2012

Facebook: Shifting Privacy, Identity, and Power Online

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FACEBOOK: SHIFTING PRIVACY, IDENTITY, AND POWER ONLINE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2012

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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by

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Due to staggering technological shifts in recent decades, the Internet has become a routine fixture in everyday life. The popularity of social networking sites, in particular, raises myriad questions regarding identity construction and social interaction. It is also unclear how these practices are related to perceptions of privacy. This dissertation examines how traditional notions of privacy compare, and apply, to privacy on the Internet and considers how issues of power are (re)created in online spaces. By focusing on identity enactment strategies and social connectivity practices, this work sheds light on the ways in which individuals define privacy and choose to engage online. This analysis also investigates how current public discourses, which emphasize users' ignorance to privacy threats online and the detrimental effects of social media on interpersonal interaction, map onto user experiences. The findings stem from an online focus group with twenty Facebook users coupled with five individual interviews with researchers, legal experts, and artists whose work centers on social media. This project

constructs a psychology of privacy that helps fill in existing gaps in the research on what is now happening on the social networking site, Facebook. The findings challenge familiar tendencies to pursue research agendas premised on binary frameworks, such as isolation versus connection and authentic versus inauthentic identities. Instead, the data highlight the novel forms of connectivity and identity practices that transpire online. As such, the data add to existing research that accentuates how online practices serve to enhance social connections and allow for a multiplicity of identity. Further, undermining some of the assumptions woven throughout public discourses concerning privacy invasions online, this dissertation demonstrates that users adopt innovative strategies for maintaining personal levels of comfort with respect to privacy online and reveals that perceptions of privacy are largely rooted in the ability to trust fellow users with personal information. Individual actions of marking boundaries with respect to what, and with whom, users share online provide the material with which researchers can construct new, dynamic definitions of personal privacy in virtual contexts.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my adviser and chair of my dissertation committee, Suzanne Ouellette, for her never-ending insight, guidance, and support throughout the dissertation process and my entire graduate school experience. I feel so fortunate to have collaborated with such an amazing scholar and mentor and will continue to carry her words and insight with me as I pursue future work.

My deepest thanks to Michelle Fine, who has also been invaluable member of my dissertation committee, constantly pushing me to think both critically and creatively and remember the broader context in which my work is situated.

My dissertation was also a result of the exceptional insight from Joan Greenbaum, whose class early in my graduate school career helped launched my research trajectory and I am extremely grateful for her guidance in helping me navigate the spaces between technologies and social psychology. I am also honored to have had Jessie Daniels and Diana Woolis as external reviewers, both of whom helped shape this work and enrich the final dissertation process.

I want to especially thank my family for their endless support. Whatever the objective, my family has always encouraged me and instilled in me the confidence to pursue my goals; embarking on the journey through graduate school was no exception. I simply do not have words to express my gratitude for their enduring love and support and genuine interest in my work.

I also want to thank my cohort – Maddy, Sabrica, Amber, Sean, and Michelle – all of whom inspired a piece of this work. I feel honored to have been a member of such

a creative, thoughtful, and passionate group of people and I look forward to continuing our connections as colleagues and friends.

This work is also the result of the many friends made along the way – Liza Pappas, Briana Denney, Jen Gieseking, Jama Shelton, Stephanie Anderson, Shaun Wiley – all of whom have shaped my experiences in this endeavor. I owe you all thanks for making this pursuit such a meaningful and positive experience. I also want to thank Kay Powell, who has been an anchor throughout my graduate school process. Little did I know that applying for a job in the IRB office would result in such a wonderful friendship and I am sincerely appreciative for your unconditional support. And I want to extend a special thank you to Valerie Futch, who has been an amazing friend, guide, mentor, and colleague since my first day of school; I did not know how lucky I was to be paired with such a wise and caring "buddy" in my first year but am continually thankful for this match and look forward to embarking on more adventures together. And, finally, I am in debt to Greg Wyles, for helping me achieve this milestone. From listening to scattered brainstorms to helping me overcome an affinity for British punctuation, having you by my side throughout this process has been invaluable.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In recent years, staggering shifts in technologies have transpired across the globe. The Internet, in particular, has launched a massive transformation in the ways in which individuals communicate with one another and experience daily life. Whether to engage with others as an alternative to the telephone, or to obtain information for personal or professional purposes, the Internet has rapidly become a routine fixture in everyday life (McMillan & Morrison, 2006).

Social networking sites are especially intriguing phenomena that have emerged through escalating internet engagement. Current estimates suggest that sixty-five percent of adults aged 18 and over currently use social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2011), and those above the age of thirty-five increasingly engage with them, growing faster than any other age group (CNNTech, 2009). Social networking sites facilitate potentially new forms of self-expression, which can be tailored to particular audiences, and their popularity raises a number of questions regarding identity enactment and social interaction.

Facebook has had a distinct impact on the evolution of social networking sites. Launched in 2004, Facebook is a privately owned social networking website that is currently estimated to host 750 million active users (who are defined as individuals who have logged in within the last thirty days) across the globe (Facebook.com, 2011; Kincaid, 2011). As of May, 2010, Facebook reported approximately seventy percent of its users are outside the United States (Fletcher, 2010). Originally founded by Mark Zuckerberg, a student of Harvard University (along with several college classmates), the site was available only to Harvard students at the start, before eventually incorporating

other Ivy League schools and Boston colleges. At that time, only users with a valid email address associated with their college could join. Shortly thereafter, Facebook invited high school students to join, along with professional adults affiliated with corporate networks, and as of late 2006, anyone with a valid email address over the age of thirteen is able to register (boyd & Ellison, 2008). (However, as of May 2011, ConsumersReports.org projected that there are roughly 7.5 million children under the age of 13 who currently have Facebook accounts.)

Social networking sites such as Facebook grant people the ability to develop identity profiles that can constantly be revised and updated and subsequently linked to other friends' profile pages. Each page consists of a plethora of forms of self-expression, including activities, personal interests, photographs, and even relationship status, currently totaling more than forty settings that can be adjusted to reflect one's desired identity (Stross, 2009). Accordingly, numerous individuals continually construct their identities in digitally mediated spaces, and more than twenty-five billion pieces of information are shared on Facebook in a given month (Fletcher, 2010). Facebook account-holders can also join common-interest groups online, organized by schools, organizations, workplaces, or other entities (boyd & Ellison, 2008). People constantly reframe their modes of identity construction as they are performed publicly in the arena of social networking sites, given the increased access to different modes of expression and communication (Turkle, 2011). More specifically, virtual[1] spaces offer unique ways of sharing personal interests or emotions that can often take a different form than in face-to-face settings.

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[1] The term "virtual" will be used throughout this dissertation, but it is not meant to imply that digitally-mediated spaces are any less "real" than those involving physical interactions.

Through social networking sites, then, individuals are able to (and often do) volunteer a great deal of personal information in an effort to create an online identity with which to interact with others. The increased ability to disclose personal information online triggers questions around notions of privacy as is tied to self-expression. Although the social science literature accounts for traditional representations of privacy in society in general, the transition of this concept to the digital realm can be slippery. Superimposing existing definitions of privacy onto technological spaces is precarious as the potential avenues for invasion are blurred when one considers the construction of online spaces (Robison, 1997). Because it is often unknown who utilizes surveillance strategies online, privacy as a means to prevent invasion over personal information becomes complicated and thereby potentially threatened. In the move toward "ubiquitous computing," some aspects of technology impose an invisible force that infuses various slices of everyday life (Uteck, 2009). These ubiquitous computing strategies necessarily alter the ways in which individuals construct their identities, by way of changing the spaces in which such identities materialize.

Not surprisingly, popular media has recently dedicated a great deal of attention to a concern over online privacy. And their trepidation is somewhat well-founded, in the sense that both government and corporate forces pay close attention to the personal preferences found through shopping, reading, and other online behaviors, acquiring them with the purpose of exploitation for their own needs (Froomkin, 2000). Such discourse has honed in on the opportunity for governing or corporate forces to usurp information that is shared online, or employers to use information posted online as a means for possible termination, as threatening to personal privacy (e.g. Albanesius, 2010; Angwin,

2010; Carter, 2010; Hill, 2011; Kairouz, 2011; Rosen, 2010). The public representations of the dangers of online spaces are warranted to the extent that some of the most commonly used internet browsers and tools are designed to automatically capture Internet Protocol addresses via cookies and other tracking methods. Ambiguous company policies have also been criticized for obscuring the default settings and privacy-protecting tools on social networking sites. Indeed, a recent issue of Wired Magazine introduced a new term called "Privacy Zuckering," described as the practice of "creating intentionally confusing privacy policies…to sucker users of social networking sites like Facebook into exposing valuable personal information" (Keats, 2011).

Taking these unresolved issues about online privacy into account, this dissertation encourages a consideration of contemporary perceptions to privacy (both online and offline) in light of users' perpetual engagement, the continual evolution of technological tools, and media attention to threats of privacy harm. By framing privacy as a question for social psychological inquiry, this project will shed light on the ways in which issues of self-presentation, social connectivity, and power inform definitions of privacy and intersect to fuel a growing engagement with digitally-mediated communication. This endeavor denotes an important addition to current discussions, particularly as it fills in gaps in the psychological and privacy literature as will be discussed in the forthcoming literature review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Privacy through a Psychological Lens

Several scholars have introduced issues of privacy to the psychological community. A critical influence in the evolution of theories of privacy comes from Westin (1967), who emphasized the ways individuals guard themselves by regulating what information they share with others. Individuals' need for privacy, he argues, shapes the ways in which people interact with one another on an emotional level, rendering privacy a fundamentally interpersonal and dynamic concept. In a more recent analysis, Westin (2003) chronicles the evolution of notions of privacy in the United States over the last near-century, calling for attention to its political, socio-cultural, and personal implications. Privacy has long been a source of recurring debate within American social and political contexts[2]; it has been an especially volatile subject in debates around the Constitution's Fourth Amendment (namely, prohibiting unreasonable searches and seizures) (Kerr, 2010). The political debates surrounding constitutional rights to privacy were likely responsible, in conjunction with the emergence of new technologies, for information privacy becoming a salient topic during the 1960s and '70s. During this time, the American public opinion revealed an amplified mistrust of major institutions, nested within a culture of increased competition in journalism and televised media (Westin, 2003). Modern social science research exploring issues of personal privacy was born in the late 1960s, which coincided with the first stage of laws related to information-privacy. Some of the early work around this time delineated multiple dimensions of privacy, such as intimacy, solitude, reserve, and anonymity (Margulis, 2003a; Marshall, 1970; Westin, 1967). Building on these early empirical works, researchers began to

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[2] Whereas ongoing debates around privacy have materialized in diverse ways in various countries and political contexts, the present dissertation will focus on notions of privacy within the context of the United States.

develop privacy scales and other measures to consider the ways privacy functions across particular contexts (Margulis, 2003a).

The surge in technological usage and increased attention to privacy issues resulted in a sense of ambivalence among many Americans during the 1980s, such that they acknowledged the benefits of new technologies, but simultaneously remained wary of the potential for misuse or exploitation (Westin, 2003). Finally, in the last two decades, with the introduction of the Internet and wireless communication devices, coupled with heightened anxiety in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, North American research suggests that privacy has become a primary source of concern and deliberation for individuals. Accordingly, Westin argues it is imperative for social science researchers to tackle issues of privacy directly as it has become a "quality of life" issue (2003: 451).

Margulis (2003b) echoes this stance, arguing that, while privacy has increasingly become an issue of social interest, it is still under-examined within the context of psychological research. Although many topics of interest in psychology (e.g. attitude formation, social comparison, and social influence processes) are conceptually related to privacy, many sub-disciplines have not thoroughly investigated the latter subject, with several exceptions by environmental psychologists (Margulis, 2003b). Margulis (2003a) notes that much of the research on privacy has often neglected to examine the ways that holding back personal information may tax mental and/or emotional well being. Disclosing information and granting others' access to one's identity necessarily involves social mediation that balances one's personal comfort level in the identity they share as well as sharing enough to sustain interpersonal relationships (Margulis, 2003a). Whereas secrecy analyses often explicitly address the potential costs of withholding information,

its links to privacy are perhaps overlooked or assumed to be absent, suggesting that a deeper psychological investigation of the emotional and cognitive motivations for perceiving, and maintaining, one's privacy is warranted.

It is possible that part of psychology's disregard for recognizing privacy as a topic of interest stems from an inability to pinpoint a universal definition (Margulis, 2003b). In a general sense, whereas some argue that privacy is positive in its safeguarding of societal norms by deeming certain things public matters, others posit that it can be dangerous in allowing illegitimate activities to take place. Like the aforementioned general definitions of privacy, within psychology, privacy is seen as maintaining control over one's susceptibility to surveillance (Margulis, 2003b; Uteck, 2009; Woo, 2006). Thus, tensions surface when legal, psychological, and broader definitions of privacy overlap and clash, perhaps triggering reluctance in pursuing psychological inquiries of privacy (Margulis, 2003b).

Altman (1975) has also played a pivotal role in building theories of privacy (Margulis, 2003a). He defines privacy as "the selective control of access to the self" (1975: 24), and argues that privacy is comprised of multiple properties. Altman asserts that privacy is relevant on both an individual as well as a group level; like Westin (1967), his perspective relies on the notion that privacy is founded on interpersonal relations, making it a fundamentally social phenomenon.[3] His stance places a strong emphasis on privacy as a *process* stemming from ongoing social interaction (Margulis, 2003b). Although it seems that privacy is an issue that permeates cultural borders, the particular

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[3] This dissertation will specifically focus on perceptions of privacy within the social sciences, related to identity enactment and social communication practices online. It will not directly address legal or corporate definitions except as are raised by participants within the context of the forthcoming data analysis chapters.

environment in which it is situated shapes how it transpires among individuals (Margulis, 2003a). Altman points out that, although privacy may be addressed in distinct ways across the globe, current modes of thought are influenced by the North American individualistic cultural context in which much of the privacy research has been situated; consequently, privacy discourse here calls attention to personal rights pertaining to choice and control for autonomous individuals (Margulis, 2003b).

Both physical and cultural environments play a key role in determining how individuals think of privacy and, consequently, interact with others around personal disclosure. Although this idea has been explored in various theoretical and empirical investigations (Margulis, 2003a), it is unclear how culture and privacy may come together in virtual spaces such as the Internet. Hine (2009) has argued that the Internet is itself a cultural artifact and its own cultural context. Adopting this perspective complicates privacy theories by raising questions around the norms and representations of privacy that have been born online. How does the conceptualization of the Internet as a cultural context shape (and perhaps complicate) the ways individuals perceive privacy and choose to engage with others in virtual spaces? Once information is shared with others, and boundaries of privacy are blurred, some argue that it can become common property; how do online users view the information that is shared in public digital spaces, in regards to ownership, authorship, and property, especially when it may stem from personal identity information?

A component of both Westin's (1967) and Altman's (1975) theories, echoed in subsequent psychological analyses of privacy, revolves around the potential costs and benefits of obtaining a sense of privacy. Due to its role as an individual and social

phenomenon, privacy can trigger different personal, and interpersonal, processes. For instance, Westin and Altman argue that privacy can provide certain psychological benefits, because it can support social interaction, which can make individuals feel a sense of competence to engage in the world and, consequently, helps shape one's self-definition (Margulis, 2003b). As well, privacy can offer the prospect of experimenting with one's social self and help develop a sense of individuality, while building interpersonal skills. The counter-side to these potential benefits of achieving a sense of privacy can mean that individuals may feel that they lack control over themselves, in the face of others. As a consequence, they may receive (and/or perceive) negative feedback from social others and eventually struggle to develop a strong sense of self or individuality. Considering this aspect of various privacy theories provokes the question, how do the potential personal costs and benefits of achieving and maintaining privacy materialize through online practices?

Privacy Online – Identity Construction and Social Connectivity

Considering these fundamental components of a traditional notion of privacy, it is useful (but sometimes troubling) to consider the ways in which they are threatened when entering a digitally mediated space, such as the Internet. Because lines of anonymity are blurred due to unknown tracking devices and other unidentified aspects of information on the Internet, engaging in an online space almost certainly alters the ways in which privacy manifests itself in comparison to "real-world" spaces. As mentioned before, applying traditional conceptions of privacy to virtual environments can be a tricky

endeavor. Certain attributes unique to digitally mediated spaces, with respect to how and what someone can share online, must be accounted for when defining online privacy.

Theoretically, then, it seems that the Internet has the potential to disrupt traditional notions of privacy. However, it is unclear how the individuals who engage with digitally mediated spaces interpret personal privacy online. Woo (2006) argues that many individuals willingly surrender their privacy by volunteering personal information on the Internet, in return for desired benefits (such as online coupons or access to particular sites). Recent survey research has also shown that internet users display contradictory attitudes and knowledge around privacy online; although a majority express concern over a lack of privacy on the Internet, a large number of individuals report a willingness to volunteer information in exchange for other benefits (Woo, 2006). This research demonstrates that many internet users may assert they feel comfortable partaking in certain data-using activities, but do not clearly know what is actually done with that information. In one relatively recent poll, more than half of respondents were unaware of cookies (an online tracking device), but were opposed to businesses and other organizations having the ability to track their website visits, especially when that information was linked to their identities (Margulis, 2003b). Whereas older definitions of privacy revolved around individuals' entitlement to dignity and autonomy, newer definitions of privacy that account for online activity may demand novel interpretations. The Internet is seemingly a paradoxical space that is often acclaimed for offering anonymity, yet nearly ninety percent of all information online is monitored via internet tracking devices (Woo, 2006).

In contrast to more critical perspectives of internet use, some recent literature has highlighted the potential benefits of growing social networking technological capabilities. Most notably, the Internet offers an arena for individuals to perform their identities in diverse ways (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Ellis, 2008; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Livingstone, 2008; Rak, 2005; Spears, Postmes, Lea, and Wolbert, 2002; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004; Turkle, 2004). Turkle (2004), for instance, has argued that the Internet offers a valuable space in which individuals can play with their identities. Several researchers, upon examining the effects of relationship development via online communication, have also found that people report feeling better equipped to project their "true" selves online, as opposed to face-to-face interaction settings (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). (In this instance, "true" selves reflected the qualities that were viewed as important to individuals, but usually withheld in public spaces.) Rak's (2005) research has similarly shown the ways in which online blogs can provide a forum for crafting various, dynamic identities. Indeed, in her research, some bloggers explain that, through the blog writing process, they sometimes feel that they "[write] one's self into existence for others to read and comment upon" (176), thus creating identities in conversation with an (potentially anonymous) audience.

In recent years, research has specifically investigated the relationship between identity performance and social networking sites. For instance, Manago, Graham, Greenfield, and Salimkhan (2008) examined several components of identity among young adults within the context of MySpace. Drawing on Erikson's theory of identity during adolescence, the authors posit that identity may be viewed as a site of exploration with possible selves. The ability to conduct this exploration, coupled with the capacity to

engage in social communication practices, renders social networking sites a prime

location for constructing social identities among emerging adults (Manago, Graham,

Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). Much of the research has cited that young people play

with their Internet identities, sometimes even crafting multiple identities online. Indeed,

the work conducted by Manago, Graham, Greenfield, and Salimkhan (2008) suggests that

the social identities performed on MySpace, in particular, are distinct in many ways from

those performed in face-to-face environments. Through six ethnically diverse focus

groups of undergraduate students who actively used MySpace, the authors explored

questions around the motivations of, and experiences in, using the site as a way of

connecting with others and expressing oneself. They found that these sites afford users

with novel tools with which to construct their identities. Moreover, Manago, Graham,

Greenfield, and Salimkhan (2008) assert that possible selves that adolescents project in

their online identities may eventually lead to the formation of actual selves, depending on

the type of feedback received by peers in the online setting.

Similarly, in their qualitative study gathering narratives from seventy-two college

students, McMillan and Morrison (2006) found that the majority of students reported that

increased participation online usually enhanced existing relationships with family and

friends. Through self-reports, participants described creating new social communities

online (primarily through email, chat rooms and gaming forums), which often carried

over into "real-world" interactions. The findings put forth by McMillan & Morrison

demonstrated the opportunity to craft new social connections as a result of Internet

engagement among young people. In their own words, participants described feelings of

connection among social others that were born online, but carried over from the virtual to

their "real" communities. Although they considered offline relationships as "real," their online, virtual connections helped strengthen and maintain those created through technological spaces such as the Internet. These online communities fostered social networks that were both leisure- and work-oriented. McMillan and Morrison even found that some participants claimed that their experience of society was largely determined through digitally mediated spaces, comparing it to the radio and other forms of technology for older generations.

Acar (2008) demonstrates the ways in which online communities may differ from, although not suffer in comparison to, "real life" communities. Through surveying more than four hundred college students who were active on Facebook, Acar found that online social networks do look somewhat different from those enacted offline. In particular, online social networks were substantially larger than face-to-face networks. Additionally, online networks were characterized by more demographically diverse members (Acar, 2008).

Hence, it is not surprising that, in their review of Internet research among adolescents, Valkenburg and Peter (2009) point out that most studies of the Internet have suggested its positive effects. Specifically, the authors posit that, among adolescents who primarily use the Internet to preserve existing social relationships, Internet use has been found to be positively associated with social connectedness and personal well-being. Based on these findings, Valkenburg and Peter (2009) pursued the hypothesis that online communication initiates self-disclosure via the Internet, which in turn, enriches the quality of relationships among adolescents. Since high-quality relationships have been shown to predict well-being, the authors argue that self-disclosure by way of online

communication should result in enhanced well-being. Documenting the existing research that would shed light on this hypothesis, Valkenburg and Peter (2009) ultimately demonstrated that self-disclosure in online spaces is responsible for the association between Internet communication and social connectedness. Self-disclosure has been linked to greater feelings of intimacy; thus, the relative anonymity of the Internet may lead to the creation of close relationships because of its ability to foster self-expression and disclosure (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Hines, 2009; Norman, 2008).

Pausing for a moment, a notable thread running throughout the aforementioned research is the samples used in each piece of work. Although this research offers a sturdy foundation on which to build a body of literature dedicated to online engagement, a skewed focus on youth experiences neglects to capture the full assortment of Internet users' experiences. This disproportionate attention is understandable considering that many Internet users, especially within the context of social networking sites, have been teenagers or college-aged; however, as Facebook and other social networking sites have expanded their membership criteria, and grown in population, it is critical to attend to the diverse experiences across the full gamut of those who participate online.

In her discussion of weblogs, Rak (2005) explores themes of self-disclosure and authenticity underlying blogger identities online. Situated in a cultural context that stresses the individual and freedom of expression, Rak argues, bloggers are driven to subscribe to an ideology that encourages disclosing personal information in favor of obtaining readers. While acknowledging the potential risk involved in disclosing aspects of one's identity via blogs, blog writers assert that communicating trust in their site visitors by sharing themselves online assures more readers. Thus, blog writers often

strive to achieve a balance between self-disclosure and maintaining a sense of privacy that feels comfortable but also enticing to readers and enables connection to a broader online community.[4]

Other researchers have claimed that sharing one's emotions is linked to enhanced closeness with others, which can create a chasm between individual privacy and emotional intimacy. As Hine (2009) points out, there is a paradox in that privacy has been determined a precursor to intimacy, yet once individuals become emotionally intimate with others, they sacrifice some of their personal privacy. Interaction as it exists through digitally mediated spaces potentially fosters their simultaneous existence because of the relative anonymity spaces such as the Internet afford; in other words, individuals can maintain some sense of privacy by disclosing select aspects of their identity, but, at the same time, can share their feelings with others online. Thus, interpersonal interaction through technologies may untangle the knots between privacy and emotional intimacy, or allow for novel connections between them (Norman, 2008).

The ability to connect with others by way of social networking sites may be especially meaningful for individuals who are prone to forms of social anxiety in the context of face-to-face interaction (Acar, 2008; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). The phenomenon of marginalized or socially-hesitant individuals finding spaces in which they are comfortable interacting with others online is evident in the birth of novel communities through the Internet. In their work examining online communities of stutterers, Stoudt and Ouellette (2004)

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[4] In considering the opportunities afforded through online spaces, it is important to bear in mind that the research that has been conducted thus far has focused on various types of online communities, ranging from weblogs to social networking sites, which likely have different purposes and functions. The forthcoming analysis and discussion of this dissertation will specifically focus on the activity within virtual social networking spaces, and Facebook in particular.

demonstrate the unique role the Internet plays in fostering identity enactment and communication practices among individuals who stutter. Noting that research has consistently identified experiences of negative stereotypes and stigmatization among those who stutter, the authors identify the ways in which stutterers actively engage in contexts or practices that will minimize negative incidents. Arguing that the Internet may serve as a potential site of respite from distressing encounters, Stoudt and Ouellette investigated conversation threads in various websites dedicated to the stuttering community. Through the different conversation postings, the authors demonstrate the five overarching ways that individuals engage with one another through the listserv, namely by offering advice, empathizing with others, sharing experiences, moving forward with their experiences, and through the expression of their emotions. As such, the Internet sites signify a space in which individuals actively negotiate their everyday experiences and identities, working in collaboration with a community of stutterers to understand themselves and grapple with societal challenges based on their stutters. Through their listserv posts, stutterers expressed appreciation for the online community, which enabled them to participate in discussions that are often more difficult in face-to-face interactions. As such, this space afforded stutterers the ability to craft personal and social identities as well as build strategies for educating others (Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004). The Internet, then, can offer new foundations for group solidarity and feelings of empowerment (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004).

Altogether, the research thus far has been indispensable in demonstrating the myriad ways users make use of various technologies. These perspectives are also valuable in underscoring the argument that the interaction between individuals and

technology is not one-directional. Instead, as Meyrowitz (1985) effectively argues, with

respect to the medium of television, technology and people actively transform one

another in a dynamic way (including even non-interactive technology such as television).

Individuals' engagement with the Internet reflects an active effort to shape it according to

social needs and to serve particular functions in their own lives.   Part of this relational

process centers on the affordances provided through the technology. As Gibson

theorized in the 1960s, affordances refer to aspects of an object or environment that

provide opportunities for individuals to apply meaning and perception to that entity

(Jones, 2003). Gibson defined affordances as pieces of an environment that individuals

have the ability to perceive and absorb in ways that are meaningful to them. Affordances

are simultaneously objective and subjective; incorporating affordances into their

meaning-making processes across contexts influences people's behaviors and

perceptions, rendering them dependent on the interaction between an individual and the

environment (Chemero, 2003).   As Greeno (1994) articulates,

> [A]ffordances and abilities…are, in this view, inherently relational. An
> affordance relates attributes of something in the environment to an
> interactive activity by an agent who has some ability, and an ability
> relates attributes of an agent to an interactive activity with something in
> the environment that has some affordance.

It is useful to integrate Gibson's theory of affordances into the present literature

review as it points to the many affordances provided via Facebook that likely give way to

particular opportunities for behavior and meaning for its users. The opportunities

enabled through Facebook affordances likely shape how users exploit its design and

make meaning with others through online interaction. For instance, Facebook Walls and

News Feeds[5] represent affordances that users can make use of according to their own needs and desires, resulting in complex interactive practices between the user and the online environment. Affordances contribute to the dynamic ways in which individuals engage with the Internet, and actively contribute to both its operation and effects on society (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Privacy Online – Issues of Power

Woo (2006) poses the possibility that having the ability to conceal or disguise aspects of one's identity in a digital network may reflect a desire to influence power distinctions among different individuals. Having the authority to maintain autonomy in networked spaces may be linked to efforts to control one's own identity and space within the larger community. Marx (2003) also points out the potential for underlying ties between power and privacy, particularly within the context of surveillance. With technological advancements changing the ways in which individuals may be monitored, privacy may be a mechanism for individuals to maintain authority over themselves and, consequently, a source of power. In essence, online users may deliberately resist observation techniques by asserting their (right to) privacy over personal information online. Marx explicitly argues that people are far from passive in terms of surveillance and, as such, craft creative strategies for resisting unwanted surveillance and ways to maintain a sense of privacy in the face of others' observations.

In a similar discussion regarding deception and privacy that echoes earlier definitions of (offline) privacy, DePaulo and colleagues (2003) take these notions a step

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[5] The Wall is a space on each user's profile page that allows friends to post comments and links with date and time stamps. The News Feed is a space on the user's Facebook homepage that enables users to view a constant stream of updates to their friends' Facebook profiles and activities.

further to suggest that privacy is both an individual and a social phenomenon in that it is

necessarily interpersonal. Privacy is fluid in that individuals are constantly negotiating

how much to disclose or withhold about themselves. This can take the form of privacy

(in which individuals determine what they share with others), hiding aspects of oneself

from others, as well as purposely deceiving others. The various levels of privacy can

even have beneficial qualities, according to DePaulo et al. (2003), because privacy can

encourage one to reflect on themselves; this argument encourages us to consider that

individuals can, and do, make active choices regarding who they want to be and with

whom.

Daniels (2009) points out that, while the Internet has helped advance certain

aspects of globalization, allowing novel communities to grow and social connections to

emerge, it has also been argued that it benefits only a particular echelon of society, and

perhaps intensifies hierarchies of race and class. Depending on who may have access to

particular technologies severely exacerbates or hinders the ability for individuals in

different communities to build connections with others across the world through online

tools. Recent research in social media has suggested that stark differences among users

of various social networking sites exist based on race and class (boyd, forthcoming; Hare,

2009; Hargittai, 2008; Petersen, 2010; Sydell, 2009). In particular, youth who actively

engage with social networking sites report that their white friends are more active on

Facebook, considering MySpace to be "trashy" and market researchers have endorsed the

idea that there is, in fact, an education and socioeconomic class difference in the

populations lurking on either site; whereas MySpace seems to host more people of color

and profiles of people with a lower income, the majority of Facebook users tend to be

white and of a higher economic background (Hare, Retrieved 11/5/2009; Sydell, 2009).

Tufekci (2008) also found that gender might be a key factor in shaping how young people

engage with social networking sites; her research sample demonstrated that female users

are nearly five times more common than male users (within a college-student sample).

These differences have significant implications in that they may reinforce broader

societal boundaries around race, age, and class hierarchies within a digital environment

such as social networking sites, further fueling power struggles between individuals and

groups.

Together, these perspectives represent a meaningful component in understanding

how individuals come to perceive privacy as it transpires online, particularly in social

networking sites. On the one hand, users may be less apt to share personal information if

they feel threatened by social and/or power hierarchies reproduced in online spaces.

Accordingly, their perceptions of privacy may be influenced by the social dynamics that

they see occurring between individuals and groups online, which may, consequently,

affect their behavior. In contrast, online users may feel empowered by the ability to

navigate virtual territory and determine how much or how little they share of themselves

online. For instance, through her research exploring teenagers' use of social networking

sites, boyd (2007) points out that these "networked publics" offer opportunities for youth

to create and enact their identities with others. For instance, although the home is

considered a "private" space in which youth may be protected from the broader society,

social networking sites provide an outlet through which young people can access "public"

spaces from home.

It is useful to consider Westin's (2003) perspective here that privacy at the socio-cultural level links issues of privacy with social legitimacy; issues deemed to be private may be driven by social norms that determine what is (chosen to be) recognized publicly, either on a social or legal level. Underlying the struggles over what is considered private are the varied interests of individuals and organizations who may be fighting to maintain autonomy over their own interests. Moreover, contextual factors such as class and race shape the opportunities individuals have to assert their freedom from others' surveillance or observations, rendering personal privacy subject to existing power structures (Westin; 2003). Revisiting Westin (1967) and Altman (1974)'s earlier work, they both implicitly build notions of autonomy and personal control into their theories of privacy (Margulis, 2003a; Margulis, 2003b). There is seemingly a thread of discussion around power woven throughout privacy discourse, which has begun to be explored, but begs for a deeper examination within a virtual context. Without having a firm grasp on how Internet users perceive the phenomenon of privacy online, it is difficult to determine if traditional notions apply to the digital realm as they have historically.

Further, drawing on C. Wright Mills' perspective, Oishi, Kesibir, and Snyder (2009) encourage psychologists to expand our horizons by paying heed to collective phenomena, including social networks. In so doing, we can perhaps realize Mills' notion of the sociological imagination: "…the ability to look beyond personal experience and immediate situations to see the influence of social forces operating in a larger societal…context" (Mills, 1959). In other words, by recognizing the individual and social influences of privacy manifested in virtual networks, we can better answer the

question, to what extent do the personal and societal intersect in understanding/shaping online privacy?

Research Aims

As reviewed in the literature above, privacy (particularly within the context of the Internet) continues to be an ambiguous concept. In addition, the research that has emerged over the last several decades has paid an inflated amount of attention to the experiences of younger people online, leaving questions regarding other user populations in its wake. This dissertation represents an endeavor to fill in the remaining gaps in the literature by investigating identity enactment and social connectivity practices within the realm of the social networking site, Facebook. Exploring these phenomena, with a consideration of the potential role of power differences in virtual spaces, this research will ideally unearth perceptions of online engagement and help build a psychological definition of online privacy. This is a study of how individuals perceive online privacy and engage with others on Facebook to analyze how such perceptions influence social interaction and identity enactment. The goal of this analysis is to elucidate how Facebook, as a social networking site, offers unique opportunities for self-presentation and social connectivity as well as challenge (or perhaps reinforce) power structures maintained offline.

Aim 1:

How do traditional notions of privacy compare to/apply to privacy on the social networking site, Facebook?

Housed within this overarching research question are the following aims:

Aim 2:

How do the various aspects of identity emerge and/or become subdued

with social others on Facebook?

Aim 3:

What are the implications of these behaviors on notions of privacy for

users?

Aim 4:

How do notions of privacy online relate to the (re)creation of power

differences between individuals and groups (via social connectivity and

self-presentation)?

Aim 5:

What interactional transactions of privacy occur online (endorsing the

notion that privacy is social and bidirectional)?

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Online Focus Group

A mixed-method approach was designed to address the aims of the current study. The first method of data collection was an online focus group. Inspired by Stoudt and Ouellette (2004), this aspect of the methodology was designed to allow individuals to articulate their own definitions of privacy and online identities in two ways: first, by sharing their personal experiences engaging with Facebook, and second, by connecting with others within the space of the online focus group itself. In pursuing questions around the construction of self and the fluidity of social identity among stutterers, Stoudt and Ouellette designed a method that directly linked to their research question; thus, their approach allowed their participants to assign their own meanings to personal events and rely on their own constructions of self. Throughout their work, the researchers also maintained an appreciation for the temporal and spatial contexts in which participants shared with each other. Similarly, the method in the current study was designed to correspond with the specific research aims that involved pursuing questions of privacy, identity and power online.

As will be addressed more thoroughly in the Results chapters, participants invoked various definitions of the given discussion topics, yielding a rich and diverse series of conversations. Although the topic areas originated from pre-existing concepts (based on the literature review and dissertation research questions), the absence of precise definitions in the focus group discussion questions allowed for distinct interpretations and, consequently, an array of shared experiences and opinions. Accordingly, the online

focus group was structured in a way that fostered the preservation of personal constructions of privacy, identity, and power, by creating a space of, and about, these topics, and simultaneously attended to the virtual context in which such discussions emerged. It is important to note a key distinction between Stoudt and Ouellette's work and the present study in that I initiated the interaction between participants, by creating a group and discussion topics specifically for the purposes of the current research as opposed to their approach, which investigated a pre-existing online forum for analysis.

Focus group participants were recruited through two venues. First, a paid advertisement (see Appendix A) was designed that was randomly posted on the Facebook homepages of any users aged 18 and above. Second, I used a snowball sampling technique by emailing personal contacts with the same recruitment advertisement (see Appendix A) as the paid Facebook advertisement requesting that they forward it to any potentially interested friends and family members. I specifically encouraged these contacts to reach out to non-graduate students to garner a group of participants that would ideally have diverse educational backgrounds. Potential participants included anyone who currently has a Facebook account, although their range of use could vary from somewhat infrequently to extremely often. Because much of the literature seems to disproportionately focus on the practices of youth online, the recruitment strategies were deliberately designed to target adults aged 18 and above to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the experiences of adult users. In addition, specific demographic information was solicited from interested adults so as to gather a sample that represented a broad range of generations of users. The snowball sampling technique, in particular, increased the variability of the participant group as it ensured that everyone had had some

experience with Facebook, but it did not demand that users be highly active on Facebook (and see the advertisement online) and accordingly, their level of engagement could vary. The recruitment advertisement was brief, indicating that the research focused on learning what Facebook means to them in terms of what it is like to be on Facebook and the role that it plays in their lives. The advertisement brevity was partly due to space limitations on Facebook and also to prevent too much influence in shaping participants' comments in the actual study by introducing topics of privacy and self-presentation.

Interested participants who contacted the researcher from the advertisement were asked open-ended demographic questions (via email) to assure they met the minimum age requirement and attain additional contextual information, including educational background, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and geographic location. A total of twenty participants, who all provided the requested demographic information, were ultimately accepted. (Only those who did not submit responses to the follow-up demographic questions were excluded from the focus group.) Six participants resulted from the Facebook website advertisement[6], and the remaining fourteen participants joined as a result of the snowball sampling technique. The table below (see Table 1) outlines the specific demographic information for the final group of participants in their own words.

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[6] The reason as to acquiring such a small number of participants through the paid advertisement on Facebook is unclear. A possible explanation is that the Facebook interface has so many advertisements and other stimuli on the homepage that users did not notice, or chose to ignore, sidebar information. Another possibility is that, due to the limited character allocation for the advertisement, participants perceived the flyer as a marketing poster, rather than a research call for participants.

Table 1.

Pseudonym[7]	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	Location
Alice	57	F	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Houston, TX
Andrea	55	F	White	Heterosexual	Gainesville, FL
Jennifer	23	F	White/euro-mutt	Bisexual	Charlestown, WV
Lisa	59	F	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Minnesota
Peg	61	F	White	Straight	Illinois
Sarah	19	F	Caucasian	Bi-curious	Kalamazoo, MI
Norah	29	F	White	Hetero	Winston-Salem, NC
Carly	27	F	White	Straight	New York City, NY
Christine	22	F	White	Pansexual	Brooklyn, NY
Georgia	21	F	Caucasian	Heterosexual	Ewing, NJ
Karen		F	Latino		Austin, TX
Kathy	51	F	Caucasian	Straight/Married	Hernando, MS
Jason	21	M	White	Gay	St. Louis Park, MN
Kyle	36	M	White	Straight	Green Bay, WI
Jeff	30	M	White	Straight	Texas
Simon	28	M	White? Dunno, I'm from Argentina, Latin maybe	Straight	Buenos Aires, Argentina
Becky	35	F	Caucasian	Heterosexual	San Mateo, CA
Justine	34	F	White	Straight/Married	Lehigh Acres, FL
Ian	23	T	White/European	Queer	Brooklyn, NY
Briana	36	F	White (Irish, Syrian, Sicilian)	Homo	Arlington, MA

I specifically targeted this demographic information because my primary goals were to

contribute to the existing literature by hearing voices that may not be as audible in the

current literature as they should be. For instance, much of the existing research has

emphasized youth participation online, so I sought a group of adult users whose

experiences are less visible in the research. Gender identity and sexual orientation were

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[7] All focus group participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

included in the demographic screening because I anticipated these may be salient

categories for people in terms of how they construct their online identities and the extent

to which they disclose personal information online. I also collected geographic

information because I was interested in seeing how different experiences may be linked

to location. For instance, I expected that the experiences of someone living in a rural

environment would be distinct from those of a user in an urban setting, with respect to the

types of connections that they pursue online (versus, or alongside, offline interactions).

Lastly, I had hoped to gather a more diverse sample in terms of race and ethnicity

because the literature often overlooks potential differences in online experiences as a

result of racial or ethnic identity, and the work that has been done has hinted that various

virtual sites differentially accommodate people based on race and class. However, the

objective to ascertain a racially diverse sample proved challenging. I ultimately made the

decision to terminate recruitment strategies after nearly two months as I had already

consulted an array of contacts to reach a broad number of people and was concerned that

the time delays would result in a loss of my initial participants. All participants were

asked to submit their virtual signature by way of an online consent form set up on the free

website, Wufoo.com. (See Appendix B for the online consent form.)

The focus group site was set up on an Internet platform called Ning. This

platform was chosen for several reasons: it enabled participants to customize profile

pages for other participants to see (e.g. with photos, usernames, page design

backgrounds); it was user-friendly in that it was fairly simple to navigate and provided

for easy posting of discussion forum topics and comments; and it allowed users to

directly access the study page through a link on their Facebook page if they preferred to

access the site that way. The Ning site was only accessible to the twenty participants in the study. As moderator of the site, I granted access to all of the participants, and emailed them the link, encouraging them to join the group and personalize their profile page.

The Ning discussion site was set up for a length of thirty days. Approximately every five days during this month, I introduced a new conversation topic with a prompt to begin discussion. Other than the initial conversation topic, I did not make any additional posts to the site with the exception of one follow-up question to a participants' comment asking for clarification. This intentional silence on my part as the researcher was to encourage participants to voice their opinions and experiences and respond candidly to one another, rather than directly to me, wherever possible. This format was designed to invite participants to share their thoughts and converse with one another and to facilitate the creation of a virtual focus group. Accordingly, I intended to observe the terms and ideas that individuals latched onto from the initial topic posts and how they mutually built off of each other's notions of privacy, identity, and other topics that arose in the discussions. (The chapter entitled *Focus Group as a Microcosm of the Findings* offers an in-depth analysis of the compelling ways in which the focus group evolved.) The discussion topics, in their chronologically-given order, were Motivations, Privacy/Safety, Identity, Power, and Social Connectivity (see Appendix C for detailed scripts). The Motivations prompt asked users to speculate, based on their own experiences or others they know, why Facebook has become, and continues to be, so popular. The Privacy/Safety discussion topic was instigated by acknowledging that the issue of privacy on Facebook has become prominent in the public and I asked participants if, and how,

issues of privacy surface as they log on to Facebook. The Identity topic noted that research has focused on online behavior and introduced the notion that people may use the Internet to figure out who they are or share certain aspects of themselves with others via Facebook. I then used this opportunity to ask participants how they thought that individuals' self-perception and desire for self-presentation plays a role on Facebook. I addressed the topic of Power by asking, very generally, how issues of power come up when using Facebook and then specifically asking participants to explain who is involved in issues of power online and how it might be a positive and/or negative force on Facebook. Finally, the Social Connectivity topic asked people to share how their interaction practices on Facebook compare to other social situations (both online and offline). Again, I purposely withheld infusing the discussion prompt with exact definitions, in an effort to invite participants to conjure up their own meanings and build off of one another's comments.

In the last few days of the discussion group, I asked participants for any additional general comments or reflections, as well as their input on aspects of Facebook that they would like to see change. The order of discussion topics was strategic because I hoped to have participants enter the focus group space by first sharing their thoughts about the site in a general way (via Motivations) and then gradually easing into more potentially volatile topics such as Safety and Power. As will be discussed in the Results chapters, the later topics did indeed seem to ignite more self-reflection and animated responses.

When each new topic was added to the discussion forum, I emailed the group members notifying them of a new conversation thread and reminding them to continue posting on current and past discussions where they felt it was appropriate. (Participants

were not notified of all topics in advance, but given one at a time.) Although I did not

require that participants post on each discussion, I requested that they login every few

days and try to comment on every discussion. Although the final discussion topics only

yielded comments from approximately half of the participants, the first three did provoke

responses from the majority of participants and I felt there was a high level of

engagement on the part of the group members overall. At the conclusion of the study,

participants were given $25 in the form of an Amazon.com gift card or a personal check,

depending on their preference. One participant was randomly selected to receive an

additional $100 Amazon.com gift card as a bonus incentive for participation. Once all of

the data was extracted from the online forum, the Ning site was closed and the account

terminated.

Individual Interviews

A second form of data collection consisted of individual interviews with five

individuals who have researched or participated in public conversations around online

social networking phenomena. Based on references in the literature, popular media

accounts of Facebook, as well as any names introduced by fellow interviewees, I sought

out individuals who have played a role in shaping or voicing shared representations of

privacy and identity, particularly as they relate to online behaviors. I specifically

targeted researchers and scholars dedicated to social networking practices as well as

figures who have been prominent in the media as a result of their experiences with social

media. These interviews were designed to assess the motives for engaging with social

networking sites such as Facebook and to obtain complimentary data that could further illuminate the phenomena raised in the focus group conversations.

All participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to conducting the interview. (For in-person interviews, I gave participants a hard copy of consent materials; telephone interviewees were sent a link to a virtual consent form on Wufoo.com that they could sign online.) (See Appendix B for the online consent form.) With the exception of one participant, interviewees granted me permission to use their names in any published materials and all agreed to be audio-recorded. Two of the interviews were conducted in person in New York City; the first was in the participant's business office, the second was conducted in a coffee shop. The remaining three interviews were conducted over the telephone because of geographical distance. The interviews ranged from thirty-five to ninety minutes in length. All interviews were voluntary and participants did not receive any compensation for their time. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

When I located the contact information for potential participants, I emailed them a recruitment script explaining that my dissertation research focuses on issues of privacy, power, and identity on social networking sites, such as Facebook, and that I would like to speak with them based on their professional experience around these topics. All participants who responded and agreed to be interviewed were included in the data. The final group of interviewees included: Yaniv Shulman, the documentary subject/filmmaker in the film, "Catfish"; Winter Mason, a social science researcher at Yahoo! Research; Mikolaj Jan Piskorski, an Associate Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School; a developer from a website company whose mission is to promote

privacy awareness on social networking sites (who asked to remain anonymous and will be referred to as "John" throughout the dissertation); and Ryan Calo, Director of the Consumer Privacy Project at Stanford Law School.

I crafted a general interview protocol for semi-structured interviews, but modified specific questions and their order for each interview so as to appropriately maximize the interviewees' level of comprehension and gain the richest understanding of their expertise relative to the topic areas. Sample questions included: "What do you think are some of the benefits/drawbacks of engaging with social networking sites?," "In what ways do you think social networking sites have affected how people interact or connect with each other?," "How do you think social networking sites have shaped how people construct their identities or present themselves online?," "What are the tones that you think underlie discussions around Facebook, and do you think the current media attention is accurate in its depictions of online interaction?," and, "How aware or concerned do you think users are of their privacy online?" (See Appendix D for a full interview protocol.) Participants were encouraged to draw on their professional knowledge but welcome to insert anecdotal and personal evidence for their responses throughout the interview as well. As with the focus group, I purposely refrained from defining certain key terms in the interview, such as "user" and "privacy" so as to elicit definitions from the interviewees. This avoidance did, at times, prove contentious in that participants would ask for clarification in order to understand the given questions and provide what they felt were appropriate answers. This exchange, in and of itself, may allude to the ambiguity and fluidity of certain concepts around privacy as they are shifting over time and with increased online engagement. (It could also simply be that interviewees wanted to ensure

they more clearly understood the questions.) A detailed examination of such concepts

will be discussed in more detail in the Results chapters and Discussion.

Media Backdrop

I anticipated that focus group participants would be sharing (and ideally

building) collective understandings of key concepts such as privacy, social connectivity,

and online presentation through the group. Since participants are necessarily situated in

this particular cultural context in which the media is highly attuned to issues of privacy

online, I simultaneously examined popular media coverage of Facebook to provide a

cultural backdrop. I specifically monitored mainstream news sources such as *The New*

York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Time and *Wired* magazines, *National Public Radio*

and CNN as well as blogs that track social media issues (e.g. theprivacyblog.com and

pewinternet.org) to see how issues of online privacy and social networking behaviors are

framed in public discourses. This process was ongoing during the dissertation process,

starting with the dissertation proposal phase and continuing through the writing stages. I

searched for any news pieces that specifically cited Facebook and other social media such

as Twitter and also paid attention to articles and posts that discussed privacy relative to

virtual spaces and mobile technologies. Although I was open to new ideas and debates

emerging in these sources, I especially noted the language used to determine the

representations of social networking practices in the cultural milieu. For instance, if a

headline used a word such as "danger" or "threat," I paid particular attention to this

language as an indication of pushing an agenda of fear and concern over increased

engagement and potential loss of personal privacy by way of social media. These sources

have been integrated with the literature and used to further elucidate the findings from the focus group and interviews. Because the focus group and interview data were collected in the midst of these public discourses, the news and blog archival strategy used here aspire to sketch the cultural context in which the data analysis is situated.

Analysis

Since the interview data was meant to complement and augment the topics raised in the focus group discussions, the two sources of data were woven together in the analysis process. Rather than examine the interviews as a separate body of information, my strategy was to allow for fluidity between the focus group and interview data in order to gain a richer appreciation of the themes that emerged across sources. The interviews magnified some of the issues raised in the focus group discussions and also helped illuminate the cultural backdrop in which they were situated, with respect to broader discourses around privacy and Facebook in the public domain. As will be addressed more thoroughly in the Results chapters, the interviewees often shared perspectives with one another but more importantly, they mimicked popular media stances that point to the potential dangers of online engagement. In contrast, focus group findings differed from interview themes at times, offering intriguing insight into the complexity of user practices on social networking sites.

Modeled after the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), the data stemming from both the focus group and individual interviews was subject to thematic analysis by specifically targeting shared words and concepts that travelled across participants' comments. (This will be discussed in more detail in the Results chapters.) Once all of the data was

transcribed, I read through each focus group discussion transcript individually, noting key terms and comments that pertained to the given topic. For instance, in the "Motivations" discussion, I paid specific attention to instances where individuals introduced the reasons they personally engaged with Facebook as well as their observations of why others do.[8] Once I read through all of the individual transcripts, I revisited them to extract themes that permeated multiple conversations. Although the six conversation topics were designed to target certain phenomena that take place on Facebook, they were not mutually exclusive, rendering prominent themes that materialized in numerous conversations. Although I observed predominant themes across participants' comments, I also maintained an appreciation for novel terms and concepts that sometimes arose only once or twice as they offered valuable insight into individual experiences of participating with Facebook, despite their rarity.

In addition, I was conscious of the fact that participants' interaction with one another within the focus group necessarily influenced participant comments. For instance, if one participant made a comment that resonated with a second participant, the latter individual would directly reference and re-post the statement, adding their own reflections, building a dynamic and mutually influential conversation. Therefore, after the initial phase of analysis, I revisited the focus group transcripts to analyze the interaction among participants within the context of the six discussion topics. I examined the language that they used with one another, how frequently and directly they spoke to one another or me as the researcher within the group, and I observed the evolution of

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[8] It is important to note that I did not specifically ask focus group participants to reflect on their own or others' online practices; because of the open-ended discussion prompt format, it is unclear at various points in the data to determine if participants were referring to personal experience or their observations of others' activity. However, I have indicated in the Results sections where participants explicitly described their own or others' online engagement.

conversations over the thirty-day period. The conversations and shared concepts are telling in and of themselves in demonstrating the unique attributes of focus groups, but especially meaningful in light of the present research focus of social connectivity online. I also paid heed to individual participant's postings across the various topic discussions to secure an appreciation of their overarching stance to online engagement. This was especially fruitful in instances in which participants seemed to shift their perspective of personal Facebook use over the course of the focus group, as demonstrated in reflective comments in later topic forums. Altogether, the focus group dynamics elicited unanticipated findings, which are described in more detail in the Results chapters.

Alongside the focus group analysis, I read the interview transcripts through several different lenses. First, I read through them to identify themes that appeared within particular narratives. For example, I would make note when a participant repeatedly referenced the technical ease with which users can share personal information via photographs on Facebook. Secondly, I looked at the recurring themes that surfaced across the various interview transcripts, expanding and organizing the initial list of themes. Consequently, I re-read the transcripts to ascertain comments that expressly pertained to the focus group discussion topics to see how the two sources of data spoke to one another. And lastly, I traced the interview narratives to note where and how they corresponded to, or contradicted, public media accounts of Facebook practices. Accordingly, I was able to allow the multiple forms of data to blend and enhance the findings from each source.

Additionally, given that the focus group design was inspired by Stoudt and Ouellette (2004), whose research examined online discussion forums among people who

stutter, my analysis strategy was also loosely modeled after their approach. In their

analysis, Stoudt and Ouellette specifically focused on individuals' different writing

threads to explore how stutterers articulated constructions of self and social identity.

Throughout their work, the authors maintained an appreciation for the temporal and

spatial contexts shared among the participants in that they also recognized the individual

writing threads as necessarily situated in collective conversations. Thus, their analytic

approach respected the collective representations of self and identity that emerged within

the discussion forums. Accordingly, my analysis process included recognition of the

mutual definitions of key terms, such as "privacy," "user," and "friend" that were

employed and built upon within the focus group discussions. The dual attention to

collective terms and both individual- and group-level threads of discussion reflects an

attempt to clarify how identity processes and social connectivity practices possibly

shifted over time within the group itself. Because participants were continually engaging

with Facebook while simultaneously commenting on it within the focus group, it was

crucial to examine how perspectives and experiences may have been adjusted during the

focus group period to further illuminate the dynamic nature of this virtual space.

Lastly, the media analysis entailed a close inspection of the language used in

mainstream media to discuss online engagement and social networking sites, in

particular. The primary objective of incorporating these resources was to sketch the

cultural backdrop in which the focus group and interview discussions are situated. I

turned to the media sources as a means of understanding the broader societal attitudes

that exist alongside individual virtual engagement and, accordingly, concentrated on the

topics, terms, and themes used in both titles and article language to denote how society

perceives the complex relationship with social media. For instance, I noted how frequently, and in what context, terms such as "dangerous" and "safety" were used in reference to privacy online. The inclusion of media sources spanned the time period from a month prior to the focus group time period and continued throughout the writing stage of the research process. Again, this aspect of the data analysis will be infused throughout the Literature, Results, and Discussion chapters of the dissertation, to further elucidate themes that surfaced in the focus group and interview materials.

Theoretical Support

Considering the ideas infused throughout the literature review, the analysis involved particular attention to issues of identity and social connectivity online. An underlying analytic strategy involved inspecting the data with an emphasis on the potentially positive aspects of engagement with social networking sites. Although I was eager to uncover novel aspects of user experiences that have yet to be documented, I initially examined the data bearing in mind that Facebook may be a platform for creative forms of identity enactment and enhanced connections to others. Whereas previous research has pointed to the potential for weakened social connections as a result of increased online engagement (e.g. Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Daily Mail Reporter, 2009; Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Kahn, 2011; Kujath, 2011; Martin, 2009; Norman, 2008; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011; Turkle, 2011; Wang & Wellman, 2010), I hoped to uncover a more complex understanding of social connectivity practices online, hopefully revealing potentially positive effects of participating in social networking sites. Accordingly, I paid special attention to comments in which participants shared personal

experiences, or those of others they have observed, around ways to connect with others on Facebook.

Similarly, as I approached the data analysis process, I kept earlier research that has explored identity construction online in mind (e.g. Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Ellis, 2008; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Livingstone, 2008; Spears, Postmes, Lea, and Wolbert, 2002; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004; Turkle, 2004). Such work led me to probe the prospect of diverse identity enactment strategies that are uniquely afforded by virtual spaces. A perpetual interest in the playful ways in which people enact a multiplicity of identities across social contexts and with different individuals prompted me to explore if, and how, these may transfer to the virtual sphere.

Lastly, in my ongoing consideration of the question of power during the data collection process, I sought to address possible differences among users based on social, racial, or educational markers. Previous research has alluded to potential demographic differences across social networking sites, driving my interest in pursuing questions of power online (e.g. boyd, forthcoming; Hare, 2009; Hargittai, 2008; Petersen, 2010; Sydell, 2009). In addition to observing demographic markers online, my perspective in addressing issues of power was also heavily influenced by Albrechtslund's (2008) work on participatory surveillance. His argument is premised on the notion that surveillance within the context of social networking sites fuels user empowerment in that people voluntarily engage with others and construct identities in virtual spaces. Albrechtslund asserts that, in contrast to traditional notions of surveillance that are cloaked in fears of government and authoritative monitoring, this type of surveillance is mutual, fundamentally social, and about sharing with others online. Thus, his work forces a

reconsideration of the very concept of surveillance, such that it may not necessarily be "un-desirable," but a source of positive empowerment for individuals engaging in social media. Building on Albrechtslund's theory, I conducted the aforesaid analyses using his argument as a backdrop to my investigation and keeping in mind the potential sources of power gained through such surveillance. I sought to examine the potential power gained by first, having the authority to maintain ownership over one's identity, audience, and space within a virtual community and, second, from having the power to watch social others' via Facebook.

By analyzing the data with this theory and past research in mind, I hoped to tease apart some of the seeming tensions that sit between issues of privacy and power underlying both users' daily engagement with Facebook and broader public discourse. Whereas the media seems to emphasize the dangers of sharing personal information online for fear that it is collected by corporate and government institutions (Albanesius, 2010; Angwin, 2010; boyd & Marwick, pending; Carter, 2010; Kairouz, 2011; Levy, 2011; McCullagh, 2010; Rosen, 2010; Valentino-Devries, 2010), the persistent sharing and observation occurring within the realm of Facebook may be due to the power generated through this model of participatory surveillance.

The aforementioned analysis will be discussed in the Results section according to the prominent themes that were found in the data, and grew out of the initial research questions, namely: *Social Connectivity; Self-Expression; Nuances of Power; Toward a Definition of Privacy;* and *Focus Group as a Microcosm of the Findings.* Again, the interview and focus group data will be woven together throughout the Results, although I will differentiate the contexts in which specific comments were made. The media data

will be incorporated throughout the following chapters, as they represent a second tier of analysis, providing the cultural milieu in which the present findings are situated. It is critical to note that the following sections were generated through the data analysis stage of the work. I initially approached the focus group and interview transcripts with the predetermined discussion topics and interview questions in mind, but the data demanded new organizational categories that more accurately reflected the dominant themes in the research. Whereas I anticipated an arrangement similar to the original prompts (e.g. organized around privacy threats, power among users, and self-presentation), the data revealed more nuanced conceptions of the given topics. Accordingly, each section reflects a major finding and illuminates the cracks that privacy and power seep into when engaging with Facebook, inviting a critical consideration of how to (re)assess the ways people use the website and illuminate why they do so. These proposed explanations pose new questions to pursue in future research endeavors centered on social media practices.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

INTRODUCTION TO RESULTS

Establishing a Vocabulary

There are a number of fundamental terms employed in the literature and embedded within the present data that warrant explicit attention before addressing the specific findings of the research. One of the primary objectives of the current endeavor was to identify definitions of privacy in virtual spaces based on users' experiences online. In the quest to uncover how individuals grapple with shifting notions of personal privacy, the data revealed a series of concepts and terms tangentially related to privacy that are also being contested with respect to the digital realm. First, the term "user" has been employed whenever one discusses an individual who participates, in any sense of the word, in an online space. However, this term is far from precise when trying to gather various people's experiences on Facebook. As Mikolaj[9], Associate Professor at Harvard Business School, explained:

> When you have a site that has 600 million people on it…one can scarcely talk about an average user on Facebook, right? There is no such thing as an average user…there is no statistical user, there's no average user, and everybody uses it differently because the context in which they use it is very different.

Because of its ever-expanding reach, Facebook encompasses a variety of people who utilize the site in unique ways, rendering it nearly impossible to classify an (average) user. Due to this diversity, the term "user" in the present work is meant to be general and flexible such that it appreciates the multitude of meanings that each individual may make of their experiences with social media. Because the focus in the present work is

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[9] All focus group participants and one interviewee, John, have been given pseudonyms to ensure requested anonymity.

specifically on the practices occurring on Facebook and the experiences people have

online, the definition of "user" in this context encompasses a complex web of activities

ranging from experience to practice in which individuals actively connect with, and

through, the site. As will become clear in the forthcoming Results and Discussion, the

data illuminates the dynamic, participatory practices that "users" engage in online, which

suggest that a "user" is an active participant in the context of (this research on) Facebook.

Similarly, Facebook has consistently been defined as an online "social network."

(Fletcher, 2010). With the persistent evolution of social media, it is important to note that

this category may be a misnomer in that it does not necessarily capture the enormity of

Facebook's capacity to influence more than the social aspects of people's lives. Ryan, a

lawyer dedicated to ensuring consumer privacy online, points this out by saying,

> I personally think that social networks, broadly defined,
> whether they're sort of truly social in the sense that they're
> about people connecting with their friends…almost none,
> none of these platforms are exclusively about that. And
> each of these communications platforms has vast potential
> for business connections, for advertising one's services, for
> connecting with people in a business form, so sometimes
> it's funny the way we talk about how things are social
> networks. A lot of social media is about, a lot of what
> drives social media policy is about people doing it for
> professional reasons. So it's not just like we're talking
> about social networks in a social sense.

Boyd and Ellison also interrogate the term "social network"; they use the term "social

network site" to describe Facebook because research demonstrates that the primary

impetus for engaging on Facebook stems from the maintenance and enhancement of

existing connections, rather than "networking," which suggests the initiation of new

relationships online.

Appreciating the rich array of tools and potential uses for sites like Facebook is indeed a prominent theme throughout the data, pointing to the need for clarity when using the phrase "social network." In the present research, Facebook will continue to be referred to as a "social networking site," but in this context, that term espouses the myriad types of connections that transpire in online spaces.

Acknowledging the diverse ways in which individuals connect to one another via Facebook, the very definition of "friend" has also been disrupted as a result of the site's increased presence in everyday lives. A range of characters, from distant acquaintances to intimate others to business affiliates, can all be collapsed under the title "friend" according to the structure of Facebook. However, Nev, an artist and filmmaker who shared his personal story of betrayal via Facebook connections through a public documentary, articulates what both the data and literature describe as the confusion about who an actual "friend" is when he says, "I think the biggest problem I have with [Facebook] is the new definition of friend because…you have to really remember what that means." And again, boyd and Ellison (2008) assert that the term "friend," in the context of Facebook and other social networking sites, can be deceptive because online connections do not necessarily reflect friendships in the traditional sense. In the forthcoming analysis, I will be clear when referring to friend, as based on the definition imposed by Facebook's design or by participants' comments. Individuals are currently negotiating their personal definitions of what it means to be a friend and user within the context of social networking sites. I now turn to the data to further illuminate the complexity of this virtual engagement.

Power of Facebook

An analysis of privacy online, and specifically Facebook, cannot neglect to address the power held by the company itself in shaping how users interact through the site. In both the focus group and interview conversations, participants made reference to the sometimes-indeterminate intentions of Facebook as a company. Some participants expressed general reservations as to the motives of the company, especially with respect to the evolution of new features, additions, and adjustments. Public conversations ignited by the media often emphasize dubious intentions and activities on the part of Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook in general (e.g. AFPNews, 2011; Manjoo, 2009; Pariser, 2011; Steel & Fowler, 2010). It is essential to be explicit about the present analysis: in this study, I acknowledge that Facebook as a corporation has its own motivations and power in shaping the ways in which users engage with, and through, the site. However, my focus has been to zoom in on the inter-personal processes that occur *between* users, which shape user experiences that transpire both on- and offline. Thus, I present an analysis in the forthcoming sections of the within-group dynamics that take place online.

However, participants made evident that they are cognizant of Facebook's overarching presence in cultivating the social networking site. Within the context of the focus group, the majority of participants expressed what could best be described as annoyance at the seemingly constant shift in default settings and layout transitions of the platform itself. Interview participants volunteered more concrete and habitually unfavorable opinions as to the corporate moves the company has taken. In line with the company's homepage declaration that "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life" (Facebook, 2011), interviewees claimed that the company's incentive is to get users to share as much as possible and maintain that openness so they can

leverage the information for business purposes. Their goal, in this process, is perceived as an effort to be a one-stop platform to which users will turn for all of their Internet needs. In May, 2007, the company debuted Platform, which allowed Facebook users to install applications built by third party organizations. One outcome of this adoption was that external sites can grant access to their social tools directly through Facebook, rather than building their own online networks. Accordingly, in line with their overarching goals, Facebook remains the primary space from which users can make use of other sites' applications (Manjoo, 2009; Naone, 2008). (For example, Facebook introduced a feature called Facebook Connect, through which individuals are able to update their profile status, make comments, or interact with Facebook connections while simultaneously browsing external websites such as CNN, Yelp, and many others. As a result, users' activity across the Internet can be imported and shared on one's Facebook profile page as they engage with external sites, making Facebook a central hub of one's Internet activity in the process (Manjoo, 2009).) However, in doing so, interviewees consistently criticized Facebook's strategy, specifically citing their lack of transparency in what an interviewee, Mikolaj, dubs "product marketing." Essentially, whether denoting privacy settings or design changes, Facebook is seen as disappointing in communicating how their product(s) work to its users.

Speculation as to why Facebook remains unclear when instigating changes on the site was loosely present in the data, and primarily alluded to secretive marketing tactics aimed at harboring users' information for financial gain. One noteworthy comment that an interviewee, John, made provided a more tangible example of the motivations driving Facebook's approach:

> Facebook has an algorithm to help figure out...which 20%
> [of people users view in their social network the most] is
> the best one for you. They track all that and that, in and of
> itself, provides some value in terms of helping you manage
> your connections. But more importantly, while they track
> all of this, they do not show any of this to you.

John's example suggests that, rather than letting individuals determine the people with whom they would like to interact or share online, Facebook manipulates who users see as they log on to the site. This algorithm is a startling illustration of the opaque ways in which Facebook may wield its overarching power as the site's creator and designer. Although this was the only reference to the algorithm in the present data, participants' questioning of the company's motives and illustration of the strategies they employ to maintain a sense of control over user experiences online suggests that they are cognizant of these types of manipulation tactics. Similarly, in an attempt to capitalize on the influence users have with their peers, Facebook codified these ripple effects in 2010 by launching OpenGraph, an initiative that allows users to "like" various facets of the World Wide Web in general. As external websites integrated the technology of OpenGraph, Facebook users could see what preferences and websites their social network connections prefer and visit (Fletcher, 2010).

Nevertheless, expanding the frame to encompass user practices among the general population, a simple Internet search for the "Facebook algorithm" yields countless results pointing to discussion forums in which Facebook members share directions on how to disable this algorithm setting and determine who appears in their News Feed. This example again insinuates that people (in the broader realm of Internet users) are proactive in preserving their levels of comfort and control in navigating their encounters with social media.

Though the data clearly exhibits a plethora of ways in which users (through their routine practices) feel authorized to define their personal communities and participate in them, it is critical to bear in mind that Facebook is steering the directions these processes may take and technological allowances on which they rely. Regardless, participants largely recognize the power that Facebook has, or their lack of knowledge thereof, and ultimately choose to engage with the site because they feel the benefits outweigh the costs.   The interviewees, too, acknowledged this negotiation as a kind of tradeoff in that users are willing to relinquish some personal privacy in exchange for the convenience afforded by Facebook. Thus, the present analysis speaks to a complex hierarchical system in which Facebook assumes a dominant role, but under the company's configuration, users negotiate their own experiences. I now turn to the comprehensive within-group analysis to demonstrate the detailed ways in which users engage online and their implications for constructing a definition of privacy online.

Why Facebook? The Unique Offerings of Social Networking Sites

The data revealed a series of areas in which being on Facebook elicits feelings of empowerment and breeds practices that rely on mutually implicated acts of self-presentation and social connection. Facebook encompasses a complex web of social connections, and because users' profiles are linked to one another, an individual's choices to share online can have considerable effects on how others participate and are perceived online. Underlying these phenomena is a plethora of tensions that individuals persistently navigate as they assert a sense of privacy both online and offline. Laying the foundation for the ambitious task of understanding the potential links between privacy,

power, social connectivity, and identity within the realm of Facebook, I find it useful to begin by assessing the overall appeal that has contributed to Facebook's ubiquitous presence in contemporary society.

A frequent theme infused throughout the data pointed to the simplicity of Facebook as a tool for organizing various aspects of everyday life. From a technical perspective, a number of participants described Facebook as easy to use and as one interviewee, John, a privacy application developer, noted, "looking at a profile is simple, straightforward; it's easy for people who aren't tech-savvy to get."

From a wider angle, Facebook is perceived as a social center that houses everything users claim to want, relative to both their social and professional lives. According to one of the focus group participants, Andrea[10], age 55, "Facebook is the world's largest planner, with everything I need to know or keep track of in one convenient and streamlined space." Marked as a homepage by several focus group participants, Facebook was often seen as a "social hub," providing a central spot for finding friends, popular culture information, social events, and even birthday reminders.

A majority of focus group participants explained that Facebook is simply a source of fun and a means for procrastination. The focus group participants repeatedly referenced the ability to allow oneself to be distracted by Facebook and used it to avoid doing other things, such as household chores and work at the office. There were multiple references to the games available on Facebook, described as an outlet for relieving stress or taking a break from work. Notably, there seemed to be an underlying sense of guilt or ambivalence embedded in participants' comments around the procrastination associated

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[10] As a reminder, all focus group participants and one interviewee, John, have been given pseudonyms to protect requested anonymity.

with Facebook. Running throughout participant comments was the implicit message that, although spending time on Facebook has come to be seen as commonplace, it lacks justification as it is not considered a productive use of one's time. The underlying resistance to spending seemingly excessive time on Facebook reflects (and possibly reinforces) the claims made by popular media asserting that Facebook activity is a waste of time, unproductive, and contributing to shorter attention spans by encouraging users to share mundane details of everyday lives in the form of limited-character posts (Ellis, 2008: Koerner, 2010; Rydberg, 2011; Thompson, 2011). As Nev explains, "[i]t's always been a love/hate with Facebook…it's a distraction and there's nothing you can really do. It's filler. It's completely useless information." The tension over this projected opposition is evident in that Nev goes on to say that using Facebook is indeed "fun."

There are several possible explanations feeding the nagging impression that Facebook activity is inefficient. Perhaps people feel anxious that, if a substantial amount of their personal time and socializing activity is now dedicated to social media, it must necessarily mean that other aspects of their life will suffer, due to a finite amount of (social) time. At times, participants hinted at a dependence on Facebook and other aspects of technology, both personally and in a general sense, implying uneasiness at the possibility of not being perpetually "connected." On a related note, a second possible basis for feelings of wastefulness may be associated with themes of addiction. Several participants used the language of addiction to articulate engagement with Facebook. As Becky explained, "I think of [Facebook] as a drug, you build up tolerance, you use it to numb out (or I do). Of course I have no one to blame but myself, why not just get off of the thing?..[I]t gives me something to love/hate." Couched within these references was

the notion that users can fall prey to addictive tendencies in which they lose control over their ability to maintain a healthy relationship with online behavior. Increased online activity may spur an uncomfortable level of reliance on checking others' profiles, posting mundane details of their day via status updates, or other forms of Facebook activity. The looming danger of compulsive Facebook-checking lurks in the background for many users, driving a need to remain cognizant of how often and in what ways users engage online and compelling them to find ways of justifying their time spent online.

Participants expressed the ongoing need to find a balance in their personal level of engagement as exemplified in Jennifer's comment: "Some people get too caught up in it, like an addiction, they obsess, are anxious when disconnected, but…in moderation it is really beneficial – an enhancement." In general, individuals appreciate the opportunities afforded through Facebook, but recognize its ability to facilitate a dependency on social media that they are uncomfortable with, either for themselves or others. The aforementioned benefits and challenges of engaging with Facebook are encompassed in Lisa's analogy, which hints at the complexity of participation on Facebook:

> When I was a little girl, we had a telephone that also connected to other houses on our block and we each had a different ringtone so you would know if the call was for you or not; but you could pick up the phone and hear the conversation if the ringtone was not yours. We called it a party line. That what Facebook is like to me. One big party line. The good parts and the not so good parts.

Perhaps offering a means of justification for taking advantage of social networking sites, the majority of interview and focus group participants simultaneously applauded Facebook for its ability to strengthen professional developments. Pointing to the ways in which Facebook allows users to knit together their social, personal, and

professional domains, a predominant theme revolved around the advantages of Facebook in promoting one's business. Because it is free and accessible to millions of people without familiar physical or geographical constraints, participants consistently shared experiences of using Facebook to "send powerful messages" (Carly). For instance, Justine, a 34-year-old focus group participant, says, "[s]ince I primarily use Facebook for business purposes, it enables me to reach thousands of my business 'fans' without having to sit in weekend trade shows and send out mass emails." Some individuals even credited Facebook with granting them the opportunity to create personal businesses at all.

Underlying much of this praise is participants' implicit references to the affordances that Facebook offers in its online environment; revisiting Gibson's (1966) theory of affordances, it is evident that users make meaning and exploit the various opportunities afforded through the attributes built into the design of the Facebook environment. Users work around familiar temporal, geographical, and financial constraints by making use of the distinctive features on the site. Gibson's conception provides a useful framework with which to interpret the considerable appreciation with which participants referenced various features of the social networking site, particularly with respect to their own professional and social development.

A similar line of productivity that individuals often linked to Facebook revolved around political activism. The majority of participants praised Facebook for its significant role in fostering activist issues. From signing online petitions to sharing information about how to take action in one's community to help others in need, participants shared countless examples of ways in which they have used Facebook as a tool for political and social change. Buried beneath participants' comments alluding to

the general appeal of Facebook lies an appreciation of the unique ways in which Facebook allows users to blend personal, professional, and social spheres of their lives in one space. Facebook features enable individuals to weave the assorted pieces of their lives together, possibly diminishing challenges that arise when merging these domains offline. The emphasis participants placed on the political and professional opportunities afforded by Facebook signals a means for users to validate their use of Facebook, countering accusations of wastefulness looming in the air.

Altogether, while participant comments did mimic some of what the mass media attests about user behaviors online, and confirmed some of the ideas posed in the existing literature, they also challenge public discourses and invite a novel interpretation of the phenomena occurring on social networking sites such as Facebook. More specifically, woven throughout some of the literature is the assumption of a simple dichotomy between criticism and approval of Facebook; the present data complicates this binary perspective by revealing how nuanced conceptions of power breed new interpretations of online phenomena and help establish a definition of privacy.

Encompassing the complexity around privacy and power transpiring on Facebook, what follows is a more in-depth analysis of such processes, which is organized into four areas: *Social Connectivity, Self-Presentation, Nuances of Power* and *Toward a Definition of Privacy*. I then offer an in-depth analysis of the focus group methodology to illustrate the distinct advantages it offers, especially in light of the current research focus.

SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

The present research complicates current speculation that social media leads to the erosion of interpersonal intimacy (e.g. Daily Mail Reporter, 2009; Kahn, 2011; Martin, 2009; Turkle, 2011). Facebook practices have indeed shifted the ways in which people connect with one another, but the data reveals that users have adopted innovative strategies for social connectivity via Facebook leading to enhanced ties to others. Considering the issue of blurry definitions underlying much of the discourse surrounding social networking sites, I find it worthwhile to outline Mikolaj's approach to defining the various characters involved in social connectivity processes on Facebook. In his words, Mikolaj (a business professor interviewee) classifies four types of use:

> I always define these metrics into at least 4 categories of use…the biggest one is what I call 'read,' which is reading content posted by others; 'write,' which is contributing any type of content be it written or words or photographs, videos, links, that all goes into 'write'; there is the 'networking,' connecting two people, connecting two entities, and there's a 'private' site of the communication that is IM and email. But 'read' and 'write' are really the most important ones and…really the biggest chunk of what people do on Facebook is 'read' or stalk other people.

Mikolaj's categorization system is applicable to the online practices voiced by many participants and, based on this overlap, I will refer to his sorting technique throughout this section as a means for articulating some of the patterns described in the focus group and interviews.

Early Facebook Generations

In the beginning of the focus group, I asked participants to share their overall thoughts on Facebook, including why they think it has become so popular. In response, a

number of people spoke about their initial entry into Facebook and many of these responses mirrored the broader social patterns discussed in the literature and popular media. Namely, Facebook was originally exclusive to college students from select universities, eventually expanding to a broader college network and requiring a school-affiliated email address to join until, in late 2006, it became open to anyone who wanted to create an online account (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Hargittai, 2008).

Several younger participants in the focus group were members of the first ranks to be involved in the evolution of Facebook. College students seemed to demonstrate an informal offline network, which contributed to the increasing membership of the site in its early days. Carly, age 27, explained her initial foray into Facebook saying:

> I first joined Facebook in college when my university became one of the first places you could use it. I joined because it was the "cool thing to do" and something that not everyone was allowed to join (compared to now). Interaction then was much different; you could connect with people in your classes, meet up in person; it was much more like a dating site that encouraged offline interaction.

Nev, also a member of one of the first tiers of college students allowed to join, disclosed his early experiences on Facebook:

> It used to be Facebook was just personal and, like most people, I think useful for researching potential girls to date…It might be you met someone that you want to see who they're friends with or, I didn't get her number but I want to send her a message but I don't know her email so I'll look her up on Facebook. I mean, that's why it was invented.

Therefore, it seems the initial design of Facebook was such that college students fueled the growth of an online community that could be used to foster loose connections to others, possibly driven by the potential for meeting others to date.

As Facebook loosened its permission barriers, and the community extended beyond college students, participants described how the expanding access to Facebook correlated with a shift in the ways in which users consumed the site. In an interview, Winter, a psychologist who works for Yahoo! Research, explained that "as the site has grown, different segments of the population have found a reason to go." People who had been in the first waves of accessible populations granted access to the site explained how its development has led to personal shifts over time; as Kyle, age 36, explained, "[w]hen I first joined Facebook, I did it as sort of a lark, as everyone at the university at the time seemed to be setting up profiles – I never thought I would use it that much, but now I can't imagine my life without it."

In discussing early experiences, alongside more recent encounters on Facebook, participants drew attention to the changes Facebook has undergone since its launch. There was an underlying recognition among participants that they are now participating in something different than they initially signed up for and that continues to transform over time. Although they did not explicitly ponder the ways in which the site's evolution has influenced their experiences online, I speculate that these shifts signal the influence that users have had on the site's direction. As evidenced by growing numbers of users since its inception, many people have become invested in Facebook; their engagement has sustained the site and perhaps user activity and preferences have significantly contributed to the course it has followed in the last six years. The thread woven throughout participants' comments, particularly those who were of the first cohorts to join, hints at a curiosity in seeing how the site will continue to unfold over time. On the

other side, it is conceivable that participants are interested in staying connected through Facebook because of the ways it may shape their lives over time as well.

Enhancing Existing Social Connections

The ways in which Facebook continues to shape social connectivity are substantial and the data illustrates this as occurring in multiple directions. First, many participants pointed to the ability to enhance existing social connections via Facebook. At times, this manifested itself in that weak offline connections were strengthened as a result of Facebook. Some people explained that they joined the site specifically to connect to people they already knew. If individuals had met people only once or twice in person and considered them marginal friends, they were able to find out more about them from their Facebook profiles and posts, yielding a more meaningful social connection and, on occasion, friendship.

Others found that Facebook was a vehicle for reinforcing familial ties. As Lisa (a 59-year old woman from rural Minnesota) noted, Facebook has brought her closer to her family because "Facebook gives [the] opportunity to talk to each member of my family one on one, which is <u>very</u> hard to do at the Christmas party, etc." (*emphasis hers*). Lisa went on to say that she used Facebook more than her cellular and home telephones combined, as further evidence of the heavy reliance she has on the website as a source of social connectivity. Lisa's comment, amidst many pointing to the opportunity to bolster existing relationships, may speak to the findings in a recent report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie & Purcell, 2011). This research demonstrated that the average social networking site user has more close ties and is less

likely to feel socially isolated, compared to the average American (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie & Purcell, 2011). The Pew Internet & American Life Project findings suggest that people are more connected (both online and offline) as a result of their online engagement, and many of these connections are, most notably, classified as intimate friendships and relationships. Juxtaposing them with the present data offers ample support for the notion that Facebook enhances existing connections.

Crossing Offline Boundaries

In many cases, the enhancement of existing social ties was attributed to the ability to cross geographical, financial, and temporal boundaries that exist in the offline world. A commonly given response among participants of varied ages was that Facebook enabled connections across long distances, allowing people to feel they are a part of each other's daily lives, despite their geographical locations. This was particularly the case for those who lived abroad for various chapters in their lives as demonstrated in Kyle's comment: "I recently spent 10 months living abroad and Facebook was my primary means of keeping abreast of everything back home." He continued to explain that this operated in both directions; he was able to keep track of what was going on in the lives of close others via Facebook, but also used it as a space to share visual and verbal accounts of the places he saw and activities he did while away.

Lisa, living in Minnesota, explained that, "Even though I live in a remote area, I do not feel cut off from the rest of the world. I have a world of people that are interested in the same things as I am at my fingers 24/7. I love it." Lisa's comment points to the importance of overcoming temporal barriers in connecting with others. Many individuals

echoed this sentiment, expressing their appreciation for the opportunity to have both constant connection and the option to reach out and respond to others when convenient. Due to the business of daily lives, people said that the convenience afforded by Facebook enabled them to maintain and enhance offline connections through an endless online connection, as exemplified in Justine's experience:

> [The] real social benefit that I have found is that I can communicate with my friends who have different work schedules (night shift) daily without interrupting their sleep. In real life, I have to worry about if I called at a bad time, etc., but on Facebook, they have the luxury of responding and keeping in touch according to their own schedule.

The use of the term "luxury" to describe the benefits of connecting through Facebook suggests that it is often perceived as a comfort that surpasses the daily hurdles of offline social connectivity.

Lastly, the convenience of Facebook was also referenced with respect to cost; because it is free, participants found that Facebook offers newly affordable ways of keeping in touch with others. As Winter pointed out, "Being able to stay in touch with people very cheaply is a great thing; it kind of gives people access to more social capital."

In addition to using Facebook as a means for connecting with close others, participants repeatedly described novel aspects of connectivity that were enacted, and often exaggerated, online. The idea that users can be selective in negotiating the desired level of intimacy with others was a recurrent theme, suggesting that Facebook allows for a blurry space between close interpersonal relationships and distant acquaintances. Numerous individuals cited the ability to maintain connections at a "comfortable

distance," granting them desired access to people they care about without being more involved than they would like. Most importantly, this measured level of social engagement was usually described as an explicit benefit of Facebook's design. As Winter, an interviewee who conducts research for Yahoo! Research, noted:

> One of the things that's been argued is that Facebook keeps your weak ties around…it reduces the cost of maintaining weak ties and so you have…very weak contact with a whole bunch of people you once knew…to some degree but I've found that, I think that actually has very large benefits.

Winter went on to share a personal example in which a high school acquaintance with whom he is only superficially connected on Facebook recently posted about travelling to Hong Kong. Since Winter was about to leave for a business trip to Hong Kong, he was thrilled at the opportunity to get knowledgeable advice from this near-forgotten acquaintance, illustrating the relevance that distal connections can have in people's lives. Whether it was intentional in their design or not, "Facebook seems to propel the idea of the 'acquaintance'" as a focus group participant, Jason, speculated, encouraging users to keep in touch, even remotely, generating a complex web of interpersonal links.

Connecting through Sharing

This shift in the extent to which people maintain social connections may also be due, in part, to the different ways that individuals can relate with each other online, as opposed to offline contexts. A recurring topic within the focus group and interview conversations revolved around the concept of sharing online. Whether in the form of status updates, pictures, videos, or links to external sites, users persistently rely on interacting with others by way of sharing on their Facebook pages, and demonstrating

what Mikolaj described as "writing" earlier. Lisa explained, "I have shared more information with people on Facebook than I have in person in the last 10 years. And I am talking information about the world, the news, the weather, etc., and learned more from them too."

For some, the sharing aspect of Facebook engagement[11] had particular meaning when they felt that their ability to participate in offline social connectivity was constrained. As a mother who had recently given birth, Norah explained that her lack of connection to the working world has narrowed her exposure to the music she used to be so passionate about and she is extremely grateful to have her friends' recommendations on Facebook. Nev summarizes many participant comments when he says:

> The exposure that Facebook offers, which isn't necessarily
> different than the Internet in general, but because it's
> personal on Facebook, because it's your friends and things
> that they're doing, you're more inclined to take interest.

Nev's comment alludes to the aforementioned idea that individuals turn to close others for guidance on activities and interests to pursue, lending a unique credibility to the impact that Facebook sharing has on both on- and offline tastes and decisions. These benefits of sharing are bi-directional in that participants expressed joy in being able to share their personal passions via Facebook in the hopes that it will serve as an introduction for others to potential new interests as well. Sharing, in these instances, can foster feelings of connectivity with others; as Jeff noted, for example, "[y]ou don't have to sit there and appreciate the song you're listening to by yourself anymore – you can share the YouTube link with all your friends." Thus, when sharing links to music or

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[11] In this context, the notion of engagement incorporates the active participation that users enact online; this distinction again points to the broad meaning of "user," which encompasses active practices online as opposed to passive responses to available technologies.

other forms of media, users may now interpret their personal experience as shared with social others in a virtual sense.

Psychologists affiliated with Facebook, as part of the company's Data Science Team, have actually undertaken research endeavors assessing the ripple effects of users' sharing online. In particular, the Facebook Data Team have quantified the language used in status updates across the globe, concluding that emotion-laced words such as "happy," "hug," and "vile" seemingly give way to similar language and expressions on friends' status updates within a short period of time (Raj, 2011). Their analysis suggests that there may be a contagious effect of sharing emotions online, such that users pick up their friends' feelings and adopt them, as manifested in status updates. These findings reinforce the ways in which users obtain meaning from their online social connections, which may be transferred into their daily lives, both online and offline.

Expanding Social Communities

Marrying some of these findings around the importance of sharing online with the opportunity to cross familiar geographical and temporal barriers, it might be expected that participants repeatedly discussed how Facebook led them to expand their social communities. In line with some of the research demonstrating the differences in online versus offline communities, Facebook seemingly encourages an expansion of networks that goes beyond those in offline domains (Acar, 2008). Although it originated in the United States, Mikolaj, an interviewee, notes that it is misleading to consider Facebook a predominantly American site, pointing to the many international voices that populate the site. The benefits of stretching one's familiar communities were reflected in various

participant comments. For instance, Lisa, speaking from the perspective of someone living in an isolated area, discussed the impact that the international reach has had on her:

> I feel Facebook has connected me to the entire world. I read newspapers and listened to the nightly news for years but always felt disconnected from what was really happening around me when I read newspapers and listened to the nightly news. Facebook not only brings the world to me, but I have the opportunity to have my say about what is going on…I talk to people that live in countries I have only read about in books.

A Complement to Offline Connectivity

It is important to note that a few participants did raise concerns that dominate public discourses about the potential disintegration of offline relationships as a result of social media connectivity. Because it may seem more efficient to comment on many people's profiles in a short amount of time than spend that time connecting with others face-to-face, participants voiced some apprehension over the long-term effects of sites like Facebook. These worries resonated with themes in recent research and popular media speculation dedicated to the potential erosion of interpersonal intimacy as a result of social media (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Daily Mail Reporter, 2009; Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Kahn, 2011; Kujath, 2011; Martin, 2009; Norman, 2008; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011; Turkle, 2011; Wang & Wellman, 2010). Such work, briefly, posits that connecting online has become a poor substitute for interpersonal relationships, replacing deeper connections with shallow forms of contact. Similarly, echoing publicly-voiced concerns, a few individuals noted that online connections can mislead users into thinking that they are intimate or meaningful, when that may not be the case. Citing a recent National Public Radio piece she heard discussing the invasion of social media on offline

connections, Becky said "[e]ven when we are in a real-world experience, we drag our virtual world along." However, she immediately continued to say that this has not been her personal experience. Her comment suggests that users are aware of the broader societal discussions around the potential erosion of intimate friendships as a consequence of virtual engagement, but they may not reflect actual experiences. In fact, the focus group data largely challenges these fears.

It is appropriate, at this juncture, to call attention to participants' explicit discussion of the ways in which online connections via Facebook are not meant to replicate or replace offline connectivity. Within the focus group, comments suggested that users recognize the differences in ways of connecting with others online versus offline, and their experiences reflect an appreciation for the (sometimes overlapping, yet) unique functions that online connectivity serve. Online connectivity through Facebook seems supplemental to offline engagement, conceivably giving way to social fulfillment in new ways, and consequently expanding the traditional notion of "friend." As Lisa explained, having a minimal amount of background information about someone from their Facebook updates can strengthen offline time spent with that person because it helps keep them abreast of each other's life developments. She actually continued to say that she feels more connected when meeting in person if she has the information from Facebook as a backdrop with which to contextualize the social encounter. Another participant, Briana, age 36, described Facebook information as "just the highlights and headlines. It's not solid information, but just a teaser." And, similarly, Norah especially appreciates Facebook because it allows her to "skim the surface" of her friend's lives when she finds it challenging to see them in person because she recently had a baby.

Thus, Facebook enables users to adopt new ways of engaging in friendship and other forms of social connections, which do not necessarily lead to the erosion of intimacy, but shift the ways in which this concept takes shape. I would argue that these forms of connecting via Facebook imply that a re-articulation of the word "friend" is at play, expanding the landscape to encompass a vast array of ways of relating with others.

Overall, a common thread throughout the connectivity discussions was that people may see Facebook information as a starting point for pursuing offline social connections and behaviors, whether in the form of an email, telephone call, or simply perusing a recommended music album. These findings provide further support for previous research suggesting that online connectivity can be perceived as enhancing existing relationships, both online and offline (e.g. Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson & Crawford, 2002; Kujath, 2011; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011; Valkenberg & Peter, 2009; Wang & Wellman, 2010). Examining how social connectivity transpires online reveals that the increased engagement with Facebook may not necessarily lead to the degeneration of interpersonal intimacy; it has indeed shifted the ways in which people engage with one another both offline and online, but has spawned new ways of connecting with others and contributed to a re-articulation of the concept of "friend."

SELF-PRESENTATION

One facet of connecting with others on Facebook revolves around the ways in which people choose to present themselves online. Whether it takes the form of sharing

information about oneself, conveying religious or political viewpoints, posting updates on recent life events, or simply offering music suggestions, individuals persistently use Facebook as a form of self-expression. In the third focus group topic discussion, asking participants to contemplate how online engagement relates to aspects of self-presentation, participants outlined the various tactics that they have used, or witnessed others using, in creating virtual identity stamps. As part of this examination, the findings complicate the familiar notion of an authentic, true, or singular identity in some psychological literature (e.g. Back, Stopfer, Vazire, Gaddis, Schmukle, Elgloff, & Gosling, 2010; Donath, 2008; Kim & Lee, 2011). The data, instead, suggests that Facebook enables a multiplicity of identity and unravels the notion of authenticity, demonstrating the fluidity of self both off- and online. Facebook allows users (through its various affordances) to enact their identities in original ways that are not always available in the offline world, granting them the power to demonstrate agency and be playful with their identities.

Challenging Authenticity

In general, participants explained that Facebook has become a platform for expressing oneself, in a plethora of ways, which partly stems from how they may see themselves as well as how they imagine they would like to be seen by (virtual) others. The potential to edit oneself online was a prominent theme throughout both the focus group and the interviews. Remnants of the focus group conversations echoed themes in public discourse around identity online, but the concept of authenticity is seemingly more at the fore in how researchers and the general public approach questions of self-presentation online (Bower, 2010; Ellis, 2008; Kujath, 2011; Livingstone, 2008).

Tangling questions of identity accuracy online, the present data demands a critical examination of the notion of authenticity, as exemplified in the interview conversation with Mikolaj, during which he directly contests the very concept, saying, "I hate to be asking this question, but what's authentic? Yes, people construct identities that feel more authentic to them." A partial answer to Mikolaj's poignant question surfaced as participants alluded to their ability to enact a multiplicity of identity through the use of Facebook. Recognizing the various roles one plays in their offline social spheres, participants cherished what they saw as an opportunity to parse out the different pieces of themselves online and across communities. Because it allows users to exemplify or focus on different aspects of their identities, users enact distinct pieces of themselves with certain audiences on social networking sites. Oftentimes in an effort to distinguish between professional affiliates, familial ties, close friends, and acquaintances, individuals employ creative strategies for differentiating the diverse roles that they play in their lives.

At times, this expansion of self takes the form of completely separate Facebook accounts. Several participants noted that young people, in particular, host distinct accounts such that one account is visible by their parents and another is dedicated solely to friends. Others said that they have created more than one Facebook account to participate in online gaming applications and take on multiple roles in the gaming world. A notable example of this emerged when Christine, age 22, cited her work in a burlesque production company. She explained that many of the performers in her company have separate Facebook profiles for their burlesque alter-egos, which are dedicated to publicity and their professional personas, whereas a second account is used primarily for social connections with family and friends. Fellow focus group participants reaffirmed this

tactic for dispersing the pieces of themselves that are enacted online, sharing examples of creating certain accounts for gaming and "silly" purposes and secondary ones for fostering professional connections.

Playing with Identity Online

The strategic maintenance of hosting multiple accounts on Facebook lends itself to the notion of a creative, playful use of identity enactment online. Interrupting public conversations (e.g. Bower, 2010) around the accuracy of people's online identities, many participants highlighted the fragility of the notion of authenticity online. Aligned instead with previous literature attesting to the phenomenon of playing with identity online (e.g. Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Ellis, 2008; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Livingstone, 2008; Spears, Postmes, Lea, and Wolbert, 2002; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004; Turkle, 2004), the majority of participants recognized that people use Facebook as a platform for sharing idealized versions of themselves with others. By enhancing certain aspects of their lives, "liking" things that may reflect well on them, and posting attractive photos on their profile pages, individuals often play with their identities in virtual spaces such as Facebook, tweaking the pieces of themselves that they want to project to others. Participants explained that what people share online may indeed be accurate, but reflects a choice of what one wants to present to the world and, consequently, may be construed as the active construction of an identity.

Although some participants asserted that people can create an entirely new self in virtual spaces, the focus group and interview discussions more frequently highlighted the subtler editing tactics that people use to enhance their online image. As John, a privacy

application software developer, described, "I think people are accurate and slow and honest in what they put up there in the sense that what they put up is true…at least they believe it to be true, but I think what's trickier is what is on Facebook, even if it's true, is still self-selected." A related thread woven through several focus group participants' comments discussed the issue of hiding certain aspects of themselves in playing with their online identity construction. These comments communicated themes throughout much of the conversations that the deliberation afforded by sites like Facebook allows people to take their time to develop what and how they want to present themselves online. Whereas offline, users feel less able to choose what they say or shape how others see them, the space afforded by the computer screen enables them to feel more in control of what they say and display with social others. Revisiting Gibson's (1966) notion of affordances, Facebook allows for asynchronous communication as well as offers diverse means through which to express oneself to others (e.g. Wall posts, status updates), leading participants to feel a sense of ownership through the deliberate choices they make when engaging online.

All of the aforesaid self-presentation processes give way to murky territory when assessing the truthfulness behind online identities. Again, much of the public and research discourses are driven by an agenda interrogating this aspect of self-presentation online. Specifically, recent psychological research pursuing questions of online engagement have paid particular attention to the ability to corroborate offline identities with how one presents themselves online (e.g. Ellis, 2008; Kujath, 2011) suggesting that determining the accuracy of online identities is a priority. For instance, researchers have crafted investigations that examine "honest" (Donath, 2008) and "real" (Kim & Lee,

2011) self-presentation online, which implies a polarized interpretation of online identity as true or not. However, participants' comments invite us to consider whether or not truth and honesty are the most fitting terms to employ when discussing online identity; rather, people use social networking sites to try on different identities and share in a purposeful way that differs somewhat from offline modes of self-presentation. As the software developer, John, speaks about the tendency to tweak certain observable aspects of identity online, he notes that this may not actually differ from offline identity practices. Although offline sharing may be generally more difficult due to financial or other logistical hurdles, the ability to share (or withhold) information online can sometimes resemble how people enact their identities in real-life situations. As discussed in the literature review, research has found that people report feeling more comfortable sharing their "true" selves online, when compared to in-person contact (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Similarly, in their research conducted with college students, McMillan and Morrison (2006) noted that many participants referred to the Internet as a space in which they could cultivate their identities in face-to-face environments. Their study's participants often described their engagement with virtual spaces as beneficial in building their offline identities, particularly in relation to family and friends. Echoing other research, the majority of students in McMillan and Morrison's explained that the Internet offered a space in which they could solidify their "real-world" identities. Although they did not find that the identities enacted online and offline differed much from one another, the Internet enabled participants to further develop and play with their identities, which moved between virtual and "real" environments.

Selective Disclosure

A prevalent theme punctuating the data revolves around selective disclosure, which suggests that questions of authenticity may not be especially relevant to online identity. This theme begins to clarify how research agendas pursuing authenticity may be asking unsuitable questions when exploring issues of online identity. Although sites such as Facebook do not ensure full anonymity (since users must surrender certain personal identifying information to join), it does leave room for people to play with their identities as demonstrated earlier. Several people described the Facebook realm as providing a certain level of anonymity that comes from connecting behind a computer screen, rather than in person. This can be especially meaningful for people who feel socially awkward or uncomfortable in offline social settings. Participants repeatedly accentuated the ways in which spending time with people in person can be stressful and the barriers that exist offline can disappear in online settings. Such comments echoed a pervasive theme in the psychological research literature, asserting that the ability to socially engage online may be vital for people who feel anxious in the context of face-to-face interaction (e.g. Acar, 2008; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). People who tend to be shy and have difficulty approaching others in social settings often feel protected by what focus group member, Jeff, age 30, labeled the "buffer zone" of the Internet. As well, platforms like Facebook may serve as a vehicle for transitioning to a more comfortable state of being in social settings, as evidenced by Jennifer's moving experience:

> I suffered from anxiety for a short time and would have
> panic attacks around new people regularly. I had Facebook
> before it was big but wasn't online for about four years –
> reconnecting, [I] found a lot of old friends and some new

> ones and immediately before I ever fixed my anxiety issue,
> I had no problem speaking my mind in my own posts as
> well as on others' (both major world issues and petty
> drama). Facebook has helped me re-adapt, socially;
> somehow through conversation online I became more
> comfortable with conversation in person.

Jennifer's experience is a powerful example of the ways in which the semi-transparency of Facebook interactions can be a unique tool for helping socially fearful individuals conquer their anxieties over interacting with others, both in an immediate and long-term sense.

The capacity for selective disclosure on Facebook can also play a role for individuals who may not experience stress engaging with others in person but find it beneficial in similar respects. In these cases, participants explained that they purposely share things online to avoid the nuisance of having to discuss those aspects of their lives in offline conversations or simply because they know they will never have to see their Facebook friends in person. Just as people mentioned creating separate accounts for sharing different pieces of themselves online as referenced earlier, sometimes they use Facebook to share certain interests (e.g. music, movie, and television shows they like) that they do not find themselves sharing offline for whatever reason. Other times, it may be significant pieces of themselves that they specifically bring to their Facebook identities. A poignant example of this was when Jason commented:

> I have my sexuality listed on my Facebook as 'Interested
> in: Men.' Now that on my page takes away the possible
> situation of people not being sure and I then don't have to
> have the 'coming out' conversation, as comfortable with it
> as I am, every time I meet someone new.

In this instance, Jason demonstrates how, although he is quite comfortable with his sexual identity, he may resent having to come out time and again and, accordingly, he relies on his Facebook profile to do the "coming out" work for him. This warrants a possible shift in focus from the assumption that Facebook is merely reflecting selected pieces of one's offline self; it suggests, instead, that users dedicate coveted pieces of their self-presentation to Facebook in and of itself. This potential theory lends credence to the importance of virtual spaces for offering venues in which to express particular aspects of oneself that may not exist elsewhere.

For others, people change how they present themselves simply based on their mood, because they do not feel threatened by the potential repercussions of having to see certain Facebook friends in person, as illustrated in Lisa's post: "Depending on my mood, I can be funny, flirty, or involved in conversation[s] of my choosing without having to be overly worried about what these people think of me. I never have to see them again or see them face to face." These findings align with a review of earlier research by Gurak and Antonijevic (2008), in which the authors cite work suggesting that internet sites such as blogs offer the potential for a sense of freedom in defining oneself, sometimes with an anonymous audience. Because of the sometimes unknown visitors, bloggers may form a person and/or group identity that is remarkably different from that enacted in face-to-face interaction settings. Although their work concentrated on blogging practices, Gurak and Antonijevic's work reinforces the notion that a pseudo-anonymity online gives way to new or different manifestations of self compared to in-person settings.

In general, the present findings correlate with the aforementioned literature and further substantiate the argument that assessing "true" or "authentic" identities either

online or offline may be a futile task. Instead, a critical examination of the ways in which users present themselves online implies that a multiplicity of identity flourishes in virtual spaces, such that different pieces of one's identity are enacted differently depending on time, context, and audience.

Mutual Identity Construction

As the data reveals, Facebook blurs the concepts of authenticity, honesty, truth, and a singular identity because it permits users to play, edit, and tweak their online identities as they choose. However, what does this mean for the social others who view these fluid identities? As many interviewees and focus group participants noted, it can be difficult to explicitly lie on Facebook as one may be held accountable by Facebook friends who observe them stretching the truth to extremes. Herein lies an interesting phenomenon in that myriad users explained that they have seen close others say or share things online that they suspect to be less than accurate. However, in those moments, they do not openly comment on those discrepancies. Instead, there seems to be a(n unspoken) mutual agreement between users allowing each other to play with identities on Facebook. In addition, the dynamic engagement online, as enacted through self-presentation and connectivity practices, represents a joint construction of online space, leading to shared knowledge(s).

Justine, age 34, put it succinctly by saying she "often reads Facebook posts of people with whom I consider myself close and think…that's not how things are when I interact with them in person." Mikolaj passionately criticized the speculation that people do not recognize that users may be playing with truthfulness online:

> There is some real assumption of…it sort of assumes that people are stupid. It sort of assumes that, like, people will read this stuff and then will read all of this posturing and will not filter. Like people are posturing but on the other side, people know that people are posturing, so it's not like the receiver of the information is stupid.

His comment encompasses a thread of dialogue throughout the data that users are conscious of one another's playfulness with how they present themselves on Facebook. These findings suggest that sharing different pieces of oneself online allows for fluid identities that are mutually constructed via online social connectivity. The personal construction of identities may actually involve a dynamic process between users in which both online and offline connections enable users to craft idealized, flexible versions of themselves. The marked absence of overt challenging of one another's extended or expanded selves online implies that individuals recognize this space as a site for moving beyond potential offline limitations in identity enactment practices. Moreover, they mutually enable one another to take advantage of the multiplicity of identity in virtual settings such as Facebook.

Addressing Theories of Narcissism

It is relevant to interject this analysis with recent research positing that themes of narcissism may drive the motivations and strategies people adopt when constructing online identities, as some of these themes resonated in participant comments. The role of narcissism in driving social networking sites behavior has received significant attention by both scholars and the mainstream media (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Dingfelder, 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Saculla & Derryberry, 2011). Much of this deliberation has been driven by the concern that the format of, and social behaviors brought about by,

social networking sites promote aspects of self-promotion that are commonly linked to narcissism. In their work examining how narcissism may transpire on Facebook, Buffardi and Campbell (2008) conducted a detailed analysis of various users' Facebook pages and their levels of narcissism to see if, and how, the two forces possibly fueled one another. The authors premised their work on the idea that narcissists are defined as being highly adept at instigating social relationships and, furthermore, skilled at using those social connections to boost their own perceived popularity and status.

Endorsing aspects of narcissism theories, focus group and interview participants described the urge for people to amplify their voices and their tendency to use Facebook as a means for talking about themselves. The promise of a guaranteed audience, in the form of one's Facebook friends can be appealing, "as if putting [personal news] on [one's] page necessarily means that they have everybody's rapt attention," as focus group participant, Briana, griped. One way in which this potential self-interest surfaces stems from the number of friends one is connected to on Facebook. Several focus group members mentioned that social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, make it seem like people have more friends than they actually do, giving the (false) impression that scores of strangers like someone. "Clogging up" one's friend list with people they may not even consider friends, as Jason says, may ostensibly serve as evidence of psychological theories of narcissism as underlying forces in shaping self-presentation practices online.

Nevertheless, the line between narcissism and positive or confident expressions of oneself may be blurry. Findings such as those put forth by Buffardi and Campbell (2008) may warrant questioning due to the fact that the researchers and broader community seem

biased toward eliciting concern among Facebook users in terms of its ability to harbor self-promotion and shallow connections. Turkle (2011) argues that being perpetually connected via technology feeds a dependency on others for validation in this sense. However, the present data implied that mutual support online may foster positive growth, rather than reflect an inherent need for validation from others.

As evidence of this alternative perspective, focus group members continually pointed to the feelings of validation and reassurance that result from being "liked" or having someone comment on a Facebook post. Having both close others as well as strangers express interest in one's ideas or posts, manifested in "likes," comments, or other virtual acknowledgements, can lead to a meaningful sense of approval from others. The negativity implicit in narcissism does not necessarily play a role in this type of online validation that many participants invoked; instead, perhaps it represents an attempt to seek approval and provide mutual support around aspects of self-presentation.

Moreover, people do not seem oblivious to the distinctions between online and offline forms of self-presentation. With respect to validation, Christine cited an example of a friend who has started to pursue doctoral graduate programs and frequently updates her Facebook page with details about the application process, campus interviews, and positive visits with potential programs. Although Christine described her as brilliant, she also asserted that this friend is insecure and suggested that she has turned to Facebook to create a space in which she is confident and in control of everything. On the other end of her friend's activity lies the numerous Facebook connections who provide encouraging comments and "like" her positive status updates, lending the reinforcement she may be seeking as she struggles through the graduate school application process. Christine

reconciled her friend's offline personality with how she presents herself through Facebook posts, illustrating her awareness of both the disparate and overlapping pieces of self that dwell between the offline and online world. Thus, narcissism may be a relatively small piece of the puzzle in understanding how and why people create virtual identities on Facebook. Whether or not one's imagined audience on Facebook represents a set of intimate "friends" or a genuinely interested network of people, the validation and reinforcement that people seek online can serve a purpose in promoting one's sense of assurance and help them in their offline endeavors.

In the interview with Mikolaj, he made a claim that:

> [P]eople are actually more authentic on Facebook than they are in the offline world…We engage with people in the offline world, but the offline world has some restrictions on what is allowed and what is not allowed to do…so one of the things to do in the offline world is boast, so even though I have a lot of things to say about myself, there might be some real restrictions about what I'm allowed to say about myself, right? And some of these restrictions make sense, but some of them are really restrictive and…actually interfere with how we interact in the offline world. So places like Facebook actually allow us, in some conditions, to express ourselves freely, in ways that some of those normative restrictions elicit so they can actually say things that [we] couldn't say in the offline world, so in many ways, I think that might be more authentic.

Again, this notion of authenticity surfaced in the focus group data and is relevant to understanding the mutual construction of identities and offering a means for reconciling the correlations (or lack thereof) between online and offline identities. Although they recognize apparent discrepancies between what people share online as opposed to in-person at times, sometimes in the form of "showing off," people will play along and resist challenging those differences in the public domain of Facebook. There is an

implicit awareness that people often promote the pieces of themselves that they like the most, in the form of pictures or what they choose to post as a status update, but lurking behind the scenes is a mutual agreement that users will allow one another the luxury of modifying themselves online. Once more, the traditional concept of authenticity or a singular, fixed identity crumbles as exhibited by participants' testimony. And this agentic play with identity, that surfaces as a multiplicity of selves online, implies a dynamic process of identity enactment in that users' identities are part of an ongoing process that relies on social others for sustenance.

Altogether, the ways in which people actively participate online point to underlying processes of mutual engagement that yield dynamic activity and production both online and offline. Manifested in both individual self-presentation as well as collective activities, the interplay between users on Facebook reveals a fluid process of identity construction that is built on reciprocal connections with others' virtual identities. The joint engagement of Facebook users generates a unique space that allows for a deliberate, playful expression of self.

NUANCES OF POWER

The fourth group discussion topic targeted issues of power online, driven by a question asking participants how issues of power may play a role on Facebook. Intentionally withholding an explicit definition of power, I sought to leave room for participants to apply their own meaning to the topic. As such, the discussion focal point elicited a number of distinct interpretations, as reflected in users' comments. I would like to revisit the place from which the discussion prompt originated. As described in the

literature review, the research question was brought about by the lesser-known dynamics of power operating in virtual spaces, particularly with respect to race, ethnicity, and class.

The ways in which accessibility to, and popularity of, Facebook has transpired is integral to the issue of power in social media practices. As has been mentioned, Facebook was initially a site for college students. And, notably, Mark Zuckerberg first began his massive empire from a dormitory room at Harvard University, a predominantly white, wealthy academic institution. This starting point and early approach to building Facebook's online community had powerful implications for its evolution in that the majority of its users were white. In the research demonstrated earlier, young people spoke about racial disparities enmeshed in social networking sites, which are reflected in the differential demographics on sites such as MySpace and Facebook. And, as mentioned in the literature review, relatively recent research has revealed some racial, economic and gender differences among users of various social networking sites (boyd, forthcoming; Hare, 2009; Sydell, 2009)[12].

Based on the above patterns, the discussion prompt on power was designed to assess whether participants' experiences and exposure to others online reflected demographic differences in who chooses and/or is allowed to participate on Facebook. However, because of the demographic composition of the final focus group sample, the original research question could not necessarily be answered. The observations of others may elucidate potential answers to this question of power, but the direct personal experiences may not provide first-hand knowledge of demographic differences on

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[12] It is important to note that these findings, while recent, may not reflect the rapid shifts in user demographics that can occur in a short period of time on social networking sites, such as Facebook. Nevertheless, they highlight noteworthy trends in the ways in which users populate various virtual spaces and are thereby worthy of consideration.

Facebook. As a result, I approached this portion of the data with flexible expectations of what might emerge.

Unpacking the particular discussion thread around power, and consequently linking it to themes throughout the other five focus group discussions, with explicit attention to how participants latched onto the term "power" exposes a series of phenomena underlying Facebook practices and experiences. Disentangling the various manifestations of power as they occur within the realm of Facebook accords insight into the complexity of privacy online. Public discourses, both in the media and research literature, often emphasize the impositions online behavior places on personal privacy (e.g. Albanesius, 2010; Angwin, 2010; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Carter, 2010; Hill, 2011; Kairouz, 2011; Levy, 2011; McCullagh, 2010; Rosen, 2010; Valentino-Devries, 2010). Such work suggests that the disclosure of personal information online represents an ongoing threat to privacy, since such information may be subject to governing or corporate entities. The present findings, and especially those addressing questions of power, implicitly offer valuable insight into various facets of online privacy. The complexity of power and online privacy, as embedded throughout all of the focus group conversations, help explain why it has been difficult to solidify understandings of how users perceive (and perhaps compromise) their personal privacy online. What materialized in my focus group is that nuances of power represent multi-dimensional phenomena that underlie many Facebook experiences, all of which shape definitions of privacy and may fuel lasting user engagement with Facebook. These processes reflect a shift in perspective from adopting the role of passive user to more active engagement through deliberate identity construction and connectivity online.

Power as Ability

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, one definition of power rests on the "ability to act or produce an effect" (2011). Once again, in the power focus group discussion, I deliberately introduced the word "power" in a vague way to probe how users construe that term within the context of Facebook. The data insinuates that this interpretation of power as ability was invoked by several participants, since a pronounced theme throughout the power discussion revolved around having the ability to present oneself in a thoughtful way online. Participants offered a number of examples in which they have gained, or witnessed others gaining, power by virtue of personal abilities achieved via Facebook.

The capacity to own one's virtual identity was partially explained by the notion that individuals felt they have the space and time to be deliberate about what they share and say online, which is sometimes a hurdle in offline interactions. Again keeping Gibson's (1966) notion of affordances as a backdrop, participants' drew attention to the ways in which aspects of Facebook's design provide temporal and spatial opportunities for deliberate forms of presentation. The asynchronous nature of communication online, for instance, as well as the expectation that one's profile or Wall will change over time, point to the affordances built into the Facebook environment that can have meaningful implications for how individuals make use of virtual spaces. Especially for those individuals who may have trouble confronting social situations offline, the ability to present an idealized version of oneself online can be "a way of establishing a sense of power," as described by Kyle. Indeed, Kyle theorized that people who may not command much power in real-life scenarios can fill that void by way of Facebook. Even

for those who may not face offline hurdles of connectivity, using Facebook as a means for showing people the affirmative aspects of your life reportedly feels empowering when others provide positive feedback online.

Another area in which selective disclosure online allows users to amplify different pieces of themselves, and perhaps reap perceived benefits of feeling empowered, surfaced particularly in reference to young people.   An interviewee, Ryan, provided several cases in which people, and youth in particular, are empowered via social media because it enables them to do things that they are normally challenged by in offline settings. For instance, restrictions that exist in the offline world, whether it is parental (in that they cannot leave the house) or social (in that they have trouble finding like-minded others) fade away in the virtual sphere, allowing young people to find new ways of connecting and collaborating with others. Ryan even narrated an example of a seventeen-year-old who set up an entire business online, because although his voice would give his age away on the telephone conducting business, his ability to demonstrate his expertise online allowed him to access customers and develop his company in a way unavailable offline.

The practice of sharing from behind a computer screen, rather than face-to-face, was usually explained by a lesser sense of accountability, often resulting in what participants perceived as a feeling of empowerment.   Some participants speculated that communicating through the device rather than in-person or on the telephone leads users to take more risks in voicing their opinions or sharing pieces of themselves because they did not feel the same sense of responsibility to their audience. This responsibility could take the form of simple etiquette rules, such that users feel less apt to edit themselves out

of politeness online as opposed to offline interactions, or it could signify distinct rules for feeling less obligated to share pieces of oneself, or the option to share them more prudently and thoughtfully, online rather than in person.

A critical examination of the themes around self-presentation practices on Facebook, integrated with discussions of power as articulated by participants, brings to light the ways in which Facebook offers a unique space for individuals to have authority over self-presentation. Relying on a definition of power as ability, participants benefit from a nuanced sense of empowerment by choosing what to share of themselves online and doing so in innovative ways afforded by Facebook.

Power as Control

Whereas participants highlighted the positive aspects of connecting with others online, they also called attention to the potential downfalls that can surface with social others, by virtue of the power struggles infused throughout Facebook. A second component of the dictionary definition of power is "possession of control, authority, or influence over others" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011). This interpretation of power surfaced in myriad participants' comments within the power discussion thread. Relying on the language of power introduced in the focus group prompt, participants illuminated several manifestations of control that occur within the realm of Facebook, and their implications in shaping how individuals connect with one another.

Just as in the offline world, power can be exploited in an adverse way between individuals. This was especially true when focus group participants referenced the ability to accept or reject "friend" requests from others. Some people directly admitted to

feelings of empowerment in not friend-ing another (for often unspecified reasons).

Sometimes these feelings of self-described power were accompanied by tinges of guilt,

but participants were usually quick to provide justification for their decisions, such as

when Nev said:

> I feel sort of guilty about it, but one person's profile picture
> was text [and] lyrics to a song…and it wasn't done in a
> weirdly political, it wasn't a big strange thing but I was just
> like, hmm, I feel like this could be the kind of person who
> says something I don't need on my wall or something.

Between the lines of Nev's comment lurks the issue of trust, in that one's profile is

inextricably linked to their Facebook connections, rendering them vulnerable to what

their "friends" may say or do online. A focus group participant, Becky, shared her

experience in witnessing multiple instances where people have "call[ed] each other [out]

by revealing personal information on a post as a power play." Others verified the ways in

which the publicity of Facebook as a forum for interpersonal interaction can manifest in a

negative light; several participants attested to the fights and bullying they have observed

online. Justine shared a disturbing example of this:

> A friend of mine has a teenage son who has a Facebook
> page and a friend of his created an album of females and
> called the album 'Beat It.' It was at least 50 semi-
> provocative pictures of teenage girls in their school that he
> was identifying as 'easy.' The kid was basically using
> Facebook as a power play to either get back at these girls,
> humiliate them, and look 'cool' to his friend.

Power, as demonstrated in Justine's example, was sometimes interpreted as bullying or

exclusivity and mirrors media coverage of the "dangers" of Facebook (e.g. Morris, 2011).

This definition speaks to the possibility of power as control over others yet again, and

played a similar role between social others around offline activities and events. In

particular, people explained that the site can be used to include or exclude others by inviting them to parties or other activities via Facebook. This "power play" is exacerbated even more when users post pictures of recent events, knowing that Facebook "friends" who were not invited to such gatherings will see them in their News Feed. Nev pointed out, in a similar vein, that although it may be difficult to completely ignore someone in person, it is fairly easy to snub them online. Clearly, the power Facebook bestows upon its users can materialize in negative forms of exclusivity that may begin online, but transcend the virtual sphere to have effects in the offline world, reaffirming the interpretation of power as control. Ignoring friends' comments or displaying pictures of a party to which one's Facebook friends were not invited, for instance, may send a message of exclusion that can carry over into offline relationships.

The damaging side of power on Facebook did not just revolve around friends, but was raised in reference to romantic relationships as well. People often cited situations in which jealous partners used Facebook to check up on romantic others. People are highly aware of the ability to, in the words of popular literature, "cyber-stalk" via Facebook and participants raised this practice within the context of the power focus group discussion. As Kathy described, "You can have all the power you want on Facebook…the power to stalk and be stalked," demonstrating the virtual struggles that people may engage in to assert power within their social relationships. Kathy's comment alludes to the recognition that, by participating in online spaces such as Facebook, users are granted a sort of power that can be exploited, and can have major implications on relations with close others. On the one hand, users are essentially given the freedom to cross familiar boundaries by prying into their partner's online activity and observing their online

behaviors. Conversely, joining Facebook renders users subject to surveillance by close

others (who have not been restricted access due to privacy settings). Thus, signing on to

Facebook brings with it a sense of responsibility in deciding how much to probe another

user's online profile as well as a personal process of determining levels of personal

discretion. This sense of responsibility is not at odds with the freedom from

responsibility discussed earlier with respect to accountability online; rather, this

responsibility highlights personal decision-making processes of assessing comfortable

levels of exploration of others' online identities and activities.

Participants frequently cited power as a feature of their educational and

professional connections as well. Whether it was in the form of students and teachers

clashing on Facebook, or peers and supervisors in the adult professional realm, users

noticeably voiced issues of power playing a role in Facebook interactions. More than

once they communicated fears that shared information could be used against someone in

applying for jobs or graduate school admission, revealing an awareness that power issues

loom large within Facebook environments and beyond. The potential for real-life

consequences of over-sharing online echoed popular media coverage of Facebook posts

threatening or damaging offline professional lives (e.g. Hill, 2011; Parry, 2011; The

Rawstory, 2010). Several focus group members shared personal stories of administrative

and admissions people in educational contexts using Facebook as a tool for asserting

power over (potential) students. For instance, Peg said:

> I know that some principals want to view the student
> teacher's Facebook page and have rejected their application
> because of what they found there. That is a power issue, no
> matter which side of it you are on.

On the other side of the power spectrum, Peg told a story in which several high school teachers were harassed by students on Facebook, in the form of destructive comments and altered pictures, resulting in the teachers' ultimate resignation from the school. Thus, power as it transpires on Facebook is complicated in that users grapple with ongoing decisions of personal responsibility with their own, and others', information.

Power through Knowledge and Action

The notion of empowerment via online sharing was a striking component of the power discussion, particularly as it related to enhanced knowledge. As focus group participant, Jennifer, pointed out, "Facebook encourages you to speak your mind and share accordingly. Information in and of itself is a powerful thing." Through the dissemination of knowledge and ideas, participants create mutual ways of knowing by engaging with, and through, Facebook, giving rise to a heightened sense of power. In this context, power was interpreted as knowledge, garnered through connections via Facebook. For some, this involved everything from staying abreast of technological developments, to learning about international affairs, finding spiritual fulfillment, and even learning new recipes. As Lisa explained:

> [Since Facebook] I have the power of knowledge and communication. I have met people from all over the world and learned what their lives are like and shared with them what my life is like without giving away any vital [information] as to my exact location. But I never would have met them without Facebook. And I have some new dear friends.

Her comment attests to the fundamental links between knowledge and power, and highlights the ways in which these forms of sharing are at the forefront of Facebook activity.

This conception of power was similarly introduced within the context of marketing. Various focus group members credited Facebook with giving producers new power to spread word about their products. They also directly applauded Facebook for furnishing its users with the ability to customize advertisements on their homepage, in the interest of eliminating unwanted and irrelevant marketing information, deeming this powerful for the consumer. A shift from monetary, commercially-driven forces to different forms of peer production online may contribute to a disruption in familiar power hierarchies online. As Anderson (2010) points out, the web as it exists today, allows for everyday users to express and share with other users, fueling a generative space that flourishes as a result of different forms of peer connectivity. In other words, in contrast to conventional hierarchies of production, spaces such as Facebook offer a place in which individual users can meet their marketing and production objectives by directly sharing with other users.

In expressing gratitude for having the opportunity to project their voices on Facebook, multiple participants commented on how the site has been a tool for political change. Whether targeting local, national, or international movements, Facebook has enabled its users to actively engage in political change in novel ways. Some focus group members directly cited experiences of signing petitions or spreading the word around happenings in their communities, such as helping advocate for local politicians during election campaigns. This praise spread to the national sphere, as a number of participants referenced the success of Obama's presidential campaign as heavily in debt to social media such as Facebook for spreading support and awareness around his candidacy. Building on one another's political activities, users communicated feelings of increased

awareness and, in turn, spread their newfound knowledge to their own virtual networks, creating a ripple effect of sharing that has significant offline implications.

The mass protests in Egypt, which resulted in the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak, took place during the focus group period (in early 2011), and participants consistently used that series of events as an example of the ways in which Facebook can be a powerful mechanism for disseminating knowledge and fueling activism. Traversing geographical and temporal borders, people felt tied to an international movement, as exemplified in Lisa's post: "The rest of the world could follow on Facebook what was happening in real-time from friends and family [a]nd get many different viewpoints at the same time, [u]nlike listening to the six-o'clock news." Her response also points to the leveling out of voices via social media, in that seemingly authoritative media sources are positioned alongside one's peers, providing a richer landscape from which to make sense of current events. This shift in ranking conceivably endows the everyday citizen with a louder voice than is commonly given in international dialogue around politically-charged events, perhaps providing the impetus for increased involvement.

It is important to note that this conversation, with a particular focus on the political events in Egypt, provides an example of how these conversations are nested within a specific cultural moment in time. Participants were necessarily situated within a broader context that includes public attention to the role of social media in shaping political activity. With the case of the uprising in Egypt, it is probable that much of what participants chose to bring to the focus group discussion were triggered by public discourses (in both popular media and research circles) around the significant impact that sites such as Facebook have on spreading international news and strengthening

mobilization efforts. Popular media has exceptionally highlighted the influence of social networking online to fuel political change (e.g. Fahmi, 2009; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Landler & Knowlton, 2011; Martin, 2009; McHugh, 2011; Moynihan, 2009; Preston, 2011; Taylor, 2011). The dual processes of user engagement and media attention likely stimulate one another, resulting in an ongoing turn to social media as a site for political change.

Closely related to the political front, users highlighted the Causes application on Facebook as a valuable tool in the dissemination of information and knowledge around various issues. Causes is defined on the Facebook webpage as a platform on which "individuals mobilize their network of friends to grow lasting social and political movements" (Facebook, 2011); this application represents another example of (Gibson's conception of) an affordance that individuals make use of on Facebook. Winter shared a story, for instance, in which a close friend suffering from a rare disease used the Causes application to raise awareness and money for medical research, resulting in heightened knowledge and financial contributions toward finding a cure. Overall, users felt powerful in that they can, as Jennifer, age 23, notes, "make a difference, express their opinions, engage in conversation, connect with people all over the world and be a part of something much bigger than themselves." Greenhill and Fletcher (1997) argue that consumption, in electronic spaces such as those online, is premised on knowledge and access to information, as opposed to traditional conceptions that rest on financially-driven consumption. And research has echoed the tendency to successfully organize around political and social causes online (e.g. Greene, Choudhry, Kilabuk & Shrank, 2010). This definition resonates with the present data, since the focus group conversations point

to the significance of sharing and learning online, with relatively little attention to the interference of corporations when engaging on Facebook. Yet again, the leveling effect of communicating with other users online presents a partial explanation behind the feeling of empowerment gained through engagement with Facebook. And more importantly, these phenomena give way to new knowledge that transcends virtual spaces and unfolds across social networks.

Clearly, Facebook houses a complex hierarchy of power in which the company itself assumes a principal role, but under the company's design, users negotiate boundaries of power with one another. By adopting practical strategies to sustain comfortable levels of personal disclosure, users feel empowered as members of a dynamic virtual space and reap the benefits of social connectivity and the opportunity to creatively enact their identities online.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF PRIVACY

Because they are nested within a cultural context that has dedicated significant attention to threats of privacy harm, numerous focus group participants and interviewees raised the issue of privacy online. A belief woven throughout the literature and popular media accounts of Facebook practices revolves around the alarming shifts in privacy as a result of online engagement. Much of the public dialogue on social media points to the infringement of privacy and the lack of knowledge among users around the dangers of sharing personal information on websites like Facebook (e.g. Albanesius, 2010; Angwin, 2010; boyd & Marwick, 2011; Carter, 2010; Kairouz, 2011; Levy, 2011; McCullagh, 2010; Rosen, 2010; Valentino-Devries, 2010).

Driven by the original goal of understanding perceptions of privacy online, I directly introduced the topic of privacy in the focus group by pointing out that it has received significant media attention and asked participants to reflect on if, and how, privacy surfaces for them as they log on to Facebook. With interviewees, I asked them to speculate on the level of awareness and/or concern that users show with respect to their online privacy. Merging the focus group discussions and interview data reveals unexpected intersections between the tensions around privacy and issues of trust, as manifested in personal establishment of boundaries. Overall, the data challenges the underlying assumption within public media discourses that users are ignorant to threats of privacy invasions, revealing instead that many people are not only aware, but take responsibility and find unique strategies for combating privacy threats online. The societal focus on privacy issues has overlooked the central component driving online practices. Namely, instead of worrying about corporate or government privacy invasions, the data reveal that the strategies people implement and decisions they make as they engage with Facebook suggest an active negotiation of setting boundaries with other users, driven by (a desire for) mutual trust.

Exhibiting Awareness of Privacy Harm

Echoing popular media accounts of privacy threats, the interviewees predominantly emphasized the lack of awareness on the part of Facebook users with respect to how personal information is usurped by corporate and government forces. Winter pointed out that, with the exception of instances in which users post status updates about how to manage their privacy settings on Facebook, they seem to be largely

oblivious to how their data is taken by invisible others online. Interviewees largely believed that only when they are personally violated or "get in trouble" do people begin to pay attention to how their information is arrogated within virtual spaces. Themes throughout the interviews relative to privacy largely matched media concerns (and, notably, more so than in the focus group findings) (e.g. Albanesius, 2010; Angwin, 2010; boyd & Marwick, 2011; Carter, 2010; Kairouz, 2011; Levy, 2011; McCullagh, 2010; Rosen, 2010; Valentino-Devries, 2010).

Much of the skepticism around the subject of privacy within the present data correlated with issues of age. Numerous comments in the focus group implied that generational differences have contributed to a dearth of knowledge around the supposed dangers of sharing information online. Adults are currently the fastest growing group of Facebook users, signaling a shift in the overall demographic of the website, likely diversifying the experiences of online engagement (Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). Focus group discussions also touched on generational differences, and repeatedly introduced the notion that the oldest and youngest generations of Facebook users represent the extremes in terms of personal disclosure. Older focus group participants had the sense that younger people are freer with their information and ostensibly unconcerned about it, which participants attributed to a false sense of security online. And those who were of older generations explained that they avoid situations in which they have to disclose a lot of information online because they find it difficult to trust websites that say they are "secure." Hearing stories of people getting their laptop computers stolen and having all of their personal data appropriated led older participants to define themselves as "conservative" with their online engagement.

Focus group participants who fell between younger and older demographics (characterizing the population in their mid-20s to 40s) noticed that older generations and younger generations (such as parents and younger siblings) were looser with their information, which they hypothesized to be because the former simply do not know how to manage privacy settings and the latter just do not care and want to expose as much as they can to their friends. Focus group speculation mirrored other research and societal conjectures around generational attitudes towards privacy online in this respect (e.g. Carter, 2010; Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Holson, 2010; Kairouz, 2011; Levy, 2011; Livingston, 2008; Melanson, 2010; Pope, 2009; Valentino-Devries, 2010). In contrast, *The New York Times* noted several recent studies from 2010 that found that young people do harbor reservations about their privacy online; the research revealed that the majority of internet users, between the ages of 18 and 22, feel there should be laws demanding websites to delete all stored information about their visitors (Rosen, July 19, 2010). Similarly, a 2010 Pew research study discovered that 18-29 year-olds demonstrate more concern about their online profiles than older people, and take an active stance in deleting undesired posts, photograph tags, and other identifying markers of themselves online (Rosen, July 19, 2010).

At times, participants themselves exhibited a "dulled anxiety" over the risks of sharing personal information online. That is, participants referenced feelings of concern about the potential ramifications of their online activity, with respect to privacy, which provided a backdrop against which they make choices in online engagement. As Justine, age 34, explained, "Maybe I should be more concerned about my personal privacy and although I have my settings regulated to 'friends only' [I] don't really trust those

settings." When acknowledging that they probably "should" be more concerned about having their information hacked, users justified their lack of apprehension by saying it would require the implausible solution of removing themselves from virtual communities altogether. They excused their self-proclaimed naiveté by saying that adopting some sense of trust in the site to participate in online spaces was necessary to be an active citizen in the world, both online and offline. These latter examples imply that users are aware of an imminent danger of having their privacy violated somehow, but do not feel overly concerned. Again, the comments point to public media discussions and an overarching tone of concern around an indifference to online privacy threats. However, any abstract worries as to threats of privacy harm seemed overshadowed by the impetus to actively participate in social networking sites and gain the perceived benefits that they provide.

When asked if and how issues of privacy emerge when engaging with Facebook, participants more often defended the site, as Lisa, age 59, said: "Facebook is not about privacy, but about connecting and finding out what's going on around you." Participants habitually praised the privacy settings on Facebook, explaining that they allowed them to control and censor their information as they felt appropriate. One person noted that, since her family is extremely conservative, she is grateful for the existing privacy settings and relies on them to filter her posts so she does not unintentionally offend family members or provoke disagreements. Another focus group member, Norah, said that it was reflective of her "normal life" in that not all of her thoughts are for all of her Facebook friends to see and making use of privacy settings allows her to manage that information as she sees fit.

Establishing Boundaries through Cautious Sharing

These comments attest to a pervasive theme permeating the focus group data that centered on individuals' establishment of personal boundaries. Numerous participants communicated the strategies they employ to control their Facebook audience(s), including their thoughtful selection of who to "friend" online and the restrictions they enforce when posting pictures and identifying information. By implementing their own security measures, focus group members claimed that it was possible to navigate the privacy settings and carefully restrict access to their information by determining who they would like to be able to view it. Perhaps ironically, this interpretation of privacy was articulated by Facebook CEO Zuckerberg himself when he said "[w]hat people want isn't complete privacy…it's that they want control over what they share and what they don't" (Fletcher, 2010). A specific example that materialized several times in the focus group had to do with professional boundaries; participants would exploit privacy options by limiting Facebook access to students, if they were teachers. Some research has directly examined student and faculty attitudes towards connecting with one another online (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). Although they only garnered perspectives from students, Teclehaimanot and Hickman (2011) conducted an in-depth examination of attitudes towards student-teacher connections on social networking sites. The authors concluded that the viewpoints varied according to the level of online exchange, such that passive behaviors (e.g. "friending," observing profiles) were generally seen as more acceptable than active behaviors (e.g. commenting on another's profile, "poking"). Their research suggested, additionally, that graduate student

connections with faculty online are considered more agreeable than undergraduate student relationships. The more favorable attitudes toward teacher-student associations were seemingly associated with a sense that online connections could foster a deeper level of engagement with professors in the classroom as a result of learning about them from their online presence (Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011).

In the exchange surrounding privacy, the focus group conversations tended to nudge the conversation away from one around the explicit privacy options available online to the principles at the heart of privacy discourse. As Andrea explained, in support of a fellow focus group participant's comment, "[i]t is more important to consider what your information says about you than whether or not people can access it." A prevalent theme emerged in that participants see it as their responsibility to be knowledgeable about how to manage their privacy. Because one can never really know in whose hands their information will ultimately end up, it is critical that users be deliberate in what they choose to share online. Focus group members infused the discussion with the dominant language of public media discourse, using words such as "wrong," "fear," "danger," and "safety," to address online disclosures, but re-appropriated it to illustrate the agentic strategies they use to combat potential threats. For instance, in advocating for a conscientious engagement with Facebook, Jason, age 21, said it does not seem smart to have everything available by search or "you [had] better be sure there is nothing you don't want people who are not your friends to see." In this case and others, users hinted at a concern for others who post what is deemed excessive amounts of information (e.g. posting updates announcing an upcoming vacation), without necessarily considering the potential consequences of their disclosure. This trepidation symbolizes a mutual sense of

responsibility in that users want to jointly create a safe and trustworthy virtual community that allows them to reap the aforementioned benefits of sharing online, without falling prey to threats of privacy invasion. This was reflected in examples such as users putting restrictions on the posts and pictures they shared that also included their friends' information and images, reinforcing the notion that Facebook is seen as a mutually-constructed space.

Many of the comments just described directly countered themes that emerged in interview conversations. Whereas focus group participants stressed the capacity for, and importance of, preserving comfortable levels of privacy, the interviewees consistently accentuated users' lack of knowledge and deference for privacy settings. Citing both research and anecdotal evidence, interviewees argued that, when asked, people consistently express a concern about privacy online, based on the underlying fear that they are on the verge of losing control over it. The specifics of who may usurp private information online is vague, but the interviewees insinuated that users are apprehensive about surrendering their privacy to invisible corporate or government forces, for the purposes of marketing and surveillance. At the same time, users of all ages seem quick to disregard their supposed concern in favor of acquiring immediate benefits, such as the chance to win prizes or get a coupon, at the cost of surrendering personal information.

Juxtaposing the two sources of data, it seems that the divergence may not reflect a fundamental contradiction, but an intriguing exchange that may be operating on Facebook. Drawing on national surveys and other research exploring levels of concern among users about online privacy, interviewees posited that people are nervous and fearful of their lack of control. Such survey research also posits that individuals are

thoughtless in hastily giving away personal information online. (It is important to note that interviewees' comments primarily stemmed from their research, legal, and professional web development expertise, in contrast to focus group participants' views, which came out of their personal experiences and observations using Facebook.) As Ryan, one of the interviewees, points out:

> When you ask people if they're nervous, they are. If you ask if they feel they have control, they say they don't… [Yet] they give away their email addresses for the chance, the one in a million chance, to get an iPod. And so sometimes there's a disconnect between what people report and how they behave. Although much of that, and I think it's important to note, a lot of it has to do with the fact that they don't feel like they have choices.

However, the focus group data, as described earlier, seemingly challenges interviewee perspectives such as this and Winter's, who claimed that people care about their privacy, but are not willing to do anything about it. Indeed, the focus group comments persistently defy this stance, suggesting that people are aware and make tactical choices about how to negotiate their personal level of privacy.

Therefore, the data indicates that there is not an inherent conflict between fear over privacy and increased Facebook engagement. Rather, the larger conversations over concerns of privacy harm may provide the impetus for users to find a level of moderation for engaging with, and through, Facebook. In the interview with John, a privacy web developer, he stated:

> There is an implicit understanding that there is some of your stuff that might not be as private as you want. I think some people don't necessarily know how to change that or what to do about it and they might accept it and change their behavior. They might accept it and not change their behavior. They might try to figure out how to change it and they may or may not succeed in changing it.

Again, the warnings in the broader cultural context are absorbed by users, but rather than instill fear enough to paralyze internet use, they are incorporated into active decision-making processes around what information, and with whom, to share, again highlighting the notion of users as *active* participants online. Focus group members demonstrated a spectrum of responses in terms of their knowledge in navigating online privacy settings. While some people described the privacy options as easy to use, others claimed that it involved some work because Facebook often changes privacy settings, rendering users subject to ongoing inspections of their personal settings. As Carly, age 27, aptly noted, "Not everyone has the wherewithal to block people or change privacy options." Nevertheless, the motivation to examine what one's privacy options and default settings are underlined the entire focus group discussion on the topic of privacy. In direct contrast to interviewee claims, such as Ryan's sweeping comment that users do not read privacy policies, focus group members seemed to adopt a sense of responsibility in regulating their own privacy. Some even likened strategies for maintaining online privacy to offline threats to privacy, such as Lisa, who said:

> I think some people put way too much [information] out
> there for anyone and everyone to see, but I think the
> majority of people are cautious enough. It's like everything
> else in this world, you need to think and protect yourself
> against unseen pitfalls.

There are ostensibly a number of trajectories for individuals to follow in understanding and making use of available privacy settings, but the more pressing issues apparently stems from one's consideration of what, and how much, they want to disclose to an imagined virtual audience. Encouraging other focus group members to set personal rules about what they choose to share and say on Facebook, as well as what they choose to

observe, was based on a sense of responsibility as an active user. Explicitly noting the importance of privacy, participants simultaneously pointed to the tools available for maintaining it, ensuring that Facebook is, in the words of Kathy, "as safe as you allow it to be." Accordingly, the evidence suggests that, through practice, users' experiences are at odds with themes in dominant public discourses around ignorance to threats of privacy invasion; on the contrary, users demonstrate active processes of reflection and restriction in choosing what they want to make available online.

Re-imagining Surveillance

Considering the myriad approaches to, and players involved on, Facebook, a related theme that surfaced in both focus group and interview conversations revolved around lurking, or the silent observations of others online. As an interviewee, Mikolaj, pointed out earlier, many people engage in "reading" behavior online, meaning they spend their time online observing what others say and do. Whether in the form of cyber-stalking, or simply browsing acquaintances' profiles online, an evocative theme embedded in the data centered on these reading practices, which have significant implications for perceptions of trust, privacy, and power online. These practices, as described by focus group participants, reflect an interpretation of power as control once more, and specifically, the control to determine one's virtual audience on Facebook. Much of Facebook engagement, as described in depth earlier, revolves around self-presentation. Not only having authoritative control over *what* is presented online, but *who* is allowed to see that presentation is apparently critical to experiences on Facebook. A fundamental component of traditional conceptions of privacy rests on the ability to be

free of unwanted surveillance (Margulis, 2003b; Uteck, 2009; Woo, 2006). Keeping

historical definitions of privacy as a backdrop, reading practices online may reflect a new

type of surveillance. A theoretically key distinction in past and present conceptions of

privacy is illuminated in Peg's comment:

> I have many 'friends' who are just observers on Facebook.
> They rarely write anything or post pictures. They simply
> observe what is happening in others' lives to keep in touch.
> You know they are out there being people watchers in a
> 2011 way, the difference is they are watching friends and
> acquaintances not strangers.

Peg's comment was echoed by other focus group participants who noted that they

sometimes spend their time on Facebook looking and listening to others' posts rather than

directly sharing themselves. And, although several other focus group members did not

claim to have done so themselves, they referenced the ability to cyber-stalk others.

However, these potential contemporary perceptions of privacy, in the context of online

spaces, centers on surveillance by (often) invited others.

A compelling aspect of the surveillance phenomenon that surfaced multiple times

in the focus group focused on parent/child dynamics of privacy. Many participants

(speaking from an observer perspective rather than from direct experience) rationalized

parents' joining Facebook merely to spy on their children's online activity. There were

numerous anecdotes of young people striving to keep certain components of their

Facebook page private, so as to prevent their parents from seeing it. The tensions around

parent/child dynamics nested in Facebook mimicked broader public discussions, which

argue that children (of various ages) struggle to maintain boundaries with their parents on

Facebook (e.g. Biggs, 2011; boyd & Marwick, 2011; Hensley, 2011). Certain media

outlets have even offered directory advice introducing "expert help" in the form of software enabling parents to monitor children's Facebook activity (ARA Lifestyle, 2011).

Becky, age 35, likened parental surveillance online to her own childhood, in which she was afraid of her mother reading her diary, saying that it would likely be problematic and lead to fights if parents could view their teenage children's Facebook pages. This phenomenon apparently takes place among older children as well, as Peg commented: "Some parents have been stopped from viewing their adult children's pages because they want to keep them private. This is a power issue and causes some family disharmony." One adult participant's mother actually joined Facebook during the month of the focus group data collection. In that time, she said it felt like she was re-living her high school experience, in that her mother's comments were embarrassing and considered too frequent, and she essentially wanted to find a way to prevent her mother's activity from cluttering her own Facebook page.

The notion of lurking and other forms of observation practices is clearly a volatile subject and invites a reconsideration of the concept of surveillance as it transpires online. Whereas traditional notions of surveillance are implicated with issues of power, in that one group or entity has an authoritative watch over others (Albrechstlund, 2008) the type of surveillance that occurs online is necessarily influenced by the aforementioned leveling of power that can occur in virtual spaces. Albrechtslund's theory of participatory surveillance challenges the supposition that threats of privacy harm should be a deterrent for engaging with Facebook. In exchange for relinquishing some personal privacy via online sharing, users (through their practices) reap the benefits of empowerment embedded in having authority over self-presentation online as well as the

ability to watch others (Albrechstlund, 2008). The present data unlocks the possibility that, because users feel supposed control over their audience online or feel that they largely know who may be able to "see" them, they may relinquish some personal privacy and allow themselves to be surveyed by known others in exchange for the benefits of participating on Facebook. As Fletcher (2010) aptly observed in his examination of Facebook phenomena, people must like to share, because it has persevered as a result of users "feeding [their] thoughts and preferences" into the site. I argue that, because the hierarchies that exist in offline spaces may be diminished in the virtual sphere, this type of mutual surveillance may actually represent one of the implicit motives for engaging on Facebook. Although the phenomenon of lurking is complex, it is possible that in some dyads, users surrender certain (private) information in return for having the ability to watch others. Taking a moment to offer a speculative interpretation, this work may provide nascent evidence for Albrechtslund's (2008) theory of participatory surveillance by encouraging an alternative understanding of surveillance; instead of the conventional interpretation of surveillance as a source of disempowerment, rendering observed parties vulnerable to authoritative watch by corporate or government forces, perhaps spaces like Facebook allow for (a new type of) mutual surveillance in which hierarchies begin to fade and users succumb to surveillance by known others in exchange for the opportunity to be included in online spaces.

A Foundation of Trust

Clearly, definitions of privacy are disrupted and in flux when considering how people engage with sites like Facebook. As the aforementioned analysis describes, the

questions that the public seems to focus on around privacy may not necessarily be the appropriate venues for consideration. Mikolaj, an interviewee, made a poignant observation in his interview that contributes to this discussion: "I think people are focused on the completely incorrect privacy. The privacy that really matters to people is the privacy that user[s] [have] with respect to other users." Mikolaj's argument resonates with the present data because an essential thread throughout the focus group conversations centered on the ability to trust one another in virtual settings. Participants' practices and observations occurring on Facebook intimated that there is an ongoing mutual construction of virtual space, and personal definitions of privacy are premised on establishing boundaries and inextricably driven by the ability to trust one another. In this context, deliberate tactics aimed at controlling how much one shares, how one is perceived, and who is chosen to participate in a given online space, lend insight into understanding the definition of privacy online.

Much of the public discourses surrounding privacy online emphasize the inability to trust corporate and government forces with the information shared in virtual spaces (e.g. Albanesius, 2010; Angwin, 2010; Carter, 2010; Kairouz, 2011; Levy, 2011; Valentino-Devries, 2010). However, whether situated in the context of familial relationships or peer connections, focus group participants intimated that a significant aspect of power online revolves around the ability to trust other users. Drawing on language from broader cultural discussions, most focus group members said that the Internet (and Facebook) itself are not inherently dangerous; rather, it is the ways in which people use one another's information that can lead to unsafe conditions. Once

information is shared online, users said that it is no longer theirs, prompting users to

advise each another to adopt a calculated approach to sharing and connecting online.

It is critical to pause and highlight the various strategies young people, in

particular, have espoused to avoid an invasion of privacy, according to (both interviewee

and focus group) participants' testimony. Most often, young people simply block their

parents from accessing their profile pages. But they have also created more innovative

strategies for avoiding unwanted surveillance, as Ryan described:

> I heard anecdotally that kids will do things like, they will
> deactivate their Facebook account so that no one can post
> anything or do anything to them when they're away and
> they'll reactivate every time they sign on as a way to
> protect themselves or…they will use code words for things
> so that their friends know what they're talking about and no
> one else does.

He continued to argue that these tactics serve as evidence of the fact that young people

genuinely care about maintaining their privacy and pursue careful ways of preserving it,

while simultaneously garnering the benefits of social connectivity and self-presentation

through social media. In their work with teenagers, boyd and Marwick (2011) have

uncovered a plethora of imaginative strategies youth have adopted to draw boundaries

online; at times, they will include language or song lyrics to communicate messages that

only their friends are able to decipher. Some teenagers have even gone so far as to

deactivate and reactivate their accounts every day when they have completed their daily

online activity to assert a sense of control over their virtual identity (boyd & Marwick,

2011).

It seems evident that people recognize that a selective process of engaging with

Facebook can lead to a safe and pleasurable experience of connectivity. If and when a

sense of mutual trust is established, Facebook can represent a vibrant virtual space. John, an interviewee, highlighted what he sees as exceptionally creative uses of Facebook:

> In general, the more creative things I've seen have been more inclusive and open and the more they are like that and the more they let other people step up, engage, show their level of interest, and then trust those people to help you out along the way, through their own comments and things, I think those have been some of the more successful things.

John's remark draws attention to the basis of trust on which users make online connections, which likely leads to increased sharing as people continually build confidence in one another and collectively breathe life into Facebook communities. Throughout these processes, users demonstrate underlying feelings of empowerment in having authority over their own information (vis-à-vis personal privacy) and being selective about with whom they interact and share. By claiming ownership over who to friend (or not), focus group participants exerted control over the communities they wanted to share themselves with. One participant, for instance, said they were "out" and currently working in a gay pride center but explained that they chose not to friend religious relatives in their conservative family so as to avoid conflict. Several focus group members explicitly identified their choice to accept or reject friend requests as well as the ability to block others who threaten their comfort level online (whether through harassment or simply suspicious behavior), and classified these decisions as a source of power. From this perspective, power as a form of control enacted through Facebook provokes a sense of agency both online and offline, and is driven by perceptions of mutual trust.

Building Community

An overview of the data reveals that the ways in which participants addressed issues of privacy implied that they see themselves as part of a mutually-constructed space online. By friend-ing another person or choosing to share pieces of oneself online, participants pointed to the dynamic implications nested in these practices. As Jennifer observed, "Facebook is very much a community. If you have the right people at your disposal, then you take care of each other." Several parents within the focus group offered personal examples underscoring a mutual confidence online with respect to posting pictures of their children. As Briana explained, "I have asked friends of mine not to post [pictures] of my kids because it is not up to me to regulate their privacy settings." Becky raised this issue as well, saying that she is on "higher alert" because she has a child and has "let" other people post pictures of her online. These two examples point to the reciprocal implications of online sharing, particularly as it relates to privacy issues, implying that personal levels of comfort around privacy stem from one's own disclosure practices but also depend on other users' activity. Others echoed this premise by arguing that everything plays a part in the Facebook world and the likelihood is that what is said online affects one another. Revisiting the theme of responsibility and personal knowledge in driving one's engagement with Facebook, Christine demonstrated the links between power and self-disclosure online: "Assuming you don't control it well…or the tools to control it are inadequate, then someone might have information that they can use in a very powerful way."

Altogether, analyzing the data with attention to public discussions around privacy and online surveillance demand a shift in perspective to appreciating the ways in which Facebook is seen as a site for building community, based on mutual trust. The exchanges

online reflect the development of socially defensive communities, in that users are conscious of how their activity influences those they are virtually connected to, spurring forethought in the potential consequences of their personal practices. Simon, for instance, explained that he only allows his friends to have access to his information but notably, continued to say he tries "to keep mostly [his] friend's information and pictures away from other people." If individuals find that their Facebook connections do not edit their sharing according to users' comfort, they will directly address it, as Briana pointed out: "I have asked friends of mine not to post [pictures] of my kids because it is not up to me to regulate their privacy settings." Clearly, users find ways to achieve a sense of comfort by contributing to the evolution of a socially defensive space on line. As part of this dynamic evolution, users actively negotiate which pieces of themselves to share with select audiences, knowing that they are subject to user surveillance, in exchange for the opportunity to do the same and benefit from engaging with social others online.

Constructing a Definition of Privacy

This work lays out the community- and trust-building processes that take place on Facebook, which point to the necessity of building boundaries online. As referenced earlier, many participants advocated a stance of responsibility when considering what and how much to share online. The fierce support for this approach is entangled with issues of power and the two notions seemed linked throughout user comments, which articulated that there is power in owning one's personal information and granting access to a specified audience; Christine even directly labeled these capabilities as having

"personal power over someone else." In determining who can see what, users feel a sense of power over others.

An integral component of this phenomenon is navigating a process of drawing *boundaries,* by determining what, and with whom, to disclose on Facebook. Boyd and Marwick's (2011) work is particularly informative at this juncture; in their work with teenagers' online activity, boyd and Marwick have noted that privacy is a social norm that is less about something had or lost, but about the ability to control personal information with respect to others. In their research, boyd and Marwick found that space is less relevant than the social others who are present in a given social context when assessing definitions of personal privacy. This research is especially insightful when deciphering the present focus group data because, taken together, it seems privacy is not static, but a moving entity that is demarcated by shifting notions of who is able to see what online.

Turning to theories concerning technologies as boundary objects offers a potential lens through which to further analyze the phenomena occurring online. Fox (2011) argues that there are active, ongoing processes that occur through technological boundary objects, giving way to communities of knowledge. Building on earlier work (e.g. Star, 1989), Fox articulates that boundary objects are "entities that enhance the capacity of an idea, theory or practice to translate across culturally defined boundaries" (2011: 70). This perspective correlates with some of the present findings because it recognizes that the technological medium (in this case, Facebook) allows for social and power exchanges. Furthermore, a fundamental tenet of this theory is that the actors are just as important as the technology itself in fostering mutual growth; this component is

especially meaningful in the current context as users seemingly build off of one another's identity construction and knowledge-sharing practices in a jointly-created space on Facebook. Consequently, individual knowledges are likely transformed as a result of the generative virtual space in which users connect with one another. Applying this theoretical slant to the present findings reinforces the notion that Facebook is a medium through which individuals are constantly negotiating boundaries with others, in a dynamic process of mutual engagement. Perhaps in the form of identity construction, self-presentation, or assertions of power, the participants in this study are exploiting Facebook to actively experiment with personal definitions of privacy.

At this point, the present analysis enables us to revisit the original starting point from which this research began; namely, the endeavor of constructing a definition of privacy online. Observing the multidimensional phenomena of identity construction, self-presentation, social connectivity, and mutuality of sharing and knowledge, it is possible to identify why privacy online has, thus far, been difficult to capture. It appears to be a moving force that changes with individuals' engagement online, predicated on a constant renegotiation of personal boundaries that are driven by perceptions of trust of other users. This perspective invites us to reconsider earlier theories of privacy, as described in the literature review, that highlight tendencies to clearly distinguish between public and private in establishing a concrete definition of privacy (e.g. Margulis, 2003b). Notions of privacy, as derived from the present data, call attention to the blurriness of public and private that occur through virtual spaces, such as Facebook. Within such environments, users' conceptions of privacy are influenced by, and transpire within, these "public" spaces. As such, the demarcation between public and private becomes fuzzy,

and stems from other users' perceptions of privacy, again reinforcing the notion that privacy itself is a complex, dynamic, and interpersonal concept that changes across temporal and social contexts.

In their research assessing attitudes and practices among teenagers who use social networking sites, boyd and Marwick (2011) demonstrate that privacy cannot be conceived as a binary entity. Instead, it centers on individual control over how information moves across social contexts, including the virtual realm. A majority of their young participants emphasized a perception of privacy that moves the focus away from stable locations and concrete rules to the fluid notion of social norms. Essentially, teenagers build boundaries in their imagined online communities to assert regulatory social norms and ascertain a sense of personal privacy online (boyd & Marwick, 2011).

A key link between boyd and Marwick's (2011) work and the present findings is the idea that the social norms that establish the foundation of privacy definitions stem from mutual trust, as discussed here. Just as the researchers' testimony from teenagers alluded to the importance of trusting others, in order to comfortably enact their identities online and feel compelled to share, the present data points to the mutual implications of sharing online and the community-building practices that are fundamental to defining one's own privacy. I contend that, partly due to the fact that their data relies exclusively on youth experiences, the present data enriches and further develops boyd and Marwick's work by highlighting the key factors in ascertaining a definition of privacy online. Privacy cannot be conceived of as an entity marked by set components or objectives delineating public and private; rather, it is a perpetually moving arrangement that stems from mutual trust and a perception that one has (mental) space to control what is shared

about oneself and who has access to that information. In an effort to grasp this notion of privacy online, then, users engage in a continuous process of *negotiating boundaries* with other users on Facebook.

FOCUS GROUP AS MICROCOSM OF THE FINDINGS: A "SHOW AND TELL" METHODOLOGY

As one of few studies employing an online focus group to date, this dissertation offers unique insight into the ways in which the methodology and research objectives yield richer data when they are closely matched. The present data demonstrate that the choice to implement an online focus group, in an effort to understand social networking practices and experiences, contributed to deep processes of analysis and interpretation. In addition to providing support for increased use of online focus groups as a valuable research tool, I claim that the current online focus group represented a microcosm of some of the practices that occur on Facebook itself. The focus group illustrated the ways in which Facebook is a jointly-constructed space that rests, in part, on a shared endeavor of building community and mutual learning.

Several studies have examined the overlaps and distinctions between online and face-to-face focus groups in pursuing various research agendas. In general, focus groups are a useful strategy for meeting research aims and rely on the researcher initiating discussion among a group of participants with set questions around a specific research topic (Underhill & Olmsted, 2003). The design is meant to foster interaction and collaboration among members of the group, as a means for gaining deeper insight into the subject at hand, with limited researcher interference (Nicholas, Lach, King, Scott, Boydell, Sawatzky, Reisman, Schippel, & Young, 2010).

Transporting the focus group methodology to the virtual realm enables researchers to overcome some of the conventional challenges of face-to-face focus groups, including: costs associated with participant travel, data recording, and transcription; the ability to reach geographically-diverse participants due to location limitations; and time constraints in scheduling participants to convene at mutually-agreed upon times (Nicholas et al., 2003; Underhill & Olmsted, 2010). Online focus groups confront these familiar obstacles by allowing for the ability to reach participants across the globe, by virtue of them being able to log on from wherever they are located. As well, because it can be asynchronous in nature, an online focus group permits participants to take part when it is most convenient for them, eschewing the hassle of coordinating multiple schedules. Another advantage to computer-mediated focus groups is that the data is automatically captured via the web platform, reducing transcription costs and potentially empowering participants to verify and re-visit ongoing data collection as the research project unfolds (Nicholas et al., 2003; Underhill & Olmsted, 2010).

Shifting attention from the logistics of a focus group methodology, research has pointed to the many social dynamics at play in face-to-face focus groups. Group discussions can be intimidating for people who may be uncomfortable in larger social settings and can also be heavily influenced by the intersection of different personalities in a group setting, such that certain participants' voices can overshadow others in the group (Acar, 2008; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Nicholas et al., 2010; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Similarly, participation in face-to-face focus group settings may be inhibited if members feel that the researcher is an authority figure, potentially resulting in a desire to please the researcher by striving to

meet their perceived interests and possibly withholding personal information in the process. These potential pitfalls of face-to-face settings may play less of a role in the virtual sphere. The seeming anonymity of communicating through a computer screen has been reported to foster a less threatening setting for people to partake in virtual conversations (Nicholas et al., 2010). The dynamics among group members in an online focus group also eliminates the possibility of tensions over people taking turns to speak and ensures that all members have a "voice" in the discussion because of its asynchronicity, enabling all contributors to have the time and space to add to the conversation as desired. Despite differences between face-to-face and online focus groups, research comparing the two approaches has suggested that they yield comparable findings, in both the quantity and quality of responses (Underhill & Olmsted, 2003). Online focus groups offer several novel benefits as well. For instance, although nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, may be lost when shifting to the virtual realm, participants can rely on textual cues, visual input, and personalized biographies online to enrich their participation and presence in the group (Nicholas et al., 2010; Underhill & Olmsted, 2003).

Building on the aforementioned research, this work leads me to advocate for the online focus group methodology (where it appropriately matches the given research aims of a study) and argue that the present work is a good example of its strengths as a method in general, but also as especially informative because of the present research topic. I would like to turn to a comprehensive analysis of the focus group, both in terms of content and style, to illustrate the advantages of using this approach to investigate questions around connectivity, identity, and privacy nested in social networking sites.

The online focus group represented a possible microcosm of some of the larger phenomena occurring on sites such as Facebook in three interrelated ways: it allowed participants to promote social connectivity through sharing of links and identity enactment through thoughtful self-presentation; it demonstrated the joint endeavor of establishing a sense of community, premised on a foundation of trust; and it highlighted the evolution of mutual construction of knowledge, as evidenced through shared language and the dynamic development of ideas based on others' comments and experiences.

As evidenced in previous sections around social connectivity and self-presentation on Facebook, a key practice in engagement online revolves around the ability to share personal interests and pieces of oneself with virtual others. In the very first discussion topic, these practices were evidenced within the focus group itself. For instance, Christine (age 22), shared an external link entitled "Why I Need to Quit Facebook" as a response to prompt further discussion around others' comments attributing some of Facebook's appeal to "good old-fashioned narcissism." Christine used this link as an entry point to her response, explaining how she feels that "social media allows us to focus/exemplify different aspects of our identities." She concluded this same post with a facetious link to "Barack Obama's Facebook Feed" to insert a little self-described humor into the discussion. Christine's post exemplifies some of the broader themes discussed in the general findings around sharing links as a form of fostering connectivity with others online. By offering external information to add to the conversation, she linked the focus group discussion to broader conversations, encouraging an iterative process of reflection and simultaneously linking it to wider public discourses. As well, the link to Obama's Facebook Feed symbolized a way of

setting the tone of the group, such that people recognized a silliness to aspects of Facebook engagement that deserve room in the conversations to follow.

This pattern of sharing continued to emerge throughout the six topic discussions, with several other focus group participants posting external links as a way of introducing their opinions or bolstering existing conversation points. Becky, a 35-year old woman from California, frequently shared links as she grappled with forming her responses to various discussion topics. In the third conversation, centered on issues of self-presentation online, Becky shared a link to a recent review of Sherry Turkle's 2011 book, *Alone Together*. After quoting the review, Becky summarized the book's main point, bolding the text she felt was most relevant and using it to support her concern that online connectivity may prevent true intimacy. Her strategy of using bold text to emphasize her main point resonates with the data mentioned earlier in that, although facial and tonal cues of a face-to-face focus group may disappear in a virtual context, participants strategically infuse the conversations with textual and visual markers to underscore their input in the group.

In addition to making use of textual symbols, several participants filled potential holes left by shifting from a face-to-face to an online setting with visual tactics. Further substantiating Nicholas et al.'s (2010) examination of online focus group methodologies, a noteworthy demonstration of this phenomenon can be found within the profiles that several focus group members created for the present study. All of the participants were told at the beginning of the data collection process that they were welcome to customize their profile page within the focus group website to their liking. Of the twenty focus group participants, nine altered the default settings on their Ning profile in some way.

(The default settings included first and last name, sex, and geographic location.) Three people changed their group username: Andrea, a 55-year old woman from Florida, used just her first initial and last name and Karen (age not disclosed) used her first name followed by the word "Fabulous." A third participant, Jennifer (age 23) from West Virginia, chose to customize her name by sandwiching "Amorous Prosperous" between her first and last names.

Fellow focus group members embodied their profiles even more by posting personal pictures and remodeling the backdrop on their profile pages with chosen colors and wallpaper settings. An interesting note is that of the nine participants who altered their profile pages, four of them featured pictures of themselves with their pets or their pets alone. In addition, Simon (age 28), having virtually met Jason (age 21) prior to the study, posted a comment ("Love you babe") and gave an online gift of a red AIDS ribbon. Unfortunately, as the focus group discussions did not explicitly address the motivations for profile personalization within the study itself, I can only speculate as to what these alterations may signify within the present context. Perhaps the pictures were attempts to have a deeper connection with the other participants in the group; showing what someone looks like (and displaying their pets) inevitably personalizes the space in which people talk to each other, and possibly leads to warmer responses from others in the group than might surface from simply seeing a username and location alone. Providing a glimpse into their personal lives through pictures and, in the case of Simon, Carly, Jennifer, and Karen who all personalized the color backgrounds on their pages as well, focus group participants seemed to want to assert themselves in a certain light to the other group members. All of the participants who personalized their Ning profiles were

relatively younger in age; with the exception of Justine (age 34) and Becky (age 35), all of them were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-eight. Perhaps the skewed demographic who chose to engage in profile personalization reflects that younger generations are more comfortable with technology and/or accustomed to having their self-image projected online, as opposed to older Facebook users. As many participants pointed out within the context of Facebook, younger people have grown up with this technology and likely feel more habituated to the blurring of offline and online forms of presentation and visibility. Regardless, the active identity enactment processes, denoted by the personalized touches within the focus group profile pages attest to the ways in which the focus group space itself mimicked broader findings with respect to Facebook practices. Making use of the opportunity to present oneself in a deliberate way online is a meaningful component of virtual engagement with others.

Although the exact stimuli prompting these participants to customize their pages is unknown, a positive ramification of these adjustments is that they elevated the study environment from a purely research-driven space to more of a social community in which members openly and comfortably exchanged ideas and experiences. Again imitating the larger findings in the present dissertation, the relationships elicited within the focus group evoked a joint construction of the shared space, such that participants built off of one another's comments to convey their own views of social networking practices. Group members seemingly displayed an increasing level of comfort with one another over time. In the first and second-topic discussions, addressing Facebook's popularity and the issue of privacy online respectively, participants predominantly spoke directly in response to the researcher's discussion prompt than to one another. However, as time passed and the

conversations progressed, participants gradually elaborated one another's posts, advancing and sometimes challenging previously-posted sentiments. Beginning in the third topic focused on identity, for instance, a few participants began re-posting peers' comments, using them to initiate their own responses to the given topic. At this stage in the data collection process, participants seemed to draw on one another's comments in a vague way, as illustrated in Jennifer's comment that she

> [saw] some mention of Facebook being this alternate to reality (*in other participants' discussion comments*). I agree that some people get too caught up in it, like an addiction, they obsess and are anxious when disconnected, etc. However, I think that in moderation it is really beneficial. (*emphasis of the researcher*)

Jennifer's post illustrates a potential growth in terms of comfort at this moment in the group because she not only references others' comments, but gently disagrees by countering that Facebook can also be a source of positivity in one's life. Voicing slight dissension insinuates that she felt at ease arguing a stance that differed from others' in the group, and sensed that her comment would not be met with negativity or judgment. By the final two discussions, focused on the similarities and differences between online and offline interactions and general thoughts, participants were actively in conversation with one another. They would directly name other participants in their own posts, elaborating or speaking to previous comments in the topic at hand. The evolution of the group dynamics revealed how, over the course of the month-long data collection process, the tone of the focus group shifted to reveal a heightened comfort among the majority of participants fostering dynamic conversations with one another rather than a series of individual responses to me as the researcher.

A noticeable sign of the intra-group dynamics, perhaps cultivating a sense of community in the focus group, revolved around the escalated use of shared language. Early on, in the second group topic addressing the role of privacy on Facebook, a few participants began recycling terms that others' introduced in the group. For instance, Jason commented that, "[f]or some people, [their] entire life is documented through Facebook, and that can be a scary thing, especially when thinking about privacy." Immediately following Jason's post, Briana stated that she had restricted the majority of her Facebook privacy settings, primarily because she had pictures of her children on Facebook and did not want them seeping into other virtual spaces. Following this assertion, she simply said "scary." And, only two comments later in the discussion thread, Justine described her impetus for having loose privacy settings as being driven by her desire to attract potential consumers for her business. Although Justine explained that "[p]rivacy is not really a concern for me because I am not one of those people that post everything that I do," she continued to express her concern for friends that post excessive amounts of personal information, which "scares" her. This string of comments illustrates how participants drew on one another's language to communicate their opinions.

Whereas "scary," a word that several participants repeated, is a term that is woven throughout public media discourses centered on online privacy, participants' reliance on one another's vocabulary also surfaced with respect to new terms. In the sixth and final discussion topic, requesting additional thoughts from participants without a set focus, Jason started the discussion thread by suggesting that researchers explore the "expression of people's passions" in the future. He justified his recommendation by saying that Facebook has led him to be more vocal and expressive of his own personal passions and

launched a discussion that clearly stimulated fellow group members. Kyle followed

Jason's post by agreeing and elaborating on his own sharing of passions online, further

propelling a ripple effect of responses, and Simon echoed these stances only a few hours

later. Even Norah, without explicitly arguing for a research agenda pursuing passions

online, employed Jason's term by saying:

> [B]eing out of the working world has greatly narrowed my
> exposure to the music I used to be so *passionate* about. So
> now I rely on recommendations from friends about what to
> listen to. It's great. (*emphasis of the author*)

The momentum with which this discussion ensued demonstrates the unity of the group in

listening to one another and using each other's comments to articulate their own.

Whether the viewpoints aligned or not, utilizing a common vocabulary allowed

participants to situate their comments within the focus group, feeding into the

development of a community such that users were beginning to speak more to one

another than to me as the researcher steering the conversation. Indeed, by the third topic,

Becky directly asked for feedback from fellow group members, which points to the

enhanced sense of the group as a unit. Becky re-posted Jason's reply to the prompt

around identity and self-presentation online, saying: "Hey Jason, I really like your reply.

And I guess this is an example where **you** can take some power back…Let me know what

you think. :)" (*emphasis hers*) In this example, Becky used the public forum of the focus

group to spark a conversation around the possibility of using self-expression in virtual

spaces as a strategy for (re)claiming power. Also noteworthy is her use of bolded text

and an emoticon to communicate a friendly tone of voice.

Participants demonstrated a subtle, but meaningful, shift from talking to the

researcher when posting comments, to making general statements. Especially within the

context of the second group discussion on "Privacy," the comments were suggestive of a visualized community setting, in which people advised one another on how to be safe and smart online. In Carly's post, for instance, she seemed to be warning fellow group members about online safety:

> [Facebook]'s the same for the rest of the sites on the Internet that ask for private information. Just say no! Or just be okay with personal information out there on the web. Searching for yourself online every once and a while is like checking your credit report; know what's out there about you.

These warnings apparently provoked others in the group, as verified by subsequent comments like those by Justine ("Maybe I *should* be more concerned about my personal privacy) and Becky ("I don't worry about these issues [of privacy] too much and I am wondering if I *should* think about it more.") (*Both emphases of the author*). There was an implicit transition between the first and final focus group discussion topic during which participants constructed a virtual space in which to build community and share with one another, both through written text and visual markers, which ultimately led to personal reflection processes that travelled beyond the focus group itself.

The cumulative factors of sharing links, personalizing profiles, speaking to one another and relying on shared language also highlight another theme within the focus group that spoke to overarching dissertation patterns; namely, the mutual knowledge-making processes that take place through virtual interaction. Sharing links and personal experiences enabled participants to build on one another's knowledge, rendering the focus group a generative space in which users could learn from one another and transfer that knowledge to their lives beyond the focus group itself. The ripple effect of assembling multiple perspectives to inform other segments of people's lives resonates

with the broader dissertation findings in that users are necessarily influenced and transformed by the public conversations that transpire online. Engaging in, and witnessing others', interactions via Facebook gives way to personal reflection that can shape how one experiences the world, both online and offline and a microcosm of this phenomenon ostensibly took place within the focus group itself. Over the course of the data collection process, participant posts brought to light the iterative and reflective processes involved in participating in a virtual exchange. Substantiating this phenomenon, several participants directly expressed a shift in perspective as a result of the focus group discussions. Peg, for instance, a 61-year-old woman living in Illinois, started a post in the fourth discussion of power by saying that reading all of the other participants' comments helped "clarify [her] thinking about Facebook power." Immediately following her post, Becky responded directly to Pat, noted she made a "great point" about power struggles between kids and parents, and provided her own example of her relationship with her mother. The interplay, which was publicly shared in the focus group space, characterizes the ways in which these online spaces can be sites for personal reflection as well as mutual support and validation. Other participants took similar approaches in formulating their responses, as shown in the tendency for certain individuals to post multiple times within one discussion thread based on continued thoughts provoked by peers' comments.

Furthermore, as referenced in previous research assessing the attributes of online focus groups (e.g. Nicholas et al., 2003; Underhill & Olmsted, 2010), all of the discussion threads in the present group remained open for viewing and commenting throughout the thirty-day data collection period. As such, participants were encouraged to re-visit

previous discussions and elaborate or modify as they chose later on in the study. Allowing participants to witness the data collection process in action ideally enabled them to feel even more an integral part of the research production, rendering them co-constructors of the research endeavor and, most likely, yielding an enhanced sense of community within the focus group itself due to its transparency.

Altogether, the online focus group methodology employed in this dissertation provided an effective strategy for answering questions of identity, privacy, and social connectivity on Facebook. Aside from the overt findings bestowed by the content of participant responses, the focus group itself reflected such phenomena in action, through active self-presentation (e.g. profile personalization), the sharing of external links and knowledge, the evolution of a common vocabulary, and the joint construction of a community space, giving way to a more robust source of data.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Significance & Contributions

 With this dissertation, I set out to investigate how users define online privacy. With an examination of how users engage with others and enact their identities on Facebook, I hoped to shed light on how these processes relate to issues of power and influence user perceptions of online privacy. This research represents an important contribution to the psychological literature, particularly in the areas of identity enactment, online engagement, and privacy. Filling in existing gaps and prompting questions for future research, this dissertation speaks to looming concerns around the increasing presence of social media in daily lives. Through participants' voices, I have shown how user experiences, in a number of instances, run contrary to predominant public discourses and call for fresh interpretations of online practices. Rather than emphasizing detrimental effects of social media practices, the results fall in line with more recent literature attesting to potential benefits and new questions that stem from online engagement (e.g. Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Ellis, 2008; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Livingstone, 2008; Rak, 2005; Spears, Postmes, Lea, and Wolbert, 2002; Stoudt & Ouellette, 2004; Turkle, 2004). Of equal significance is that this work offers new concepts that are significant for the social interaction literature; notions such as "buffer zone," "selective disclosure," "comfortable distance," and "dulled anxiety" point to nuanced understandings of identity and connectivity, unraveling familiar binaries and acknowledging the complex phenomena occurring between users online.

 In the following Discussion, I discuss the unique contributions that this work adds to the psychological literature by revisiting the major themes in the research, namely:

Novel Aspects of Online Engagement & Connectivity, Endorsing a Multiplicity of Identity, and *Unpacking Power and Constructing a Definition of Privacy.* I follow these themes with a brief consideration of the limitations of the current study, and lastly, I offer new directions and suggestions for future research exploring the topics of identity enactment, social engagement, and privacy online.

Novel Aspects of Online Engagement & Connectivity

The present research disrupts public discourses, particularly those in popular literature, that allege that social media has led to an erosion of interpersonal intimacy. Rather, the data suggest that users have adopted innovative strategies for relating with others on Facebook, which lead to enhanced connections and stretch conventional modes of relating to others. This research begs for a reconsideration of social connectivity *practices* as they transpire online; the ways in which people connect with one another online often take a different shape than offline communication, but still yield meaningful connections.

A major theme in the present work points to the ways in which online spaces, such as Facebook, boost social connections. For instance, the methods by which people relate to others online enable users to cross offline boundaries of time, space, and money. Participants demonstrated the ways in which using Facebook allows for far-reaching connections, because, among other reasons, it is available for free at any time and across the globe. Gibson's (1966) notion of affordances underscored the various aspects of Facebook that participants emphasized with respect to temporal, geographical, and physical constraints. The attributes infused throughout Facebook's design proffer opportunities that users exploit in meaningful ways to connect and share with others, and

demonstrate Gibson's theory of affordances in action. For instance, the ability to post links on friends' Walls represents a strategy for connection, based on an affordance embedded in the site.

In addition to its broad accessibility, participants frequently pointed to the ability to enhance existing connections as a result of Facebook participation because of its supplementary role in offline relationships. A reliance on status updates and profile changes in friends' profiles allows users to maintain a continuous connection to others whom they may not see or speak to frequently offline. As a result, participants explained that Facebook bolsters existing social connections, and provides a complementary glimpse into their friends' lives, which can strengthen offline encounters. This finding substantiates other work demonstrating that online communication, via MySpace and Facebook, provide an extension to face-to-face interaction, rather than a substitute (e.g. Kujath, 2011).

Finally, a prevalent theme in the present data pointed to the ability to encourage a sense of social connection by way of sharing. Whether by posting pictures or sharing links to music and videos of interest, participants expressed a desire to spread information and passions to others online, and consequently felt delighted when those interests were adopted by the latter, acquaintances or otherwise. Sharing, in this sense, fostered enhanced feelings of connectivity through online engagement and the unique affordances of Facebook.

Another way that spaces like Facebook afford users to adopt new forms of engagement with others is by fostering a mutual construction of space and community. In their collaboration online, users contribute to the evolution of Facebook and use it as a

space for sharing knowledge. Through political activism, professional development, and sharing of personal interests and activities, users seemingly learn from one another. These processes, in turn, spur a ripple effect in that users' personal experiences are shaped as a result of their exposure to, and engagement with, others' lives on Facebook. These findings lend support to Meyrowitz's (1985) argument that transformative processes occur as a result of dynamic interaction between technology and people. Exhibiting the diverse ways in which users interact with, and through, Facebook according to their individual needs, participants' online activity provided a telling example of Meyrowitz's theory that individuals and technology actively shape one another; although Meyrowitz' stance was in the context of the medium of television, his argument resonates in the present work as an illustration of how people and technology mutually shape one another.

Taken together, the data negates a binary of connectivity versus isolation by revealing the *spaces in between* that allow for versions of intimacy that may not translate to the offline world. The present work speaks to recent psychological research probing online social connections, and points to an elastic notion of intimacy that infringes on the conventional dichotomy of connection versus disconnection. In a recent analysis among Facebook users, for instance, Sheldon, Abad, and Hinsch (2011) set out to determine if Facebook use helps users meet their relatedness needs. Finding that Facebook use is paradoxically correlated with both enhanced feelings of connection *and* disconnection, the authors posited that people may turn to Facebook to cope with offline feelings of disconnection. Their complex results led them to speculate that, for those who feel disconnected in their lives in general, feeling connected through Facebook use could

denote a fleeting solution to distress and loneliness, but ultimately magnify feelings of disconnection. The authors seemed to design their work seeking findings in support of *either* connection or disconnection, but as they found, this dichotomy may not hold in online settings.

A similar theme runs through recent work by Jordan, Monin, Dweck, Lovett, John, and Gross (2011), who conducted a series of studies regarding the perception of others' emotions via Facebook. Examining if Facebook use causes or exacerbates feelings of disconnection, the authors concluded that people seem to believe they are more alone with respect to emotional turmoil than they actually are, based on how other users manage self-impressions on their Facebook pages. Because Facebook is necessarily a social space, in that it is inherently populated by millions of users at any time, people may mistake their observations of others' online behavior to signify constant activity and the absence of any sort of loneliness or solitude. Accordingly, these perceptions led users in their study to believe that others' emotional lives are better than their own (Jordan et al., 2011). Most importantly, the authors suggest that these overestimations of peers' emotional lives can lead to greater feelings of loneliness and life dissatisfaction, which clearly has profound implications for one's overall well-being.

The present findings complicate some of this recent psychological research by accentuating the positive effects of Facebook use on aspects of social connection. Rather than emphasizing intensified feelings of loneliness or isolation as a result of observing others online, focus group participants underscored the feelings of connection that stem from constant social flows online. Having a world of social others, along with their

accompanying interests and knowledge, perpetually at their fingertips, led my participants to report feelings of greater connection.

Indeed, Facebook as a means for creative sharing strategies and boosting offline connections, participants exhibited novel ways in which connectivity takes place online. Most notably, the ability to navigate how frequently, and with whom one connects, online enables users to negotiate a "comfortable distance" with social others. Donath's (2008) work is relevant here as it draws attention to the augmented inclusion of weak ties (or those who may be more acquaintances than intimate others) in one's social network as a result of social networking sites such as Facebook. Through the maintenance of connections with weak ties, users can contribute to the evolution of broader social networks, and simultaneously gain knowledge and a sense of connection from these ties, but still preserve a *comfortable* space between themselves and social others.

The expanded social networks and novel forms of social connection, as exhibited in the present work, stretch familiar notions of the concept of a "friend"; users actively exploit the unique attributes of Facebook to dictate how they interact with others, in regards to time, level of intimacy, and modes of sharing oneself. As Donath (2008) points out, "as the software improves and the interactions become more personalized, the line between real and fictional friend becomes blurred" (246). I would argue that the concepts of "real" and "fictional," within the context of friendship may not provide a suitable overlay onto the phenomena occurring on Facebook. Definitions of friendship are indeed altered as a result of online connectivity, but their complexity do not fall neatly into polarized categories of fictional or real; rather, they reflect a spectrum of ways of relating to others and destabilize the very notion of a "friend." Individuals are

deliberate in their negotiation of a preferred level of intimacy with other users and

participants reported that having the authority to do so gives way to more pleasurable and

improved social connections.

Endorsing a Multiplicity of Identity

Countering the tendency to pursue questions of authenticity when discussing

identity enactment, this work points to the ways Facebook facilitates a multiplicity of

identity among its users. Facebook allows users to enact fluid notions of the self by

emphasizing distinct aspects of their lives with chosen social others and across (digital)

contexts. Making the most of the affordances on Facebook, users seemingly parse out

certain pieces of themselves with selected social others. As evidenced in the present data,

some users even rely exclusively on virtual spaces, such as Facebook, to share personal

identity markers to avoid having to adopt them in offline settings. For example, by

sharing his sexual identity on his profile page, Kyle deliberately sidesteps offline

"coming out" conversations by hoping his online connections see this piece of his

identity on his Facebook page. This finding is particularly remarkable because it

contradicts the assumption that online spaces reflect (certain pieces of) offline identities;

instead, it opens up the possibility that users purposely bestow pieces of themselves in

virtual spaces, further enabling a fluidity of identity across contexts.

Complicating the dichotomy of authentic versus inauthentic identity, this work

encourages nuanced interpretations of self-presentation, in that my findings points to

performance of identity as most often selective, partial, and fluid. The data draws

attention to the multifaceted pieces of oneself that can be accentuated, tweaked, and

stifled across (digital) social contexts. As discussed in her earlier work, Turkle (1995) contends that enacting identities online may be especially gratifying because it allows for flexibility in pursuing and accessing multiple selves. By playing with their many identities in the virtual domain, individuals can learn more about themselves in offline contexts as well, which stimulates personal growth and enhanced well being in general (Turkle, 1995). The present research offers additional evidence for the notion that online identity enactment possibilities give way to such fluidity, and likely shape how individuals negotiate their offline identities as well; moreover, these processes are constantly in motion, such that users adjust their modes of self-presentation across social contexts in an ongoing way.

Taking advantage of the opportunities to enact identity online, users rely on Facebook to present themselves in ways that are sometimes taxing in the offline world. This is particularly meaningful for shy people, who may confront hurdles interacting with people in real-life scenarios. Because of the pseudo-anonymity that can occur between users online, those who may feel uncomfortable in face-to-face encounters appreciate the possibility of "selective disclosure." Users value the ability to maintain control over how, when, and with whom, personal information is shared online. Dubbing the Internet a "buffer zone," participants pointed to the ways in which selective disclosure can yield social changes offline as well. For instance, Jennifer described how Facebook and online engagement helped her overcome social anxiety issues; feeling safe to interact online eventually led to a heightened sense of confidence and comfort in offline interaction. These nuanced concepts erode the necessity to question the authenticity of online identity, in favor of endorsing a multiplicity of self that is constantly in progress.

These identity construction processes occur in tandem with users' joint production of a shared virtual space in which to engage with others. Through the diverse forms of sharing online, users actively contribute to a mutually-constructed environment in which a dynamic construction of identity takes place. Illuminating what Liu (2008) labels "taste statements," participants engage in performance strategies through their profile by sharing particular interests and personal information to others. These sharing tactics feed into opportunities for the enactment of multiple selves across social audiences and virtual contexts. The agentic performance of one's various identities through such taste statements allows for fluidity and epitomizes a key facet of "selective disclosure." Through Facebook, individuals derive meaning from, and through others', online presences, which in turn, shapes their own experiences and forms of self-expression via profile pages and activity.

Additionally, users ostensibly rely on an unspoken agreement, by which they allow each other to play with their virtual identities. The modification and exaggeration of certain pieces of oneself online often depends on the agreement of social others who seldom challenge how one presents themselves on Facebook; this exchange suggests an implicit arrangement in which users are all "entitled" to take advantage of the online space as a site for enacting identity in creative ways.

The present work partially aligns with recent psychological research examining self-presentation online that has acknowledged the unique benefits of playing with identity in virtual spaces. Nevertheless, it is important to use these dissertation results as a foundation on which to critically analyze how researchers pursue questions of identity and the language they employ to discuss them. For instance, although researchers remark

on the novelty of identity enactment practices online, and often applaud its potential as a site for multiplicity, many scholars' agendas hinge on simplified categories, which necessarily limit the scope of what is observed online. For instance, Back, Stopfer, Vazire, Gaddis, Schmukle, Elgloff, and Gosling (2010) conducted a study assessing the "accuracy" of online social network profiles. In their work, Back et al. sought out to compare idealized selves against extended real-life selves as projected online, and ultimately claimed that Facebook profiles reveal "actual" personalities. Similarly, Donath (2008), in her examination of online identity and networks turns to words such as "reliability" and "real" when discussing one's online identity. Research agendas that rely on such language and are inspired by binary frameworks placing "idealized selves" in opposition to "real-life selves" obscure the grey space between the two, in which users enact multiple selves and various identities in creative ways within virtual domains.

Kim and Lee (2011), in a recent study examining the effects of one's Facebook friends and self-presentation practices on individual well-being, also fell prey to the thorny language of "positive" versus "honest" strategies for presenting oneself online. Although Kim and Lee's findings offered valuable insight regarding the ways individuals construct their identities online, it is important to draw attention to the language they rely on to articulate their research; categorizing "positive" self-presentation as a type of selective (and perhaps idealized) identity construction in opposition to "honest" self-presentation, defined as presenting oneself "without selectively putting [one's] best face forward" (2011: 360) can be misleading. As shown in the present dissertation, the two forms of self-presentation may not exactly be at odds with one another; the multiple

strategies for self-presentation may be better conceptualized as falling along a spectrum of identities, which can vary across online social contexts.

Thus, these terms hint at a contrast with traditional conceptual frameworks built on notions of authenticity in identity, as though what one presents online is either purely genuine or not. Rather than conceptualize identity as either static or rooted in a singular truthfulness, the present data show that identity, as it manifests online, represents fluid enactments that shift depending on audience, context, and time. This dissertation encourages scholars to move away from such language in the direction of more nuanced conceptual frameworks that leave room for the complexity of online engagement and presentation practices.

Unpacking Power & Constructing a Definition of Privacy

Much of the psychological research and public media discourse to date have dedicated significant attention to the invasion of privacy online, raising concerns that individuals are unaware of how to manage their information. These discussions have relied on varied and ambiguous conceptions of privacy, demonstrating the blurriness of this concept within the realm of digitally mediated environments. While the information shared online is certainly subject to seemingly invisible forces, such as governing and corporate parties, the present research demonstrates that users actively negotiate strategies for maintaining (mostly) comfortable levels of disclosure online. An observation of these strategies and examination of the mutual processes occurring online helps construct a psychological definition of privacy.

The notion of "dulled anxiety" surrounding privacy threats permeated participant conversations. This nuanced understanding of privacy harm suggests that users are aware of potentially invisible threats to their personal privacy as a result of online engagement, but continue to pursue social media practices because of its potential benefits and justify their decisions by making deliberate decisions about their disclosure. This underlying bargaining strategy – actively maintaining privacy settings and exercising selective disclosure in order to participate online – forces attention to the complexity of realizing a sense of privacy online. Instead of pinpointing a definition of privacy as a static entity, the present findings expose privacy as an active, ongoing, and dynamic process.

An integral component of this perspective is premised on the joint processes implicit in virtual engagement on social networking sites. Whereas public discussions have predominantly stressed potential threats of privacy invasion, especially by largely invisible corporate forces, the conversations have not adequately addressed a core element in understanding online privacy. That is, users' perceptions of privacy are largely rooted in the ability to trust fellow users with their personal information. As the data here have demonstrated, sites like Facebook are partly fueled by the mutual construction of space, in which users establish *boundaries* with one another in terms of how much and where they decide to share pieces of their identities and everyday lives. The cautious disclosure of information is driven by ongoing perceptions of trust among users, which shapes how individuals set boundaries in their personal virtual space and maintain custody of their own information.

Considering once again the earlier theories around privacy (offline), it seems the present findings resonate with many of the ideas put forth by Westin and Altman

(Margulis, 2003b). Both Westin and Altman noted the fundamentally social psychological tenets of privacy, due to their reliance on interpersonal communication and social interaction. Accounting for the cultural and social context in which definitions of privacy are cultivated, privacy in a general sense stems from mutuality (Margulis, 2003b). This dissertation builds on such earlier notions of privacy and demonstrates that online processes of establishing a sense of privacy revolve around social interaction processes centered on the ability to trust others (particularly individual users) when disclosing personal information and sharing oneself through virtual activity. It is also relevant to reiterate that Westin's conception of privacy points to the opportunities it invites for practices of self-evaluation (Margulis, 2003b). Westin's stance underlies much of the phenomena online in that experimental approaches to self-presentation, via "selective disclosure," give way to nuanced definitions of privacy. These processes of enacting identities are deeply entwined with social psychological themes, and highlight the relevance of exploring online privacy within the context of the field.

A prominent factor in determining levels of trust and establishing boundaries of disclosure is around nuanced interpretations of power online. Unpacking the multi-dimensional concept of power, as illustrated in participant comments, feeds into a definition of privacy and helps explain continued user engagement on Facebook. The data reveal the myriad ways power operates in spaces such as Facebook; whether power is manifested as ability, control, or knowledge and action, users weave in the many ways it surfaces online when they negotiate levels of personal privacy online. The many faces of power are implicated in the sense of community and mutuality in virtual spaces. They shape the extent to which users feel comfortable disclosing personal information and,

consequently, inspire the negotiation of boundaries and implicitly build perceptions of privacy.

In a discussion of issues of power relative to privacy, it is necessary to speak to the corporate power of Facebook as a vessel for information shared online. Even though participants in the present study largely indicated that their privacy is within their control and managed based on personal levels of comfortable intimacy, the reality of corporate access to such information cannot be ignored. Questions surrounding the vulnerability of users to the intentions of Facebook, as a company, linger in the background of online phenomena. Because the success of Facebook is predominantly driven by user engagement, it would befit the company to remain vigilant in respecting user preferences and tread lightly when they align with external organizations to share user information. Nevertheless, the present work demonstrates that many users, to a certain extent, are conscious of such exposure, as a result of what they share online, and continually work to enfold such threats into their ongoing privacy maintenance strategies.

A conception of privacy in this sense, as a fluid, active negotiation of boundaries sheds light on the difficulty thus far in pinpointing a set definition. An enduring and dynamic process in which users rely on one another for direction in the negotiation of comfortable levels of personal disclosure, privacy is inextricably linked to particular temporal and virtual social contexts. Accordingly, it shifts over time and across digital spaces, depending on the players involved and information at stake. This prospect also invites social norms into the present discussion; as described earlier in reference to boyd and Marwick's research (2011), users draw on shared understandings of appropriate boundaries, vis-à-vis social norms, to maintain a sense of personal privacy online.

The present findings add to broader conversations over the last few decades assessing definitions of privacy with the development of the Internet. Just over a decade ago, Brin (1998) posited that society has disproportionately focused on trying to prevent others from knowing personal information in an effort to maintain a sense of individual freedom and right to privacy; yet, Brin also argued that the opposite stance of complete transparency is equally unrealistic and, perhaps, inadequate. Instead, Brin argued that notions of privacy should be premised on mutuality and, in the pursuit of personal freedom, people should concentrate on asserting the power to hold individuals and groups responsible for violations of crossing personal boundaries. Evaluating the present findings through Brin's theoretical lens suggests that users' definitions of privacy, through the negotiation of boundaries and assessment of trust, hinge on this notion of mutuality in an effort to maintain autonomy over their information. Perceptions of privacy are continually shaped by interpersonal processes of trust and engagement.

Similarly, Nissenbaum (2010) stresses the mutual processes that feed into notions of privacy, rendering her argument relevant to the present analysis. Nissenbaum argues that discussing individual rights to privacy entails a "general confidence in the mutual support these flows accord to key organizing principles of social life, including moral and political ones" (231). Through what she dubs "contextual integrity," Nissenbaum defines the right to privacy as realized through a balance of social norms in addition to what has historically been recognized as boundaries of privacy. Moreover, because the contexts and conditions in which such norms are set are subject to constant change, the ways in which rights to privacy are defined necessarily shifts over time. Discarding the stale dichotomy of private and public, "contextual integrity" underscores the dependence of a

right to privacy on the norms within a particular cultural context. According to Nissenbaum's argument, the contemporary concerns over privacy harm are only warranted if contemporary information systems disregard social norms, thereby "potentially tearing at the very fabric of social and political life" (2010: 128). However, such anxieties are to be expected because of a current rupture in information flow systems, with the proliferation of social media such as Facebook. The ongoing endeavor of striking a harmonious balance, with regard to social norms and active engagement in the flow of personal information, is fundamental to a definition of (the right to) privacy (Nissenbaum, 2010).

Solave (2011) adopts a similar stance asserting that privacy is not a static entity subject to loss at a particular moment; rather, it is a moving force that can corrode over time as a result of subtle harms. Because it is constantly under negotiation, it is more likely that any threats to privacy emerge as minor cracks in the foundation of shared social norms. Solave goes on to point out that, because of its contextual reliance, one person's perception of privacy harm likely differs from the next, leading to nuanced interpretations of threats to privacy. Yet again, this theoretical standpoint resonates with the present data in that users adopted various interpretations of personal privacy, but they all circled around a nucleus of established social norms and mutual trust.

Observing the novel ways users engage in, and through, Facebook calls attention to the blurring of private and public in virtual contexts. Ongoing performances of identity and connectivity, nested within the "public" space of Facebook, point to the complexity of distinguishing between private and public online. The difficulty thus far in clearly articulating definitions of online privacy is likely rooted, in part, in this increased

obscurity between private and public. However, the present findings build on budding definitions of online privacy, and insinuate that it is a dynamic, moving force anchored in social norms and continually in flux according to particular contexts. This perspective rests on a co-construction of seemingly new forms of privacy that occur in public settings. As users perpetually make sense of their (digital) environments and the social others implicated in those settings, they navigate personal definitions of online privacy on which to base their participatory practices.

Limitations

In the present study, I deliberately selected a relatively small online focus group methodology in order to address the given research aims by observing online practices in action. By facilitating participant discussion in an online forum, I hoped to examine how individuals choose to share and connect with others. As has been discussed, this approach did yield unique insight into the ways in which users choose to disclose personal information and the tactics they adopt to relate with others in virtual spaces. However, there are some limitations in this methodological strategy that warrant attention.

First, because of the challenges in recruiting a racially and ethnically diverse sample through Facebook.com advertising as well as snowball sampling, the resultant sample was predominantly White. As such, I was unable to directly observe potential dynamics in online experiences stemming from racial or educational differences. This had been an initial goal in the present work as various literature has alluded to distinct experiences among users of different populations on Facebook and other social

networking sites (boyd, forthcoming; Hare, 2009; Hargittai, 2008; Petersen, 2010; Sydell, 2009).   Nevertheless, there were aspects of the data that touched on associated themes; both focus group participants and interviewees raised the exclusivity of Facebook, particularly in its first few waves of membership. John, for instance, commented on the corporation's initial strategy for gaining popularity, and suggested that the company first targeted college students, knowing that they were a prime demographic for having disposable income as well as being influential in shaping what older and younger family generations perceive as "cool." John's comment attests to the ways in which Facebook infused its product with themes of exclusivity right from its inception.

Similarly, several focus group participants were members of the first generation of Facebook users and shared similar observations of how selective access proved to be enticing, likely feeding into the rapid expansion of the social networking site. The power that Facebook had placed in the hands of its users fed into its popularity as it spawned a ripple effect of students persuading peers to join. Moreover, Facebook was able to heighten its own level of power over users by exploiting college students' ability to persuade close others, whether friends or family so that, once made available to the broader public, older generations of users became active online.

It is key to note that, in reflecting on this process, the participants echoed some of the existing literature with respect to potential differences in experience based on racial or educational differences. Because the first member cohorts were largely drawn from private (and somewhat elite) university settings, Facebook's users reflect that particular population demographic; consequently, the foundation on which Facebook rests is intrinsically tangled with issues of exclusivity around the demographic differences of

who was granted access to join and was responsible for extending its reach to later generations of users. Thus, although the present research sample did not reflect the desired diversity, it did illuminate some of the issues driving the original research questions by highlighting how Facebook was perhaps designed toward particular users and how that initiation likely influences the ways it has, and continues to, evolve over time. Nevertheless, with the recent globally viral development of Facebook, and consequential multinational and diversifying presence, it is possible that racial and socioeconomic divisions are less relevant than other aspects of online engagement in research moving forward.

A second limitation of the present work also stems from the methodology; namely, that the reflective processes inherent in gathering participant input may represent somewhat partial findings. Although the online discussion forum revealed rich data, it was based on posts that participants *chose* to share. Keeping the dissertation findings in mind, particularly around selective disclosure, it is possible that participants adjusted their focus group responses according to what they thought were my expectations as the researcher, or how they would like to be perceived within the group. It is difficult to ascertain the factual accuracy of participants' comments because they stemmed entirely from self-reports. Although I feel confident that participants were candid in their responses, especially due to the sense of community and comfort that seemed to develop within the group over time, it is important to stay mindful of the fact that participants' chose when and what to share and it could have been tweaked according to personal preferences. Similarly, I did not specify if focus group participants should speak from personal experience and/or their observations of others' online behaviors. This

distinction was hard to capture given the open-ended focus group questions, but deserve attention in future research.

Lastly, another key aspect of this research that warrants further attention is the complicated relationship between Facebook as a corporation and its members. Although I have noted elsewhere that the present analysis zooms in on the practices occurring *among users*, the phenomena discussed in this work do not occur in vacuum. I did not have the opportunity to speak directly with representatives of Facebook, the company, which might have illuminated their role in steering the course of the social networking site to some extent, and consequently, the occurrences that unfold within. I similarly did not approach the business press to delve into their perspectives or analyses with respect to data gathering practices. While this work cannot account for the direct motives of Facebook as a business or other corporate and economic factors, the current analysis provides a robust addition to the literature by analyzing dynamics *within* the Facebook community itself, a population that has nourished its growth over time. Thus, I want to again be explicit that the current research is an examination of within-group dynamics, that occur within a larger corporate and economic frame; as such, they offer unique insight into the motivations for pursuing social networking activity online and contribute to an emerging definition of online privacy.

Future Directions

This research adds to the social interaction literature as well as the nascent research around the phenomenon of social networking sites. Future research can build off of this work and should strive to address some of the limitations in the current study.

For instance, obtaining a more diverse sample, in terms of age, racial, and economic backgrounds promises to yield a more representative survey of experiences of Facebook users. Relying on a diverse sample of users may well grant further insight into the potential power dynamics that operate within social networking sites.

In addition, incorporating the voices and experiences of those who actively do *not* participate on Facebook would be informative for understanding the ways in which social media and online privacy are perceived. There is a substantial number of the population who intentionally dissociate from Facebook, sometimes even resisting direct pressure to join from social others. It may be useful to integrate their opinions into the body of literature to achieve a more comprehensive examination of the appeal (or lack thereof) of participation in social networking sites and how perceptions of privacy may play a role in such decisions.

Future research could also benefit from compensating for potential reflective biases by building on the current methodology. One possibility is to have an online focus group methodology, much like the present study, in which participants express their opinions and share their personal experiences in their own words, but use it in conjunction with more objective reports of actual online behaviors to compare and contrast how users engage online. Combining these methodological strategies could augment the findings with an analysis of how self-reports compare to actual online practices.

From a theoretical perspective, I encourage future researchers in this area to shift directions when pursuing questions of virtual engagement. Moving from research agendas burdened by binaries such as authentic versus inauthentic, connectivity versus

isolation, and offline versus online behaviors, will likely deepen the work to yield a greater understanding of the phenomena online. I encourage researchers to avoid comparative frameworks when designing research agendas; instead of having research questions rest on polarized notions of identity and connectivity, widening the lens to appreciate the full complexity of online experiences can generate insight into the diverse and innovative ways individuals make sense of their virtual activity.

Conclusions

More than forty years ago, Westin (1967) embarked on a psychological inquiry of privacy, during which he noted that what is considered private may be driven by social norms. As such, perceptions of privacy are necessarily shaped by the interests and motives of different individuals and inevitably vary across social contexts. Revisiting this definition, and transporting its fundamental components to the virtual space of social networking sites, this dissertation has articulated a definition of online privacy, revealing it is a fluid notion of the right to determine a comfortable level of information disclosure, driven by the social norms and mutual trust in a given virtual context. Far from being stationary, ongoing definitions of privacy will continue to move with changes in technological affordances and users' choices in their identity and connectivity practices online, as lived experience shapes social norms regarding privacy.

In conclusion, this work contests the familiar tendencies, particularly within some of the psychological literature, to organize identity and interaction processes in static categories. Moving toward a more nuanced appreciation of how individuals present themselves and connect with others, both on- and offline, and the dynamic ways in which

these processes unfold, gives way to a deeper understanding of users' experiences and clarity around privacy online.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Scripts

(Online Advertisement and Email Recruitment Script for Focus Group)

WHAT DOES FACEBOOK MEAN TO YOU?
Want to be part of an exciting research project? How has Facebook changed your life
and your social connections? Click here* to share!

*(*link to introductory webpage with following statement:)*

Hello, my name is Rachel Verni and I'm a doctoral student at the City University of New
York Graduate Center. I'm looking for up to 25 Facebook users to be part of an online
discussion group – all participants will be paid for their time. You will contribute to an
online discussion group for one month talking about what it's like to be on Facebook and
the role it plays in your life.
You don't need any past research or writing experience – I just want to know what you
think! So, if you'd like to be a member of this new research, or want more information,
please email me at rverni@gc.cuny.edu.

*If participants showed interest by emailing me, I responded with the following email to
gather demographic information and confirm interest:*

Thanks again for your interest in this dissertation research! As the advertisement
indicated, your participation will be in an online discussion group. It will be set up for 30
days and will only be accessible to you and the other participants in the study. Every few
days, during the 30-day period, I will post a topic for discussion. Each day, I will ask that
you login to the site to review current discussions and contribute by sharing your
thoughts and experiences where you feel comfortable. Once new discussion threads are
posted, "old" ones will still be up for discussion in case you have additional thoughts or
comments that you want to add as times goes on.

I am still gathering participants, so the site will probably not start until sometime in
January, but I hope you are still interested and will participate when that happens! In the
meantime, I would greatly appreciate it if you could email me your responses to the
following basic information to get started (whatever you feel comfortable answering):
Name:
Age:
Gender:
Educational Background:
Race/Ethnicity:
Sexual Orientation:

If potential participants responded with demographic information and continued interest, I emailed them the link to the online consent form and granted them access to the private Ning project site.

(Sample Interview Recruitment Script via email or phone)

Hello,

My name is Rachel Verni and I'm a graduate student in the Social-Personality Psychology doctoral program at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. I'm currently working on my dissertation, which centers on issues of privacy, power, and identity on social networking sites, such as Facebook. As part of my dissertation research, I'm planning on conducting several individual interviews with key players in the current Facebook phenomenon. As such, I was hoping that you might be available to talk with me about some of your experiences and opinions regarding social networking sites, as they would be extremely relevant to my work.

If you have any time to speak with me, I would greatly appreciate it and know it would really strengthen this piece of my doctoral work. If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please feel free to contact me at rverni@gc.cuny.edu or 617-335-5566. Thanks so much in advance for your help!

Best,
Rachel Verni

If potential participants responded with interest, I emailed them the link to the online consent form or presented it in person before conducting the interview.

Appendix B

Consent Forms

FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

My name is Rachel Verni and I am a student in the Social-Personality Psychology Ph.D. Program at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Principal Investigator of this project, entitled "Perceptions of Facebook." This is a research study of how people use Facebook in their daily lives. The study is expected to help us further understand the reasons why social networking sites, such as Facebook, have become so popular and how people feel about their popularity. I would like you to participate in an online discussion group, which will involve talking about some of your own experiences and opinions regarding Facebook.

This online discussion group will be set up on Ning.com for 30 days and will only be accessible to the 20-25 participants in this study. Every few days, during the 30-day period, I will post a topic for discussion. Each day, I will ask that you login to the Ning site to review current discussions and contribute where you feel comfortable sharing your thoughts and experiences. Ideally, I would like you to spend about 30 minutes a day reviewing and contributing to the group discussion, but this may vary depending on the topic. At the end of the 30-day period, I will pay you $25 by check or Amazon.com gift card. All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential, and will be stored in a secure place online to which only I, and my advisor, will have access. At any time you can refuse to participate or remove yourself from the study. (If you choose to no longer participate, you will still receive the $25 or gift card.)

The risks from participating in this study are no more than encountered in everyday life. The benefits of your participation are that it will add to the generalized knowledge around the links between psychology and social networking sites. There will be approximately 20-25 participants taking part in this study.

I may publish results of the study, but names of people, or any identifying characteristics, will not be used in any of the publications. Please note that you are welcome to use your name and other identifying information in the Ning discussion group, but are not required to disclose any personal information if you do not want to. If you would like a copy of the study, please provide me with your address and I will send you a copy in the future. I will save the data for future research, but will keep it confidential and will not disclose any identifying participant information in any presentations or publications.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at (617)335-5566 or rverni@gc.cuny.edu or my advisor Suzanne Ouellette at (212) 817-8708 or souellette@gc.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Kay Powell, IRB Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, (212) 817-7525, kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation in the study. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

By providing my electronic signature on this consent form, I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

_____   _____   _____   _____
Investigator's signature   Date   Participant's signature   Date

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

My name is Rachel Verni and I am a student in the Social-Personality Psychology Ph.D. Program at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Principal Investigator of this project, entitled "Perceptions of Facebook." This is a research study of how people use Facebook in their daily lives. The study is expected to help us further understand the reasons why social networking sites, such as Facebook, have become so popular and how people feel about their popularity. I would like to interview you to hear about some of your experiences and opinions regarding Facebook and other social networking sites.

This interview should take between one to two hours. With your permission, I would like to audiotape our interview conversation. All information gathered will be kept strictly confidential, and will be stored in a secure place to which only I, and my advisor, will have access. At any time you can refuse to answer any question or decide to stop the interview.

The risks from participating in this study are no more than encountered in everyday life. The benefits of your participation are that it will add to the generalized knowledge around the links between psychology and social networking sites. There will be approximately 10 interview participants in this study.

I may publish results of the study, but I will not publish your name unless you agree; if not, your name and any identifying characteristics, will not be used in any of the publications. If you would like a copy of the study, please provide me with your address and I will send you a copy in the future.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at (617)335-5566 or rverni@gc.cuny.edu or my advisor Suzanne Ouellette at (212) 817-8708 or souellette@gc.cuny.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you can contact Kay Powell, IRB Administrator, The Graduate Center/City University of New York, (212) 817-7525, kpowell@gc.cuny.edu.

Thank you for your participation in the study. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

I agree to have my name be used in any publications: YES   NO

I agree to have this interview be audio-taped: YES   NO

_____ _____   _____ _____
Investigator's signature   Date   Participant's Signature   Date

Appendix C

Discussion Topic Scripts

Thank you for participating in this project entitled "Perceptions of Facebook." As you know, this is a research study of how people think about, and use, Facebook in their daily lives. The study is expected to help us further understand the reasons why social networking sites, such as Facebook, have become so popular and how people feel about their popularity.

This online discussion group will be set up for 30 days and will only be accessible to you and the other 19 participants in the study. Every few days, during the 30-day period, I will post a topic for discussion. Each day, I will ask that you login to the Ning site to review current discussions and contribute by sharing your thoughts and experiences where you feel comfortable. Once new discussion threads are posted, "old" ones will still be up for discussion in case you have additional thoughts or comments that you want to add as times goes on.

If, at any time, you have trouble accessing or posting something on the site, or have any questions/concerns, please let me know (rverni@gc.cuny.edu or 617-335-5566). Thanks again!

      a. *Topics/prompts:*

            <u>Motivations</u> – Facebook has clearly become a phenomenon of interest in the last few years and many people, whether they use it or not, seem to be connected to it. Based on your own experiences or those of people you may know, why do you think Facebook has become so popular?

            <u>Privacy/Safety</u> - Recently, the issue of privacy on Facebook has received significant media attention. How, if at all, does the issue of privacy come up for you as you log on to Facebook?

            <u>Identity</u> – Research that has explored online behavior (e.g. on weblogs, dating websites, social networking sites) has considered how internet use may be linked to how people think of themselves; for instance, people may use the Internet to help figure out who they are or share certain pieces of themselves with others. Do you think how people think of themselves and want to present themselves to others plays a role in how and why people use Facebook? Please explain.

            <u>Power</u> –Do you think issues of power come up when using Facebook? Please explain (e.g. between who? Is power a positive thing on Facebook for its users? Can power play a negative role on Facebook?)

Social Connectivity – Thinking about why you first joined, how does interaction on Facebook compare to your other social situations (online and/or in "real life")?

Additional Information – Thank you for helping participate in such interesting and informative discussion over the past few weeks. For this last week, I would like to ask you to help me by sharing some ideas that you think I might have missed. As you know, this project is part of an effort to understand the role that Facebook plays in people's daily lives and why it has become so popular. Is there anything that you think have been useful to talk about relative to these goals that I did not come up over the past few weeks? And are there any aspects of Facebook that you would add and/or change if you were designing it?

At the end of the 30 days, I made a post to the group:

Thank you for your generous participation in this project over the last 30 days. Your input is invaluable in helping us further understand the phenomenon of social networking sites. If you would like a copy of the results of this project or if you have any questions or comments at a later time, please feel free to reach me at rverni@gc.cuny.edu or 617-335-5566.

Appendix D

Sample Interview Script

All participants were read the following introductory and closing statements:

(*BEGINNING*) Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me about some of your experiences and opinions around Facebook and other social networking sites. To give you a better sense of the details of my project, I'm conducting an online focus group/discussion board where 20 people who all have Facebook accounts are going to engage in some discussion around different topic areas that I introduce (such as privacy, self-presentation and online identities, and the idea of power online). These interviews are meant to compliment some of that data, and I'm reaching out to different people who have contributed to the general discussion about Facebook and privacy on social networking sites, so I'm eager to have your input.

(*END*) Thank you for sharing. Those are all of the questions that I had prepared, but do you have any other thoughts or comments you'd like to add? Thank you again for your participation. Please contact me if you any other questions or thoughts come up.

Sample Interview Questions for those more directly active on Facebook (or have shared public stories of Facebook experiences):

These first few questions are meant to get a sense of how you use and perceive the Internet in general.

- What do you consider to be public/private spaces in your daily life (what makes them so)?

- What types of sites do you access? Please list the top three types of sites you access (or specific website names); feel free to list more if relevant (e.g. individual weblogs, maintain own weblog, social networking sites).

- What are the primary reasons you go online? (e.g. connect with friends, connect with strangers, general information, educational information, observe others' activities, engage in live social interaction, share something about yourself).

- What positive/negative words and/or feelings do you associate with being online? (Personally, and in the general society?)

- How safe do you consider the Internet to be?
  - Why?

- Who do you feel the information online belongs to (multiple people/parties)?
    - Does this vary across different websites? Please explain.

- Do you (know how to) clean up your cache? Cookies?
    - If yes, how often do you clean up your internet history?

- Why do you clean up your internet history?

- Do you usually go online alone and/or with others?
    - If with others, who do you go online with?

- Is there anything you say and/or do online that is meant just for you?
    - If yes, can you share with me what you intend to keep to yourself?

- Is there anything you say and/or do online that is (specifically) meant for others to see?
    - If yes, what do you intend to share with others or make known to them?

- How much do you feel the information online belongs to you and/or others?
    - (Scale of 1 to 10, 1 being solely yours and 10 being solely others)
    - Does this vary across sites? (Explain)

- Is there anything you share online about yourself that is different and/or the same from "real life" interactions?
    - When?
    - With who?
    - Why?

- How concerned are you about privacy in areas of your life other than online?
    - (Scale ranging from 1 to 10, 1 being not concerned at all to 10 being very concerned)
    - What areas cause you to feel concern? Please explain why.

Now, I'd like to ask some questions that are specifically focused on Facebook and the role it plays in your daily life.

- When did you first join Facebook?
- What made you decide to join Facebook?
- Roughly how often do you log on to Facebook?
- Who do you connect with on Facebook?
- How are these people similar to you (e.g. in age, experience, interests)?
- Approximately what percentage of time do you think you initiate FB contact with other people (e.g. "friend" them or write on their wall)?
- How do you use Facebook – for what purposes?
- How do you think interaction on social networking sites like Facebook compare to "real life" social situations?
- Is there anything you share on Facebook about yourself that is different from "real life" interactions? (When, with who, why?)
- Have you created anything on Facebook (e.g. groups, fan pages)? (Please list them.)
  - What motivated you to do this?
- How influenced are you by what you see your friends do on Facebook (e.g. purchases, "like", status updates, pictures, commenting)?
- Roughly what percentage would you estimate Facebook takes up of your total time online?

Recently, the issue of privacy on Facebook is very much in the public eye. The next few questions are designed to better understand how the issue of privacy comes up for you regarding Facebook.

- How satisfied do you feel with the current privacy options on Facebook? (Can you rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being very comfortable?)
- Can you talk about any times when you have felt violated on Facebook? If yes:
  - What happened?
  - What did you feel?
  - Did you respond by taking action? If yes, please explain.
  - Did you change your behavior in any way following this violation?
  - Have there been times when you think you have done this to others? (Please explain.)
- What do you think are some of the benefits of being on Facebook?
- What do you think are some of the drawbacks of being on Facebook?

Sample Interview Questions for those involved in public discussion/media/research related to social networking sites:

- First, can you tell me a little about your role at (*insert organization/affiliation*) and the work that you do there?
- What are the primary objectives of *(insert participants' website or company affiliation)*?
- What are the company's goals and how does *(your website/affiliation)* attempt to meet these goals?
    - o Who are your target customers/users?
- How has the ongoing media attention (regarding privacy, in particular, and with the recent release of movies like "The Social Network") affected the website?
    - o How has it affected the goals or activity of the company (in terms of future moves and public representation(s))?

Recently, the issue of privacy on Facebook is very much in the public eye. The next few questions are designed to better understand how the issue of privacy comes up for you regarding Facebook.

- What do you think are some of the benefits of engaging with Facebook or other social networking sites?
- What do you think are some of the drawbacks of engaging with Facebook or other social networking sites?
- In what ways do you think social networking sites have affected how people interact/connect with each other?
- In what ways do you think social networking sites (and blogs) have affected how people present themselves/construct their identities?
- What are the tones that you think underlie discussions around Facebook? (e.g. among researchers, public media, individual users), and
- Do you think the current media attention is accurate in its depictions of online interaction, self-presentation practices, and privacy issues?
- How do you think the current media spotlight on Facebook has shaped or potentially changed the way it is seen or used?
- Why do you think people decide to join (either in the past or now)?
- What are the ways in which social networking sites appeal to different generations? Racial groups? Others? / Do you think there are certain aspects of social networking sites that appeal most to different individuals?
- How aware and/or concerned do you think users are of their privacy online?
- Are there any aspects of social networking sites that you feel are under-used or not taken full advantage of?
- In what ways do you think social networking sites have affected how people interact/connect with each other?
- What are some of the most creative (strategic) uses of social networking sites that you know of or have witnessed? (e.g. political mobilization, power)

- What would you predict to be some of the changes in social networking sites' popularity and practices over the next 5 years?

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