

FACEBOOKED
**Groupthink in the Era of Computer Mediated Social
Networking**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the symptoms of Groupthink as they manifest themselves in the modern age of computerized social networking. What began as a social-psychological condition used to explain the policy blunders of governments and organizations, Groupthink has evolved into the computerized landscape, and in so doing has provided researchers a new medium for investigating the process. The study investigates specific political events tied to this condition, providing a historical examination of the profound manner that Groupthink has shaped society and how it will mold the future of computer mediated interaction. The thesis also evaluates research methodologies presently being used to diagnose the symptoms of Groupthink in organizational settings. This analysis is an instrumental part of the thesis because Groupthink research is notably difficult to conduct in clinical conditions utilizing the scientific method. However, because social networking sites do not follow the same rules governing the organizational structures previously being tested – they provide a unique means for compiling empirical data pertinent to Groupthink study. The task however, is discovering where the exact defects are in Groupthink and the errors that stem from them. The principal question of this research is to identify if the ever-growing trend towards Internet-based social networking, like Facebook, can provide researchers with successful strategies for clinically evaluating the process of Groupthink. Using this model, tangible solutions for combating Groupthink are possible.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Importance of the Study

The political community is, by design, a small-scale model of the society that it represents. Leaders constantly test the waters of popular opinion to gauge the acceptability of decisions and the perceived detriment of political outcomes. This construct, however, is vulnerable to mismanagement and can just as easily lead to misguided decision-making without strong leadership encouraging the coalescence of good ideas in the face of disagreement. This community construct, which Kouzes and Posner use as a metaphor for organizations (Kouzes & Posner, 2003), requires guidance towards cooperative outcomes without succumbing to Groupthink (Janis, 1982).

Unfortunately, until recently, there has been little transparency into the proceedings leading to many of these outcomes. That, and those that do become public knowledge, do so several years following the incident, and almost certainly in the context of being exposed as past failures. As such, documented managerial strategies undertaken during tremendously successful initiatives seldomly reach the research community for thorough academic inspection of the presence of Groupthink in such scenarios. Adding to this research hurdle is the reality that conducting research on the condition is highly limited because multiple symptoms are difficult to recreate in lab conditions utilizing the scientific method.

However, this does not mean that the academic analyses of past cases of Groupthink lack value. What we do gather from these far more prevalent accounts of documented failures, in particular elements contributing to their failure – is a blue print

for avoidance. With this pre-existing model and newer research techniques on online group interaction in social networking sites, solving the Groupthink puzzle is becoming an increasingly tangible goal. Because the “workplace” of international diplomacy and decision-making is continuously gravitating toward a more computer-mediated landscape, research into how the Groupthink condition manifests itself in an online community is imperative for gaining insight into the potential decision-making hurdles facing future leaders operating in the Internet realm. An investigational model for this process in relation to online leadership dynamics warrants development in order to equip decision-making groups with the necessary organizational training in critically evaluating their own perspectives so they may avoid the Groupthink trap. That is, if they are to avoid allowing the pitfalls, that plagued decision-makers in the traditional organizational constructs, from cascading over into the computer-mediated community.

Examining these diverse models helps in the assessment of the relationship between group decision-making and decision quality in multiple levels of governance. It also provides a clear representation of the level of impact Groupthink has on both small and large-scale leadership decisions and how the outcome is subsequently affected.

Statement of the Problem

Research in the field of Groupthink emerged with the theoretical inception of the phenomenon in 1972 by social psychologist, Irving Janis (Janis, 1972). Underlying this condition are eight symptoms, as defined by Janis (1972):

1. Members in these groups operate under the illusion of invulnerability.
2. Group members will discount warnings contrary to the group mentality.
3. The groups maintain the illusion of morality during decision-making.

4. The group members stereotype the views of their opposition.
5. The group pressures members to conform to the common group attitude.
6. Members dismiss viewpoints contrary to the shared group beliefs.
7. Participants harbor the perception of unanimity with other group members.
8. Individual “Mindguards” insulate the group from conflicting information.

The confluence of these symptoms receives credit for numerous policy blunders in United States history (Janis, 1972). Notable cases of poor decision-making commonly attributed to Groupthink include the now-famous “Bay of Pigs” invasion during the Kennedy administration (Janis, 1977), the United States military involvement in the Vietnam War (Janis, 1977, 1982) and the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy (Moorhead, Ference, Neck, 1991).

The Groupthink process in government has resulted in a deficit in political accountability and has led to organizational collapse when occurring in the business realm. After discerning the meaning and symptoms of Groupthink, this paper aims to discuss newer computer-mediated decision-making atmospheres where Groupthink outcomes are more easily observable. Surveying the available research data, the researcher aims to clarify the following problem: despite rather developed academic inspection, the Groupthink problem remains without well-developed, systematically proven remedies – particularly in the computer mediated group setting. By incorporating modern communication modes, namely online social networking, into the discussion of Groupthink development, this thesis seeks to uncover a new avenue for understanding and diagnosing this decision-making pitfall. By demonstrating the conditions in which Groupthink is prevalent and assessing known research methodologies in the field, this

integrative analysis will offer potential strategies for future empirical research on the topic of “Groupthink” and encourage the creation of tangible solutions.

This thesis explores an emerging trend, as well as, utilizes a breadth of field-specific terminology, meaning there are several key terms that require clarification. These terms include the following:

Definition of Terms Used

Antecedent conditions are established elements preceding an experiment, which may affect the outcome of the investigation. The conditions, in place at the onset, include all background factors, both internal and external forces, leading into an experiment exerting influence on the outcome. For this application, they shape situational assessments by members in a Groupthink control scenario. Standardizing these elements helps control variables conducive to Groupthink for more effective in-process evaluation.

Coding is the application of value-assignment to variables within an experiment, making them quantifiable. Using coding provides a means of value assessment for group member actions. For this particular application, coding is accomplished by applying a valuation akin to Cline (1990) and Courtright’s (1978) point value system to elements within the study that represent symptoms of Groupthink.

Discounting Warnings is a symptom of Groupthink wherein the members of a decision-making body ignore evidence from external groups and individuals that is contrary to the shared group perception. It is a symptom highly interrelated with the Illusion of Invulnerability, as it involves a narcissistic perception of in-group belief structures (Janis, 1972, 1976, 1977, 1982)

Decision-Making Bodies are at the most basic level – groups tasked with mission of reaching an outcome collaboratively. In Groupthink research, they are commonly administrative agencies in multiple organizations and government entities, though for this research design, the team will be comprised of an “open” Facebook group. Group membership is not restricted to academic or network affiliation so any user can join.

Experimentally induced ideological identification is the process in which researchers establish the illusion of agreement by framing the decision-making body in focus with the idea that their selection is a virtue of the compatibility of their beliefs. Also technically an antecedent condition, this practice directly aims to manipulate the perception of group members regarding the existence of shared values.

Facebook is an online social networking site. Initially it was an Ivy League phenomenon, founded by then-Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg in February of 2004. Presently it exists on hundreds of campuses and business networks worldwide hosting 90 million members (Fact Sheet, 2008). The networking utility also has the fifth highest Web traffic rating on the Web (Alexa traffic Rankings, 2008).

Groupthink: The operational definition of Groupthink comes from Irving Janis’s (1972) discussion of the process, during which group decision-making bodies arrive at substandard conclusions while exhibiting the following symptoms:

- Having the illusion of invulnerability
- Discounting warnings conflicting with group mentality
- Harboring the illusion of morality
- Stereotyping their opposition’s ideology
- Pressuring the group members into conformity

- Dismissing opposing viewpoints
- Experiencing the perception of unanimity
- Group members acting as “Mindguards” (Janis, 1972, 1976, 1977, 1982)

Group Cohesion evaluates the measure of in-group consensus about the quality of a particular group-made decision. During this process, group members seek conformity with their decision-making, electing to agree with the implied consensus rather than seek alternative solutions.

Illusory Unanimity is a condition where group members in a decision making body operate under the understanding that they share specific values. This group inclination results in premature concurrence seeking (Cline, 1990). During the Groupthink process, member compliance tendencies occur in spite of conflicting viewpoints.

Illusion of Invulnerability: This is another symptom of Groupthink, characterized by excessive optimism, which reduces group member aversion to taking risks. As a result, members of groups make decisions uninhibited by reasonable fears of consequence because they share the perception that they are beyond accountability. Frequently the symptom gains mention in dangerous international policy decisions, such as the sanctioning of Chechnya (Lintonen, 2004).

Interpersonal Relationships consist of connections often associated with face-to-face interaction, wherein social bonding occurs. The boundaries of this definition have increasingly grown to include computerized relationships, with computer mediated communication researchers such as Joseph Walther (1992), expanding the concept to encompass the computerized realm through the assertion that the basic need for social bonding transcends physical interaction.

Pluralistic Ignorance: Social Psychological term frequently used interchangeably with Irving Janis's (1972) term "Groupthink" (Miller, 1987).

Self-Appointed Mindguards are group members that maintain group cohesion by shielding other group members from dissenting viewpoints and contrary arguments originating outside of the group (Janis, 1972, 1976, 1977, 1982). A historically recognized example is Robert Kennedy, brother of former U.S. president John F. Kennedy, for his occupation of the Mindguard role during the now-infamous "Bay of Pigs" invasion (Janis, 1972).

Self-Censorship: is the deliberate restraint of personal beliefs that may contradict group attitudes. During the Groupthink process, a perception of group consensus (Illusory Unanimity) discourages individual group members from expressing ideas that are different or conflicting with the perceived consensus decisions.

Social networking sites like Facebook build and confirm Web-based social networks designed to attract communities of like-minded people or work as an avenue for those seeking to meet others online. Popular sites at time of press: Myspace, Bebo and Facebook (with a current estimated net worth of \$15 billion dollars)

Stereotyping is assigning generalized characteristics to a particular group or belief structure. It is also a condition of the Groupthink process, during which groups assign negative values to individuals with opposing viewpoints and demonize conflicting viewpoints by designating them "enemy" ideas. This process maintains group insulation and perpetuates the other conditions in the Groupthink process.

Symptomology: A term most often utilized in the medical field, defines the indicators and behaviors (in this case, group behavior) associated with a particular condition.

The Remaining Chapters

The research presented in this thesis comprises five separate chapters. The second of these chapters will establish the theoretical basis for the research, review the established scholarly understanding of Groupthink and define the symptoms of Groupthink while examining their areas of prevalence. This portion also demonstrates known occurrences of Groupthink in historically chronicled incidents of group decision-making failures. These investigative findings will contribute to the subsequent debate of Groupthink validity and provide a basic framework for understanding how social scientists traditionally conduct Groupthink research. This portion of analysis aims to expose the expansive research potential inherent to an online social network unhindered by the limitations of physically interactive Groupthink studies.

The remainder of chapter two will provide an overview of a social networking site, Facebook, and evaluate how this type of Internet communication offers researchers a superior means for clinically observing certain types of group interaction. In particular, this paper will focus on how the observable community construct created by Facebook and similar sites provides a window for viewing the individual actions of group participants spanning from acts of conformity to proclamations of disagreement.

Chapter three will focus on the scope and methodology utilized in gathering pertinent data, and chapter four will discuss the study itself, investigating Groupthink in the Facebook setting and providing subsequent analysis of the information collected. The fifth and final chapter will provide summaries and conclusions derived from the analysis, examine the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for further research in the field.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Philosophical Assumptions

The rapidly developing scope of computerized social networking across the globe and the subsequent influence this technology may eventually wield over the international political and organizational landscapes is a truly remarkable societal phenomenon. As the “Facebook” experience expands, the entire culture involved has begun to redefine the concept of “community,” beckoning academic exploration into how Groupthink may potentially emerge in this new the social order. The growth of online social networking communities is presently outpacing current research attempts at understanding their exact sphere of influence, beckoning the question: “are we, as scholars (and thus stewards of societal betterment), ethically obligated to devote considerable research to this topic?” While there is some disagreement in the academic community, regarding how “Groupthink” contributes to failed political decisions - there is little debate about the fact that the consequences of failed policies, namely the loss of human life, warrant efforts to find future solutions. This research obligation, coupled with opportunity provided by the sheer volume of publicly observable data on sites, such as Facebook, makes this instrument for investigating Groupthink so tremendously valuable.

Understanding Groupthink

The Perception of Unanimity

Organizational properties conducive to Groupthink begin with the illusion of unanimity. This component of Groupthink involves a condition in which decision makers

operate under the implicit understanding that the opinion of the majority has unanimous approval. As Dr. Rebecca Cline points out, the investigation of illusory unanimity has garnered limited empirical research, and of the data available, most studies occurred without being “cast as operational derivations of Janis’s concepts of symptoms of Groupthink” (Cline, 1990). Accordingly, her investigational model is consistent with several theoretical attempts to code Groupthink symptoms empirically (Ahlfinger, 2001, Jervis, 1976, Thompson, 1994). To solve for the research pitfalls of preexisting models, Cline’s approach assessed group inclination towards premature concurrence seeking by coding agreement and disagreement in a controlled Groupthink environment (Cline, 1990). Her methodology is an expansion of Janis’s 1982 revisit to the Groupthink process, wherein he views the Watergate scandal through the lens of Groupthink – which he more narrowly identifies as concurrence seeking (Janis, 1982).

Haslam and Ryan (2006) also seek to avoid the pitfalls of prior research methodologies, and investigate this condition within Janis’s operational derivations of Groupthink. Modeling their approach akin to Dietz-Uhler’s (1996) paradigm, their study explores the probability of groups believing they have concurrent social identities to remain committed to faltering projects versus the commitment of groups without this illusory unanimity (Haslam, Ryan, 2006). Their methodology involves manipulating social identity salience, in efforts to isolate the test samples for comparative data sets. In both studies, the outcomes occurred as predicted, concluding that the formation of “experimentally induced social identification” resulted in continual commitment to faltering projects.

This sustained commitment was a contributing element in NASA's persistence in the decision to proceed with the ill-conceived 1986 launch of the space shuttle Challenger (Griffin, 1997, Moorhead, Ference, Neck, 1991). During the process, NASA maintained that their management team was in complete agreement about the shuttle's preparedness, ultimately resulting in the tragic mid air explosion that killed the shuttle crew (Moorhead, Ference, Neck, 1991). This contention, however, ultimately proved to be a misrepresentation of the perspectives harbored by individuals involved in the launch decision. Following the disaster, many testimonies revealing internal disagreement, dismissal of serious concerns from an outside actor and supervisory arrogance confirmed many of Janis's suspicions that the Groupthink condition was the likely culprit (Moorhead, Ference, and Neck, 1991).

The process occurs within the business realm as well, often deemed as "Pluralistic Ignorance" (Westphal, Bednar, 2005). This is used to explain why board members often underestimate the level of concern fellow administrators may have about a failing strategy once it has been implemented. Because of this, directors reserve their warnings and dismiss opposing views, making strategic change more difficult.

Often, Social Psychologists also define this symptom with the term "false consensus" in their research in the field of Pluralistic Ignorance (Berkowitz, 2004, Ross, Greene & House, 1977). In this interrelated field of study, the Illusion of Unanimity (false consensus) produces negative behavior considered socially normative by the group's participants. Researchers Kypri & Langley (2003) demonstrate this process by showing the perception that alcohol is a social norm among individuals who consume alcohol. Other theorists have linked the phenomenon to the behavior of smokers and their

concept of the prevalence of individuals who smoke in society (Sherman, Presson, Chassin, Corty, Olshavsky, 1983).

Discounting Warnings and Dismissing Conflicting Views

These processes of discounting conflicting views and dismissing warnings are interrelated Groupthink symptoms of insulated group mentalities (Janis, 1972, 1977, 1982). As discussed earlier, Moorhead, Ference and Neck (1991) examined how the NASA administrators ignored warnings from Morton Thiokol engineers prior to launching the space shuttle Challenger. In this situation, the specific qualms voiced by the engineers were that the weather conditions were not conducive to launch. More specifically, and certainly more alarmingly, was the fact that the shuttle O-ring seals - deemed "critical" to rocket function - had yet to be evaluated at temperatures below 53 degrees Fahrenheit. Nonetheless, NASA managers continued, feeling invulnerable to in-flight fatality because it had never occurred in prior launches where the risk of O-ring failure was also present (Griffin, 1997).

Ahlfinger's (2001) research design also confirms that the rate in which groups reach decisions, without discussion of conflicting viewpoints and warnings, amplifies with the presence of agenda-promoting leadership. When evaluated against groups lacking promotional leadership, groups led by preference-pushing leadership demonstrated these symptoms at a higher rate, thus reaching decisions with less resistance from individuals harboring information warning against the action or conflicting viewpoints (Ahlfinger, 2001).

This is historically evident in the Bay of Pigs invasion (1959-1962) because of the strong disagreement from several of President Kennedy's top advisors. However, this

particular symptom of Groupthink, as Robert S. Baron (2005) suggests, is difficult to use in Groupthink study because they cannot accurately isolate it in lab conditions utilizing the scientific method.

Group Bias and Stereotyping

The Stereotyping of opponent views is another condition symptomatic of the Groupthink process. In the Challenger scenario, NASA's dismissal of cautionary warnings occurred as a byproduct of group insulation and from stereotyping the Morton Thiokol consulting engineers as inferior to the NASA managers (Moorhead, Ference, Neck, 1991). Steven Alderton, a Wayne State University researcher, focuses on how these antecedent conditions of the Groupthink hypothesis can predict the polarization of groups and explain the process in which groups construct their arguments (Alderton, 1981). His methodology incorporated a strategy of creating pseudo jury panels to evaluate circumstances with evidence heavily biased towards guilt or innocence (Alderton, 1980; Myers and Kaplan 1976). This biased "predecision" process causes group members to augment their perception of the controversial situation in favor of a particular argument and stereotype the elements involved (Brownstein, 2003).

Group bias also emerges in Jervis's (1976) exploration of interrelated Groupthink symptoms stemming from group-bias and Henningson's (2006) study assessing "retrospective sensemaking." Additionally, these studies confirm biases produced group arrogance and increased the potential for poor decision-making.

One hurdle in bias testing is the process of clearly identifying the incident when it occurs. This is because bias in Groupthink models may not always be entirely transparent. The element complicating the process is the reality that bias may also

inadvertently result in positive outcomes - depending on the nature of the bias. Thusly, Henningson (2006) conducted experiments utilizing “hidden profile” groups. These various groups expressed the likelihood of biased-information “oversampling” in particular Groupthink structures (Henningson, 2006).

Group Member Conformity

The aforementioned “hidden profile” groups (Henningson, 2006) created situations wherein members withhold information contrary to group consensus. This practice is symptomatic of Janis’s Groupthink process of group members pressuring conformity (Janis 1972, 1977, 1982). Researchers, like Henningson, also note that in this dynamic, groups are more vulnerable to the persuasive efforts of “directive leaders” and are prone to electing inferior decisions (Henningson, 2006., Larson, Foster-Fishman, and Franz, 1998).

Park Won-Woo’s (2000) empirical investigation into the Groupthink phenomenon uses a 24 variable experiment with groups developed through ad-hoc alliances. In this approach, the model evaluates conformity through the lenses of a case study, lab experiment and subsequent content analysis (Won-Woo 2000). The procedure involves presenting subjects with a scenario for assessment and then proceeds to manipulate the individual knowledge of the particular scenario for several group members, though not all. He then evaluates how much individual knowledge remains withheld for the sake of within-group cooperation. Ultimately, he finds that Janis’s predictions proved valid in only two of twenty-three cases.

Kitts (2003) however, finds that in cases of Pluralistic Ignorance members will conceal “counternormative” behavior, because they overestimated the group concept of

normalcy. His research demonstrates how members in student cooperative houses, each only serving meatless products, operated under anti-meat norms while in the house or around house members regardless of their own actual dietary preferences (Kitts, 2003).

The same is true in Van Boven's investigational study of student support, including both public and private doubts, about issues such as affirmative action (Van Boven, 2000). His research suggests that sociopolitical norms, like the acceptance of affirmative action have resulted in student overestimation of affirmative action support by their peers. Consequently, personal objection remains reserved or kept within more intimate group settings.

Kramer's (1998) exploration of Groupthink is reflective, incorporating the recovered memoirs, personal accounts and newly available pertinent government documents, into his evaluation of the Bay of Pigs incident. His research suggests that group member conformity, and the pressures reinforcing it, are not as prevalent in the event as had been previously suggested by Janis (Kramer, 1998). By incorporating individual accounts of advisory groups to Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy, he demonstrates how these contributing elements of Groupthink occurred in varying degrees during the Bay of Pigs incident.

This type of methodology, like those analyzed by Baron, is the most difficult because it is challenging to conduct in a clinical research atmosphere. Retrospective evaluations of past events, such as Kramer's, have a comparatively large burden of proof relative to Van Boven and Won Woo's empirical investigations. Another difficulty that stems from investigating group conformity is that there exist multitudes of atypical findings linked to this symptom specifically. A prominent theorist in Groupthink

research, Paul 't Hart lends credence to these contentions in his case analysis of the Iran-Contra event, revealing how contradictory the proceedings actually were to Janis's defined symptom of group cohesiveness ('t Hart, 1990). He also applies these critical review techniques to depict how the Watergate scandal too lacked the entire Groupthink symptom profile given the intra-group rivalry present in the members involved.

Mindguards

These forms of ideological insulation are elements integral to Groupthink and often exacted by another defined symptom of this process, during which, individuals act as "Mindguards" (Janis, 1972, 1977, 1982). Thompson's (1994) laboratory based studies indicate how an insulated group mentality and the tendency to dismiss conflicting evidence lead to failed policy outcomes and were interrelated Groupthink elements present in the United States involvement, and sustained commitment, in the Vietnam War.

This form of directive leadership occurs when group members act to insulate the group from information that may otherwise detract from group consensus. These "Mindguards" act as the instrument of ideological insulation, shielding the group from conflicting viewpoints (Janis, 1972, 1977, 1982). This was shown in the structurally exclusive decision making body involved in the Gulf crisis (Yetiv, 2003). In his research, Janis also determined Robert Kennedy, brother of former U.S. president John F. Kennedy, occupied the role of the "Mindguard" in his evaluation of the "Bay of Pigs" invasion (Janis, 1972).

Hergovich demonstrates the escalation of this symptom in times of international conflict – examining the prevalence of "self-appointed mind-guards" from in-group

leadership during the Northern Ireland conflict (Hergovich, 2003). The methodology applied, like Kramer's (1998), was a non-laboratory phenomenological evaluation. His approach specifically examined articles from *The Economist* magazine published during the period spanning between 1946 and 1990 – and he derived his evaluations accordingly. Isolating Mindguards in a recreated lab condition, utilizing the scientific method – is also a challenging process and likely to yield erratic findings.

Invulnerability and the Illusion of Morality

The Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy (1986) reveals how the illusion of invulnerability can also lead to failed decision-making in groups. The perception of invulnerability led the designers of the shuttle Challenger to dismiss indicators that suggested the project was not entirely safe, and to censor the concerns expressed by project engineers (Peterson, Owens, Tetlock, Fan, Martorana, 1998).

This misconception too produces continued group commitment to failing projects. When empirically analyzed, management teams in Fortune 500 companies exhibit vigilance during failed projects (Peterson, Owens, Tetlock, Fan, Martorana, 1998) when compared to their successful counterparts.

Lintonen shows how the EU sanctioning of Chechnya, deemed an inherently difficult task, is resultant of both the illusion of invulnerability and European Union council's belief in its own inherent morality (Lintonen, 2004). The European Union, he contends, has accepted policy risk and defective rationality in their judgment on the issue, creating an atmosphere of heightened potential of policy failure. Halbesleben, Buckley and Sauer (2004) demonstrate in their investigation of Pluralistic Ignorance that both students and lawyers harbor the perception of ethical superiority versus their peers.

An Answer to Critiques on Groupthink Research

Hardin, Fuller and Valacich (2006) found Groupthink to be an effective strategy for attaining optimal results by administering their research to virtual teams, which they feel were ideal instruments for measuring the construct. The quality of the outcomes in their research was relative to the level of consensus on the decision from the decision-making body. Schafer explores antecedent conditions as well, among other structural factors over an 18-year span (1975 through 1993), involving 31 different cases of decision-making (2002). His findings, using 21 policy experts to assign outcome values, suggest that situation variables are actually far less important in determining outcomes and the quality of information dispensation. Choi and Kim (1999) also contend that the symptoms of Groupthink are not necessarily associated with each other. Such findings build upon the notion that Groupthink involves two processes, and support the idea that research focused more specifically on the various individual symptoms of Groupthink, rather than the phenomenon as a whole may be more appropriate. Additionally, McCauley (1989) also asserts that Groupthink does not automatically produce less-than optimal results, making identifying the process difficult to perform consistently.

THE FACEBOOK PHENOMENON

An Overview of Facebook

Social networking sites, a growing trend in nearly all demographics of the developed world, have revolutionized human interaction. Facebook, a once-Ivy League phenomenon, founded by then-Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg in February of 2004 has expanded to hundreds of campuses and business networks worldwide (Fact sheet, 2008). At present, the site hosts 90 million members and with the fifth highest Web traffic rating on the Web, Facebook's social networking boom shows little signs of slowing (Alexa Traffic Rankings, 2008).

College students are able to use this utility to connect with classmates, view random members within their university network or meet complete strangers. Likewise, incoming college students can peruse future course mates, fellow freshmen, investigate potential roommates and research campus organizations (Millar, 2007). Meanwhile, users from all age sets can reconnect with distant friends, manage their social network, and meet new individuals through the Web. All of these things create a publicly observable, large-scale model of communities on the Internet.

Adding to the appeal is that users can accomplish all of this while sitting in front of a personal computer, which is why Internet social networks are so pivotal for researchers examining in-group influence and member conformity. These interpersonal exchanges occur in an online infrastructure supporting a far more grandiose network than can be physically maintained via face-to-face interaction. Group exchanges in these forums occur on a macrocosm scale versus small group research, thus providing us with

an exploded diagram of group cohesion. This is because electronic networking sites such as Facebook “increase the range of social networks by enabling people to connect with even more people than before” their inception (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2006).

Financial indicators also seem to suggest that this technology will continue to expand at its already rapid pace. Recent valuations of the total Facebook network concluded it has an estimated worth nearing \$15 billion dollars. This figure is derived from the recent Microsoft acquisition of 1.6% of the site at the cost of \$240 million dollars (Palmer, 2007) and the November 3rd 2007 purchase of a 0.4 percent stake for \$60 million dollars by Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing (Liedtke, 2007). However, even more revealing of Facebook’s impressive growth is the fact that this appraisal comes less than 2 years following an attempted \$750 million dollar acquisition of the site. Incidentally, it was a bid that fell well short of the alleged then-asking price of \$2 billion dollars - which is still less than a seventh of the current valuation (Rosenbush, 2006). All of this ultimately means that if the projected figures are indeed close to accurate, then the now-4 year-old site has seemingly limitless social networking potential and will profoundly alter the way we interact in the future.

Another attractive quality of using Facebook to derive sociological data pertaining to Groupthink is the long term potential of the site. Many users want to publicize their presence to other members with shared affiliations such as a college network or regional location. Such openness is also one of the key features making Facebook a rather inviting realm for potential users. Default settings make current members readily findable – making reconnecting with old friends relatively effortless, all while protecting personal data. Essentially, the attractiveness to outsiders, coupled with each member’s ability to

invite unregistered friends to the network, provides a perfect formula for growth. With such allure, it is of little surprise that the growth in user participation has elevated the site into the upper tier of Internet traffic, and done so at an incredibly rapid pace.

Monthly Facebook Traffic Comparison

Date	Total Visits (millions)
May 2006	14.07
Jan 2007	27.97

Source: ComScore Media Metrix

As the above data set reveals, the total visit count for the Facebook site essentially doubled in just a 6-month period. This sense of segregated security is a likely culprit for why Facebook has also become the number one public upload site for photos on the internet (Beaver, 2007), with 85% of college members logging in at least once per week (Arrington, 2005). According the Ridgewood, New Jersey-based “Student Monitor,” on college campuses Facebook and Beer remain tied as being the second most “in” thing following Apple’s “iPod” (Associated Press, 2006).

But while it is the college oriented component of Facebook that has most commonly been associated with the site, it is important to note that the largest growing demographic on Facebook is, in fact, the “above 35” crowd. And although the under-18 participant pool still trails the “college-aged” member totals, much of that is likely attributable to the fact that people in that age bracket were not granted the ability to create accounts prior to September of 2006 (Thinkubator, 2007)

Age Distribution of Facebook Visitors

Percentage of Visitors	Age of visitors
39%	35 or older
12%	25 to 34
29%	18 to 24
20%	13 to 17

Source: ComScore Media Metrix

As research samples go seldom are such demographic spreads this easily accessible, let alone at the touch of a mouse. From the “Social Network” perspective, Facebook allows individuals to manage interpersonal ties at a multitude of levels of closeness and interconnectedness via privacy controls and messaging (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2006). Users regulate the frequency of contact, amount and type of information exchanged and mode of communication with personalized settings within their Facebook account. The network is an avenue for various means for resource exchange, such as posting on a friend member’s “wall,” sending him or her private messages or simply “poking” another individual. Additionally, multiple fields in member profiles exist (with new applications constantly being developed) providing space to share personal information such as individual status, friend lists, mutual friends, photos, personal notes/blogs and group memberships – to name a few (Yadiv, 2006).

Research Questions

The following questions were designed to build upon known experimental research methodologies in the field of Groupthink by examining the condition as it

manifests itself in the Facebook community in order to supplement the limitations of past research models. Essentially, the aim is to overcome the methodological constraints of clinic-based investigations into the symptoms of Groupthink. The primary questions driving this research are:

1. Can the symptoms of illusory unanimity, discounting warnings contrary to group mentality, the illusion of morality, stereotyping opposing views, pressuring group members to conform, dismissing conflicting views, the perception of unanimity and “Mindguards” be examined through computer mediated communication – namely the social networking site “Facebook?”
2. If so, are the prior limitations of Groupthink study (specifically the application of the scientific method) solvable by utilizing computer-based social network sites in research?

My investigational strategy involved collecting and analyzing related research on Groupthink and isolating the symptomology of Groupthink within the structure of Facebook groups. Further explanation of this methodology occurs in the next chapter. The literature review addresses the findings of researchers in several related academic disciplines to extract the most effective methodologies and conclusions pertinent to conducting an exploration of the Groupthink phenomenon in social networking.

Facebook, an emerging electronic landscape is a relatively new networking phenomenon for researchers to investigate when compared the settings primarily

discussed in the scientific literature that presently exists in the field of Groupthink research. Nonetheless, the existing theoretical frameworks are useful guides for establishing new methodologies for investigating the condition on Facebook, as there are strong parallels between those group constructs and the newer organizational workings of Facebook groups.

CHAPTER III: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

This thesis examines the process of Groupthink in the realm of Internet-based social networking sites like Facebook. While there are alternative social networking sites existent on the World Wide Web, this study primarily isolates the specific design components of Facebook for the sake of specificity. However, many of the conclusions stemming from this examination are pertinent to similar sites given the prevalence of shared characteristics - in both formatting and in user applications. In addition, because this study is preliminary, it provides a theoretical basis enabling future researchers to conduct substantially more-comprehensive investigations based upon the governing principles of this design. Because online social networks integrate elements of traditional social interaction with computer-mediated communication, research must also become integrative in order to examine psycho-sociological theories developed to explain “normative” face-to-face interaction in a manner more germane to this emerging online societal construct.

Methodology of the Study

The elected methodology involves an integrative approach to studying Groupthink, combining historical methods and analysis as well as research components examining a specific case study. The ensuing study will first provide a brief historical examination of online interaction, including findings from earlier applications such as chat rooms and interest-based online communities that preceded the inception of Facebook. This is primarily to establish a basis for explaining the elements investigated within the remainder of the research design because the following examination postulates

how the specific symptoms of Groupthink may manifest within the structural confines of the Facebook group format utilizing the traditional definitions associated with the process. Furthermore, this thesis tests the validity of these assertions about evaluating Groupthink within this theoretical framework, examining these tenants as they apply to members of a publicly viewable Facebook group characterized by strong ideological unity.

In addition, this thesis examines several additional research applications for Facebook, showing the immense research potential that Facebook presents for social scientists in a multitude of disciplines – legitimizing its usefulness as a valid investigational tool. Because of the specific type of sample group used in this study, the analysis is preliminary and thus primarily useful as a tool for assisting future researchers in the development of further studies and not meant as a generalization for all organizational dynamics.

Accordingly, the measures administered in this thesis involve a hybridized approach to social research, utilizing historical analyses such as Kramer (1998) and Hart's (1990) explorations into group member conformity and Hergovich's (2003) investigation of mindguards coupled with a case-study analysis. Structurally, this approach involves pairing a non-laboratory phenomenological evaluation of Groupthink with a scaled-down representation in the Facebook setting.

Blending research methodologies produces alternative models for future empirical studies on the topic of "Groupthink" in the context of computerized social networks and encourages further research in this emerging topic matter. The first portion will apply the defined symptoms of Groupthink, as defined by Irvin Janis (1972) to the basic framework

of the Facebook group design. To supplement this structural analysis, an accompanying case study evaluation provides additional evidence of these characteristics. This portion of the analysis utilizes publicly observable behavior on an “open” Facebook group created by the researcher (Appendix A), wherein participant identity remains confidential and all general group information is secured through a consent survey to preserve the ethical credibility of this supplemental case study (Appendix B).

CHAPTER IV: THE STUDY

Groupthink on Facebook

Facebook's research applications are remarkably vast so the site has significant potential as an academic utility for investigating Groupthink. There is substantial evidence confirming that the symptoms that Janis uses to define Groupthink - or as sociologists have deemed it - "Pluralistic Ignorance," are present in online communities just the same as in traditional group constructs (Westphal, Bednar, 2005). In smaller digital communities such as chat rooms, which form by social identification - people often refuse information that is contradictory to online group attitudes - which really reflects three key conditions that are integral to diagnosing Groupthink: Group member conformity, dismissing conflicting views and discounting the warnings of individuals in disagreement (Thurlow, C., Lengel, L., & Tomic, A. 2006). However, because there is a condition of anonymity in these cases, the authenticity of member preferences and frequency of expressing their actual beliefs is clinically difficult, if not impossible, to gauge. Thus, the perceived invulnerability attributed to Groupthink in these cases may be purely a virtue of participant anonymity. These are two major hurdles inherently alleviated by the nature of the Facebook community construct.

These symptoms in particular are of great significance to researchers because, as Robert S. Baron concludes, they have traditionally proven to be uniquely troublesome to classify in typical social research settings (2005). However, Facebook provides an alternative means for solving this conundrum. This is because Facebook frames the process of ideological identification in a different manner, combining the useful elements

of both chat rooms and clinical studies, revealing member identities and instilling accountability in individual actions without compromising the clarity of antecedent conditions. The result is a new kind of research setting that provides answers to Robert Baron's (2005) critique of the invariant quality of Groupthink in-group decision making, which he describes through his "ubiquity model of Groupthink." This particular examination of the existing data suggests that the primary shortcoming of Groupthink research to date is that linking certain antecedent conditions to controversial decisions has, in large part, been erroneous thus far (Baron, 2005).

Many of these analytical shortcomings resolve themselves by default in a study focusing on Groupthink in online social networks – primarily due to the built-in antecedent structures that are already integral to Facebook's design. While chat-based anonymity allows group members to un-censor their own perceptions of ethical superiority versus their peers, having a public profile that is viewable by a group (such as is the case on Facebook) curbs erratic misbehavior and incentivizes conformity to the interests of the group. Voicing dissenting viewpoints in a highly opinionated Facebook group would be counterproductive for individuals because such behavior results in member alienation and possible removal from the group by administrators. This social construct designates rank and order, and even institutes a "Mindguard" with moderating authority in the form of "group administrators." In addition, each group already possesses an antecedent group purpose, subsequently inducing ideological identification between group members. Both of these conditions contribute to an environment that is optimal for developing premature concurrence seeking (Cline, 1990). They also promote the development of ideological barriers. Furthermore, the combination of these elements

fosters an atmosphere that is conducive to group members' insulation from ideas that are harmful to maintaining group complacency. (Janis, 1972, 1976, 1977, 1982)

Depending on their administrative position within a Facebook group, self-appointed "Mindguards" can have considerable censorship ability despite the fact they have little control in sheltering group members from information outside of the online group. Because there is an additional wealth of information available to all group members accessible with the ease of opening up an additional Web browser, complete group insulation is impossible to accomplish. However, a group administrator dictates everything from membership, information posted to the group, regulating member posts on the group wall, the very existence of a wall, and the group's mass emails.

Group Cohesion and Mobilization

Beyond that, there are additional caveats of Facebook interest groups that can assist researchers in isolating the symptomology of Groupthink. This is because all of the unique online groups within Facebook contain elements to attract members that Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic appropriately deem as "birds of a feather." As a result, Facebook groups created for particular "shared interests" are, by design, already primed with antecedent conditions conducive to the illusion of unanimity, since group members associate with each other under the assumption that they harbor shared values – or at minimum, the shared value that is the group cause.

One means for identifying this cohesion is examining the commonalities between group members of a particular Facebook group. However, this method is complicated when the group members have restricted access to their individual profiles. Because directly contacting each individual to extrapolate such data can be intrusive and met with

resistance, the most readily available data on group ideological polarization is accessible through the information provided on the publicly viewable group page.

Using the data from the researcher-administered Facebook group, member shared-value sets and antecedent conditions for prospective-member cohesion are clearly observable. The most prominent examples come from examining the additional groups that members belonged to – particularly where overlap occurs.

Five Most Prevalent Group Affiliations of Sample Group Members

- Stop Hillary Clinton: (One Million Strong AGAINST Hillary)
Common Interest - Politics
- 1,000,000 Strong For Stephen T Colbert
Entertainment & Arts - Celebrities
- I Support Israel in the War Against Terrorism
Common Interest - Beliefs & Causes
- End the Welfare State
Common Interest - Politics
- ANTI Hillary Clinton for president`08
Common Interest - Politics

Of these shared group affiliations, 80% explicitly belong to the categorization of “Common Interest – Politics” and the remaining group, though technically categorized “Entertainment” is highly political – as it pertains to the presidential election.

Additionally, 40% of these shared interests dealt specifically with the opposition to one presidential candidate in particular. The overlapping group membership, coupled with the duplicate missions of two of the groups, depicts the seemingly congruent belief structure harbored by group members. Additionally, the particularly strong political tendencies of the sample group members are highly useful in clearly identifying shared ideological identification and insulated group mentality. Also, because the tenants of the five most prevalent group associations embody heavily subjective political attitudes they contribute

to an illusion of unanimity – shaping the group atmosphere and shared dialogue in a manner that is consistent with the perceived “majority view” (Janis, 1982).

Just as online affiliations on Facebook can be very loose, so too can they foster very powerful personal identification between members. Intimacy between community members potentially stem from perceptions of inflated similarity encouraged by shared group memberships (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2006). This illusion of unanimity is a primary symptom of the Groupthink process, and when it exists as an antecedent condition between members joining a group - the onset of additional symptoms becomes more probable. This is particularly the case for members who may merely be “Facebook Friends,” otherwise meaning that they have not actually met outside of the Facebook community – and only share the bond of a particular mutual interest. In these social dynamics, the participants have the opportunity to market themselves in the manner influencing how others perceive them.

That said, a Facebook network is unlike a chat room (or most virtual communities for that matter), in that it removes much of the anonymity that has long characterized Internet usage. Misbehavior is “self-defeating,” because actions occur without a veil of secrecy (Grossman, 2007). In this socially engineered realm, there is enforcement of member accountability without compromising each participant’s information privacy and keeping profile data exclusive to the network or individuals they select. However, this “identity” accompanies ideological expectations when members mobilize via ad-hoc alliances to promote an action. Just like group decision-making bodies in government, organized Facebook groups exact outcomes on issues when they choose to mobilize.

This is evident by the site’s recent modification of the “Facebook Beacon”

program in compliance with pressures from Facebook groups and online privacy activists MoveOn.org (Auchard, 2007). The rapid response from the Facebook community to halt these activities and maintain the network's insulation is prominently due to collective action by Facebook groups. Members harboring negative feelings about the software aligned to prevent Facebook from going the way of many chat sites - a collective experience that Lev Grossman (2007) describes as "the great experiment [that] proved that some of us are wonderful and interesting but that a lot of us are hackers and pranksters and hucksters" (p.54). Retrospectively, it was an assertion that ultimately proved to be true. The Beacon software, as it turns out, allegedly reports Facebook members' Internet actions to third party sites regardless of whether the users are "logged on" to Facebook or if they have authorized the release of their actions according to CA's Threat Research Group (Perez, 2007).

In response to the group actions, on December 5, 2007 Mark Zuckerberg released a statement in the Facebook blog section of the website www.facebook.com addressing these concerns. The below excerpt from the Internet press release depicts the true gravity of the concern:

Facebook has succeeded so far in part because it gives people control over what and how they share information. This is what makes Facebook a good utility, and in order to be a good feature, Beacon also needs to do the same. People need to be able to explicitly choose what they share, and they need to be able to turn Beacon off completely if they don't want to use it. This has been the philosophy behind our recent changes. Last week we changed Beacon to be an opt-in system, and

today we're releasing a privacy control to turn off Beacon completely.

(Zuckerberg, 2007)

Thus, not unlike committees and government decision-making groups, Facebook groups possess the ability to foster social change. Such powerful group influence is the reason why Facebook, which gained notoriety by having an emphasis on privacy, is scrambling to rework the software in accordance with the group demands. This component, which mirrors the normative concept of a committee structure, makes Facebook an ideal “laboratory setting” for examining group decision making.

The 50,000+ person strong petition against the Beacon feature is just further proof of the collective strength wielded by the growing Facebook social network. The movement itself also reveals how members that are not even socially connected can utilize the site to develop powerful ad-hoc alliances. This is predictably evident in politically driven Facebook groups. For example, as of December 5, 2007 the “Students for Ron Paul” Facebook Group Exceeded 50,000 members and had more than 375 group chapters (PressMediaWire, 2007). Groups of this magnitude have the mobilization power to influence government elections in a profound manner, particularly since they do not have, nor do they need a physical location to meet. Instead, they utilize each member’s respective Internet connection as a portal to convene. Recognizing this, ABC News and Facebook announced a collaborative project to execute during the 2008 presidential election trail. The “Debate Groups” tool enabled users to discuss the January 5, 2008 debates, directly posting them onto Facebook via ABC (Rhee, 2007). With a membership scope this expansive, the specific data that can be extrapolated concerning shared value structures and group cohesion is immense.

Usefulness for the Study

Many Social Science researchers have already begun to take notice of the immense resource Facebook and similar sites provide for academic inquiry. Harvard researchers in conjunction with scientists from the University of California, Los Angeles, have embarked on a project examining the Facebook profiles of one university's entire class of students (Rosenbloom, 2007). The reason Facebook oriented studies of this immense scope are becoming increasingly popular is because, as Vincent Roscigno, editor of *The American Sociological Review*, points out, "for studying young adults, Facebook is the key site of the moment" (Rosenbloom, 2007). Proving that Roscigno is not alone in his beliefs, Stephanie Rosenbloom's (2007) findings also revealed that social scientists at Indiana, Northwestern, Pennsylvania State, Tufts, and at the University of Texas are testing the traditional theories in their respective fields on Facebook. The investigational findings revealed that Facebook-oriented research spans multiple academic disciplines including psychological theories on "relationships, identity [and] self-esteem" as well as clinical evaluations pertaining to sociological understandings of the collective action process and even political engagement.

"..it is Facebook's role as a Petri dish for the social sciences -- sociology, psychology and political science -- that particularly excites some scholars, because the site lets them examine how people, especially young people, are connected to one another, something few data sets offer, the scholars say."

(Rosenbloom, 2007, p. 1)

An additional reason for electing this test setting is the immense public usage of the site. Just as the financial data suggests, the popularization of Facebook is truly a remarkable occurrence. Nonetheless, there are a myriad of influencing factors contributing to Facebook's ascension among competing online communities. The organizational landscape of Facebook itself is highly appealing to many members and strongly responsible for the site's success. In fact, according to Lev Grossman (2007), much of the Facebook popularity ironically stems from "a growing popular irritation with the Internet." The rationale behind this contention is because Facebook defies the traditional anonymity of the Internet, which he contends "has anarchy in its DNA," (p.54) by forcing members to be accountable for the things they place on the site (Grossman, 2007). This starkly contrasts alternative modes of online communication such as chat rooms where contributors often use the shield of being unidentified as license to reveal their "authentic" (and often undesirable) self. What makes this online accountability important from a research standpoint is that actions performed by site members mirror the social communications patterns exhibited in typical social interaction.

Once individuals join the network, the shield of online anonymity no longer exists and they become completely linked to their Internet actions. The willingness of individuals, to divulge otherwise private information about their personal lives, is likely attributable, in most part, to the filters put in place by Facebook personnel to limit access to personal information. However, the interaction most pertinent for observations in Groupthink would stem from viewing groups of shared affiliation – of which there is no shortage. Furthermore, misrepresentation of a member's true self is a violation of

Facebook policy, and results in termination – which makes the sampling of member actions a more credible survey than that of an anonymous online poll (Locke, 2007).

By having personal profiles limited to networks of common affiliation, the site makes the task of designing a group with antecedent conditions catering to Groupthink relatively simple. This is particularly the case when examining structures within the network that are segregated by institutional membership (as was verified through .edu university email addresses), but it can also be extended to network-wide groups of ad hoc alliances that have been developing in the rapidly increasing non-academic public sector.

In fact, membership is open to an ever-growing base of students and employees attending any of the 30,000+ Facebook-recognized schools, colleges, universities, organizations, and companies that are located in the United States as well as several additional English-speaking nations (Yadiv, 2006). This is why privacy controls can be relaxed and tightened to the individual user's discretion. This is also why analysis of the multitude of group movements and interactions has such large term potential in the academic understanding of group decision-making and collective action.

News journalists have also recognized Facebook's research potential as a resource for investigating trends and generating stories. This process gained recent notoriety during the Virginia Tech massacre when a campus paper, the Collegiate Times, utilized social networking sites to research and post the first list of victims at 4 a.m. the following day (Spencer, 2007). While this particular event is the grim extreme, it is revealing of the type of possibilities that arise from Facebook-assisted journalism, as the process of "interviewing" evolves into the computer-mediated realm.

Companies are also recognizing the Facebook collaborative model for solutions to tasks in the workplace. Accordingly, investigational studies into the Groupthink dilemma - as it manifests itself on Facebook - can have incredible potential in preventing future organizational pitfalls. According to Brian Fetherstonhaugh, chairman and CEO of OgilvyOne Worldwide, a “Facebook approach” to creating business solutions would entail approaching problems with the collaborative efforts of their employees "let[ting] 15,000 people solve it in an hour" (Havenstein, 2007). Such revolutionary group decision making, should it come to fruition, would be vulnerable to the same Groupthink symptomology that has long plagued failed policy makers. The imperative task for researchers in the field, naturally, is adapting the sociological understandings of a prior generation’s Groupthink research to apply in a drastically different community construct. Facebook has created a new generation of workers needing revolutionized IT tools and policies to accomplish solutions, contends Chris Starlet (Havenstein, 2007). He argues persuasively that, as the current college crowd cascades into the workforce so too will their Facebook mentality.

One company, Salesforce, has already implemented these Facebook-esque business links by allowing customers to create “ad hoc business networks” with partners (Veitch, 2007). Using this model, organizations will be able to use the Salesforce “on-demand platform” to share business leads, recruitment data and pricing information among other things (Veitch, 2007). Much like what individual members can do on Facebook, entire organizations can invite additional companies to join the on-demand platform and create networks. The primary difference being that these connections are instruments for building business networks instead of social networks. The service comes

at a monthly fee of \$100 per pair of companies to their transfer data and with 38,000 companies presently using the service (and company projections of having one million subscribers by the end of December) the profitability is evident (Hendrickson, 2007).

Corporate Intranet designers are also looking to Facebook for an alternative format to their failing company Intranet designs. A recent Silicon Republic survey revealed that over 50% of employees do not use company Intranets, with many citing their lack of usefulness and failure to provide access to pertinent information as the primary cause (Kennedy, 2007). Because of this, companies like Wachovia have contracted Microsoft to create a Facebook-esque social network that not only provides information relevant to the company in general (which employees have humorously named Wachipedia) but also allows employees to upload images and maintain blogs. The Intranet even incorporates presence awareness, much like Facebook (Cone, 2007).

All of this has shown that whether Facebook is being used as a social networking utility, a political action tool or by corporations for developing business models the continuing growth of Facebook is not only remarkable, it is inevitable. The expanding list of Facebook-recognized schools, colleges, universities, organizations and companies is certain to encourage membership growth in all age demographics. Nevertheless, beyond that, the nature of social networking is becoming increasingly computer mediated as more of the world connects via the Internet and the framework for this new landscape reflects the influence of the Facebook phenomenon.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

One concern that emerges when using a new research environment to observe social data is the initial ethical ambiguity. When administering any academic research on human subjects, there are federal regulations governing the ethical merits of the researcher's methodology. While there is some variance among institutional research guidelines, the primary academic consensus states that observing public behavior is within the realm of ethical conduct (Rosenbloom, 2007). However, Facebook is unlike the traditional public settings envisioned by those establishing said regulatory procedures. As Facebook researcher, Samuel D. Gosling, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin describes it: "The (federal) rules were made for a different world, a pre-Facebook world... There is a rule that you are allowed to observe public behavior, but it's not clear if online behavior is public or not." (p. 1)

However, the study setting, while unique when compared to traditional laboratory research locations, may offer the purest format for non-intrusive sociological observation. The goal of this study is to demonstrate how to conduct Groupthink research in the Facebook community. The process itself, because it is so transparent, will assist researchers seeking to better gauge the ethical limitations presented by this methodology.

Facebook, by design, embodies an atmosphere where subjects are observable unknowingly during the normal group interaction. This occurs because the participants in the study operate under their own social agenda and interactions proceed untainted by the perception of "being studied." As such, the design is as purely observational as a static

group comparison, wherein participants interact unaware of the monitoring process evaluating their actions. Therefore, this form of academic study maintains the highest levels of realism.

Another concern about this research format is that it employs non-representative sampling to reach findings. As Eszter Hargittai, a professor at Northwestern has demonstrated - Facebook does not completely represent ethnic backgrounds, education and income levels of the population since membership is “self-selecting” (Rosenbloom, 2007). His research concludes “Hispanic students were significantly less likely to use Facebook, and much more likely to use MySpace. White, Asian and Asian-American students, the study found, were much more likely to use Facebook and significantly less likely to use MySpace” (p.1).

However, it is important to recognize that the retrospective analyses of major examples of Groupthink, such as the assessment of John F. Kennedy’s advisory panel, are hardly examinations representative of the general populous. Even the Social-Psychological clinical experiments conducted in university settings, which rely heavily on voluntary student participation, sample a rather restrictive population. Relative to these alternative approaches, the process of researching Facebook data to understand Groupthink still maintains academic credibility largely by virtue of the methodology. This format for gathering observational data more effectively achieves discriminant validity than the traditional counterparts, which rely on controlled settings or historical inspection of events using numerous presumed variables. In essence, such an environment embodies the best qualities of each alternative method: A) The actors involved conduct themselves unaffected by the knowledge that their actions are being

critically analyzed. B) The group structures can still be primed with antecedent conditions making the tenants of Groupthink more accurately test-able. The confluence of these elements creates a unique environment where researchers have access to publicly viewable groups that are primed to have shared value structures, wherein member actions occur unaffected by the study itself because participants are unaware of their contribution to academic research.

For example, Facebook groups, by virtue of their design, can isolate conditions where the illusion of cohesiveness is present as an antecedent component. Accordingly, an evaluation of group activity decisively illustrates symptoms that develop when the perception of cohesiveness exists. Thus, a Facebook group, targeted for its perception of shared values, provides an ideal sampling of individuals influenced by the illusion of unanimity. In turn, such findings contribute to the research community by providing academics with a more efficient instrument for isolating a refined component of Groupthink research - how the perception of shared values influences group member actions.

Furthermore, the examination of Groupthink in Facebook groups enhances successful research techniques in the field, such as the coding methodologies utilized by Cline (1990) and Courtright (1978), by avoiding direct intervention with test subjects and thus not inadvertently priming the attitudes of the participants. High levels of realism occur in Facebook-based experiment groups because of the absence of directional leadership found in lab settings - allowing the antecedent conditions that are conducive to the illusion of cohesiveness to develop sans researcher intervention. Thus, the groups

evaluated to extrapolate comparative data will not harbor either agreement or disagreement tendencies that could otherwise taint the accuracy of the study.

For justifying these assertions, the operational definition of Groupthink applied to the study is from Irving Janis's original work identifying the process (Janis, 1972, 1976, 1977, 1982). Additionally, the aforementioned example of identifying illusory unanimity in the Facebook research setting applies the fundamental precept of gauging the symptom utilized during Rebecca Cline's (1990) investigational research into Janis's Groupthink model.

As is typical with social research, subjective assessment of social conditions has limitations by means of external factors influencing subject attitudes. The Groupthink condition of stereotyping relies on the assumption that the group identity forms out of concepts aligned against something. While such stereotyping is clearly present in groups designed around heavily debatable subject matter such as one titled "The best band in history was not The Beatles, it was The Rolling Stones!" - isolating such behavior in groups that are created with non-controversial purposes such as one titled "The Audubon Society: Connect with fellow bird watching enthusiasts!" is slightly more complex. Such groups provide little use for this research purpose.

Additionally, the task of isolating literal "Mindguards" in an online setting poses a unique challenge because, unlike in-person group interaction, participants in Facebook groups lack a means of physical control to shelter other group members from information outside of their respective group page. An additional wealth of information is available to all group members with the relative ease of opening an additional Web browser. Within this format, even the most aggressive attempts to act as a Mindguard fail to reach the full

coercive potential of face-to-face interaction, because internet bullying is moderated on Facebook – limiting the influence of Mindguards to savvy persuasion techniques, at best. As such, anything more than minimal group insulation is nearly impossible to accomplish for group members aspiring to shield others from conflicting data.

Recommendations for Further Study

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the academic research potential that Facebook presents is far too valuable to neglect. The obligation to investigational research into the process of Groupthink continues, and Facebook provides a new avenue for critically examining these processes and the advancement of academic understanding relating to the phenomenon. The isolated data provided from the research study group builds upon known experimental research methodologies in the field of Groupthink, examining the condition as it manifests itself in a Facebook community microcosm: the Facebook group. Expanding this model for researching social data has significant scientific potential for supplementing the limitations of prior research models. By overcoming the methodological constraints of clinic-based research studies used to evaluate the symptoms of Groupthink, new advancements toward Groupthink avoidance models are an increasingly realistic goal. Additionally, the advancement of research into the computer-mediated realm of communication has tremendous application in multiple disciplines within the social sciences.

Conclusions

In the traditional group interaction, where the normative community concept precedes the inclusion of online social networks, research shows that Groupthink contributes to negative organizational outcomes. In certain cases, like the Challenger

incident, these consequences have proven to be quite severe - including the tragic loss of human life and financial ruin (Moorhead, Ference, Neck, 1991). The findings in this paper also reveal that many of the same elements present within traditional group interaction are, in varying degrees, also present on computer-mediated communities like Facebook. Thus, understanding how and to what degree Groupthink will emerge in the online landscape is a research topic of tremendous importance as decision-makers are steadily incorporating social networking into their organizational infrastructure.

In addition, the expanding sphere of influence such networks have on organizational group structures creates fascinating new opportunities for qualitative and quantitative research in this emerging field of academic study. Further studies may reveal more specifically how the Groupthink symptoms translate into computer-mediated environments and offer modernized solutions relevant to identifying and preventing these conditions.

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APPENDIX A RESEARCH GROUP DESCRIPTION

Group Info

Name: Higher Education Fraudulence Must End!
 Type: Common Interest - Politics
 Description: "Believe nothing merely because you have been told it. Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be kind, conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings -- that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide." – Buddha

It's not about political leanings. Liberal, Conservative or Anarchist - people need to realize that agenda peddling in higher education harms us all! You didn't pay for half of an education, so why on earth would you allow yourself to be subjected to one?

Ever feel like every attempt at indoctrination being instructed by a professor is contradictory to your beliefs?
 Get mad! You have been cheated.

Ever feel like the positions championed in the classroom are perfectly in line with your own beliefs?
 Get mad! You have been cheated.

Public universities need to be held accountable for providing America's future leaders with beliefs on all points of the ideological spectrum - even those that they ultimately disagree with. Academic bias harms us all because it limits our thinking to a narrow range of beliefs instead of embracing the true definition of "diversity." A recent study of 18 elite Law and Journalism faculties conducted by the Center for the Study of Popular Culture revealed faculty Democrats outnumber Republicans by a factor of 7-1.

Unless we actually (and foolishly) consider 'diversity' as being comprised of people who look different, we should demand our institutions to honor their pledge to provide us with the diverse education they promised to us in exchange for our incredible tuition expenses.

The battle starts with our lawmakers. Vote to change

APPENDIX B

Dear Group Member,

The reason I am contacting you is to ask for your permission to include general, non-identifying information about your inclusion in this group for research I am conducting about group tendencies. The specific information I am seeking permission to use is the following:

1. Numerical data about the group membership totals
2. Most commonly shared group affiliations (at the time of the study)
3. The institutions represented within the group

Types of information that will NOT be included in the study:

1. Anything identifying individual group member identity
2. Anything revealing the gender or ethnicity of the group members

Despite federal rules classifying group content as publicly observable data, it is the opinion of this researcher that such assertions are ambiguous in large part due to the relatively new nature of content present on this site and sites like it. As a result, I personally feel ethically obligated to offer all participants the option of having themselves and their network affiliation removed from the data presented in my research findings. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to be removed from the group membership data, or if you have any further questions about the nature of the material being presented.

Thank you in advance,

Robert McKeever

APPENDIX C
PARTICIPANT DATAⁱ

School affiliation and number of group members at each respective institution ⁱⁱ	
Gonzaga University 1	MSU 2
Berkeley 1	Muhlenberg 1
North Carolina State University 2	Appalachian State University 3
UNC Charlotte 2	Curry 1
Greensboro College 1	Virginia Tech 1
Marquette 1	Wayne State University 1
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute 1	Cooper Union 1
SUNY Potsdam 1	Boston University 1
George Washington University 1	Liberty University 1
Catholic University 1	Longwood University 1
Hanover 1	Rhode Island Technical Institute 1
Culver Academy 1	Hood College 1
University of Georgia 1	Kennesaw State University 1
Pinson Valley High School 1	University of Birmingham 1
NYU Law 1	University of Michigan 1
Indiana 2	Tennessee Martin 1
Rivier College 2	University of Missouri - St. Louis 1
Arizona State University 1	University of North Carolina 11

ⁱ Of the 56 participants, 32 universities and 1 high school are represented

ⁱⁱ Several individual and institutional affiliations omissions were made out of respect for group members wishing to keep this information unavailable to the public.