

Instant Validation: Testing Identity in Facebook

Graham Nichols Dixon

ANT 679HB

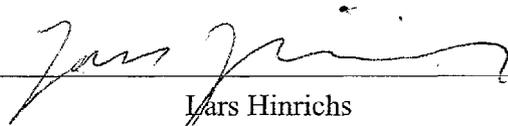
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Elizabeth Keating

Department of Anthropology
Supervising Professor



Lars Hinrichs

Department of English
Second Reader

Dedicated to my late Grandmother, Dorothea Rolls

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Research Methodology.....	2
Chapter One: Introduction to Facebook.....	3
Facebook's Infancy.....	5
Global Expansion.....	11
Future Outlook and Legal Troubles.....	16
Chapter Two: Traversing the Links.....	18
Chapter Three: Instant Validation in Facebook.....	34
Identity Performance.....	34
Influence of Society in Online Identity Construction.....	35
Instant Validation.....	40
The Imaginary Audience.....	50
Instant Validation and Symbolic and Social Capital.....	52
Conclusion.....	59
References.....	61

Abstract

Identity has been frequently conceptualized as a set of attributes a person processes (Faith 2007:3). However, the cyber-world of Facebook has brought a new focus of how people construct their identities online, demonstrating that identity is not just a process or list of attributes, but rather a dramatic performance in which one's identity never remains static – it is constantly undergoing construction (Ethier and Deaux 1994:243). According to Sociologist Erving Goffman, performance is “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman 1959:15). With this in mind, the concept of identity in Goffman's view is a performance that is deliberately engaged in, but not a constant conscious perception (Faith 2007:4). Because of its easy-to-use and fast-paced digital features, Facebook has become an efficient tool in this form of identity exploration in which users actively engage in the social discourse of instant validation (i.e. publishing one's image in hopes of receiving instant and positive feedback). While instant validation can occur both online and offline, it is important to explore whether Facebook has changed the way people engage in that behavior. Furthermore, I will examine how instant validation is played in Facebook, and determine how it is used in online identity construction.

Research Methodology

Since the focus of this paper concerns identity and performance, the inclusion of Facebook users' personal encounters and stories regarding their cyber-lives lends credence and insight to my research. Ten University of Texas undergraduates ranging in ages 18-22 were interviewed in coordination with the Institutional Review Board protocol. Questions pertained to their Facebook usage and performance. The students, all of whom are Facebook users, represented diverse backgrounds (racial, gender, ethnic, and sexual orientation). Also, in order to protect confidentiality, all informants' names have been changed.

Although their comments recorded for this paper do not reflect the entire UT Facebook population, their narratives do indicate the power of Facebook on identity construction and performance. I hope that more research will be done on this subject in the future so that we can better understand why and how social networking sites have become an important feature in young people's lives.

CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction to Facebook

The Emergence of Social Networking Sites and the Origins of Facebook

I find Facebook to be a strange and new thing; it's just so easy to do.

-Maria

The advent of the internet has produced a multitude of changes in how people in some societies conduct their daily lives. Trips to the mall have been cut down, the time spent laboring away with bills and checkbooks has become antiquated, and using the telephone to talk and socialize with friends has changed, all because the internet substitutes these actions with much more streamlined and user-friendly programs. Now, one can skip the stores and buy online, pay one's bills with computer-mediated electronic transfers, and manage one's social life with just the click of a mouse. In relatively recent terms, management of a social life has evolved tremendously with the internet revolution, producing a new digital universe known as the social networking site.

Social networking sites (SNSs) are among the most visited websites on the internet, gathering a membership base that rivals most countries. The context for which these sites are used can vary, but they are mainly oriented towards the maintenance of social connections with others (offline friends, family, co-workers, etc.), and can be used as a tool for proliferating one's self. Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe, authors of a study on

SNS's role in social capital, state "social network sites allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others" (2007, vol. 12). In many instances, online SNSs can also bridge people together with complete strangers, presenting a very new form of internet socializing, whereas one's anonymity has largely been lost in the SNS world.

One of the first SNSs to gain ground was Friendster. Originally constructed as a dating site in which users could only contact friends of friends, its popularity with young adults soared in its early years (Ellison et al. 2007, vol. 12). By 2002, membership grew in the millions, as users sent out "invites" for friends to join. Today, the site records around 50 million users (Pipl), with a majority registered in East Asian countries (Lipsman 2007). The high East Asian demographic, mostly in China and Korea, is attributed to the several foreign language versions launched in early 2002, which continue to grow strong (Sloane 2007). However, since 2003, after declining a reported thirty million dollar buyout by Google Inc. (Arrington 2006), what many observers described as an unwise business move, Friendster's appeal in the US has steadily declined while a similar SNS, MySpace, has grown considerably.

Originally designed as an outlet for music enthusiasts, MySpace officially launched in 1999 and has since evolved into a far reaching community of people representing different countries, cultures, and generations. Users have a greater amount of control over their profile, allowing them to personalize their pages by uploading art as their background or adding a favorite song to their media player. This sort of customization feature is unique to MySpace in the SNS world, with many users highlighting this to be the reason they prefer it over other such sites. Its global appeal has

also made it one of the most popular SNSs as it allows anyone with a working email address, anywhere in the world, the ability to become a member. Today, the site boasts an incredible 200 million registered users, and currently holds the title of “sixth most visited site in the entire world-wide-web” (Alexa). In 2005, Rupert Murdoch’s media conglomerate *News Corporation* (parent company of the New York Post, Fox News, among others) purchased MySpace for little over half a billion dollars, making it one of the first SNSs to have been bought out by a major corporation. With MySpace’s new found fortunes and its firm standing in a niche market designed for a diverse group of users, a similar site known as Facebook found its way in the networks of college campuses.

Facebook’s Infancy

The beginnings of such an influential centerpiece on college students began in a fitting place: founder Mark Zuckerberg’s Harvard dorm room. Although much of the media attention has been focused on Zuckerberg, he did not create it alone. He had the help of several of his Harvard classmates, and he also received technical training from assisting other SNSs, notably ConnectU.com. Yet, he alone has become a poster-child of Generation Y’s ingenuity with digital technology.

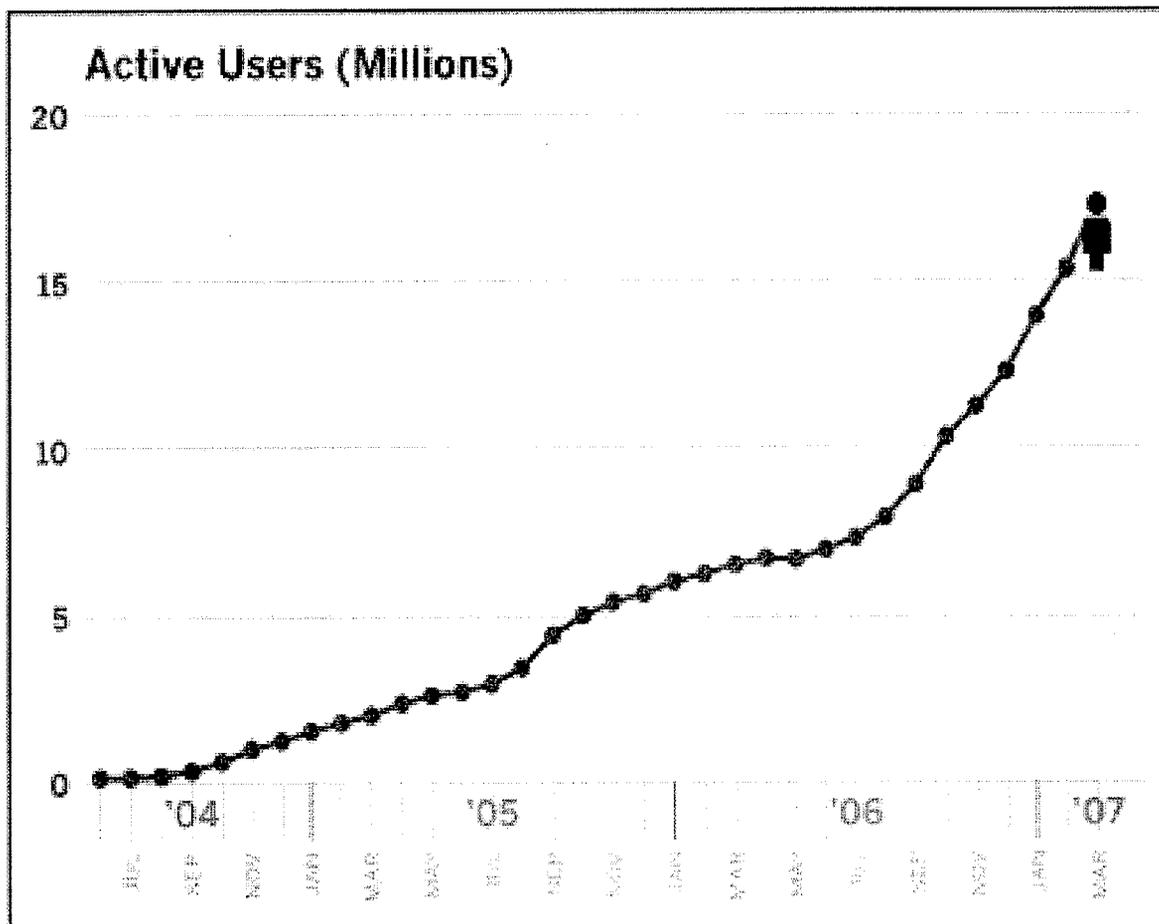
With the help of fellow Harvard students Chris Hughes and Dustin Moskovitz, Facebook successfully launched in February 2004. Within 24 hours, 1,200 Harvard students had signed up, and after one month, over half of the undergraduate population had a profile (Phillips 2007). The name itself is derived from college directory booklets, other wise known as a “facebook,” published on college campuses containing

information and portraits of entering freshmen. Facebook simply took that concept and streamlined it for the digital world, allowing members to keep and update a profile containing their names, school, major, age, sex, relationship status, political leanings, etc. Another key feature in Facebook is the ability to add “friends,” similar to MySpace and Friendster.

After much success on Harvard’s campus, Facebook expanded to other schools in the Ivy League (Facebook Press). In keeping with the idea of a closed community, only students using “edu” email addresses could become members. So essentially, Facebook became just as exclusive as its member schools. By the end of the year, as the company’s popularity continued to climb, Zuckerberg dropped out of school and moved Facebook’s headquarters to Palo Alto, California, situating itself among the heavyweights of Silicon Valley (Yahoo!, Ebay, Adobe, etc).

Eventually, as more students from selected institutions signed up, word of mouth about Facebook began to virally expand all over the US. Networks were opening in colleges as far north as Alaska and as far south as Brownsville, Texas (Facebook Press). In 2005, institutions in Puerto Rico and Canada joined the ranks, as well as several community colleges throughout the US (Facebook Press). Later, the service expanded overseas to Australia and New Zealand, and by the end of 2005, nearly 2,000 colleges were represented on the site (Ellison et al. 2007, vol. 12). The growth did not stop there.

Facebook's Exponential Growth



¹ Graph courtesy of Stephen Abram (2007).

In fact, much of what makes Facebook a fascination among social commentators and technology bloggers alike comes from its seemingly endless exponential growth (Lipsman 2007). There are many reasons this has occurred: early investment, sound business strategies, partnerships with leading software engineers, etc. One striking factor in its growth comes from its continuous expansion in key niche communities. As stated, the end of 2005 saw over 2,000 colleges from the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand gain access. However, the following year Facebook began toying with the idea of adding a high school format to the mix, which would allow users as young as 13 membership privileges. This proposal was met with fierce opposition from college members, who not only saw this move as an infringement on their Facebook sovereignty, but also a cheap attempt to gain popularity in untapped resources (Facebook 2005). Several petition drives were drafted hoping to persuade Facebook to withdraw these plans, however, with little consideration Facebook remained undeterred. This is one of the first examples of how users, many of whom did not know one another offline, gathered together for a common cause against controversial Facebook proposals. Unfortunately for them, the high school version successfully launched in early 2006.

With the arrival of a new demographic of young internet users (some as young as 13, the minimum age for Facebook registration), issues of safety became serious a concern for parents. Because of Facebook's historical closed network features, there is an even greater chance that one would know an online friend offline. But, since it is a closed network, parental access is much more difficult, if not impossible (Goodstein 2007). For

these reasons, the decision was made to keep both versions, college and high school, separate. Facebook's marketing director, Randi Zuckerberg², explains:

We definitely wanted to make it so that a grad student at the college could not meet a high school freshman girl. So they're totally different; high school members can't get on the college site and college kids can't get on the high school site. (Goodstein 2007:58)

However, problems regarding this system have come to light. For instance, recent high school grads discovered their newly upgraded college profiles did not allow them to correspond with their remaining high school friends, and vice versa. Zuckerberg admitted the system was not perfect, saying, "We have gotten complaints...but I think it's a smart thing to separate them" (Goodstein 2007:58). However, the format did not last long.

After a few months went by, and an inbox full of angry emails, Facebook amended its segregation policy. Now, high school students can add non-high school members in the same way college students add one another. The basic format of the high school site remains a carbon copy of its college counterpart. But since the required "edu" email does not apply to high school students, the closed-community feel Facebook once enjoyed has been damaged to a degree. Anti-high school sentiment continued in forms of groups and petitions, which still remain strong to this day. However, with open access comes the problem with online predators.

With so many students under the age of 18 signing up for this service, parents, educators, and even the government sector have become concerned over indecent solicitations of minors by sexual predators. This has become a highly reported problem in

² Sister of CEO and Founder, Mark Zuckerberg

many SNSs, but how much of a problem is subject to interpretation. Reports of teenagers and young adults meeting strangers online have been common, with one study finding that fourteen percent of teenage SNS users later meet face to face with people known solely online (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children). However, the report does not stipulate how these individuals knew one another before corresponding online and what forms of meetings took place. For instance, they could be strangers in the sense they have never met, but at the same time they could have common friends, which would be characterized a little different from *complete* strangers. In fact, many SNSs, including Facebook, have “friends of friends” functions –a function that allows a user to access their friends’ friends accounts as well as the ability to message them. But keep in mind that, as academic reports indicate, such meetings are in the minority. The majority of users maintain a profile for practical purposes: keeping in contact with old friends, maintaining new relationships made offline, and articulating their identity.

Anastasia Goodstein, author of *Totally Wired* argues that such solicitations by complete strangers are rare, with only a small fraction of minors responding to such messages (2007). The only time the general public hears of a child being kidnapped, molested, and/or killed by an online predator is through highly orchestrated and sensationalist media outlets. We forget that there are millions of users on these sites, and that the chances of a child being whisked away by an online predator is very remote. However, privacy measures are one of the main selling points of any SNS, and Facebook does provide such settings that can reassure most parents and users alike. Because of this, it is understandable why Zuckerberg was so enthusiastic about keeping the college and high school formats separate. Upon the failure of the segregation policy, Facebook’s

privacy settings were changed to accommodate a more user friendly tone. For example, one's privacy controls can now be made to restrict profile access as well as access to photo albums and one's friend list. This feature has remained relatively unchanged.

Global Expansion

With the high school format firmly established, and membership steadily rising, several high tech industry titans took notice. Investment by independent entities has become a very common occurrence at Facebook Headquarters, as evident with the 12.8 million dollars received by Accel Partners in early 2005. These early investments from venture capitalists helped ensure the steady growth of the site during its infancy. Consequently, the same year of these investments, the official url name switched from "thefacebook.com" to simply "facebook.com" after the company paid a reported 200,000 dollars (Williams 2007). However, for what Facebook is worth, these investments and spending are effectively pocket change. In early February 2006, closed-door offers from industry giants began to trickle through the media, with reports of offers exceeding well past MySpace's 580 million dollar buyout (Rosenbush 2006). In fact, Yahoo! Inc. put out a one billion dollar cash bid (Zuckerberg 2008). With what appeared to be a looming end to Facebook's triumphant status as a private company, many observers and users felt Facebook would become another casualty of corporate expansion, much like in MySpace's case. Instead, Facebook declined the offers, and focused on gathering smaller investments from technology firms, notably Microsoft's purchase of 1.6 percent of the company for 240 million dollars in 2007 (Zuckerberg 2008). This would mean Facebook's worth, according to Microsoft, is around 15 billion dollars, which observers regard as "wildly unrealistic" (Zuckerberg 2008). However, the devoted attention by so

many powerful investors has cemented Facebook as one of Silicon Valley's elite. As of early 2008, the company still remains private.

Aside from heavy interest by technology conglomerates and several high dollar bids, a new measure that would radically change Facebook's format was announced in early 2006: opening the doors for the general public. This did not catch many by surprise. Rather, with all the vested interest by Yahoo and Microsoft, this expansion was viewed as inevitable. On September 11, 2006, Facebook officially opened its doors to the entire global internet community (Jesdanun 2006). As with the introduction of high school students, the complete open-door policy was met with harsh criticism and organized campaigns by veteran users, many of whom regarded Facebook as having sold out. The group, *Facebook is For College Students, Not for anyone with an email, duh*, highlights this dismay. A message posted on the wall of the group exclaims, "If I wanted to be stalked by ANYONE, I would join Myspace, but I only want to be stalked by college students!" (Facebook 2006). In another group, students organized a plan to delete their accounts en masse in response to the public expansion. The group's introduction explains:

This is a group for those who are fed up with Facebook's plans to go public and believe that a public Facebook will be one with drastically diminished usefulness [*sic*]. It is different from the many other groups that exist for the same purpose, because inasmuch as joining a group constitutes an "official commitment," members of this group make the commitment to delete their profiles if Facebook goes forward with its plans. It is our hope that pressure from users and the threat of a drastically decreased userbase will persuade Facebook to keep the service private. While Facebook has offered enhanced privacy controls, they have gone public as of Tuesday, September 26. Remember that if you delete your profile you

should also post in the message board to record your former existence [*sic*] on facebook. (Facebook 2006)

This group, as of February 2, 2008, had 388 members. After checking the membership list, it is apparent only a small number of users actually deleted their profiles (a deleted profile can be determined whether or not the profile has an active link attached to it). Ironically, two years after the fact, the group still has an active membership base, with frequent wall postings and updated messages. However, not everyone protested Facebook's open policy. In fact, many users welcomed the change, and there were good reasons to. The open community allows more people from all over the globe the chance at participating and representing their unique backgrounds. This is evident with the influx of international users, many of whom were unable to participate before because their university did not have an established network on Facebook. Also, the open format allowed for an older generation of people the chance at using the service.

The onslaught of newly registered users following the 2006 general public takeover also brought on the introduction of a feature called a "Newsfeed." This function appears on users' homepage and contains recent information about their friends: newly joined groups, changes in relationship status, uploaded pictures, etc. Accompanying the Newsfeed is the "Mini-feed" feature. Located in the users profile itself, the Mini-feed updates changes made to the individual's profile in a list format. Items can be deleted by users at their discretion, however completely removing oneself from the Newsfeed and Mini-feed systems have not yet been worked out. Even the deletion of items in the Mini-feed does not guarantee they will not appear in a friend's Newsfeed. Privacy advocates have questioned whether this tool goes too far, stating that users could unintentionally

broadcast private information without even knowing. As before with the implementation of high school students and with the general public, protests became widespread in the incantation of groups. One particular group, *Students Against Facebook News Feed*, reached a membership of over 750,000 users, representing a sizeable chunk of Facebook's population (Facebook Statistics). The sheer size of the group did present Facebook with an interesting dilemma: risk alienating a large population of users by ignoring their grievances, or engage in some form of dialogue. In an indirect way of addressing the petition, Facebook amended some of its security features, allowing users to have more control of their privacy, while simultaneously allowing Facebook to continue promoting the Newsfeed and Mini-feeds. This compromise became one of the first major responses made by Facebook to its users. The second, and most recent, comes from a much more controversial program called "Beacon."

One question that lingers in the mind of most people unfamiliar with Facebook would be how it generates revenue, enough that can warrant billion dollar bids from corporations such as Yahoo. Since the site is completely free to join and use, advertising has become its primary method of income (Zuckerberg 2008). Knowing that switching the site to a premium service would essentially be the kiss of death, Facebook has tried to capitalize as much as it can through innovative advertising methods. Some of these methods, as in the case of Beacon, have become a controversial fixture in the digital community. Beacon is a service which partners with consumer-based websites (Ebay, Blockbuster, etc) in which the ³customer's buying history is shared with his or her Facebook friends. For example, if a Facebook user bought a shirt from a Beacon site, a

³ The customer must be registered with Facebook

notification would be sent to Facebook, telling them of the purchase. Facebook would then notify the user's friends through the Newsfeed. Zuckerberg describes it as a personal endorsement (Zuckerberg 2008). However, Beacon's main criticism stems from the inability to opt-out of the system, and critics argue it is an unnecessary invasion of a person's privacy. Users have also commented that Beacon has made Facebook over-commercialized. In response to criticism, Mark Zuckerberg states, "I actually think that this makes it less commercial. I mean, what would you rather see? A banner ad from Bloomingdale's or that one of your friends bought a scarf?" (2008).

Only months after being introduced, Beacon backfired tremendously after several major advertisers threatened to leave, citing privacy concerns as justification. Among those also feeling the direct effects were Facebook members. As reported by Leslie Stahl, one notable incident occurred when a man bought a diamond ring for his wife and his subsequent surprise was ruined when Beacon sent out notifications to his friends and wife on Facebook (Zuckerberg 2008). These initial problems with Beacon prompted Zuckerberg to issue a statement of apology:

About a month ago, we released a new feature called Beacon to try to help people share information with their friends about things they do on the web. We've made a lot of mistakes building this feature, but we've made even more with how we've handled them. We simply did a bad job with this release, and I apologize for it. While I am disappointed with our mistakes, we appreciate all the feedback we have received from our users. (2007)

Industry experts saw this as a major failure for Zuckerberg, as in the case of Kara Swisher, a former technology writer for the Wall Street Journal. Swisher regards the

mistake in Beacon was simply “doing it” and not making swift changes when problems occurred (Zuckerberg 2008). As of now, members have the ability to completely disable the program. But since Facebook relies so heavily on advertising for its revenue, new programs are sure to be implemented in the future. Whether this creates a new storm of controversy depends highly upon how Facebook structures its new advertising campaigns.

Future Outlook and Legal Troubles

With its worldwide user-base and steady investments, Facebook’s future appears to be set quite well. Questions regarding the company’s private status and plans of going public have become a new sensation after Microsoft’s hefty investment. When asked whether he plans to take his company public in 2008, Zuckerberg declares, “I think what I can announce is that it is highly unlikely that we will go public in 2008...and when going public makes sense to do, we’ll do that. And maybe that’s two years out; maybe it’s three years out” (2008). Though only 23, Zuckerberg sounds like a well seasoned CEO of any Fortune 500 company. And *that* fact is even harder to believe: a 23 year old college dropout creating and heading a multi-billion dollar company,⁴ and doing so in such a short period of time. But could he have done this all on his own, with his ideas alone? Recently, a similar SNS called “ConnectU” (also founded by Harvard students) has filed a lawsuit claiming Zuckerberg stole their ideas by using the format and source code from their site. ConnectU argues that Zuckerberg was given access to their code when he

⁴ Estimated; no exact figures released to public due to company being private.

briefly helped them complete the computer programming for their site. With his inside knowledge on ConnectU's background information, Zuckerberg has been accused of simply copying the ideas for Facebook. The lawsuit is still pending, but Zuckerberg and company regard these accusations as false with no evidence to back up the claims (Zuckerberg 2008).

Even in light of these allegations, Facebook continues to go strong. According to *TechCrunch*, "about 85 percent of students in previously supported colleges have a profile on the site. Of those who are signed up, 60 percent login *daily*. About 85 percent login at least once a week, and 93 percent login at least once a month." Chris Hughes, spokesman for Facebook, states, "People spend an average of 19 minutes a day on Facebook" (Arrington 2005). On a given day, an average of 250,000 people register with the site; every week sees a three percent rise in membership (Facebook Press). As stated before, membership levels in Facebook do rival most country's populations. With the new active involvement in protests and community engagement highlighted by Facebook's changes in policy as well as the inclusion of people around the globe, Facebook has become its own sovereign world. Its future certainly is not set in stone, but with such a vested interest by so many segments of society, it is certainly here to stay.

CHAPTER TWO

Traversing the Links: Navigating Facebook's Features

In 1983, well before the introduction of SNSs and the high performing internet technology of today, the book *Computers, Teaching and Learning* outlined the benefits of computers in education. In discussing how computers should be made to impact a larger proportion of people, the authors list the goals to be reached:

- Programs should be user-friendly. That is, educational software should not require a Ph.D. just to understand how to make it run properly. Mistakes should not be fatal (i.e., cause the program to stop running).
- Programs should be interesting. That is true for any educational media, although some topics are harder to make interesting than others.
- Programs should be well organized, use good learning principles, and provide feedback to students.
- Programs that make extensive use of graphics displays, figures, tables, and charts are usually more interesting than programs which rely solely on printed material.

(Dixon et al. 1983:183)

Even with all the changes and evolution of the personal computer, these principles are universally prescribed in all SNSs. Imagine if Facebook did not offer user-friendly service or a well organized format. The site would simply not have caught on and gained such an enormous user-base. With this in mind, a thorough understanding of Facebook's processes and functions lend vital support to the reader, and since a large portion of potential readers are not familiar with Facebook, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive guide illustrating the various terms and applications present in Facebook.

Signing Up

Registration has evolved since 2004 – first requiring users to have an “edu” e-mail address (only when site exclusively served college students), then allowing high school students to join with similar verification methods, and finally in mid 2006 allowing anyone with a valid email address to join.

The process of signing up requires little-to-no advanced computer skills. This insures that computer novices and first-time internet users alike will have the chance at joining. To sign up, one must enter an e-mail address as well as enter his or her name. Optional information includes various background information (hometown, employer, university, age, picture, etc) which allow for a more personalized profile. If a registrant uses an “edu” email address from a recognized college or university, then the profile will be automatically assigned to the registrant's school (ex: a utexas.edu address will be assigned to the University of Texas network). Otherwise, a registrant will need to choose a network (typically the user's hometown, country, or employer).

Login page



⁵ Received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

Profile Page

The profile page is the portal and starting point for any Facebook user; it is a user's beacon of individuality, personalization, and self-promotion. Aside from variations in background and icon displays, the profile format remains relatively the same as with other SNS's. A typical profile consists of the user's: name, age, picture, friend list, network (their school or hometown), and former high school (if applicable). Many users expand these profiles to include much more information, sometimes highly personal information such as a home address or phone number. In fact, it is not uncommon for users to leave highly sensitive information on their profile page. For example, Ellison et al. reported that more than 25 percent of users reported listing their cell phone number (2007, vol. 12).

The format of the profile is universal, and while one can upload personal pictures, notes, and applications, its overall look does not differ between Facebook users. In MySpace, much of its fanfare centers around its personalized pages in which users can change their backgrounds, add music, upload their blog, and link Youtube videos – creating a high variation in profile pages. For a long time MySpace held this distinction, but with the rush of public users following the 2006 expansion, Facebook introduced new features that would allow users to further customize their profile. Such features include: graphic wall posts (allowing friends to post drawings to the wall), Youtube video links, and interactive games.

Author's Homepage

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying the Facebook homepage. The address bar shows the URL <http://utexas.facebook.com/home.php?>. The browser's menu bar includes File, Edit, View, History, Bookmarks, Tools, and Help. The Facebook interface features a top navigation bar with links for Profile, edit, Friends, Networks, and Inbox. On the left, there is a search bar and a list of applications including Photos, Groups, Events, Marketplace, Top Friends, Compare People, and Socialistics. The main content area is titled "News Feed" and contains several updates:

- An update from "Updated: Ej Abrigo, Wendy Chang and Rusty Kocian are attending CSA's Light Up the Night (Lantern Festival)." with a photo of the event.
- A sponsored advertisement for "Need money?" from Uloop, promoting a marketplace for Texas students.
- Activity updates: "Sarabeth Sutton joined the group North Texas Exes.", "Sarabeth Sutton left the group Yes I Go To Uint and No I'm Not a Music Major. If You ask Me again I Will Kill Your Family.", and "Kate Roberts and Heidi Gardner are now friends."
- A photo album update: "Kari Kristoferson added new photos." showing four photos from a 2008 album.
- A final update: "Felicia Travieso is attending The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy."

 On the right side, there are sections for "Status Updates" (with a prompt "What are you doing right now?"), "Upcoming Events" (listing "JA GM" and "CNN and University Democrats hosted Presidential debate"), "Birthdays" (listing "Ali Reinhard" and "Queenä Lin"), "Invite Your Friends", and "New Stuff" (featuring a "More Cowbell" gift).

6

⁶ Received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

Author's Profile Page

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying the Facebook profile of Graham Dixon. The browser's address bar shows the URL <http://utexas.facebook.com/profile.php?id=7931881>. The Facebook navigation bar includes links for Profile, Friends, Networks, and Inbox, along with utility links for home, account, privacy, and logout.

Profile Information:

- Name:** Graham Dixon
- What are you doing right now?:** (Blank)
- Networks:** Texas '08, Austin, TX
- Sex:** Male
- Interested in:** Women
- Birthday:** March 15, 1986
- Hometown:** Austin, TX
- Political Views:** Moderate
- Religious Views:** Orthodox Grahamology

Mini-Feed: Displaying 10 stories. See All

February 10: Graham wrote on Jeremy Goyette's wall. 8:00pm

February 7: Graham wrote on Stephanie Creef's wall. 2:65pm

February 6:

- Graham wrote on Stephanie Creef's wall. 3:12pm
- Graham wrote on Griffin Hotchkiss's wall. 4:18pm
- Graham wrote on Emily Wong's wall. 4:17pm

February 5:

- Graham joined the group Convergence of social and business networking. 7:23pm
- Graham joined the group Social Network Analysis: On-line Roles, Community & Network Weaving. 7:04pm
- Graham joined the group Communities of Practice. 7:04pm
- Graham joined the group I should be working on my thesis, but I'm on...

Texas Friends: 102 friends at Texas. See All

Friends: Jonny Ahn, Padraic 'Paddy' Nichols, Nate Rosenberg, Tyson Yi, Felicia Travieso, Nick Morgan

Left Sidebar: Search, Applications (Photos, Groups, Events, Marketplace, Top Friends, Compare People, Socialistics), frutels, acne care in a candy?, frutels.com advertisement.

Bottom Taskbar: Start button, Facebook | Graham D..., Document1 - Microsoft Word, system tray showing 9:30 PM.

7

⁷ Received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

“Friending”

The term “friending” has become an important term not only in Facebook, but in other SNSs as well. Friends are the central tenet to an SNS’s existence; without them, Facebook nor any other SNS could exist, just like a town not being able to exist with one person.

The basic concept of “friending” is rather simple. By using either the “search” function or by simply browsing, a user can add another as a “friend” by clicking on a specialized link next to the member’s listing. After the link has been clicked, a notification is sent to the requested friend. The request can be either accepted or denied by the click of the mouse. If a friendship is accepted, then a notification will be sent back to the user; however, if the friendship is denied, no notification will be sent. As one accumulates friends, the profile will organize them according to their school and network affiliations.

Groups

Groups are virtual organizations in which users can join, manage, and even promote. A group’s content can be of any subject; however, the subject must abide by Facebook policy (pornography, spam, and racism is not allowed). Before Facebook’s expansion, users could only create and join groups within their school’s network. This meant that a user from Michigan State could not join a group made by a user from UT. However, in 2006, Facebook introduced “global groups” which allow any user the ability to join, regardless of network affiliation (Facebook Press). With global groups, the opportunity

for large numbers of users to participate in a single group opened up, allowing for record growth in group membership. For example, the group entitled “The Largest Facebook Group Ever” has reached a membership of over one million (Facebook). Though this particular group emits rather innocuous tones, with the 2008 presidential campaign season underway, political campaigns have utilized global groups in hopes of gathering support from young voters (Przybyla 2007). In fact, every major candidate, from the Democratic and Republican Party, has a group, with membership numbers ranging from 3,150 for Mike Gravel to 500,000 for Barack Obama (Facebook).

In the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, author Robert Putnam describes how today’s Americans have become disconnected from association: community, family, friends, and even democratic institutions (2000). With so much community and political involvement in Facebook groups, perhaps today’s generation of Americans instead choose online associations instead of offline, which can then contribute to the limited social participation as described by Putnam. However, it is not fully understood whether Facebook groups are a mere substitution for offline social participation, or rather, a starting point which leads to real-life association.

Variations in Groups

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying a Facebook group page. The address bar shows the URL: <http://utexas.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7321232170>. The page title is "Dept. of Anthropology UT-Austin".

Group Information:

- Name:** Dept. of Anthropology UT-Austin
- Type:** Common Interest • Activities
- Description:** Members of the Dept. of Anthropology.
- Contact Info:** Website: <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/anthropology/>; City/Town: Austin, TX

Posted Items: Displaying 2 of 4 posted items. [See All](#)

College of Liberal Arts, University of Texas at Austin
<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/scholarships/main/>

Award winners will be selected by the College Scholarship Committee and announced by April 30, 2008. For more information, contact Priscille Ebert in the Gebauer Building, GEB 2.200, or at 475-7586.

Merit-Based Scholarship is now available online.

The Merit-Based Scholarship Competition is now open until March 1,

Events We're Hosting:

- IntegrityUT Week**
Today, February 18 at 1:00pm
- Health Professions Week**
Today, February 18 at 2:00pm
- PreMed/PreDent Information Session**
Thursday, March 6 at 2:00pm
- Taking Care of Business: Applying to MBA Programs**
Tuesday, March 25 at 1:00pm
- Raising the Bar: Applying to Law School**
Tuesday, April 1 at 2:00pm
- Research Week**
Monday, April 14 at 8:00am

8

⁸ UT's Department of Anthropology Facebook Group; received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

Variations in Groups

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying a Facebook group page. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <http://utexas.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2202630785>. The Facebook navigation bar includes links for Profile, edit, Friends, Networks, Inbox, home, account, privacy, and logout. The group name is "High School Kids, Get the Fuck Off College Facebook" and it is located in Texas.

Information

Group Info

Name: High School Kids, Get the Fuck Off College Facebook
 Type: n/a
 Description: First, they let high school kids have Facebook. Now, they let them on college Facebook. This group is for all the people who say "GET THE FUCK OFF OF MY FACEBOOK"

Photos

No one has uploaded any photos.

Videos

No one has uploaded any videos.

Posted Items

No one has posted any items.

Discussion Board

Displaying 3 of 5 discussion topics.

god dammit
 1 post by 1 person. Updated on Mar 6, 2006 at 2:53 PM.

1 post by 1 person. Updated on Mar 2, 2006 at 3:46 PM.

Related Groups

I SAW Bone Thugs N Harmony at ZBTal!!! and it was ELAZIN!
 kalze needs to do something other than make out
 Just for Fun - Facebook Classics
 SHOES PARODY - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmWlx7smHc>
 Music - Religious

Keshav and Frankie 108
 Student Groups - Political Groups

Group Type

This is an open group on the Texas network. Anyone from Texas can join and invite others from Texas to join.

Admins

On the left sidebar, there is a search bar, a list of applications (Photos, Groups, Events, Marketplace, Top Friends, Compare People, Socialistics), and an advertisement for Facebook social ads. The bottom of the browser window shows the taskbar with icons for Star, Facebook, High Scho..., Document1 - Microso..., and the system clock at 9:59 PM.

9

⁹ A highly vocal group protesting the inclusion of high school students on Facebook received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

Events

Events are similar to groups in that they are postings created by users in order to promote parties, organize meetings, rallies, etc. The event format includes the date, time, location, host's name, and listing of invited guests. When an invitation is sent, a notification appears in the user's home page. Then, the user has the choice of clicking on either "attending," "maybe attending," and "not attending." Upon selecting their choice, users have the ability to browse the guest listings in order to see who will be attending and who will not. The events feature has become an efficient tool in supplementing posters and paper postings. (See examples on next page)

Networks

A network is the virtual community a user belongs to in Facebook. For college students, their network is their university; for other users, their network can be their hometown, high school, or job (ex: Apple, Ernst and Young, etc.). Users belonging to the same network can access each other's profiles, even without being friends. However, due to privacy concerns, many users have changed their profile settings, restricting access to just their friends.

Marketplace

Much like a newspaper's classified ads, the Marketplace is where users can post items for sale, search jobs, and place wanted ads. As of 2008, the service is free to use.

Events

Facebook | Ron Paul on the Main Mall - Mozilla Firefox

File Edit View History Bookmarks Tools Help

http://utexas.facebook.com/event.php?eid=8345552047

Getting Started Latest Headlines Yahoo!

facebook Profile edit Friends Networks Inbox home account privacy logout

Search

Applications Photos Groups Events Marketplace Top Friends Compare People Socialistics more

Summer of Your Life

ISLAND LAKE

Prestigious coed sleepaway camp seeking counselors. Great salaries and perks. Internships available. Interviews in Feb.

More Ads | Advertise

Ron Paul on the Main Mall Global

Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free

Information

Event Info

Name: Ron Paul on the Main Mall
 Tagline: Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free
 Host: UT Students for Ron Paul
 Type: Causes - Rally

Time and Place

Date: Saturday, February 23, 2008
 Time: 2:00pm - 8:00pm
 Location: University of Texas Main Mall
 Street: 200 W 22nd St
 City/Town: Austin, TX
 View Map

Description

Just in time for the March 4th Primary, Texas Congressman Ron Paul brings his message of freedom and the Constitution to the Capital of the Lone Star State. Come join thousands of your fellow Texans as we show America what it means to have Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Event will include live music by Jimmie Vaughan. Open to the public.

<http://ronpaulaustin.com/feb23>

*** EDIT: Working on bringing you more bands for an all day event! Please stay posted here and the website. ***

Confirmed Guests

This event has 1,259 confirmed guests. See All

RON PAUL ON THE MAIN MALL

Invite People to Come
 Remove from My Events

Share Export

Your RSVP

You are attending.

Attending
 Maybe Attending
 Not Attending

RSVP

Done

10

¹⁰ Rally for Republican candidate for President, Ron Paul; received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

Events

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying a Facebook event page. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <http://utexas.facebook.com/event.php?id=6118949566>. The Facebook navigation bar includes links for Profile, Friends, Networks, and Inbox, along with utility links for home, account, privacy, and logout.

The event page header reads "ONI ORGY on 6th STREET" with a tagline "One last chance to melt faces...". The event is categorized as "Music/Arts - Listening Party".

Event Info:
 Name: ONI ORGY on 6th STREET
 Tagline: One last chance to melt faces...
 Host: Tatsu Carlton
 Type: Music/Arts - Listening Party

Time and Place:
 Start Time: Saturday, December 8, 2007 at 11:00pm
 End Time: Sunday, December 9, 2007 at 3:00am
 Location: Tatsu's Loft above the Aquarium and Paradise on 6th and Trinity
 Street: 6th Street
 City/Town: Austin, TX
 View Map

Contact Info:
 Phone: 325.212.9069

Description:
 Tatsu is throwing a party this Saturday night, and ONI ORGY will be there to rock it out, one last time. Come get drunk and party with us!

Other Information:
 • Guests are allowed to bring friends to this event.

Your RSVP:
 You may be attending.
 Attending
 Maybe Attending
 Not Attending
 [RSVP]

Other Invites:
 Maybe Attending

The left sidebar contains a search bar, application links (Photos, Groups, Events, Marketplace, Top Friends, Compare People, Socialistics), and an advertisement titled "Do You Need Girl Help?" featuring a woman's face.

11

¹¹ Invitation for a college party, complete with live music; received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

The Wall

Located in the profile, the wall allows users to post messages for others to see. Unlike the messaging system, the wall can be viewed by friends and, if privacy controls allow, fellow network members. When a user makes a wall posting, a notification appears in the Newsfeed, alerting friends of the posting. Once a wall posting is made, it can either be accepted or deleted.

Applications

In May 2007, Zuckerberg introduced the Facebook Platform, which gives individual developers the ability to create applications for Facebook users. These applications supplement Facebook's profile features and allow users more personalization options. There is a wide range of applications, such as games, photo-editing devices, political commentary tools, calendars, etc. As of January 31, 2008, there are more than 14,000 applications (Facebook Statistics).

Photo Uploading

With this feature, users can upload personal photos from their digital cameras or from scanned prints. Aside from profile pictures, users can also create digital albums which can be accessed by friends and network members (depending on privacy controls). When creating an album, a user can "tag" his or her friends that appear in the photo by clicking their faces and typing in their names. Once someone has been tagged, a notification is sent to the respective user's inbox. From there, they can choose to accept or decline the tag request. Also included in the albums is a space which gives friends the ability to make

comments on each individual picture. Once a comment is made, a notification is sent to the user for verification.

Privacy Controls

The ability to control our personal information from being leaked and accessed by others is just as important in Facebook as it is in the offline world. Privacy features have evolved since the inception of Facebook, with users steadily given more direct controls over their profile pages. When users login, they can access a privacy control page which allow them the ability to restrict profile access, control their search/browse functions, and monitor what stories are published in the Newsfeed/Minifeed (see next page for more details).

Privacy Controls

facebook Profile edit Friends Networks Inbox (1) home account privacy logout

Search
Q-

Applications edit
Trips
Photos
iLike
Video
Groups
Scrabulous
Marketplace
more

Privacy Overview

Facebook wants you to share your information with exactly the people you want to see it. On this page, you'll find all the controls you need to set who can see your profile and the stuff in it, who can find and contact you on Facebook, and more.

Profile
You are in two networks and you can control who can see your profile, contact information, groups, wall, photos, posted items, online status, and status updates. [Edit Settings](#)

Search
You can control who can find you in searches and what appears in your search listing. [Edit Settings](#)

News Feed and Mini-Feed
You can control what actions show up in your Mini-Feed and your friends' News Feeds. [Edit Settings](#)

Poke, Message, and Friend Request
You can select which parts of your profile are visible to people you contact through a poke, message, or friend request. [Edit Settings](#)

Applications
You can edit your privacy for applications you have added to your account, applications that you have used on another website, and other applications built on Facebook Platform. [Edit Settings](#)

Block People

If you block someone, they will not be able to search for you, see your profile, or contact you on Facebook. Any ties you currently have with a person you block will be broken (friendship connections, relationships, etc).

Person: [Search](#)

Block List

You have not blocked anyone.

Limited Profile

If you want to hide some of the information in your profile from specific people, add them to your limited profile list below. [Edit Settings](#)

Person: [Add](#)

Limited Profile List

You have not limited profile access to anyone.

Facebook © 2007 [about](#) [developers](#) [jobs](#) [advertisers](#) [polls](#) [terms](#) [privacy](#) [help](#)

¹² Received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook (Facebook Press).

CHAPTER THREE

Instant Validation: Identity Performance in Facebook

My claim is not that cyberspace is a medium where one can transcend the bounds of race, gender, age, and so forth, and discover a kind of utopia on earth. (Although this is exactly what much internet hype still baldly proclaims). As we shall see, cyberspace is much more grounded in the “real world,” in all its inequities and injustices, than this fantasy would admit.

Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams*

Identity Performance

A performance can be defined as the sum of activity of a given participant which seeks to influence the audience in any way (Goffman 1959:15). The ways people construct their identity via performances is similar to how an actor assumes a role. People’s dramatizations of roles become a part of their identity and are used in varying circumstances dictated by the “established social role” (Goffman 1959:15). However, appearance and manner can contradict with each other, as seen “when a performer who appears to be of higher estate than his audience acts in a manner that is unexpectedly equalitarian” (Goffman 1959:25). The audience does not have to accept the influence, but can assume either active or passive roles with regard to the individual’s performance.

In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman argues that individuals are motivated in trying to control the impression of the situation their audience receives (Goffman 1959: 15; Faith 2007:3). He describes this action as *impression management*. By engaging in this activity, a performance can be influenced by an individual's expectations of how an audience will respond. For example, waiters do this when they want to make good tips. They use a certain language and method of interaction when performing for their customers and then employ a different form of identity with their friends. Sometimes, a performer can mistakenly confuse the audience's expectations and/or established social role (Goffman 1959: 27). Goffman's example includes: "Seamen, whose home away from home is rigorously he-man, tell stories of coming back home and inadvertently asking mother to "pass the fucking butter" (1959:15). When this occurs, the response from the audience can further cement the established social role, or if the response (or lack thereof) does not attempt to inhibit the performance, the established role can be tweaked or changed altogether. This shows the effect the audience has on the performer, demonstrating that while the performer tries to "define the situation" for the audience, the audience's reaction will greatly influence the performer (Goffman 1959:22). It is through this concept that I explore how Facebook has been used by members as a way of performing in hopes of quick audience reactions. To further explore this issue, it is important to first understand how online identities can be constructed, and what societal branches readily influence that construction.

Influence of Society in Online Identity Construction

The people who created and now use Facebook have generated new questions of how SNSs impact individuals and their society. I emphasize *their* because although SNSs

do have a considerable impact on the world, just as they do on the individual user, the selective nature of the individual's social input in Facebook will affect society in a similarly *selective* manner. Because of these connections, identity construction is heavily influenced by the society in which the individual resides in and is subjected to. Social psychologist Morris Rosenberg¹³ states, "If society may affect self esteem, so too may self esteem affect society" (1989:240). Self-esteem and the self image in Facebook can be characterized as something as mundane as college freshmen posting portraits of them standing in front of their school's student union, perhaps a subconscious symbolization of their association with that school, or in more extreme terms, young people posting pictures of their drunken nights and making comments on how wasted they were, all because they want to feel a part of their particular community. Sometimes, the line between reality and virtual reality do cross, and there exists consequences.

One such example, which has become a frequent occurrence on college campuses, deals with parties in which students dress up as racial stereotypes and engage in racially insensitive acts (Green 2006). Though extreme, these parties demonstrate the interrelated nature of society and the self and how Facebook has broken the chains of anonymity in the internet. In fact, the University of Texas Law School came under fire for just this type of incident after a group of first year students organized a "Ghetto Fabulous" themed party, complete with malt liquor, fried chicken, "gangster" style clothing, and other material commonly stereotyped with the Black community (Jensen 2006). It is known that after university officials caught wind of the party, the suspected students pled

¹³ It should be noted that Rosenberg's theory is very Western. Other societies, such as the Japanese, place a high emphasis on group dynamics; thus making the group just as important, or in some cases more important, than the individual. Because I use Rosenberg, I will be taking the Western perspective; thus placing emphasis on the individual rather than the group.

nothing but ignorance, regarding the incident only as a serious error in judgment. UT's Law School Dean Larry Sager stated, "Among the many ways to happily party in Austin, this particular one was singularly heedless and odious" (MSNBC 2006).

What Rosenberg tells us about people's attachment to society may explain more behind these students' actions. Rosenberg argues that self-esteem affects an "individuals' feelings of attachment to society" (1989:240). Considering all the students in question were first year law students; many of whom were most likely new to Austin, it is not surprising that even under the most absurd conditions these individuals found a way to co-mingle and feel a part of the group. Many of these students have much in common with one another. They share the same courses and professors; they live in the same community, under similar conditions, etc. So their selective social out-put (the party) was directly received by these shared commonalities. In these students' case, the result of their social output was harsh condemnation by the UT community: their professors, town, classmates, etc (Jensen 2006). This example shows how the direct results of students' self-esteem and self image affect their surrounding society...not society as a whole, but *their* administrators, *their* community, *their* classmates, etc.

Unfortunately, the direct results produced by these "ghetto fabulous" parties have brought forth serious questions of racism on campus. But another question comes to mind: just how did the university find out about this in the first place? It was, after all, a private party with only invited guests. In fact, the University discovered this party after pictures surfaced on Facebook. It appeared these bright and intelligent attorneys-to-be forgot that posting such incriminating evidence on a site viewed by millions of people was a bad idea. However, racist parties are not the only questionable occurrences in

Facebook. In fact, there have been many instances of students posting underage drinking photos, over-sexualized portraits, racy comments on their friends' walls, etc. In one highly publicized incident, a student was busted for skipping work after his employers discovered Facebook photos proving he was not sick, as he had stated. In fact, the photos showed him in costume and drinking alcohol at a Halloween party, which later forced the student to admit his real reason for skipping work: a massive hangover (WBZ, Boston). But why would students do such things, nevertheless post such ill-thought out items on one of the most accessed websites in the world? For a better understanding, we must explore why some SNS users, specifically adolescents and young adults, make these sporadic, impulse-driven decisions in online communities.

Goodstein suggests that impulsive decision-making in teens and young adults is due to their underdeveloped brains, specifically the prefrontal cortex which, when fully mature, allows individuals more control over impulses and the ability to make rational decisions (2007). However, this fact alone does little to explain the nature of the adolescent mind, much less why some teens and college students deliberately post provocative items on an SNS; rather, it disregards society's influence on the individual, which I argue, has a much stronger impact than the purely biological explanation as described by Goodstein. For instance, the emphasis of the interrelated nature of society and the individual by Rosenberg and Goffman corroborates this point (1983; 1959), with examples of this interrelation evident in many fields of modern mass communication: in the media, advertisements, television, etc. For example, the average American household watches 2 hours of television a day, and logs an average of 14 hours a week on the internet (Dawley 2006). As an individual watches a television program or surfs the web, a

digital citizen becomes exposed to a digital society that can easily manipulate and influence, from the moral guidance espoused by “Dr. Phil” to the political commentary shouted by the self described “truthiness” expert Stephen Colbert. Online, where users have much more freedom to quench their thirst for digital adventure, the amount of material is practically infinite. Websites catering to every need and want can be found, or even made. Youth culture’s strong relationship with the internet and digital media demonstrates how selected branches of society impact the adolescent and young adult. In this case, these branches of society include popular culture and marketing (i.e. celebrities, popular music, trends, technology, etc.) Take for example the changing role of the media. What was once confined to print and radio waves, the media has since expanded with the internet revolution. Blogs, digital tabloids, SNSs, and their accompanying advertisements have the advantage of being accessed more readily than with their paper or television counterparts. Because of this wide accessibility and outreach of online media, many catering to a specific demographic, the impact on users can be quite profound. In adolescents, the impact could be as simple as influencing them to buy the latest fashion in gadgets or clothes, or in a more open way, influencing their outward behavior. For example, photos of celebrities in varying states of inebriation (i.e. Britney Spears) circulating the digital media frequently can influence an adolescent’s behavior (Okey 2002:31), allowing them to think *if a celebrity can do this, then it is ok if I do it*. By using this rationale, then posting a racy photo or comment on their SNS will group them in the same league as their idol, whereas becoming *completely* ostracized by their peers or even authority figures is less likely to occur; it is accepted by *their* digital society. However, it should be noted that individuals who engage in provocative postings are not the majority

of Facebook users (Goodstein 2007). In fact, most users engage in fairly ordinary discourse (messaging friends, uploading simple portraits, etc). Yet, everyone is influenced by digital societies; just at different degrees, and we all channel this influence in similar ways when performing our cyber-identities. With this in mind, the question of how one performs their identity online is important. In discussing this, I use the term “instant validation” to describe how individuals engage in performance with the hopes of receiving instant feedback from their audience.

Instant Validation

In relation to identity performance, Goffman argues that individuals create “fronts” which are used as “expressive equipment” that are performed in a manner that defines the situation for the audience (1959:22). Fronts become an integral part between the relationship of the individuals and their audience during a performance. It is during the performance that the presentation of a front to the audience becomes an important piece of negotiating one’s identity. Goffman suggests that an audience can act as a judge during an individual’s performance, stating that if the front an individual presents lacks credibility and accuracy, the audience can feel compelled to “pounce on the chinks in his symbolic armor” (1959:59). Essentially, the audience, regardless of how the performer tries to define the situation through impression management, can respond to a misrepresented and contradictory performance with criticism. It is in this play between the individual and the audience the concept of instant validation becomes important. Instant validation can be described as publishing one’s image out into the open in order to get positive and instant feedback (Goodstein 2007: 61). Whereas Goffman describes the

interplay between the individual's front and the audience, instant validation can be described as the action of performers publishing their fronts in hopes of receiving instantaneous feedback from their audience. Facebook, I believe, has become a major carrier for this type of activity.

Instant validation is constantly being played. We engage in it: when we call our friends for advice, answer a question in class, or simply give a nod to a stranger crossing our path. The degree to which people "push" themselves out in the open can be on any end of the spectrum, but in instant validation, the expectation for audience reciprocation and confirmation is key (Goodstein 2007). Take for example when a professor presents an idea intended to receive a response to his or her class. The professor is effectively publishing a front in hopes of receiving instant feedback. This action is a form of instant validation. Also, to receive a desired response, the professor may use impressive management to influence how the audience will react. In more symbolic terms, the way people publish themselves by wearing certain attire, be it designer watches, diamond rings, Italian-made suits, or even a modest pair of jeans, exemplify how we can engage in non-verbal instant validation. And instant validation is not limited to the offline world. In fact, SNSs form a new platform for this discourse, and essentially revolutionize how people engage in instant validation.

In Facebook, there exist a variety of functions that broadcast users' self images to their online community. Portraits, albums, journals, movie lists, relationship status, wall postings, etc., are some of these broadcasting tools in Facebook. With these tools, users of all age ranges have been found to overtly publish their image, in some cases to highly sexualized and provocative lengths. Former editor in chief of Seventeen Magazine,

Sabrina Weill, discusses the reason why teens and young adults feel more emboldened to push their image online rather than offline:

That distance, that barrier, emboldens teens to do things that they would never do in person. No teen would ever strip down to their bathing suit at a party and say, “look at my body,” but essentially that’s what you’re doing when you post a photo of yourself online... The thoughts that teens may be having are, “this is funny” or “ this is fun, this is a dare,” “I don’t usually feel sexy, but I’m going to feel sexy today and post a picture of myself in my bathing suit online.”

(Goodstein 2007:63)

While Weill’s account states that the barrier between offline and online worlds allows for young users to post provocative items because they feel they are situated in a non-realistic setting, qualitative evidence refutes this assumption. A 1998 *New York Time’s* article by MIT Professor Sherry Turkle states “we now see a fusion of real life and online identity among adolescents that may enable a healthy expansion in how they think of themselves” (Goodstein 2007:67). If this was the case back in 1998, well before mainstream SNSs hit the web, then the “barrier” between reality and the virtual world as described by Weill is not as strong as believed to be, especially in Facebook where users typically engage in instant validation with people they already know offline (Ellison et al 2007, vol.12). My interviews with UT Facebook users illustrate this point. For example, when discussing how he chooses his profile picture, Robert, an education senior, states he wants a picture that people will laugh at, something that evokes a response in his friends which make them think, “He’s a funny guy.” Robert goes on to say:

Usually I try to find something that makes me look funny...making a goofy face, holding a beer bottle. If I do something stupid in a picture, I think it’s funny.

Also, Robert expresses how he enjoys reading his friends' comments on his pictures, in most cases pictures that were only taken several hours ago at a party. Concerning his "drunk pictures," Robert explained they were only available to his friends, and that he used Facebook's privacy control features to prevent strangers from viewing them.

Privacy, he told me, was a major factor in being a dedicated Facebook user. Facebook, he said, "is another dimension to my life...I can restrict access like I restrict access to my house, room, or car." Along similar lines, Rebecca, an engineering junior, views her photos as tools in conveying her personality to people. She also uses them to spark some humor with her Facebook friends. She explains:

I pick funny things for my profile picture, like me being inebriated or doing dumb things...or things that I've painted. I've untagged like two because they were really gross. [I then asked her to elaborate a bit] My friend Stephanie thought it would be funny to zoom in my cleavage and post that on Facebook. Yea, that's where I draw the line.

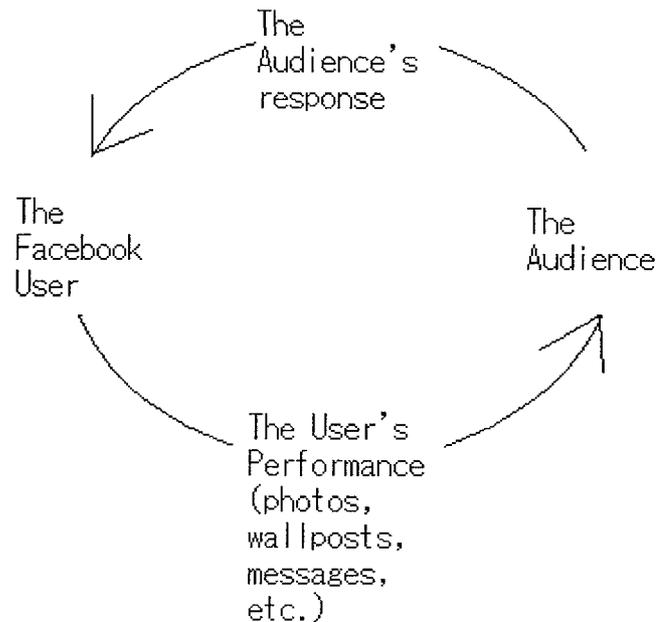
Even upon revealing how her privacy had been violated, Rebecca dismissed the event with a smile on her face, only to say that it got a lot of laughs out of her friends. In more sobering terms Maria, a senior political science major, discusses this same form of instant validation. In contrast to Robert and Rebecca, she explained to me how she rarely uses photos to broadcast her image, but instead uses quotes and movie lists. She states:

I do have one quote, from Woody Allen that says something like "I know I don't smoke but I look so handsome with a cigarette in my mouth I can't not have one" I guess that is one thing up there that is a reflection of my personality because I don't smoke that much. I also have my favorite movie list up as well, and my work, and where I go to school, and I have picture albums only available to my friends.

When asked how these quotes and movie lists were tied into her expectations of eliciting responses from friends, Maria asserted that she uploads items that are only a reflection of *her*, not of what she thinks others want her to be. She acknowledged that by uploading the Woody Allen quote and her favorite movie lists, she had hoped her sense of humor would be conveyed to her audience, demonstrating that even something perceived to be as innocuous as a quote can still be performed with expectations of an instant response. In fact, she had received several messages commenting on her quote and movie list only hours after updating her profile.

Robert, Rebecca, and Maria's narratives provide revealing examples of how instant validation manifests itself in Facebook and the SNS world. The universal assertion that Facebook is a form of private space demonstrated by the rest of informants suggests that instant validation in an online sense is not as different as it is in the offline world. While a computer program will never exist in the same reality of the offline world, Turkle's belief in a "fusion" between the online and offline self is wholly represented in Facebook today (Goodstein 2007:67). In reality though, the introduction of the SNS, Facebook in particular, has changed the role of the internet – from a shield of digital anonymity to a semi-open landscape where our offline and online identities differ little. With our full identities at stake in the open environment of an SNS, the "barrier" users once enjoyed has now been diminished. Because of this, most users engage in instant validation to the degree in which they trust a person, as demonstrated with Robert regarding his privacy controls over his pictures, or Maria's hesitation to upload her picture for fear others will find her immodest. Why they engage in this discourse varies

from person to person. But to sum it up, Rebecca simply put, “this is why I love this site...you can post such stupid things for your friends to see and get a response so quick.”



¹⁴ Fig. 1

In conclusion, my subjects reveal that by actively publishing performances of their identities via the mechanisms of Facebook, their engagement in instant validation has become a form of identity testing. The significance is that when users engage in instant validation they are effectively testing their identities in which their audience is the grader. The user’s published material (photos, messages, wall postings, etc.) is displayed to the audience (typically Facebook friends, but not always the case) who then process the information and elicit a response (or sometimes ignore altogether). The response from the audience (or lack thereof) becomes a critique of the performance published by the user, which in turn, can affect the construction of the user’s identity.

¹⁴ Model of instant validation in Facebook. Illustrates how the user’s performances (via photos, messages, etc) are processed and responded to by the audience. The audience’s response can then be used as an influential agent in the further construction of the user’s online display of identity.

Instant validation in Facebook is essentially the same as it is offline; however, Facebook provides one key feature which cannot be readily found outside of the internet: instant access to a responsive audience. Offline, there exist few social situations in which a person would have access to a large, responsive audience, and even at that, it is highly unlikely a person would have *instant* access (i.e. being able to interact with an audience whenever; and the ability to receive quick feedback). Facebook has essentially solved that problem; thus giving people the ability to engage with an audience faster and more efficiently than they ever could offline.

Instant Validation in Facebook

Profile
edit
Friends
Networks
Inbox (1)
Home
Account
Privacy
Logout

Search

Applications edit

- Photos
- Groups
- Events
- Marketplace
- Video
- Scrabulous
- more

Eliza Bennet
is video!

Updated 20 minutes ago edit

Networks: Jersey Shore, NJ
Birthday: May 17, 1982

▼ Mini-Feed
Displaying 6 stories. See All

Today

- Eliza recorded a new video. 12 photos
- woot video**
0:10 Recorded 5 minutes ago
- Eliza is video!
- Eliza added the Scrabulous application. Share

August 29

- Eliza commented on Holly Ann Calloway's photo. 12 photos
- Hot fun in the summertime ... lookin' goodooooooooooooo!

August 19

- Eliza wrote on Pip Havisam's wall.
- Eliza and Dylan Sole are now friends.

▼ Information

Personal Info

Activities: hanging out with my girls, being sarcastic, laughing, reading, mocking people to their faces

Interests: defining people's character for them, gossip, writing letters (the old fashioned way)

Favorite Books: any novel

Favorite Quotes: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that any man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife"--JA

About Me: you think I can tell you in the space of this box?

▼ The Wall
Displaying the only 2 wall posts. See All

Write something on your own Wall.

Attach: Record Video Share Link Add Music

Posts

- Dowey McAlister** wrote at 9:46am on August 23rd, 2007
Nice outfit last night!
Wall-to-Wall - Write on Dowey's Wall - Message - Delete
- Pip Havisam** wrote at 2:32pm on August 15th, 2007
Call me soon ... need 2 chat wu!
Wall-to-Wall - Write on Pip's Wall - Message - Delete

▼ Friends See All

5 friends

Dowey McAlister

Dylan Sole

Elis Bell

Holly Ann Calloway

Pip Havisam

▼ (fluff)Friends See more about Rawr.

"burnination!"

My name is Rawr.

Pet Me!
Feed Me!

▼ Friends in Other Networks

Networks with the most friends
Jersey Shore, NJ (4)

Networks you belong to
Jersey Shore, NJ (4)

Show All Networks | View All Friends

▼ Scrabulous See more about Scrabulous.

15

¹⁵ Facebook Press-issued profile format (i.e. fake profile). Notice Eliza's comment on Holly Ann Calloway's photo: an example of audience critique. Also, Eliza acts as a performer with her video recording entitled "woot." Received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook (Facebook Press).

Profile [edit](#) Friends [▼](#) Inbox [▼](#) Home [Account](#) [Privacy](#) [Logout](#)



[View Photos of Me \(41\)](#)

Graham Dixon
 is going to Japan!
 Updated just a moment ago · edit

Networks: [Texas '06](#)
[Japan](#)

Sex: [Male](#)

Interested In: [Women](#)

Birthday: [March 15, 1986](#)

Political Views: [Moderate](#)

Religious Views: [Orthodox Grahamology](#)

16

Wall Postings



[REDACTED] (North Texas) wrote
 at 7:32pm on April 4th, 2008

when are you leaving?

[Wall-to-Wall](#) - [Write on Yonathan's Wall](#) - [Delete](#)



[REDACTED] (Pacific) wrote
 at 6:19pm on April 4th, 2008

Congratulations!!! That's so Awesome. And, yeah... it is hard to believe it's been almost a year. Unfortunately, I can't go... I've got classes this summer ; (BUT, if I find out what day y'all are off, I may come down to stalk you guys *ahem*, I mean, come and visit, since Stockton's only like an ninety minutes from SJ.

[Wall-to-Wall](#) - [Write on Sarah's Wall](#) - [Delete](#)

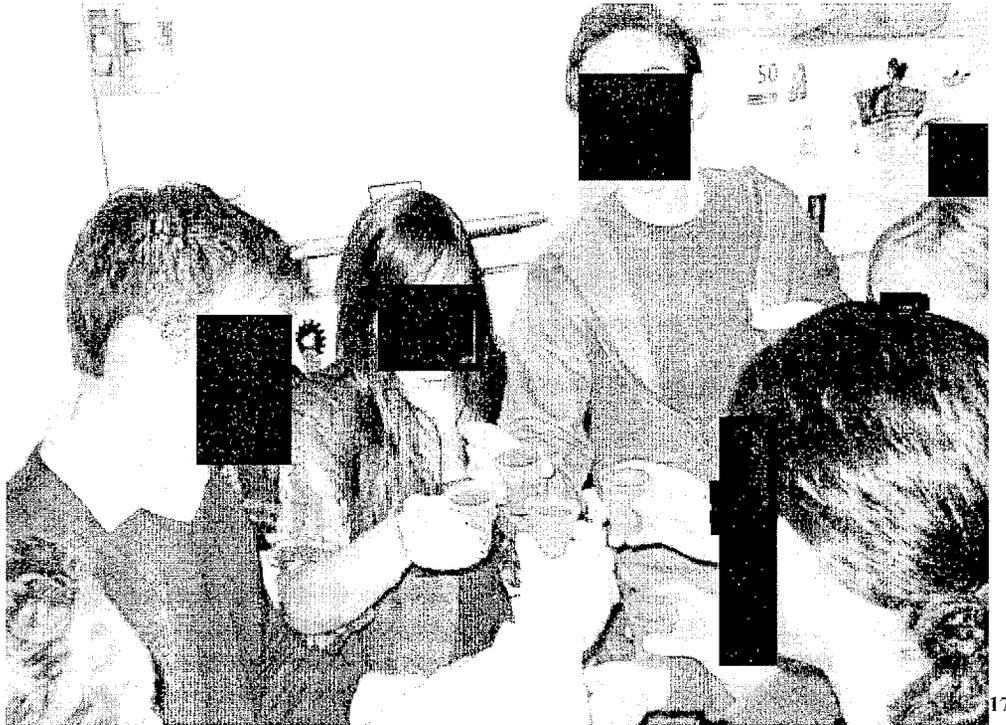


[REDACTED] (Pacific) wrote
 at 12:52pm on April 4th, 2008

hey Graham... I saw your status- did you get accepted as a JET? :)

[Wall-to-Wall](#) - [Write on Sarah's Wall](#) - [Delete](#)

¹⁶ The author's profile. After updating my status bar to inform my friends about new job in Japan, I received several congratulatory wall postings, many of which were sent only a few hours after updating my profile. Received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.



[redacted] (Orange County, CA) wrote
at 5:27am on December 13th, 2007

hahaha... someone looks very... very... happy. haha.



[redacted] wrote
at 12:16pm on December 13th, 2007

I like how only [redacted] knew how to use those frozen shots...we were supposed to take them out of the cups

Delete



[redacted] wrote
at 6:39pm on December 13th, 2007

Then it would've been all sticky...



[redacted] wrote
at 12:12am on December 14th, 2007

Its an illusion my friend. Mine is still in the cup. What a great shot of us shooting.

¹⁷ A photo uploaded by an informant. Notice the comments. Received written permission to use; courtesy of Facebook.

The Imaginary Audience

Developmental Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett proposes that the rise in digital self-portraiture comes from “a high-tech way of expressing an impulse among teenagers and young adults called the *imaginary audience*” (Willaims 2006; Goodstein 2007:64). According to Arnett, adolescents and young adults often imagine greater interest in themselves on the part of their social environments than actually exist – they entertain ‘imaginary audiences.’ There is a subconscious belief that people are constantly looking at them and judging what they are doing, even if it is as benign as walking across a parking lot (Goodstein 2007). The presence of this imaginary audience acts as an influential agent in convincing users their performances are being readily watched, and since Facebook can provide a faster/more efficient method of communication to a wide audience,¹⁸ users might be more willing to engage in instant validation based on their belief a large audience is waiting to critique and comment on their performances.

The fact that Facebook displays a user’s friends list in the profile page practically illustrates a visual form of an imaginary audience. Users may believe that their friends are taking every little detail of their profile into account, when in reality the majority of their friends are either not logged in, or do not readily check their page. Ellison et al. found that 97 percent of Michigan State University Facebook users believe at any given time their profile page is being viewed by old high school friends; 91percent

¹⁸ As opposed to telephone, in-person, or video communication. The main difference between these forms of communication and Facebook is that Facebook allows an individual to have universal access to an audience, whereas offline, potential audience members may have social limitations that can vary their receptiveness towards individual performers (i.e. A few of my informants described how they feel awkward chatting on the phone with a certain person, and prefer to instead use a more impersonal communication device: the internet).

believe fellow classmates are viewing their profile; and 90 percent believe their profile is viewed by “other friends” (2007). The study implies that these three examples are based off of the user’s added Facebook friends. However, the article also states that 80 percent assumed their audience to be “total MSU strangers,” as well as 79 percent perceived their audience as “someone they met at a party” (2007). The latter two results signify how participants in this study assume an imaginary audience much in the same way a student walking across campus would perceive being viewed by “total MSU strangers.” The combined data from Ellison et al. demonstrates a strong likelihood that Facebook users, as in the case of MSU, frequently assume an imaginary audience.

However, my informants’ personal reflections contradict Ellison et al.’s findings, whereas the majority of them rejected the idea that they believed they were being watched constantly, especially by random UT users. Maria elaborated, stating,

I like to think I’m not that interesting or exciting. I don’t want to think people are clicking into my profile all the time.

The only people that she admitted were, in her thoughts, viewing her profile at any time, were “close friends or members of her student organization.” Christine, an engineering student whose profile contains more portraits and pictures (many containing “drunk party pics”), still agrees that only close friends look at her profile, and even at that, “they do not look often.” In fact, the majority of my subjects, whose Facebook-use ranges from logging on only once a week to several times a day, agreed with these notions: (1) They did not perceive being readily watched, (2) those who did visit their profiles were just “close friends,” and (3) they were indifferent to who was looking at their profile at a particular time.

While these accounts contradict Ellison et al.'s findings, they do not disprove the existence of an imaginary audience in Facebook. Rather, my findings indicate that my subjects either consciously conceal their imaginary audience, or are completely unaware of its existence in their cyber-lives. Another possible reason could be caused by the personal nature of my fieldwork itself. Perhaps my informants, because of the interview format, did not feel comfortable disclosing their true imaginary audience perceptions (an example of a social desirability response), whereas Ellison et al.'s subjects had a veil of anonymity due to the study's internet- survey based format (2007). In order to address these inconsistencies, more research, in combined qualitative and quantitative methodology should be performed with a larger participant group from different colleges across the US.

Instant Validation and Symbolic and Social Capital

Symbolic capital can be described as the “quantity of honor or prestige a particular person holds within the context of particular social structures” (Traphagan, 2007). People use this capital in discourse, implementing power and influence, as well as promoting their individual sense of self. The instruments of influence form as intangible social constructs, such as a title or diploma. However, symbolic capital is dependent on its societal context, whereas different societies may have different applications for such instruments of influence. For example, a public school teacher in one country can be viewed as a diligent educator on par with the best university professors, or in another country could be viewed as a simple public servant with little admiration. They are both of the same profession, but the two societies have different interpretations on their

symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is also a part of a person's identity (Traphagan).

Symbolic capital should not be confused with social capital; however, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Social capital as John Traphagan explains is

Identified in terms of a person's position within a matrix of social relationships; it implies having attained wealth in some form (economic, knowledge, etc), and for example, an education represents a means of attaining social capital. (2007)

This demonstrates that one's symbolic capital (ex. title of nobility) can be used as a form of social capital (confirmation of power). In Facebook, users engage in this form of discourse frequently (affiliation with schools, Greek life, exclusive groups, etc).

However, the real point of inquiry is whether Facebook students actively convert symbolic capital into social capital, and if so, how often. In conjunction with this idea, I asked my informants if and/or how their associations with Facebook-related items (groups, relationship-status, friends list, college network, etc) were used in cyber discourse – for example, how they felt about their attachments to the UT Facebook community relative to friends from other schools and networks. Christine affirms her feelings on the exclusivity of being a college student in an ever expansive public Facebook. She states:

I hate it (the facebook expansion) I thought it was a great idea and genius to have it for just college students...I hated that it expanded to high school also, because since I went to a small high school, all the little high schoolers started adding me as a friend, sometimes I wasn't even friends with them in the first place, and I just ignored them until they actually got a college account.

Christine's process of ignoring high school friend requests based upon them not attaining the level she deems fit, in this case being a part of a university network, shows how she

uses her university affiliation as a form of social capital. She explained further that the connected and closed-community feel that Facebook once enjoyed prior to the expansion had been “completely lost.” Along the same lines, Brett, an engineering senior, remarked:

I thought it was cool when it was a college thing, that's what made it unique. I guess for them it was in their best interest. It was kind of like a closed community. The only people I want to contact on Facebook are in that demographic (college students).

The rest of my subjects expressed similar sentiments. Also, the majority of them felt a sense of privilege and class from being college students in the rapidly expanding Facebook. In fact, new statistics show that roughly 49 percent of Facebook users are college students¹⁹, making them not only a minority, but a minority in a website that was once solely dedicated to their kind (Facebook Statistics). And it has become evident that UT students, though not always in an overt way, use their status as members of their university's network as a form of social capital.

Another potential form of social capital in Facebook is a user's *friends list*. In Facebook, a friends list becomes an essential component of the user's identity in which it can be readily accessed. Whereas offline, one has the ability to conceal their friendships, in Facebook though, your friendships and relationships are broadcast for many to see. With this in mind, the potential for this function to be used as social capital is high. While most of my informants disclosed they have never viewed their friends list as a form of capital, they did recognize that some Facebook users add large quantities of people just for the sake of having a high number of “friends.” In fact, my informants plainly stated

¹⁹ To be precise, they are college students that are members of college networks.

their disgust with these people. When asked how he viewed his friends list as a form of capital, Robert responded:

I have around 300 friends, but I have very few real friends...maybe like 10 percent are my real friends. I don't add anyone. I wait till someone adds me. Since I have so few people on the site that are really my friends I just don't go adding people at random. I don't think having a lot of friends on Facebook really means anything.

Christine similarly states:

I probably have around 400 friends on Facebook...about half of them are people that I met at school, so if I see them, I will stop by and chat for a few minutes, but the ones that are real friends, that I'll go and spend the weekend with, are around 30...I don't like the people who rack up fake friends just to seem popular on Facebook, I mean, it's just the internet!

Both Robert and Christine's thoughts are echoed by all of my informants²⁰, which suggest that the amount of friends in Facebook is not actively used as a form of social capital. However, if "friends" are being used as capital, the market value would be reduced heavily based upon the largely negative views displayed by my informants. Also, my informants' responses raised an interesting point: if only a small percentage of their friends are seen as true "friends," then what is the purpose of adding everyone else? Ellison et al.'s article, *Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites*, found a positive relationship between certain forms of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital in Michigan State University

²⁰ My informants' average number of friends was around 250.

undergraduates, specifically in why they create these “weak-ties” with non-friends (2007). They go on to state:

Our findings suggest that certain kinds of Facebook use can help students accumulate and maintain bridging social capital. This form of social capital – which is closely linked to the notion of “weak ties” –seems well-suited to social software applications, as suggested by Donath and boyd (2004), because it enables users to maintain such ties cheaply and easily. Although more research is needed to understand the nature of this trend, we suspect that Facebook serves to lower the barriers to participation so that students who might otherwise shy away from initiating communication with or responding to others are encouraged to do so through Facebook’s affordances... This implies that highly engaged users are using Facebook to crystallize relationships that might otherwise remain ephemeral (Ellison et al. 2007, vol. 12)

In fact, my informants generally responded that the main purpose of using Facebook was to keep in touch with old high school friends, many of whom they would not readily correspond with if they were not on Facebook. Robert told me,

It’s nice for the people that I’m not really close to, to be able to find out what they’re doing without calling them and talking to them for a long time.

Maria shares similar thoughts, stating

It’s just one more way to keep in touch. Sometimes calling someone you don’t know that well, it can be awkward. It is easier to write on their wall, instead of calling them up...it’s just a smaller step...and if you don’t want to respond, you don’t have to.

These sentiments were not exclusive to just Robert and Maria; in fact the majority of my informants expressed similar feelings. Although Ellison et al.’s conclusions were drawn

primarily through quantitative data (surveys), my personal interviews further corroborate their findings.

In terms of identity performance, it can be shown that the products of instant validation can be used as forms of social capital. Just as college Facebook members use their university affiliation as a form of capital, as in the case of Christine, responses from audience members provoked through instant validation can, in some cases, be used in similar manners. For example, when showing me her various albums, Rebecca explained to me that comments she receives from friends (regarding her pictures) are accessible to anyone that can view her profile. Because of this, she told me that any comments that were blatantly offensive or condemnatory could be removed. After asking why she felt compelled to remove these types of comments, Rebecca stated that the point of displaying photos (specifically racy party pictures with many of her friends tagged along), would be to receive a lighthearted and “silly” response from her audience, not something negative or disapproving in nature. She allowed me to glance at a few of her pictures and their accompanying responses. The comments ranged from online displays of laughter (lol, lmao, etc)²¹, compliments, and lighthearted criticism written in a sarcastic manner.

When exploring this issue with the rest of my informants, it was demonstrated that they universally engaged in the same form of behavior. Although Rebecca, like all of my informants, did not specifically state that the inclusion of positive comments were a form of capital, it can be inferred that the high frequency in separating out bad comments

²¹ Lol is an abbreviation for “laughing out loud;” LMAO stands for “laughing my ass off.” Both are used frequently as a form of internet slang.

from good can be seen as a method of categorizing a form of capital. Since the user has full control over comments, it is very possible that the allowance of positive comments produced from instant validation can be then used as a form of social capital on Facebook.

Conclusion

Facebook has become a platform for identity performance, with many of its members actively using, and almost exploiting its streamlined digital features to perform for their audience. By further exploring how users perform their identities, it has been demonstrated that the active engagement in instant validation has become a form of identity testing in which the audience's response can influence how the user further constructs his or her identity. As shown in some instances, the audience's response can then be used as a form of social capital and traded and exchanged in the online social marketplace. Furthermore, the presence of an imaginary audience, though verbally denied but supported by the actions of my informants, enables users to believe that their published material will be instantly accessed, digested, and responded to. Since Facebook essentially categorizes an imaginary audience via the friends list, then it is not surprising the site has become a place where individuals constantly perform.

The significance of this research is that while instant validation is being played both online and offline, Facebook has the ability to connect a user with a large and geographically diverse audience who in some cases consist of people the user cannot personally interact with on a regular basis. Because of this, Facebook gives users a faster and more efficient method of communication to a wide audience, and thus allows for instant validation to be played with relative ease. Although most of my findings reflect the contributions made by my informants, further research encompassing larger participant groups should be conducted to explore whether the high engagement in instant validation is an ongoing trend among all Facebook users.

When exploring cyberspace the question of whether this digital landscape embodies a certain life form comes to mind – is it real or imaginary? In Julian Dibbell’s groundbreaking article, *A Rape in Cyberspace*, he asserts that cyberspace is “neither exactly real nor exactly make-belief, but profoundly, compellingly, and emotionally *true*” (Dibbell 1993). The ways in which Facebook users actively engage in identity performance via instant validation fulfils Dibbell’s belief. The computer age, like never before, is seeing a cyber-community actively participate in discourses that were once bound to the terms of offline worlds. As Facebook users continually engage in these discourses, our concept of the cyber-world changes from an imaginary existence to a new and very real form of identity exploration.

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