically the works of Mead and Goffman, has good analytic utility for studying Facebook. The fact that the works of these authors fit so well is a testament to the strength of their concepts as descriptors of social life.

As a practical (and methodological) matter, an SNS like Facebook turns out to be especially productive terrain for researching symbolic interaction. Facebook provides an endless stream – perhaps a glut – of "raw data" that is recorded, stamped with date and time, and easily transferable, sorted, and organized in a manner that enables the

researcher to go back through a reverse sequence of actions and interactions. For that matter, computer-mediated communication in general seems a good arena for the symbolic interactionist scholar in that, being digital, it is what Negroponte calls being inherently archivable); it tends toward exaggerated performances; and it allows the researcher to overcome some limitations of space and time regarding participant recruitment, observation and interviews.

The design of this study worked well in addressing my central questions. The observation period allowed an adequate development of ideas that subsequently served as a backdrop for the interview and guided tour portions. Further, the interviews allowed participants a depth of feedback that would not have been available with most other methods. Further, the ongoing connection with participants through the site itself allowed for interactions if and when questions or thoughts came up later. Several participants liked that I was using the site itself to study Facebook. Lastly, the period of the study allowed for tracking activity and changes over time, an important element in the symbolic interaction tradition.

More research needs to be done to understand the methodological implications of the differences between online and face-to-face interviews found in this study. Nearly all Facebookers in this study were more open during online interactions than they were during face-to-face interviews. Even those participants who were comfortable in offline encounters were equally open when discussing Facebook during online chats. Thus, for this study, there was little to gain from pushing for offline interviews. Perhaps this difference was due to the participants' comfort with the site itself, dynamics in the participant-interviewer relationship, or larger effects of computer-mediated

communication. In any case, this study did not deeply examine the cause of the difference in interview settings, but rather adopted the most productive setting.

Another area for future research is the sort of doublethink Facebookers displayed in regarding self-presentation versus interpretation of others' performances. In discussing their own presentations, Facebookers usually acknowledged that their profiles did not give a complete picture. However, participants almost always thought others' profiles provided sufficient information to form strong and decisive opinions about those others. This difference in views might be tied to the third person effect or social distance and certainly warrants investigation.

Isolating effects and networked individualism were not entirely supported by this study. However, these views and concepts may be long-term effects of technology that could not be properly studied in this design. Broader, longer-term research, perhaps meta-analyses, may be necessary for properly examining these effects.

Facebook underwent two major format changes during the time I completed this study. The site also underwent countless minor changes and additions, and it continues to change; meanwhile, new tools and venues for social networking, from Twitter to Google's recently unveiled Google Wave, continue to emerge. More changes will no doubt occur on the site, and researching this ever-changing scene must be an ongoing process.

A final question about my findings has to do with the generalizability of social norms and patterns. Although some of the norms and behaviors I discovered might be shaped by the nature of computer-mediated communication itself, many are presumably socially and culturally constructed. Facebookers in this study were located in the

Midwest U.S., and the results indicate that a good portion of the norms and behaviors on Facebook stem from offline social life and offline culture. Facebookers from other regions of the U.S. or users in other nations would likely have different sets of norms and behaviors.

For instance, the tendency found in this study to avoid posting negative comments on Facebook might not be as prominent outside the Midwest. Further, the apparent indifference shown by many participants toward news, politics, and civic engagement might not hold in other cultures. Lastly, the age range in this study likely has different norms and values than younger or older populations. Further, the norms of the group studied appear to shift over time as younger participants' profiles focused more on alcohol, sports, and (often crude) humor while older participants' profiles focused more on family and career. It is likely that a comparative study between more distinct age ranges would show much different norms and behaviors.

However, the site itself fosters some norms that would likely transfer to other cultures. For instance, the norm of reciprocity found in this study is likely to occur elsewhere given that Facebook prompts all of its users to return to the site. Additionally, simply due to the nature of computer-mediated communication, the frequent use of humor, not taking oneself too seriously, and the tendency toward exaggerated performances is likely to be at least somewhat universal. Additionally, the options provided by Facebook regarding applications such as flair and bumper stickers tends toward humor and exaggerated identities. Clearly, further comparative research to probe similarities and differences among regions, countries and cultures is called for.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCHER PROFILE

Basic Information

Networks:

University of [state] Grad Student '09

Sex: Male

Birthday: November 19

Interested In: Women, Men

Looking For: Networking

Personal Information

Activities: Research on social network sites.

Interests:

Observing user profiles on Facebook & MySpace.

Talking with users about their online social networking experiences.

About Me:

 I am a researcher at the University.

My dissertation focuses on identity and Facebook. I am currently browsing publicly available user profiles to develop a better understanding of just what exactly people are doing online. How do we act online? What about the technology is different from face-to-face interactions?

Please note that I am ACTIVELY OBSERVING publicly available user profiles for my research. However, I am NOT collecting identifying information (names, D.O.B.s, courses, addresses).

I am observing profiles in an effort to generate GENERAL themes about what people are doing on Facebook.

Further, I am looking for people who would be interested in talking to me in greater detail about their Facebook experiences. Your participation would be strictly confidential and I am using pseudonyms for everyone involved. No identifying information will be used.

If you are interested in being a part of my research, please contact me using the above information.

Contact Information

Email: iowaresearcher@gmail.com

Phone: 3193352714

Current Address: - - - -

Education and Work

Grad School: [University] '09

Mass Communication, Social Psychology in Computer-mediated environments

Employer: [University]

Position: Researcher

APPENDIX B

FIRST RECRUITMENT STATEMENT

Hello.

I am doing my dissertation research on Facebook. I would really like you to take part in my study. I'm looking for interview subjects to talk about their Facebook use, what sorts of stuff they've seen on Facebook, and so on. I expect these interviews to take around 20 minutes. I'm scheduling interviews over the next couple months, so it certainly wouldn't have to be right now. If you live in the [placename], [placename], or [placename] areas, I'd really like to meet in person. If not, I'm also open to chatting on Facebook.

If you have any questions, please feel free to check out my profile or respond to this message. If you would be interested in participating in my research, please simply respond to this message and we can go from there.

Thanks in advance for your time.

-Lee Farquhar, [University]

(319)325-6669

APPENDIX C

SECOND RECRUITMENT STATEMENT

Hi… I am a graduate student at [university]. I am currently interviewing people about

Facebook for part of my dissertation. I was wondering if you would be willing to talk

about Facebook sometime (basically, what people do on Facebook).

APPENDIX D

QUESTIONS FOR FACEBOOK INTERVIEWS

Tell me about your wall discussions… who are these people, what do you typically talk about?

How long have you been on Facebook? What got you started?

Tell me about your overall experience?

You seem pretty active. How much are you online? What do you typically spend your time doing?

How much do you think people look at personal information? Do they spend much time with it?

Tell me about your profile pic? What type of reactions do you think it gets from people?

Talk to me about the photos. Where do most of them come from? Are there photos you have decided not to upload? What makes a good Facebook photo?

How would you describe your friends list? Do you know everybody? How do you know all of them?

Do you use the chat function much?

Tell me about your wall use.

Ever had any issues with posting something that a "friend" didn't like?

Anything on FB that you wouldn't want your family to see?

Tell me about the applications you use.

What is the value or the purpose of these applications?

APPENDIX E

PROMPTS FOR INTERPRETATIONS OF OTHERS

1. Could you go to ___NAME_____'s profile?

2. How would you go about interpreting this person based solely on this profile?

3. What sorts of things would you look at?

4. Talk me through the process. Where do you look first, what impression does it give you and why?

5. Where do you look second? What impression does it give and why?

6. Third

7. Fourth, etc.

8. What are your overall impressions of ___NAME___? Why?

9. Do you think __NAME__ wants people to have this impression? Explain.

10. If a negative impression… Is there any advice you would give to __NAME__?