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Can Concepts Associated with Physical Environments Be Applied to Social Media Sites? An Empirical Study Using Theories from Place Attachment, Social Behavior, and Social Integration

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SOCIAL MEDIA SITES?
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY USING THEORIES FROM PLACE ATTACHMENT, SOCIAL
BEHAVIOR, AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

by

BRIAN BOYLE

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in
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ABSTRACT

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Brian Boyle

Advisor: Joan Greenbaum

My study analyzed the extent to which physical environments and social media sites may be used by people in similar ways. The following research question was asked: “Can concepts associated with physical environments be applied to social media sites?” Three additional research questions developed throughout my study: (i) Do students become attached to social media sites in ways similar to physical environments? (ii) How do students communicate and portray themselves across social media sites? (iii) How do students shape their social groups differently across social media sites? My methods included a two phase approach. The first phase was two months long and required respondents to take surveys via the online website Survey Monkey. The second phase was conducted through seven in-depth thirty minute interviews with respondents who granted permission to contact them. Similar to research on how people interact with physical environments, my findings revealed that users become attached to social media sites, present themselves differently across social media sites, and integrate with different groups across social media sites. There were two significant limitations to my study: sample size and the restricted nature of the questions. Despite the limitations, the research reported here could be considered a viable pilot study for analyzing how social media users relate to the places or sites they visit on a regular basis.

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I. Introduction

The popularity of social media sites has blossomed over the past decade. Six years ago, it was reported in the *2010 Social Media Benchmarking Composite Report* that 60% of people in the United States were active users (Oullette, 2010). However, in recent years that number has grown to over 70%, with trends suggesting continued growth as we move further into the internet age (Perrin, 2015). The increase in percentage of users alone is significant, but studies observing age range add to the intrigue. For example, although usage rates of those from age 18-30 are predictably high (79%), it is revealing that 35% of individuals over the age of 65 now have social media accounts, more than triple the percentage reported in 2010 (Perrin, 2015). In addition, studies observing frequency of use are also worth mentioning. Within the past five years, the amount of time per day the average person spends on social media has tripled from thirty minutes to an hour and a half (Duggan, 2015).

Social media is not a popular fad. It has become an extension of life for millions of U.S. citizens that shapes the way they think, feel, and behave. Many interesting questions arise when observing the effects of social media. One specific question is whether or not social media sites can take on aspects of physical “places.” For example, do people view sites in ways similar to the ways that people experience place attachment issues, elicit communication patterns, and/or influence social group formations? This study sets out to explore the extent to which these forms of social interaction may currently be taking place.

II. Overview of the Study/Research Objective

My study analyzed the extent to which physical environments and social media sites may be used by people in similar ways. Utilizing three social science concepts related to physical environments (place attachment, social behavior, and social integration), and participants from

two public universities (CUNY Brooklyn and CUNY Graduate Center), this study sought to answer the question, “Can concepts associated with physical environments be applied to social media sites?” Three additional research questions developed throughout my study: (i) Do students become attached to social media sites in ways similar to physical environments? (ii) How do students communicate and portray themselves across social media sites? (iii) How do students shape their social groups differently across social media sites?

The study produced intriguing evidence. Particularly, findings revealed that the way people interact with social media sites is similar in some ways to the way they experience physical environments. For example, I found that the research respondents develop feelings of attachment to social media sites, alter their behavior across social media sites, and shape their social groups depending on the social media site they are using. In addition, research provided insights into how social media executives are changing sites in ways that make them more marketable to users. Furthermore, it demonstrated how social media sites are beginning to be used by individuals in ways that differ from their original functions. Lastly, as this thesis will show social media creates negative effects pertaining to free speech, particularly the “Spiral of Silence” epidemic. The Spiral of Silence refers to a tendency among users not to speak up about policy issues in public when they believe their point of view is not widely shared by others.

The thesis layout is as follows. First, a review of previous literature relevant to the concept of place will be provided, as well as a review of previous literature relevant to social media. Secondly, an explanation of how this research fills a gap in previous literature will be discussed. Thirdly, I will present a description of the methodology used to gather the necessary data needed to fulfill the research objective. In the fourth section I will report on the findings. I will then interpret the findings within the scope of our research by providing an analysis of four

prevalent themes that occur throughout. Finally, I will share my closing thoughts, limitations of the study, and suggest ideas for future research.

III. Past Literature

a. Literature Related to Place

The work of cultural geographers John Brinkerhoff Jackson and Carl Sauer was most relevant to my study. In his publication *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1986), Jackson drew on examples of everyday landscape to demonstrate how people of small means make positive, significant changes to physical environments. Jackson's main conclusion pertained to how geography is not just made up of physical environment, but the interaction between humans and a particular landscape. In an extension of Jackson's findings, Carl Sauer, in his work the *Morphology of Landscape* (1925), explored both natural and built up components of a place not as separate aspects, but as intermingling concepts that coincide with each other. According to Sauer, the combination of natural and man-made (particularly cultural) elements comprise, at any time, the essential character of a place. Significantly, Sauer noted how the true character of a place shifts as the landscape becomes more inhabited, economic and social forces become more complex, change accelerates, and layers are formed. The conclusions of both Jackson and Sauer were critical for my research because they deal with interactions between people and a particular environment.

There are other forms of research besides Jackson & Sauer that have examined the concept of "place." Sadatsafavi, Walewski, & Shepley (2015) utilized hospitals to study whether physical work environments play a role in job-related anxiety and employee-employer relations. In doing so, Sadatsafavi et al. found that modern fixtures (colorful paintings, flat screen televisions, fresh paint, and new desks) in segments of hospitals, particularly patient treatment

areas, operating rooms, therapy rooms, and staff lounges contributed to several positive results. These included: lower levels of work-related stress, heightened degrees of job satisfaction, and stronger bonds amongst employees. Additionally, in *Sexual Place, Spatial Change, and the Social Reorganization of Sexual Culture* (2005), Kelly & Laboy used San Jose Park to research whether the ecology of a place enhances or inhibits sexual experiences. By ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews, Kelly & Laboy (2005) identified several aspects of a park to contribute to sexual activity. Notable components included green scenery, playful vibes in the area, and access to secluded areas within a larger, open landscape.

b. Theoretical Concepts Related to Place

This thesis builds on three theoretical concepts about physical place and examines their relationship to social media environments. The three concepts include: (i) place attachment, (ii) social behavior, and (iii) social integration. Attachment to place was initially studied by phenomenological scholars such as Bachelard (1964) and Eliade (1959) who were interested in environmental-behavior issues. Their studies primarily used homes and sacred places to determine how people seek out and adapt to new situations (as cited in Altman & Low, 1992). However, in their book *Place Attachment (Human Behavior & Environment)* (1992), Irwin Altman and Setha Low further developed the concept of place attachment by focusing on how people affiliate and attach themselves to new locales by giving meaning to those places over time. According to Altman and Low, we may or may not become attached to places for various reasons over time, which is ultimately determined by the feelings we experience when being in a particular place.

Several researchers have used early studies on place attachment conducted by Bachelard (1964) and Eliade (1959), as well as modern studies conducted by Irwin and Altman (1992), as

a backbone for their own work. Smith & McAlister (2015) used place attachment as the groundwork for studying inhabitants of the Great Plains. Their findings found that despite eroding economic realities of living in small, segregated counties, middle aged and older people had a deep connection to the area that would prevent them from ever leaving. However, these place attachment-related findings proved to only be generational (younger inhabitants were less attached the area and open to one day leaving, citing the internet as the main reason behind their differences in perspectives from previous generations). In addition, McAuley (1998) used place attachment as a lens when studying people living in rural all-Black towns. His research uncovered intense feelings of place attachment among residents, which derived from extreme racism encountered by residents outside of that particular neighborhood. According to McAuley, symptoms of attachment were so intense that many residents expressed discomfort for leaving town for more than a week's time.

Early research on social behavior theory, particularly by Homans (1974), studied interpersonal relationships, power and authority, cooperation and competition, interaction structure, status, satisfaction, leadership, and satisfaction. His study, and those like it, primarily focused on social behavior occurrences happening in real time. However, in his book *No Sense of Place* (1986), Joshua Meyrowitz, further developed the concept of social behavior by studying how it applies to media, particularly the television. According to Meyrowitz, the people and surroundings in one's environment impacts one's communication methods, particularly how they convey content and tell stories.

Several researchers have used early studies on social behavior conducted by Homans (1974) as well as more recent studies conducted by Meyrowitz (1986), as a backbone for their own work. Keyton et al. (2013) identified different communication methods and phrases

employees use both in and out of the workplace. After they analyzed organizational publications to identify 343 communication behaviors commonly used in the workplace, they asked employees to list how many of those phrases they used both at work and at home. In accordance with past research on Social Behavior, participants used less than 40% of work phrases while they were at home. Wu et al. (2014) studied whether communication styles differed between individuals talking in virtual environments in comparison to those talking in physical environments. Through the lens of social behavior theory, they found individuals communicating in virtual environments to be less reserved in communicating their feelings towards others, in addition to being more liable to express anger, disrespect, and aggression.

Social integration theory was developed by Emile Durkheim (1897) when he was trying to understand why some people are more likely than others to commit suicide. According to Durkheim, people's norms, beliefs, and values make up a shared way of understanding and behaving in the world known as a collective consciousness. This collective consciousness binds individuals together and creates social integration. A lack of social integration creates anomie, which in turn increases the chances of taking one's life.

More recent studies have used the concept of Social Integration to provide insights into homogeneity of individuals, particularly how people feel connected through similar work, education background, and social networks. For example, Berkman & Glass (2000) researched the effect of social integration on health. In studying adults age 24-36, they concluded that those who reported higher levels of social integration (such as being members of a sports team, activity club, etc.) had higher levels of self-esteem and overall well-being. Those who did not were more likely to report feeling stressed out, fatigued, and anxious on occasion. In addition, Green et al. (2010) studied urban African American teenagers to determine whether low social integration

was positively or negatively associated with substance abuse among this particular population. Their findings concluded that those who had higher levels of social integration were more likely to fall victim to substance abuse. The reasoning behind this associated increased social integration with greater exposure to peer pressure as well as compulsions to impress others and fit in. However, it also represents the notion that social integration can result in different outcomes, according to the group one is integrated into. Furthermore, Walker (2009) studied a combination of urbanization, religion, and social integration and their effects on the likelihood of suicide. His most significant finding was that the mere presence of religious institutions in neighborhoods helps lower the chance of those with low levels of social integration of committing suicide. Moreover, Benner & Wang (2014) studied if social integration affects the educational success and self-efficacy beliefs of adolescents across different cultural backgrounds. Their conclusions credited low social integration having an effect on the academic outcomes for African American students, but not playing a significant effect in the scores of Asian or Latino students. Finally, Schmidt & Muller (2013) studied employees throughout German work environments and found that migrant workers not only formed groups based off common interests and nationalities, but used these bonds to effectively overcome instances of severe prejudice.

c. Literature Related to Social Media

There have also been studies pertaining to how people use social media. For example, Shneor & Efrat (2014) used four cultural dimensions (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity) to determine that individualistic cultures use social media more frequently. Chong et al. (2015) studied LGB individuals living in Hong Kong and concluded that social groups commonly subject to stigma use social media for facilitating social information

exchange, building camaraderie, and bolstering resilience among their group. Ramos & Bennett (2016) studied 200 high school students and found that teenagers use social media as a vehicle for cyberbullying. Aydin & Arslan (2015) used surveys for individuals 18-25 to determine that young adults use social media for travel ideas.

Other literature has narrowed the focus to examine how people use specific social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram. Mehdizadeh (2010) utilized self-esteem self-reports to conclude that individuals lower in self-esteem tend to post more often to social media sites. Kapidzic (2013) looked at the presence of narcissism throughout the posting process and found it to be significant predictor in social media activity, particularly the selection of one's profile picture. Utz. et al. (2015) utilized online surveys across three countries in Europe to determine that Snapchat elicits more jealousy than Facebook between and amongst users. Shein (2013) determined that the ephemeral nature of data (content that differs after a short amount of time) influences people to take pictures and record videos conducting silly and/or inappropriate behavior. Van Ogtrop (2014) concluded that Snapchat is the main way children communicate inappropriately with friends to avoid getting in trouble by their parents (given the short duration of the content availability). Waxman (2014) & Minsker (2015) used McDonalds to illustrate how corporations and educational institutions utilize Snapchat as a means of marketing to the masses, particularly through advertising and producing coverage of events. Streufert (2013) researched LinkedIn and concluded that users strive to incorporate the following in their profiles as a means of attracting professional contacts: (i) obtaining 500+ connections, (ii) adding abbreviations at the end of one's name representing certificates, licenses, or degrees, (iii) providing a professional biography.

Further research has examined how different social media platforms are being marked for different purposes and audiences. Forrester recently conducted a study on the benefits of Instagram for business owners and concluded that its posts deliver 58 times more engagement per followers than Facebook, and 120 more times engagement than Twitter (Adriel, 2015). Other studies have focused on Instagram's influence on celebrity-fan interaction. For example, Richardson et al. (2014) studied how Snoop Dogg is able to use Instagram to promote tobacco use. In addition, Smith & Anderson (2015) concluded that Instagram is a viable platform for both athletes and celebrities to sell products like sports apparel and concert tickets. Marwick (2015) utilized Instagram to describe a micro-celebrity culture that has been produced by the platform, made of a regular folks that have thousands of followers for mundane reasons.

IV. Gap in Literature

There is a myriad of thought-provoking research in the social sciences on concepts related to places, landscapes, and environments, many of which have utilized place attachment, social behavior, or social integration as a platform for study. However, most research, whether it has been conducted from a cultural geographic, environmental psychological, or sociological viewpoint, has viewed places, landscapes, and environments from a physical perspective. Very little research has studied "place" from a digital realm, specifically from a social media standpoint.

Therefore, my study will try and identify concepts commonly related to physical environments that may be present in the use of social media. From a place attachment perspective, I will examine if, why, and how individuals become attached to social media sites in ways that reflect similarities to physical environments. In doing so, I will look to also identify the possible repercussions of becoming attached to social media. From a social behavior perspective,

I will investigate if users present themselves differently depending on what site they are using. In doing so, I will analyze components such as photos and writing style across different platforms. From a social integration perspective, I will examine whether people utilize social networks to differentiate between social groups and connect with others. In doing so, I will analyze how users determine their “friends” across different platforms.

In addition, although there has been a large amount of research on specific social media sites, many studies have a tendency to place an emphasis on the negative aspects of social media. My study will go beyond that by identifying the positive, negative, and neutral effects at play when viewing the use of social media sites as “places.”

V. Methods

My methods included a two phase approach. The first phase was two months long and required respondents to take surveys via the online website Survey Monkey. The target sample was students between the ages of 18-45. Overall, thirty-five surveys were submitted. However, five were deducted from the total and listed as “N/A” due to insufficient responses. For example, three respondents filled the survey out but just typed “Nah” as a response to every question. Since these responses would have skewed results, they were voided from the research. Relationships with past and present classmates, connections with teachers, and access to CUNY student Facebook groups served as tools for recruiting survey respondents. All members of the research population were CUNY graduate students currently enrolled in either the CUNY Graduate Center or CUNY Brooklyn College. The surveys consisted of ten questions pertaining to social media usage. Participants completed the survey anonymously. However, the tenth question requested permission to reach out to the respondent via email for further inquiry (see Appendix A).

The second phase of the study was conducted through seven in-depth thirty minute interviews with respondents who granted permission to contact them. Interviews were conducted in either of two formats: (i) in person or (ii) Skype. Thanks to the diversity of the CUNY student body, I was able to conduct interviews with students across a variety of demographics. The age range among the respondents was between 25 and 40 years of age (see Appendix B for the background of the interview participants). After data from thirty Survey Monkey responses was gathered and all seven interviews were conducted, the data was transcribed and an inductive scheme was developed that focused on the respondents' social media usage.

VI. Results

Data from the survey and interview questions provided insights across a variety of spectrums. In a broad sense, they sought to answer the question "Can theoretical concepts associated with physical environments be applied to the use of social media sites?" This was done by posing three additional research questions: (i) Do students become attached to social media sites in ways similar to physical environments? (ii) How do students communicate and portray themselves differently across social media sites? (iii) How do students shape their social groups differently across social media sites? Answers provided insights into these questions, in addition to offering unintended contributions to research.

Surveys

The survey data indicated that all respondents had an account on at least one social media site (100%). The five most popular sites among respondents were as follows: Facebook 28/30 (93%), LinkedIn 23/30 (77%), Instagram 17/30 (57%), Twitter 14/30 (47%), and Pinterest 12/30 (40%). When asked about the frequency in which they visit these sites, 27/30 (90%) of respondents mentioned that they visit at least one social media site at least once a day. Of those

twenty seven respondents, twenty two (or 85%) said they accessed at least one social media several times per day.

Table 1. Social Media Popularity

| Social Media Site Popularity | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Facebook | 28 | 93% |
| LinkedIn | 23 | 77% |
| Instagram | 17 | 57% |
| Twitter | 14 | 47% |
| Pinterest | 12 | 40% |
| | | |

Table 2. Frequency of Visits

| Frequency of Visits | | |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Once Per Day | 27 | 90% |
| Several Times Per Day | 22 | 85% |
| | | |

The most common reasons for frequent visits included: keeping in touch with family and friends (many of whom live in other states or other countries), staying informed about the news, following what favorite athletes/celebrities are up to, keeping up with fashion trends, and promoting one’s business. One survey respondent stated:

“I grew up in Texas, so I use Facebook as a means of keeping in touch with family members as well as people I went to high school with.”

A second survey respondent said,

“I use Instagram to keep tabs on my favorite musicians and athletes. So many of them post frequently now so it is cool to see what they are up to. The reason why I like looking them up is to see for motivational purposes as well as to see what products they are promoting.

Another respondent mentioned,

“Twitter has basically taken the place of all news outlets for me. If I hear wind of something, I just go to Twitter. No need to go to CNN, etc. People will already be tweeting about it.”

A fourth survey respondent came close to mentioning all three of these reasons verbatim:

“I need to visit several social media sites basically every day of my life. For starters, it helps me keep in contact with family and friends, many of whom live overseas. They also serve as great platforms to find out about breaking news. Lastly, as someone who is in to pop culture, social media sites are the go-to places for seeing what celebrities are doing and what brands they are promoting.

Although there were many responses that mentioned one (or all) of the above reasons for visiting social media sites, other responses in the survey varied. For example, one respondent stated,

“ I visit these sites frequently for a variety of reasons – to keep in touch with friends, follow news, and to online shop. I also use them to network. Lastly, although I used to think this was weird, I now use social media sites as an occasional outlet for online dating.”

Respondent mentioned,

“I go on Facebook multiple times a day to see updates in people’s lives, trending news, and to read through and/or comment on fun or intellectual threads within private groups that I am a part of. Being able to comment on intellectual threads allows to meet people I do not know, which is cool.”

A respondent indicated that social media use was becoming required:

“I have no choice these days. All communication is made on social media sites now. I used to not use it at all and now I feel that almost all of my graduate school classes have mandatory Facebook pages.”

When asked about whether social media sites can fill a role similar to a particular environment, 24/30 (80%) of respondents said yes. The five most popular answers to this question were: (i) Facebook fills the role of a meeting area such as a coffee shop, bar, library, or park (20/24, 83%), (ii) LinkedIn fills the role of a networking event (17/24, 71%), (iii) Twitter fills the role of a newsroom (15/24, 63%), Instagram fills the role of an art gallery (15/24, 63%), and Pinterest fills the role of a shopping mall (13/24, 54%). Given the nature of the survey question, respondents were not asked to elaborate.

Table 3. Social Media as a Physical Environment

| Social Media as a Physical Environment | | |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Facebook --> Meeting Area | 20 | 83% |
| LinkedIn --> Networking Event | 17 | 71% |
| Twitter --> Newsroom | 15 | 63% |
| Instagram --> Art Gallery | 15 | 63% |

When asked whether the pictures they post are different depending on the social media site they are using, 22/30 (73%) respondents answered yes. In doing so, many respondents touched on how certain sites, particular LinkedIn, differ from others in the way that they encourage the promotion of professional photos. For example, one respondent mentioned,

“Yes, I only post professional photos on LinkedIn. On other sites I post pictures from my personal life.”

Another survey respondent had this to say:

“Yes, I post family and personal outings on sites like Facebook and Instagram, but not LinkedIn. On LinkedIn, I will post professional pictures, such as headshots or photos taken of me speaking at conferences.”

Although the professionalism of LinkedIn was a significant factor in many responses, there were also other answers provided. A third respondent said,

“Yes, the photos I post on Instagram are artistic in nature. On Facebook, the pictures I post are more or less a documentation of my life.”

A fourth respondent stated,

“Yes. The photos I put on Facebook are more of everyday life. I can put a lot up there and sort them into an album that does not have to clog everyone’s newsfeed. The pictures I post on Instagram are of special occasions.”

When asked whether their writing style is different depending on the social media site they are using, 21/30 (70%) respondents answered no. In addition, almost all of those did not give explanations, instead choosing to either write “no” or “no, I do not.” I found the responses to this question were surprising and will be discussed in the next section.

One respondent said:

“No. Why would it be?”

Although they represented a minority of the population, those who answered yes to these questions often provided explanations. One respondent in particular provided an in depth answer that reflected many of the answers:

“Yes my writing style definitely is different. On Facebook, I use more of a personal tone. On LinkedIn, I try to type in a way that comes off as professional and well-mannered. Twitter is more short and to the point. Instagram is a more

creative platform where words aren't even needed the majority of the time. When words are used, it is common to communicate via hash tags."

Another respondent echoed this sentiment,

"Yes, LinkedIn is definitely more professional writing, whereas the rest include a lot of joking and short hand."

A third respondent provided extended insights to their Instagram writing habits,

"All of my writing on social media is very relaxed. I don't purposely misspell words but I do not care if I do. Also, on Instagram I use a ton of emojis. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out that I use more emojis than letters. When I am not using emojis, I use hashtags."

When asked whether they are comfortable saying things on one social media site and not the other, 21/30 (70%) respondents answered yes, citing a difference in friend groups and the duration for how long things stay open to the public. For example, one respondent stated,

"Yes, I feel more comfortable saying things on Instagram because I have less followers/friends on there than I do on Facebook."

A second respondent mentioned,

"Yes I wouldn't share my political views on Instagram, Twitter, or LinkedIn because it is not the place for that."

A third respondent stated,

"Yes I can talk about things with my friends on Instagram in regards to what we do while we are out partying. I won't talk about getting drunk or crazy on Facebook anymore since my whole family is on there."

A fourth respondent stated,

“Yes, I am way more comfortable in what I say on Snapchat because I know it will be gone in ten seconds. The things I say on there are downright absurd sometimes.”

Those who answered “no” to this question all expressed feelings of discomfort posting anything at all. For example, one respondent said,

“The way things are these days, I am not comfortable posting any of my views. I do not want to offend anyone. I also don’t want people yelling at me because they disagree with something I say.”

A second respondent mentioned,

“I never post anything anymore because I feel like one day it will come back to haunt me.”

When asked whether their friends are different depending on the social media site, 25/30 (83%) respondents answered yes, citing personal, professional, and celebrity driven reasons. One respondent stated,

“Yes, Facebook is personal contacts, LinkedIn is professional contacts, Instagram is full of random inspirational people, and on Twitter I am connected with a lot of brands and content creators.”

A second respondent mentioned,

“Those I am connected with on Facebook tend to be family and friends. On Instagram, I look to follow famous celebrities and athletes.”

A third respondent states,

“All of the social media sites on the computer I more or less have the same friends. However, on Snapchat I have way fewer friends and those tend to be

people that I am most close to, since I have to have their phone number in order to connect with them.”

When asked as a yes or no question whether from an overall basis, if they present themselves differently depending across social media sites, 21/30 (70%) of respondents answered yes. One respondent states,

“Yes, I do. It is important to abide by boundaries across settings that promote different behaviors.”

Another mentioned,

“I present myself different in a subtle fashion across all interpersonal environments. Physical and virtual are one and the same in my opinion.”

Interviews

In addition to the thirty survey responses, qualitative methods in the form of interviews were conducted with seven individuals as a second phase of research. The interviews were conducted in person or on Skype with the participants so that the actual sites could be shown. For the sake of anonymity, interviewees will be referred to by the following letter codes: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7. By conducting interviews, I hoped to build on questions asked in the interview as a means of gathering more in depth responses that would enhance our findings. For example, interviewees who mentioned on the survey that they visit at least one site several times a day were asked two follow up questions: (i) what do you would happen if you were unable to access this/these particular site(s) for one week? (ii) How about two or three weeks?

When faced with this question, P2 answered,

“I do not think a week would be that bad. Sure, I would be out of the loop with friends and family on Facebook but that is not that long of a time. I’ll be honest, it

would be much easier if that week happened to be very busy at work, to help keep my mind off of it. Overall I think I would be fine though. I might even grow to like my life better and realize that I do not need to be checking all of these sites every day. It is interesting, now that I think about it, a lot of what I see/read on there is useless information.”

P4 echoed this sentiment,

“A week? That’s nothing! Sure, I definitely visit sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat a lot but I think a lot of what causes me to visit them so frequently is just out of habit. I sit next to a computer all day at work so it is almost a reaction to log on to them when I get a few minutes of peace, especially at lunch time. I probably would just wind up going on more sports and news websites like ESPN, CNN, Fox, etc.”

P6 felt the same,

“Do I go on social media every day? Sure I do. But I really think I do so in order to fill low points of the day. I could easily see myself substituting sports websites into that allotted time. And plus, I’m married. I am sure my wife and kids would jump at the opportunity to give me extra things to do!”

P7 was not so confident:

“I do not think I would be able to do that. I rely on social media sites for so many things. For starters, it is the easiest way I can stay in touch with my friends and family, many of whom live in other countries. I guess I could always text, but connecting through social media is easier and creates a stress-free way of communicating that does not require immediate responses. In addition, I use

Facebook to promote my business. Without updating my page, I am sure my consumer base would think something bad happened.”

Responses took on a more uneasy feel when the length of time was extended to two or three weeks. P2 stated,

“Maybe not after two, but I think after three weeks I would start to experience withdrawal. I would feel out of touch not only with those closest to me, but with world news as well. I guess I could always go on the websites of news stations to stay informed, but that is annoying. Again, I think losing contact with my friends would be the worst part! Sure I can text them, but seeing what they are up to in regards to the pictures they post on Instagram and Snapchat is a big deal.”

P4 stated,

“I think I could get away with a week. But not two or three. So much of what I do is reliant on social media, particularly marketing my business. Being away from social media is simply not an option for me.”

P6 said,

“Eh, I still think I would be alright. I am sure there would be times where my friends would tell me to go to a link of a specific site, and it would start to get annoying not being able to do that. I also like keeping up on what some of the New York Giants’ players are posting on Instagram, but I guess I could find out elsewhere, although it would not be as much of a personal feel.”

Lastly, interviewees were asked out of the all their social media sites, which one would create the biggest sense of withdrawal. The majority of interviewees said Facebook.

P7 stated,

“Facebook for sure. So much of what I do is on there, especially my business related things. In a way I feel like Facebook can compensate for missing out on the other sites. But if I lost Facebook, I would be in trouble. Now that I think about it, it is interesting that I basically rely on a social media site as a means of being able to feed my family.”

P2 said,

“Facebook for sure, because my family is on there. It’s all about keeping in touch with the family!”

However, P6 offered a different insight:

“I actually think I would have the hardest time giving up Snapchat. At this point, it has become an extension of the text dialogue I have with my closest friends throughout the day. Without it, I’d feel like they were having a separate conversation without me through pictures/videos and I’d start to feel very secluded.”

During the second phase, participants elaborated on some of their initial answers in the survey, particularly examples of how social media sites fill the role of physical environments, and how photos, writing style, and “friends” can differ across platforms. For instance, P1 mentioned,

“Although I only have one social media site (Facebook), I view it having two different sites because I have a personal page and a public figure page. My public figure page is dedicated to my job as a life coach helping provide guidance to kids in underserved communities. My behavior differs greatly across these two pages. In fact, nothing I do is the same on both. For example, on my personal page I will

post past pictures of me in the army, or pictures from more current times of me with family and friends. You know, the people I am connected with. I will also post funny, “ironic” things that I find humorous. However, on my public figure page, things are completely different. I only post photos that include inspirational quotes. I think I do this because I certainly do not want anything I post to offend that particular segment that I am working with. Also, those I am connected with, or “friends” with, tend to only be my clients. ”

In addition, interviewee P7 provided insights into how social media sites fill roles of physical environments that she was not able to fully get across in the survey:

“I could not expand on this while I was completing the survey, but I think sites like Pinterest, and even Facebook, are beginning to fill the roles of cooking classes. These days, people post creative videos of how to cook dishes that are not only cool but they only are a minute in duration. Instead of it being something that takes an hour, the content of the video is sped up to skip over unnecessary time spent stirring, or when the food is actually cooking in the oven. They are cool videos that are over in about 90 seconds. You’ve got to check them out.”

P6 stated something similar in regards to how social media sites are taking on unconventional roles:

“I put “Snapchat → News Outlet” in the “Other” section of the survey because I think businesses are really using the “MyStory” application of Snapchat to effectively spread 60-90 second videos and provide their content. People usually consider Snapchat as a means of communicating silly things with your friends, and yes, it has a reputation for being an outlet to send nude photos, but the way

companies are beginning to utilize it to market themselves is very impressive. I click on the videos almost every day.”

Furthermore, P5 mentioned why her photos differ across platforms that unlike many other responses, did not include a personal/professional element:

“My Instagram photos definitely differ from my Facebook photos. On my Instagram, the photos are taken from my perspective, in other words, from my eye point of view. Therefore, I am never actually in the picture that I post to Instagram. On Facebook, I am in the in the picture, so it is from someone else’s point of view. I find that to be an interesting difference that may very well only apply to me.”

P5 also provided insights into her writing style on social media, particularly Instagram,

“It is amazing to me how Instagram has all but made the use of full sentences irrelevant. As I allowed to a bit in my survey response, almost all communication I do on Instagram (and I’m not an anomaly) is done through hash tags and emojis. It is almost as if Instagram has created its own language free of grammar (and the judgment that accompanies it). I think it is starting to move its way to Snapchat as well.

In addition, P7 provided some insight into why she answered this question with an abrupt “no.” She stated:

“To be honest, and I am not sure if this was the intention of the question, but I felt kind of offended by the question. This might seem silly, but I feel like it was assuming that I conduct myself differently when I talk to “my people” or “my friends.” Like it was saying that I type lazy and ignorant when speaking with

people my age, but make sure to use proper grammar when I know my words are going to be seen by others, like professional people. I am not sure. For some reason I thought a straight “no” would enforce the fact that how I speak (in this case, type) is consistent across all platforms. I am who I am. Then again, I could have just been reading the question completely wrong.”

Finally interviewee P7 offered some insights into how her friends differ depending on the social media site she is using:

“On social media sites, regardless of what kind of vibe there is, whether it be personal or professional, people’s “friends” tend to be people they know. However, I have found Pinterest to be quite different. Many of my friends on that site are complete strangers that I’ve connected with solely because we like each other’s tastes. It will start with one of us “pinning” one of our posts, and then it snowballs from there. It is strange having this dialogue through “pinning” without even knowing the person.”

When asked to consider from an overall perspective, taking everything into, whether she thinks she presents herself differently across different social media platforms, P3 provided the following statement:

“Overall, yes I do. I think just in general I find myself trying to portray a different image of myself in countless environments throughout my life. When I am out with friends, I will speak a different way and assume a different role. For instance, all of my friends are very funny so I usually am not the one coming up with the witty comments. However, when I am around my family (a less funny crowd), I usually feel obliged to step up and assume the role of “class clown.”

Now that I have taken part in this project, I can definitely recognize a lot of parallels between my behavior across different physical environments, particularly in front of different crowds, and my behavior across social media sites.”

P6 offered a similar insight,

“I do. At the end of the day, we are all going to adjust our behavior to what best fits our current environment. And these days, social media has risen to the point of prominence where you can feel a specific “vibe” when accessing different platforms. LinkedIn screams professionalism. Snapchat gives off the impression that people can act as silly as possible without any repercussions. Given our nature to adjust to vibes, I believe I, as well as everyone else portrays themselves a bit differently. It certainly does not have to be dramatic, but it’s certainly comes into play. “

VII. Discussion

The data provided a clear indication that an overwhelming majority of the respondents use at least one social media site at least once per day for a variety of reasons pertaining to their day to day functioning. Any absence from social media longer than one week would cause an array of adverse effects, particularly: heightened levels of anxiety, falling out of touch with family/friends (particularly those who lived in other states or other countries), feelings of loneliness, and severe loss of income. These findings can be seen through an analysis of the concept of place attachment as they seem to indicate that, as past studies, place attachment relates to one’s familiarity and comfort level with an environment (Smith & McAlister, 2015, McAuley, 1998). However, our results also go beyond traditional portrayals of place attachment.

Whereas previous forms of research looked at place attachment in environments where members communicate face to face, my study introduced an understanding of the ways that people can become attached to places where members communicate virtually. These findings are consistent with Altman and Low, whose research concluded that attachment is generated from the feelings people experience when being in a particular place.

Secondly, survey and interview data indicates that users have a tendency to post different photos depending on what social media platform they were using. Survey and interview respondents offered considerations that contributed to their decision making, most notably whether the social media environment was personal or professional in nature. Other reasons were also presented, particularly the time duration of the availability of a photo to others, comfort levels revealing a photo to particular audiences, the intended message of the photo, as well as the stylistic components at play within the photo. These findings can be seen to fit in with the concept of Social Behavior, particularly with reference to how one's behavior (in this case, the depiction of one's behavior) differs across environments. They also concur with conclusions of previous related literature that compared and contrasted behavior patterns across personal and professional environments (Meyrowitz, 1986, Keyton et al., 2013)

Thirdly, survey and interview data indicates that users tend to keep their writing style consistent across different social media platforms. An interesting aspect here is that many respondents responded with a simple "no" to the survey question asking if they used different writing styles, without taking the opportunity to provide a short explanation. Although there was no way to tell at first, there was a sense that some individuals were offended by the question. It was not until the interviews that these notions were partially justified. When discussing the matter, P7 mentioned that for her, it seemed implied that she typed in a loose, ungrammatical

style on one website while talking to “her people” while taking the time to portray a sense of professionalism on the other. It is not clear if these findings illustrate that respondents used a consistent communication style across environments which would conflict with previous social behavior literature like Meyrowitz (1986) and Keyton et al. (2014) that found differences in behavior across media and personal/professional environments. The answers to the ‘writing style’ question were different than the responses to ‘presentation style’ questions, which may indicate that the question was perhaps misunderstood.

Finally, survey and interview data indicates that users tend to have different friends across social media platforms. On Facebook, the majority of respondents mentioned being connected with people they have known for a significant amount of time, particularly family and friends. On LinkedIn, the majority of respondents mentioned being connected with people they have met at work, or borderline strangers who just happen to work in the same professional industry. On Instagram, respondents mentioned being connected with celebrities or famous athletes in addition to their friends. On Pinterest, the majority of respondents mentioned that they were connected mostly with complete strangers who had similar fashion/cooking interests. My findings support earlier studies about social integration by Durkheim (1897), particularly that people will seek to integrate with others in an environment who have similar tastes and interests. In addition, they agree with the conclusions of past studies that found instances of social integration across work environments by people of similar ethnic background and professional interests (Schmidt & Muller, 2013). Furthermore, my findings support previous conclusions by Jackson and Sauer examined geography as the interaction between humans and a particular landscape.

In addition to the aforementioned findings, I found after an inductive analysis of the surveys and interviews data produced four themes. The first theme present throughout the results pertained to the popularity hierarchy across different social media sites. For example, although sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram are growing in popularity among my respondents. Facebook was still far away and the site most frequently used by respondents (>90%). These findings support research done by Pew Research Center in 2015 that concluded Facebook to have the highest percentage of users among adults (“Social Networking, 2015).

The second theme present throughout the results was that social media sites are being developed in ways that build on the characteristics commonly associated with them by the public. For instance, long considered a site strictly meant for sending silly and/or inappropriate content that would disappear within seconds, Snapchat is now being developed into an outlet highly coveted by corporations and news outlets looking to expand their reach to consumers. In fact, many respondents considered Snapchat as a viable way to check up on events like sports events, as well as brand promotions. These finding align with previous research, particularly studies that observed the strategies implemented by corporations like McDonalds, ESPN, and CNN with hopes of infiltrating the Snapchat marketplace (Waxman, 2014) (Minsker, 2015), as well as the appeal of social media sites to large corporations looking to data mine consumer data (Donovan, 2013).

A third theme present throughout the results was that users are becoming less comfortable expressing their views on social media. Several respondents mentioned that their hesitancy to post opinions is out of fear that they will offend people, and in turn be the victim of disrespectful backlash. These findings have been indicated in previous research, particularly studies that have labeled virtual platforms as havens for aggressive verbal behavior (Wu et al.,

2014), as well as research that has detailed the “spiral of silence” epidemic (a tendency not to speak up about policy issues in public when one believes their point of view is not widely shared) across social media users. (Hampton et al., 2014).

A fourth theme present throughout the results was that the majority of users still view keeping in touch with family/friends as the main reason for using social media sites. These findings are backed by previous research, including King (2015), whose qualitative study of hundreds of college students produced similar findings. However, this theme seems to be evolving into broader patterns. An array of respondents mentioned other main reasons that contribute to their social media usage, such as following athletes/celebrities, keeping up with fashion and cooking trends, staying in tune with global news, and posting photos of their travels. These findings are supported in previous research (Smith & Anderson, 2015), (Watanabe et al. (2015).

VIII. Conclusion

To recapitulate, the focus of this study was to analyze the extent to which physical environments and social media sites may be used by people in similar ways. Results indicated that my three featured concepts (place attachment, social behavior, social integration) were evident in the use of social media by survey respondents and interview participants across two urban college campuses – CUNY Brooklyn College and CUNY Graduate Center.

Data from the surveys and interviews produced three key insights. First, an overwhelming majority of users access at least one form of social media every day and have developed attachment issues to these platforms. Secondly, social media users tend to post different photos across different social media sites, which depends mostly on their intended

audience and the time duration a picture is viewable on the website. Thirdly, users tend to have different “friends” depending on what social media site they are accessing,

An inductive analysis of the surveys and interviews also identified four main themes. First, Facebook is still the most popular social media site, but others are quickly gaining comparative popularity. Secondly, keeping in touch with friends/family is still the prominent reason why users turn to social media. Thirdly, social media sites are being developed in ways that build on the characteristics commonly associated with them by the public and align with the interests of data mining by big business. Finally, users are becoming less comfortable expressing their views on social media.

There were two significant limitations of this study. The first limitation concerns the sample size. It included only thirty participants across two public campuses that collectively include over 20,000 students, which is too small to gain a true perspective on social media usage even in an urban university setting. My study also included participants who predominantly came from two academic programs: the CUNY Brooklyn Sociology MA and the CUNY Graduate Center MALS program. Lastly, my study lacked several cultural components by only including American students. The second limitation concerns the limitations of the questions themselves. Survey responses are restricted in nature, and the interviewee questions had to be succinct given that there was a thirty minute maximum duration.

The limitations mentioned create interesting avenues for future research. First, I think more detailed questions about the use of sites would provide additional data. Secondly, studying other colleges in New York, as well as the United States as a whole would serve as a means of rounding out a study such as this one. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, there are 1400 four year colleges in the United States (“Degree Granting, n.d.). Thirdly, studying

students from other academic levels, particularly high school, could contribute to different findings. According to the Pew Research Center, 92% of high school students have use at least one form of social media (Lenhart, 2015). Therefore, comparing the differences across high school and college students could provide interesting findings not uncovered in previous studies. Furthermore, the same study can be done using students born in different countries as a means of determining the effects of culture on results. Finally, different theoretical realms pertaining to physical environments can be applied as backbones of the study, particularly Lefebvre's Production of Space theory (Lefebvre, 1992) and Kurt Lewin's Field theory (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995). Despite the limitations, I believe that the research reported here could be considered a viable pilot study for analyzing how social media users relate to the places or sites they visit on a regular basis.

Appendix

A. LETTER REQUESTING PARTICIPATION

I am doing a study that seeks to determine how graduate students present themselves in different environments. In terms of this particular research, “environments” will take the form of social media websites. Concepts such as communication styles, self-presentation, and place attachment will be explored. Students who wish to participate, please out the following form. It will require that you list all social media sites you use as well as answering a few questions. Then if you are interested I will you to sit down for an interview (in-person or Skype), which will only take about 30 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked to display your social media pages and discuss a few brief open-ended questions about each.

[questions attached]

B. DESCRIPTION OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

The background of the participants was as follows: Respondent 1 was a Sociology MA student currently working as a life coach. Respondent 2 was a Sociology MA student currently working as an accountant. Respondent 3 was a MALS (Issues in Urban Education track) student currently working in admissions for a charter school.

Respondent 4 was a Sociology MA student currently working as a real estate broker.

Respondent 5 was a MALS (Fashion Studies track) student currently working in fashion retail. Respondent 6 was a School Counseling MA student currently working in property management. Respondent 7 was a School Counseling MA currently working in financial services.

C. SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Graduate Center
Liberal Studies Department

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Research Study: Can theoretical concepts applicable to physical environments be applied to social media sites? An analysis through Place Attachment, Social Behavior, and Social Integration theories.

Principal Investigator: Brian Boyle
Graduate Student, MA Liberal Studies

Faculty Advisor: Joan Greenbaum
Professor, MALS
CUNY Graduate Center
Environmental Psychology

Research Sponsor: N/A

Purpose:

I am doing a study that seeks to determine how graduate students present themselves in different environments. In terms of this particular research, “environments” will take the form of social media websites. Concepts such as communication styles, self-presentation, and place attachment will be explored.

Procedures:

If you volunteer to participate in this research study, we will ask you to do the following:

- Be subjected to an interview (in-person or Skype) that will include displaying your social media pages as well as discussing a few brief open-ended questions.

Time Commitment:

Your participation in this research study is expected to last for a total of 30 minutes.

Potential Risks or Discomforts:

- There are no foreseeable risks involved in this study

Potential Benefits:

- Better understanding of how/why you use social media.

Payment for Participation:

You will not receive any payment for participating in this research study.

Confidentiality:

We will make our best efforts to maintain confidentiality of any information that is collected during this research study, and that can identify you. We will disclose this information only with your permission or as required by law.

We will protect your confidentiality by *keeping you anonymous and not referring to you by name. Interviews will be destroyed after research is complete.*

The research team, authorized CUNY staff, and government agencies that oversee this type of research may have access to research data and records in order to monitor the research. Research records provided to authorized, non-CUNY individuals will not contain identifiable information about you. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not identify you by name.

Participants' Rights:

- Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. If you decide not to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- You can decide to withdraw your consent and stop participating in the research at any time, without any penalty.

Questions, Comments or Concerns:

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to one of the following researchers:

Brian Boyle, CUNY Graduate Center, Graduate Student

P: 917-362-6816 E: brianboyle88@gmail.com

Joan Greenbaum, CUNY Graduate Center Professor

P: [\(212\) 817-7000](tel:2128177000)

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or you have comments or concerns that you would like to discuss with someone other than the researchers, please call the CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at 646-664-8918. Alternately, you can write to:

CUNY Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research

Attn: Research Compliance Administrator

205 East 42nd Street

New York, NY 10017

Signature of Participant:

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Individual Obtaining Consent

Brian Boyle

Printed Name of Individual Obtaining Consent

Brian Boyle

1/21/15

Signature of Individual Obtaining Consent

Date

D. SURVEY EXAMPLE

Link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BBSGPKZ>

1. What social media sites do you have an account on?
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Snapchat
 - Instagram
 - Etsy
 - LinkedIn
 - Tumblr
 - Pinterest
 - Match
 - Tinder
 - Other (please specify)
2. List the sites you clicked in Q1. Use the letter code below to describe how often you visit them.
3. Why do you visit these sites frequently?
4. Of those sites, can some (or all) fill a role similar to a particular environment (ex: art gallery, bar, classroom, coffee shop, movie theater, networking event, shopping mall, restaurant, party, speed dating event?)
 - LinkedIn → Networking Event
 - Instagram → Art Gallery
 - Etsy → Shopping Mall
 - Pinterest → Shopping Mall
 - Pinterest → Cooking Class
 - Snapchat → Movie Theater
 - Tinder → Speed Dating
 - Match → Bar
 - Twitter → Newsroom
 - Facebook → Meeting Area (coffee shop, bar, library, park)
5. Do the photos you post differ depending on the site you are using? If so, please write one or two sentences that explain why.
6. Does your writing style differ depending on the site you are using? If so, please write one or two sentences that explain why.
7. Are there things you feel comfortable saying on one site and not the other? If so, please write one or two sentences that explain why.

8. Do you have different “friends” on different sites? If so, please write one or two sentences that explain why.
9. Overall, do you feel that you present yourself differently on different social media sites?
10. Can I contact you for a short interview about your responses?
 - Yes, my email address is _____.
 - No.

E. INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. You mentioned in the survey that you visit _____ site at least once a day. Please expand on why this is the case.
2. In your opinion, what would happen if you didn't go on that/those sites for a week? 2 weeks?
3. What social media site of yours would be the hardest to go without?
4. (If applicable) -- you mentioned that some sites fill the role of a particular environment. Can you expand on your reasoning?
5. On the survey, you mentioned your photos (do/do not) differ depending on the social media sites. Can you show me some examples?
6. On the survey, you mentioned your writing style (does/does not) depending on the social media site. Can you show me some examples?
7. On the survey, you mentioned that your friends (do/do not) differ depending on the social media site. Can you show me some examples?
8. (If Y answer on survey) - Please elaborate on why your Comfort level is different depending on the site.
9. You answered (Y or N) on the question that asked whether or not from an overall standpoint if you feel you present yourself differently on diff sites. Please elaborate on your answer.

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