EFFECTS ON RELATIONALITY IN LEADERSHIP: LOOKING AT THE EFFECTS OF THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES ON ASPIRING LEADERS THROUGH THE LENS OF RELATIONAL DIALECTICS.

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This study will examine the effects of the use of social network sites (SNS), specifically Facebook, on the relationality of aspiring leaders. The use of SNSs has skyrocketed among people all over the world, and particularly within the younger generation. An increasing amount of studies have been undertaken to look at the effects of using such SNSs. Further, as such SNSs take root and reveal substantial influence on relationships and habits within daily life, they seem to be increasingly leveraged by influential people for leadership purposes. As leadership remains one of the most critical topics within our culture, and relationality has long been acknowledged as a foundational element of effective leadership, it is vital that we examine the effects of the booming SNSs on relationality of young, aspiring leaders. This study implemented ethnographic interviews within a purposive sample of six recent graduates identified as leaders through being hired within their alma mater, which is a small state liberal arts university. The themes emerging from participant responses revealed the following effects on the relationality of the participants: heightened self-awareness and impression management; increased efforts towards balance, consistency, and credibility; heightened awareness of responsibility; and increased reflection on the intentionality of self and others, corresponding relational investment, and ultimate personal impact.
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Chapter I: Introduction

The Problem

In the past decade, the number of people using social network sites (SNS) has dramatically increased (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Hargittai, 2008; Mitra, 2010). Further, it is not only the number of users that has increased but also the amount and variety of ways that SNS use can be integrated into daily life (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). While the specific purposes for SNS use vary among users, the primary purpose of communicatively engaging in relationship remains the same. This primary purpose is natural as people communicatively form relationships necessary for meeting both lower and higher-order needs (Caputo, Hazel, McMahon, & Dannels, 2002).

It is important to note that relationships not only meet needs, but also, in meeting needs, relationships work to transform the people who hold them. Relationships profoundly and effectively change people. This thought serves as the foundation for the concept of leadership, which played an integral role in the formation of this study. Shepherd, St. John, and Striphas (2006) wrote:

Relationship is an interdynamic force. Like gravity, a relationship is diffuse, invisible, perhaps immaterial, and yet it pushes and pulls. Relating or relationships exert influence. Communication constitutes relationship and, in so doing, it reconstitutes the entities that are related. (p. 4)

As such, communication itself changes people as it serves as the overarching forum for transformative relationship to take place. Thus, it is important to examine how various
communication mediums can change aspects of relational influence, especially among those who aspire to positively influence others, or lead.

Spitzberg wrote, “Historically, every major innovation in communication technology has demonstrated a complex interplay with social forces to produce transformative effects on human relationship” (Spitzberg, 2006, p. 629). If the use of social network sites is producing transformative effects on human relationship, what are those effects on those who seek to transform? Thus, the focus of this study is to offer a response to the following question: What are the effects of the use of SNS on the relationality of aspiring leaders? This paper offers a conceptual and theoretical framework upon which the subsequent review of literature and qualitative study are established.

Definitions of Key Terms

*Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)* – This term refers to any communication activities particularly mediated by computers (as opposed to other forms of technology). In Thurlow et al.’s (2009) work, December offered the following definition of CMC, “a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes” (p. 141).

*Social Network Sites (SNSs)* – This term refers to the realm of Internet based Web sites dedicated to social life, networking, and community. Boyd and Ellison (2008) define the social network site as a web-based service that allows people to develop personal profiles and list others with whom they have some sort of connection.
Relationality – In this study, the term “relationality” is used to refer to a person’s capacity to use communication to engage relationships towards mutual identification of meaning in the process of transforming relationship.

Facebook – This term refers to the specific social-network-site “Facebook,” founded in 2004, which includes various channels of mediated communication involving features such as a personal profile, a personal “wall” where “friends” can post messages, private messages, news feeds, and the capacity engage in various groups, organizations, and interpersonal relationships.

Leadership – For the purposes of this study, Kouzes and Posner’s (2003) definition of leadership as, “a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow” will be used (p. 1).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

While the first chapter provides a thorough introduction of the problem and key terms for the study, the remaining chapters capture the scholarship that informed the study, the implementation of the study, and the results of the study. Chapter II is a review of the literature that informed the study, including the theoretical framework, foundational scholarship, recent related findings, and a discussion of initial implications for leadership. Chapter III is an explanation of the scope of the study and the methodology utilized in its implementation. Chapter IV provides an extensive presentation of the results of the study in narrative form, followed by a succinct
discussion. The final Chapter (V) will discuss limitations of the study, recommendations for further study, and ultimate conclusions of the study.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

It has been recognized for a long time that technology both shapes and is shaped by society (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2009). Some of the most influential technologies of our time have been related to computer-mediated communication (CMC). A form of CMC known as social network sites (SNS) has been a recent and increasingly saturating force in American as well as global society. Many questions have arisen in regard to the use of SNS and its resulting impact on individuals, groups, cultures, and even society as a whole. In approaching the question of the effects of SNS on the relationality of aspiring leaders, the literature review will include: (1) a philosophical foundation and theoretical framework, (2) an overview of the history and rise of CMC and SNS, (3) foundational scholarship on the connections between communication and relationality, (4) a review of recent findings on the effects of SNSs on users, and finally (5) connections between such findings and the study of leadership.

Philosophical Foundation and Theoretical Framework

The assumption that communication, relationship, and leadership are inextricably interconnected serves as a foundation for this study. As such, this study will magnify those interconnections in the context of the use of SNSs for leadership purposes in light of Komives, Lucas, and McMahon’s (2007) relational leadership model, and more specifically, through the lens of Baxter and Montgomery’s (1988) relational dialectics
theory of communication. It is important to note the philosophical assumptions in which these perspectives are rooted.

One of the key philosophical assumptions for this study is the concept of process, and that communication, relationship, and leadership each represent unique, yet integrated processes. Komives et al. (2007) stated, “Leadership is inherently a relational, communal process” (p. 74). This idea serves as the foundation for the relational leadership model, which seems to naturally emerge from the conversation surrounding the connections between communication, relationship, and leadership. The relational leadership model is relevant particularly in the correlations between its five components and the study of communication, which include the premises that leadership is: (1) purposeful, (2) inclusive, (3), empowering, (4) ethical, and (5), process-oriented (Komives et al., 2007, p. 75). This is similar to the communication perspective that views communication as relationality.

Condit offered a helpful description of this perspective in her article in Shepherd’s (2006) work, when she wrote, “Taking a relationality perspective on communication would mean always asking, ‘How are the interesting entities being constituted and related by his communication?’” (Shepherd et al., 2006, p. 7). Using the relationality perspective of communication means focusing on how people are transformed within the dialogue of communicative relationship. For the purposes of this study, relationality is understood as a person’s capacity to use communication to engage relationships towards mutual identification of meaning in the process of transforming relationship. This means communication in inherently process-oriented and purposeful in how it results in
transformation. It also can be inclusive, empowering, and ethical in the process. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) focus in on key elements of this communicative process in their theory of relational dialectics.

Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) theory is based on the idea that “personal relationships are constituted in communication” (p. 42). Their theory offers a few key vantage points that allow for the examination of various tensions within relational dialogue. They include, (1) the idea that relationships are created and maintained in dialogue, (2) that dialogue creates the opportunity for unity in diversity, which reveals tensions of contradiction, (3) that dialogue is aesthetic, (4) and that dialogue is discourse (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, pp. 200-202). These theorists understand dialogue as a process in which humans manage dialectical forces of seeming contradiction that can either push people apart or pull them together (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Their theory focuses on three dialectic tensions that typically influence relationship including connectedness and separateness, certainty and uncertainty, and openness and closedness (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006).

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) describe the interplay between these dialectic tensions in acknowledgment of diverse realms of meaning. They wrote, “‘separateness’ and ‘connectedness’ hold the potential for multiple meanings, including, but certainly not limited to, the raidiants of interdependence, similarity, and positive affection” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 89). They describe the tension of certainty and uncertainty as “the dialogue between the ‘given’ and the ‘new,’” which include key “radiants” of predicting the others beliefs and attitudes, making future plans, and spontaneity of interaction
(Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, pp. 121-124). Finally, they describe the dialectic tension between openness and closedness as taking the three following forms: (1) the said and the unsaid, (2) free talk and constrained talk, and (3) inner speech and outer speech (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 145). These meanings, radiants, and forms begin to reveal how the concepts of dialectical tensions and paradox are specifically relevant to understanding the leadership relationship.

It is important to note that each dialectic tension is influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors reference perceptions of that which takes place within the relationship while external factors reference perceptions of that which takes place within the relationship itself in specific relation to the greater community as a whole (Griffin, 2009). Analyzing perceptions of the interplay of such tensions within the use of SNSs allow for these aspects of relationality to be examined, and thus, to see how the use of SNSs affects relationality and further, those engaging relationship. Thus, using the relational dialectic theory as a foundation will not only allow for the exploration of the effects of the use of SNSs on aspiring leaders, but also for the potential implications of those effects for society as a whole.

**The History and Rise of Computer-Mediated Communication & Social Network Sites**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) rapidly took off upon the advent of the Internet, and more specifically, the World Wide Web. December (1995) wrote, “The Web is essentially a communication medium, making it possible for organizations, individuals, and groups to connect in a variety of ways” (December and Randall, 1995, p.
He defined CMC as “a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes” (Thurlow et al., 2009, p. 141). Through the Internet, CMC has served as a channel in which people connect and initiate new relationships (Haythornthwaite, 2005), maintain and deepen previous ones, and engage in self-disclosure (Yum & Hara, 2006). Spitzberg (2006) explained that CMC interaction typically varies based on time, relational, environmental, functional, and cultural factors. One form of CMC that seems to have successfully bridged many of these factors is the social network site (SNS).

A social network is defined as a web-based service that allows people to develop personal profiles and list others with whom they have some sort of connection (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). They claimed, “Since their introduction, social network sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices” (p. 210). SNS use has increased in use as much as 74% among adult populations in the United States in the past 10 years (Pew Research Center, 2010). The integration of the use of SNS into much of daily life has begged many of the questions surrounding the nature of the impact of SNS on users.

The development of SNS began as far back as the 1960s with preliminary exploration in computer-mediated communication (Mitra, 2010). However, the first social network did not appear until 1997 (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Mitra (2010) explained that the transition from solely text-intensive CMC to SNS was influenced primarily by (1) the availability of powerful computers, and (2) the broad penetration of high-speed Internet connections. Following the initial launch came a wave of SNSs devoted to
business networks, quickly followed by sites like MySpace (2003), and Facebook (2004), which within a year had grown to include “high school students, professionals inside corporate networks, and eventually, everyone” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 218).

Such rapid growth quickly generated various opinions about the nature of engaging in online relationships and specifically whether or not online relationships were as “real” as face-to-face relationships. Additionally, a key question became whether or not the online context created more “equal footing” for a diverse range of people to engage in relational ways they might otherwise not (Hargittai, 2008). This question of equal footing began a proverbial and conceptual “identity crises” within the discussion of CMC. Boyd & Ellison explained that SNSs are often designed with identity-based categories in mind, such as, religious background, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and ethnicity (Boyd & Ellison, 214). Further, Mitra noted, “the digitization of human communication led to one significant development—the real person was replaced by a discursive construction of the person” (Mitra, 2010, p. 4). Thus began a wave of serious research concerning SNS, which primarily focused on relational performance, impression management, privacy, and online/offline connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

The Effects of SNS on Users

There has been an increase in studies examining a wide range of effects of the use of SNSs on users. Vergeer and Pelzer (2009) stated, “the Internet lends itself well for socializing with new people with all sorts of backgrounds” (p. 194). As such, studies comparing it with face-to-face interaction yield interesting results. Vergeer and Pelzer (2009) found that due to “cuelessness,” or the absence of nonverbal cues (Thurlow et al.,
2009), forming relationships online, in some cases, seemed easier than building offline, face-to-face relationships. Yum & Hara (2006) found that “there exist more similarities than differences between face-to-face and CMC” with specific regard to self-disclosure and relational quality (p. 145). This is consistent with Vergeer and Pelzer’s findings that people often engage self-disclosure to, in effect, take their “offline identity online,” thus making online relationships more tangible (Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009, p. 194). The degree to which people utilize SNSs to not only initiate new relationships but also deepen previous ones may reveal an increasing reliance on social networks for maintaining relationships (Wright, 2004).

Wright (2004) found that people engage various relational maintenance strategies in online contexts, of which self-disclosure was one of the most popular and effective. It is important to note at this point, that while the presence of SNSs span the globe, such communication strategies as self-disclosure are perceived differently among cultures (Yum & Hara, 2006). Yum and Hara (2006) found, in a comparison of SNS based relationship between Asians and Americans, that a positive association with self-disclosure was true only for Americans (Yum & Hara, 2006). This begins to unveil two key cultural differences: (1) “the digital divide,” or the idea that there is a division between those who have access to communication technology and those who do not (Thurlow et al., 2009; van Dijk and Hacker, 2003; van Dijk, 2005); and (2) the existence of cultural differences in the understanding of relationality involving the “presentation of self.”
First, the concept of the “digital divide” is important to note in the discussion as it relates to leadership in functioning as a controversial issue in which good leaders are needed. Second, Goffman’s (1959) original idea of the presentation of self has been profoundly expounded in the realm of SNSs. Goffman (1959) originally put forth the idea that people manage and present themselves in ways that are favorable to themselves. Recent research reveals three key components of self-presentation specifically in the online environment, including: strategy, story, and situatedness in the public sphere (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Mitra, 2010; Ramirez & Shyangye, 2007; Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009). Gonzales and Hancock (2008) asked a pivotal question in whether mediated self-presentations can serve to shape identity. They explained, “Internet users may express previously unexpressed aspects of identity or even act out new identities” (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). This reveals the potential for mediated self-presentation to be used strategically.

Multiple studies support the idea that online mediated self-presentation is much more easily modified, controlled, and “pliable” (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Mitra, 2010;). Gonzales and Hancock (2008) noted, “Others have found that online self-presentations tend to portray strategies of ingratiation and competence, suggesting that individuals want to facilitate social relationships while trying to impress others” (p. 170). Ramirez and Shuangye (2007) further supported this notion by saying users engage in “strategic self-presentation” by highlighting positives and downplaying negatives about themselves. Mitra (2010) examined this strategic aspect of self-presentation on an even closer level by analyzing the use of “narbs,” or narrative bits of information.
Mitra (2010) identified “narbs” as the use of text, picture, video, and audio to tell a personal narrative about oneself. Mitra (2010) found that individuals’ identities become constructed by combinations of narbs, which function as “the vehicle through which specific identities are created and propagated” on SNSs (p. 6). She explained, “The narrative bits become at best a snapshot about a specific aspect of a person at a specific moment in time, or at worst a complete misrepresentation of a specific individual” (Mitra, 2010, p. 15). This reveals a similarly weighty reality as Gonzales and Hancock’s (2008) findings that the situatedness of a mediated self-presentation in public has substantial affects on self-concept. It seems that true character, which used to be commonly identified as what someone does “when no one is watching,” may have a unique position of greater visibility in SNSs. Gonzales and Hancock (2008) noted, “The data and analysis presented here suggest that online self-presentations have the power to change our identities” (p. 179). They explained, “By manipulating awareness of being public, or a sense of publicness, researchers have demonstrated that public self-presentations are more strongly linked to identity formation than those performed privately” (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008, p. 169).

Such change is important when SNSs seem to be increasingly used to leverage social capital. Thurlow et al., (2009) explained that social capital concerns the width and depth of social worlds. Vergeer and Pelzer (2009) discussed the concept of social capital as reproducing social inequalities through the leveraging of social relationships for one’s own benefit. Concerning such inequality, van Dijk and Hacker (2003) similarly identified “strategic skills of using information for one’s own purpose and position” within the realm of CMC (p. 319). This is more closely linked with the leveraging of CMC use as a
competency through which individuals gain social capital beyond existing communities. Spitzberg (2006) highlighted the nature of the use of CMC as a competence, saying, “as CMC competence increases, coorientation, appropriateness, effectiveness, satisfaction, and preferred relational outcomes are more likely to occur” (p. 48). This further supports the notion that SNSs may be used as strategic self-presentation that both shapes and is shaped by self-concept.

In summarizing thus far, there has been a large increase in the use of SNSs for the purpose of building and maintaining relationships, which has come with a set of unique issues. Some of those issues include cultural differences involving access and usage within the problem of “the digital divide,” as well as differences in perceptions of key relationship building strategies such as self-disclosure. Further, the use of narrative and other modes of self-presentation have led to the idea of CMC use as a competency that may be used strategically within relationship. From all of this, the key role of identity has emerged as an influential relational and communicative factor within the engagement of SNSs.

**Foundational Scholarship on Communication and Relationality**

Relational communication can result in the establishment and growth or destruction and demise of relationship. “The notion of relationship development refers to the idea that our communication has the potential to build or destroy our connections with other people” (Caputo et al., 2002, p. 9). Communication involves a negotiation of shared meaning between two individuals, which works to and necessitates the creation of a relationship (Caputo et al., 2002). Key to interpersonal communication is the idea of
interpretation—or the processing and identifying meaning in another’s message in the process of creating the relationship. In discussing “person perception,” Caputo et al. explained, “Everyone makes observations of people’s behavior and draws conclusions about other people’s personality traits” (Caputo et al., 2002, p. 65). This can also be true of text-based behavior, or the decision-making concerning communicating in mediated environments, which as we saw before, has profound implications for the construction of relationships, in which the concept of identity plays a key role. Komives et al., (2007) noted, “We view others through an identity lens and make attributions based on our expectations of some identities” (p. 392).

Identity is a complex concept studied in various disciplines and with varying conclusions. Thurlow et al., (2009) noted, “Identity is really all about addressing the simply question, ‘Who am I?’” (p. 96). They further explained important components of identity that people must consider including self-perceptions regarding who they are, what narrative stories they use in communicating about themselves, who others perceive them to be, and narrative stories others rely about them (Thurlow et al., 2009, p. 96). As discussed earlier, similar to relationship and communication, identity is also a process.

Many scholars expressed that identity is always being formed, including Greenhow and Robelia (2009, and Stewart (2006). These referenced the idea that identity is something we do, not something we are. Thurlow et al., (2009) explained, “identity is something which we are working on all the time” (p. 96). Further, Caputo et al., (2002) noted, “Your self-concept is a subjective collection of your attitudes and beliefs about yourself, built up over all the years of your life” (Caputo et al., 2002, p. 82). This leads to
the important notion that people arrive at such perceptions of self in relationship with others. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) wrote, “Self-identity, and thus conceptions of our ‘inner,’ ‘private,’ ‘unique,’ or ‘separate’ being, come about only through our social relationships” (p. 89). Greenhow and Robelia (2009) similarly explained, “The process of identity formation, therefore, is both an individual cognitive process and a social process, carried out among and in negotiation with others” (p. 123). Further, Thurlow et al., (2009) uniquely explained it as how “our sense of ‘I’ is put together in relationship with other people” (p. 96). The fact that identity is relational and takes place within communication further reciprocates how identity is a process, and as such, it changes as our relationships change (Stewart, 2006).

Kenneth Gergen developed a unique perspective in the discussion of interpersonal communication, identity, and mediated communication (technology), or, in this case, SNSs. Gergen (2000) put forth the idea that the self, identity, or self-concept can become socially saturated. He stated, “In the process of social saturation, the numbers, varieties, and intensities of relationship increasingly crowd the days” (Gergen, 2000, p. 49). This notion is strongly supported in the findings of the aforementioned studies. For example, Van Dijk and Hacker (2003) discuss such saturation merely in the possession of computers and networks (p. 319). Gergen (2000) explained, “The technologies of social saturation expose us to an enormous range of persons, new forms of relationships, unique circumstances and opportunities, and special intensities of feeling” (p. 69). He discussed the resulting conditions of “the populating of self,” “multiphrenia,” and “pastiche personality,” all marked by an individual whose identity is saturated by virtue of engaging in an overwhelming amount of relationships. The question quickly arises as to
what the ramifications of such saturation are on relationality, the self, and on society. That is exactly what this study seeks to draw out, specifically concerning leaders. As such, we move towards the connections between these processes of communication, relationship, identity, and increasingly popular topic of effective leadership.

**Connections to Leadership**

Key to this discussion is the concept that people “decide to follow.” Kouzes and Posner (2003) defined leadership as, “a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who decide to follow” (p. 1). SNSs are increasingly adopting such leadership language in seeking to define the relationships that are taking place within online contexts. For example, users select to “follow” other users on the SNS Twitter or even to “follow” other user’s blogs. People choose to follow—whether in life or online—people choose to follow something or someone, necessitating that they are in relationship with that person or thing. Robert Greenleaf touched on this concept explaining that those who follow include those who lead (Greenleaf, 1977). This means that leaders are also followers. It may be that leaders have even come into such a title by excelling at following in a particular realm, and have thus, become equipped to lead others. This reveals yet another unique attribute about the nature of leadership. If everyone follows something, the question quickly becomes—what or who do they follow, and why?

One deeply intriguing, yet simple answer is that they follow what or whom they value. I define a value as something or someone a person believes is worthy of their time, energy, and investment. Inherent to the leadership relationship is not only the selecting and following of particular values—but the fact that leaders influence others to join them
in the following and valuing of certain values. Northouse (2007) explained this saying, “Leadership involves influence…without influence, leadership does not exist” (p. 3). Influence requires relationship. Kouzes and Posner noted that the process of clarifying and communicating values is inherently an influential meaning-making process, and therefore a relational and communicative one (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 62). They explain:

Genuine leadership is definitely associated with something more than handling and controlling. There is supposed to be some moral force behind it. To lead, not mislead, you must have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to consistently exemplify the values you profess. (p. 70)

Leadership involves an array of competencies, including the ability to present oneself genuinely and consistently through communication in the context of relationship. Thus, CMC use becomes a competency available to leaders specifically in presenting themselves in such a way that convinces others to literally “follow,” as reflected in current SNSs language.

Credibility serves as the conceptual foundation for followership. Gergen (2000) noted, “to become a trusted leader, one must be able to establish the reality of his or her identity…One must appear as an authentic being” (p. 203). Kouzes and Posner (2003) equated this establishment of identity and resulting authenticity to the concept of “credibility,” which concerns consistency between words and action (p. 46). Further, Kouzes and Posner (2003) noted foundational elements of credibility consistent with what communication scholars refer to as “source credibility,” which include the qualities
of being honest, inspiring, and competent (p. 21). In seeking to be credible or authentic, they stated, “discovering yourself is the first discipline of credibility” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 81). Thus, in the realm of SNSs, many questions arise regarding the credibility of those available to “follow” online.

In accordance with the previous discussion, as engaging SNSs not only offer a forum to present self but also shapes self, the question of technology’s effects on identity must be tackled in light of its inherent influence on self as well as others. Komives et al., (2007) wrote, “Our personal leadership identity shapes how we view the expressions of leadership in others” (p. 392). The realm of SNSs magnifies the decision of followership in the sheer magnitude of those seemingly leveraging CMC to gain “followers.” Gergen (2000) noted, “as the social world is increasingly saturated, each form of relationship demands its demonstration of allegiance. Thus, each assessment of sincerity is made against a backdrop of multiple, competing alternatives” (p. 219). This pinpoints the choice of followership and the imperative nature of identity exploration and values clarification—specifically when engaging SNSs, as misrepresentations have proven to abound. This begs questions such as: What makes people “follow” others on SNSs? How do leaders leverage SNSs use and how does it shape their identity, therefore influencing their credibility?

Gergen (2000) put forth a challenging thought in writing, “it is the achievement of authenticity that the technologies of social saturation serve to pervert” (p. 203). Kouzes & Posner (2003) offered a similar thought, saying “too many leaders are not real people anymore. Technology, for all its wonders and potential, has actually made them less
accessible and more distant” (p. 46). Similarly, Robert Greenleaf (1977) charged that leaders must be creative and willing to enter the unknown. In this case, the unknown is the rapidly changing environment of SNSs and the purposes for which they are used in society. SNSs are constantly being used for leadership purposes. They are being used for the purpose of influence, whether through the leveraging of social capital or the strategizing of self-presentation. As Shepherd et al. (2006) noted:

The idea that one could forego persuasion rests on the belief in an autonomous self, and the relational perspective insists that there are no such things. Any two persons are always in some relationship to each other, and any relationship presumes ineradicable lines of influence, usually carried out in part through the communication flows of meaning and confusion that constantly remake the persons involved. So one cannot not persuade. (p. 10)

Thus, it is imperative that we examine how engaging in social networks influences the relationality of those who are using SNSs for leadership purposes.

**Discussion**

It is clear that the effects of the use of SNSs are relevant specifically in the realm of leadership. In the interconnections between communication, relationship, and leadership, there is an opportunity to evaluate various elements of relationality within the use of SNSs for leadership purposes including, inclusion in the realm of separateness/connectedness, identity in the realm of certainty/uncertainty, and self-disclosure in the realm of openness/closedness. Therefore, this study will use the
dialectical tensions within the relational dialectics theory to examine the following research questions concerning people’s use of the SNS, Facebook for leadership purposes:

RQ1: How does the use of the SNS, Facebook, affect the leader’s perceptions of connectedness or separateness?

RQ2: How does the use of the SNS, Facebook, affect the leaders’ perceptions of certainty or uncertainty concerning his or her identity as manifested through Facebook relationships?

RQ3: How does the use of the SNS, Facebook, affect the leaders’ perceptions of his or her openness or closedness?

RQ4: How does the use of the SNS, Facebook, affect the leaders’ perceptions of their own being influenced as well as capacity to influence others?

Chapter III: Scope and Methodology

The Scope of the Study

This study employs ethnographic interviews to examine the perceived effects of the use of SNSs on the relationality of those who use Facebook for leadership purposes from the lens of relational dialectics. In accordance with the relational dialectics theory of communication, this study will examine the three “clusters” Baxter (1988) identified in considering relationality, as represented in the aforementioned research questions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 201). The clusters include the dialectics of separateness and connectedness, uncertainty and certainty, and openness and closedness.

These clusters will be examined through ethnographic interviews of six recent graduates of a small, state liberal arts university, who are now serving on staff with the university within the offices for student success, student engagement, and the admissions
office. As such, these graduates are not only considered leaders but are also charged with exercising effective leadership among the undergraduate student population at CNU. Further, their use of Facebook not only spans their personal college experience but now stretches into their professional roles and work environment as well, rendering their experience very relevant for this study.

This study will provide a small but in-depth view of the perceived effects of the use of the SNS Facebook on the relationality of those leaders who engage it specifically for leadership purposes. The next sections will provide a more detailed overview of the methods used in this study.

**Methodology**

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) noted that the primary goal of ethnography is “to observe how people interact with each other and with their environment in order to understand their culture” (p. 138). In light of this goal, this study was designed using the qualitative method of ethnography in order to obtain the most relevant data concerning a specific subgroup within the culture of social network use. This study specifically targets recent graduates identified as leaders in attempt to find relationships between social network use and relationality among a subculture of young people who seek to positively influence others. The study will use participant inquiry to draw out patterns within the perceptions of the respondents concerning the social practice of relating via SNS. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) wrote:
In ethnographic research, talk is conceptualized as a social practice: what people say and what they keep silent about produce meaning and value in social life. Talk is socially constructed because it is shaped by social and historical forces, which are beyond the control of individuals. At the same, however, talk constitutes people’s lives together by specifying, creating, maintaining, and changing the frames of their action. (pp. 138-139)

In this study, “talk” is understood as the communicative exchanges that take place through social network sites, and further that such “talk” can transform action. Thus, it is relevant in examining communicative action within the specific culture of leadership.

**Sample**

This study will be an exercise of nonprobability sampling which Rubin, Rubin, and Piele (2005) noted as useful for studying particular groups of people and exploring relevant areas for more in-depth analysis. Particularly, this study will use a purposive sample of graduates from a small, state liberal arts university, who currently hold University Fellow positions within the offices of student success, student engagement, and the admissions office. These graduates were honored with these positions in response to their leadership as undergraduate students, and further, a few of them received a minor in leadership studies. These attributes allow for the highlighting of the relationality of those who have been identified as influential leaders, who also use Facebook. As such, participants were selected based on status as a University Fellow at CNU, Facebook use, availability, and willingness to participate. This purposive sample will allow for a focused and in-depth analysis of the relationality of those considered to be leaders as
exercised on Facebook. Further, with the permission of participants, it may be possible to glean even deeper analysis in examining the “texts” of their individual and organizational Facebook pages (Rubin et al., 2005).

**Ethnographic Interviews**

With the purposive sample of undergraduate leadership students selected, the method of participant inquiry, or individual face-to-face interviews will be used to glean the relevant data for the study. Neuman (2006) notes that face-to-face interviews not only have the highest response rates but also often allow for deeper analysis via more open-ended questioning as well as longer questionnaires. Additionally, supplementary interviews may be conducted with mentors and staff members specifically dedicated to the leadership development of the specific sample students to provide further understanding of participants as well as context for their leadership development (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

The research instrument can be found in Appendix A. Appendix A provides a list of the interview questions used with the purposive sample population of graduate university employees. The questions were designed based on the main research objectives of the study in accordance with the relational dialectics theory and the ethnographic concern for the implications of the findings (Rubin et al., 2005). The included questions were designed to achieve maximum insight on the relationality of the participating students as well as the context for their leadership development.

**Confidentiality**
In light of the depth and personal nature of qualitative ethnographic research, various methods of protecting the privacy and identities of the participants were considered. A combination of two methods will be used to retain confidentiality for participants. First, informed consent will be obtained from each participant after a detailed explanation of the study and the main research objectives (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Second, respondents articulated perceptions will be coded and presented in aggregate, yet simultaneously narrative form, to “retain a sense of realism” as Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) stress (p. 143). Further, data will be stored in a secure location to which only the primary investigator will have access.

Fieldwork, Interpretation, and Analysis

Throughout the fieldwork of ethnographic interviews and possible text analysis, a posture of learning and continuous reflection will take place through the practice of “jottings,” description, thoughtful analysis, and reflection (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Thus, once fieldwork is complete an even deeper analysis will proceed. The deeper analysis will follow Eriksson and Kovalainen’s (2008) articulated pattern of reading and reviewing the whole of field notes repeatedly, and “reducing” the data by systematically drawing out themes and findings from the learning that has taken place throughout the entirety of the process (pp. 148). This method of identifying emergent themes through comparison is called constant comparative analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Finally, the identified themes, findings, and corresponding implications will be presented from a realist perspective via narrative description (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The description will be detailed in nature through the
incorporation of respondent quotes and articulated experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Further, personal researcher bias will be strongly evaluated considering similar cultural and sub cultural experiences of the researcher.

Chapter IV: The Study

Introduction

The study investigated three dialectical tensions of relationality as identified by Baxter and Montgomery’s (1988) theory through six ethnographic interviews with recent graduates concerning their engagement of Facebook as leaders. The six participants were asked to share a little bit about themselves, their role within the university setting, and their perceptions concerning the SNS Facebook and three dialectical tensions of relationality with regard to their use of Facebook. The first dialectical tension explored was that of connectedness and separateness concerning relationship; the second was that of certainty and uncertainty in relationship as manifested in the question of identity; and the third was openness and closedness in relationship concerning their caliber of engagement on Facebook. This chapter contains the research findings as presented in the themes that emerged concerning the three dialectics of relationality within the narratives provided through the ethnographic interviews.

Data Analysis

The ethnographic interviews were conducted in a relaxed setting and with an intentionally conversational tone in order to glean the best narrative descriptions. Further, the interviews were recorded as to reduce the distraction that note taking can often be on
the part of the investigator. As such, while important notes were jotted throughout the interview, each interview recording was intensely and repeatedly combed through for theme identification and narrative analysis. Thus, this next section will present the themes that emerged through the systematic reducing of the data through constant comparative analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This means participant responses will be set in relationship to each other for the comparison of similarities and differences in order to “identify underlying and emerging uniformities” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 159). First, it is important to review the nature of the purposive sample by introducing the sample through the themes that initially emerged regarding what the participants generally share in common.

As previously discussed, all of the participants were recent graduates of a small, state liberal arts university, each of whom had been selected for a “University Fellow” position as a result of their engagement, leadership, and thus, evident passion for the University’s mission, vision, goals, and culture. Four of the participants were female and two of the participants were male. While each of them expressed having come from different backgrounds, it is evident that they are individually and collectively marked by the CNU culture, which is further reflected in their responses (PI1). This facet will be further discussed in the limitations section of the conclusion. However, it is important to identify this shared culture before further exploration of the results. The results will be presented in order of the area in question, to include: Facebook use; each of the three dialectics of relationality examined, concerning, perceptions of connectedness-separateness, certainty-uncertainty, and openness-closedness; and ultimately perceptions of influence.
Results

Facebook Use

First, a general description of participants’ Facebook use will be presented in order to understand how they frame their own use of Facebook. Each participant was asked about the nature of their Facebook use, to describe any routine they have when using Facebook, as well as to give a rough estimate of their number of Facebook friends. In regard to the nature of their use, all participants responded using language to describe maintaining relationships with friends. Multiple participants referencing using Facebook to “stay informed” about what is going on with certain friends, groups, various news stations, and as such, “the world” (PI4, PI6). Some referred to their use as “personal” in nature (PI5), and many discussed a recent change in the nature of their Facebook relationships to specifically include family members (PI4, PI5, PI6). Further, all participants referenced their use in contrast another type of user, primarily referred to as “one of those people” (PI1), perceived as someone who “sits on Facebook all day long” (PI6) for “serious stalking” purposes (PI2). This unanimous reference to “those people” revealed a primary limitation of the study, in that no participants identified as one of “them.”

Additionally, each of these participants referenced a similar routine when logging on to use Facebook. Their routine primarily consisted of checking for “red flags” (PI1), or messages and notifications, followed quickly by “scrolling a few scrolls” (PI3) through their newsfeed to look for “anything interesting” (PI1, PI3), and finally checking the “birthdays section” (PI2). One participant shared their strategy of ensuring a response to...
certain Facebook items by “control selecting” each notification causing it to pop up into its own tab in the Internet browser (PI3). Such strategy is understandable as each participant referenced having somewhere around 500 Facebook friends. One participant immediately knew their number of friends, retorting “706” as soon as the question was posed (PI2), and multiple participants referenced having recently deleted hundreds of friends (PI4, PI6). After participants were asked about the nature of their Facebook use and relationships, they were asked to reflect on the various dialectical tensions of relationship.

*RQ1: Connectedness—Separateness in Relationship*

When asked how Facebook makes them feel connected within their relationships, participants’ responses revealed three main ways Facebook affected them regarding relational connectedness. The most primary theme was the variety of communication channels Facebook provides as opportunities for communicative connection. Participants referenced the capabilities of posting on a friend’s wall, sending them a private message, status updates, and even engaging in “Facebook” chat, a real-time text-based chat tool. One participant said, “[Facebook] gives me the opportunity to—if I want to—post on [someone’s] wall, chat, or post an encouraging message. I can use multiple forms of communication” (PI6). Another participant explained a level of connectedness available “by reading the newsfeed on my homepage, seeing what people are up to, and what’s affecting their daily lives” (PI4). A few explained how they “follow” their favorite news sources and feel connected by staying up to date with important world events (PI1, PI4,
This newsfeed option is just one of many features that reflects a second theme of connectivity, that is, organization.

All participants referred to a collection of Facebook features that provide varying degrees of social organization. One such feature is “groups,” which allows users to participate in as well as create any group organized around a particular purpose, interest, or membership base. This allows for the organization of groups on small, campus and community-based levels, to national, international, and even in the virtual realm (PI3, PI4, PI5). Further, individuals as well as groups can utilize the “event” feature, which enables users to create, advertise, and manage a vast array of actual and virtual events of both public and private nature. For example, multiple participants referenced feeling connected to others through coordinating or being invited to events on Facebook (PI2, PI3, PI4, PI6).

On a more individual level, all participants referenced the “birthday” feature, which posts birthday announcements for any friend who has elected to list their birthday on their Facebook page. However, participants had varying responses as to how this birthday feature affected their feelings of connectedness. While a few participants shared their enjoyment of wishing their friends happy birthday, one participant stated, “It’s very sad how birthdays have become so impersonal via Facebook” (PI1). Another participant even expressed their using the birthday feature to “weed out” friends. The participant explained, “I recently started a campaign for myself—if I don’t want to wish someone a happy birthday on their birthday, I delete them as a friend” (PI4).
One participant used the term “passive” in referring to a certain element of connectedness they perceived on Facebook (PI3). Further, all participants described a type of “passive” engagement in describing how Facebook makes them feel more connected. Participants stated the following: “I can see on their Facebook status what’s going on and decide how to respond” (PI2), and “I can still know what they’re doing without having to text or call. It’s easier than keeping up verbally or face to face” (PI5). Another explained, “I don’t have to interact with them directly, I can just find something out from their page, but I still feel connected” (PI3), and still another said, “[Facebook] makes me feel like I can still keep that relationship somewhat stable without engaging it on a regular basis” (PI5). This element of passive connectivity seems to be a pivotal point in the dialectic between participants feeling connected and separated.

The same aspects of Facebook that allow for such passive feelings of connectedness can also result in feelings of separation as indicated by the participants. One participant explained this in discussing Facebook as a form of mediated communication. In response to whether or not the engagement of Facebook resulted in any feelings of separation, the participant stated, “Yes. In the aspect that Facebook is mediated, not face-to-face, not ‘pure communication.’ It’s through a screen. There is a lot of static, loss of tone, and things are not received they same way they are sent” (PI1). In referencing the mediated nature of Facebook, another participant stated, “The concept of Facebook chat baffles me…I have friends I’ll try and call—and I’m not one for a phone call—and they won’t pick up, and then I Facebook chat and they respond. It makes me feel like we’re losing that sense of personal touch. There are times I’d rather hang out with someone one on one than Facebook chat” (PI4). According to participants, this
mediated aspect of Facebook often results in a deeply personal feeling of separateness related to the experience of being uninvited or even jealous (PI2, PI3, PI6).

One participant stated, “I definitely have a jealousy issue when it comes to Facebook” (PI3). The participant when on to describe an example, saying, “Take my roommate. If my roommate posted on someone’s wall and I don’t get in on that, I’m like, ‘Why aren’t you interacting with me on Facebook,’ ‘Why can’t I have that too?’…That’s when I feel disconnected” (PI3). Another participant gave an array of examples, saying:

When I see stuff my high school friends are doing that I’m not a part of, I see a disconnect. I can have preconceived notions about what people are doing. People post pictures all the time, of their Halloween costumes, etc., and I’m like ‘I don’t want to see you naked, put some clothes on!’ When every weekend they’re at a new party or bar scene…it does create a disconnect. (PI6)

Still another participant referenced a similar experience, stating, “If there are pictures of a big party and you weren’t invited—[that’s when you feel] super disconnected” (PI2).

The results concerning the connectedness-separateness dialectic of relationality initially reveal Facebook use’s effects on relational engagement, including relationship initiation, maintenance, and balance. This points to the key aspect of leadership itself functioning as a relationship, and further, the integrity of the relationship between leader and members or followers for leadership effectiveness. The integrity, or sturdiness, of a relationship and therefore its impact on those involved is further explored through the second dialectic investigated.
RQ2: Certainty—Uncertainty in Relationships and Identity

As Facebook offers a unique forum for the presentation of self and relationships, participants were specifically asked how their engagement of Facebook resulted in feelings of certainty or uncertainty concerning their relationships, and even more, their identity as portrayed within those relationships. All participant responses revealed the “concreteness” of Facebook as the foundation for both feelings of certainty as well as uncertainty in regard to relationship as well as identity (PI3). One participant referenced the “See Friendship” feature, which allows users to view every form of communication, group interaction, or event attended collectively within a particular relationship (PI5). Multiple participants also referenced how “others” outside a particular friendship have access to similar evidences of relationship. One participant described this saying, “Facebook is ‘hey what do your friends think of you and what do you think of your friends” (PI1).

The integrated nature of relationships and identity was particularly evident in participants’ deeply reflective responses to this line of questioning. Many participants immediately made connections between their relationships, their portrayal of self, and others perceptions of them in the Facebook environment. One participant stated, “My mom used to tell me, ‘you can tell a lot about a person by their friends and the way their friends treat each other.’ Who I talk to, who my friends are…it’s a testament to who I am” (PI4).

Multiple participants referenced the profile creation element of Facebook as integral to their feelings of certainty regarding their personal identity. One participant
stated, “I can physically see it…what pictures people have tagged me in and what I’m putting up there. By looking at my profile page, I see a definition of who I am” (PI3). Another participant explained the process:

They make you describe yourself. You don’t have to, but you can choose to use words to describe yourself. You put concrete words to yourself, likes and dislikes, and post pictures that represent you. And [you] can associate [yourself] with other people who do similar things. (PI1)

One participant said, “We’re always informed that what you put on Facebook is reflective of who you are. You can change it. You can make it something you’re not, or something you aspire to be. It should be a wake up call” (PI3).

A few participants expressed how such a mediated and concrete form of not only self, but also relational portrayal, cannot only result in feelings of certainty, but also uncertainty. One participant shared how they often compare themselves and their relationships to others on Facebook, which results in personal insecurity and uncertainty about themselves. By comparing amounts of notifications and statuses “liked,” the participant explained, “I feel more insecure. I think ‘Maybe I’m just not good enough…people aren’t as supportive of me.’” (PI1). That participant went on to say, “It’s not my identity but people affirming my identity with the like button” (PI1). Other participants expressed how this uncertainty manifested itself more in a form of awareness or cautiousness concerning their presentation of self. One participant shared a relational example, saying: stated:
One time someone posted something on my wall I thought was humorous, which is part of who I am. But it had expletives and bad words, and my parents saw it and got upset and it was this huge ordeal. Even though that’s not who I am—I mean it is who I am—but its not. (PI3)

Another participant said, “[Facebook] has given me an understanding about not just what I like about myself, but the things I want to present to others” (PI4).

The results from the investigation of the second dialectic point to the integral relational processes of values clarification, identity development, and self-presentation. Each of the participants referenced Facebook serving to trigger such self-analysis concerning values, identity, and impression management. This effect of the use of Facebook to trigger such self-analysis points to the foundational nature of such a practice within effective leadership. Such intentional consideration of the clarification of values, solidification of personal identity, and intentionality in presentation are related to a key challenge within leadership that almost all participants directly referenced in the concept of role modeling. As role modeling requires a degree of vulnerability, this leads to the third dialectic examined in this study of openness—closedness.

*RQ3: Openness—Closedness*

Various themes emerged from the exploration of the dialectic between openness and closedness as participant responses seemed strongly associated with personality as expressed in preference. Three primary themes emerged from participant responses including the concept of congruence, privacy, and impression management.
Congruence relates most to the personality preferences as articulated by each participant. All participants referenced the desire for their Facebook page to, in some way, reflect congruence with who they are. One participant stated that they wanted their profile to be an “accurate representation of who I am” (PI6). Another said, “I let people see what is on there because I trust in what I put on there” (PI5). That participant went on to say, “If its not truly reflecting who you are…its not getting that purpose across” (PI5). How participants express such accuracy and seek congruence seems to range dramatically. One participant shared:

I almost let my inner thinking come out on Facebook. I’m just trying to be creative in the way I put [myself] out there. There is white noise—it doesn’t make a difference in anyone’s day, but something creative or quirky on there…might challenge people to think about something in a different light. (PI4)

Yet, another participant stated that they knew people far more open on Facebook than they were, saying, “I won’t list my life story…I want to tell someone [that] face to face” (PI1). Further, most participants expressed that such a desire for congruence and resulting decisions about how open they were in expressing themselves was strongly related to an awareness of others’ interpretations of their portrayal of self on Facebook.

One participant noted, “People can create all sorts of interpretations…[they can] go through all my pictures and make judgments about my relationships…I don’t want assumptions about me when that’s not how I am in person” (PI2). Additionally, multiple participants shared that just by virtue of being on Facebook, “[people] know a whole lot about ‘me’ that they wouldn’t necessarily know” (PI3, PI6). Another participant stated, “I
don’t spill all of myself out there, that loses a lot of personal connectedness—anyone can read and not talk to me and know everything about me” (PI1). Further, in reference to the commonality of controversial matters being addressed on Facebook, one participant stated:

> I don’t usually post controversial things…If you want to talk about something meaningful, let’s talk about it. But if you’re trying to offend people with what you’re saying…you’re just stirring the pot. On Facebook, you’re just facing their words; you’re not facing them…it’s keeping you from interacting with them. Be with them when you’re making [your] point. (PI6)

According to participant responses, in acknowledgement of interpretation, such concern for congruence and understanding—specifically regarding important values—manifests itself in a balance between sharing openly and maintaining privacy commonly called “impression management.”

One participant stated, “I am constantly thinking, ‘How am I going to come off to someone?’ If I ‘like’ a particular thing—how will that reflect my identity, [or] come off, [or] portray me?” (PI3). Another stated, “[Facebook] makes me very cautious as to how I represent myself online. I’m not cautious in what I put out there, but I like to represent the best parts of myself on Facebook” (PI4). Further, all participants shared how their concern for impression management seemed to be heightened with the onset of a professional position.
A participant shared, “As a new employee of the university…I am hesitant in terms of…I have to be cautious in the way I represent myself—my role did change” (PI4). Another participant noted, “No matter what I put—now I have to be more censored with statuses and pictures—I did since becoming a fellow put all my pictures to private” (PI5). Still another participant went from saying “I don’t have anything to hide. I’m an open book,” to immediately saying, “No more pictures, I don’t post them” (PI2). Further, they went on to say, “my Facebook represents what I want the people I work with or friends on Facebook to see” (PI2).

Initially, the results from the exploration of this third dialectic may seem similar to the results from the second in regard to impression management. However, the results from the third dialectic reveal an even deeper motivation for the consideration of impression management, specifically within leadership—the concern for credibility. All participants referenced critical thinking and decision making in relation to protecting the impression of them available on Facebook. Their primary concern seemed to be their desire for others to view them as consistent, or congruent, thus reinforcing their credibility as an honest and competent person. Further, participants concern for credibility was not only intrapersonal, but also interpersonal, or relational, in an awareness of the influence of self-presentation on others, and thus, on leadership effectiveness. This leads to the exploration of Facebook as means of influence.

**RQ4: Perceptions of Influence**

In light of the conversations that flowed from the questions, participants were asked about their feelings regarding Facebook and whether or not it has a nature of
influence. All participants stated emphatically that Facebook is influential. Some explained its influence saying, “it reaches so many people” (PI2), and “its so ingrained into daily life” (PI3). Others cited personal examples of its influence referencing the recent Casey Anthony trial, and in that realm one participant stated, “Elections, articles. [People] make huge statements about things, and can either research them or believe whatever their friends are saying. People can be heavily swayed by what’s on Facebook” (PI3). Another participant explained, “Facebook holds credibility” (PI1). Multiple participants shared the belief that Facebook’s influence is “dependent on the person” (PI2, PI4).

When asked how Facebook might have personally influenced them, participants’ answers varied drastically. One participant said:

I don’t think so or feel like it does. I guess it influences my emotions. If I see someone posts something offensive—or they post something negative about something I love in a public place…my whole day is ruined! I’m wierded out because you just offended me! (PI2)

When asked the same question, another participant shared, “It influences me a lot, [it’s] so routine, in everyday activity. I go on it without thinking…just like face to face interaction” (PI3). One articulated how Facebook can have “positive and negative impacts on society and [the] people of our generation” (PI4).

Additionally, the participants were asked if they had ever intentionally used Facebook to influence or lead. One participant shared how they might often lead
unconsciously, and explained that there is a “great capacity to lead on Facebook” (PI1).

Another reflected:

I guess I influence people all the time, with what I post on other people’s walls, what I post on my wall, groups I’m involved in, even being at CNU, the friends I have—it influences people all the time, whether I like it or not. It’s a scary, scary thing. (PI3)

Still another explained, “You can influence a lot of people if you are being someone who others can respect…they’ll listen to you” (PI2).

One participant even shared an example of leadership on Facebook that influenced them directly, and shared:

Someone posted something about a sit-in protest. When that was posted, it took off. One charismatic really wanted to get support even though it wasn’t the best way. The true leaders on my end had to reevaluate, and it made it harder because it was easy on Facebook. It made it this huge thing, and those of us who needed [the protest] to not happen, we had to encourage that it was not the way to [accomplish our goal]. It was hard to reach all of those people—[Facebook] was like a virus to me…it was infectious and made it harder for me as a leader. (PI5)

This participant went on reflecting about the type of leadership that takes place on Facebook, and said, “I didn’t study leadership, but being in leadership roles, I think ‘lead by example’ is most effective” (PI5). Another participant stated, “Role modeling is huge
in leadership…being a good role model, respectable, etc.—having a profile, representing yourself in the best manner—you can show that through your Facebook” (PI2).

The results from this line of questioning reveal that Facebook indeed has a profound influence on participants. Although in articulating their perceptions of the influence of Facebook, many participants attempted to separate themselves from such influence, all participants clearly reflected some degree of not only being influenced by Facebook, but influencing through it as well. It was ultimately clear that the key to the degree and nature of influence related to Facebook is the concept and existence of relationship itself.

Discussion

These results highlight many aspects of the interconnections between communication, relationship, leadership, and even identity. Ultimately, the results provide a lens of viewing Facebook as a potential microcosm and simulation of relationality in a more concrete and tangible way. In such a realm, it almost seems that what is often unseen becomes visible and what is often visible becomes quite unseen. This works to reveal the mediated nature of the SNS Facebook as a pivotal point affecting relationality.

The results unveil an array of effects of the use of the SNS Facebook on the relationality of the participants within the purposive sample. The themes that emerged from the participant responses pointed to various effects inherently related to leadership and effectiveness as a leader. Exploration of the first dialectic revealed effects on
relational engagement, including initiating, maintaining, and balancing relationships. In their discussion of the relational leadership model, Komives et al. (2007), noted, “Although a person could exert leadership of ideas through persuasive writings or making speeches, most leadership happens in an interactive context between individuals and among group members” (p. 74). Facebook functions as such an interactive context and forum for relational influence, which is foundational for leadership effectiveness.

Further, in the relational leadership model, Komives et al. (2007) identify that such relational influence must be inclusive, empowering, ethical, and ultimately purposeful. For this, reflection is required, and increased reflection was one of the primary effects of the use of Facebook that emerged from the findings. Participants expressed how Facebook increased their reflection concerning what relationships to initiate, maintain, and therefore balance. Such reflection was primarily based on whether or not those relationships were consistent with their values and self-perception. Exploration of the second dialectic revealed further reflection concerning values clarification, identity, and self-presentation.

Facebook seemed to trigger participants’ reflection on values and identity, specifically in how Facebook “asks” participants to create a profile through which such values, and ultimately identity will be articulated (PI1). Such reflection on values and identity are required for effective leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2007) describe values clarification as “discovering those fundamental beliefs that will guide your decisions and actions along the path to success and significance” (p. 68). Participants thought deeply about their self-presentation on Facebook and how their presentation of values would
ultimately impact their significance in existing or desired relationships and even their success within their career. Such reflection was specifically related to a desire to achieve congruence in their self-presentation and to “come across” as credible in accordance with being an advocate for their personal values and in their style of maintaining relationships (PI3). This leads to further discussion of credibility—a theme that emerged from exploration of the third relational dialectic.

As mentioned previously, credibility is considered the foundation of leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). As the participants reflected on their practices of exercising openness or closedness on Facebook, their primary purpose in selecting to reveal information or conceal it was to maintain their credibility in relationship. This reveals that credibility, as the foundation of leadership, and like leadership, is inherently relational. Kouzes and Posner (2003) wrote:

The secret to closing the credibility gap lies in a collective willingness to get closer, to become known, and to get to know others…By getting closer to their constituents and by letting their constituents get to know them, leaders can strengthen their foundation of credibility. (p. 46)

This reveals the necessity to protect credibility which ultimately motivated participants decisions to share or conceal. In fact, in many cases, it was clear that even participant decisions to conceal information on Facebook were in pursuit of valuable relationship. Participants hesitated to share information when they felt it would be better shared in person, and thus, more consistent with their relational approach and values. This reveals
another aspect leading to the influence of Facebook—the dynamics of its influence on life outside of it, or offline.

Facebook definitely serves as a forum for relational influence, however, there is a question as to the purpose behind such influence, which raises a large question for aspiring leaders who use Facebook related not only to their purpose in using Facebook, but in how effective Facebook is at helping them to accomplish their personal purpose in leadership. Facebook can be used purposefully and intentionally within the unique form of relationship Facebook provides. However, through the unique form of relationship that Facebook offers is an immense opportunity for relational saturation. The question becomes: what happens to a purpose wielded in the midst of relational saturation? Is personal vision maintained and sharpened or lost? The initial answer to this question is an appeal to dependency on the user.

Initially, this study revealed the following effects regarding the use of SNS and relationality among identified, yet aspiring leaders: heightened self-awareness and impression management; increased efforts towards balance and consistency; heightened awareness of responsibility; and increased reflection on the intentionality of self and others, corresponding relational investment, and ultimate personal impact. Further, those effects initially seem positive. In accordance with the leadership perspective on effective relational maintenance and intentional identity development that results in credibility—these effects could result in increased leadership effectiveness both in online and offline forums. However, this is dependent heavily on the user and their response to the unique relational forum Facebook provides and how they engage this forum. It is important to
note that Facebook might also offer the opportunity to spend inordinate amounts of time
focused on successfully maintaining a vast amount of relationships. In this case, personal
vision, awareness, and ultimate impact in personal relationships could be casualties of
extreme relational saturation. As Gergen (2000) noted the idea that as the social world
becomes increasingly saturated, relational and values decisions may decrease in true
sincerity.

Chapter V: Summaries & Conclusions

The goal of this study was to identify possible effects of the use of SNSs on the
relationality of specifically those who aspire to lead. As such, decisions were made as to
the perceived best way to encounter and identify those effects in a given situation. As in a
majority of studies, pressures of both time and purpose, as well as relational hindrances
and flaws in design impacted the nature and results of the study. This section will address
specific limitations, corresponding further recommendations, and final conclusions.

Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study primarily include classic circumstantial restrictions,
the narrow nature of the purposive sample, potential investigator bias, and the lack of
including the population of “those people” as referenced by all participants. The
circumstantial restrictions include the incapability to conduct the study in a variety of
locations due to limitations of time and proximity. This yields an additional limitation in
the lack of general application to the population due to the qualitative nature of the
study. The narrow nature of the purposive sample limited this study specifically in
regard to the shared culture among participants and even the investigator. By virtue of selecting to both attend and later work for their alma mater, certain values are inherently shared and held in high regard. The cultural values that were most likely to influence this study were those of leadership, service, face-to-face communication, and a strong commitment to a particular vision of each of those things.

Finally, one of the greatest limitations of the study was revealed within it, as a certain perception of a population of “those people” was identified and referred to by all participants. “Those people” are said to be those who engage Facebook in an inherently different way than all of those interviewed. This leads to an exciting amount of opportunity for future research.

Further Recommendations

This study reveals ample opportunities for future research. One option would be to simply replicate the study in other contexts to gain ground for generalization and external validity through possible quantitative supplements. Another option would be to expand the study to either include a greater population of those identified as or aspiring to function as leaders, or to interview a mixture of those who consider themselves leaders and those who do not. A third recommendation, in light of the results, would be to identify and interview the population of “those people” who engage Facebook in a nearly 24-7, extremely dependent manner, as referenced by the purposive sample. Another direction could be to research what Facebook or SNS users actively “do” in light of passive connectivity, and examine what motivates a user’s decision to actively respond to a status post. One could also more closely examine the “passive” response—
similar to the responses of judgment, comparison, and jealousy articulated by the participants in this study. Further, one could research the initial motivation for status posts, or the differences between users who engage a comprehensive SNS like Facebook or an exclusively status-update SNS such as Twitter. Finally, the recent collaboration between Facebook and Skype, offering a computer-mediated form of face-to-face communication, provides profound opportunity for a new direction as well.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, this study has revealed a consistent set of potential effects of the use of the SNS Facebook on those who aspire to lead. Those effects include: heightened self-awareness and impression management; increased efforts towards balance, consistency, and credibility; heightened awareness of responsibility; and increased reflection on the intentionality of self and others, corresponding relational investment, and ultimate personal impact. Each of these effects was reflected within all participant responses of varying type and degree. Further, the effects found in this study further support the literature that originally informed its design and implementation. Additionally, the results continue to beg the questions of Gergen’s claims as the cost of relational saturation on positive influence remains mysterious, specifically within the SNS environment.

Finally, the results of this study were consistent with the transformative nature of the relationality perspective of communication as well as the relational leadership model. First, the results yield that each participant was and is, in fact, transformed by their engagement of communicative relationship via the SNS Facebook. Further, it is clear that
the participant’s engagement of Facebook is purposeful in nature, in their individual and collective desire to be generally inclusive, creatively empowering, and even ethical in their engagement of Facebook. This study also reaffirmed the process-oriented nature of each of its elements, to include communication, relationship, identity, and leadership. The mediated nature of SNSs, particularly Facebook, seemed to provide an additional dimension of relationality, creating a more tangible view of the processes of managing the dialectical tensions within relationships, and the resulting reflection towards more purposeful influence. However, this mediated nature also alluded to the implication that unintentionally managed Facebook use might result in the relational and identity saturation that Gergen spoke of and potential lack of personal significance and effectiveness. This study simply offers a thoughtful approach to considering the effects of the use of SNS on those who seek to make a positive difference, and thus, the encouragement to engage communication, relationship, leadership, and technology with great consideration and respect, as one ought never underestimate the power of influence.
References


Appendix A: The Research Instrument

Interview Questions used with Purposive Sample

1. Concerning Role:
   - Could you tell me your name and a little bit about yourself? What about your role within the university and how you came to this role?

2. Concerning General Use of Facebook:
   - Could you describe for me what you typically do or any sort of routine you have when you log in to Facebook?
   - Why do you use Facebook? What purposes do you typically use it for?
   - How many friends do you have on Facebook? How many organizations are you a part of?
   - How do you think your use of Facebook influences those friends you have on Facebook? How does your use of Facebook influence you?

3. Concerning Connectedness—Separateness in Relationship
   - Can you describe how your use of Facebook makes you feel connected to your friends/followers?
   - Can you describe how your use of Facebook makes you feel separate from your friends/followers?
   - How do you use Facebook to manage or influence such connectedness—separateness or how others might feel connected to you?

4. Concerning Certainty—Uncertainty as manifested through Identity in Relationship
   - Can you describe how your use of Facebook makes you feel certain about the nature of your relationships/identity?
   - Can you describe how your use of Facebook makes you feel uncertain about the nature of your relationships/identity?

5. Concerning Openness—Closedness
   - In what ways do you consider yourself vulnerable or “open” with others in your engagement of Facebook?
   - In what ways do you feel you are more hesitant to be vulnerable or “closed” with others in your engagement of Facebook?
   - How do you think your engagement of Facebook influences others? Yourself?