“WHEN DID FACEBOOK BECOME MY GIRLFRIEND?”: GENDER AND SELF-PRESENTATION ON FACEBOOK

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the two people who have helped me survive and have the time of my life these last two years: my friends Alexa Megna and Amy Guidry. Amy, since the beginning you have given me confidence in this research topic, telling me it was “cutting edge”, saying that I will be famous someday for being a Facebook researcher and that you will “ride on my coattails”. You have always reminded me that I am capable and that my ideas are worth writing down; plus you fed me countless Trader Joes meals that kept me from starving in the department. I loved our long discussions about TV, feminism, and life in general while wreaking havoc on the city of San Diego. Alexa, I probably would not have graduated if it wasn’t for you. You were constantly keeping me on track and motivated, and you have been my role model for more than just school for the past two years. You made me want to be a better student, feminist, beer enthusiast, and person just by the way you live your life. Thanks for saving me from countless meltdowns. I cannot wait for our future as bloggers and DeVry employees. Amy and Alexa, my partners in crime: thank you so much for, in your own unique ways, getting me through this thesis and this master’s program. I love you!
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“When Did Facebook Become My Girlfriend?”: Gender and Self-Presentation on Facebook
by
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A content analysis of Facebook profiles of undergraduate students examined the profile pictures and status updates to reveal how self-identified males and females construct their identity in this online environment. The findings revealed that perhaps users view statuses and profile pictures differently in regards to strategies of self-presentation. However, some findings also revealed that identity on Facebook is constructed using stereotypical ideas of gender. Although studies have been done on social networking sites, sociological concepts have been greatly ignored in regards to Facebook. More research needs to be done, especially in the field of sociology, to examine how this novel social environment is affecting the identity construction and social interaction of people today.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Facebook currently has about 845 million users compared to the 1 million users that it began with in 2004 (Hepburn 2010). According to their website, 50% of Facebook users log in at least once a day, and the average user has about 130 friends. Over half of all users are ages 18-34, although those aged 45-65 also constitute almost 20% of users (Smith 2010). Facebook has become much more than the social networking phenomenon on college campuses. Today, it has spread worldwide, with approximately 80% of its users living outside of the United States (Facebook 2010). Although there are multiple social networking sites that serve the same purpose as Facebook (for example, MySpace), Facebook has undoubtedly surpassed these in popularity and has established itself as the dominant social networking site for people of any age and nationality; in 2010, 67% of social networking users worldwide used Facebook (Whitney 2010).

Most news coverage of Facebook has been centered on privacy issues, marketing opportunities, and legal battles surrounding its invention. Unfortunately, not much attention has been given to the social implications of this phenomenon, especially in sociology. Facebook has given us a whole new environment and multiple new methods of social interaction. Along with this, new social norms, etiquette, and problems are being created that are becoming a huge part of today’s social life. The field could greatly benefit from an investigation into Facebook and the possible ways in which the social constructions of race, class and gender manifest themselves in this new social world. Since Facebook has become a significant part of peoples’ everyday lives, the inequalities and existing social issues undoubtedly have a role online. The way people interact in this online social sphere is becoming increasingly relevant and can no longer be ignored by social scientists.

Specifically, the theoretical question being explored is: How do people present their public gender identity? This will be studied in the context of Facebook by looking at profiles and seeing if and how gender shapes the way users present themselves online. Therefore, the empirical question being examined is: How do people present themselves on Facebook
profiles, and does this differ depending on the sex of the user? This will be assessed by looking at profile pictures and status updates on a user’s profile. By looking at how gender and self-presentation intersect in this online atmosphere, this study can introduce the idea that Facebook is an important topic for sociologists and increase the knowledge of how this phenomenon is affecting our society.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though the topic of social interaction on Facebook is extremely relevant to the social sciences, there is a dearth of research on this topic. The amount of literature that does exist on Facebook and social networking sites (SNS) does, however, explore the benefits for users, gender, personality traits, and self-presentation. These findings will help aid in my examination of gender and self-presentation on Facebook profiles.

Benefits of Using Social Media

Contrary to the dominant discourse of how social media can be damaging to relationships (Green and Brock 2008; Sanders et al. 2000; Schmidt 2011) and for young people in particular (Hensley 2011; Klein 2011; Weeks 2011), many researchers have explored how the emerging obsession with social media could benefit its users. Kujath (2011), for example, explored the question of whether Facebook is a substitute for face-to-face interaction. This study found that users used SNSs mostly for maintaining close friendships that started offline; most respondents had only a few friends online that they have never met. Kujath concluded that SNSs are not used as substitutions for in-person interaction; they are used to enhance and maintain existing friendships. Coyne et al. (2011) also explored a similar topic: they examined how media affected positive or negative communication within heterosexual committed relationships. They particularly focused on how texting can benefit relationships by enabling affection to be sent while the person was away or doing other activities (like texting “I luv u!” during a meeting). They concluded that although texting and media can be used in negative ways in romantic relationships (for example, using them to cheat), most communication via texting and other media has a positive effect on relationships, like enabling partners to stay connected during busy schedules.
**MYSPACE: THE PRECURSOR TO FACEBOOK**

MySpace is a social networking site that preceded Facebook. Before Facebook was launched, MySpace was the place to post pictures, add online friends, and create an online profile that allowed people to present specific images of themselves. In July 2006, MySpace was announced as the most visited website in the US. In 2008, Facebook started to become a competitor, yet MySpace was still dominant among US users. The website also hit its peak number of users in 2008, at about 76 million. In 2009, membership was declining, although it was still the number one social networking site in the US. By 2011, it became clear that MySpace was rapidly losing money, employees, and popularity (Stenovec 2011). It is clear that Facebook has not only replaced MySpace as the number one social networking site, but that it has largely surpassed the success that MySpace had during its peak (845 million users on Facebook today versus 76 million at MySpace’s peak). Yet one cannot ignore that MySpace paved the way for Facebook’s success, and that the idea of online self-presentation started there. Although there are other online environments that one could argue involves self-presentation (i.e. dating sites, job searching sites, video game communities, etc.), MySpace was the first online environment that offered an arena to give a comprehensive image of oneself. A user wasn’t just trying to present themselves as a date, or an employee, or a fantastical character- they were presenting themselves, as they wanted to be seen, to a large and mixed audience of peers.

Studies have been done on how users have presented themselves on MySpace, and how this process may interact with sex and gender. For example, Thelwall, Wilkinson and Uppal (2010) examined plain-text comments (excluding links, videos, and photos) on MySpace, using a dataset from a previous study. They looked at expressions of emotions in the text, and found that two-thirds of the comments had positive emotions expressed in them, and that females were the primary users who wrote and received positive comments on MySpace. However, there was no difference by sex for negative comments. They did not mention how they determined the sex of the users who made the comments, which in my opinion, should have been clarified. They concluded that traditional patterns of communication that differ by gender are manifesting themselves in online social networking sites.
Another study also examined the same topics, but had a different approach to methodology. Magnuson and Dundes (2008) used their own MySpace friends to create a sample of 100 males and females (which leads me to believe that they used the self-identified sex displayed on profiles, although they did not specify) who all happened to be white. They looked at the “Info/About” sections and had a very interesting discussion about how males and females create their identities differently. For example, they found that females mention their significant other more than males do on their profiles. They also discussed their findings using Goffman’s (1979) *Gender Advertisements* and concluded that women still conform to the norms of femininity (creating a sense of self that is centered on others) despite this new online social environment. Despite potential issues within the methodology, this study reflects my goals of determining whether the sex of the user on an online social environment affects the way that they present themselves, and how gender norms on social networking sites are similar or differ from those offline.

The most interesting discussion of self-presentation and MySpace came from Jenny Davis (2010), who used the idea of Goffman and symbolic interactionists to discuss how the architecture of the “space” of MySpace dictates how users construct their identity. For example, certain structural aspects of the site limit the expression of users, such as choosing from a list of races rather than expressing what one’s race is in a fill-in-the-blank format. Davis explained that she used MySpace over Facebook because it has a more consistent structure that has been relatively the same for years (unlike Facebook, whose structure is constantly changing). She used her own MySpace profile to take notes of how the structure of the site affects self-presentation; she also conducted “semi-structured interviews” with participants over instant messaging (IM) and MySpace messages. She used 96 of her own MySpace friends as her sample, which she justified by saying that the use of her online friends and of IM and messaging for data collection reflects the way that users experience the site. I disagree and think that this methodology limits the amount of spontaneous information given by the participant, as well as the diversity of the participants themselves. I would argue that it is less important to have the methodology reflect the experience of the user, and more important to get the most information about that experience as possible. I am assuming she used the self-identified sex of the user based on what was communicated on their profile, but she unfortunately did not specify this.
In her discussion, Davis (2010) argues that MySpace is structured to have the users provide primarily overt, not covert, information about themselves. I think this is an unnecessary distinction, since presenting yourself online will undoubtedly communicate covert information about the user. She even admits that “even overt categories can have covert undertones” (Davis 2010:1111). She goes on to discuss how users purposefully intend to send covert messages about themselves to others through seemingly overt information posted on their profiles:

Dan, for example, explains during his interview that he includes movies in his ‘movies’ section which he feels portray him as funny and masculine. It’s good to be a Romero [the MySpace user name] reports using her top friends section to covertly show her audience that she is selective in the friends she chooses [italics in original]. (Davis 2010:1111)

This supports the idea that things like status updates and profile pictures should be examined in the context of what the user was attempting to imply about themselves via a seemingly straightforward and unimportant piece of personal information.

Davis (2010) concludes that self-presentation on MySpace is different than in face-to-face interaction because the negotiation between performer and audience is not instantaneous. She argues that the identity construction has already taken place when the user creates their profile, and the audience doesn’t interact with the process in the same way. I would disagree, however; I think this argument ignores the fact that users are constantly editing their profiles and presenting more information each day- posting pictures and status updates, for example. This is all based on others’ profiles and the reactions of others to the information they present (just like in face-to-face interaction). I would argue that this is just a different format of self-presentation, or a different arena for it. The user has more time to think about how to present information, and how to respond to others, but this is just the same old process, yet perhaps in slow-motion. I also disagree with her statement that the information posted on MySpace is less likely to be misinterpreted. Since the user is not there to immediately clarify any concerns of the audience, I would say that the information on MySpace (or Facebook) is just as likely, if not more, to be misinterpreted. Information on MySpace about oneself is no different than any other information given about oneself- everyone has the potential to interpret it in different ways. Proving my point, she concludes by reminding the reader that MySpace users cannot be separated from the larger social world
and contexts. She also points out that in the process of shaping one’s identity for others, the user shapes how they view themselves.

Davis’s (2010) discussion is useful because of the breadth of ideas she addresses, which are relevant to my Facebook discussion as well. Her article also demonstrates how complex the topic of self-presentation on social networking sites is and all of the loose ends that need to be discussed among the academic community.

Although the structure and the social context of MySpace and Facebook may differ greatly, comparing them and drawing upon the ideas of previous MySpace researchers can help guide the examination of Facebook and self-presentation, as well as serve as a learning opportunity to improve research in this area.

**SEX AND GENDER ON THE INTERNET**

Although not much has been done on gender identity presentation, gender has been discussed in the literature in regards to the internet. For example, it was found that females posted 5.3 more pictures on Facebook of themselves with another person than males on average (Lewis et al. 2008), and females were also found to be 4-5 times more likely to be Facebook users than men (Tufekci 2008:556). These studies could imply how the effect of gender norms for females (like the encouragement to be more social than males) is the same online as it is offline.

Thompson (1997) also studied gender issues in the online environment and found that other gender role trends are seen online as well. She found that language trends associated with gender (e.g. more passive comments by females, more interruptions and assertions of knowledge by males) in chat rooms can allow people to correctly guess whether the person they are having a conversation with is female or male. It was significantly more difficult to guess, however, when participants were told exactly how to avoid communicating according to gender roles. This study highlights how gender issues and inequalities in social settings can play out in the same ways online as offline, unless steps are taken to consciously combat these norms.

Yet Rosen (2007) found in his research that social networking sites can also be a place to experiment with gender roles and alternative identities. This implies that social networking sites could be an arena for different types of social interaction, and that perhaps
not all social norms will translate directly online. Rosen found that 11% of teen MySpace users had “shadow pages,” or additional profiles that had fake information. Some teens interviewed said they used these to experiment with acting as a person of another gender and seeing how people reacted differently to them. Perhaps with the tools provided by the internet today, young people can explore gender roles, become more aware of their effects, and hopefully learn to combat them in the future.

In another study, boyd and Hargittai (2010) found that women have a different experience than men using Facebook, unfortunately. They found, aside from conclusions about privacy settings, that young women had a particular incentive to keep their social networking information more private because of the fear of predation online. In addition, Walther et al. (2008) unexpectedly found gender issues and sexism to be a crucial part of their findings. Participants were asked to view fake Facebook profiles with profile pictures that varied by attractiveness and wall postings (written expressions from friends displayed on a user’s profile) that either reflected positively or negatively on the profile owner. They found that what is termed the “double standard” had a big effect on their results: attractiveness of male profiles went up when wall postings from “friends” described them excessively drinking and had sexual innuendos, but attractiveness ratings of female profiles with these same postings went down. This study shows that gender has an impact on how viewers perceive people based on their Facebook profiles, which compliments Thompson’s results. The findings also imply that people may construct their identity differently on their Facebook profiles based on their gender, which Rosen found to be the key aspect of social networking sites that users experimented with.

**Self-Presentation Online**

Rosen (2007) also explored identity presentation and formation online, although he did not focus on sex or gender. He found that teens use social networking sites to experiment with who they are and to gauge the social acceptance of certain behaviors by seeing the reactions from their peers online. He found that on MySpace, teens feel more open to expressing their feelings and taking social risks (like asking someone out) without the fear of face-to-face consequences, and that it was easier for them to make friends online as well. Rosen provided an example of how teens form their identity using their social network
online: In order to test their peers’ reactions to experiments with aspects of their identity (such as whether to use drugs or not), teens will post a comment on their profile that is somewhat controversial, and then alter their behavior or identity based on reactions that are subsequently posted. This new and complex online environment is so important to the young community that it is essential that research is done to see how offline social interaction translates to online interaction (or vice versa), and what implications this may have.

Peluchette and Karl (2010) discussed the idea that the generation of Facebook users has a tendency to go too far with self-disclosure online when presenting themselves on their profile. This could be due to a childhood of being videotaped, or the emergence of reality shows. Some believe that young users rarely use privacy settings, and that some put up controversial material on their profiles or misrepresent themselves online to impress others or be humorous. They also mentioned research that showed that men and women alike cite being attractive to the opposite sex as the reason why they put provocative material on Facebook. The researchers concluded that users are always purposefully constructing a particular image on Facebook, and that if they post provocative material, it is to impress a particular audience (most likely their peer group). This supports the idea that users are constantly aware of how the information they are displaying will aid in constructing the specific image of themselves that they want their peers to see.

Self-presentation online is not only about how others view the user- it is also about how the users view themselves, and how the process of constructing a public image of themselves affects them. For example, Kim and Lee’s (2011) findings suggested that self-presentation on Facebook is related to a person’s sense of well-being. Two types of self-presentation affected well-being differently: honest self-presentation and positive self-presentation. Honest self-presentation means that one discloses a lot about themselves regardless of how it may be perceived, in order to feel connected and feel like they got things off their chest. Positive self-presentation means that the user is consciously creating a positive image on Facebook. This study found that positive self-presentation had a direct effect on well-being, while honest self-presentation had an indirect effect. For honest self-presentation to have an effect there needs to be perceived social support- so when someone discloses the details of their bad day, they will feel better if their friends communicate their support. Furthermore, because they found that positive self-presentation has a direct impact
on subjective well-being, the authors suggest that “…we could infer that Facebook users’ happiness would be enhanced when their positive self-images are better preserved and affirmed through self-presentation” (Kim and Lee 2011:362). Gonzales and Hancock (2011) came to a similar conclusion; they found that self-esteem of Facebook users went up when they viewed their own profile, managed their profile, or engaged in “selective self-presentation”. These studies show how the relationship between the process of self-presentation and the user is complex, and needs to be further explored in the context of online environments.

Another study focused on how self-presentation is related to narcissism on Facebook. Mehdizadeh (2010) focused on the psychological aspects of Facebook use, specifically narcissism and self-presentation. Mehdizadeh found that people who scored higher on a narcissism scale used Facebook more frequently, and that things like the “About Me” section of a Facebook profile and profile pictures are tools that fuel narcissism in users. They also discussed gender differences in how users promoted themselves via their profiles; although not much was found, they concluded that men used aspects of the profile that allowed them to write about themselves more than women, who used their profile pictures more. My criticism of this study is that they are solely focusing on psychological motivations and implications, and ignoring the social sphere and communication aspects of Facebook and how this interacts with self-presentation. Hopefully examining Facebook use from a sociological perspective can start to fill in existing gaps in the literature on social networking sites.

**Characteristics of Users**

Personality was also studied in relation to Facebook users: one study found that being extroverted based on the Five-Factor Model of personality traits (Costa and McCrae 1992) increases the likelihood that one will have more friends on Facebook, but decreases the likelihood of using personal information on one’s profile. Being neurotic was found to be associated with posting more pictures and providing more personal information, while being more open meant that one was more likely to be expressive on their profile (Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky 2008). Another study had very similar findings: The authors examined personality traits like openness, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness and
extraversion and how they relate to Facebook behaviors. For example, they found that being open was related to adding and editing photos on Facebook (Gosling et al. 2011). In regards to introversion and extroversion, Wilson, Fornasier and White (2010) explored whether these personality traits were connected to addictive tendencies on the internet. They found that personality and self-esteem were not the only variables that influence time spent on social networking sites or addictive tendencies, and admitted that there must be other factors that should be studied further. As these studies show, things like personality traits can be linked to specific behaviors on Facebook; yet other aspects of this online social environment need to be studied further to get a comprehensive view of how Facebook can affect its users.

Although their proportion is decreasing, some people are adamantly opposed to participating in social networking on the internet (Tufekci 2008); the opinions on SNS use reveal interesting trends in internet use. For example, Tufekci (2008) defined two different categories of internet use: the expressive internet (e.g. social networking and blogging) and the instrumental internet (e.g. checking the weather, news, driving directions, etc.). Non-users reportedly did not understand the value of the expressive internet where what Tufekci calls “social grooming” (the infatuation people have with one another, with gossiping, and with comparing themselves to others) takes place. No other significant difference was found between the groups of SNS users and non-users; non-users were not found to have a smaller number of close friends, although they did keep in touch with a smaller number of people than SNS users. Tufekci’s analysis of social grooming and expressive internet is very helpful in studying Facebook and gender identity presentation.

Other social aspects like race, socioeconomic status, and social capital have been studied in association with Facebook use. For example, Lewis et al. (2008) found that black students had more Facebook friends on average than white students, and that socioeconomic status did not have a significant effect on the size of one’s network. They also found that non-white students had more heterogeneous friend groups than white students, and that socioeconomic status had a negative impact on heterogeneity of friend groups, but no significant effect on network size. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) found that there was a positive relationship between Facebook use and the creation and maintenance of social capital; college students were able to maintain high school friendships and easily communicate with new friends to forge social groups and obtain social resources. These
findings show that a variety of social factors and individual characteristics can interact with behavior on Facebook and that this online environment is complex and understudied. The more we understand about the interaction between Facebook and various social characteristics, the more we can utilize Facebook to conduct research or even initiate social change.

**SUMMARY**

Based on the above findings, it is clear that sexism and gender issues are just as prevalent online as offline, that Facebook is an important arena for the age-old practice of “social grooming”, that it is conducive to social capital, and that individual demographic and personality characteristics can be used to predict online behavior. Social interaction on Facebook is undoubtedly a relevant area of research; more needs to be understood about this social environment, and this topic needs to be taken more seriously in order for us to address the crucial issues that surround it. My proposed study will help shed light on how gender issues play out in the online social environment, and will add to the literature to expand on the little knowledge the field has on social networking sites. Knowing more about how gender issues translate to the online environment will help researchers understand how other social issues may unfold online as well. By examining gender on Facebook, perhaps other conclusions or research ideas will emerge that provide a more clear understanding of this phenomenon and how it is affecting society.
CHAPTER 3

DATA AND METHODS

While keeping in mind the goal of ethnographic research (to base all conclusions on the reality of the participants), I also used the ideas of Erving Goffman to guide how I analyzed the data on Facebook profiles. Goffman (1959) addressed how people presented themselves to others in his theory about social interaction in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He described social interaction using the metaphor of the stage and theater; people are constantly putting on a performance for others to give an impression of themselves that is most beneficial to them. Using this framework to analyze Facebook, a user’s profile can be seen as the ultimate social performance. Users construct their presentations carefully, with plenty of time to edit and contemplate what kind of person they want to come off as to their Facebook friends. With this in mind, I analyzed the profile data by asking myself how they are trying to come across to their peers. For example, are they using a picture of them playing sports to present themselves as an active, healthy person to their friends and acquaintances? Are they mentioning studying in the library for hours in their status to convey that they are studious? Taking this approach, the idea that the users were constantly editing their image for others guided how I coded the data and came up with the themes in my findings.

On Facebook, the image given to others can be endlessly customized and edited to portray the exact identity that the users want. However, Goffman described two types of communication: one that is overt, or what someone purposefully communicates to another, and one that is more unintentional, contextual, and non-verbal. The former is the impression that one “gives” versus the latter which is the impression that one “gives off” (Manis and Meltzer 1972). Although a performance is designed to have the audience think what the performer wants them to think about themselves, there are still unintentional impressions that come through. Both of these types of communication were analyzed on Facebook. For example, one might have a picture of themselves taken in a mirror. Their intention may have been to look attractive, but others could perceive this as evidence that the person is vain.
Users may think that they are using only overt methods of communication and that they have complete control over the image they are presenting on Facebook, but they are also unintentionally giving impressions of themselves through their profile. These unintentional impressions are not always detrimental; for example, unintentionally giving the impression that users are uninterested in their schooling via status updates could impress some audiences, instead of viewing that as negative. The point is that others derive expectations about one’s identity and behavior from the information one gives them. Someone viewing a Facebook profile, in Goffman’s view, would consequently have certain expectations and ideas about the person based on the information presented. This is why impression management is so important to individuals in social situations. Thomas Scheff (2006) explains the importance of impression management, one of Goffman’s most famous ideas:

> Beyond these considerations, there is another, broader one that is implied in Goffman’s ideas, particularly the idea of impression management. Most of his work implies that every actor is extraordinarily sensitive to the exact amount of deference being received by others. Even a slight difference between what is expected and what is received, whether it be too little or too much, can cause embarrassment and other painful emotions. (18)

Impression management is an integral part of social interaction, and the nature of the Facebook profile makes it a crucial process in the Facebook experience as well. These ideas were the basis for my analysis of the participants’ profiles.

Goffman’s work also guided the way that I approached analyzing differences in self-presentation based on sex. Although I used sex (one’s biological sex characteristics) to compare my participants’ methods of self-presentation, gender (the cultural roles, behaviors and norms in which one may express their biological sex) is still very relevant to this study and will be used in the analysis of the results, since it is stereotypically the expectation associated with sex in our society. Biological sex needed to be used as a category for my participants because I did not want to assume their gender, and their sex was provided on their profile. Goffman’s ideas were helpful because he was one of the social scientists to promote the social constructionist approach to gender, arguing that gender is not something derived from nature, but is a creation of culture. Ann Branaman (2003) explains the integration of this theory of gender into his self-presentation theory:

> Gender, in Goffman’s view, is constituted through its “display” in social situations. Although gender displays may be thought to represent the basic natures
of men and women, Goffman argues that they are instead fashioned out of cultural resources and have little to do with any essential male or female nature. Instead, the idea that gender is rooted in human nature is based on the seemingly universal capacity of men and women to “learn to provide and read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures” (Goffman 1979:8). For Goffman, a major part of gender socialization involves learning how to use situations to express gender. (2003:90)

According to Goffman and gender scholars like Judith Butler (1993), gender is also a performance, and is an integral part of the impression management and identity construction process. Therefore, the differences in how the participants expressed themselves based on sex was of interest to me, and will be discussed in the findings section.

**Participants**

Twenty-four undergraduate students aged 18-25 attending San Diego State University volunteered to be a part of this study. This included twelve self-identified males and twelve self-identified females (based on the sex they chose to display on their Facebook profile information). I did not want to assume the gender of the user, so sex was used as a category since it was information given directly from the user. Undergraduate students were used because this is the age group that uses and is affected by Facebook the most (Smith 2010). The participants were recruited by email explaining the study and instructing them how to volunteer. A Facebook profile was created specifically for this research, and the volunteers added this account to their friend list. This gave me access to the information on their profile to take screen shots of and save for later analysis. I would then “unfriend” them and their privacy would be restored.

The privacy of the participants was a great concern during the data collection process. Due to the sensitive nature of the information they posted, the participants’ names will not be disclosed, and their information was kept password protected and not associated with their identity on my computer.

**Methods**

After taking screen shots of profiles, I saved data of the user’s profile pictures and status updates. Profile pictures are used on Facebook as a default photo that other users would see in association with your profile information. Profile pictures are used to give other
users an idea of what you look like, or are even used as the image that represents you the most. Therefore, profile pictures have great significance when assessing methods of self-presentation.

Statuses, or status updates, are messages or written expressions that a user can display (or “post”) on their profile for all of their “friends” (people that they have agreed to share information on Facebook with) to see. There are no restrictions on what a user can say or how long the status may be. This allows users a method to express themselves, talk about their day, or share thoughts with a variety of people. Statuses, therefore, also have great significance when analyzing self-presentation and impression management.

All of the profile pictures displayed on a user’s profile were used as data. However, in the interest of time, the most recent twenty status updates of each user were collected. Many users post status updates multiple times a week and the statuses that can be accessed would potentially date back to a number of years ago. For this reason, a sample of the most recent status updates was collected from each person.

The type of status was also taken into account when collecting data. A status on Facebook is an umbrella term for a variety of things that a user can post to their profile, including photos, videos, and links to websites, all with text captions. In the interest of time and simplicity, I limited the statuses collected to those that were only text expressions. This, therefore, is what is meant when status is discussed.

I coded the profile pictures and statuses on the participants’ profiles using the program HyperResearch. Coding included the attempt to find common themes in profile pictures and topics of status updates, or ideas or prevalent topics that kept coming up on various users’ profiles. These dominant themes make up the findings section, and were then compared to the literature to gain relevant new insights about the nature of self-presentation on Facebook.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

PROFILE PICTURES

Profile pictures are a unique method of social self-expression. They are chosen to represent who the user is in one single image. Goffman (1979) suggests that pictures like this, that are portraying an individual in a socially desirable situation, make people feel good about themselves:

Something like self-worship can thus be accomplished. The individual is able to catch himself at a moment when--for him--he is in ideal surroundings, in association with socially desirable others, garbed in a self-enhancing way…poised for a promising take-off, terminating an important engagement, and with a socially euphoric look on his face. A moment in what is visible around him attests to social matters about which he is proud. A moment, in short, when he is in social bloom, ready, therefore, to accept his appearance as a typification of himself. This moment he can dry-freeze and hang on the walls of his house, his office, his shop, his locker, and his wallet, a reference point to which he can return time and again (and long after he can no longer live the scene) as testimonial, as evidence, as depiction, of what his best social self has been and, by implication, must still be. (10)

This is the essence of the profile picture on Facebook. It is a way to display a concise and static testimony of the person the user wants others to believe is their true self. Yet a unique aspect of this online picture is that it is both private and public (Friedlander 2011). Goffman (1979) defined a private picture as “…those designed for display within the intimate social circle of the persons featured in them--pictures taken…in order to commemorate occasions, relationships, achievements, and life-turning points, whether a familial or an organizational kind” (p. 10). He defined public pictures as “designed to catch a wider audience—an anonymous aggregate of individuals unconnected to one another by social relationship and social interaction, although falling into the same market or the same political jurisdiction, the same outreaches of appeal” (Goffman 1979:10). These include advertisements, news photos, instructional pictures, human interest pictures, and “personal publicity pictures”. It is clear, by these definitions, that the Facebook profile picture could
easily fall in between or overlap the two categories. This causes the profile picture to be a unique method of self-presentation to examine.

However, as Larry Friedlander (2011) reminds his readers, we must acknowledge the ways that the Facebook profile is just like the methods of self-expression of the past as well: “Without ignoring the novelty of digital self-portraiture, we should recognize that all visual representations share the full complexity of human communication” (p. 12). He discussed the particular characteristics of the profile picture in his article comparing Facebook profiles to portraits throughout history. Having pictures around of oneself in a desirable light, like Goffman discussed, has been a practice for centuries. A Facebook profile is, in essence, a contemporary portrait. The author explains how portraits are not just about communicating an accurate likeness of the subject, but also need to communicate through symbols and associations with others who they are (i.e. status, occupation, and personality). One can look at a Facebook profile picture as a self portrait; Friedlander points out that all portraits are basically self-portraits, because it is about what the subject wants to communicate about them self, even if they didn’t paint it themselves. Therefore, the Facebook user might not have taken the picture, but they chose the picture, and perhaps even cropped or edited it to convey a certain message about them self. As Friedlander (2011) put it, the portrait essentially says: “This is how a person looks; this is what a person means” (p. 5) This makes the profile picture a useful tool in studying self-presentation online.

Choosing a profile picture is a complex process for a user, even if it seems simple and they do not think much about it at the time. Yet even if it takes only a minute to decide which picture they want to display to their online social world, an array of social norms and considerations are made. Friedlander (2011) mentioned how the Facebook user has a very diverse audience to consider: potential romantic partners, classmates, coworkers, family, peers, etc. Their portrait has to appeal to all of those different groups; they need to portray a certain identity that sums up all of the things about themselves that they want others to recognize to all those groups at once. This is not a simple task. A user might want to come off as attractive to potential romantic partners, but as funny to their wider circle of friends. The choices in how to present these aspects of their personality in a picture can say a lot about the user’s priorities and view of themselves and their social circle.
Katie Ellis (2010), using the theoretical framework of George Herbert Mead, analyzed the way that users construct their self-image on Facebook. She discussed how the profile pictures people display say much more than what is on the surface. Being pictured getting married or partying, for instance, creates an image with implied social messages hidden within it that the user wants their audience to see. Goffman (1979) would call this “symbolization”; for example, a picture of a groom putting a ring on the bride provides evidence that a wedding happened, but it is also a representation of a loving relationship and lifelong commitment that we cannot actually verify, but that is implied by the symbolism pictured (p. 20). Friedlander (2011) also supports the idea that profile pictures contain social meanings beyond what is merely in the photo. For instance, he mentions the methods of self-presentation of the past: “The subjects of 17th century Dutch portraits had a very clear idea of who was going to view their paintings, and could trust that the viewers would recognize and understand its pictorial codes” (p. 5). This idea is still true for Facebook users; they understand what symbols to use to convey certain things about themselves to their audience. Since social codes and symbols are commonly understood among Facebook users and are used often, they come up time and again and patterns emerge. Users use the same symbols to portray the same desirable characteristics about themselves. With this in mind, I attempted to reveal the most common methods of presenting oneself through a profile picture.

Goffman (1979) would call a profile picture, or the choosing of a profile picture, a ritual. One of the aspects of a ritual is that individuals display stylings that indicate what kind of person they are, or their status; basically, what others can expect from their interaction from them (gender: clothing, tone of voice, hairstyle; or even handwriting and name). This is the same with profile pictures. Users know that what they put in their picture will communicate to their friends or social circle what they can expect from them. This is more than communicating what they can expect the user to look like- like Goffman points out, it goes further to portray their place in the social world. Goffman also explained how displays can have more than one piece of information encoded in them, and that recognition of different statuses can be encoded in the same display. There is also a hierarchy of displays that signify different things that determines in what order they should be acted out. This can be seen in profile pictures as well; one can be pictured doing something active, but can also be posing in a way to attempt to attract potential romantic partners. This is why I found
multiple themes present in one profile picture many times; users may try to portray many things about themselves in one image. The hierarchy of what is displayed over other things is something that could be explored further. For instance, is displaying traditional gender norms more important to users than portraying themselves as active or well-liked? This idea will be addressed in the context of this study during the discussion of the profile picture and status themes.

Through coding and analyzing the content of profile pictures and status updates, a few common themes emerged. These were used to portray the most common ideas and content found in these aspects of a Facebook profile, including examples from the raw data and how these ideas compare to the existing literature. Five major themes emerged from the examination of profile pictures that explain the trends in the content of these chosen portrayals of the participants. These themes were Relationships, Attractiveness, Average Joe/Jane, Impressive, and Out in the World. The themes were named after what the user was assumed to be trying to portray about themselves through the content of their default picture. Each user had multiple profile pictures, and I coded every profile picture that was available. This means that one user could have had only two profile pictures available, and another might have thirty. The pictures were also coded multiple times if necessary; for example, I would code a picture of two friends at an amusement park under the Friendship category and Outings category. The tables included below represent 762 profile pictures for females and males out of a total of 223 for males and 616 for females. The remainders were either not included in a table and were summarized in the text, or they were pictures that had codes that only occurred a few times across the whole sample, so they were not included. For example, Cooking was one code that wasn’t included because there was only one picture that fell under this category. The more prevalent themes are discussed and included in the tables below.

**Relationships**

The Relationships theme includes pictures with family, a friend, a significant other, or a group of people (see examples in Figure 1). It is reasonable to assume that the user could have a profile picture with this content in order to convey that they are the “type of person” who has meaningful relationships. This could include a variety of messages that they want to
Figure 1. Examples of profile pictures in the relationships category. Source: FreeDigitalPhotos. n.d. “Pictures of People.” Retrieved May 15, 2012 (http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html).

communicate about themselves; for example, they are close with their family, they have a cute boyfriend, or they are popular. Everything that the user has in their profile picture is purposeful; if others are in a profile picture with the user, it serves a certain purpose in creating the image they are trying to portray of themselves. Steffen Dalsgaard (2008) discussed how important relationships are in the construction of identity online and the effect of the unique nature of the social networking site on this process. He pointed out that an individual on Facebook or MySpace can be seen as unique, but only based on their unique relationships and how they display them. Therefore, users still see themselves as unique individuals, but they can only be defined by their relationships; their relationships define their identity and how others perceive them. Friedlander (2011) also describes this strategy of self-presentation: “Subjects augment their own importance by connecting themselves to others…” (p. 5). The structure of Facebook itself conveys relationships as an important social
attribute: therefore, users try to communicate that they have that desirable attribute through their profile picture.

The percentages of pictures with family members, friends, significant others and in other social contexts are shown in Table 1.

### Table 1. Comparison of Profile Pictures in Social Contexts by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile Picture Code</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Males (%)</th>
<th>Females (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>Pictured at a formal event, like prom or a wedding</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Pictured with family members</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Pictured with a friend</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outings</td>
<td>Pictured out of the house at places like theme parks, restaurants, the beach, etc.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Pictured with a significant other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Pictured with a group of people</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that there is no big difference between males and females in how they present themselves as someone social or someone with meaningful relationships. The only thing that stands out is the difference in the Relationship category; females have more than double the percentage of these pictures than males. This finding could be attributed to stereotypes and gender socialization, because females are typically seen as viewing relationships as a key aspect of their identity unlike males. For example, this idea is found in the work of Magnuson and Dundes (2008) who concluded that women conform to the social norms of femininity online by constructing their identity based on their relationships with others. However, the fact that males surpass females in the Social category is notable because this goes against typical stereotypes of females being the ones to portray social outings and friend groups as part of their identity. Regardless, it is important to remember that as a whole, males and females do not differ much in how they construct their online identity. Perhaps the nature of Facebook is allowing males to also communicate the importance of the relationships in their lives.
Attractiveness

The Attractiveness theme includes pictures that I labeled Portraits, Vanity Shots and Vanity Shots: Partial Nudity. Portraits were pictures of solely the participant that looked professionally done by a photographer (example in Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Example of a profile picture in the portrait category. Source: FreeDigitalPhotos. n.d. “Pictures of People.” Retrieved May 15, 2012 (http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html).](image)

Vanity Shots were pictures that the participant usually took of themselves where they are posing in order to look attractive; for example, taking a picture of themselves in the mirror, not smiling, and including their body in the frame (example in Figure 3).

Vanity Shots: Partial Nudity included pictures of the participant in a bathing suit, costume, or clothing that exposes their body (examples in Figure 4). The pictures in Figure 4 were notable because it was clear that people were using the main image that other users see first and associate with them to portray themselves as attractive. The Portrait would highlight their attractive features, and would be edited to show them in the most favorable light. Vanity Shots are an unapologetic display of their attempt to frame themselves as attractive, and there is no question that they spent time constructing this image of themselves in their spare time.

Vanity Shots: Partial Nudity could have the user pictured at the beach in their bathing suit, which is a completely normal social scene. Yet the notable aspect of this is the fact that the user picked this image to be the main picture that their peers see the most often. A picture that includes their exposed body is now a key aspect of their identity presentation on Facebook. They want their social community to see their body, undoubtedly because they want to come off as attractive, fit, or healthy. This way of presenting oneself as attractive via pictures online was also found by Jenny Davis (2010) in her study of MySpace. Her description of what I call Vanity Shots could help explain these pictures in more detail:

I want to specifically talk about the album “i got new makeup…” This album consists of 11 photographs located inside. Each picture is of Holla Holly by herself, posing in different ways. In most of the pictures she is looking serious and displaying what might be understood as “sexually toned” facial expressions (e.g. biting her bottom lip, having her head angled downwards with her eyes looking up while leaning against the wall with her hair covering part of her face, biting her pinky, and making a kissing face). (Davis 2010:1112)

These are the type of pictures that were coded under the Attractiveness theme. Some might wonder why users would put up pictures like this, and some researchers have attempted to answer that question. Peluchette and Karl (2010) found that both men and women said that being seen as attractive to the opposite sex was the main reason they posted provocative material on their profile. They also pointed out: “Results show that many students make a conscious attempt to portray a particular image…” (Peluchette and Karl 2010:174). Posting these pictures is the user’s way of consciously trying to present themselves as attractive to others.

The number of pictures under the Attractiveness theme between males and females was also notable. There was not a significant difference between the sexes in attempting to present themselves as attractive, healthy people, as seen in Table 2. The only notable difference was in the Vanity Shot: Partial Nudity category, where females had a higher percentage. There was also a difference between the sexes in the Portrait category, yet it was not as great.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile Picture Code</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Males (%)</th>
<th>Females (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portrait</td>
<td>Picture looks professionally done by a photographer</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanity Shot</td>
<td>Pictures that the participant usually took of themselves where they are posing in order to look attractive</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanity Shot: Partial Nudity</td>
<td>Pictures of the participant in a bathing suit, costume, or clothing that exposes their body.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These findings are encouraging because it shows that despite popular belief, females and males care just as much about coming across as attractive to their peers. However, the difference in the Vanity Shot: Partial Nudity category could be a sign that stereotypes and methods of socialization are still a part of self-presentation and gender. As research has shown, females are typically taught to care more about their appearance and body image than males (Coleman 2008; Jones & Smolak 2011; Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore 1984; Rudd & Lennon 2000). This could explain why these female participants are shown in their
bathing suits or revealing costumes more than males shown with their shirts off. Yet it is important to note that most of this theme shows that males and females are not as different as one might initially think.

**Average Joe/Jane**

This theme included the codes Profession, Basic, and Pets. Profession described pictures of people at professional conferences, in a uniform, or pictured at their job or another professional event (example in Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Examples of profile pictures in the profession category. Source: FreeDigitalPhotos. n.d. “Pictures of People.” Retrieved May 15, 2012 (http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html).](http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html)

Basic describes pictures of the user that were normal shots that someone took of them with them smiling (examples in Figure 6).

Pets describes pictures of the user with a pet (examples in Figure 7). The images in Figure 7 are used to portray a person who can relate to everyone; who isn’t too controversial and who isn’t trying to draw too much attention to themselves. This may seem like an odd strategy in self-presentation, but researchers like Friedlander (2011) have acknowledged that portraits and profile pictures communicate the subject’s uniqueness, but also their place in the social community at the same time. When looking at images like this, he asks: “How does the portrait convey both the subject’s individuality and his or her membership in the common world?” (Friedlander 2011:4) Emphasizing the user’s membership and likeness to others in their social circle can be very important. These users want to come across as “normal” or as a “typical” girl, guy, student, etc. This, to them, is an appealing characteristic that they want to
portray first and foremost to others. Females had more pictures under the Basic and Pets category, yet in the Profession category the numbers between males and females was essentially the same. This implies that males and females value portraying themselves as someone with a career or a professional life equally, but perhaps females care more about portraying themselves as a “normal” or “typical” person. Future research should explore this difference in more detail, and see if this is an online phenomenon or one that translates into other spheres as well.
Impressive

The Impressive theme includes pictures coded as Funny, Accomplishments, and Active. These images are meant to show off the users’ talents or personality.

Funny are pictures of the participant making a funny face or in a funny situation. For example, making funny faces and poses towards the camera with a friend, posing with a funny sign, wearing a funny hat or costume, etc. (examples in Figure 8).

![Figure 8. Examples of profile pictures in the funny category. Source: Source: FreeDigitalPhotos. n.d. “Pictures of People.” Retrieved May 15, 2012 (http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html).](image)

The pictures in Figure 8 are supposed to convey the idea that the person is fun to be around and that they have a good sense of humor. It could also send the message that they don’t take themselves that seriously, since they may be putting an unattractive, but funny, face as their main picture for everyone to see. This could cause people to draw a variety of conclusions about the person: that they are humble, that they value humor and fun over looking good, that they can make a fun situation out of a normal day, or that they have funny friends and a fun social life.

Accomplishments describes pictures that display things like the user getting an award, graduating, or at another ceremony recognizing them (examples in Figure 9). The pictures in Figure 9 portray an image of the participant as successful, recognized, and accomplished in their field, hobby, sport, or academics. In a profile picture, these images show that the user wants others to see their success as one of their main attributes and something that largely defines them.

Active describes pictures of the user exercising, hiking, playing sports, or doing other physically stimulating activities (examples in Figure 10). This could send a message to other
users that they are physically fit, a great athlete, or someone who is well-rounded and healthy. This is seen as an appealing aspect of their lives that the user wants to put at the forefront of their online identity.

All of these images are part of a strategy, a process where the user debates what they should reveal and conceal about themselves (Friedlander 2011:12). These users are attempting to reveal their more impressive attributes that others can see at first glance. Friedlander (2011:5) would say that these images contain symbols that everyone in the user’s social circle can recognize and draw conclusions from. The symbols that the Impressive theme pictures convey communicate that the user is well-rounded, successful, and fun to be around.
Interestingly, males and females were essentially the same in the frequencies of the codes under this theme. The only notable difference was for Funny: there were 59 instances of this code for females compared to 34 instances for males. This was surprising to me, since females typically care more about looking attractive (Coleman 2008; Jones & Smolak 2011; Rodin et al. 1984; Rudd & Lennon 2000), and having pictures labeled as funny could sometimes cause them to look less attractive. This challenges the idea that females are using traditional ways of presenting their identity online.

**Out in the World**

This theme includes the codes Events, Landscape or Scenery, and Outings. Events describes pictures of the user at formal events like proms or weddings (examples in Figure 11).

![Figure 11. Examples of profile pictures in the events category. Source: FreeDigitalPhotos. n.d. “Pictures of People.” Retrieved May 15, 2012 (http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html).](http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html)
Landscape or Scenery describes pictures that are centered on a scenic view; for example, the person’s feet and a view of the ocean are only in the frame (examples in Figure 12).

![Figure 12. Examples of profile pictures in the landscape or scenery category. Source: FreeDigitalPhotos. n.d. “Pictures of People.” Retrieved May 15, 2012 (http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/People_g40.html).](image1)

Outings are pictures of the user out of the house at places like theme parks, restaurants, the beach, etc. (example in Figure 13). The pictures in Figure 13 are posted in an effort to portray the participant’s daily life as exciting and full of new experiences. As Friedlander (2011) said: “…they post multiple images of themselves to convey a sense of their busy and multi-faceted lives…” (p. 5).

Females had many more instances of these codes in their profile pictures than males. Across all three categories, females had more than two times the amount of instances than male participants had. Perhaps this is because this theme has a social aspect to it, and females could use these images to portray themselves as rooted in a social world of relationships. This would support the idea that females are constantly constructing their identity based on others, even online (Magnuson and Dundes 2008).

**STATUS UPDATES**

Status updates are a method of true social performance. The user can write any text that they want, but it will be associated with their profile and therefore their social image. Users are free to textually express themselves with no restrictions, and these expressions are a big part of the process of self-presentation on Facebook. Statuses can let others know how it might be to be around that person, what their “voice” is like, and can contain countless signifiers of who that person is.

Goffman (1959) would look at status updates as a series of performances to help develop the user’s “character” on Facebook. In his discussion of “staging and the self”, he describes the process of how an individual performs to create a character that others assume is the person’s true self. These are the two aspects of an individual: the character and the self. However, the character is a result of all the aspects of the performance; as Goffman (1959) explains:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Pp. 252-253)

This can be compared to the process of self-presentation on Facebook: the profile is the character, and the self is the user. The presentation of the self on Facebook is a constant performance, and is not representative of the person in reality necessarily. That is why it is interesting to look at the aspects of the performances of the user’s character: because whatever they want that character to be is what they value most in a social context. Status updates are a great way to look at the performance, since it is directly from the user. This is
unlike profile pictures, which could be taken or posted by others and then chosen by the user to be their main picture. The status update is a more immediate and intimate performance from the user, and there are many conclusions that can be drawn from its content to get an insight into the process of self-presentation.

The status update is also an interesting aspect of self-presentation to look at because it is in a social context where the user is constantly getting feedback and ideas for how they should present themselves. Christofides, Mui, and Desmarais (2009) explain:

…participants reported being significantly more likely to disclose information on Facebook than they were in general… these findings suggest that there is something different about the ways in which people act when interacting in the Facebook environment as compared to other means of communication. Perhaps it is because Facebook creates norms regarding what specific information to disclose based on what others have disclosed. It is an environment where information is shared proactively and in response to others. (343)

The potential for what people could disclose about themselves is endless in status updates. Users are feeding off of each other and constantly deciding what kind of person they want to come across as. The authors go on to say that “…identity is not an individual characteristic but a social product created not only by what you share, but also by what others share and say about you. Disclosure thereby becomes an aspect of identity construction…” (Christofides et al. 2009:343) The disclosure practice on status updates can be anything from what the user ate that day to how they feel about a break-up to their opinions on controversial political topics. The vast number of subjects gives a diverse look at the variety of ways that users construct their identity in this inherently social arena.

After coding the text-only status updates of the participants, seven themes emerged. These were: Student, Venting, Average Joe/Jane, Relationships, Pop Culture, Interesting/Appealing, and Intriguing/Controversial. These themes were named after how the user wanted to come across by writing the content of their status updates. The same methodology was used for status updates as for profile pictures; one status could be coded under multiple categories. However, I used the 20 most recent status updates of each participant (although some had less than 20 available). Some codes were not included in this discussion because there was not enough status updates under that category to make it particularly relevant. The following themes express the most prevalent topics in the status updates in my sample.
The Student theme included the codes Reading, Studying, Being in College, and Leaving or Coming to School. All of these topics that users included in their status updates portrayed an identity of being a college student. This identity could reflect the user’s social class and perhaps level of intelligence to their fellow users. References to being a college student came up often across all of the participants (making it a theme), so one could conclude that it is an important identity for users of this age. Constructing this identity as a student is a conscious performance, perhaps based on an ideal image of a college student that users compare themselves to. This idea was explained by Kasworm (2005):

These articulated understandings and judgments of a constructed image to define the successful college student suggest that adult students mediate their behaviors and actions in relation to a set of tacit beliefs of the nature of the desired college student behaviors and actions. They use this constructed image of characteristics and behaviors as a comparative reference for defining and critiquing themselves… their sense of self and future were highly invested in being successful as academic students, as well as being successful in the highly important societal agency (higher education) that bestowed access and the status of a college student and a college credential. (Pp. 17-18)

These “desired college student behaviors and actions” are what users are trying to line themselves up with via their written expressions on their status updates. Through this process, users can create an image of themselves that includes the college student social status.

The code Reading refers to a status that mentions reading, whether it is specifically for school or just a reference to reading without any specifics mentioned. For example: “how can you read a book for 4 straight hours…? you need to sit outside in a really comfy giant faloppa chair and a cozy blanket.” This topic for a status update could imply that the user is intelligent and responsible, or well-rounded and perhaps culturally aware. The user mentions things like this to come across a certain way; they want other users to know that they are the “type of person/student” that reads. This also implies that the act of reading is significant enough for them to mention on Facebook, and that it is therefore an important part of their identity that they want others to know about.

The code Studying refers to statuses that mention going to the library, having to study for a test, or studying with friends. For example: “trying to write a paper in this freezing
house? i need a snuggie!” or “& the cramming for finals has begun -__- ---with Emma and Vanessa.” This type of status could communicate to other users that the person cares about academic success in school; yet it could also say a lot more about the personality of the user as well. A status like this could imply that the user is responsible, self-reliant, or intelligent.

The code Being in College includes statuses that mention other aspects of the college student role than things like studying and reading. This could include mentioning just being in college in general, class schedules, aspects of campus life, etc. For example: “We’re in fucking college. Blake”, “[love] my Tuesday and Thursday schedule” or “‘Why am I drunk on a Wednesday Morning????Causes IM in College!!! HAPPY BIRTHDAY MICHELLE!” This type of status communicates the lifestyle of the college student to other users. It situates the participant in the college student social status and communicates that being in college is a key part of the participant’s everyday life and identity.

The code Leaving or Coming to School refers to statuses that mention coming to or leaving school after holiday breaks. For example: “Finally heading back to state, i missed sd sooo much:D” or “I don’t want to go back yet---at San Diego State University.” This type of status also communicates the lifestyle of the college student. It also allows them to relate to other college student users by mentioning missing friends and family, being excited to be back, etc.; issues that other students are going through at the same time as well. This allows the user to feel like they belong to this social group, and they are also communicating to fellow users that they are just like them.

The only significant difference found in these codes by the sex of the participant was in the Being in College and Studying categories. Males were more likely to mention these topics in their status updates than women. Perhaps women are less likely to mention their student identity because of the negative connotations that could be linked with their academic performance as a female. For example, they could be dealing with stereotype threat, defined by Claude Steele (1995) as “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (p. 797). When females or other minorities are reminded of their minority identity before completing a task, like a math test, they underperform; when they are not reminded of their minority status, they do well. This refers to the anxiety that females may feel as a student, when they are expected to not succeed in certain areas of academia based on stereotypes. Men might have less of a conflict between their student
identity and their gender identity, since they are not part of the minority gender and are not stereotyped as an unsuccessful student. Yopyk and Prentice (2005) explain:

> Of course, minority status is a way of life for many students in academic settings, and that minority status is often linked to negative academic stereotypes. For students with identities that are both contextually distinctive and negatively stereotyped, stereotype threat may well be inescapable. The distinctiveness of these identities will render them frequently salient, and the risk of confirming the associated stereotypes will pose a continuing threat. (335)

This idea could help explain this difference by sex found in my findings of status updates that mention the student identity. Females are less likely to include their student role in the construction of their identity online, perhaps because of conflicts relating to stereotype threat.

**Venting**

The theme Venting included the codes Annoying, Complaining About School, Fails, Procrastination, and Awkward. This theme is both about how users can use Facebook for a certain purpose and how they use these topics to create their online identity. These topics communicate that the person goes through the same inconveniences and frustrations as their peers, allowing others to relate to them, or make them feel like they know them better. It is in this way that the participants used these topics to add to their identity construction. However, this theme also shows how participants used Facebook as a place to let off steam and talk about the frustrations of their lives that other users may be able to relate to. This is consistent with Rosen’s (2007) research that found that teens felt more comfortable expressing their emotions online as well as with the fact that journaling and blogging are used as a way to vent, pointed out by Baker and Moore (2008:83). The Facebook status update is a way to get something off a person’s chest but without taking up a particular friend or family member’s time. It is also a good way to get support from others. Friends could comment about how they went through the same thing, or that they hate when people do that too, or they took that class and got a bad grade as well. This could make the user feel justified in their frustration, causing them to go back to Facebook to vent their feelings again. However, my finding contradicts the findings of Thelwall et al. (2010), who concluded that two-thirds of the comments in their sample on MySpace had positive emotions expressed in them. Their
research makes it seem like social networking sites are a place of positive expression, rather than a place to vent frustrations. Further research will have to settle this debate.

The Annoying code includes statuses that talk about an annoying situation; for example, having to endure something they didn’t want to, being around people they don’t like, having to wait in line somewhere for too long, etc. Here is an example from a participant: “really…the kid who has been screaming bloody murder through security is on my flight?” “Fml-___- signing up for classes was a nightmare” or “I swear to god if anyone from San Diego has a status anything related to it raining today your an idiot…it’s weather, it happens, so please spare me.” This kind of status could be meant to communicate to other users that they are funny, since some annoying things that happened to the user could describe situations that are humorous. For example: “So apparently the dude in line next to me at Lolitas thinks it’s okay to grab my keys out of my pocket and when I catch him he says ‘oh nice lanyard.’ wtf! Nice try ya douche.” This could also be meant to simply get feedback from other users that they have gone through the same thing, or that they would find that annoying as well. This could make the user feel justified in how annoyed they were, or perhaps gauge if they are overreacting.

Complaining About School is a code that describes statuses that mention complaints about school-related things. For example: “8am classes X( they make me love my life” or “The TA is teaching class today??..I don’t pay high tuition to hear a student talk.” This code could serve the same purposes as the Annoying code, although it could also be a way to further align themselves with their identity as a college student, as explained above.

The code Fails describes statuses where the user messed something up, didn’t realize something, missed plans, etc. For example: “fell asleep tanning…now i look so freakn uneven :(“, “WTF! I’m at Mammoth and we have NO beer!!?WHAT IS THIS!” or “My day of productivity has turned into a day of The Walking Dead.” These are usually humorous and display the user’s humility, meant more for entertaining other users with their mistakes than anything else.

The code Procrastination refers to statuses that mention the user putting off things that they need to do, whether it is school work or errands. Some examples are: “I should finish packing to leave tmw….looooool jk im playing TEMPLE RUN” or “It’s always awkward when you are the only one with the song Footloose stuck in your head…why did
that movie have to be on yesterday when I was procrastinating?” These types of statuses communicate that they are just like everyone else, with a to-do list that they have been avoiding. They also get to complain and get it off their chest via writing it on Facebook.

The code Awkward describes statuses that refer to uncomfortable social situations that the user describes for their fellow users. For example: “Awk moment when you give your best advice to other people but realize you don’t have the motivation to even take your own advice”, “Awkward moment when you walk into a store with your parents and the a-- a-- a-- song starts playing. Uncensored nonetheless. Yaaaaaa” or “That awkward moment when nick sets off the fire alarm. –at CSULB.” These statuses are mostly for entertainment value, meant to provoke shock or simply to communicate an experience that others may have had as well.

The only difference in the statuses under the Venting theme by sex is with the Complaining About School and Annoying codes. Males were twice as likely to complain about school as females in my study. This could perhaps be because this is a safe topic for males to vent about, because they do not have a conflict between their gender identity and student identity, as discussed above. Females, in contrast, may be more likely to vent their frustrations about relationships or more personal matters, because they are more comfortable with those topics rather than academic topics, due to how they were socialized.

Females were found to have twice as many statuses under the Annoying category than males in this study. This could be because females are socialized to be more comfortable expressing their frustrations of everyday life with their words than males. However, this finding contradicts the findings of Thelwall et al. (2010). They concluded in their study of MySpace comments that that two-thirds of the text expressions had positive emotions expressed in them, and that women were the primary users who expressed and received these positive emotions on MySpace. This makes my finding somewhat surprising, since the females in this sample seem to be posting more negative expressions than males. Again, more research is needed to conclude which is true regarding online comments.

Relationships

The theme Relationships includes the codes Family, Friendship, Relationship, and Social. A user who mentions their friends, family, or significant other is trying to portray
themselves as someone with meaningful relationships. The same could be said about mentioning relationships in a status that can be said about having others in a user’s profile picture. They are trying to come across as popular, likeable, and rooted in a fun social life.

The code Family refers to statuses that mention the user’s family members. For example: “love watching the playoffs with my dad”, “Lunch with my mommy”, or “Another year deep into senility. Happy Birthday John (Dad)”.

The code Friendship describes statuses where the user mentions a friend. This could be in the form of “tagging”, where the user includes a link to the friend’s homepage in the status, and the status also appears on the friend’s profile. Tagging someone can be recognized when a status has “—with (friend’s name)” at the end of it. However, including a friend in a status can also simply be mentioning the friend’s name in the text. Some examples of a Friendship status are: “tanning with the best friend—–with Arianne”, “‘You look like someone from twilight.’ –with Amanda” or “I’m not going to class so fuck you Earth! –with Ryan.”

The code Relationship includes statuses that mention a significant other. For example: “Thanks for a good time and thank u Michaela for still loving me even though I wore a sweat band the majority of the time I was there…” or “Happy 2 years babe :) –with Ashley at Zensei Sushi.”

The code Social describes statuses that mention a group of friends. For example, when a status ends with “--- with (friend’s name) and 4 others”, that means that the user tagged five of their friends in that status update, causing the status to be posted on all of those people’s profile and to connect it with each of their homepages. Some examples of this are: “had so much fun tonight! –with Kate and 4 others” or “Craziest most awesome weekend so far at no other than Syracuse University…stay classy. ---with Alex and 11 others.”

The only significant difference by sex in this theme was in the Relationships and Friends category. Males were about twice as likely to mention a significant other in their status update as females, and females were much more likely to mention a friend in their status updates than males (see Table 3).

It has been concluded in existing literature that relationships like those with significant others and friends is important to people’s identity construction (Dalsgaard 2008), especially that of females (Davis 2010; Magnuson and Dundes 2008). This finding seems to
Table 3. Comparison of Statuses in the Relationships Theme by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status Update Code</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Males (%)</th>
<th>Females (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Mentions family members</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Mentions or “tags” a friend</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Mentions a significant other</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Mentions being with a group of people or “tags” multiple friends</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

challenge the idea that females are the ones who create their identity around relationships, like existing research and stereotypical ideas of gender suggest. In my study, the male participants clearly wanted to include their relationships as a key part of their identity construction on Facebook. This also contradicts the profile pictures finding, showing that although males are less likely to have profile pictures with a significant other, they are more likely to mention them in a status update. Both sexes seem to value including their significant other in their online social life, perhaps because it benefits their relationship. Researchers have explored the effect that social media may have on romantic relationships. Coyne et al. (2011) concluded that texting can benefit relationships by allowing people to show affection to their partner while the person was away or doing other activities (for instance, texting them “I luv u!” during class). This could also be applied to Facebook: a user could post something sweet about their partner in their status update and perhaps tag them in it, showing both their group of friends and their partner’s that they are thinking of them (For example, this status from a participant: “Missing him”). Coyne et al. asserted that although social media can be used in ways that could damage a romantic partnership, most communication via social media has a positive effect on relationships. This could explain why it was a popular trend in my sample to include one’s significant other in their status updates.

This finding could lead one to conclude that perhaps there is an aspect of posting an image of oneself that is different than writing about oneself textually in regards to self-presentation. Do males feel more comfortable mentioning significant others and portraying themselves as someone with meaningful relationships on status updates more than profile pictures for some reason? If so, why do females still post more than males about friends?
Future research should look into this and see if males and females feel differently about presenting themselves textually versus through images.

**Interesting/Appealing**

The theme Interesting/Appealing includes the codes Active, Outings, Funny, and Poll. Participants used these topics in their status updates to portray themselves as a well-rounded person who is fun to be around to their peers.

The code Active includes statuses where the user talks about doing physically engaging activities, such as working out, playing sports, going to a dance class, etc. For example: “First kickboxing class of the semester for this girl. woo hoo!”, “Pilates and ballet!! ---with Savannah”, “Just met with the sdsu coach. Tryouts on the 30th!” or “Beautiful morning, and started it off with PT, 10k run, and a steak and egg breakfast.” There was a significant difference in the number of these statuses by sex in this sample: females were much more likely to mention being active in their status updates than males. This could be because females are worried more about their physical body image in our society (Coleman 2008; Jones & Smolak 2011; Rodin et al. 1984; Rudd & Lennon 2000).

Outings is a code that consists of statuses that mention going out, usually with friends or in a social setting. This could mean going to a restaurant, a bar or an amusement park, for example. Some participant’s statuses in this category included: “Seaworld for a couple hours! Why? Because we can. :)”, “Hot Springs and a full moon :)”, and “Jameson---at Hennessey’s La Jolla.” There was a difference in sex with this code: females were more likely to post statuses about going out than males. This could have to do with the social nature that an outing status implies. Females have been found to construct their identity more around others than males (Davis 2010; Magnuson and Dundes 2008), as discussed above.

The code Funny describes statuses where the user posts for the purpose of being humorous. For example: “I love braiding my armpit hair with ---with Kevin”, “New Years Resolution? I’ll think of one later, lets get drunk” or “My TA said thongs…got my attention.” These kinds of statuses were much more likely to be posted by males in my sample. This contradicts the above findings, where females were more likely to have funny profile pictures than men. This also leads me to suspect that males perhaps view profile
pictures differently than females. Perhaps males are more expressive and multi-faceted in their status updates, and view presenting themselves via images in differently.

The code Poll describes statuses that participants used to ask questions to their fellow users about everything from philosophical queries to what the best song that describes their life is. Here are some examples: “has anyone taken sociology 101 at state?” or “If nothing is forever than why do people get married?” This kind of status takes advantage of the structure of Facebook and utilizes it to get a variety of answers from potentially hundreds of people in a short period of time. It also makes them come across as interesting, since often they are coming up with fun conversation topics to stimulate a discourse between their friends. It seems that the males in my study took advantage of this Facebook perk more than the females; they were more twice as likely to post a poll question as the females. This seems odd, since the stereotype seems to be that females would care more about other’s opinions than males. However, perhaps this is another manifestation of the theory that males are more expressive via status updates.

**Intriguing/Controversial**

The Intriguing/Controversial theme includes the codes Inside Joke, Vague, Swearing, and Drinking. These topics for status updates portray users as mysterious or rebellious to their fellow users. It could leave others to want to know more about the meaning of a post or an inside joke, or leave them thinking that they are exciting or fun by the fact that they post about drinking and don’t mind swearing on their Facebook page. Existing literature has found that users post controversial material on social networking sites like this to impress others or be humorous (Peluchette and Karl 2010), as well as to gain feedback from peers (Rosen 2007). This type of status could also be attributed to the fact that users are more inclined to disclose information about themselves online than in general (Christofides et al. 2009), perhaps leading the participants to ignore inhibitions a little more when writing their status updates.

The code Inside Joke includes things in a status update that refers to something unbeknownst to the reader. Some examples of this are: “rip clammy :) ---with Kate and 4 others” or “How about that ride in ha ---at MGM Grand Las Vegas.” Posting this could be an attempt by the user to convey that they have a fun time with their friends, and to cause
others to want to know what happened that must have been so fun or funny. The point is for others to wonder about the user and wish that they were in on the joke as well. This type of status is an attempt to be intriguing. Males were twice as likely in my study to have this type of status, which makes sense considering that they were also more likely than females to post statuses that were labeled under the funny category, discussed above.

The Vague code describes statuses that refers to something unbeknownst to the reader, but that includes a dramatic element. Here are some examples to make this more clear: “yaaa..i’m over this”, “I can never seem to get it right”, “OBSESSED!! (”,”Revenge tastes soooo fucking GOOD”, “Caught in a Bad Romance!” and “I’ll see you when the sun sets…” These statuses are posted in order to get other users to wonder what they are talking about; it makes them seem mysterious to their peers. People will wonder if only their closest friends know what it’s about, if it’s about them, or if it is about what they think it is about.

Other users will no doubt be intrigued, and the participant will hope to come across as someone who has secrets and “drama” that makes them interesting. Interestingly, there was no significant difference by sex in the instances of this type of status; yet this was a popular type of status for both males and females. This made this code too important not to discuss, and it seems it is a very common trend in status updates. Apparently leaving people to wonder what is going on in someone’s life is a key part of self-presentation among Facebook users like these.

The code Swearing simply includes statuses where the user includes swear words. Users could swear on their Facebook page as a way to come across as rebellious or to give off an “I just don’t care” attitude. The same could be said for the Drinking code, when users mention drinking, getting drunk, or going to bars. Some examples of Drinking statuses are: “Every time Art drinks, everybody has to drink!! Lol --with Randy and 4 others at randys house”, “Happy hour! ---at Bare Back Grill- Gaslamp” and “What happened last night???” In this way, users try to come across as someone somewhat controversial and rebellious, which could communicate to some that they are exciting and fun to be around.

Males were more than twice as likely to swear as females in this sample, and more than twice as likely to mention drinking in their status updates. Existing literature could help shed some light on this finding. Walther et al. (2008) found in their study of Facebook profiles that the attractiveness of male profiles went up when wall postings from “friends”
described them excessively drinking and had sexual innuendos, but attractiveness ratings of female profiles with these same postings went down. This could be the reason why females in my sample avoid these controversial status topics- because they would be judged negatively by their social network, unlike males. This is just another example of how the experiences of males and females differ in an online social environment like Facebook.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Certain findings in this study confirmed existing literature regarding the way that males and females construct their identity. For example, the finding that females have higher percentages of profile pictures with significant others supports the idea that females are still perhaps constructing their identity in traditional ways: by constructing an image of themselves that depends on their relationships with others. They also mentioned friends more in their status updates, as well as not linking themselves to academics as much as males, which is supported by existing literature as well.

However, there were also surprising findings that emerged in this study, such as the higher numbers of funny profile pictures for females. This suggests that perhaps females do not care much more about their appearance than males, as suggested by existing literature. Perhaps the novel environment provided by Facebook allows females to express their identity in different ways. The most interesting unexpected finding was the higher percentage of status updates by males about significant others. This contradicts the findings in the profile picture section that suggested that females were much more likely to construct their identity around their relationships. It was also surprising to find the fact that males posted more funny comments in their statuses than females, which was opposite for the funny category in the profile picture section. In general, I found that males and females do not differ as much as one might think in how they present themselves to others online.

It seems that more questions need to be answered in light of these findings, such as: Do users consider using profile pictures and statuses differently when constructing their identity online? Do they use one over the other for certain purposes? Would females and males answer these questions differently?

There are limitations in this study regarding scope and focus. For example, I could have looked at race as well in the construction of identity on Facebook, as well as sexual orientation, region, religion, or class. I also looked at the data presented on Facebook profiles and analyzed them through my specific lens based on my interests and social standing,
causing me to focus on certain things and perhaps overlook things that other researchers, or even Facebook users themselves, would highlight. Using interviews or another methodology could result in other findings that could uncover new and significant aspects of Facebook.

Future research could examine how each aspect of Facebook is used in the identity construction process, and to what end, to uncover the complexities of the site and go more in depth into how the users view it as well. Researchers could also look into other social phenomena on Facebook and ask if existing social norms translate into this online environment, such as inequality, language patterns, patterns of racism, sexism, or classism, etc. Facebook has become such a complex arena of social webs that researchers could choose from countless topics to uncover cutting edge findings for us to better understand the site and how it affects social interaction and society as a whole.

Many implications could arise from studying Facebook. As I have said, what users post on Facebook shows what is most important to mention in their opinion, or what is most important to constructing their image. This in itself sheds a lot of light on what our society values in general. Studying patterns of social interaction on Facebook could also reveal things about how we interact face-to-face, or why the two mediums might be different. Researching how people negotiate relationships online could tell us more about social relationships in general, just as examining Facebook and its interaction with the work place could tell us more about professional dynamics in general. There are so many research topics regarding Facebook that could benefit our understanding of how this website that affects so many of us interacts with aspects of society. Researching Facebook, especially in the field of sociology, is important in order to not only understand a generation, but to understand the values of our society and the intricacies of social interaction that are operating today.
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