WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ON FACEBOOK

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is an online space where people can form a self-presentation strategy and construct an identity through a personal profile. Because women are the biggest users of Facebook, this qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to explore the factors women between the ages of 18-34 consider when putting together their identity online.

The data revealed that women are acutely aware of Facebook behavior and its consequences. This awareness is demonstrated by a woman’s desire to appear a certain way for a professional audience and the fact that a woman’s judgment of other users affects her behavior on the social network.

The findings relate to Goffman’s (1959) idea of “performance” and Stryker and Burke’s (2000) Identity Theory. Specifically, the findings imply that a woman transforms her identity online as she takes on new and different roles in her life, adjusting her self-presentation strategy appropriately for each role.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Social networking sites have become an integral part of daily life for a majority of the population. Facebook in particular, with its vast amount of active monthly users, has become the “go to” place for people to “learn what their friends are doing, whom they’re dating, and even what [music] they’re listening to” (Parr, 2011). More importantly, it is the largest social network with over 800 million active users and counting (Parr, 2011).

Facebook has provided a platform for people to create an intricate profile that is their principal means for presenting themselves to an online audience (Bobkowski, 2008, p. 6). Due to the fact that details are included voluntarily on the user’s profile, the user has a choice about what to say about themselves and how to say it (Rybas & Gajjala, p. 24, 2009). The process of putting together the profile can be likened to the construction and formation of an online identity; once assembled, the profile “reveals details about [the user] as if shedding light on [their] personality” (Rybas & Gajjala, 2009, p. 16). As explained by Gearhart & Kang (2010), the authors of social networking profiles “actively use their profiles for personal identity expression” (p. 16). Further, because users have the “luxury of time” (Bobkowski, 2008, p. 6) when constructing their online identity, they have the opportunity to think and reflect about the self they want to present to their online audience.

As Smock (2010) explains, “Self-presentation is often seen as a set of processes employed by people for the purpose of convincing others that they are a particular type of person or have specific characteristics” (p. 8). As users carefully put together their
Facebook profile, they are forming an online identity congruent with the self they are aiming to present to their network of connections.

Smock (2010) highlights that the study of self-presentation allows for an increased understanding of social behavior (p. 7). This is the first time in history when such a vast amount of the population has had the opportunity to form a personal identity from scratch, thereby presenting a self that may be different than the self they present in face-to-face interactions. Uncovering *why* users choose to include or omit certain information on their profile, *how* users choose a profile picture, and *what* the thought process is behind such decisions, is important in order to understand communication behavior as it relates to identity construction and self-presentation on the largest social network, Facebook.

Though scholars from various fields have looked at social networking sites to understand multiple aspects of the social networking phenomenon, including the practices, culture, and meaning of the sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211), the research has not yet focused solely on the group that accounts for the most hours spent using social networking sites: women. Women make up the majority of social media users (Faye-Carter, 2010), with women in the 18-34 demographic being the most active (Parr, 2010). Therefore, in order to make any conclusions about how and why users create a specific identity and self-presentation strategy on Facebook, it is important to study women and their behavior on the social network.

*Importance of the Study*

The social networking phenomenon is relatively new in the grand scheme of communication studies. As researchers look to understand identity and self-presentation
in face-to-face interactions, the focus must now include the way people use and interact on social networking sites. Because the Facebook profile is complex and allows users to construct an online identity that may or may not be a true representation of who they are in face-to-face interactions, it is important to study why and how users construct their online identity and self-presentation strategy in certain ways.

Looking at the behavioral patterns of women on Facebook as they relate to this identity construction and self-presentation strategy may reveal new and important information about the social behavior of women. As such a large amount of people use Facebook to interact, and women make up the majority of those on the social network, looking at the ways women on Facebook utilize their profile to create an identity is important in order to understand identity construction and self-presentation in the social networking space.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

*Social Networking Site*

A social networking site can be defined as a website where “users can create a profile and connect that profile to others to form an explicit personal network” (Barker, 2008, p. 3). In addition, social networking sites have become a primary means of communication…in recent years (Bobkowski, 2008) as they act as venues for people to interact (Bryant, 2008).

*Social Networking Profile*

A social networking profile is a “personal web space for descriptions about the self, using multimedia components” (Gearhart & Kang, 2010).
Facebook Friend

A “Facebook friend” refers to an “established connection between Facebook users” (Smock, 2010, p. 5). This connection is established when one user sends a “friend request” to another user. When the recipient of the request accepts, the two users become “friends” on Facebook.

Tagging and Untagging Pictures

Users who upload pictures to their Facebook profile have the option to “tag” other users in the picture. “Tagging,” then means that “a user’s name is attached to the photograph, indicating that they appear in it” (Smock, 2010, p. 6). Furthermore, “once a user has been tagged in another user’s photograph, that photograph appears [in their photos section], as well as on that [section] of the original poster” (p. 6). Users who have been tagged in a picture, have the option of “untagging” themselves, thereby removing their name from the picture so it no longer appears anywhere on their profile.

Facebook Wall

The Facebook “wall” is the space where a user’s status updates will be posted, along with any recent pictures that have been added to the user’s profile. Additionally this space “serve[s] as a public message board where friends can leave notes for each other” (Smock, 2010, p. 6).

Facebook “Like”

When a user posts anything to their profile, including a status update, picture, or article, other users have the option to “like” this post. The action simply requires any user to click the word “like” below that post. When a user “likes” another user’s post, the user who posted will be notified.
Self-presentation

Self-presentation is a “theoretical construct that refers to the processes individuals use in attempting to control how other users perceive them” (Smock, 2010, p. 6).

Identity Theory

Identity Theory is a “theory of role-related choice behavior deriving from a structural symbolic interactionism…which assumes that humans are actors, recognizing the possibility of choice in human life” (Stryker, 2000, p. 26). Identity Theory also assumes that multiple roles can make up the self, which can impact role-related behavior (Gearhart & Kang, 2010).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This study is organized into five main chapters. Chapter two includes the philosophical assumptions and theoretical basis for the study, as well as a literature review focusing on the rise of social networking, its importance to the field of communication, and its relationship to identity construction and self-presentation. Additionally, this chapter provides a rationale for the study and concludes with four research questions. Chapter three is comprised of the scope and methodology of the study, highlighting design, sampling, instrumentation and procedures, analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter four provides a detailed explanation of how data was analyzed, which emerging themes were extracted from the data, and the overall results of the study. Chapter five includes the limitations of the study, further recommendations for research, and the final conclusions.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Social networking’s increasing popularity among both youth and adults makes it an area worth studying to find patterns of human behavior and communication. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, have become venues for self-presentation through complex online profiles (Smock, 2010). The Facebook profile has created a platform for people to share information about themselves with friends, acquaintances, and strangers. While authoring this profile, a process that requires continuing thought and attention, a user must decide what details about their personal life they would like to share and, with just as much thought, what details they would like to omit.

As the user creates and structures his or her online profile, an identity is being crafted and represented through text and photographs. All digitally imprinted on a user’s Facebook profile, this information becomes the user’s way of constructing a self to present to others in their network, which could otherwise be thought of as their “audience.” Most users carefully choose an identity based on the self they are aiming to present to this specific audience, and continual maintenance of the profile is often necessary.

While constructing an identity through a Facebook profile, users can choose to present a self that is congruent with who they are in face-to-face interactions, or can present a self that is different or reinvented. The way that users make such choices is a focal point for this study.
The following literature review highlights a theoretical basis for this study, examines prior contributions to the field about social networking, Facebook, creating an identity, creating a self-presentation strategy, and concludes with research questions. The focus is on the construction and maintenance of the Facebook profile, the ways in which this process contributes to online identity creation, and how women ages 18-34 view and talk about their Facebook profile as it relates to their identity and self-presentation.

**Philosophical Assumptions and Theoretical Basis**

Goffman (1959) uses the term “performance” to refer to any person’s activity that occurs during a period in which that person is continually present before a set of “observers,” or audience, and where this person has some influence over those observers (p. 55). He explains that “when an individual plays a part [in this “performance”], he implicitly requests observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess” (p. 52).

Goffman also discusses the difference between two types of performers. There are those who are completely immersed in the “act” which they put on, believing fully that the identity being portrayed to others is the actual reality. Alternatively, there are those who do not fully believe in their own act, but may derive satisfaction from knowing that they can toy with their audience and may deceive their audience for the purpose of self-interest (Goffman, 1959, p. 53). Goffman (1959) also explores the idea of a “mask” as a representation of the role a performer is trying to live up to, explaining that the mask is the self the performer would like to be (p. 55).
Goffman’s concept of performance is congruent with Stryker and Burke’s (2000) Identity Theory. Accordingly, Identity Theory is a theory of “role-related choice behavior” stemming from symbolic interactionism, which assumes that “humans are actors, recognizing the possibility of choice in human life” (Stryker, 2000, p. 26). Identity Theory posits that people may have as many identities as they have sets of role relations (Stryker, 2000, p. 28). The frame of symbolic interactionism assumes that a person’s self-conception is shaped during interactions and is an outcome of others’ responses during those interactions (p. 26).

For the purpose of this study, Facebook will be the user’s stage and the profile will be the vehicle for self-expression, self-conception, identity creation, and interaction.

**Literature Review**

*Social Networking Defined*

Social networking, once a convenient way to reunite and connect with friends and classmates, has become a social phenomenon and has transformed the way people interact. A social network can be defined as a web-based service that allows an individual to create a personal profile with information about themselves and their interests within a constrained system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). It displays a list of other users who the individual is connected with, and allows the individual to navigate their list of connections and connections made by others (Rybas & Gajjala, 2009, p. 3; Barker, 2008, p. 3). In essence, individuals who use social networking sites are able to create a profile and connect their profile to other users in order to shape an explicit personal network (Barker, 2008, p. 3).
Social networking can take place online through various websites. These websites are created specifically to either link individuals with their existing connections or to bring together strangers based on shared interests, including political views, hobbies, and location (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 210).

Though the terms “social media” and “social networking” are often used interchangeably, they are not one in the same; Social networks are a form of social media, however not all social media can be considered social networks. Whereas social networking sites offer spaces to connect with similar individuals or friends, and can serve as “micro blogs” where users share information through status updates, pictures, and the like, social media is all encompassing and refers additionally to any media which has two-way capability, such as full blogs and digital magazines (Andrews, 2011).

**The Emergence of Social Networking**

Online social networking sites have become a significant means of communication among both teens and adults in recent years (Bobkowski, 2008, p. 3). Multiple social networking sites have been introduced, including sites dedicated specifically to college students, those focused on dating, and others looking to connect business professionals. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and MySpace are among the most popular social networks to date.

In 2010, The Pew Internet and American Life Project revealed in a research report just how relevant social networking has become. The report indicated that 73% of wired American teenagers use social networks, a percentage that has steadily increased from previous research. Prior research revealed that 65% of teens used social networks in 2008 and only 55% in 2006. According to the study, 47% percent of online adults use
social networking sites, which is an increase of 10% from 2008 (Lenhart et al., 2010, p. 2). In 2009, Americans spent 17% of their time online using such networks, a percentage that tripled as compared to the year before (Warren, 2009). Currently social networking accounts for one of every six minutes spent online (Parr, 2011).

Through social networking sites, more than half of American youth have created an online profile (Barker, 2008, p. 3). These networking websites continue to become an increasingly popular arena for people to interact using the personal profile pages they have created that display both their identity and social connections (Bryant, 2008, p. 3).

Though each social network requires the user to create a profile, some networks allow users to create more complex profiles than others. Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites (Bryant, 2008, p. 3), allows members to create profiles that portray their identity through a collection of personal information. This information can include everything from religious affiliation and relationship status to favorite television shows and music (Bryant, 2008, p. 3). Because the focus of this study is about the shaping of an identity through a personal profile, it is important to look at a social networking site that allows users to create a personal profile that is complex. The nature of both the creation of the personal profile and its popularity among both youth and adults around the world makes Facebook a rich social network to use for this study.

*Facebook*

Facebook is currently the most commonly used social network among adults (Lenhart et al., 2010, p. 3) and is the fourth largest web property in audience size (Lipsman, 2011). Within a year of its February 2004 launch, Facebook boasted nearly one million users (Facebook Statistics,” 2011). When it was originally released,
Facebook was open only to college students at select universities. Eventually, however, the network became available to anyone with a university email address, and has most recently become available to everyone. By 2006, only two years into its existence, Facebook had almost 12 million active users; as it became available in other countries, the user count increased to 50 million by 2007. Currently, Facebook has over 800 million active users, 50% of whom log on to the social network on any given day, and on average, people spend over 700 billion minutes each month on the site (“Facebook Statistics,” 2011). The networking site’s reach is equally impressive: around 70% of users are outside of the United States and Facebook can be translated to more than 70 different languages.

The popularity of the site is notable. As Parr (2011) explains, “Facebook has become an integral part of our lives. It’s where we learn what our friends are doing, who they’re dating, and even what [music] they’re listening to” (p.1). A “world map of social networks” was recently created, showing Facebook to be the leading network in 119 of 134 countries analyzed (Wauters, 2011). With so many people participating in the Facebook experience across the world, it is important to analyze the experience such engagement has on individuals.

Facebook allows users to engage and connect with other users who have created a profile on the social network. Each connection is referred to as a Facebook “friend.” A primary portion of engagement focuses on maintaining a presence on the network by updating details on the personal profile and interacting with others via their personal profiles (Rybas & Gajjala, 2009, p. 15). When a user wants to establish a connection with another user, he or she must view that user’s profile and send a “friend request.”
The user who receives the request must accept it in order for the two users to become officially connected.

Facebook has become a robust environment for social interaction. In addition to the creation of a profile, the social network has multiple features, including the ability to both send private messages and post messages on other users’ profiles. In addition, users can share links to websites, “like” specific brands, and announce their whereabouts at any given time. Essentially, Facebook is a stage for every user to share anything with their connections, whether it is a link to their personal blog, an inside joke, or an expression of their support for a world cause.

Though the term “friend” refers to an established connection between Facebook users, what signifies a friend within the virtual walls of Facebook can vary (Smock, 2010, p. 5). In a market research study, 84% percent of Facebook users admitted to being annoyed by connections on the social networking site, the biggest source of annoyance being those who complain on their profiles (O’Dell, 2011). This study suggests the influence that one person’s Facebook identity can have on another.

*The Facebook Profile*

The Facebook profile, a personal web space for descriptions made about the self (Gearhart & Kang, 2010, p. 3), is a unique page where individuals can “type themselves into being” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 3). The profile is the user’s principal means for presenting him or herself to the online community (Bobkowski, 2008, p. 6) and it is the place where a user’s identity is created in the social networking space.

When a user signs up to become a Facebook member, he or she must build the personal profile. In order to assist with this creation process, Facebook provides a
template with suggested categories of personal information, including the following: sex, birthday, hometown, current city, sexual orientation, political views, religious views, interests, activities, favorite music, favorite television shows, favorite movies, favorite books, and favorite quotations (Smock, 2010, p. 3). In addition to this information, users have the option to post in an “about me” section, further revealing any details the user would like to share with their network. Once the profile has been created it can be modified at any time.

A user who goes to edit his or her profile will see nine sections where they can manipulate the information: basic information, profile picture, friends and family, education and work, philosophy, arts and entertainment, sports, activities and interests, and contact information. This information will be distributed onto a user’s profile in numerous places; some information appears as the “header” of the profile, while other information becomes grouped into the “info” section of the profile.

The status update is another important feature of the Facebook profile. Users can update their status at any time, telling others anything from personal matters to exciting news. These updates become visible on the user’s profile immediately after being posted. Anyone can see what status updates have been shared by other users upon signing into the network.

In addition, users can create digital albums from any pictures the user wishes to upload. The user can choose a title for the album, assign captions for each picture and “tag” themselves and other Facebook users in the pictures. “Tagging” in this context refers to the fact that a Facebook user’s name is tied to the photograph, signifying that they appear in it (Smock, 2010, p. 6). Users also have the option to “untag” pictures
posted of them by other users. Once a picture has been “untagged” by a user, and his or her name has been removed, it will no longer show up on their profile.

Though each element of the profile is significant and contributes to the creation of a specific identity, the profile picture is one of the first steps in the selection of the self each user would like to present to his or her audience (Ellis, 2010, p. 39). This picture is the first representation any other user will see when searching for individuals to add to their network. Profile pictures can be changed often or can stay on a user’s profile indefinitely.

The Facebook “wall” serves as a “public message board” where users can share messages with and leave notes for one another (Smock, 2010, p. 6). The wall also serves the default landing page for the profile; once a user selects a Facebook friend’s profile to view, the user will see that friend’s wall first. In addition to acting as a message board, the user’s wall includes information, pictures, and videos that have either been shared by the user himself or have been posted on the wall by other users. Any status updates that have been shared will also appear on the user’s wall.

Though the user must create his or her profile upon becoming a Facebook member, the endeavor of profile making is never complete and requires constant effort and attention (Rybas & Gajjala, 2009, p. 15). The elements of this profile include representations of the self and social identity (Gearhart & Kang, 2010, p. 4)--this social identity affecting the formation of a personal identity (Ellis, 2010, p. 37).

*Women and Social Networking*

Though research shows that both sexes are engaged with social media, it is women who are outpacing the men (Hoffman, 2008, p. 1). The latest research has
revealed that women in the 18-34 segment are the most active visitors to social networking sites (“State of the Media,” 2011); women 18-29 are even being referred to as the “power users of social media,” with 89% using social media habitually (Ray, 2011). In fact, about one third of women say the first thing they do in the morning is check their Facebook profiles (Parr, 2010). In the United States specifically, of the 87 million women who are active on the Internet, an estimated 67.5 million women engage with social media (Faye-Carter, 2010).

According to Faye-Carter (2010), “social media represents an identity that is modern, connected, and a little bit daring…the participative nature of [creating this identity] and the opportunity to add new layers to their identities is part of what makes [social networking] so attractive to women” (p. 1). A woman’s behavior on social networking sites is relationship-driven as women spend their time on these sites “building relationships, communicating with friends, and making new friends” (Hoffman, 2008, p. 2). Today it is common for a woman to communicate with friends and acquaintances through her social network more than she does in face-to-face interactions; research shows that 57% of women say they talk to people more online than they do in person (Parr, 2010, p. 1).

Constructing an Identity

The idea of identity has occupied the attention of philosophers and scholars for years (Ellis, 2010, p. 37). Though a multitude of research has been conducted about constructing an online identity, the research has been relatively broad to date (Gearhart & Kang, 2010, p. 2). Current research includes online identities as they relate to self esteem (Gonzales, 2009), gender representation (Bryant, 2008), and religious presentation
(Bobkowski, 2008), but little to no research has been conducted about the construction of a woman’s identity through a Facebook profile.

As stated by Gearhart & Kang (2010), Identity Theory has underlying roots in symbolic Interactionism, as its goal is to understand how social structures affect the self. In addition, Identity Theory seeks to understand and explain how the self affects social behaviors (p. 5). Each element of the Facebook profile contributes to identity creation; it is this identity, or self, created that can influence the way a person acts in both online social networking sessions, and even in face-to-face interactions. The authors of these Facebook profiles may choose to represent multiple identities congruent with their multiple social roles in “real life,” or may choose to represent one identity only (Gearhart & Kang, 2010, p. 5).

The creation of the Facebook profile is the first step in creating a personal online identity, and this personal identity provides the foundation for social identity building (Gearhart & Kang, 2010, p. 19). How people choose a specific identity to share with their network of friends and acquaintances often differs. Some may choose to construct an identity that is not harmonious with the identity they present in face-to-face interactions; however a person’s friends are unlikely to let the user get away with any false representation should they see inaccuracies between the user’s profile and who the user is in actuality (Smock, 2010, p. 5).

Gearhart & Kang (2010) found that on Facebook, some subcategories of personal identity were more frequently expressed than others. This suggests a deliberate choice made by the author of the profile about what to share and what to hold back, depending greatly on the type of audience that may view their profile (p. 16). In addition, Gearhart
& Kang (2010) found that the authors of Facebook profiles expressed group representations, such as educational and relationship roles, position in peer communities, and contact information, more frequently than they expressed information reflecting views on political or social issues (p. 17).

After surveying a group of students who attended a university with a religious affiliation, and who attended religious services on a regular basis, Bobkowski (2008) found that these students omitted any religious information or affiliation in their Facebook profile. The authors of this study speculate that this was a blatant omission in order to prevent these users’ connections, or “friends,” from forming stereotype-based preconceived notions about their religious involvement (p. 19).

Smock (2010) found that personality characteristics influence how Facebook users present themselves. In addition, his research indicates that levels of public self-consciousness play a distinct role in a user’s decision about what information and content to share on their Facebook profiles. This stems from a concern for how others will perceive that information, and ultimately, how they will perceive the user (p. 24). Smock’s (2010) findings bring attention to how Facebook users manage content on their profiles differently, with some closely controlling their self-presentation and others showing little concern for information presented in their profile (p. 24).

Gearhart & Kang (2010), Bobkowski (2008), and Smock’s (2010) studies all link identity to the concept of self-presentation. A user will create his or her identity based upon the image he or she wants to convey to a network of friends and acquaintances. This means that users may choose to share everything about themselves in an effort to present a self that is congruent with the self they present in face-to-face interactions, or
users may choose to omit certain information in order to present a different self to their audiences.

_Self-Presentation_

According to Smock (2010), self-presentation is a theoretical construct that refers to the processes individuals use in attempting to control how others perceive them (p. 6). Using the personal profile, Facebook users have the ability to present a controlled image of themselves to their audience of friends and acquaintances, and this information control is vital to self-presentation (p. 3). As compared to face-to-face self-presentation, the ability to modify and manipulate online presentation allows the user to be selective when choosing a version of the self to present, thereby permitting the user to present multiple versions of the self (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008, p. 169).

When choosing an identity to present on Facebook, users are ultimately choosing how they want to present a particular self to their network. As Smock (2010), explains, a major assumption of self-presentation is that people are concerned with the opinions others have of them and that their self-presentation behavior can assist them in making certain impressions to their audience (p. 7). Users make decisions about their Facebook identities based on how they want other users to perceive them (Gearhart & Kang, 2010, p. 16).

_Rationale_

The rise of social networking has provided new venues for studying communication behavior. Facebook specifically, with its social complexity and rapidly growing number of users, is an ideal network to study when trying to discover the reasoning behind how and why users act and interact in the online space. The Facebook
profile allows users to construct an identity through pictures, status updates, and personal information, presenting a self to their online network, or “audience,” that may or may not be congruent with the self they present in face-to-face interactions. This has been detailed in the preceding literature review.

Because women ages 18-34 are the heaviest users of social media, they can help researchers understand the thinking behind identity creation and self-presentation on Facebook. Looking at the details of profile creation and maintenance, such as what information is deliberately shared or omitted, the thought process behind posting status updates and pictures, the significance of showing a relationship status, and the like, provides valuable data and reveals new themes related to this process of identity creation and self-presentation. Though other research has been conducted on the topic of identity creation and self-presentation, little of this research relates to the heaviest users of social media—women.

Using both Goffman’s idea of “performance” and Stryker & Burke’s Identity Theory, this study focused on the ways that women use Facebook to construct an identity to present to their online audience. Additionally, this study examined how women talk about the Facebook identity they have created, and looked further at how this identity reflects the self they are hoping to present to their online audience. The objective was to understand a woman’s thought process as she creates and maintains her Facebook profile.

As social networking continues to gain popularity, researchers will continue to advance their research in this field. This literature review examines multiple studies that have already been conducted on the topic of social networking, however a clear understanding of the relationship between a woman’s identity creation, self-presentation,
and her thinking behind the construction of these two elements has not been fully
developed. This study aimed to create that understanding and give insight into a woman’s
behavior on Facebook.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question:
How do women discuss and interpret their Facebook identity and how do they use their
Facebook profile to construct an identity?

Secondary Research Questions:
RQ2: What factors determine which information women choose to include on their
profile?

RQ3: Do women believe that the choices they make about what to share on their
Facebook profile directly impact the way other users view them?

RQ4: How does the behavior of other Facebook users impact a woman’s identity
construction and self-presentation strategy?
Chapter 3. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope

This study investigated the ways in which women ages 18-34 construct a specific identity and a self-presentation strategy through their Facebook profile. Rather than examining the vast amount of social networks available, this study focused specifically on Facebook due to the complex nature of the Facebook profile and the fact that, among Internet users, Facebook accounts for most of the total time spent online (“State of The Media,” 2011). The researcher interviewed participants after an outreach was conducted through two Facebook channels: a message sent out to other users and a status update posted.

According to research, when it comes to social networking, “women rule” (Solis, 2009). The latest Nielsen report explains that women make up the bulk of visitors to social networks (Solis, 2011). Additionally, this report indicates that the 18-34 segment “boasts the highest concentration of active visitors among all age groups” (“State of The Media,” 2011). This makes women within this age range of particular interest to study in order to learn about social and communication behavior on social networking sites.

In order to study the ways a Facebook profile is used to construct a woman’s identity, participants were chosen using nonrandom theoretical sampling. All participants in the study had to be women, ages 18-34, who had a Facebook profile. Both users who were active on Facebook and those who have a profile, but rarely use the social networking site were considered for the study. The women who participated in this study came from different educational, professional, and cultural backgrounds and had varied
levels of engagement with the social networking site Facebook. The diversity of the sample contributed to emerging themes within the data.

The rise of social networking has impacted the self-presentation strategy employed by people who engage in computer mediated communication (Smock, 2010). Individuals can create and possess many possible identities and can use their social networking profiles as an outlet for personal identity expression (Gearhart & Kang, 2010). A key assumption of self-presentation is that individuals are often concerned about how others view them and that, at least to some extent, their self-presentation strategy can aid in making specific impressions to their audience (Smock, 2010, p. 7). Thus, the use of social networking profiles allows users to present a controlled image of themselves to their network (p. 5).

Because the use of social networking continues to rise, this study provided a strong theoretical basis for any future research that may be conducted on the topic of social networking and identity creation.

Methodology

Design

This study used a qualitative approach through the use of semi-structured constructionist interviews. Utilizing this qualitative approach, the researcher was able to remain open to unexpected outcomes and change the direction of the research during the data collection process (Neuman, 2006). As a result, the researcher had the option to ask additional questions that were not originally part of the topic guide, but that could contribute greatly to the study. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher could ask the participants a multitude of questions in an environment that was
comfortable for and familiar to the participant, so that she could be honest and open when sharing her answers, thus allowing the researcher to collect rich data. The researcher’s flexibility during the data collection process, in addition to the depth of data collected through the interviews, made this qualitative approach an ideal method to address the topic of this research.

The ways in which a social networking profile contributes to the construction of an identity is not an area that is often discussed. Therefore, it was important for the researcher to ask a variety of open and closed questions that would yield a wide range of responses from participants. The interview process allowed the researcher flexibility in determining if there were any new topics that should be discussed that the researcher did not originally expect to introduce to the participant. The data collected during the interviews was intended to lead to the emergence of particular themes that would answer the researching questions.

Sampling

The researcher posted a message about the study on Facebook through a status update and invited users to volunteer to be interviewed. In addition, the researcher sent a message out to other Facebook users about the study and the opportunity to participate. Both the status update and the message indicated that this study would be focusing on women only. Those users who showed interest in participating were interviewed.

Conducting face-to-face interviews requires that participants live in close proximity to the researcher, therefore when Facebook users who live in distant areas showed interest in participating, the researcher conducted in-depth phone interviews with
those participants. The researcher conducted both face-to-face and phone interviews until theoretical saturation had been reached (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Instrumentation and Procedures

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a convenient meeting location chosen by each participant, so that the participants felt as though they could engage in conversation with the researcher in an environment where they felt comfortable. In every location, the researcher was able to fully observe both the conversation and nonverbal cues of the participant. Phone interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for the participant when they could answer questions in a comfortable and moderately quiet environment.

During face-to-face interviews, the researcher pulled up the participant’s Facebook profile so that the participant could view the information on her profile as she was speaking to the researcher. At the beginning of phone interviews, the researcher asked the participant to pull up her Facebook profile for the duration of the interview, if possible.

Before the interview began, the researcher gave the participant a brief description of the study and a general overview of topics that may be covered. In addition, the researcher reminded the participant that she could refrain from answering questions at any time should she become uncomfortable or decide not to share specific information with the researcher. This was also covered in the participant consent form.

For the duration of the interview, the researcher asked each participant about various topics over a period of approximately one hour. A topic guide provided an outline of the topics to be discussed and questions to be asked, assisting the researcher in
making sure that all objectives were met (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The subjects and questions charted on the topic guide aimed to uncover how the use of a Facebook profile contributes to the formation of a specific identity and a self-presentation strategy. These subjects covered general areas of social networking profiles and their role in identity creation, as well as specific areas of identity creation and how it relates to each participant’s self-presentation strategy. General topics included social networking, Facebook, creating an identity, and self-presentation. The goal was to have participants openly reflect upon this process and share how they decided to include specific information on their profile, what they believe their profile says about them, and what factors influence the way in which they have chosen to present themselves. During the data collection process, the researcher was flexible with the topic guide in order to allow certain topics to be explored more in depth.

The researcher collected data throughout the interviews and generated new topics and questions to ask each participant as needed. Both verbal and nonverbal cues displayed during face-to-face interviews were considered important pieces of data throughout the interview process.

Analysis

The researcher took detailed notes during each interview, and upon the completion of every interview, data was coded using open, axial, and selective procedures (Neuman, 2006). During the open coding phase, the researcher looked for initial categories to pull from the data that could be explored further. These categories were very general and all encompassing in nature so that the researcher would have plenty to work with in the next phase of coding.
During the axial phase of coding, the researcher took these initial categories and classified them into groups, combining categories that were similar and dissecting categories into multiple subcategories that were related.

In the final phase, the researcher used selective coding to thread data together in a cohesive manner. This phase involved comparing and contrasting participants’ responses and relating them to Identity Theory and self-presentation.

**Ethical Considerations**

In order to ensure that the study was performed in accordance with ethical guidelines, certain measures were taken. All participants voluntarily participated in the study. At the beginning of each interview, participants were notified again that their participation was voluntary, that they could abstain from answering certain questions, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. An informed consent document was also handed out to participants before each interview began, once again explaining in writing that their involvement in the study was voluntary. Participants signed this document, giving their voluntary agreement to participate (Neuman, 2006).

Before the study began, the researcher also explained the purpose of the study, the basic procedures involved, and the intended future use of the data. In addition, the researcher explained that the research was not tied to any specific sponsors and that the researcher was able to answer any questions related to the research, the study, and the data, at any time.

In addition, the researcher informed the participants that their identity would remain anonymous throughout the study and after the conclusion of the study. All of the data collected from the participants was kept confidential and specific data will never be
linked to specific participants. In order to ensure this confidentiality, the researcher presented data in aggregate forms only (Neuman, 2006).
Chapter 4. THE STUDY

Introduction

Gonzales & Hancock (2008), found that online self-presentation strategy does, in fact, have the power to change a user’s identity (p. 182). In order to study the ways that women construct an identity and create a self-presentation strategy through their Facebook profile, data was collected through 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes in length and occurred in a face-to-face setting or over the phone. The average participant was American, 25 years old, and held at least a Bachelor’s degree. The majority of participants resided in the United States, however two of the twelve participants, though both American, lived abroad. All participants had varying levels of engagement with Facebook and multiple reasons for using the social network. Though each participant shared some characteristics, they had differences in profession, geographic location, religious affiliation, relationship status, cultural background, and social media use. The diversity of the sample contributed to emerging themes within the data.

The goal of this study was to answer four research questions, all of which are related to how women use Facebook to construct their identity. For each question, the researcher collected data that was then condensed into select categories used to answer the research question.

The following chapter will first further explain the way that data was collected and analyzed, and second will provide the results of the study, highlighting the categories and themes that emerged from the data to support each research question.
Data Analysis

During each interview, the researcher wrote direct observation notes in addition to transcribing each participant’s answers. At the end of every interview, the researcher analyzed her notes and wrote analytic memos to refer to at the conclusion of all interviews. After several participants shared similar responses to a certain question, the researcher marked the topic of the question as a potential theme to be explored at the culmination of the data collection process.

When all 12 interviews had been conducted, the researcher used open coding to initially analyze the data collected, looking for emerging themes that had not already been discovered in the data collection process. This initial phase involved the researcher condensing the data into various categories that could then further be reviewed. These categories were isolated after the researcher found that multiple participants shared parallel ideas or expressed similar answers to the same questions. During this phase, the researcher found 11 categories to be explored more in depth.

After writing down these initial categories, the researcher used axial coding to further dissect the categories, looking for ways to either join categories that were exceptionally similar, or break down categories that were broad in nature. During this phase, the researcher wrote every category on a note card, placed data from each interview on multiple note cards, and distributed the data into various “category piles” accordingly. When the data was grouped together this way, the researcher could more easily recognize various themes within the data, and also which themes were most important for the purpose of this study.
Though 11 categories were originally documented, it was determined that nine of these categories were most valuable for answering the research questions. In the third phase of data analysis, the researcher used selective coding to find relationships between the categories and extracted themes from the data. By comparing and contrasting participants’ answers in each category, the researcher found three main themes that emerged from the data collected that could be intertwined with Identity Theory and self-presentation.

**Results of the Study**

The results of this study are intended to develop a cohesive reasoning and explanation of a woman’s identity construction and self-presentation on Facebook. The researcher focused on how women discuss their profiles, taking into consideration both observation notes and analytic memos written during the interviews. Each interview was structured in such a way that would reveal important factors that contribute to a woman’s identity construction and self-presentation strategy on Facebook.

While coding the data, the researcher found nine important categories that could be further analyzed, giving way to emerging themes tied to identity and self-presentation on Facebook. The categories are as follows:

1. A shift in audience based on career path
2. Importance placed on choosing a profile picture
3. Significance of being “in a relationship”
4. Power to remove unflattering or inappropriate pictures
5. Power to delete status updates and wall posts
6. Thought process behind posting status updates
7. Presentation of a “fun,” social, or well-rounded self
8. The profile representing a “toned down” or “modified” version of the self
9. Judgment of other Facebook users’ profiles and their Facebook behavior

After completing three phases of coding, the researcher was able to condense these categories and found three main themes, which could include groups of subcategories from the list above:

1. The power to manipulate information
2. The right to have control over identity
3. Heightened awareness of Facebook behavior and its consequences

The purpose of this study was to answer one main research question and three supplementary research questions. This chapter is broken into three sections where each main theme is supported in detail with corresponding subcategories. The findings aimed to answer each research question in detail.

**The Power to Manipulate Information**

During each interview, most participants both questioned their answers and discovered something on their profile that they had not previously known was present. For example, multiple participants found that their mobile numbers were being displayed in their “info” section, immediately removed the number, and explained that this was not a piece of information they were comfortable sharing with others. Additionally, when participants looked at their profile with the researcher present, they often discovered that certain pieces of information on their profile were outdated, and removed this information during the interview. Further, when talking about the audience they take into consideration when posting on Facebook, some women started to deeply analyze and
consider why they were posting for that audience; one participant who lives abroad and uses Facebook to stay in touch with friends from home even remarked, “Maybe I should just be emailing this stuff!”

The researcher’s main observation was that participants cared as much, if not more, about what was not on their profile, as what was there. One participant explained:

I should probably start thinking more about what I omit! Well, I omit the really personal stuff because I wouldn’t post it on a billboard, so why would I post it on Facebook? I don’t put things up that would make me look bad, like photos of myself completely [drunk]. I guess I do try to represent myself as best I can on Facebook. I untag gross photos and try to share exciting news.

Another participant refrains from sharing certain information about herself for fear of being judged by other users:

It makes me nervous to fill [some categories] out. I’m afraid people will judge me. What if the music is not hip enough or the shows are girly musicals? If I actually put [my favorite book], I would be scared of being judged.

Deleting status updates and wall posts

Multiple participants in this study shared that they have both removed posts that others placed on their profile’s wall, or have deleted their own updates that received no comments or “likes” from other users. This demonstrates that what is not present on a user’s wall or profile is part of the overall construction of a woman’s identity on Facebook.

As outlined in the section above, the women interviewed for this study place great importance on the status updates they post. The question, “Have you ever removed a
status update you posted if other users in your network did not engage with the post?” received mixed responses. Though the majority of women expressed that they would feel badly if no one “liked” or commented on their posts, not every participant felt it was necessary to remove the post. “Oh it’s kind of sad if no one comments,” described one participant, “but I wouldn’t remove a post because of it. I think [to myself], ‘I said it, yeah I did. It’s staying.’” Another participant explained that she would “definitely have some kind of reaction” if no one “liked” or commented on her update, and would reconsider what she originally thought was relevant to her audience.

Other participants, however, explained that they are quick to delete an update that receives no action:

I’ll post something…and I don’t think about it, but if no one comments or “likes” my update, I will delete it. It’s not bringing anything to the world and if it’s not interesting to anyone, I should take it down.

A participant who recently posted a status update about listening to a certain type of music received twelve comments, a number she was happy with. However, this participant said that if the update had not garnered any responses, she would have removed the post immediately, citing that she is prideful and has deleted posts before that have not received any comments.

The participants who have deleted wall posts explained that the removal, aside from being a prideful reaction, was part of an overarching attempt to ensure that their profile was a clear representation of who they are; inappropriate posts, labeled “iffy”, or posts that could make other users in their network view them in a different or unfavorable light, had to be removed. One participant found a post on her wall to be embarrassing
and removed it instantly: “Someone was joking with me, but I didn’t think it was funny.”

Another participant deleted comments on pictures she had posted to her own wall, deeming the comments “unnecessary.” A participant who had removed wall posts that she either found to be controversial or reflecting bad judgment on behalf of the user who had posted, explained, “If I am leaving my job or talking about leaving my job, why would someone say ‘Good luck on your interview’ on my Facebook wall?”

A user’s Facebook audience and overall image are the primary factors that participants took into consideration when deciding what to include, and with the same intentionality, what not to include, on their profile. Users found it important, and often necessary, to take advantage of the power they have to remove certain posts, citing inappropriate posting or a prideful reaction to receiving no engagement or interaction with that post. Participants in this study seemed most concerned with what their profile would portray to potential employers, therefore crafting their identity to fit the “ideal employee” mold by removing certain pictures, information, and updates from their profile.

*Significance of being “in a relationship”*

When two people solidify their romantic relationship, the next step for many couples in the world of social networking is to make it “Facebook official.” Often considered momentous, this step in a relationship signifies that both people are ready to let all of their friends, family, and connections know about their significant other.

One participant interviewed for this study explained that because she is young, she never knows if her relationships are going to last. Therefore, when she actually is in a relationship, she chooses not to share this information on her profile. Another participant
who recently became engaged felt as though the act of “being in a relationship” on Facebook played a significant role in her real-life relationship. The decision to let everyone know about the relationship was made after many discussions with her significant other and was done with “extreme intentionality and excitement.” When her Facebook relationship status switched from “in a relationship” to “engaged,” she felt as though people were having a virtual engagement party for her as she received a plethora of comments on the change in status.

For one participant, the idea behind putting that she was “in a relationship” on her profile was that she felt it is “the norm these days,” further explaining that “when people don’t have [a relationship status] on their Facebook, people think there’s something peculiar going on.” Other participants did not share their relationship status right away, but felt as though it was an important part of their identity. After discussing it for almost a year with her boyfriend, one participant eventually coaxed her significant other into putting the status of their relationship on both of their profiles. She explained that when her boyfriend did not have his relationship status on his profile, it made her feel as though he did not want people to know he was in a relationship, and that made her insecure. This participant had been dating other men before she got into a relationship with her boyfriend, so being “in a relationship” on her profile was her way of letting those men know that she was “off the market” and that the relationship was an important part of her identity.

The Right to Have Control Over Identity

Overall, participants aimed to present a self to their audience that appeared either “fun” and “social” or “well-rounded.” Choosing a profile picture was a vital part of this
process for the women in this study, as it represents a main component of the user’s self-presentation strategy.

Though participants put a lot of thought about what was present, or not present, on their profiles, they felt that their identity on Facebook was a true representation of the person they are in face-to-face interactions. However, some participants did feel that their Facebook identity represented a more “toned down” or “modified” version of themselves.

Importance placed on choosing a profile picture

When users select a profile picture, they are “communicating something significant” and this picture is one of the first steps in identity selection (Ellis, 2010). The women who participated in this study felt that their profile picture was a critical piece of their overall profile and took great care when choosing which picture to present to their audience. Though their self-presentation strategies varied in some ways, with some women choosing profile pictures that included their significant others, while other women chose to be alone and “independent,” or surrounded by friends, every woman interviewed for this study expressed that this picture unarguably had to be flattering in some way.

A participant who recently got married explained that although she likes to have her husband in her picture sometimes, often she likes to be alone: “I am independent of him and make a conscious choice not to put him in. I have [even] cut him out of pictures before.” This participant also expressed the need to look a certain way in her picture, giving other users a specific image of who she is. Her goal when choosing a picture is to strike a balance between being fun and silly, while remaining professional. For this
participant, however, the most important feature of this picture is that she “look[s] good no matter what.”

Other women were also on the fence about including their boyfriends or husbands in their picture. A participant who has been dating her boyfriend for three years said that she has only included him in her profile picture once or twice, explaining that should the relationship come to an end, she doesn’t want to draw attention to it.

Two participants who got married in the last year chose profile pictures of them and their husbands from their wedding night, citing that they wanted the importance of their significant others to be apparent immediately when people looked at their profile. A participant who recently became engaged chose a picture of herself being proposed to. She explained, “I am excited! I want people to know! I’m engaged so I’m doing the cliché engaged photo.” During her college years when she was single, however, this participant explained that she chose a profile picture that would make her look “cool” or “desirable” where she was surrounded by a group of beautiful friends.

**Presentation of a “Cool,” social, or well rounded self**

One of the final questions asked during the interview, “What does your profile say about you?” allowed participants to sum up their profile in a few choice words or sentences. During this summation, participants had the opportunity to reflect on everything previously discussed with the researcher, and share any additional information. Most participants took a few moments to eloquently find a way to say what their profile communicated, making sure to be honest, but confident about their identity on Facebook. The majority of these answers pointed to the user wanting to present a self that was fun, social, or well rounded.
One participant responded, “I appear put together and that I’ve got my life in order. I’ve gone to school, I’m working, and married. I like to travel and have a lot of pictures with family and friends. It’s pretty vanilla.” Another felt that when other users look at her profile, they will see a “cool” version of her and, as she explained, “everyone wants to be cool. [Through my profile, other users] get to see a more fun side of me.”

One participant felt as though she tried to represent herself as accurately as she could, saying that her profile showed other users the main components and interests in her life: she likes to travel a lot, she likes photography, and she likes to do fun things around London. After expressing this view of her profile, the participant paused and then remarked, “that probably makes it seem like I’m trying too hard or am spoiled, but I don’t really care.”

A participant who felt as though authenticity was the most important factor when deciding what to put on her profile explained that her Facebook identity showed what was important to her, which included her fiancée, what she does with 40 hours each week, and her role at her church. Her hope was to show that she is well rounded and humble, and additionally that she is not putting on a show.

Another participant confirmed the importance she placed on other users engaging with her wall posts and status updates, explaining that this was part of the self she was trying to present, “[Other users will say] that I’m social…and that I have a lot of friends because I have responses to my updates.”

*The profile as a “toned down” or “modified” version of the self*

Many participants explained that although their Facebook profile was an accurate portrayal of them, it was a toned down version of the person they are in face-to-face
interactions. Once participant explained: “[My profile] is a very basic version of me. Definitely simplified and one-level, but not a misrepresentation [of who I am].” Another user expressed that her profile represents her “best foot forward” but that it is more “even keel” than who she is in person. She explained, for example, that she is “more excited in real life” and does not feel the need to share every detail on her Facebook profile, keeping some of that information private and only for close family and friends.

A participant shared that because she is naturally a private person, she does not include too much information on her profile, as she does not like the public knowing everything about her:

On Facebook I have 500 friends [but maybe] 100 of them are close. When I put stuff on Facebook, I share the public persona of me. It’s who I am [but] it’s a version of me. It’s a manufactured part of me. I choose the part of me I want to show [to everyone] and my friends and family know the actual [me].

Another participant described how on Facebook, she tries to be more filtered than she might be among close friends:

Am I trying to be a more polished or filtered version of myself because I’m not sure who’s looking? Sure. [For example] I don’t swear on Facebook, but do in real life. I don’t always have make up on, but I do [in my pictures] on Facebook. I’m not manufacturing something, but I’m conscious and selective of what others get to see.

*Power to remove unflattering pictures*

Women are often concerned with the image they put forth for others to see, as demonstrated by the amount of thought they put into their profile pictures. Though
women have complete control of the photograph they choose to make their profile picture, they do not always have control over all of the pictures that appear on their profile. As explained in the literature review of this paper, every user has the ability to “tag” other users in a picture. All pictures that a user is tagged in will appear in the “photos” section of that user’s profile. Once any user is tagged, they have the option of “untagging” themselves, ensuring that their name is no longer connected to the photograph and also that the photograph will not appear on their profile.

When asked about having unflattering pictures on their profiles, all twelve participants interviewed for this study expressed that they had, at some time, untagged a picture that they found to be uncomplimentary. For some participants, untagging pictures is directly correlated with the image they are trying to uphold for their professional audience, while others simply want their network to see them as looking beautiful all of the time. One participant explains, “I immediately untag pictures where I don’t look good. It will bother me if I look horrendous and I can’t untag the picture right away. I’m careful about my image and how people see me.” Another participant explained her feeling that she should have control over how she appears on Facebook and will untag any picture where she doesn’t feel that she looks good enough for her network to see.

Beyond the act of untagging pictures is the feeling users have just knowing there are unflattering pictures on their profile. Most participants shared that they don’t want other users to see them looking anything, but their best: “If I have a double chin or a huge zit, I’m untagging it. It just bothers me; I think it’s my own pride. I don’t want [those pictures] to represent me.”
From a professional standpoint, participants frequently untag themselves when they feel as though the picture is not appropriate and potential employers may judge them based on those pictures. Some participants go as far as to alter their privacy settings so that they have the power to approve all pictures before they appear on their profile.

Since using Facebook, however, one participant has entirely changed her outlook on untagging pictures, and instead of removing a picture she doesn’t like, she leaves it up:

I used to always untag pictures, but I stopped because the photo is not what’s making me look unflattering, it’s me. If I looked like that in the photo, I looked like that in real life. I’m not really doing anything by taking it down except showing everyone that I was self-conscious.

When talking about their profile picture and overall self-presentation strategy, all participants explained how their thought process is directly impacted by the way they think others will perceive them. These participants expressed that they make certain choices about these categories based on what they want their audience to see and how they want their audience to view them.

**Heightened Awareness of Facebook Behavior and its Consequences**

According to Smock (2010), when it comes to self-presentation, one of the major assumptions is that people are often concerned with the “opinions others have of them and that their self-presentational behavior is meant to assist them in making certain impressions on their audience” (p. 7). In addition, “the ways in which users construct their identity can be tied to...a desire to maintain social approval” (Snyder, 1974, p. 526). In order to look further at how women construct their identity on Facebook, the
researcher aimed to find out which components and features of the profile were most important to women, and if they felt their choices about what to share would impact the way other users view them.

_A shift in audience from social to professional_

All twelve women who participated in this study created their Facebook profile in the early days of the social network’s existence when only students with a university email address had access to the network. Therefore, the participants originally developed their profile to appeal to an audience of peers, including fellow classmates, sorority sisters, former high school friends, and the like. When the participants graduated from college and transitioned into the professional world, those in their peer group were still the primary users of Facebook. However, because Facebook eventually flourished into a network open to anyone with an email address, users became more aware of who was looking at their profile.

Of the twelve women interviewed in this study, ten women expressed that their Facebook behavior had changed since they originally created their profile. According to one participant:

> When it was only college and friends, it was kind of anything goes. When I graduated college, I took down the pictures from [the local bar]. When you’re going into employment, there’s a different foot you want to put forward.

Another participant explained that when she first signed up on Facebook she was “more free” about what she included on her profile, knowing that it was only her friends looking at it. Now, though, she explains:
The older I get, and the more I get into my career, the more careful I am about what I put up. [Today] customers and co-workers see my profile and I need to give off more of a professional image.

Participants who were trying to make a name for themselves in specific industries were especially aware of the impact Facebook could have on their image overall, both currently and in the future. A participant who looks forward to having a political career is already thinking about the image she needs to project:

I think specifically about when I work for a candidate, which is what I want to do. I work for the public eye, therefore I am in the public eye. [My profile] is a representation of who I am, [and] who I hope to be. My audience used to be more my friends, but the audience has definitely changed now as I am meeting people in my field.

One participant, who just released her first publication, became aware of the impact her Facebook profile could have on her image as an author. Realizing people could Google her book and find out more information about her, she explained that she wants her identity to be perceived in a “professional way” as an author. If her Facebook profile appears in a Google search result, she has a specific image to uphold: “I want people to be able to find me and know who I am as an author, not as a college party girl. Therefore, I tailor my profile to fit that image.”

A participant who is currently attending law school also expressed the need to keep her profile “professionally appropriate,” going so far as to remove the year she was born from the birth date that appears on her profile, so employers would not hold it against her that she was so young and “at the bottom of the food chain in corporate
America.” Additionally, she fears the consequences of having all of her information and pictures readily available should she run for office one day, citing the fact that Facebook, which owns all of its users pictures, could give the tabloids a photograph of her that could be considered inappropriate or controversial in the world of politics.

*Thought process behind posting status updates*

A clever blog that aims to provide unconventional definitions for words that have meaning in pop culture, recently posted the following definition for the word *Disappointment*: “receiving no likes on a witty status update” (“Oh so that’s what that really means,” 2011). When a user posts a status update, other users in their network can “like” or comment on their post, two actions which, according to the participants in this study, give the user validation for posting in the first place. Of the twelve participants interviewed, ten expressed that they took a great amount of time considering what other users would think of their update, if they would comment or “like” it, and whether or not it would resonate with other users.

A participant who was not entirely proud the Facebook behavior she exhibited a few years ago has learned her lesson. She explained that an alarm now goes off in her mind before she actually posts any updates, and considers two questions: “Am I going to sound like ‘this’? Or come off [a certain] way?” One participant who also asks herself questions before posting an update, is always unsure of how her audience will perceive the updates she posts: “How am I going to communicate my message effectively? I don’t quite know what to say to sell it. I over think it [because] I don’t want to say it the wrong way.” Another participant shares a similar feeling, explaining her fear of posting an
update that others will not find interesting: “I’m paranoid that whatever I put up there will be lame.”

Two participants felt it was important to be humorous or clever in their posts, citing that they did not want people to think their updates were boring. The majority of participants explained the importance of posting updates that other users in their respective networks would find useful, intriguing, or “relevant to the world,” noting that they did not like to “post just to post.” Recognizing other users’ updates that were “interesting” or “novel” and using them as a guide for what to include in their own updates, was a popular approach participants took when deciding what types of updates people would like or appreciate.

**Judgment of other Facebook users’ profiles and their Facebook behavior**

According to Snyder (1974), an individual who self-monitors is “one who, out of a concern for social appropriateness, is particularly sensitive to the self-presentation of others…and uses these cues as guidelines for monitoring [their] own self-presentation (p. 528). When asked, “Have you ever judged another user based on the information they put on their profile or the behavior they exhibit on Facebook?” every participant interviewed answered without hesitation, “yes.” As the participants elaborated on what types of Facebook behavior bothered them, they also shared that seeing other users’ “annoying” behavior helps them know what not to do on their profile.

In the days before Facebook, it was natural for a woman to tell her best friends certain information. However, Facebook has defined a “new normal” when it comes to sharing. One participant explained that “what is tacky in real life is also tacky online, but people don’t use the same manners.” She elaborated, highlighting the fact that “it used to
be considered impolite to talk about yourself all of the time, but [on Facebook] people have forgotten this.”

A common Facebook behavior that participants found to be “obnoxious” is “Debbie downer” postings; in other words, status updates and wall posts that express too much information about a user’s bad day, a hardship that person or another user is facing, or the like. Another behavior they cited as inappropriate was posting “sexy” or “sultry” pictures from a night out, or when users take pictures of themselves in the mirror and post them immediately to their profile. One user claimed, “I worry about my Facebook friends sometimes. Why would you take [such pictures]?” While another feels that such pictures are “self-aggrandizing and a cry for help.”

A behavior that all participants who were interviewed found to be annoying is “stream of consciousness” posts, where users feel the need to share everything they are doing. One user remarked, “People are journaling in front of everybody and I just don’t get it.” Another participant explained, “I don’t need to know about what you ate for lunch…or that your baby is happy.”

Every user felt as though seeing this behavior exhibited by other users would make them less “annoying” users on the social network, explaining that they are more conscious of their behavior and what they post.

**Discussion**

The data collected during this study revealed that women are acutely aware of Facebook behavior and its consequences. The awareness is demonstrated by a woman’s desire to appear a certain way for a professional audience and the fact that a woman’s
judgment of other users affects her behavior on the social network. Nearly every participant interviewed expressed the need to appear professionally appropriate, and every participant explained how her judgment or perceptions of other users affected the way she presents herself on the social network. Both factors affect the way women construct their Facebook identity and self-presentation strategy.

*Identity Construction and Self-Presentation for a Professional Audience*

The findings suggest that women are sensitive to the way they construct their identity for a professional audience. Having had a previous, more “social” identity, these women found that as they immersed themselves in the professional world, it was important to come up with a new self-presentation strategy. As a result, the women began constructing a new identity on Facebook. Though previous research suggests that Facebook users often tailor their profiles for a certain audience (Gearhart & Kang, 2010), the research has not focused on the transformation users, specifically women, go through when switching from a social to professional audience.

People can possess as many identities as “sets of role relations in which they participate” (Stryker, 2000, p. 28). According to Gearhart and Kang (2010), role choice is seen on social networking profiles through content the profile’s author chooses to display and share. Further, “these displays of content are the result of self-meanings that develop in the context of the roles one possesses” (p. 6). The women who participated in this study held multiple roles, including wife, girlfriend, student, advocate, daughter, sister, friend, classmate, and professional. As explained by Stryker (2000), a person, and for the purpose of this study, a woman, can possess a different identity for each role. On
Facebook, however, the challenge for women ages 18-34, is how to edit and maintain their Facebook profile as they transform their Facebook identity to fit each new role.

The women interviewed for this study created their Facebook profiles when Facebook was a social space consisting of only those in their peer group who had a university email address. As demonstrated by the participants in this study, the identity created for this role was much more “care free,” less serious, and did not need to be monitored as heavily for “appropriateness.” When speaking about the audience she constructed her profile for, one participant explained: “Because it was just college, I wasn’t thinking of it as an audience. [I thought] anyone who sees me on Facebook is going to be my friend.” Additionally, she explains the feeling of the Facebook community as “so small and so personal.”

As the women graduated college and were introduced to the professional world, Facebook gradually modified its settings to become a more public space where everyone could socialize and connect. At this time, as Facebook became open to any user who had an email address, professional institutions and human resource professionals began to use Facebook as a tool to check on existing employees and find out information about potential new employees. With this change came a challenge for women who wanted to use Facebook as a place to construct an identity and present a self that was fun and social; these women had to transform their identity to fit a professional role, thereby changing various information on their profile, taking down certain information, and untagging pictures that could be considered inappropriate for the professional world.

The identity a woman constructs for each of her roles is typically displayed in face-to-face interactions, where the woman can focus solely on, and immerse herself fully
in, the role she has constructed that identity for. In the world of Facebook, however, the two roles—social and professional—are blended together, often forcing women to make a choice about the role they want to, or need to, construct an identity for. According to this study, the professional role takes precedence; ten of the twelve women interviewed constructed an identity that would make them appear “professionally appropriate” to their audience, even if, as a result, they had to omit certain information or pictures that would highlight their social self.

Though a woman can construct both a professional and social identity online, it is not easy. Facebook allows users to manipulate their privacy settings so they can share information with some Facebook friends, but not with others. Additionally, Facebook allows users to choose which Facebook friends can see a “limited profile” where the user herself dictates the limitations placed on the profile. Though some participants took advantage of using the limited profile for their bosses and work colleagues, the majority of participants found it to be too much of a burden to decide which users were able to see specific information, and instead reinvented their Facebook identity to be more professional overall.

The fact that two of the women’s roles share the same space creates a conflict for some. Women must decide how much importance to place on their career in this social space, how they want to appear for potential employers and current co-workers, and must become comfortable with the fact that those who are their friends will see only their professional identity.

The choice of which identity to display involves manipulating the key information and prominent images on the woman’s profile, including the profile picture and all
categories incorporated in the information section. In addition, women must pay close attention to the appropriateness of their status updates, must monitor what other users post on their wall, and must further monitor which pictures other users tag the user in. This profile maintenance requires much time and effort, thereby making it difficult to create an identity for both roles.

*Judgment of Other Users’ Behavior and its Effect on Identity Construction*

Another important finding suggests that a woman’s judgment of other users greatly impacts the way she both constructs her identity and behaves on Facebook. Overall, participants were very passionate and animated when talking about their judgment of other Facebook users’ “annoying” behavior on the social network. According to Smock (2010), “awareness of the perception of others is necessary for the individual to know what impression to attempt to make” (p. 13). The women interviewed for this study have learned what *not* to do or post on Facebook by seeing how other users conduct themselves within the realm of the social network, and were adamant about not engaging in similar behavior.

In Goffman’s (1959) explanation of “performance,” he suggests that “an individual offers his performance and puts on his show for the benefit of other people (p. 52). In the same way that a person might critique a movie, show, or concert, women on Facebook judge the way other users “perform” and display their identity on the social network. The researcher found that women have an extensive list of behaviors they label as “annoying” for a social networking site. Included on this list is over-sharing, posting too many pictures of oneself, especially in “sexy” attire, and posting status updates that can be characterized as sad or depressing. As the women find these behaviors “sad” and
“[cries] for help,” they are unlikely to engage in similar behaviors for fear of appearing or seeming like those they judge.

An explanation for this finding can be illustrated by Goffman (1959), who notes that an “individual may attempt to induce the audience to judge him and the situation in a particular way” (p. 54). Behaviors characterized by women in this study as “narcissistic and irritating” were labeled as such due to the fact that the users displaying this behavior were trying to extract compliments or feedback from their Facebook audience. Women explained that such behavior is a turnoff, and further, that they do not want to appear that way to their network.

Women who find this type of behavior to be an annoyance in face-to-face interactions, most likely have a similar feeling towards those who behave in such a way on Facebook. The idea of “fishing for compliments” is often used among women to describe the action other women take when proclaiming something in the hopes of garnering a response from those around them. A similar judgment pattern is taking place on Facebook, where women are viewing others posting status updates and pictures for the sole purpose of acquiring a response from their network. Because every status update and picture is tracked on a user’s wall, the women in this study highlighted that it is easy to cite multiple offenses coming from one user. As a result, women are putting extra effort into making sure that their Facebook profile, and Facebook wall in particular, is not sprinkled with status updates and pictures that make it seem as though they are looking for responses from other users.
More research is needed in this area to fully explore how the behavior exhibited by other users influences the way that women shape their identity and create a self-presentation strategy on Facebook.
Chapter 5. SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations

Though all appropriate measures were taken by the researcher to ensure that this study was conducted properly, there are some limitations that should be noted. The limitations are primarily found in the sample population interviewed. When the researcher originally conducted an outreach to find volunteers for the study, she received 15 responses. However, due to time constraints and scheduling conflicts, the researcher was unable to interview all women initially interested in participating. After multiple attempts to schedule an interview time, some potential participants’ interest waned and they became difficult to reach. As a result, the researcher concluded that it was best to focus on the quality of the interviews she was able to conduct. Had the researcher not reached a saturation point during the data collection process, she would have made additional outreach attempts to find more volunteers.

Additionally, all women who responded to the researcher’s outreach were between the ages of 24 and 28, though the study aimed to look at women 18 to 34. The researcher anticipated that her outreach would have yielded many more responses from women of different ages, however those who were interested in participating were in their twenties. Further, every participant came from either an upper middle-class or upper class economic background and had graduated from college. Though economic status and education were not factors that the researcher was focused on, they are factors that may have impacted the results of the study.

Lastly, though a multitude of data was collected after twelve interviews, the researcher had intended to use a much larger sample size. As noted earlier, the sample
could have been bigger had scheduling conflicts and time constraints not been a factor. Researchers who further investigate identity construction and Facebook could look at a larger sample to extract more data if needed.

**Further Recommendations**

The researcher hopes that this study is the first of many on the topic of identity construction, self-presentation strategy, and the Facebook profile. Because the researcher collected a vast amount of data, there are many areas of this study that could be further explored in depth.

Taking a closer look at *why* users judge others on Facebook and how this affects their identity construction is one area for further exploration. The researcher detailed this finding in her Discussion section, but feels as though it would be important to broaden the investigation, looking at which behaviors are judged, why they are judged, and how many users are in agreement about these behaviors being unfavorable or inappropriate for a social networking site.

Additionally, the researcher recommends that the transformation of the profile from social to professional be further explored in a longitudinal study. This would involve researching women’s’ identity construction behaviors beginning with her days in college, and concluding around five years after she has graduated. The goal would be to see how these users transform their profiles, and additionally to see how their identities have changed from that of a college student to a working professional.

**Conclusion**

After studying the ways women construct an identity and a self-presentation strategy on Facebook, the researcher found that women have a heightened awareness of
Facebook behavior and its consequences. The process of constructing an identity, including, but not limited to, choosing a profile picture, deciding which information to display and which information to omit, and determining what status updates to post, is influenced heavily by the woman’s audience and the role she is constructing her identity for.

The majority of women who participated in this study chose to construct an identity on Facebook that would reflect their role as a professional. What is important to recognize, however, is that when these women began using Facebook while attending college, they constructed an identity that strictly reflected a more social version of themselves. The transformation from a social to professional identity was the result of both graduating and transitioning into the professional world, and also due to the fact that Facebook became a space where employers and human resource professionals could check on existing and potential new employees.

Women, then, must determine their self-presentation strategy and construct an identity based on the role they want to assume in the social networking space, as their audience is most often a combination of social connections and professional connections. This may create a conflict of interest for some women who would prefer to share a more social version of themselves, but feel the need to create a professional identity in order to appear well-rounded and put together for a professional audience.

The researcher also found that women have an extensive list of behaviors they label as “annoying” for a social networking site, and further, that a woman often determines what to include and what not to include on her profile based on her judgment of other users’ “performance” (Goffman, 1959) on Facebook. Goffman’s (1959) concept
of the “mask” as representing the role a user is trying to live up to, provides the perfect explanation for this finding; women can determine which users are “masking” their true selves, or trying desperately to be someone who they are not. This behavior is irritating to women who find it to be disingenuous.

Women expressed that what they do not incorporate into their identity and self-presentation strategy is equally as important as what they do include. Using these “annoying” behaviors as a guide, women carefully craft an identity and self-presentation strategy that is unlike that of the user she judges, omitting certain information and abstaining from behaving in certain ways. If any user exhibits behavior that a woman finds to be a “turnoff,” she will not engage in similar behavior in order to ensure that she does not appear the same way to her network.

Typically, the behaviors that women found to be a turnoff on Facebook were behaviors they also found to be offensive or “annoying” in face-to-face interactions. Though labeling behaviors as “annoying” is often subjective, a majority of women listed the same behaviors in this category repeatedly in separate interviews. This finding suggests that multiple women on Facebook are judging such behaviors on the social network and are altering their identities and self-presentation strategies to make sure they do not exhibit any similar behaviors or characteristics.
References


Gearhart, S., & Kang, S. (2010). You are what you post: using social network profiles


Appendix A

Interview Questions/Topic Guide

General Topics:

Identity

Self-presentation

Social networking

Facebook

General Questions:

1. Tell me about the process of putting together your Facebook profile.

2. How do you use Facebook? [Is it for professional use? Social use? Or another use?]

Identity and Self-Presentation Questions:

1. What information did you choose to share on your Facebook profile?

2. What information did you omit?

3. Why did you include certain information?

4. Why did you omit certain information?

5. When you created your profile, did you have a certain person or audience in mind?

6. Tell me about why you chose this profile picture? Do you change it often?

7. How often do you change the information on your profile?

8. How often do you post pictures?

9. Do you ever “untag” unflattering pictures of yourself?
10. Have you ever judged someone else based on the information they put in their profile?

11. Do you put that you are “in a relationship” on your profile (if applicable)?

12. What does your profile say about you?

13. Do you think your profile is an accurate portrayal of the person you are in face-to-face interactions?

14. Do you ever post status updates?

15. If yes, what makes you want to post a status update? Can you give an example of a status update you have posted?
Appendix B

Interview/ Participant Consent Form

I, ____________, understand that the purpose of this study is to uncover how the use of a Facebook profile contributes to the construction of an identity. I have been informed that the researcher, Melissa Melcombe, will interview me and that the information provided in the interview will be used for research purposes.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am able to withdraw from the interview and study at any time. My personal identity will remain anonymous and any information I contribute to the discussion will be kept confidential. I agree to answer questions in the interview only when I feel comfortable contributing. Any time I do not want to share information, I have the right to abstain from answering any questions.

I agree to participate in this study and affirm that all information provided by me is true and accurate.

Participant Name____________________________________________________

Participant Signature__________________________________________________

Date ________________