

IMPACTS OF STUDENT IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

By

SARA AGOSTINELLI

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education

August 2009

To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Sara Agostinelli find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Eric Anctil, Ph.D., Chair

Al Jamison, Ph.D.

Willie Heggins, Ph.D.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I have many people to thank for my completion of this project. First, I need to credit my chair, Dr. Eric Anctil, for both challenging and supporting me in the writing process, as well as, for the countless conversations about Facebook over the past three years. Second, I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Al Jamison and Dr. Willie Heggins for their thoughtful feedback and critical readings of my work. Finally, I would like to thank my supervisor, Edwin Hamada, for listening to me talk about my research, and share more Facebook information than I am sure he cared about. It is these four men that have allowed me to arrive at this place, as they all pushed me intellectually, while still offering encouragement through the process of this project.

IMPACTS OF STUDENT IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Abstract

By Sara Agostinelli, M. A.
Washington State University
August 2009

Chair: Eric Anctil

Online social networks have been growing exponentially since their creation in the early 2000's, and the vast majority of college undergraduates are active members of at least one network. Even though the Internet is a public place, students share a great deal of personal information online as they work to construct their identity online, in image of their offline identity. The purpose of this study is to explore what factors impact how students construct their online identity by examining this through a multiple selves theory framework, as students often behave differently based on the social environment in which they are involved. These factors allow student affairs practitioners to examine ways students critically consider their own identity and what motivates them to share and hide personal information about themselves online.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of Study.....	3
Guiding Research Questions.....	4
Method	5
CHAPTER TWO	7
LITERATURE REVIEW	7
History of Social Networking, the Internet and Facebook	7
Privacy and Self-disclosure Trends Online	9
Quality of Intimacy in Online Interactions	15
Role of Non-Students in Online Social Networks	17
CHAPTER THREE	23
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	23
Data Collection	26
Data Analysis	27
CHAPTER FOUR.....	29
FINDINGS.....	29
Vastness of the Network.....	29

Facebook “Creepers”	31
Presence of Parents	33
Use of Privacy Settings.....	35
Realization of Self.....	37
Awareness of Stereotypes	38
CHAPTER FIVE	41
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMENDATIONS	41
Implications for Practice and Future Research	44
BIBLIOGRAPY	46
APPENDIX A.....	49
APPENDIX B	51
APPENDIX C	53
APPENDIX D.....	54

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my ten students willing to share their stories and experiences with me. You all have given me the ability to critically examine a rising trend and taught me how to be a better student affairs professional. Your honesty and time is much appreciated. Thank you all.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, a new form of online social networking has been sweeping colleges and universities around the country, creating new methods of communication for students. Online social networking websites, like Facebook and MySpace, have risen in popularity since their birth in the early 2000's, which has only continued to grow in number of users, with Facebook leading the way. According to the social networking website, Facebook has over 110 million active users, is the fourth most trafficked website in the world, and is the most trafficked social networking website in the world (Facebook.com, 2008).

Online social networking websites have brought together a variety of online forms of communication into one website in which people may actively engage. These social networking tools have combined the ability for people to blog (see Appendix A) in online forums, send targeted messages privately to friends, post public messages to friends on their page and instant message with friends who are also online and logged onto the same website. In May 2007 Facebook added a new feature in which users may develop their own applications on the Facebook Platform. Applications are additional tools or games used to personalize a webpage. Facebook users can now send birthday "flowers" to a buddy, play online scrabble with a friend, and take a quiz that tells what brand of sports car they are without leaving the Facebook website. Facebook users are now able to adapt the website to their specific interests and represent themselves online in new ways by developing applications specifically tailored to their own individual interests. Never before have students been able to publicly journal, email, update friends, publicly and send an instant message all within the same website. By combining multiple

forms of online communication, Facebook has captured the attention and interest of college students across the globe.

This new social networking tool is a true phenomenon. Research has shown that an estimated 90 percent of college students use online social networking websites, yet many of these students fail to do so in a secure manner (VanDerWerk, 2007; Gross & Acquisti, 2005). The continuous growth is not limited to college students, as Facebook's fastest growing demographic is people 25-years of age and older (Facebook.com, 2008).

These websites also allow students to construct their online identity, in similar fashion to their offline identity, with people they know both online and offline. The difference between students' online and offline identities is that they may choose who gains access to their profiles, and how much of their profiles are visible, by utilizing the privacy settings offered through the websites. While privacy settings do allow students to greatly limit access to their information, very few students use the privacy settings to their fullest extent. It is possible for students to share only certain aspects of their lives and offer a dramatic view of their true self by limiting what is shared within their created profile. Students may also choose to share their intentions for joining the online social network. This may be to network or make friends, but students may also choose the options of dating, finding a relationship or "whatever they can get" referring to seeking a casual one-time connection with someone else. With multiple options available for the purpose of joining the social network, the websites highlights its own spectrum for the intentions of their users. Others are just looking for the next "hook-up", and recognize that a social networking website which contains the majority of individuals on their college campus can greatly assist in setting up a "one night stand".

The impact online social networks may potentially have is not limited to college-aged students. President Barack Obama examined online social networks and the impact these websites can have on an individual based on the information people share online (Obama Transition Foundation, 2008). In a questionnaire for people interested in a position with the Obama-Biden administration as they transitioned into the White House in 2009, Obama's team requested that all applicants, "please provide the URL address of any websites that feature you in either a personal or professional capacity, (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, etc.)" (Obama Transition Foundation, 2008, pg. 7) showing that more than just college students are participating in online social networks and that this participation can greatly impact an individual.

Even with a growing number of active users and interest from both college and non-college students, there has been little formal research done on social networking tools, specifically Facebook. There is a lack of research on students' perception of their online identity, what they choose to share with others, what they choose to protect from others and how they make these decisions.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how traditional-aged college students construct an online identity and how they choose to project this identity through emphasizing or embellishing certain characteristics of this identity. Based on profile-content choices (i.e., what personal information they choose to share, etc), this study will examine what students self-report about themselves on social networking sites and how they hope to be perceived by others based on those postings. This profile content will include personal pictures, descriptions, and other details that reflect how participants wish to be perceived by others.

Facebook, an online social network created just over five years ago in 2004, offers a

virtual meeting space for people to connect with others. The nature of Facebook suggests that multiple interactions take place between those who post information and those who view it. It is possible that a person with a Facebook profile might have close friends, acquaintances, family members, and strangers all provided the same access to personal information about the individual.

This study is significant due to the amount of information that students make available through online social networks and the potentially damaging consequences that revealing private information can have on an individual. With a growing number of employers, student conduct offices and parents creating online profiles, students become more likely to share their information with people they do not intend to. This study will explore if students see the potential of being “watched” online, and with this, the consequences that may come from the choices they make online. This study will add to the existing research and examine whether students are aware of these issues.

Guiding Research Questions

Available research points to the growing popularity and importance of social networking sites and such growth implies that a plethora of the college student population is forming their identity online. However, it is not yet clear how students perceive their own identity construction and how they choose what to share and withhold in online social networks and what factors impact these decisions.

This study poses the question: how do students perceive their own online identity and what impacts how they form their online identity? It will also ask:

- According to students, who’s observing their online activity?

- Are students aware of the potential for parents, employers, and higher education administrators to use the website for surveillance of student behavior?
- If it were up to the student, which individuals or groups would not have access to the student's profile and online identity?
- How do students adjust their behavior online to protect their identity?

Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Patton (2002) states that qualitative researches use a phenomenological approach to “focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world” (p.106). Since a phenomenological approach aims to understand the lived experience, it would give insight to students' identity construction in online social networks, as it is difficult to truly understand why others act in the ways that they do. By combining multiple experiences, shared themes will arise to create an understanding of behavior in online social networks by traditional-aged college students.

This qualitative study was conducted at a large, Pacific Northwest, land-grant institution. Participants in this study include ten undergraduate college students. Stratified random sampling was used to gain participants for this study. The study was advertised via Facebook to ensure all participants were active Facebook users and students were selected using a stratified method to reflect gender differences on the campus. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to gather information from participants. In these qualitative responsive interviews, the interviewees were able to provide examples of their understanding of their online identity, who they think views their websites, if they think about who else could be viewing their profile, and if they adjust their online behavior due to the consideration of someone watching them online.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim before the content was analyzed. The identifying information was kept confidential, and data was interpreted for emerging patterns. The results are shared as the findings for this research study, but names of the participants were kept confidential.

The goal of this study is to provide greater understanding of students' self-perception online, how they critically think about their online identity and whom they perceive as a risk to their identity construction. The next chapter provides an overview of the literature used to ground and situate the study followed by an in-depth description of the methods used to carry out the study. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study and Chapter Five the conclusion and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is divided into the following categories: (1) the history of online social networking, the Internet and Facebook, (2) privacy and self-disclosure trends online, (3) quality of intimacy in online interactions, and (4) the role of non-students in online social networks. Since the phenomenon of online social networks is relatively new, most of the literature available is in reference to students' behavior on the Internet in general and not specifically to online social networking websites. However, due to the variety of types of interactions that can occur through online social networking websites, such as Facebook, it is possible to examine other types of online interactions to provide context for the research at hand.

History of Social Networking, the Internet and Facebook

To examine the current use of social networking on the Internet, it must be clear how the youth culture arrived at their current state of online social networking and communication. The Manchester School brought about social networking analysis during the 1950s, in the field of social anthropology (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Three decades later, in the 1980's the number of civilians using the Internet was on the rise as "a virtual meeting place where people exchanged information and ideas, and shared emotions" (Weiner, 1996, p. 3). While virtual communities were developed by civilians, "the Internet grew out of Arpanet, a Government sponsored project which scientists, engineers, and military personnel could exchange information with great speed and efficiency" and "a virtual community, an online culture, arose from the depths of computerized networking and communication" (Weiner, 1996, p.3).

With the growth of the Internet and the emergence of online communities, people could now connect to those physically far away from them, who share common interests, ethnicity,

political ideologies, or are dispersed members of the same family (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Online chat rooms brought about a new language amongst its users as “interacting members of online groups constitute a speech community as they presumably share to some extent communicative practices, beliefs and norms, since communication would be hindered otherwise” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 459).

In July 2003, Tom Anderson launched MySpace, a social networking website, open to anyone with a valid email address. The website allowed people to create personal profiles about themselves, share photos, comment on friends’ pages, write blogs and send bulletin messages to all of their friends. The site boasts “its search function ranks sixth among all search engines,” (Evans, 2006) and to date, MySpace has almost 100 million people using their website as a social networking tool (VanDerWerk, 2007, p. A28).

Less than a year after the creation of MySpace, on February 4, 2004, Mark Zuckerberg launched a social networking website for Harvard University students. Within two weeks about half of the students had created an account. Demand soon came from surrounding schools and by the next month 30 schools had access to Facebook (McGirt, 2007, p.2). Less than a year after its creation, Facebook reached nearly one million active users (Facebook.com). Facebook originally targeted college students and users had to have a valid college email address to create an account. In September 2006, Facebook began open registration, allowing anyone with a valid email address to access the site and become an active member. Three years after its birth in February 2007, Facebook had over 47,000 networks and about 4 million users with a growth rate of three percent per week (Fast Company, 2007).

Both Facebook and MySpace, along with several hundred other smaller websites used for social networking, have become central in many college students’ lives. At colleges and

universities where Facebook is available, it is estimated that 90 percent of undergraduates have profiles (VanDerWerk, 2007, p. A28). Looking specifically at Facebook usage by Michigan State University (MSU) freshman, it was found that by the second semester of their first year, “95.5 % of respondents to the survey indicated they were Facebook users. Sixty-nine percent of respondents to the second survey reported that they spent 30 minutes or less on Facebook per day. Twelve percent of Facebook users reported spending more than an hour a day on the site” (Lampe, Ellison, & Streinfield, 2006, p. 168).

Zuckerberg created Facebook with the intent for users to showcase their real person, however, it is still possible to showcase certain aspects of a person or personality, which may or may not be real. “The Web has created a new arena for group and individual self-representation, changing the power dynamics of representation for traditionally marginalized groups...within the discourse of popular culture” (Wilson and Peterson, 2002, p. 462).

While the United States government created the original concept of the Internet for official use, it is now a virtual meeting place for people of all ages coming together for a variety of reasons including social networking. As social networking websites grow and expand, people have the ability to gain access to others across the world. The Internet and social networks are contributing to people’s ability to communicate interpersonally in a new medium, leading to the rise of other issues; including, the risk of violations of privacy.

Privacy and Self-disclosure Trends Online

“Online social networks are both vaster and looser than their offline counterparts” (Gross & Acquisti, 2005, p. 79). This is because students are open about sharing personal information such as their image, birthday, hometown, high school and phone number on their Facebook

profile. Information that is typically unknown to social acquaintances in offline connections can easily be found through online connections, even if that offline connection is not strong.

In a survey distributed via email, authors Lampe, Ellison, & Streinfield (2006), interviewed students to gain an understanding of who the students' felt was looking at their profiles. A large majority believe that high school friends (93 percent), people from classes (86 percent) and someone they had met at a party or social event (70 percent) had looked at their profiles. About half (49 percent) think their Residence Mentor had looked at their profile, while only five percent think a professor had looked at their profile and only three percent think that either someone from MSU administration or law enforcement had seen their Facebook profile (Lampe, et al., 2006).

At the same time, the majority of students surveyed said they use Facebook to keep in touch with old friends or to check out the profile of someone they met socially (Lampe, et al., 2006). Students were less likely to use Facebook to find people to date or to find casual sex partners (Lampe, et al., 2006). "Given these indicators, we find support for the idea that Facebook members are using the site to engage in social searches, i.e. find out more about people in their offline communities" (Lampe, et al., 2006, p. 169).

Another study found that privacy settings are rarely used and thus are not helping to protect the students from online risks, such as stalking or identity theft (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). While these risks are not solely a Facebook issue, students have a perceived connection to the online community as it is shared through a physical connection, typically their school, city or employer. This does not limit their risks, but authors suggest it may be through peer pressure that students chose to leave their profiles unsecured and able for all in their network to access (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

A similar article by Stutzman (2005) found that undergraduates at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had “a large number of students share particularly personal information online” (p.6). This information included everything from sexual orientation to a physical address. Overall students were comfortable with friends accessing their social networking websites and found protecting their identity as important. Along with this, only about half of the students felt their information was well protected online and were comfortable with strangers accessing their accounts.

While most online social networking websites provide online security options, students fail to use them and instead make their private information, including cell phone numbers and addresses, available to the public. Students believe that these online social networking websites are private as you must be registered to use the website (Abril, 2007).

A study done at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania revealed that 90.8% of profiles contain an image, 87.8% of users reveal their birth date, 39.9% list a phone number (including 28.8% of profiles that contain a cell phone number), and 50.8% list their current residence. The majority of users also disclose their dating preferences (male or female), current relationship status (single, married or in a relationship), political views (from ‘very liberal’ to ‘very conservative’), and various interests (including music, books, and movies). A large percentage of users (62.9%) that list a relationship status other than single even identify their partner by name and/or link to their Facebook profile (Gross & Acquisti, 2005, pg. 75).

Ilene R. Berson & Michael J. Berson’s article *Children and Their Digital Dossiers: Lessons in Privacy in the Digital Age* (2006), argue the right to privacy versus the need to protect children on the Internet. The authors state that the “digital technologies offer ways for children

and youth to obtain information; the interactive nature of the Internet creates prime opportunities for young people to engage in activities which compromise their privacy or well-being” (p. 136). While laws, such as the Children’s Online Privacy Act of 1998, protect children under the age of thirteen from having their information collected from website operators, these do not protect older students. “Developmentally, children typically do not begin attenuating to risk until middle childhood, thereby necessitating that adults serve critical protective roles” (Berson & Berson, 2006, p. 138). In addition, the authors argue that young people are increasingly accustomed to seeing personal information online and are becoming “desensitized to the loss of control over their personal information” (Berson & Berson, 2006, p. 138). The Internet is constantly changing and adults can find themselves in a position where they are unable to help young people navigate the digital world and their personal privacy. With this, “youth often remain oblivious to ways to maximize the privacy of their online activities” (Berson & Berson, 2006, p. 143).

The authors present the idea that literacy will empower the youth generation to examine the Internet and allow them to develop the skills to understand the online messages that they are sending. The way to achieve this, according to the authors, is to allow children to have opportunities for autonomy online which allows them to develop a skill set that is partnered with intentional opportunities to understand how to regulate what they share online (Berson & Berson, 2006). While trust “allows us to reveal vulnerable parts of ourselves to others and know others intimately in return...the public is too trusting online; without thinking, people routinely download software likely to destroy important information or blithely engage in e-auctions or chat rooms with strangers” (Friedman, Kahn, & Howe, 2000, p. 34). People tend to be more trusting of people, than of technology.

Whether people view their online communications as with another person, or with a machine, can drastically change how they feel about the communication they participate in while online (Friedman, et al., 2006). Much like offline communication, a deviation or betrayal of trust can end a relationship online (Friedman, et al., 2006). “Privacy may be at risk in social networking sites [but the] information is willingly provided” (Gross & Acquisti, 2005, pg. 73), and the majority of students using Facebook felt that their profiles accurately described their offline self, and that this description was positive (Lampe, Ellison, & Streinfield, 2006).

In a study done at a large Midwestern university on college students’ self-disclosure behaviors on the Internet, Punyanunt-Carter (2006) discovered that “females reported that they were more likely than males to be aware of their self-disclosure behaviors” (p. 330) based on the responses from 492 students. The study also found that males self-disclose more negative information and statements about themselves than their female counterparts do. The author credited this to the idea that men “tend to bond with others using negative statements, while females tend to bond with others using supportive and positive statements” (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006, p. 330). Punyanunt-Carter (2006) did not provide any examples of what the negative and positive statements were, but rather provided the general idea of negative and positive communication while online. The study also discovered that females reported that they disclose more honestly and communicate on a more personal level than males do. While the study is not completely comprehensive in explaining the online communication behavior of college students on the Internet, it does allow insight into how gender plays a role in online self-disclosure. Just over 53 percent of respondents said they use the Internet often or very often, which affects the outcome of how students present themselves online (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006).

In a study done at Keele University in the United Kingdom on gender differences in student online discussion, authors Bostock & Lizhi (2005) compared how men and women utilized online discussion in both mixed gendered and single gendered groups. The study was done to see if “students would be able to use the Internet to find, access and evaluate resources relevant to any particular subject; to participate appropriately in online discussion environments; and to discuss the impact of electronic networking on business, education, gender, and the nature of work” (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005, p. 74). Prior to the study, the authors presented gender issues associated with information technology. “Fewer girls and women study or have jobs in engineering; in schools and homes boys can dominate computer use, often for playing games; and females are typically less confident about using technology” (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005, p. 76). Along with this, women are typically seen as more social and the Internet supports a feminine approach to communication, which is typically centered on talking about ideas.

What was discovered from the study is that women in all-female groups sent “significantly more messages per student than male groups” (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005, p.79). In mixed-gendered groups, the number of messages from females decreased, but the number of messages from males increased. The women involved in the study were “less confident [when] using computer applications, were less positive about using computers, and preferred paper to online information” (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005, p.81). With this, however, the study did find that while the women preferred paper communication, they preferred the online discussion as opposed to face-to-face communication. The authors did not speculate on why women preferred the online communication, but rather focused on the fact that women communicate more when the group is all female, and men communicate more when the group is mixed.

Students view social networking websites as forms of communication that are well protected from outsiders, thus they are willing to share a large amount of personal information (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005). But seeing the website as private is not the only reason students self-disclose a large amount about themselves. Gender and the concept of trust also impact how and what people share online, in similar fashion to how and what people share offline

Quality of Intimacy in Online Interactions

Through the use of email, instant messaging and chat rooms, it is arguable that interpersonal communication is the most important use of the Internet (Cummings, Butler & Kraut, 2002). While social relationships online are not perceived to be as intimate as social relationships offline, online communities, such as Facebook, are growing in popularity for people with offline connections to also have a relationship online (Cummings, et al., 2002; Lampe, et al., 2006).

Cosley, Ludform & Terveen (2003) examined if similarity in demographic identities affect online communication and contribute to social connections in the same way that “behavioral science studies show that in everyday life, people choose friends with similar age, income, gender, marital status, and/or ethnicity and that similarity of interests is an important factor in liking others” (2003, p. 321-322). To accomplish this, the authors partnered people online with both similar and dissimilar characteristics in a game, similar to Family Feud, in order to see how the pairs interacted with one another. The results of the study show that same gender teams, similar age teams and similar education teams “engaged in more social dialogue” than teams with different genders, ages or educational backgrounds (Cosley, et al., 2003, p. 326). This was measured by the amount of personal information that teams either offered to their partner or asked. The study also found that “these behaviors suggest that when people meet online they

actively seek to gather and are willing to provide, much of the information that would be apparent in face-to-face interaction” with the exception of asking or volunteering their race (Cosley, et al., 2003, p. 327).

Cummings, et al. (2002) argue that on-line relationships and communication are not as strong or beneficial as offline relationships and communication due to the lack of face-to-face connection. Morahan-Martin & Schumacher (2003) agree that “time online interrupts real life relationships” (p.660) and the Internet encouraged the idea of loneliness as users “were more likely to make and interact with online friends, and to use the Internet for emotional support. Lonely people went online when they felt lonely, depressed or anxious” (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003, p. 669). These ideas have recently been challenged by the evolution of the Internet and online social networks.

Bower (2002) found that people who were active Internet users tend to participate more in their community, have a higher level of political involvement, and tend to be more social than non-users. The argument for this is that Internet users tend to be “better educated, wealthier and younger” (Bower, 2002, p. 282) than their non-Internet using counterparts. With the Internet consistently expanding, people are having more opportunities to connect online. When people are able to reveal what they see as their true self to other people in the online venue, they were more likely to form long-lasting friendships online (Bower, 2002). With the anonymity the Internet provides, college students often thought more positively about their online partners than they did in their initial meeting offline. This is because physical appearance seems not to be a factor in the initial online relationship versus the initial offline relationship (Bower, 2002).

Facebook tends to be unique in the quality of relationships built online as the relationships tend to be centered around an offline knowledge of one another through previous

friendships, shared class or mutual friendships. This challenges the concept of a traditional view of an online friend being someone that was met on-line. Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe (2007) found Facebook users “overwhelmingly used Facebook to keep in touch with old friends and to maintain or intensify relationships characterized by some form of offline connection such as dormitory proximity or a shared class” (p.1162). Facebook, in fact, helps students maintain even loosely connected friendships through the bridging of friendships and bonding (Ellison, et al., 2007). Since these relationships online form from an offline initial meeting, “online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact, even when life changes move them away from each other” (Ellison, et al., 2007, p. 1165)

While people who have online friendships were once thought of as lonely by turning to the Internet, this stereotype is changing. With the development of social networks, more people are turning to the Internet to find and maintain friendships. Much like offline friendships, people still prefer people with similar interests as potential friends when online. Social networking lends to this by allowing people to be a part of a network based around a university, city or workplace. This then lends to the formation of online friends and also allows the ability to maintain offline friendships.

Role of Non-Students in Online Social Networks

While Facebook was created primarily for students, another group of users quickly followed the students’ lead and joined the Facebook network. University administrators and faculty members are a secondary wave of users that participate online along side their students. Anne Hewitt and Andrea Forte from the Georgia Institute of Technology found that 66 percent of students find it acceptable for faculty to use online networking communities (2006). The study

found that “social networking sites like Facebook offer trade-offs to community members who must balance the potential social gain associated with new opportunities to establish ties and the social pain of relinquishing some control over the presentation of self” (Hewitt & Forte, 2006).

In an attempt to connect with students, the Career Services Office at Ursuline College in Ohio created a Facebook account to communicate with students in a manner that students used to communicate with one another. After six months, Facebook administrators removed the page, as Facebook has a “policy that forbids organizations from creating web pages on the site” (Carnevale, 2006, p. 1). The office was using the account to connect students with internship and job opportunities. A Facebook spokesperson told the university that the site “prohibits people from using the site for commercial marketing purposes” and that pages must be set up for people and not organizations (Carnevale, 2006, p.1). Because Ursuline College was seeing success in connecting with their students through the online communication website, they decided to look into creating a MySpace account as it is also a “social-networking site similar to Facebook except that it allows organizations to create pages” (Carnevale, 2006, p.1). Facebook can still be used to reach students, though. “Instead of creating a page for, say, the admissions office, administrators can ask the admissions director to create a personal page” (Carnevale, 2006, p.1). From here the individual can create groups to connect people together. Ursuline College feels strongly about being on the Internet with the students and states that they will “be there in some capacity” (Carnevale, 2006, p.1).

Harcum College, a two-year college near Philadelphia, created a MySpace profile for the school when administrators “realized that many students were missing important messages. They were paying no attention to the college email newsletter. They were not even showing up for ice-cream socials and everyone likes ice cream” (Carnevale, 2006, p.A27). Since the school decided

to go online in a non-traditional form, they have included blogs from students about disliking the cafeteria food, and posting dates of important events. With over 160 of the 900 students becoming “friends” with the college in just a matter of weeks, the college’s new “hip” approach to reaching the students has been accepted and working. “Ashley M. Elliott, a veterinary-technology student in her second year at Harcum, says the Harcum MySpace page shows the college is making an effort to reach students” (Carnevale, 2006, p. A27).

The websites can also serve as a conversation starter between administrators, faculty and students. “Our best bet is to become a part of the conversation and help [students] make good, safe decisions, as they join the online community (Harris, 2006). Harris finds multiple avenues in which faculty members can utilize the Internet in sparking conversation in their classrooms. “Perhaps the greatest concern about MySpace involves its role as a public gallery for posting pictures. Art teachers can take this opportunity to spark a dialogue on what is appropriate imagery for public and private display” (Harris, 2006). The online communities allow educators to get to know their students outside the classroom and build rapport with them that is not possible during a class lecture. The websites also create a venue in which students can be informed of upcoming events or services offered at the university. “No longer will ice cream socials in the residence hall lobby be sufficient to bring students together, despite the everlasting lure of free food for college students” (Shier, 2005, p. 83). By creating MySpace pages and Facebook events, student affairs offices can connect with students in a venue that the majority of students spend over an hour at every day. The websites “may encourage the feeling of a professor being approachable,” especially at schools where there is limited time available for one on one contact (Shier, 2005, pg. 84).

While many offices use online communities to reach out to students, other offices use these same websites to hold students accountable for their behavior, thus the reason that not all students are excited for faculty and administrators to join them online. The primary argument against administrators and faculty members being online with the students is that students want to protect their free speech rights as they may see school administration as a threat to their privacy. In October 2005, Pennsylvania State University was victorious against their rival Ohio State. On the day of the game, students rushed the field and campus police officers only made two arrests. A tip from an anonymous source sent police officers to Facebook and campus police “found a student group titled, unsubtly enough, ‘I Rushed the Field After the OSU Game (And Lived!)’” (Reed, 2006, p.1). This group helped identify students who claimed to have rushed the field, but police were unable to contact during the event.

A University of Cumberlands student, Jason Johnson, was discovered to be openly gay based on information on his MySpace account. His Baptist school forbids homosexual relationships in their students’ code of conduct and Johnson was expelled. This erupted a debate about if it was ethical as the University found out about Johnson’s relationship from his MySpace profile (Lindenberger, 2006, p. 36). Even though students “believe that faculty and administration should respect students’ right to privacy and not use Facebook as a means of checking in them” (Abel, 2005, p. 1), this does not stop the fact that the Internet is still a public forum in which students have legal rights to post what they wish, but administrators have legal rights to look at whatever it is students choose to post online.

Even though free speech is protected in the United States Constitution, the Supreme Court has “attempted to find equilibrium between student rights and the necessity to maintain order” (Stader, 2006, p. 60). They have done this by acknowledging that students do not have the

same rights in school as they have out of school. In the case of *Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser* in 1986, “the Court established that school officials’ legitimate need to suppress lewd or vulgar speech or speech that runs counter to the educational mission of the school outweighs the First Amendment rights of students” (Stader, 2006, p. 60). The Supreme Court acknowledged that censorship can only occur within the school and does not pertain to off-campus speech unless the communication is a “true threat” as determined in 1969, in *Watts v. U.S.* (Stader, 2006, p. 60). Students have several legal precedents on their side when addressing the Internet and freedom of speech. Because the trend in the court systems has been increasingly supporting students’ free speech on the Internet, it is important that school administrators understand the legal issues surrounding online communication and how best to help students navigate these without illegal censorship. Simply setting a profile to be private from anyone who is not a “friend” is not enough. “Thousands of users may be classified as friends of friends of an individual and become able to access her personal information, while, at the same time, the threshold to qualify as a friend on somebody’s network is low” (Gross & Acquisti, 2005, p. 73). While this means that students can openly post what they desire, it does not protect them from their school administrators or being held accountable for what they say. By being online with the students, school administrators can work to help them see their level of risk and educate them about online privacy.

There are mixed views of how students feel about university administrators actively using social networks. On one hand, students appreciate the new medium to learn about social events and campus resources. However, on the other hand, students dislike the fact that administrators have used the website to hold students accountable for their behavior. Regardless of how students feel, though, the Internet is a public place and students can not stop administrators from

joining them online. Students can choose how they navigate their own profile and its content choices.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors a traditional-aged college student takes into account when creating an online identity. This study also seeks to understand the self-perceptions students' employ within the constructed identity that's displayed on their social networking page. This study examined what students say they post about themselves on social networking sites and how they hope to be perceived, based on profile-content choices (i.e., what personal information they choose to share, etc). This profile content includes personal pictures, descriptions, and other details that reflect how participants wish to be perceived by others.

The study used identity construction as a framework. Originally introduced by Cooley and Mead in the 1970's, this framework "focuses primarily on the formation of the 'me', exploring the ways in which interpersonal interactions mold an individual's sense of self" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 386). Students then begin to explore peers like them and compare themselves to what they see others doing and focus on the "cultural contacts within which age categories are constructed, age identities are built, and age transitions occur" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 395). More recently, the impacts of new communication technologies on identity construction have been studied as well. David Altheide (1995) "argues that new communication technologies enable new communication formats- new models of selecting, organizing, and presenting information. In turn, these new formats reshape social activity; they modify or dismantle current practices; and spur or shape new ones. In this way, new communication technologies create new environments for self development and identification" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 398). This leads to a new balance of an online identity and an offline identity, which are both being constructed at the same time, but in different mediums. The interactions that impact identity construction are not

just between two individuals' offline, but the new technology driving online communication is now impacting how identity is constructed. In a study by Reeves and Nass, the "authors find that media objects become a viable 'other' in building of self, and they outline the ways in which human-to-machine relationships mirror purely human relationships" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 399). This is important to consider while exploring the impacts of student identity construction in online social networks.

This study asks if students consciously consider that they might be observed or monitored by university administrators, such as residence life personnel, officials within student conduct or officials in the dean's office. In addition, the study sought to understand what impact, if any, that perceived surveillance has on the choices that students make when constructing their virtual selves and what they choose to purposefully share and purposefully not share.

Knowing that Facebook offers open registration for undergraduate students, their initial audience, and non-students, it is easy to conclude that interactions will take place between students and people they know from multiple settings. This often includes acquaintances from classes, family members, and childhood friends. According to multiple selves theory (Harter, et al., 1997) people assume different "selves" based on the situation they are in. Students "come to describe themselves quite differently across different interpersonal contexts, for example, with parents, teachers, classmates, close friends and those whom they are romantically interested" (Harter, et al., 2007 835-836). William James (1890) set the foundation for multiple selves' theory when he expressed "a man has many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind." He continues that "many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his tough young friends" (Harter, et al, 2007 p. 836).

These multiple selves come out for several reasons. “People are compelled to adjust their behavior in accord with the specific nature of the interpersonal relationship and its situational context” (Harter, et al., 1997, p. 836). People want to promote a positive aspect of themselves, and what different people and social groups deem as positive from a person changes based on the situation a person is in. For this, people will highlight different aspects of their personality and behavior in different ways based on the situation they are in. This idea of adjustments in performance is to “preserve critical relationships” (Harter, et al., 1997, p. 836).

It is important to distinguish the idea that people possessing multiple selves is not the same thing as multiple personalities. It is not that people are completely different based on who they are with, but rather, they highlight different aspects of their true self (Harter, et al., 1997). For example a young college student may drink with her peers while at school, but may choose to not highlight this aspect of her life with her parents, knowing their disapproval of the activity would negatively impact the student’s relationship with the parents. This same student may highlight another aspect of her personality, such as her religious views, with her parents, but choose not share this with her friends. This student, is in all actuality both a drinker and religious, but engages in different aspects of her identity, based on the company she is with. James (1890) felt that “the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list [of his selves] carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation” (Marks & MacDermid, 1996, p. 418). As a person ages they “continually shape their roles and identities as meaningful systems” and “by adulthood, such patterns of self-organization have probably become more or less solidified” (Marks & MacDermid, 1996, p. 419).

Knowing that Facebook is an online meeting place of both undergraduate students and non-students, it is easy to conclude that interactions will take place between students and people

they know from a variety of places. According to multiple selves theory people will take on different voices, positions or viewpoints depending on what else impacts them in that particular setting. This can include the people they are with, place they are at or history with either of the prior mentioned (Hermans and Kempen, 1993; Ragatt 2002 from Bahl, 2005). Since students often behave differently with friends, than with family or in the classroom, this research will use multiple selves' theory to understand how students balance their multiple roles with one online profile. By grounding this research in multiple selves theory it will allow an understanding of how students balance their multiple selves based on the situation they are in and people they are with, when they bring these multiple components together in one space.

This study is significant as students regularly post information and photos that could impact their employment and personal reputations; unfortunately little is known about the student perspective and lived experience. It is well known that employers, student-conduct offices, and parents create online accounts to observe and gain access to students' behavior and observe students' behavior online. The study will explore if students see the potential of being watched online, and with this, the consequences that may come from the choices they make online. This study will add to the current research and show if students are aware of these issues, and if so, how students choose to adjust their online identity based on who views their profile.

Data Collection

Participants were selected using random sampling. Facebook advertisements soliciting active Facebook users on the Washington State University network were asked to respond if interested in participating in a study. Once students emailed in interests they received more information about the study and asked if they would like to continue on in the study. Of those that responded back, ten students were selected to participate with stratified random sampling.

Of the ten students, five are men and five are women. This is to account for gender differences within responses. No other factors were used when selecting participants through stratified random sampling. Of those selected three are members of Greek letter organizations, two are members of a student government organization, one is an international student, one is a student athlete, five live in on-campus housing and five live in off-campus housing.

Students were asked demographic questions, as well as questions about information they purposefully share and don't share online, how they utilize their privacy settings, who they believes views their profiles, who they do not want to view their profile and assumptions they believe other may have about them based on their profile content. These questions were asked to gather information about what impacts what students choose to share online, but also, how they utilize their privacy settings for people they wish to protect themselves from. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect this data. For complete protocol please see Appendices B-D.

Data Analysis

The student interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews were then read and re-read to become familiar with them. Codes were assigned to portions of the data, and emerging themes were identified. Qualitative research methods were used for the purpose of this study to gain a depth of understanding from the student perspective on what impacts the decisions they make while constructing their identity online. A qualitative method was also used, as the questions being asked in this research were meant for open-ended answers to gain a depth of understanding of a students' experience. It is through understanding individual lived experiences and searching for common themes that understanding what impacts students behavior online can begin to be understood.

After the information was coded and sorted into categories, it was then sorted and compared, and then the information was weighed and combined as outlined by Rubin & Rubin (2005). With this “you have to first infer how the concepts are related from the way they are described by the interviewees, or perhaps you work out how they might be related and then go back to the coded interviews to look for evidence that either supports or modifies the logical guesses” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p.228). After the information had been combined, six major themes arose from the interviews. These themes were vastness of the network, Facebook “creepers”, presence of parents, use of privacy settings, realization of self and awareness of stereotypes. These findings are explained in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Through inductive analysis of the transcribed interviews from ten undergraduate students six common themes emerged. The six major themes that emerged are: vastness of the network, Facebook “creepers”, presence of parents, use of privacy settings, realization of self and awareness of stereotypes. There are aspects of these themes that overlap into other areas, but the distinction is clear when closely analyzed to understand how students choose to construct their identity in an online social network. The following is a summary of the findings of each theme.

Vastness of the network

When examining what impacts students’ identity construction online, the knowledge of how vast social networks are was of major concern for the respondents. There was a clear understanding that Facebook is an open network and anyone with a valid email address may join. Respondents also undoubtedly recognize that online social networks are no longer just university students, but are expanding to both older and younger members, as well as, business and advertisers. The overall vastness was thus seen as both a positive and negative occurrence, as it allowed them to stay connected with friends, but also opened them up to advertisements and businesses. One respondent explained his view of who makes up social networking websites,

Advertisers, public officials, potential employers... I think that is a huge push that is going to be happening. Starting about last year and probably moving into the next couple years until Facebook dies out and something else emerges. It is becoming increasingly a strong advertising website. I get increasing [number of] friend requests from companies or divisions from companies, wanting to market a specific product. Where that pages is just like the Mock 3 from Gillette page. Definitely anyone looking for public office is on

Facebook. You saw that a lot in the last presidential campaign with Obama and McCain. That was the most visible but you will see county officials advertising on Facebook. And potential employers are on there. And that has been there for about two to three years. And that is really, you start to see, as you move through college, you start to see peoples' pages evolve and start to look a little bit more professional. And people out of college, their pages are a lot more barebones and a lot more professional looking because it is geared towards potential employers rather than a popularity contest.

Another respondent explained

Pretty much anybody actually. There are people who get on Facebook, for you know, they want to be younger and they think it is cool, like my great aunt, or people, who like my father, who are on there simply for real estate ... And then there are a lot of people who join it because they have to for groups. I think it started out somewhere ...and then it swung down to college kids and just turned into the cool thing. But now I think it is just spreading through the parents and I think everybody.

While respondents recognized that anybody could join Facebook and this impacts what they share online, they also admit that this was one of the very reasons they were initially attracted to the website. The respondents' appreciated the ability to connect to people they met at college, keep in touch with high school friends, and reconnect with childhood friends they may not have seen in years. As one respondent explained

Facebook is amazing. Like I said all my friends are dispersed across the state. So it is kind of nice to just know what people are doing at a glance, and especially now that I am over here.

This connection with friends made respondents feel comfortable to put private information online. While all ten respondents focused on using Facebook to connect with friends, most respondents also referenced knowing potential employers and advertisers are online and what they post does impact the advertisements that show up along side their page. Respondents recognize there are a large number of people participating in social networks, by being linked to a specific network based on their university and/or town, the respondents felt disconnected from the entire network. They knew it existed, but focused on the limitations of access provided by belonging to a specific network, rather than the entire network.

Facebook “creepers”

The concept of “others” came up most often in an uncomfortable understanding that people outside friend groups can and do look at people’s profiles. Every respondent referenced in some way the concept of a Facebook “creeper”, which essentially is a person who views profiles of people they do not know to gain information about them. When asked who views his profile one respondent responded,

Creepers. Yea, creepers. People that you don’t know, but they want to know you and know more about you, but they never really contacted you so they just look through your Facebook like they know you. There are weird people out there honestly. Like you will find some people, you will see them and you will finally meet them, but you won’t know that you knew them. But they were like I know you.

Another respondent explained,

There should be a new word in the dictionary called Facebook creepers. There are people who just sit there and like don’t have the guts to talk to you but will be on your Facebook, stalking in a sense. You don’t know who is looking... It kinda feels

uncomfortable at times. You don't know if these people are your friends or who is being obsessed.

The term creeper was a strong consistency amongst the respondents, and taken as common colloquialism amongst their peer groups. This term was used by both male and female students, mostly to describe the opposite gender, looking at their genders' profiles for the intent of knowing about them, without actually knowing the person offline. Respondents linked these type of people as being both "judgmental" and "stalkerish" to even being thought of as "rapists" and "murderers." In no way is a creeper seen in a positive light.

Creepers were a major reason that students used and set their privacy restrictions. Privacy limitations were seen as the way to avoid Facebook creepers from gaining access to an individual. Respondents express fear of creepers.

Well I really hope that people who don't know me aren't viewing [my profile], but I know that they are. Which feels really weird. More specifically, like sex offenders. That's really scary. That's probably mostly it. Like people who I don't know I hope are not viewing it.

Another respondent said,

It just kinda odd to think that okay, we are not friends so you are legitimately searching my name on Facebook to look at me and see what you can find without actually talking to me. Its odd and its uncomfortable and I don't understand it.

Respondent often took steps to attempt to ward off Facebook creepers, as one explains,

I still don't have my address or my phone number, or a lot of personal information [online]. Yea, I just don't really want my information out there. I like having a Facebook page, but I only want people I am friends with to see it. Like with the applications I

almost never sign up for those cause they make your information available to people that I am not friends with and companies that I don't want my information out there.

It is clear that knowing others could gain access to them impacted how the ten respondents constructed their identities online. The limited information they would share, mostly to ensure you could not gain access to them immediately. Only two of the ten respondents shared their phone number online, but both had privacy restrictions around this, making it more difficult for an unknown person to gain access to this information. Most respondents only made their email address available as this was seen on the same level as the profile itself, and would not direct a stranger to where you lived, or means to connect you offline.

Presence of Parents

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the presence of parents, relatives and other parental figures in students' lives joining Facebook. Facebook (2008) advertises that people over the age of 25 are the largest growing demographic, and students feel this shift. Relatives and friends' relatives are joining them online. Several of the students were in favor of relatives joining the network because they enjoyed the ability to connect to their family in a new way. One of the respondents recently "friended" his grandmother, he explained,

It's actually kinda nice to have [my grandma] on Facebook cause we don't talk on the phone, and she likes computers. I can just write on her wall or send her a message and say 'hi grandma, what's going on', and we can keep in touch every week or so.

The majority of respondents referenced discussing Facebook with their friends and family and all ten respondents were Facebook "friends" with at least one family member. While some respondents were not "friends" with their parents, they do talk about showing and sharing their profile information with them. One respondent explained,

My mom's seen my profile. I've shown it to her. And she doesn't have any problem with it or anything. And a lot of the friends back home, who talk to my mom a lot. They've seen it and talk to my mom.

Other respondent referenced knowing their parents saw their profile through other family members, such as cousins, or work colleagues who were Facebook users.

At the same time, many respondents didn't like the idea of sharing their online space with parents. Some students were against friending their parents and saw this as a point of contention. One respondent said he would delete his profile if his mother added him,

My mom is just more nosey, I guess. With like, the status updates I usually don't take seriously. If I write something in there it is not anything serious and usually just designed to get a laugh, and there's occasionally profanity involved. Okay. There is a Seinfeld episode where George is freaking out cause his fiancé is becoming friends with his friend, Elaine. He keeps saying his worlds are colliding. Cause there is relationship George and independent George and when the worlds combine, independent George dies. And I don't want independent George to die. So, I feel, I see my mom joining Facebook as [my] worlds colliding.

This concept of worlds colliding was a point of concern for most respondents. Even though accepting an extended family members or siblings friend request was not a problem for respondents, friending parents made respondents examine what they chose to put online.

Students went to great lengths to keep parental figures from seeing their profiles, yet still felt pressured to accept their parent's friend request.

I block [my pictures] from my ex's mom and step dad and my great aunt. I don't really know how they will feel about the fact that I might not be drinking but I do go to parties

and I am around that. And I don't know how they will feel about that and I don't want that kind of controversy, but if I don't add them, they will freak out.

Other respondents have also felt family pressure to be online friends with relatives and friends' parents as they move away from home and to college. A first-year college student explained that he is well aware his friends' parents look at his profile often.

Well some of my friends' parents just want gossip. So they bring that up on nights that my parents get together. So I would say some of that and they just want to see how I am doing. I have always hung out with certain friends and been in their families' lives every day for like years. And all of a sudden I am not there ever and they want to see how I am doing.

While respondents were still struggling as how to balance their social lives online, they did recognize that their parents wanted to know what they were doing while away at college. Respondents understand that adult-figures were joining them online and gaining a larger presence in another area of their lives.

Use of Privacy Settings

As the prior three sections explained, the respondents are highly aware of how large the Facebook network is, the potential for unknown outsiders to view their profile, and the presence of an older generation of Facebook users. With these three things at play, respondents also discussed their use and understanding of privacy settings and the importance of these to how they form their online identity to protect them from unwanted profile spectators. One respondent explains her change in privacy,

Yea. I used to, like, add everybody and now I block my profile from being seen from people I don't know. I block my tagged photos from parentals.

Blocking the profile overall seemed to be the simple solution for most of the respondents. This allowed them to choose person by person who saw their profile and thus, how a person could decide what they were willing to share online.

And I am tough with friend requests. [In the past] if people friend request me, I more than not approve them even if I don't know them. [Now] if we had one friend in common or two friends in common I'm like okay, that's cool. But if we have no friends in common, I usually, I try not to approve their friend requests. And like I said the privacy settings, if you aren't my friend you can't see my profile at all.

Another respondent explained,

If I have met them in person, I will be friends with them on Facebook. Umm... or if she's cute, but not even that usually. If I get a friend request and it says you went to high school with this person I will try and like look through their pictures and see if I actually recognize them. And I say, if I don't immediately recognize the name and I kinda recognize the person, it is like 50/50 if I will accept their friend request. It is usually who our mutual friends are between me and the person.

The idea of blocking their profiles and using privacy through friend requests came up in the vast majority of the interviews. Even with privacy settings and friend requests being used, the respondents still recognized that they were not always highly discriminatory as to who they friended. One respondent explained how he protected himself from people he did not want to view his profile,

Put it on private. The other thing is, I suppose you could be more discriminatory on who you let be your friend. Like they know the person but they are not really friends with

them. Like the word friend is kinda of arbitrary. It's not literal in Facebook world. Like, who are my really good friends is not 800 people.

Only one student talked about restricting privacy friend by friend on Facebook, while most had the same privacy for all friends and a different setting for all people who were not friends. So while the respondents were aware of the websites privacy capabilities, very few were taking full advantage of these to the extent they knew they could.

Only a few of the respondents left their profiles open for anyone to view, and with these they chose to just limit what they put online in the first place. The respondents that left their profiles open saw this as a way to meet new people and provide only a small insight as to who they are,

I want the person to get to know me and, I don't think it is important to put all that out there. I don't live my life on Facebook. I just network on it more or less. I don't need someone to completely know me without knowing me. That is just creepy. And I don't want some stranger to read and think they completely know me.

By being able to control who views their profile, respondents' were more comfortable with sharing more about themselves on the Facebook. If respondents wanted to be able to network more openly they would leave their profiles open and add less information, almost as a self-teaser into who the people saw themselves as. As one respondent put it,

I figure if I don't want the world to know I just wont put it on there.

Realization of Self

While this study was not looking at identity development, but rather identity construction, to what students choose to share when describing themselves online, respondents often brought up pieces of their identity they are either proud of or have struggled with as to what they share

and hide on Facebook. A respondent who identifies as gay, and shares his sexuality on Facebook explained,

I see no benefit of putting information up there that could be misleading. Because most of the people who view it are my friends and I don't want them thinking I am someone I am not. And that would be someone I am not. I've done that with my sexuality.

Other respondents also stressed the importance of sharing who they are offline, with their online friends,

I'm comfortable with who I am [and] present myself rather truthfully on the website. And my friends are on there and they know me. If I had something really weird on my profile they would say, why do you say you are a strict Mormon on here?

Respondents often expressed the idea they were more mature and aware of themselves when they created their Facebook accounts versus other social networks, such as MySpace. Respondents seemed to have concerns with parts of their identity they saw as controversial or had not clearly thought out.

Awareness of Stereotypes

Even though the respondents want to share what they perceive to be their offline selves, they do recognize that this can negatively impact them online. In the majority of the interviews, the respondents expressed that knowing if they had photos of them drinking, regardless of age, they were assumed to be heavily into partying. Even those respondents over the age of 21 talked about how they felt stereotyped, even though it is legal for them to consume alcohol. A sorority woman who described herself as a geek because she likes Star Wars explained that she knew people made assumptions about her due to her chapter affiliation,

And then with the fact that I go to parties and the fact that I am a member of a house and people have connotations towards that. And the fact that I'm on like a Victoria's Secret thing. And people think of Victoria's Secret, oh, she must be a slut. Or she's in these photos with a lot of party people; she must be crazy and wild.

A respondent involved with athletics at the university explained,

On my Facebook they would just assume that I am a jock. That's pretty much the only thing. A jock and a dumb jock... Just the stereotype of people who play sports in college. That they didn't make it into college because of academics. They made it into college because of the athletic ability and they don't necessarily have any smarts in the academic area... I don't think it's an accurate portrayal of me. It's something that I have a kinda battled with I guess cause the way that I dress and the people that I hang around it associates me the kinda of view that some people may have of me and I don't think it's necessarily accurate. I kinda struggle with myself to portray myself in a way that I want to be seen by other people.

Other areas that came up with respondents were religion and political party. While the respondents wanted to share this information about themselves they were often concerned with what their peers would assume about them. One woman who identifies as both Christian and politically conservative shared,

Yea, I do think that I am conservative when it comes to my beliefs and stuff like that. But I do like lots of things. So I am still kinda leant then. So I try and make it so that it does portray a lot of myself. The things I don't like and the things I do like. If I want to share that, which I don't always have to do. But I do also want to make it so they want to get to

know me without getting to know my Facebook instead of me. Facebook is really just a brief overview. There is really more to me when you talk to me.

One respondent explained that while he means to portray his offline self, online, this often depicts the social side of his offline self, over other aspects of his personality,

It goes back to the whole; you play different roles in different situations. It's a pretty accurate depiction of me, but at the same time, it is leaning more towards my social, less taking life seriously side. I think, I like to think, I am a little bit more deep than my Facebook page may portray. Mostly because you won't see a picture of me on Facebook reading Emerson or having an intellectual discussion with my friends. The pictures are all social nightlife pictures, for the most part or travel. So, and I think that is true of everyone. I mean, your Facebook page is more than likely, unless you set it up specifically for networking where it's almost like a second page of a resume. Like after college it will probably start developing into that for me. But unless that is the case I feel like most pages, my page included, is much more social skewed than, not much more, but more socially skewed than my actual true personality you would say.

It is through this delicate balance of trying to portray an accurate self, and the awareness that this is typically a more social self, that the respondents struggle with on how to construct their identities. All ten respondents expressed the idea of being more than just their Facebook page, but not always sure how to convey that and avoid stereotypes.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 1890 William James recognized that students adjust their behavior based on which social environment they are engaged. Students today still recognize the ways in which they modify their behavior online and the impacts this has on their offline lives. While students are able to construct an identity online in any manner they wish, aspects of identity construction are still at play, in similar fashion to offline identity constructions.

The main point of identity construction in that students' are forming their "me" and exploring their sense of self. This is true for online identity construction as well. Students consciously choose information to share with others. The recognition of how large the social network is has a major impact on how students structure their online life. Students are aware that social networks are not just friends and college peers, but in addition, a large number of older parental figures and Facebook "creepers" are also online and finding ways to gain access to students' information. Even with the presence of others, students still highly value the desire to create a true representation of themselves on their webpage and have an accurate portrayal of their depiction of themselves.

While the respondents expressed wanting an accurate depiction, it should also be noted that the depiction that they were referring to was one of their social self. Just as James explains that students alter their behavior with friends versus family, students portray their friend attitude within their social networks. The respondents expressed a desire to represent what they feel is their true self as their peer group friends view them through their Facebook profile. Since parents and administrators are also actively engaged with social networks, the respondents found ways through manipulating their privacy settings to control the amount of information that is available

to these two groups of people. While not all students fully utilize their privacy settings, there was a general theme that the respondents would either not allow parents to see their profile, or the respondents would limit their parents access. In this way, the respondent does not have to deal with the parent being upset by what is shared online.

As Altheide (1995) pointed out, new forms of communication technology allow students new ways to select, organize and share their identity. This in turn means that when students are able to share a space with a variety of people, it will continue to allow students to shape their identity, behavior choices and safety. Friends from a variety of places challenge peers to learn and grow, and being able to consider what this means will allow students one more opportunity to reflect on their choices and learn from these. Even though students may be finding ways to limit access from certain people online, this does not mean students are not examining their identity, but rather, recognize the identity they have chosen may not be in line what others wish for them, so are still in the process of bridging their multiple selves together.

As students construct their own “me” they begin to look for others like them to share and participate in communities that are typically built around a similarity, such as age. Social networking allows students to connect with peers from a variety of places in their offline social circles and explore how others around them are developing their own identity as they construct theirs. Students desire to avoid stereotypes about themselves and put a great deal of information online. The respondents want a realistic view of themselves to be seen on their social network page, and are aware that if they only share certain photos or information they may be thought of in a negative way. This then encourages more information to be shared.

Privacy settings may give a false sense of security, as they have the ability to limit access, even though not all students use privacy settings. This idea of sharing information to avoid

stereotypes seems contradictory to the idea that students are “creeped” out by the idea that strangers can view them. Yet, students still want people to have an accurate portrayal so they share a lot of information within their webpage.

Students understand that future employers are online with them, and what they choose to share has a lasting impression and impact online, as then it is not solely their information to control. When they have a social networking profile, they are putting a piece of themselves out there, into the Internet world, and having to be responsible for the identity they portray. Online social networks offer one more avenue of teaching responsibility to the young people in our communities. Through the interviews it is apparent that students understand this concept, and what is at stake for them. Much like other difficulties teenagers face, students do not always like the facts of life, but they are learning and growing from them. Students are becoming more aware of reasons to protect their privacy, understanding how media and advertising works, and critically considering how other view them based on decisions they make in public spaces. These social lessons can, and do, occur offline, but online social networks are becoming just one more way to reach and educate our college students.

While the research showed six major themes from the student perspective, these areas often overlapped and shared purpose. The idea that the entire Facebook network is quiet extensive in size, that an older generation is entering social networking and students are aware the Internet is full of strangers truly impacted their use of privacy settings. It was the combination of these three areas that brought about the fourth theme. At the same time, it was being able to connect to friends they have made at multiple stages of life and being able to strictly control their own privacy settings that students felt comfortable sharing a great deal of information online. The ease at which students are able to share photos, ideas and memories

meets the fear of strangers gaining access to this same information is where a student constructs her own identity online based on her offline identity.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

With the vast majority of students participating in online social networks, it becomes imperative for university administration to understand not only what students are participating in online, but what is influencing how students are making their decisions. While social networking is transitioning and changing at a rapid pace, students have no desire to leave them all together. They will continue to move and shift with the popularity of networks, always bouncing to the newest and most convenient network for them. Ignoring social networks can not be an option.

University administration should be joining students within these spaces, continuing to find ways to reach out to students and role modeling safe choices within online communities. Students recognize this is a convenient way to gain contact with one another. Social networks offer one more way to contact people within a set community in addition to both other electronic and non-electronic means of communication.

Students are not opposed to administration joining them online. Even if students disliked university administration online, the Internet is a public space, and Facebook has chosen to be an open network, available for all people with an active email address. The fact remains, the majority of the students interviewed did not care if the Office of Student Conduct viewed their profile. They were secure in what they chose to share, and in the ways they had adjusted their privacy settings online.

Future research needs to be done to examine more specifically how privacy impacts students identity. Being able to see the connection between privacy and family and privacy and strangers opens the door to further explore each of these areas on their own. By exploring more

specifically into these areas would allow researchers to understand how strangers and family are competing for how privacy settings are structured by students.

In addition to this, future research should also explore how social networks are impacting identity development. This research focused on identity construction and how students explore an already developed identity online. It is also important to explore how social networks impact the development of students, especially since students are joining social networks before they enter college. There are greater impacts of social networks than this research alone explored, which would add a great deal of information to the field.

As social networks continue to grow and expand, and college students continue to search for the newest online trend, it is important that student affairs professionals continue to explore these forums with their students to help them learn and grow in all mediums. A holistic approach to education does not exist just offline, so practitioners need to be joining their students online and helping them explore these forums while critically thinking about their choices and how it impacts their offline experiences. For this holistic education to be successful, future research on online social networks is necessary.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abel, M. (2005, Dec). Find me on facebook...as long as you are not a faculty member or administrator. *National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience*, 3(3), 1-2.
- Abril, P.S. (2007, Fall). A my(space) of one's own: on privacy and online social networks. *Northwest Journal of Technology and Intellectual Property*, 6(1), 4.
- Berson, I., & Berson, M. (2006, Spring/Summer). Children and their digital dossiers: Lessons in privacy rights in the digital age. *International Journal of Social Education*, 21(1), 135-47.
- Botstock, S., & Lizhi, W. (2005, February). Gender in student online discussions. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 42(1), 73-85.
- Carnevale, D. (2006, Oct.6). Email is for old people. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(7), A27.
- Carnevale, D. (2006, Nov. 24). College tries to be cool but runs afoul of Facebook. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(14), 1.
- Cerulo, K. A., (1997) Identity construction: New issues, new directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23, 385-409.
- Cosley, D., Ludford, P., & Terveen, L. (2003). Studying the effect of similarity in online task-focused interactions. *Group*, 321-329.
- Cummings, J., Butler, B., & Kraut, R. (2002, July). The quality of online social relationships. *Communications of the ACM*, 45(7), 103-108.
- Evans, B. (2006, Fall). Your space or MySpace?. *Library Journal*, 12, 8-10.
- Facebook. (2007). Facebook. Retrieved November 14, 2008 from www.facebook.com.
- Fast Company Staff. (2007, May). Facebook by the numbers. *Mansueto Ventures, LLC*. 115, 79. Retrieved April 28, 2007 from <http://www.fastcompany.com>.
- Friedman, B., Kahn, P., & Howe, D. (2000, December). Trust online. *Communications of the ACM*, 43(12), 34-40.
- Gross, R., & Acquisti, A. (2005, Nov. 7). Information revelation and privacy in online social networks. *WPES*, 05, 71-80.
- Harris, C. (2006, May 30). MySpace can be our space. *School Library Journal*. 52(5).
- Hewitt, A., & Forte, A. (2006, Nov.) Crossing boundaries: Identity management and student/faculty relationships on the Facebook. *CSCW*, 06.

- Kelsey, C. (2007). *Generation MySpace: helping your teen survive online adolescence*. New York: Marlowe & Company.
- Lampe, C., Ellison, N., & Steinfield, C. (2006). A face(book) in the crowd: social searching vs. social browsing. *CSCW*, 167-170.
- Lindenberger, M. (2006, Nov 30). Questions of Student Conduct. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 23(1), 36-7.
- Marks, S., & MacDermid, S. (1996, May). Multiple roles and the self: A theory of role balance. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 58(2), 417-432.
- McGirt, E. (2007, May). Hacker.dropout. CEO.Mansueto Ventures, LLC. 115, 74. Retrieved April 28, 2007 from <http://www.fastcompany.com>.
- Morahan-Martin, J., & Schumacher, P. (2003). Loneliness and social use of the Internet. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 19, 660-671.
- Obama Transition Foundation. (2008). Release Authorization: Pursuant to the FCRA (15 U.S.C. sec.1681). 1-9.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Punyanunt-Carter, N. M. (2006, June). An analysis of college students' self-disclosure behaviors on the Internet. *College Student Journal*, 40(2), 329-31.
- Shier, M.T. (2005, Winter). The way technology changes how we do what we do. *New Directions for Student Services*, 112, 77-87.
- Stadler, D. (2006, Summer). Sticks and stones: Student speech and the Internet. *Catalyst for Change*, 34(2), 60-2.
- Student Affairs Leader*. (2006, Feb. 15). How to make Facebook your new best friend. 34(4), 1-2.
- VanDerWerf, M. (2007, March 2). Beware of using social-networking sites to monitor students, lawyers say. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(26), A28.
- Weiner, R. G. (1996) The Internet Culture: Transitions and Problems. (Report No. IR 056 141). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 401 898).
- Weinstocks, J. (2006, December). U r HeRe. *T.H.E. Journal*, 33 (17), 4.
- Wilson, S. & Peterson, L. (2002). The Anthropology of online communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 31, 449-467.

Wolak, J., Mitchell, K., & Finkelhor, D. (2003). Escaping or connecting? Characteristics of youth who form close online relationships. *Journal of Adolescence*, 26, 105-119.

APPENDIX A

Important Definitions

Application or AP- a program created by any Facebook user that can be added to a users page. These range in type from games to favorite movies to personality quizzes. The application feature was added to Facebook in May 2007.

Blog- short for web log, a blog is similar to a journal in which users can write about any topic of their choice and share their thoughts, insights of feelings with friends. Other users may comment and send messages back to original user about their blog. Within Facebook this feature is often referred to as notes.

Facebook Chat- a feature on Facebook in which users logged into the website can chat in real time through typed messages.

Fan Page- users can create pages for things they are a “fan” of. This is another way to advertise and share things you like with others. Fan pages can represent objects, places, people, ideas or anything other topic a user makes a page for.

Friend- a loose term given to any person the user of a page has an online network connection with. A list of friends appears on a users page as well as information is shared with all friends via a newsfeed pending how privacy settings are used. Pending how privacy settings are used, friends are often give more access to profile information than non-friends.

Network- the offline affiliation people identify with, typically a university, business or city.

Newsfeed- a program that gives users updates about their friends on their profile’s homepage. The newsfeed updates in real time with friends’ status updates, changes to profiles and comments posted on friends’ walls.

Wall- the main page visible to other users when looking at a profile of another person. The wall is the open space where people can send one another public messages called wall posts, as well as a place people can share updates about themselves for their online friends to see.

APPENDIX B

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology

Research Study Consent Form

Study Title: Student Identity Construction and Behavior in Online Social Networks

Researchers:

Sara Agostinelli, Graduate Student in College of Education, 509-335-5232

Al Jamison, Associate professor in College of Education, 509-335-0117

You are being asked to take part in a research study carried out by Sara Agostinelli. This form explains the research study and your part in it if you decide to join the study. Please read the form carefully, taking as much time as you need. Ask the researcher to explain anything you don't understand. You can decide not to join the study. If you join the study, you can change your mind later or quit at any time.

What is this study about?

This research study is being done to explore how students attempt to construct their identity in online social networks. The study is part of a Master's thesis project.

What will I be asked to do if I am in this study?

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a one hour, taped interview. In that interview, I will be asking questions to help understand how you project your image to your Facebook friends.

Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?

There anticipated risks to the study are considered minimal.

Will my information be kept private?

The data for this study will be kept confidential. All data will be kept in a locked file. Your identifiable information will be kept confidential and pseudonyms, not names, will be used in any written documents. Tape recordings of the interviews will be destroyed once the transcripts are written and the data are analyzed.

Are there any costs or payments for being in this study?

There will be no costs to you for taking part in this study. You will not receive money or any other form of compensation for taking part in this study.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?

If you have questions about this study or the information in this form, please contact the researchers:

Sara Agostinelli
RED Apt., Streit Perham Hall
Pullman, WA 99163
509-335-5232
sagostinelli@wsu.edu

Al Jamison
263 Cleveland Hall
Pullman, WA 99163
509-335-0117
ajamison@wsu.edu

What are my rights as a research study volunteer?

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to be a part of this study. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take part. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

What does my signature on this consent form mean?

Your signature on this form means that:

- You understand the information given to you in this form
- You have been able to ask the researcher questions and state any concerns
- The researcher has responded to your questions and concerns
- You believe you understand the research study and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.

APPENDIX C

Statement of Consent

I give my voluntary consent to take part in this study. I will be given a copy of this consent document for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands the purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and potential risks of participation.

I also certify that he or she:

- Speaks the language used to explain this research
- Reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her
- Does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Role in the Research Study

APPENDIX D

Student Interview Questions

Online Identity and Disclosure

How did you first learn about Facebook? What about other social networks?

- When did you join Facebook?
- Do you belong to any other social networking sites? If so, which ones? Is your profile on Facebook different than the other ones (MySpace)? If so, how are they different? Do they each have their own “personality”? Are they linked together at all? For example, is there a link on Facebook to your MySpace page?

Do you use privacy settings on Facebook? If so, how have you chosen to set your privacy limitations? Is that a different setting than your other social networking site?

- What information do you purposefully choose to share?
- What information do you intentionally not share?
- Who do you think views your profile?

If a stranger viewed your profile what three things do you think he or she would assume about you? Do you think he or she would make any negative assumptions about you based on your profile? If so, what might those be?

Given your responses, do you think those things (both positive and negative) are an accurate portrait of you? Why or why not?

Besides your friends and relatives, who else do you think uses Facebook? Besides your friends and relatives, who else do you think looks at your profile (if anyone)?

- Do you have evidence that anyone besides your friends and relatives have seen you on Facebook?
- How does it make you feel to suspect or know that people besides your friends and relatives look at your Facebook profile?
- Who do you hope does not view your profile?
- Do you think a professor, the office of student conduct, or a parent has ever viewed your profile?
- Is there anything in your profile you would not want a parent/conduct officer/ professor to see?
- How do you protect yourself from people you don't want to view your profile?

What would make you delete your Facebook account?

How would describe your overall experience with Facebook?

Basic Demographics

- Age, year in school, major, extracurricular involvement.