

**THE STRUCTURED SELF: AUTHENTICITY, AGENCY,  
AND ANONYMITY IN SOCIAL  
NETWORKING SITES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore social networking sites' structural affordances and their implications for identity creation, maintenance, performance, broadcast, and comprehension. Facebook is employed as a case study. By applying affordance theory, I argue that scholars should recognize Facebook as an ethic, or as a mediator, that employs moral choices when filtering input that is then displayed and aggregated through the site. By framing identity as narrative, I show that identities are on-going and are not only created via social expectations, but also work as reflexive tools used to write the self into being. Specifically, due to the large scope of this project, I explore the ways in which the structure and cultivated cultures of the site influence notions of, and expectations for, authenticity, agency, and anonymity.

Breaking down Facebook into its constituent parts, I first completed a structural discourse analysis of the Sign Up Page, the About Page, Likes, Friends, Photographs, the Timeline, and Cookies. Next, I conducted focus group and one-on-one interviews with 45 emerging adults to learn how they recognize and work within Facebook's structure. Themes emerged that speak to the "cultures" that Facebook privileges and reifies through their granted affordances: Digitally Structured Culture, Visual Culture, Celebrity Culture, and Socially Divided Culture.

I found that users generally adhere to Facebook's problematic conceptions of identification on the site, particularly through the ways in which they describe and perform authenticity, agency, and anonymity. Users have come to view the site as the

*official* social space and thus feel pressured to perform a unitary, “accurate,” and superficial self. The inherent trust placed in Facebook has led users to rely on the site’s decisions regarding structural affordances and to not question the identity guidelines provided.

This dissertation concludes with a call for a more rigorous understanding of social networking affordances and a wide-spread application of methods that recognize social media as non-neutral filters. I argue that the limited choices presented by Facebook compel users to build conceptions of identity that adhere to the cultural expectations privileged by the site. Although it is clear that my methods can be applied more generally to other social media and digital spaces, I also argue that Facebook is unique in that it is a “tentpole” of both interfaces and user content—the site offers a variety of identity performance tools and acts as the main place that users visit to “conduct research” on others.

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents,  
Cathryn and Dominick Cirucci. Without their infinite  
love and support, this dissertation, along with  
all of the other entries on my (short)  
list of accomplishments thus far, would not  
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to social media expert and PhD.

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the last. But, as always, let us be thankful  
you only had one of me.



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## **CHAPTER 1 DO SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES' STRUCTURES MATTER?**

### Introduction

The recent ascension of social media sites has illuminated the significance of self-presentation as users turn to these sites as places to create, maintain, broadcast, and interpret their identities. Self-presentation has always been an important aspect of identity. However, social networking sites allow users to broadcast the self to unprecedented potential audiences. Although numerous scholars have focused on the ways in which users perform identity within these sites and their related breaches of privacy, few studies examine the ways in which the architecture of these sites provides the guiding light for users' identity performances. That is, identities online are the "composite result of structure, design, and organization" (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 205). Like all environments and their structures, social networking sites grant their users certain affordances (Gibson, 1979), and these resources are invariably couched in political and economic powers (Winner, 1980).

While early online social media studies praised the internet for creating a safe and anonymous space in which to experiment with identity (e.g., Turkle, 1995), more recent research suggests that social networking sites have become "nonymous," or not anonymous, as they compel users to perform identity in new ways. For example, users of Facebook "show" more than "tell" their identities via visible networks and profile

pictures (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Indeed, current social networks endorse digital embodiments of the offline self, often through features such as uploaded photos and GPS check-ins. Many users may find these new abilities, or affordances, useful. However there are also implications for the creation and perception of self.

This dissertation project began with a simple question: Do social networking sites' structures matter? I was determined to explore the implications of these digital spaces for identification practices and conceptions. Thus, this project explores the interpretations of identity, authenticity, agency, and anonymity that social networking sites promote through their architectures and related affordances.

More specifically, I have chosen to understand potential phenomena by employing Facebook as a case study. I assess the site's constituent parts through a structural discourse analysis to uncover the ways in which Facebook may define, present, and constrain identity. In addition, the structural breakdown allows for: 1) an examination of the ways in which Facebook *suggests* how users can perform "authentically," 2) an exploration of spaces where users can enact agency, and 3) an investigation into how users can attempt to participate anonymously. Employing this new interpretation of the site's architecture as a guide, I then present data from interviews and focus groups with emerging adult Facebook users to learn how they interpret and work within the site's structure.

## Research Questions

In sum, my goals are to examine the architecture of Facebook and to explore the implications that this structure and its affordances have for users' identification processes. Thus, the questions that guided this project are as follows:

RQ1: What affordances are offered by Facebook for the identification process?

RQ2: In what ways does Facebook's structure privilege certain aspects of the identification process over others?

RQ3: How do users perceive the structure and its affordances?

RQ4: How do users define notions of identity, authenticity, agency, and anonymity?

Facebook is appropriate for a case study of social networks because it is reportedly the most popular social networking site with more than 1.15 billion monthly active users, 699 million of whom are daily active users (facebook, n.d.). Seventy-one percent of adult internet users are on Facebook while only 18% use Twitter, 21% use Pinterest, and 17% use Instagram (Duggan & Smith, 2013). In addition to its popularity, Facebook has an assortment of features that allow users to construct and perform identity in different ways, such as status updates, photographs, and GPS check-ins that work to "validate" certain identity performances.

Throughout this project I will be referring to the site and its many behind-the-scenes decision makers as just "Facebook." This is in an effort to save space and to simplify my claims. However, it is important to note that my argument is not a

technologically deterministic one; I do not view Facebook as a monolithic technology that acts on its users autonomously. Instead, as will be illuminated throughout this dissertation, I am aware that there are many actors in the process: from executives to programmers to advertisers to the users themselves.

Focusing on emerging adults (users who are between the ages of 18 and 30) provides a productive starting point in understanding the implications of social networking sites because these are the heaviest Facebook users (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Additionally, the age range of 18-30 is an important stage in the identity process; individuals are transitioning into adulthood and learning how they fit into society. College students, especially, use sites like Facebook to perform new identities that distance themselves from their former, child selves. For example, undergraduates reported posting photographs of themselves with peers and significant others to display emotional closeness, often leaving out pictures that would link them to family and to their more juvenile selves (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011). Emerging adults enjoy working within the Facebook world because it provides them with a space to display the self (e.g., Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

A larger goal of this project is to fill critical gaps in the social networking and identity literature by developing new conceptions of identification, authenticity, agency, and anonymity that are more amenable to the blurring of digital spaces with offline spaces, instead of modifying the definitions relevant in offline situations. In each new

social situation, the aggregate of two previous situations will not suffice; instead, a new definition of the situation must be formed (Meyrowitz, 1985). Thus, new digital spaces call for a reimagining of definitions. These new definitions are integral in recognizing how users are altered by sites' architectures and their affordances.

Further, while a few studies have explored how interfaces alter user performances, research exploring personal interpretations of the structures and how users conform or deviate from the templates is needed (Papacharissi, 2009). Ultimately, I argue that social networking structures are inaugurating new *cultures*—new ways of thinking about identifications and social interactions. Because so much of the actual processing of information is done behind the scenes, these cultural functions become invisible and naturalized. However, becoming more aware of these structures' inner workings may result in a more literate and healthy culture when it comes to both offline and digital identity.

### Summary of Chapters

I begin by breaking down the main terms that are integral to my investigation in this preliminary chapter. First, I discuss digital affordances and the importance of realizing the ways in which digital spaces influence the choices we make in identity processes. Instead of imagining sites like Facebook as media, I argue that we should see them as mediators, or filters, that are not neutral and instead should initiate moral discussions (Galloway, 2013). Second, I explicate my stance on what identity is, noting

that the verb identification is much more efficient because it connotes an on-going, ever-evolving process. Drawing from narratology, I argue that the best way to understand this on-going process is to understand all identity as narrative. I also discuss identifications as influenced through conversations with both others and the self.

Next, I focus on three characteristics of identification that are often cited and explored in internet literature: authenticity, agency, and anonymity. These notions are not mutually exclusive; in fact they inform one another during identification processes. All are hard to define and change depending on time and space contexts. Authenticity is often understood as honesty and transparency; agency within social networking sites is rarely discussed; and anonymity online is far too often conflated with privacy concerns. To address these limitations, I propose a new definition of anonymity that both differentiates the concept from privacy and is more amenable to understanding identities as multiple and dynamic.

I then outline my methods. First, I describe my structural discourse analysis of Facebook's affordances. Although this is a new way of exploring digital spaces, I rely partially on Papacharissi's 2009 study on social networking sites' "virtual geographies." Second, I explain my narrative methods for both conducting and analyzing focus groups and one-on-one interviews. I also describe my attempt at empiricizing Galloway's (2013) theory that media should instead be understood as mediators, or filters, that create a certain ethic by selecting a specific ontology to be presented.

Chapter 2, Structural Discourse Analysis Findings, outlines the affordances on Facebook that aid in identification performances. I break the site down into seven categories: Sign Up Page, About Page, Likes, Friends, Photographs, Timeline, and Cookies. Through these groupings, I explore what Facebook allows users to do on the site, what performances are privileged, and the larger messages that Facebook is potentially sending by making these deliberate choices.

In Chapters 3 through 6, I present my narrative analyses of my focus groups and interviews. Speaking with 45 emerging adults, many themes emerged regarding the structured performances through Facebook's interface. The emergent themes presented in this dissertation are as follows: Digitally Structured Culture, Visual Culture, Celebrity Culture, and Socially Divided Culture. I label these themes as cultures because my goal was to understand the contemporary heteronormative ways of viewing the world, others, and ourselves. Thus, cultures are broadly defined here as the norms and expectations that we learn and then use to move through time and space.

In Chapter 7, I revisit my research questions and compare my informants' narratives and emergent themes with my original theoretical arguments and with the results of my structural discourse analysis. I discuss implications and suggest future directions that social media and identity research should take. Finally, I discuss Facebook's "social contagion" study that was released while this dissertation was being

completed, arguing that if users and scholars alike were more aware of Facebook's structure, their views of the study would be much different.

### Review of Literature

In an attempt to better understand identification online through social networking sites' affordances, this dissertation project draws from five topics—affordance theory, narrative identity, authenticity, agency, and anonymity, and also pays specific attention to how each group intersects with and informs social networking literature. I begin by discussing affordances within manmade, specifically digital, structures and move to an appeal to thinking of media as mediators that make ethical decisions when our identification information is filtered through them. I then move to narrative identification theories, arguing that all identifications should be understood as narratives that are always in conversation with others and the self.

In the third and final section of this literature review I discuss three specific areas of debate within social networking and identity: authenticity, agency, and anonymity. Although not mutually exclusive, I suggest new ways of thinking about and researching these three concepts within digital and interactive spaces, as an alternative to settling for definitions that are better suited for offline performances.

#### *Structures and their Affordances*

Analyzing online social networking sites' affordances may uncover the ways in which technology and society are concurrently working to determine one another and

cultivate new cultures regarding identifications and social expectations. Although a unified theory that links affordance theory to social networking structure has yet to be solidified, this project aims to help in the effort. Technologies may *appear* to have agency (Srauy, 2013). But, in reality, those who create these digital structures consistently make moral choices that concern functionalities, representations, and altered social norms.

I do not mean to argue that the technologies themselves are not important. But instead, I argue that we do not pay enough attention to those people who are “behind the curtain.” In everyday life we do not feel like we are in discourse with the designers, but *we are* in discourse with the interfaces which indirectly connects us to their human programmers. It is not necessarily relevant to actually know the people who are behind social media per se, just to realize the reality of social networking spaces.

Drawing on perceptual psychology, Gibson (1979) proposes that animals in nature are only allowed, or afforded, what their environmental structures permit. Affordances and the lives of the animals they constrain are inextricable, and it is essential for animals to perceive the provided affordances because they offer both benefits and limitations. Evolutionarily, comprehending affordances allows animals to learn to realize their surroundings, to find ways to survive, and to avoid injurious phenomena.

Applying affordance theory to humans and the structures they create is not that different, Gibson (1979) explains. The environment remains the same; humans have just

added onto it. These created structures are inescapably non-neutral; they have been created by people who have the power to create them and thus contain implicit ideologies and beliefs. Indeed, Winner (1980) argues that artifacts have politics and that our modern systems “embody specific forms of power and authority” (p. 121). These structures enhance experiences for some, while limiting them for others. In this sense, structures *afford* certain things to certain people.

Winner (1980) provides us with the example of overpasses into Long Island, New York. Many of the overpasses were built with a height of only nine feet. A seemingly benign characteristic, the reality is that this is too little clearance for buses to pass underneath. Thus, the height deterred buses’ entrance into the city. Those people that owned automobiles, who were mostly upper- or middle-class and white, could enter the city with no second thought. However, members of the working class and racial minorities were essentially not welcome. Despite the fact that Joerges (1999) later contends with Winner and writes that the overpass paralleled a highway that allowed any vehicle to enter the city, the general message that structures alter or reify cultural expectations remains.

Clearly then, these created structures influence our choices for the creation and maintenance of the self. When performing identity, Goffman (1959) argues that we are actors with different social situations representing our stages. The self needs to be validated through these social performances. However, actors are limited to finite roles.

Humans are bound to social constructs and moral rules; actors “are constrained to define themselves in congruence with the statuses, roles, and relationships . . . [according to] the social order” (Branaman, 1997, p. xlvii).

In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) notes that those with the most power are the ones who create these social standards; as the status quo we simply work to reify their norms. Utilizing Bentham’s panopticon, for example, Foucault explores how institutionalized structures guide identity performances toward habits that are most beneficial to the state. As he explains, punishment turned from torturing bodies to *training* bodies. As actors, we internalize the “right” way to do things. The panopticon-style prison<sup>1</sup> forced prisoners to self-surveil because they never knew when a guard was watching them. Thus, even if no one is watching us, we still feel as though we are under the “gaze,” shaping our performances to coincide with accepted norms.

Importantly, Foucault (1979) recognizes that the panopticon (both theoretical and actual) is not just a place for observation, but also for experimentation. Those with the power to drive the panopticon can learn how to alter behaviors and train humans.

“Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men’s behaviour [sic]; knowledge follows the advances of power,

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<sup>1</sup> The panopticon-style-prison was a circular prison with a guard tower in the center. All inmates’ cells could be seen by the guards in the tower. However, the inmates could never tell if the guards were actually in the tower at any time. Thus, the inmates were conditioned to police themselves, fearing that the “gaze” of the guards was always on them.

discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised” (Foucault, 1979, p. 204).

Therefore, not only do structures afford agents certain selections, but those created by people are *not neutral*. The choices made in the creation process are couched in political, economic, and social powers. In light of this, it is important to analyze how structures operate and the ways in which their affordances affect how we create, maintain, and perceive the self. For example, those who are not afforded the ability to go to school, are likely to not be literate and thus are not privy to the information that those who could read have. As another example, people with physical disabilities perhaps cannot access buildings or certain floors of buildings if ramps and elevators are not afforded to them.

These arguments become especially pertinent when applied to online contexts. Media in general create spaces where power is decided (e.g., Castells, 2007). The introduction of participatory media led users to feel as though they have a hand in the power flows that, with traditional mass media, were previously out of their grasps. With Web 2.0, users could tailor spaces and feel a sense of ownership and power in the new process of not merely creating identity but broadcasting it. Instead of a one-to-many model where large media corporations create messages for the masses, internet spaces allow consumers to also be producers. However, as these digital spaces become more

mature, so do the ways in which corporations attempt to again control the messages therein. Thus, identity online has come to be defined as *customization* (Marwick, 2013a).

In dialogue, Neff, Jordan, McVeigh-Schultz, and Gillespie (2012) discuss the possibility of applying affordance theory to the study of online media structures. Previous discussions had warned against technologically deterministic language—faith in user agency and knowledge was high, and academics and users alike did not want to think that technologies were their directors. Perhaps this position was too strong, causing us to give too little respect to the power not that technological tools hold, but to the power that those people who conceive of, design, program, and maintain them hold. Tools are *programmed* to render social change (Neff et al., 2012), even if that is not how those of us who are not programmers would like to view them.

The affordances presented in online spaces are similar to offline affordances, but present “distinct affordances” (boyd, 2011, p. 39) that more directly shape identifications. Although it may be extreme to say that these affordances strictly dictate behavior, it is accurate to say that, through calculated suggestions, they shape engagement (boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2009) with the site, with others, and with the self. It is not that technologies force themselves onto people, but that technologies work to set parameters regarding what acts of identification are possible within each digital space (Hutchby, 2001).

Indeed, it is important to uncover affordances in online spaces because while they deeply impact user actions, they are often seen as “natural” because they have been so

seamlessly integrated into the sites and into users' daily lives. Affordances in online spaces can be viewed as within one of two categories: technical and social. However, social affordances rely on technical affordances, and, in many cases, it is difficult to discretely separate the two for analysis. Social affordances are formed through the influences of technical affordances (Postigo, 2014). Thus, it is not my goal in this project to delineate Facebook's social affordances from Facebook's technical affordances.

Exploring online social networks, boyd (2011) identifies three components: profiles, friend lists, and tools for public communication. Profiles work to represent users and are often the center of action. They also are the site of each user's *control*. Friend lists confirm ties to both the user herself and to her networks. Because identity is so dependent on others, visible networks play an important role in identity management. Finally, the tools for public communication, attributes such as comment sections and Likes, allow users to check in with one another and to socially groom each other.

Behind the scenes, these structural affordances alter how we control information and broadcast the self. Information is amplified, recorded, and spread in new ways. Our identifications exist in perpetuity, constantly transformed and interpreted in new ways with each new broadcast. A display of the self can be replicated an infinite number of times, and it is impossible to differentiate the original from the copy. And, beyond all of these changes to how our selves are maintained, we can be searched. All of our information is not just recorded, but archived in such a manner that sophisticated

algorithms can point us to the different iterations of our selves with one click (boyd, 2011).

While sites strive to become “user-friendly” (Cohen, 2012), they are really just clearing away “pesky” coding structures that the majority of users feel they might not, and should not be obligated to, understand. The general user becomes less and less aware of how the spaces they use every day work. This may actually prove beneficial to sites—if users have less choice but still feel it necessary to use the site, the site is granted the majority of control over shaping users and their information. A site like Facebook, for example, employs “object-oriented programming” (OOP).<sup>2</sup> In the most basic terms, OOP works this way: objects are created with specific parameters—they are given *inherent* adjectives and verbs that describe them and that can be called upon at any time in the code, making it easier to insert these objects since they need only be defined once at the top level of the program.

This method allows designers to build cascading collections of objects that are each more specialized than the previous. Whoever takes part in this coding must make moral decisions in defining what an object even is and what properties are inherent to it. Therefore, consider this question: What is a *user*? Digital affordances can only be programmed to represent a user with a finite number of “adjectives” and “verbs.” Of

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<sup>2</sup> Among others.

course those involved try to cover as many possibilities as they can, but they are also fighting time- and budget-based demands. In the offline world, we can define new “object” parameters; but within social media structures, “user” can only mean so many things.

As Cohen (2012) discusses, these new structures are not only reshaping how we perform, manipulate, and broadcast the self, but they are also *representing* realities in new ways. Recognizing digital affordances is not only important for understanding how the functionalities offered to us affect our interaction and broadcasting of the self; realizing digital affordances in online social networks also helps us to recognize the changes happening to our *representations*. To better visualize this concept, take for example Baudrillard’s (1981/1994) analogy of the map and the territory.

Drawing on Borges’ parable *On Exactitude of Science*, Baudrillard (1981/1994) explores the relationship between a map and a territory. Maps are traditionally employed to be simulations of territories. However, when people place the map before the territory, the map begins to define the lives of those within the represented territory. Initially, the affordances of using a pen and paper or a computer program to create a map are important due to limited functionalities in representing certain territorial attributes. Eventually, however, these same affordances also have an effect on how the territory is represented—they were the very functions that helped to create the representation in the first place. As a postmodernist, Baudrillard’s fear is that we let our maps define our

territories, placing more energy in simulacra than in the real. As boyd (2011) also addresses, a portion of this anxiety subsists in the fact that media technologies make it more and more difficult for us to differentiate the map from the territory—the duplicates from the original.

The more that we incorporate digital technologies into our daily lives, the more we choose to see *through* them instead of examining their power to represent reality in new ways (Verbeek, 2011). Galloway (2013) argues that Web 2.0 networking sites should be understood as *mediators*, not media. They exist to filter information, allowing some aspects of the target ontology through while constraining the broadcasting of other aspects. The ability for the structure to act as mediator and make decisions regarding what is salient highlights the encoded values that structures possess. Thus, a structure like Facebook is “an ethic...because it is premised on the notion that objects are subject to definition and manipulation according to a set of principles for action” (Galloway, 2013, pp. 22-23). That is, Facebook is not concerned with trying to *know* reality; it is focused on “how specific, abstract definitions are executed to form a world” (Galloway, 2013, p. 23). We are thus inclined to enter into a moral argument when discussing how selves are created and broadcast through the site (e.g., Cohen, 2012; Galloway, 2013; Verbeek, 2011).

### *Narrative Identification*

Narratology, or the study of how narratives structure identifications, is a new theoretical branch of identity theory. Many scholars argue that identity *is* narrative (e.g., Bamberg, 2006; DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Freeman, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). The mind works in narrative form and therefore it is how we make and understand our world (Bruner, 2004). Narratives work as both psychological concepts and as research tools; they can help us to interpret our own identities, and they can reveal social changes at the micro level (Hammack, 2011). Holstein and Gubrium (2000) argue that narratives are integral to understanding identity because they are where “discursive practices and discourses in practice meet” (p. 103).

Many narrative identity scholars argue that identities are not static (e.g., Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Schrag, 1997). Indeed, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that the noun “identity” is overused and only represents a shallow condition. They propose that scholars instead write of “identification.” This verb represents identity as an on-going *process*. This on-going process is highlighted in the fact that Facebook users are constantly maintaining and updating their online identifications.

Understanding identification in this fluid manner also allows us to recognize that identification aspects are acquired throughout one’s lifetime. Engrained cultural norms or traumatic events of the past still add to the identification of the present. Even if in one

subject position a person is not actively calling on certain identification aspects, they still exist in the background, adding thickness to the currently forward-facing identification.

When we speak with both ourselves and others, these conversations are not isolated. Instead, they exist on a continuum that includes past experiences, present contexts, and future aspirations (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Understanding a narrative as an on-going conversation highlights two main ideas: how we rely on the social for identification and how we converse with ourselves.

#### *Narrative and the social*

In a play on Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," Schrag (1997) states, "we interact, therefore we are" (p. 78). In other words, narratives are grounded in social interaction; they are created in the moment and are not recalled through some static list of criteria (Bamberg, 2006). Instead they are based in the current context in which the teller finds herself.

Although agents are always in conversation with themselves working to construct their identifications (as discussed in the next section), personal narratives also help people to appreciate cultural memory (Hammack, 2011). We realize concepts, and thus tell stories, through social spaces (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). We must use these predefined labels for telling our narratives, and they become important to us as social beings because they connect us to metanarratives and thus place us in history. However, these labels are not natural; they represent hegemonic norms that become "common

sense” and are often used unconsciously (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Redman, 2005).

Schrag’s (1997) claim that we exist because we interact seems self-evident on social networking sites. The perceived primary goal of social networking sites is to create digital connections, especially between people who already know each other offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007). A site like Facebook feels natural because we become aware of broader cultural norms through telling narratives in social spaces (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Hammack, 2011). Likewise, scholars (e.g., De Saullés & Horner, 2011) have explored how digital narrative sites, like Facebook, act as “portable panopticons.”

Indeed, narratives are told “locally” on social networking sites—they are told for certain audiences that the user has constructed as her “friends” or “followers” list. However, identifications are also still created by the user pulling from larger societal and cultural norms, just as offline narrators do. Again, these predefined labels are not natural—they represent hegemonic identity norms (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Redman, 2005).

On Facebook however, these “larger societal and cultural norms” from which users are pulling to perform the self are not equivalent to the choices available in the offline world. Users are bound to performing a self that, for the most part, coincides with Facebook’s perception of identity. This would mean that Facebookers are bound to

Facebook's expectation for concepts such as authenticity and anonymity. Further, when identifications are displayed to others, they would also be bound to Facebook's style of aggregating and displaying identity.

### *Narrative and the self*

The process of telling a narrative is not merely describing the self. Narratives are important to identity because the process of telling a story about oneself is how we comprise our identities (Redman, 2005). This construction is an important part of understanding the self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). The teller gets to be both protagonist and reflexive narrator at the same time (Bruner, 2004). Therefore, she has the ability to understand herself in new ways as she chooses the aspects of her narrative.

Constructing a narrative not only gives the teller the space to be reflexive, it also is what creates identity in the first place. As Bruner (2004) explains, we become the autobiographies that we tell. Each time we speak about ourselves we are choosing a certain path that is a new constitution of the self. Instead of understanding narrative as a character creating a story, the reverse is true—the story creates the character (Schrag, 1997).

Butler (1997) explores this idea of retroactive identity. She argues that we are not what we say we are until we have proclaimed it. Drawing from Althusser (as discussed in Butler, 1997), she explains how we accept the interpellations by which we are addressed, with some negotiation, casting an identity back onto ourselves. Althusser explains that we

are hailed by others, and when we turn around to their call we accept the identity they have cast upon us. Butler adds that we do this to ourselves—the metaphorical act of turning onto ourselves is what makes the self. The content of this process of reflexivity is not as important, Butler explains, as the fact that we feel compelled to take part in the symbolic process.

For example, I am not “female” until I accept that interpellation of myself as such. The cultural understanding of what it means to be female exists, but until I hail myself as such, I am not female. Further, this interpellation does not exist in a vacuum. I negotiate my unique understanding of “female” in the moment. The effect is not important; instead it is the *choice* of the cause that is meaningful for narrative identity because the cause is really the effect (Žižek, 2000). Butler’s (2006) point, then, is to establish this identification process as one of *performativity*. We unconsciously choose how to hail ourselves. Heteronormative identifications are always being pushed on us; thus we often, without thinking, reify these problematic norms by interpellating ourselves through them. Again, the content of each performance is not as important as the fact that the teller is so inclined to perform and tell her narrative in the first place. In conversing with the self, the teller is working through her own understanding of her identification.

The popularity of social networking sites has altered this reflexive identity process. Users can now look to the site to learn about their own selves. The interface acts as an interactive mirror that constantly reflects narratives and identity choices back to

users. For example, algorithms take our input and summaries of our networked interactions and reflect content back to us that they have deemed “right” for us. However, as discussed above, those programming these choices have the power to define what we are and into what category we belong. Indeed, this reflection is not a neutral one. Because the structure, acting as mediator, filters information and represents identifications in calculated ways, the content with which a user is provided to be reflexive is tainted—I am what the algorithms and interface define me as. Instead of a neutral mirror, the site acts as a funhouse mirror, filtering, distorting, and altering the self that exists before this digital mirror is introduced.

If narratologists are correct and our narratives highly influence our identities, it is salient to explore how Facebook’s representation of our identifications alters our identity performances as a whole, whether they are performed in online realities or offline realities. If we as Facebookers employ Facebook’s versions of our identifications in the self-constitution process, then we truly are succumbing to the new culture that Facebook is facilitating and to the ideas about identifications that the programmers manage.

To better understand social networking sites, we must realize the importance of viewing identification as narrative. Narratology helps us to comprehend how sites display personal information along with the affordances granted to allow for the revealing of this personal information. Further, a current application of narratology to social media spaces

highlights the added complications of telling stories through digital media and the ways in which identity performances are reflected back to users.

### *Authenticity, Agency, and Anonymity*

In an effort to limit the scope of this dissertation, I have chosen to specifically examine how the structure alters users' perception of authenticity, agency, and anonymity. These ideas are certainly not mutually exclusive. In fact, they were chosen because they have many intersecting components. However, this section will attempt to outline each concept and its connection to Facebook's structural affordances.

#### *Authenticity*

The term authenticity is frequently used in both casual social conversations and formal academic discussions; however a singular definition is difficult to articulate. Authentic may mean unique or original; creating a faithful representation; giving authorization or a stamp of approval; or remaining true to some internal essence (van Leeuwen, 2001). Some people suggest that authenticity is enacted by "being yourself" (Marwick, 2013b). Taylor (1989) argues that the modern self is a true, inner, centered self that can be uncovered. On the other hand, postmodern scholars argue that the self is de-centered—multiple selves are all equally representative and can be enacted depending on the context (e.g., Perinbanayagam, 2000).

In news media, for example, ordinary people, such as the bystander or the witness, are seen as more authentic than the newscasters. They have no stake in the

corporation and are viewed as truly stating what it was that they had seen or heard. As news blogs took the place of some news sources, authenticity shifted to be defined as knowledgeable. Those bloggers who had “real” expertise regarding the topic about which they were writing were the authentic news bloggers (Gilpin, Palazzolo, & Brody, 2010). Even in this small change in news source authenticity as it switched from the innocent bystander to the civilian or amateur blogger, it is clear that the notion of authenticity is ever the moving target.

Banet-Weiser (2012), in her book titled *Authentic*<sup>TM</sup>, argues that we are living in a “brand culture.” In our commercial society we learn how to self-brand and promote the self. Toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tired of mass consumption, people were ready to become “real” people. Companies began to sell them personalized, original, and unique products to support this fragmentation of markets. Traditionally, to be authentic was to remain outside of commercial and consumer culture. Recently, however, the notion of authenticity implements an important economic function both online and offline despite—or because of—its seemingly contradictory placement outside the commercial realm.

Indeed, users of Facebook become commodities themselves; the information that they enter is traded without reverence, like pork belly (Rushkoff, 2013). Existing as mere collections of abstract, commercial traits, user identities translate to dollar signs for Facebook. However, I do not intend for this paper to include a full discussion of how

Facebook, or any site for that matter, commoditizes its users. I do, however, intend to explore the following questions: what must the structure of a site like Facebook look like to support the commodification of users? And, in turn, what does this structure mean for identification generally and the fight for authenticity specifically?

The real issue that I have with discussions surrounding modern authenticity is that selves can seemingly only be perceived of as authentic when they are consistent—there is only one true self, and if a person should diverge, she must be fake or deceptive (Slater, 2002). In digital media spaces, people are described as authentic if they are honest, transparent, and revealing (Marwick, 2013b). That is, the affordances offered promote identifications that are situated in celebrity or self-branding culture.<sup>3</sup> However, I do not think that these definitions precede social networking sites. Instead, I argue that the structure of a site like Facebook cultivates these narrow definitions.

Early social media platforms (such as MUDs) disembodied users and allowed them to “play” with aspirational selves. These identities without bodies displayed the self as multifarious—instead of defining the self as unitary, multiple windows acted as “drafts” of the self that could be altered at any time (Dahlberg, 2001; Turkle, 1995). It would be naïve, however, to think that these spaces were only praised; scholars worried about deception in the anonymous spaces, noting that sometimes users questioned the

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<sup>3</sup> A more through discussion of celebrity culture and self-branding can be found in Chapter 5.

trustworthiness of other users who could potentially embarrass them or “troll”<sup>4</sup> their spaces (Dahlberg, 2001). Nevertheless, because these spaces disembodied their users, the users felt liberated from traditional notions of authenticity (Slater, 2002) and were able to experience a “more fluid sense of self” (Turkle, 1995, p. 261).

More recently, online spaces have regressed to traditional notions of single, centered, and “authentic” identifications. Social networking sites that promote ample space for personalization are really touting some perceived ability to guide the user to her authentic state (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Indeed, Marwick (2013a) observes that Facebook publicizes itself as helping its users to uncover real selves and then helping them to stay true to these real selves.

A discussion of how Facebook understands authenticity is superfluous—Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has publically announced what he thinks the concept means multiple times. He claims that we all have only one identity and that the days of having multiple images that span professional, personal, and familial contexts are numbered. Zuckerberg also boldly states that having more than one identity shows a lack of integrity. Instead, we should behave consistently and in a transparent manner (Kirkpatrick, 2011). I think that we would be naïve to assume that Zuckerberg really believes these things concerning identity. Instead, these concepts help Facebook to build

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<sup>4</sup> To troll a digital space is to purposefully upset participants through hurtful comments. Most of the time trolls are working under a pseudonym unknown to the others involved.

an economic identification that equates to profit by encouraging users to provide information (e.g., “free data”) to digital media and marketing institutions.

Because Facebook strives to represent one-dimensional selves, identifications are inescapably flattened into shallow versions of diverse selves. Users are compelled to construct identities on the site that conflate the stages and audiences that Goffman (1959) sees as natural to everyday social interaction. To try to decide what equation of the self will work to not offend any one audience member means combining many selves, with each never going beyond a superficial representation.

The ways in which identifications are displayed also fit nicely into Zuckerberg’s dreams of monolithic identity. The Timeline, for example, promotes a consistent identification. Users are expected to log their lives chronologically, from birth. This creates a sort of “zombie baggage” (Cirucci, 2013b); users are forced to correspond with their past selves. If a performance on Facebook is too dissimilar from a previous performance, a user’s network can immediately see the inconsistency and question her “authenticity” or risk being “called out.” Users thus resort to identifications that are more in line with company profiles—honest and transparent, following a single, unchangeable mission statement (Marwick, 2013b).

Authenticity is a tricky concept because, in reality, it does not exist. It is merely a placeholder in common discourse to represent some ethos of being true to the self. As we know, however, the “self” is contextual and changes through space and time and depends

on the audience members present. Theoretically, the concept is problematic because questioning if someone's performance is authentic or not, collapses their dynamic identifications and attempts to judge a person unfairly. Thus, I have chosen to explore the term in this dissertation *because* it is used so widely and *because* it is so problematic. Indeed, Facebook chooses to use this word in a variety of ways knowing that it connotes a very deep, personal feeling that many users, especially younger users, believe to be aspiring toward.

### *Agency*

Concerning identity in its general form, some scholars (e.g., Foucault, 1973) argue that the limited choices presented through institutionalized norms are inadequate, adding that even if agents realize this, there is no way out. Even when we use language to voice our concerns we remain slaves to this language. However, narratologists find recourse in narrative. Redman (2005) explains that as the teller, I may pull from the grand discourses, but I still get to choose from what is available. This flexibility in defining myself, because I am the narrator, *is* agency (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). As Schrag (1997) states in another play on "I think, therefore, I am": "I choose, therefore I am" (p. 63).

Derridian scholars may argue that narrative identities are invalid because of his concept of *différance*—the idea that every sign's meaning is fleeting. Therefore, the moment we pull a sign and attempt to apply it to our narrative, it has already come to

mean many different things (as discussed in Perinbanayagam, 2000). However, Perinbanayagam (2000) claims that through our narratological agency it is as if time freezes when the teller plucks the sign from a meta-narrative. Additionally, the original meaning of the sign does not matter because the agency within narrative identity allows the teller to interpret her choice differently each time she uses it in a narrative; she can craft that sign to mean the things that are necessary based on her current context and needs.

Vila (2005) and Ferrarese (2011) argue that just because hegemonic discourses exist does not mean we have to use them at face value. Similarly, Branaman (1997) notes that although we must choose a frame (frame here comes from Goffman's work) that does not mean that once we have selected a frame we cannot do what we wish inside of it. Therefore, unlike Foucault's argument, we may pull from existing, hegemonic discourses, but it does not mean that we are made by institutions (Perinbanayagam, 2000). Once we have chosen the master narrative, we can keep those things that we like and throw away other aspects (Hammack, 2011). In other words, "the self we live by is not fully determined" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 103).

Butler (1997, 2006) further explains that agency is found *within* structures. Power comes with repetition; others, especially those in power, reify hegemonic norms by constantly applying them—they maintain their effectiveness. However, this repetition

will have to fail at some point. Therefore, we can continue to decide for ourselves how to act while still within the system.

In particular, Butler is writing about sex and gender. She argues that the point is not to argue about what “sex” is, but to “articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of ‘identity’ in order to render that category...permanently problematic” (Butler, 2006, p. 174). That is, when our identifications are considered “normal” it means that they are situated in some produced boundaries. To subvert these boundaries, we must question their duality and attempt to disrupt both the inner and outer metaphors that keep them established.

Butler suggests drag as a way to subvert gender norms from the inside. The act blurs the distinction between internal and external identifications and mocks both the expressive notion of gender and the notion that some true gender identity exists. Because drag imitates gender it also parodies it and implicitly reveals that gender is a created, and thus a non-neutral structure in the first place. This new routine, reified over and over, denaturalizes the fabricated notion of binary gender. In general, Butler is arguing that we attempt to utilize strategies that already exist within dominant identification structures to then carry-out discontinuous acts and disrupt problematic identification expectations.

Indeed, because identity construction is an on-going process, the flexibility and the choice of aspects of our narratives is happening all the time. We do not just pick from the existing discourses once. In fact, narrative identity scholars argue that we are always

choosing from the selection given to us *each* time we tell our narratives. Through this choice, we can position ourselves in our narrative depending on the context and our audience. Therefore, many narrative scholars maintain that identities are not only not constant, they are also not singular (DeFina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

Amid the praise for narratives in their ability to open up space for agency, some scholars argue that the space is not as freeing as it seems. Alcoff (2006), for example, discusses visible identity. She claims that identity is rooted in bodily difference. Unlike other social identities that are created and maintained in the psyche, we cannot transcend those visible identities that have come to acquire meaning—visible differences are embodied through their universal understandings and alignment to hegemonic norms of the “right” way to act.

For example, although race denotes a visual difference, it has become a social difference by promoting “better” or “worse” ways of “being” a race and by promoting the white race as “superior.” Although a teller can perform her race however she wishes through her narratives, Alcoff (2006) argues that how her story will be received is still ultimately affected by how others view her. Additionally, it is inevitable that the teller has already embodied the stereotypical meaning behind her visible identity, letting it affect her narratives.

Agency online is often examined through social and political movements.

Scholars explore how users work within social media to change policies (e.g., Stevenson

& Greenberg, 2000), to transcend hierarchical positions in institutions (Battilana, 2006), and to make changes within corrupt organizations (e.g., Battilana & Casciaro, 2012). Van Dijck (2013) discusses how online social networking users enact agency by employing feedback channels; users contact sites and boycott usage when development changes are implemented that users feel interrupt their daily usage of the site or invade previous privacy expectations.

However, this project is concerned with exploring the extent to which users can work *within* Facebook's structure to subvert the hegemonic expectations that Facebook puts forth. As Butler (2006) explains, the only way to enact agency is to find the ways to do so inside of the existing structure. The few users who are technologically savvy enough are aware of certain add-ons and hacks that alter Facebook and its structural affordances. For the most part, however, users are utilizing the site at face value.

Previous social media sites such as Myspace allowed users much freedom in performing their identities through customization features. Myspacers could change backgrounds, colors, and fonts. Additionally, most identification spaces were open-ended and just worked as free spaces to include biographical information. As Marwick (2013a) explains, identification online may be defined as customization, however, the levels of possible customization are dropping. Facebook users (unless they have installed add-ons) all see the same blue and white design, the same font, the same prompts, and the same functionalities and representations of themselves and others.

### *Anonymity*

Many scholars (e.g., Morgan & Newton, 2004; Pfizmann & Hansen, 2006; Shmatikov & Hughes, 2013; Wallace, 1999; Zhao et al., 2008) attempt to define anonymity. In general, anonymity has been described as the inability to link any one trait, or set of traits, back to the originator of those traits. Therefore, an agent remains anonymous when one identification, for example as a PETA activist, cannot be linked back to her other identifications, for example as a mother and as a professor.

I would be remiss to not discuss privacy within a discussion of anonymity since scholars often use the two terms interchangeably. Many scholars (e.g., boyd, 2008; Liu, Gummadi, Krishnamurthy, & Mislove, 2011; Moore, 2008; Papacharissi, 2009; Shmatikov & Hughes, 2013) have sought to define privacy in both online and offline spaces. Traditionally, privacy has been understood as the right to be left alone (Warren & Brandeis, 1890). However, electronic media work to rearrange the traditional boundaries of public and private (Papacharissi, 2009).

Notwithstanding, privacy is generally recognized as the right to *control* personal information (e.g., Moore, 2008). The expectation is that agents will self-manage their right to disclose content (Solove, 2013, p. 2). Practically, privacy in online spaces has proven difficult to acquire. For example, although Facebook provides users with choices regarding different levels of privacy, a 2011 study reported that Facebook's privacy options regularly do not match user expectations (Liu et al., 2011). It seems that policies

presented by social networking sites as protecting user privacy actually exist to protect the site and to allow marketers to collect data that will generate the most profit (Fernback & Papacharissi, 2007).

The issue surrounding online privacy and anonymity rhetoric is really that the two ideas are conflated even though they are independent from one another (Shmatikov & Hughes, 2013). It may help to first define privacy. Let us consider two different types of privacy. From this point forward I will refer to the first type as Privacy and the second as privacy. Big “P” Privacy is the general notion for which we fight. Much like property rights, we have come to expect “a certain level of control over the inner spheres of personal information and access to one’s body, capacities, and powers” (Moore, 2008, p. 420). Indeed, offline I operate under the axiom that there are places I can go and actions I can take to ensure that information I do not want shared remains private. For example, I can write in a diary, I can close the door when I go into the bathroom, and I can place my medicine in a brown paper bag after I purchase it, hiding my prescription and thus my ailment.

Privacy also gives me the agency to choose when I will enact my right to privacy. Little “p” privacy is made up of smaller, every day instances. This means that I can choose to whom I want to disclose which information. For instance, I can write a letter addressed to only one person, I can allow my partner in the bathroom with me before I close the door, and I can share with family the diseases for which I have to take medicine.

Little “p” privacy is relevant in that if I do not want certain people or groups of people to know certain things, I can control their access.

The expectation of big “P” Privacy, and therefore our right to enact privacy whenever we want, is valid in the offline world because, as far as we know, the universe is not recording us. We can choose to not disclose personal information, no matter how we define “personal.” Therefore, I can do as I wish when I am alone, without the fear of there being a record of my actions. It is important to note that both privacy and Privacy are about *content* offline—the things that I choose to disclose, and the things that I choose to not disclose.

Anonymity on the other hand can be defined as nonidentifiability within some set (Pfitzmann & Hansen, 2006). That is, anonymity is context dependent. Consider the following definition, based in my above discussion of identification definitions:

Assume there is a universal set of identification traits that exists from which agents pull each time they perform an identification. Each agent then is constituted of a finite set of traits, i.e. they are comprised of a set  $A$  comprised of the traits  $a_1, \dots, a_n$ . Each identification then is some non-empty subset of  $A$ .

Therefore, anonymity is the “noncoordinability” (Wallace, 1999, p. 23) of two or more subsets. That is, a user can freely perform one subset without the fear of an audience or context collapse. Goffman (1959) describes this as actors having different stages on which to perform identifications in front of different audiences. The right to “audience segregation” is essentially anonymity.

Nissenbaum, in her 2010 book *Privacy in Context*, constructs a similar conception of anonymity in online spaces. She argues for a new understanding of “privacy” that takes “contextual integrity” into account. Our social lives rely on the norms and expectations that have been crafted and maintained throughout time. These social mores exist in explicit contexts. “What people care most about is not simply *restricting* the flow of information but ensuring that it flows *appropriately*” (p. 2). Therefore, Nissenbaum is arguing that online contexts should not be broken down and should remain true to their offline equivalents.

Although I agree with Nissenbaum that context is integral, I fear that she is implying that offline contexts will easily transfer to digital spaces. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. As Meyrowitz (1985) explains, with each new social situation comes a new definition. Therefore, if a patient is online accessing her medical records, an example that Nissenbaum explores, she should not expect to have the same power over her information as she has offline. Perhaps it will be more power, perhaps it will be less. The amount of power is not really the issue. What does matter is that the moment that her medical information is moved online, it is just *different*. The actual content is different and the way that she, and others, interact with it is different. Thus, contexts are extremely

important to anonymity, but we cannot expect them to be the same contexts that we experience offline.<sup>5</sup>

It seems that there are two particular, special subsets that complicate my definition of anonymity: the *visible* (your corporeal self) and the *legal* (legal name, place of residence, etc.) identifications. This is perhaps because visible and legal identities are the most static identifications. Changing visible or legal identities is seen as invasive or drastic and is rare, especially if it would completely alter a person's recognizability. Much privacy rhetoric has come to be centered on these notions. A site like Facebook, for example, insists that it keeps your information private because it does not connect the plethora of information it aggregates to your real name or address (Turow, 2011). Thus, the site is not only *not* respecting your right to privacy, it is also not respecting your right to anonymity. The site is disclosing information to other parties that you perhaps only intended for certain groups, or yourself. Additionally, Facebook is aggregating your information and not respecting your right to anonymity, or to some noncoordinability of your identifications.

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<sup>5</sup> I want to be careful here to not make it seem as though I think that online and offline worlds are completely separate. The lines are blurred between what is "offline" identification and what is "online" identification. Indeed, it is rare that people ever actually "log out" of social networks, and consequences move between the spaces as expectations and norms transcend their originating platforms. However, it is important to remember that digitized information is inherently different and that the affordances we are given to interact with digitized information are also different. Therefore, in this explication, I find it important to set up a dichotomy. Digital and offline spaces call for new contexts that take into account the blurring of these spaces.

I do not mean for this dissertation to include an exhaustive discussion of privacy. What I do intend to show is how anonymity is different than privacy and why it is actually a more pertinent topic of conversation when discussing online realities. Here is the reason why: the notion of Privacy in today's online world is irrelevant. The instant we suspend disbelief and interact with Web 2.0, social networking sites, or user-generated content sites, we give up our right to Privacy.

As I discussed above, Privacy makes sense offline because the universe is not recording our actions. The "keys" to who we are for others exist in a small, finite list. They may be physical features such as hair color, or personality features such as gregariousness. Perhaps we remember a person because of her job or because of a store she frequents. Online however, we *are* being recorded. Almost every cursor move, mouse click, word typed, picture uploaded, product purchased, and file downloaded can be logged. Additionally, the list of "keys" or identifiers seems infinite. All of the aforementioned actions and more become part of our identifications. That is, *content* is defined much more broadly. Thus, when we perform in the digital world, we have already chosen to disclose a multitude of content to *someone*.

A study released during the initial stages of this dissertation project reported that the majority of Facebook users regularly self-censor their posts. That is, they alter original text that they input, or they simply do not submit their typed text at all. Golbeck (2013), in a *Slate.com* post, writes that, as a byproduct, this study reveals that Facebook

has the ability to collect metadata for content (such as for status updates or comments) that users assume is Private. Soon after, I noticed that a Twitter debate spawned. Golbeck's Twitter followers were questioning her decisions in representing Facebook's abilities. Was Facebook only collecting metadata? Or was the site actually collecting (and reading) censored and deleted content?

Golbeck (2013) notes in her article that a concern with Facebook's structure is that perhaps the Data Use Statement does not adequately account for this type of data collection. She writes:

It is not clear to the average reader how this data collection is covered by Facebook's privacy policy. In Facebook's Data Use Policy, under a section called "Information we receive and how it is used," it's made clear that the company collects information you choose to share or when you "view or otherwise interact with things." But nothing suggests that it collects content you explicitly *don't* share. Typing and deleting text in a box could be considered a type of interaction, but I suspect very few of us would expect that data to be saved. When I reached out to Facebook, a representative told me that the company believes this self-censorship is a type of interaction covered by the policy.

The problem with this debate is that people do not view the site and its structure as a mediator. As our devices evolve our mediators evolve. Imagine a traditional middle-man, perhaps a telegram boy. You would not whisper something to him, tell him to disregard that information, send him on his way to deliver your edited message, and fully expect him to not divulge the "private" information as well. Further, as our mediators evolve, our methods of input evolve. With computers we first had the keyboard, then we added the mouse. Now, methods of input include technologies such as voice recognition, touch

screens, and eye-trackers. Thus when a site says “interaction,” and as the Facebook representative that Golbeck (2013) spoke with noted, it covers *anything* that you can do with the structure and its interface. In other words, there is a forgotten difference between interacting with Facebook versus interacting with people via Facebook. Facebookers are *always* interacting with Facebook, even if they are not interacting with people via the site.

A more interesting, and salient, discussion is how these structures alter user expectations and performances, both online and offline. If a user expects that just typing, but not submitting, on Facebook is, as Goffman (1959) would label it, a backstage performance, it seems they are mistaken. Perhaps unfortunately, it is not surprising that Facebook’s representatives do not worry themselves with these misconceptions.

At this writing, there is an ongoing Twitter debate questioning if Facebook only collects metadata or if Facebook collects content. However, I am not sure why this distinction matters. Golbeck (2013) notes that the site has the capabilities, even if they are not currently employing them, to archive unsubmitted content. We can see similar capabilities in something like Gmail’s ability to automatically save “draft” versions of emails. Therefore, should we not just assume Facebook will, at some point, if it does not already, utilize them? Further, even if Facebook never looks at content, it seems highly probable that in the future, more powerful social networking sites that replace Facebook will. Hence, what we should be thinking about is the culture that Facebook is creating

when it comes to what P/privacy means, what interaction is, and what can be deemed “content.”

When exploring identifications online, each piece of content is less important than the aggregation of that content. Because anonymity is the noncoordinability of traits, what we should be talking about is how to ensure that we can perform different selves while maintaining segregated audiences. I admit there is not one way to do so.

Anonymity, like P/privacy, exists on a continuum. However, disclosing information is still our choice; we can choose to not disclose content online by not using online spaces or by creating online selves that are *completely* separate from offline selves. On the other hand, if we are already immersed in the online world, the discussion should be about anonymity.

This is certainly the case insofar as sites like Facebook are used in the spirit in which they were originally created—to interact with people that we already know offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007). These “anchored” relationships lead to what Zhao et al. (2008) coin as “nonymous,” or not anonymous. Facebook asks users to compile many different identifications onto one site—this, as previously discussed, they define as authenticity. Users are compelled to disclose information regarding personal achievements, family events, occupational milestones, popular culture “Likes,” and so on. Traditionally, these subsets of identification remain largely separated.

Notice how Privacy is completely off the table since the minute we enter any information onto the site, we have disclosed it to at least Facebook, and most likely to other third party sites. And, also take note that because the site compels us to interact within anchored relationships, it is unlikely, and in Facebook's favor, that we would represent a self that is completely different from any one offline self.

My argument is not to say that spaces do not exist where anonymity is possible. The Anonymous group and their website 4chan.org is an example. What I am arguing however is that Facebook's structure is cultivating a culture that does not see the value of anonymity. Yes, we have many discussions surrounding privacy. And, yes, these conversations are usually ambiguous because we are not sure how to define privacy online—most likely due to the fact that what *content* is has changed. But, in truth, it is anonymity onto which we are trying to grasp.

Our current obsession with Big Data, as Cohen (2013) explores, allows for hidden research agendas, underlying ideologies that pick up on “patterns,” and, consequently, constructed subjectivities. More important for this discussion, Cohen notes that “privacy shelters dynamic, emergent subjectivity from the efforts of commercial and government actors to render individuals and communities fixed, transparent, and predictable... Privacy also shelters the processes of play and experimentation from which innovation emerges” (pp. 1905-1906). Yet, in relation to my definitions of privacy and anonymity, Cohen is actually writing about our right to *anonymity*.

Turkle (1995) touches on a similar sentiment in her *Life on the Screen*. Given anonymous, online spaces like Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) in which to perform, users could act out aspirational selves, learning as they stumbled through these safe environments. These spaces, remember, were not Private—users divulged information on a daily basis, speaking about family troubles, medical ailments, or aspirations to try-on a new gender identification. Privacy does not shelter experimentation, anonymity does. In fact, to be able to play with desired or hidden selves online, the first step *must* be to disclose information.

Indeed, the right to anonymity allows people to reinvent the self. Working within a world where you are almost guaranteed that there will be no coordinability to your other identification subsets is empowering (Zhao et al., 2008). Anonymity is integral because it preserves the validity and the integrity of the identification process. The right to the separation of identifications allows agents to freely experiment—anonymity is possible *because* people are a plurality of traits and *because* these traits do not have to be connected (Wallace, 1999).

The purpose of this section has been to review relevant literature and to convey the importance of recognizing how Facebook's structural affordances alter user definitions of and expectations for authenticity, agency, and anonymity. I argue that digital affordances are important to realize as are affordances in any environment. However, all man-made structures differ in that their affordances are never neutral. Thus,

we must investigate how these spaces alter those that are living within them. Second, I contend that identifications should be understood as on-going narratives that are both important when speaking with others and when speaking with the self. This is an especially pertinent claim considering that users of sites like Facebook are constantly sharing stories and having these stories reflected back to themselves.

Third, I explore past definitions of three important aspects of identifications: authenticity, agency, and anonymity. I explain that authenticity online is often linked with shallow, one-dimensional selves even though this is not how we behave in the offline world. Agency is a concept that is not explored as thoroughly as it should be on social media sites. While users view digital spaces as personalizable, they are really just *customizing* the same template as everyone else.

Anonymity is a term that is often conflated with privacy, even though these two concepts are different. While privacy has to do with content, anonymity has to do with the separation of our different identifications. How we think about privacy must change since what content and interaction are online has changed. I suggest an updated conception of anonymity for social media spaces and suggest that anonymity, not privacy, is for what we should be fighting.

### Methods

This project seeks to stimulate new discourse that unites the architecture of social networking sites with user experiences in an effort to promote an awareness of the

architectural makeup of the spaces. This awareness will hopefully lead to researchers questioning the sites' affordances *before* analyzing user behaviors and cultural implications as well as bringing structural components into dialogue. It will also allow for general social media users to gain a better understanding of the spaces that they fold so seamlessly into their daily lives. For these reasons, a mixed-method approach is most fitting. Combining a structural discourse analysis, focus group interviews, and one-on-one interviews allows for a type of triangulation that also stimulates a more holistic discussion of social networking and identification.

#### *Structural Discourse Analysis*

Because architecture plays an important role in structuring digital identification process and presentation (e.g., Papacharissi, 2009), this project first analyzes the constituent parts of Facebook to uncover what identification means on the site. This structural discourse analysis will provide answers for my first two research questions:

RQ1: What affordances are offered by Facebook for the identification process?

RQ2: In what ways does Facebook's structure privilege certain aspects of the identification process over others?

Therefore, this dissertation will recognize and analyze Facebook's affordances.

Architecture here is defined as the "composite result of structure, design, and organization" (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 205).

As Galloway (2013) suggests, I understand Facebook's interface not as a medium, but as a *mediator*. Traditional social networking research examines what structures

mediate, e.g., the scene outside a window or identity performances. This study, on the other hand, explores the ways in which the structure of Facebook mediates identities. Therefore, instead of studying what is seen through the “window,” I first investigate the “window” itself and its implications.

My method, then, is a discourse analysis not of specific user content, but of Facebook’s structure and its granted affordances. A first reading of each structural part notes general functional purposes. Subsequent readings systematically analyze each architectural part; this process is outlined in Fairclough (1995) and employed in Papacharissi’s (2009) study of social network “geographies.”

Discourse analyses examine social power and how powerful groups attempt to control content and content structures. These powerful groups also have privileged access to culture; they become integrated into daily norms (as Gramsci includes in his discussion of hegemony) and can influence people’s knowledge and opinions (Van Dijk, 2001). Thus, my analysis understands Facebook as a sociocultural system whose presented language and structure play a role in shaping social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge (Fairclough, 1995, p. 55). The discourse analysis also pays specific attention to the intersections of narrative identity, authenticity, agency, and anonymity.

The survey and analysis of Facebook’s architectural parts and related discourses were primarily conducted in January 2014. However, other pieces of information were added throughout the course of this project, such as Facebook’s new gender options and

updates to user terms of service. The first step of the structural discourse analysis was to fully explore the site through my personal profile. I took field notes, cataloguing all affordances offered to me as a general user.

I also experimented with my profile to see how Facebook's prompts would change depending on the choices that I made. For instance, I altered my relationship status, changing it from "married" to "divorced" to "single" to "engaged." (My findings are outlined in the following chapter.) Throughout my exploration, I also read the related Help Content that Facebook suggested to me. If Facebook did not suggest Help Content, I navigated to the Help Center on my own and searched related terms. After listing Facebook's affordances and summarizing related Help Center Content, I organized Facebook's many structural parts into categories. To do this, I generally followed how the interface is organized, grouping affordances by pages and similar types of content.<sup>6</sup>

Next, I took note of forum posts by users and news content that give Facebook a voice (mostly unearthed through *The Zuckerberg Files*<sup>7</sup>). Finally, I conducted initial analyses of Facebook's affordances and moral decisions—I viewed Facebook's provided spaces for identity performance as non-neutral selections that are necessarily morally loaded because they are man-made. In other words, I analyzed Facebook as an "ethic"

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<sup>6</sup> Long after deciding on these categories, I learned, through personal conversations with team members, that Facebook's User Experience Research teams are divided in a similar manner.

<sup>7</sup> You can request access to the files at <http://zuckerbergfiles.org/>

(Galloway, 2013). (More thorough analyses of specific Facebook affordances, as they relate to actual user perceptions, can be found in Chapters three through six.)

I want to note that my structural discourse analysis findings should not be considered exhaustive. Facebook has extensive affordances, and, even with my rigorous method, I have most certainly left pieces out. This is amplified by the fact that Facebook is changing, adding, and deleting affordances all the time (a perfect example: the gender options which I discuss in the About Page section of the next chapter). However, this perceived limitation is indicative of a larger goal of this project—my point is not to perfectly analyze Facebook across time. Instead, I intend to use a current snapshot of a representative social networking site as a jumping off point to argue that platform studies and structural analyses of this kind—investigating any medium as a *mediator*—are just as important as the study of content or audience reactions and should be employed more often.

To my knowledge, this project is unique in that never before has a study attempted to account for all of Facebook's affordances, analyzed these choices, and then used this new knowledge to inform conversation with actual users, gaining their perceptions of the available affordances. I hope that this research design inspires others to conduct more thorough analyses of the social networking spaces in which they are interested.

To ensure a comprehensive analysis, I broke Facebook down into the following categories:

### *Sign Up Page*

This is the first page that new users encounter when registering for the site. The prompts ask for real first and last names, a working email address, birthdate, and provide a choice between male and female. All questions must be completed to sign up.

### *About Page*

The About Page is where the user creates the more static profile than the Timeline, reminiscent of early AOL or Myspace profile pages. Users are provided spaces to record information regarding work and education; living locations; relationship status; contact information; and favorite quotations.

### *Likes*

Users are invited to “Like” a variety of things on Facebook including, but not limited to: other Facebook pages; books; movies; TV shows; music; external websites; clothing brands; artists; athletes; sports teams; and inspirational people. These Likes are displayed on the About Page for the user and her friends to see. Facebook not only lists the “liked” items, it also recommends new items to like.

### *Friends*

Friend networks on Facebook are reciprocal friending relationships—one user requests friendship and the second user accepts it. In this model, both become the other’s

friend. This is unlike a site like Twitter, where a user can “follow” another user, without the followed user also agreeing to be a follower. How a user chooses to create her network plays a large role in the identification process. The mere presence of these users in her network serves to constitute her identification. Additionally, these users can see her identification performances online and can write on her Timeline, aiding in, albeit often uninvited, her individual identification process.

### *Photographs*

A prominent feature of the Facebook experience is photographs. The user is prompted by the site to add a main, profile picture, even allowing friends to “suggest” photos if the user has chosen to keep the default, silhouette image. Photographs of users are also collected through albums and individual Timeline or Instagram uploads. Users are tagged in photographs by themselves and by their friends. As Alcoff (2006) notes in her visible identifications work, the presence of corporeal representations plays a significant role in the formation and conception of self.

### *Timeline*

Once known as the user’s “wall,” the Timeline is the space that users can post status updates (limited to 63,206 characters) and write messages to other users. These messages are visible to different groups depending on the user’s privacy settings—they may be visible to all Internet users, to just the user’s network, or to a select subset of the user’s network. In addition to the traditional “wall” model, the Timeline shapes a user’s

Facebook identification into a chronological narrative of status updates, photographs, friend messages, Life Events, and so on. Life Events allows users to create highlighted Timeline posts that fit to specific categories such as “new job,” “bought a home,” and “marriage.” The Timeline is also the place where GPS check-ins are displayed. Users can “validate” their posts by checking in using GPS tracking.

### *Cookies*

Not only does Facebook monitor how users work within the site, the site also tracks what users do online when they are not signed in. Cookies are saved on users’ browsers and collect data regarding users’ online actions. This data can be referred to later by Facebook and used, along with in-site personal data, to sell targeted ad space.

### *Narrative Analysis*

Next, this project employs a narrative approach to analyzing and reporting data. Listening to informants’ narratives allows them to recall stories and to find language that adequately expresses the meaning of past experiences (e.g., Bochner, 2011). Using a narrative approach also leaves space for informants to learn in the research process (Kincheloe, 2005).

Although some narrative identity scholars understand narratives to be autobiographies (e.g., Bruner, 2004), other scholars argue that the more meaningful stories are the small, mundane, everyday ones. Instead of asking someone to tell a long and linear life-story, the smaller stories about everyday life are the stories that truly

display how the teller performs identity on a daily basis. While people do not often tell long narratives, they are constantly creating brief discourses within their own psyches and with others. Each small piece displays an in-flux identity that is catering to the current context and audience.

Freeman (2006) agrees with the importance of small and mundane stories and adds to the debate by questioning why narratives need to be consistent to be “valid.” As Bamberg (2006) explores, narratives are too often compared to literature, with an expected linear beginning, middle, and end. However, inconsistency in a narrative should be expected since the performance of identifications is on-going and forever changing, depending on the teller’s standpoint. But, just as importantly, inconsistency is important—it shows how a teller is working through their “contradictions,” sculpting their current self. Consistency and linearity do not make sense in narratives because we are only present for the middle of our stories. Someone else has written our beginnings and someone else will write our ends (Freeman, 2006).

Thus, I spoke with Facebook users about their interactions with the site’s structure. Allowing them to tell brief stories about how they recognize and work with Facebook’s affordances, I attempt to paint a more accurate picture of the current social networking climate and the cultures that Facebook’s structure is creating or supporting.

Informants consisted of emerging adults that volunteered to be a part of the study through recruiting I conducted at a large, diverse, and urban East Coast University.

Informants were mostly recruited through Sociology and Media and Communication courses. However, informants were welcome to bring friends to our discussions. Before participating, informants completed the IRB-approved forms, allowing me to speak with them and audio record them. (My IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix A.)

Topics for conversation were derived from the findings of the structural discourse analysis. Informants were often asked to tell stories regarding how they have used different aspects of the site and were asked to speak about the extent to which they are aware of each of the structural parts and their affordances. I also brought up more holistic topics to discuss that targeted how Facebook, and other sites, play a role in identification performances and conceptions of self.

For my narrative analysis, I conducted both focus group and one-on-one interviews. A few of my informants mentioned that they felt more comfortable sitting with me alone, while others liked the social support. I also used one-on-one interviews (mostly through email) to ask informants from focus groups to further expound a story or to ask more specific questions regarding something that happened in our focus group discussion. The following two sections explicate my methods of conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews more thoroughly.

#### *Focus Group Interviews*

Realities are created and maintained socially, so creating a focus group that mimics customary interaction is fitting (Frey & Fontana, 1993). This method is especially

relevant for the current project since I spoke with my informants about experiences on social networking sites. Focus groups also prove useful when a power differential exists between participants and decision makers. For example, Facebook presents affordances that allow “certain” people to take on “certain” traits (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Immersing myself into the social dynamic in the focus group, I gained a broader and richer understanding of Facebook, and had the opportunity to vicariously experience my informants’ everyday lives. Because people already deliberately build communities and define reality through group contexts, they get to know themselves through engaging with others (Freeman, 2006; Frey & Fontana, 1993). Therefore, the added social component of a focus group interview challenges informants to be as they are socially, not just how they think they should act in a research context (Albrecht, Johnson, & Walther, 1993).

Focus groups took place in March and April 2014 in conference-type rooms in an academic building on campus and lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours each. While some general questions were inspired by my structural discourse analysis findings to begin or keep our discussions going, interviews and focus groups were generally open-ended, providing “the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another, or even for a politically correct dialogue in which researcher and researched offer mutual understanding and support” (Silverman, 2003, p. 343).

#### *One-on-One Interviews*

The one-on-one interviews acted as both safer spaces for informants who felt uncomfortable speaking in groups and, in a few cases, as continuations of focus group discussions if I felt it necessary. These either took place in a building on campus or over email. I mostly let my informants tell their stories, but when I did speak, I asked both “what” and “how” questions, maintaining an open-ended space and allowing each informant the opportunity to perform her chosen narrative (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

This kind of “off the cuff” (Fernback, 2005; Frey & Fontana, 1993) interviewing is known as “active interviewing”—the researcher takes on a very involved role in the process, reading her informants. The less structured the interview, the more a researcher can get to know her informants and use their experiences to construct the interview. Thus, I allowed my informants to guide me to what is important and worth reporting (Fontana & Frey, 2003). Through this process, I hope to empower my informants, displaying in my findings that they are really the ones who “know” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). The intimacy of a one-on-one interview, the characteristic that focus group interviews lack, did allow for an understanding that was more personal when it came to identification performances and interactions with Facebook’s affordances.

### *Interviewing Process*

After completing my structural analysis of Facebook, I employed my findings to inform the discussions that I had with my informants. My interviews then were structured only by the knowledge I had gained regarding Facebook and its affordances. A list of

general questions can be found in Appendix B. Sometimes I would use a few of these questions to inspire my informants if they did not have many stories to tell me. However, because I was conducting narrative analyses, I was more interested in letting my informants tell their stories as opposed to adhering to some structured or even semi-structured list of questions.

Although I did not stick to a list of interview questions or attempt to lead my informants to speak about Facebook and other social networking sites in specific ways, I did tell my own stories when appropriate. I did this in an effort to provide my informants with the vocabulary to speak about the site and identification in new ways. Many of my informants expressed both verbally and non-verbally that thinking reflexively about the site critically was a new task and therefore there were many times when it was difficult for them to express what exactly it was that they were feeling in the moment or how a story that they really wanted to tell related to the current point that we were. Thus, telling a few of my own social networking and identification narratives opened up a space for more comfortable and valuable discussions both for this project and for my informants to learn from and feel empowered by our discussions.

I spoke with 45 emerging adults, ranging in age from 18 to 30. My informants were mostly white (71%) but also consisted of Black (13%), Asian (9%), Latina/o (4%), and Other (2%) students. These percentages were close to the university's overall racial breakdown (59% white, 13% Black, 10% Asian, 5% Latina/o, and 5% Other). Racial

affiliations present at the university but that are not represented in my study are:

American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander.

All of my oral interviews and focus groups were audio recorded. I employed *QDA Miner Lite* to assist with the organization of my findings—the software allowed me to create and attach keywords, to highlight text, and to sort responses into organized excel spreadsheets. The actual analysis, however, is rooted in my own reading of my informants' comments and demeanor as they were situated in different perceived contexts throughout the interviews and focus groups. Each of my informants chose their own pseudonym for this project. Although all of my informants may have ended up not being quoted directly in the body of my findings, their comments were all considered and their narratives are all important aspects of my analyses and conclusions. A complete list of my informants with demographic information can be found in Appendix C.

The majority of my informants spoke with me in focus groups while a few others felt more comfortable speaking with me one-on-one. A few of my informants spoke with me in both contexts, mainly because after participating in their respective focus group I had clarifying or specific questions for them. My recordings were transcribed by an unrelated third party who did not have access to the list of my informants' legal names and other identifying information. After transcribing and reading over the transcripts multiple times, themes emerged regarding the types of cultures that Facebook promotes both offline and online.

My emergent themes are organized by “cultures,” or ways of creating and maintaining identifications that I argue are promoted by Facebook and other social networking sites. In the first findings chapter, *Digitally Structured Culture*, I discuss Facebook as it is couched within a larger structure of social media sites specifically and internet spaces generally. I argue that social networking sites should be understood as belonging to a larger ecology of digital identification performances. I also argue that Facebook is a tentpole medium for both interfaces and user content. Finally, I comment on a complacency that seems to be a running issue throughout Facebook user norms.

Second, in the *Visual Culture Chapter*, I discuss the important role that visual culture plays on Facebook. Users place a lot of emphasis on photos, and I argue that the use of photographs to both tell a “better” story and to validate identification plays a large role in the anti-anonymous culture that the site cultivates. Third, in the *Celebrity Culture Chapter*, I discuss the promotion of consumer and celebrity culture through the affordances presented on the site—users strive to collect friends and likes, and they are therefore more comfortable performing watered down identifications if it means they are gaining attention.

Fourth, I move to a chapter titled *Socially Divided Culture*, arguing that Facebook, just like every other technological advancement, cannot be expected to solve cultural and social problems. Thus, we see social divisions and misconceptions move from offline to online spaces. However, I also argue that while Facebook should not be

expected to be the antidote, it could perhaps be working harder to fulfill its potential as an open-minded, liberal space.

Sprinkled throughout my findings, I discuss my small, but meaningful, sample of ex-Facebookers. Although only four are ex-users, their beliefs and comments may be telling of larger trends in media refusal. Portwood-Stacer (2012), for example, argues that media refusal is an important performance that some people choose. She describes refusal as a type of critique, which embodies people's objections to certain media or consumer culture in general. Listening to ex-users' narratives plays an important role in understanding those who choose to still intertwine social media into their daily lives. The ex-users' critical distance and ability to recognize themes that their Facebook-using counterparts did not is suggestive of larger ex-user and media refusal trends.

## **CHAPTER 2 STRUCTURAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS FINDINGS**

Although not often studied as such, social networking sites' structures play a large role in how users employ the site, view others, and view themselves (e.g., Papacharissi, 2009; Postigo, 2014). Thus, before speaking with emerging adults to learn how they experience Facebook, I needed to discover and analyze the affordances myself, linking them to other discourses and previous research conducted regarding identifications. As Galloway (2013) suggests, I did this by viewing Facebook as not a medium, but a mediator, remembering that the structure of Facebook is man-made and thus not neutral.

The following seven sections break down Facebook's structure, cataloguing its affordances, analyzing related discourse, and adding to the identification discussion. This chapter is partly a summary of my notes that I took while navigating through Facebook's interface and its Help Center content. I also have included external debates regarding Facebook, such as forum posts and how-to articles. Finally, I have appended my own analyses, folding in related literature that deals with issues similar to those that emerged from my structural findings.

The most prominent findings from this structural discourse analysis can be found at [www.angelacirucci.com/thestructuredself](http://www.angelacirucci.com/thestructuredself). It is my goal for this website to act as a more accessible outlet to my research than a dissertation or even an academic book of which few are aware or have access to. Therefore, the site is committed to reaching out to

a general audience, removing academic jargon, and catering to as wide of a group of typical social media users as possible.

### Sign Up Page

When potential users first access [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) they are greeted with a Sign Up Page that consists of the following: fields to enter real first and last names; fields to enter and re-enter a working email address; a field to enter a new Facebook password; drop-down boxes to enter the month, day, and year of birth; and female or male bubbles.

Once all of the aforementioned steps are completed, and before new users click the “Sign up” button, they are presented with this message:

By clicking Sign Up, you agree to our Terms and that you have read our Data Use Policy, including our Cookie Use.

“Terms,” “Data Use Policy,” and “Cookie Use” are blue links that, if clicked, send the new user to Facebook’s *Statement of Rights and Responsibilities*; *Data Use Policy*; and *Cookies, Pixels and Similar Technologies*, respectively. It is important to note that these documents are often constructed through confusing legalese. Additionally, Facebook focuses on user-to-user privacy and leaves out user-to-company privacy (Fuchs, 2011).

New users must fill in each of the fields and must select female or male before they can be granted a Facebook account. If any field is left empty, or if no gender is chosen, “You must fill in all of the fields” appears below the sign up button inside of a red box.

Initially only people with an approved university affiliation could sign up. Soon after, high schools and even geographical regions became sufficient. By 2006 Facebook changed the policy again so that anyone can sign up and no network affiliation is needed. Zuckerberg claims that now people can stay in touch, even after they graduate or leave a geographical region. This move of opening up the site to anyone older than 12 induced a quick increase of users from 10 million to 250 million (Idea to Product Latin America, 2009).

#### *Real Name and Working Email*

Coining the term “anonymous,” Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) explain that along with anchoring users to offline networks, Facebook also continues to be not anonymous by requiring users to include real first and last names along with a working email address. The site’s Statement of Rights and Responsibilities reads

Facebook users provide their real names and information, and we need your help to keep it that way. (Statement of rights and responsibilities, 2013, *Registration and account security*)

The site also includes that users agree to not provide false information, to not create more than one personal account, to keep contact information up to date, and to use a username that is the user’s actual name.

Facebook, and others, argue that anti-anonymity is integral to online spaces. Real names mean more civility, less harassment, and accountability (Edwards & McAuley, 2013; York, 2011). However, it is also no secret that Facebook is concerned with gaining

valuable information to sell advertising space and to connect the online self with the offline self. As Edwards and McAuley (2013) argue, the real name policy that exists on Facebook and other social networking sites is broken. In reality, what is the shared format for a human label? Asking for a “real” first and last name favors certain culture’s norms. Some common format is really only common to the software engineers and site creators.

Therefore, if a new user’s name does not fit into Facebook’s cultural parameters she has already been deemed not normal enough to use the site. Facebook’s use of “real names” in its verbiage directly coincides with notions of natural, common, and, consequently, accepted and normal, automatically deeming those whose names are not fitting as not “real,” unnatural, or abnormal. Even within the same culture, it is hard to know what counts as a “real” name; people in the United States alone go by a plethora of names including legal names, maiden names, and nicknames (Edwards & McAuley, 2013; Elliot, 2012).

Indeed, while supporters of real name policies may argue that providing real names creates safer online spaces, their reasons are the same that create detrimental consequences. Lack of freedom of speech, exposing victims of harassment to their harassers, and retarding user ability to explore different selves are all byproducts of forcing a culture of real name policies (Edwards & McAuley, 2013).

Limiting users in their identification exploration is especially pertinent to this project—obviously, social minorities, or the culturally marginalized, feel the harmful

effects more acutely when attempting to “play” with identity. Real name policies are just one hurdle that constricts users to certain work, personal, or sexual lives because they are under the assumption that one Facebook profile must be the dominant identification. Further, they are allowed no space to broadcast different attributes in different social contexts (Edwards & McAuley, 2013). Instead, social minorities experience the “chilling effect,” silenced by the pressure to conform to the site’s structure and suggested identification models (Elliot, 2012).

The push in many online spaces for real names and email addresses is a paradox, considering that in the offline world people are not expected to justify the choice to withhold their real names. Instead, the burden of justification is usually on the demander’s end (Elliot, 2012). Indeed, current drives toward real name cultures completely ignore traditional online norms of roleplaying and multiple digital identities (Edwards & McAuley, 2013). Sites like Facebook incorrectly place the burden on the individual (Elliot, 2012), expecting users to “prove” that they are who they claim to be on the site.

The site informs its users that Facebook employees have the right to request a valid form of identification if there is any suspicion that a user is not who she is claiming to be. Beyond some type of identity theft, this statement also includes users who are using fake names just so that they can be more anonymous on the site. For example, if I changed my name to “Angela C” instead of the full “Angela Cirucci,” and someone

reported me as using a false name, my account would be at risk for suspension. I would then have to change my name back to “Angela Cirucci” seeing that this is the name on my legal ID, and the name that Facebook would see if I were to send them a copy of my driver’s license. Facebook wants to be a place that users feel safe in being social and sharing personal information. Therefore, this policy allows them to have some control over the identities in the space, compelling users to perform selves that line up with typical buying habits.

Lastly, I should include that it would of course be naïve to think that not providing a real name would automatically lead to some desired anonymity. Facebook claims to not link your real name to other personal information. Realistically, the other information that the site can aggregate and connect with other site information along with external information makes a real name almost irrelevant, if not just another piece of data to triangulate a positive identity match. Again, this is the process that many social media sites use to decrease our availability to anonymity. In fact, one way that Facebook promises “privacy” is by telling users that names are not linked with personal information (Turow, 2011).

### *Birthday*

Adjacent to the space where new users are asked to reveal their birthdate is a link that reads: “Why do I need to provide my birthday?” When clicked, Facebook provides the following information:

**Providing your birthday** helps make sure you get the right Facebook experience for your age. You can choose to hide this info from your timeline later if you want. For more details, please visit our Data Use Policy.

Facebook claims that knowing each user's birthday is integral because they do not permit people younger than thirteen to sign up. Because of the complex Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA),<sup>8</sup> Facebook has decided to completely ban children from the site instead of creating a special derivative that is suitable for younger subscribers. Facebook has, however, mentioned that there is a project in the works for those under thirteen (E-G8 Forum, 2011).

Although Facebook does want to know if a user is younger than thirteen because the site does not adhere to all of the COPPA guidelines, they are also collecting valuable data to understand into which age group users fit and therefore into which marketing fragment they belong. Stereotypically, people of different ages are expected to be interested in certain events, products, and so on. When Facebook notes that they just want to provide the "right" experience, they are really noting that they will afford users different experiences based on age.

#### *Female or Male?*

In the Facebook Help Center, users have posed (many unanswered) questions regarding gender on the site. These questions range in topic from: "why does Facebook

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<sup>8</sup> More information at <http://www.coppa.org/>

only allow ‘male’ or ‘female’ for gender identification?” to “why does Facebook display ‘he’ when posting about me even though I have my gender set to ‘female?’” At one time, gender was a large issue on Facebook, both regarding the limited choice and the performance thereof.

Initially, Facebook users were not obligated to select their gender. It was an option, but never choosing an option was also possible, resulting in pronoun allotments becoming “they” or “their.” Eventually, users who had chosen this “neutral” option received a message:

Right now your mini-feed may be confusing. Please choose how we should refer to you. [user-first-name] edited *her* profile. [user-first-name] edited *his* profile. (McNicol, 2013, p. 204)

On June 27, 2008, Naomi Gleit, Facebook Director of Product for Growth and Engagement, posted a Facebook note explaining the change. She claimed that translators were having some trouble.

However, we've gotten feedback from translators and users in other countries that translations wind up being too confusing when people have not specified a sex on their profiles. People who haven't selected what sex they are frequently get defaulted to the wrong sex entirely in Mini-Feed stories. (Gleit, 2008)

In her post, Gleit labels the affiliation “sex.” This is how Facebook previously labeled the category. Notice how Gleit mentions this in her post to connote a more objective sense of the labels we give ourselves. Besides conforming to the English (US) delineation on the site, she is also implying that all users need to check off a sex, just as the hospital did when we were born. Later in the post, however, Gleit refers to the selection as “gender.”

Indeed, some users were offended that Facebook generally used the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably. It is deemed more appropriate by some to understand sex as the biological, forced, and false binary understanding of bodies and gender as the selected mode of performance, being that a person is closer to the feminine or masculine end of the stereotypical spectrum.

Attempting to enact agency, some users discovered that although in English (US) the option was referred to as selecting “sex,” in English (UK) the option was referred to as “gender.” Therefore, some opted to change their language settings to at least feel as though they were selecting gender as a choice, not their sex as some objective category. However, this was still problematic—Facebook used the terms interchangeably and researchers use this field to report the same types of data findings and comparisons.

Multiple studies utilize this easily accessible Facebook binary data to compare usage of females and males. One large study (Schwartz et al., 2013), for example, claims to have discovered the “disappointing” finding that males and females perform quite stereotypically on Facebook. Females were more likely to use “emotion words” and first person singular pronouns while males were more likely to use foul language and possessive pronouns (such as “my” girlfriend instead of just girlfriend).

The issue with these studies is twofold. First, users are forced to choose a gender, therefore even if a user does not necessarily associate herself with her choice, she has been labeled as such by Facebook and thus by researchers. Second, it goes mostly

unmentioned that perhaps the majority of the users are performing gender stereotypically because they have internalized the site's created norms and culture enough that, at least within the context of the site, they *do* begin to act in the ways that fit the choices they have been forced to make. Therefore, it is clear that other studies do not think of the site as a mediator that filters and has implications for the display and interpretation of information.

This notion further highlights the issue of one, monolithic, "authentic" identity. Perhaps around one group of friends I perform more stereotypically feminine than when with another group of friends. Therefore, if the choice to perform somewhere on the gender scale is contextual, outside catalysts could affect where I am on that scale at any time. Thus, subjected to Facebook's expectations, I may in fact act as a "female" on the site, performing in a more stereotypically feminine way.<sup>9</sup> While setting up friend "lists" may separate status updates and photo uploads, choices such as gender and Likes can only be set at the main profile level and are thus applied to all contexts. Further, these choices are the identifications that are then projected back to the user each time she signs in—if "female" is chosen it is likely that all advertisements she sees will be "feminine."

Trying to enact some agency, dejected users took different steps to protest and subvert Facebook's gender affordances. Petitions on Change.org, for example, gained

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<sup>9</sup> Which, according to Schwartz et al., 2013, means using more emotional language and using "I" and "me" often.

signatures for reverting back to the time when Facebook allowed the gender neutral choice. As one petition reads:

Now, Facebook is forcing users to make a choice between Male and Female, which is violating on a number of levels, and represents an assault on the ethos of self-determination that has made the internet and social networking so powerful. (Martinez, n.d.)

Forums and blog posts also tried to assist users by giving step-by-step instructions for hacking Facebook's code and making changes to gender/sex choices. For example, marilynroxie's (2013) post updated users on the process of changing the code to again provide a space for neutral gender. First, the user must be on the browser Firefox. Then she must download the Firebug html-editor plug-in. From there she must sign in to m.facebook.com, the site's mobile interface, otherwise the hack will not work. Then she can right click on the gender option, change some code, delete some code, and finally, the user is changed to a neutral setting, allowing any pronoun mentions to become "they" or "their." Besides the questionable grammatical issues, users should also wonder if this only changes the view, or if Facebook and its third-party vendors have really been subverted into forgetting the hacker's gender.

Upon finding this hack I tried it myself in January 2014. It worked, and it only took me about ten minutes to make the change. However, it is certainly not intuitive, nor does it seem widely known. However, this is a very small glimpse into the kinds of changes users can make if they want to create more affordances and have more control over their identity performances. Not only could my narrative reflect back to me with no

gender selection, and not only could other users only see gender neutral pronouns when Facebook referred to me, but I also was presented with a different perception of myself when reading my Facebook profile and notifications.

However, all of this changed when Facebook introduced new gender options on February 13, 2014. The site's Diversity page posted a Life Event on its Timeline to reveal that Facebook now offers three options for gender: female, male, and custom.<sup>10</sup> These new choices will be discussed in the following About Page Section. It is important to note that, at the time this dissertation was completed, new users *still* had to select female or male at sign up.

### About Page

The About Page works as a static profile page, reminiscent of AOL or Myspace pages, that lists personal information that the user inputs. Unlike the more contemporary version of the profile, the Timeline (which is discussed later in this chapter), the About Page asks users to complete fields and dropdown boxes regarding specific aspects of their identifications. As I argue in the following sections, by only asking for certain aspects of identifications and by limiting many answers to drop down boxes, check boxes, and validated fields, Facebook privileges certain information while deeming other information unimportant.

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<sup>10</sup> Read the post here:

[https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=567587973337709&set=a.196865713743272.42938.105225179573993&type=1&relevant\\_count=1](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=567587973337709&set=a.196865713743272.42938.105225179573993&type=1&relevant_count=1)

### *Work and education*

This section of the About Page allows the user to list places of employment and places of education. The entries are listed in reverse chronological order and generally formatted to resemble that of a resume or curriculum vitae. When entering a new job, prompts appear for the place of employment, city or town, a description of the new position, and a time period. The field for place is a *suggested field*, meaning that as the user types, options appear below the text box. If a user works at a place of which Facebook is not aware, the user must enter a new name, losing some default information like a picture or further information. I argue that suggested fields like these value certain places of work over others. If a user happens to work at a place that is not listed users may infer that their job is not as important as one at an institution that is a part of the suggested list of options.

When entering a new place of education, the process is similar. The prompts ask for the place of education, the time period attended, a check box to know if the user has graduated yet, a description, a concentrations list, and if the time spent was for college or for graduate school. The concentrations list is a suggested field. Once again, if a user's concentration is not one that Facebook lists, the user cannot select and must type in the full name herself. This same issue occurs within the professional skills field. Users are only afforded certain options in the suggested fields, and anything outside of Facebook's structure becomes seemingly abnormal or "othered."

### *Relationships*

To update friends on relationship statuses, users can choose one of the following from a drop-down box: “single,” “in a relationship,” “engaged,” “married,” “in a civil union,” “in a domestic partnership,” “in an open relationship,” “it’s complicated,” “separated,” “divorced,” or “widowed.” In the “To:” field a user can enter another user to whom she is referring. This must be validated by the partner before it can appear on the requestor’s page. There is also an anniversary option where the user can enter the date the relationship began or “since when” the relationship became complicated.

During my explorations, I noticed that when I changed my status from “married” to: “in a relationship,” “engaged,” “in a civil union,” “in a domestic partnership,” “in an open relationship,” or “it’s complicated,” Facebook prompted me with a field for a partner, asked for a new anniversary or “since” date, and informed me that my partner would be requested to confirm the relationship change. However, if I changed my status from “married” to: nothing, “separated,” “divorced,” or “widowed,” there was no longer a partner or a date option, and the message “This will not appear in News Feed” appeared in a grey box. Additionally, users are afforded the ability of only listing one relationship partner.

Users can also link to other users by listing them as family members. Facebook asks that users type a friend’s name in a blue box, validating the letters as they type—this is called a *validated field*. Once the family member is selected, Facebook allows users to

choose the relationship. The options are as follows: sister, brother, mother, father, daughter, son, uncle, aunt, niece, cousin (male), cousin (female), grandmother, grandfather, grandson, granddaughter, nephew, stepsister, stepbrother, stepmother, stepfather, stepdaughter, stepson, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, mother-in-law, father-in-law, daughter-in-law, or son-in-law. If a family member's gender is selected, only the corresponding options are prompted.

However, if a user has selected "they" as their pronoun, if another user adds her as a family member, she would have all 28 options from which to choose. Additionally, if a name is selected but no relationship is chosen before the user clicks "save," Facebook responds with "You cannot add a family member without specifying a relationship." There is also no option to write in a relationship. Thus, options such as godmother, godfather, great aunt, and great uncle are not possible.

#### *Places lived*

Users can list the places that they have lived throughout their lives. There are three general options: current city, hometown, and other places lived. For "current city" and "hometown," users are only afforded one city. Therefore, even if a user perhaps grew up in more than one place or currently calls more than one place home, she can only select one geographical location to be displayed as "current" and "hometown" on the About Page.

The third category covers other places that the user has lived. She can add new locations with the same time periods as hometown and current, but only one city each gets the official labels of “current city” and “hometown.” When a user clicks on “add place” a prompt appears that automatically deems the location update as a Life Event (discussed in the upcoming Life Events Section) titled “Moved.” The user can input “where to” (validated field), “address” (optional), “from” (optional), “with” (validated field to add friends), “when” (year, month, and day), and a “story” (optional). The user can also add photos to the update.

#### *Basic information*

I can only assume that Facebook labels this section “basic” information because it is information that is often readily available and often asked for on forms and applications. However, this label also implies that these options are simple or easy for anyone to perform and share. The first is gender. Users traditionally could only pick female or male, but, as mentioned in the above Sign Up Page Section, Facebook changed the available options to “female,” “male,” and “custom” in February 2014.

If “custom” is selected, the user is presented with a blank field where she can add at least one validated gender affiliation. If Facebook does not list a desired gender affiliation, she *cannot* add it. The validated choices include the following: agender, androgynous, androgyne, bigender, cis, cis female, cis male, cis man, cis woman, cisgender, cisgender female, cisgender male, cisgender man, cisgender woman, FTM,

female, female to male, gender fluid, gender nonconforming, gender questioning, gender variant, gender queer, intersex, MTF, male, male to female, neither, neutrois, non-binary, other, pangender, trans, trans female, trans male, trans man, trans person, trans woman, trans\*, trans\*female, trans\*male, trans\*man, trans\*woman, and two-spirit. At least one of these validated choices must be selected if the user has chosen “custom” from the gender dropdown box. The site also affords users the ability to “suggest another option”—they can send a message to Facebook asking that a new affiliation be added. Additionally, users can decide between the pronouns she/her, he/him, and they/them, which is considered the neutral choice.

Also in the “basic” section is birthday. Users must have their birthday listed, but they can choose to show no birthday, just the month and the day, or a full birthday to their networks.

The next option is “interested in.” Users can check a box next to women and/or next to men. These are the only options, and, although Facebook changed the gender settings, there is no space for description or “other.”

Languages that a user presumably speaks or comprehends can be listed here. This is a suggested field. There is no free space for description.

Users can choose their religion and Facebook prompts by asking “What are your religious beliefs?” This field is suggested and there is also a box for free-form description. The suggested field affords the user only one option for religion.

Users can choose their political views and Facebook prompts by asking “What are your political beliefs?” This field is suggested and there is also a box for free-form description. The suggested field affords the user only one option for political view.

It is important to remember that all of the above choices can be set to custom privacy settings, but Facebook is always privy to the information and the default setting for all is almost always public.

#### *Contact information*

Facebook’s Terms of Service (TOS) includes that users must keep their contact information up to date. In the Contact Section, Facebook prompts users to add multiple email addresses, phone numbers, screen names for other services such as Twitter and Instagram, address, city/town, zip code, neighborhood, residence, room, school mailbox, and website. All of these options can be made private and become hidden from the user’s Timeline, but Facebook requires that users at least list a working email and a working mobile phone.

#### *Life Events*

Life Events take special places on the Timeline (as discussed in the Timeline section below), but they are also simply listed on the About Page. Each Life Event is a link, and, upon clicking, users can view the post that they created for that Life Event including descriptions, dates, and pictures if they had previously chosen to enter this information.

### *Other fields*

#### *About you*

About you is a free space to type in biographical information. This space was popular on sites like Myspace and AOL. However, on Facebook it is rare to see the space filled in completely or, even, updated since sign up.

#### *Favorite quotations*

This is a free space for users to type in quotations that they enjoy. Often, users quote people who they find to be mentors or who they aspire to be like. For example, in a previous study that I conducted exploring Black students' online identities at HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), my informants described the value of this space—it allows them to include their role models in their identity performances (Cirucci, 2013c).

#### *Events*

This space shows users' past and upcoming events that they have either attended, marked as "attending," or marked as "maybe."

#### *Notes*

If a friend tags a user in a "note" it is listed here. Note entries are similar to blog posts—users can post a log regarding any topic and tag places and friends.

#### *Apps that you have linked*

If a user has linked any apps to Facebook they are listed here.

### *Other apps that you may have*

If a user has apps installed through Facebook they are listed here.

### Likes

Likes are listed on the About Page, after the fields that were discussed in the previous section. Traditionally, each category of Likes could only be “liked” by clicking the blue thumbs up icon. Now, Facebook is starting to afford more delineated actions so that users can give more insight into their hobbies. For example, music can be liked or saved to “listen later;” books can be liked or marked as “read” or “want to read;” and places can be liked or marked on a map as visited. Other traditional likes still include apps and games, inspirational people, restaurants, foods, websites, athletes, sports teams, sports, clothing, interests, activities, and other.

Beyond the platform itself, Facebook is attempting to develop an “Open Graph.” With this technology, users can interact with Facebook while not actually being on any facebook.com page. “Like” plug-ins, along with “share,” “comment,” “recommend,” and so on, can be embedded in virtually any site. This means that, as long as users are signed into the site on the active browser, they do not have to be on Facebook to log “likes” and other actions. Zuckerberg describes the “like” process and the “like” plug-ins as liking the thing itself, not the digital representation (Singel, 2010). In other words, Facebook deems a “like” a direct one-to-one relationship. For example, if a user “likes” a product online, it means that she most likely owns it or will buy it. These likes are clearly very

valuable to Facebook's marketing equations. Once a user likes a company or a product, they are then added to the list of customers who "want" to receive advertisements.

Other sites, along with Facebook, use cookies and crawlers to understand how people are browsing the web. Google, for example, learns a lot about users just by what they search for and what they subsequently click on. Crawlers aid in making connections to see which sites are most visited and algorithms then help Google show user-specific results that the site has deduced to be perfectly suited to each searcher. Facebook, on the other hand, also uses people as their workers. They look to people to make connections between sites and products just as Google's crawlers do. Crawlers may have hiccups, but users are actively clicking on "likes" and other Facebook buttons.

As Fuchs (2014) discusses, employing a Marxian lens, identity online is more about quantity than about quality. The line between leisure time and labor time are blurred, and users find themselves wanting to save time by expressing themselves through more and more simple means. Thus, the "like" is a convenient affordance for users to quickly both define themselves and socialize with their networks. It is also a way of compelling users to generate their own dossiers that are what ultimately make Facebook worth so much money.

Indeed, Facebook provides users the affordance to "like" just about anything. Recently, liking has been most popular with user generated content. In other words, users are more likely to like content that users in their networks have posted. As Rushkoff

explores in *Generation Like* (2014), although young adults seem more sophisticated with their digital media usage than ten years ago, they also have one major weakness—likes. They will confer with friends for hours, deciding which pictures to post, in the hopes of collecting likes.

### Friends

Friending is reciprocal on Facebook. Unlike on a site like Twitter where user A can follow user B without user B following user A, on Facebook, User A requests friendship with User B and if User B approves, the two become Facebook friends. Friends can be sorted into different subgroups, or “lists,” making it easier for users to limit post and picture access.

Facebook often recommends friends to users by listing “mutual friends.” These are Facebookers that a user is not friends with, but that a lot of her friends are linked to. Users can also “suggest” friends for other friends. Facebook asks, “Does [user name] know any of your friends? Help [he/she/they] find them.” (The pronoun changes depending on each friend’s selected pronoun in the gender section of the About Page.)

In the early days of Facebook, users were required to be a part of at least one network. First networks were organized by university affiliation, then other schools were added, and eventually geographical regions were added. Privacy models previously revolved around these networks. User information was always visible to those within their network, and users could also friend members of other networks.

This model made sense when Facebook was mostly used by students. Eventually, regional networks became unwieldy and the “network” model was too difficult to manage, especially when it came to privacy concerns. In an open letter from Zuckerberg on Facebook’s blog on December 1, 2009 (Zuckerberg, 2009), the CEO explains why he did away with regional networks and added new ways to control content visibility.

However, as Facebook has grown, some of these regional networks now have millions of members and we've concluded that this is no longer the best way for you to control your privacy. Almost 50 percent of all Facebook users are members of regional networks, so this is an important issue for us. If we can build a better system, then more than 100 million people will have even more control of their information.

The plan we've come up with is to remove regional networks completely and create a simpler model for privacy control where you can set content to be available to only your friends, friends of your friends, or everyone. We're adding something that many of you have asked for – the ability to control who sees each individual piece of content you create or upload. In addition, we'll also be fulfilling a request made by many of you to make the privacy settings page simpler by combining some settings.

As Zuckerberg describes, privacy settings, such as for the content on the About Page or Timeline posts, can be set to “public,” “friends,” “only me,” and “custom.” If “custom” is selected users can choose from created lists, add friends one-by-one, and block friends one-by-one. Additionally, if a user chooses “Only Me” as her post privacy setting, she is greeted with the following message:

Just checking...

Usually you post to **Friends**, but last time you posted to **Only Me**. Want to change it back to **Friends**?

Thus, even when a user makes an active decision, Facebook intervenes. Prompts like the above potentially compel users to feel that their choice is somehow wrong or out of the norm.

What is interesting about “friends” is that Facebook’s culture has altered the general definition of the word. Now, there is “friend” and friend, no matter the context, people will use the word friend. However, it is often that people will have to elaborate as to which type of friend they are referring. Are they speaking about a friend, as in offline? Or, are they speaking about an online, Facebook “friend,” or someone they simply have added to their Facebook network?

Whichever the case, the definition of friend has undeniably been altered by Facebook’s culture. Zuckerberg has mentioned that he specifically chose the word “friend” to denote a connection between two people on the site because he foresaw it making people imagine more intimate relationships (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 312). Thus, using this word that was already filled with rich connotative meaning led people to share more and feel more comfortable on the site.

Zuckerberg has explained that he wants to create a “social graph.” Just as we map the content of the internet, he wants to map people and eventually make everything we do online social (D8 all things digital, 2010). It makes sense that friending and the resulting social interactions are so fine-tuned on the site. The connections that users make are integral to the site meeting financial demands. The site relies on connections to

understand what users “like,” buy, and so on. The site deduces a lot of information about users just by their Facebook friends’ habits, especially friends with whom users interact often.

Friends are also used in advertising on the site. If a friend has liked a product or a company’s page, the user will see the thumbnail profile picture and friend’s name within the ad. Just like getting a recommendation from a friend—word of mouth advertising—this type of advertising is much more effective than traditional advertising. If someone knows that a friend “likes” or “recommends” a product, there is seemingly less between a potential buyer and taking the leap to spend money on something new.

### Photographs

Photos can be uploaded through albums or through Timeline posts. They can also be added to the site through linked apps, such as Twitter or Instagram. Both albums and individual photos give users the option to choose custom privacy settings. Users can tag friends in their photos by simply clicking on a face in the photo and starting to type a friend’s name. Anyone can tag a photo, and it is up to each user’s privacy settings if they are notified or asked before the tag goes live (as I discussed in the previous Friends Section).

The profile picture is the main photo and acts as the visual representation of each user within their personal page and across the site. It is also displayed as a thumbnail in searches next to users’ names and anytime a user posts, comments, shares, etc. Facebook

previously allowed users, through privacy settings, to make their profile picture not public and therefore only visible to a select few. However, in October 2013, Facebook distributed an email that, among other changes, noted that thumbnail versions of profile pictures are now always public. Users can change who sees “likes” and comments on their profile pictures, but the thumbnail itself is always visible.

A thumbnail version of the photo is made and appears next to your name around Facebook. This helps friends identify your posts and comments on Facebook. (Who can see my profile picture?, 2014)

This explanation, provided by Facebook in its Help Center, speaks to the anti-anonymous culture of the site. Not giving users the choice to control who sees their visible identification makes it much harder to create a controlled self or a self that is not tied to any one offline identification. Additionally, the default image, if a user has not added a profile picture of her own, is a silhouette of a “male” (short-haired) or “female” (longer-haired) bust.<sup>11</sup> This visualization arguably compels users to upload similar photos of themselves—photos that categorically reveal a user’s physical identification.

Along with the profile picture, the cover photo is a large, visual aspect of each user’s default page (their Timeline). Zuckerberg explained that they added the cover photo “so you can express who you are” (F8 2011, 2011, p. 6). He continued:

What better way to tell the story of who you are than putting a nice, big photo right at the top of your Timeline? You still have your profile pic, so you can use

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<sup>11</sup> If “other” is chosen for gender, the silhouette defaults to the male bust.

your cover to express a unique moment from your life, something that you're interested in. It's just a great way to learn about who a person is without having to read anything about them at all. (F8 2011, 2011, p. 9)

It is clear that Facebook puts much emphasis on visual culture. Zuckerberg is speaking here about photographs, in this case cover photos, as the way we can get to know people. He explicitly includes that we do not need to read much at all; we just need to look at one or two photos.

Beyond the profile and cover photos, photographs overall are a core part of the Facebook experience. When Facebook was in its infancy, users were only afforded the space for one profile picture. However, Zuckerberg and his team found that some users would change this one, profile picture as often as once a day. They realized the potential impact visual communication could have to the site and decided to add other spaces for visual performances and storage (Idea to Product Latin America, 2009). Now, Facebookers report caring more about pictures than the other modes of performing identification afforded to them on the site; studies have reported that emerging adults spend the most time thinking about, editing, and updating photographs for their spaces (e.g., Hum et al., 2011; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Ong et al., 2011; Siibak, 2009).

When users upload photographs to the site they have the option of “tagging” friends in the photos. When a user is tagged, the photograph is posted to her Timeline and is added to her collection of photographs. Users have the option to untag a photograph if they do not want it to live on their profile. Additionally, if they find the photograph

particularly offensive, they can report it to Facebook and request the photo be taken down. At this point, even if the photograph is banned from the site, other users most likely have still seen the photo and potentially saved it or taken a screenshot. Further, Facebook already had the rights to keep the photograph, even if it is no longer visible to users.

In a recent presentation, three Facebook researchers and one researcher from Tel Aviv University introduced a new system called *DeepFace* (Taigman, Yang, Ranzato, & Wolf, 2014). This facial recognition software is 97.35% accurate—less than 3% from human-level capabilities. In other words, Facebook now suggests tags to users, “guessing” which friends are present in a photograph and allowing the user to quickly tag them.

Thus, Facebook’s facial recognition software is extremely accurate and, with good lighting and angles, can identify users in any uploaded picture. General users are presented with this software on a regular basis. Any time you upload a picture and an automatic box and tag suggestion appears with the message “Is this [friend’s name]?” or “Want to tag [friend’s name]?” the software is being put to use.

Facebook claims that this software, what they commonly refer to in the Help Center as “tag suggestions,” just helps Facebookers to share memories.

Our tagging tools, including grouping photos that look similar and suggesting friends who might be in them, are meant to make it easier for you to share your memories and experiences with your friends. (How can I turn off tag suggestions for photos of me?, 2014)

Searching *DeepFace* in the Help Center delivers zero results. On the same page from which the above excerpt regarding tag suggestions was pulled, users are also given step-by-step instructions guiding them through the process of turning off tag suggestions—friends will no longer be prompted with a suggestion when Facebook’s *DeepFace* thinks it recognizes your face. Additionally, Facebook claims that when you turn off this feature you are also asking them to delete the template that they have created of your face.

I could find no literature confirming this deletion or if this deletion is consistent across the board—does Facebook still use this template as a part of advertising and other algorithm-related efforts? Do they use this template for these purposes in the first place? As Anthony mentions in a 2014 article, while Facebook attempts to market their technology as facial *verification* (matching a new photo of a face with an already tagged face) and not *recognition* (looking at a new photo and linking it to other user information), it is difficult to imagine that Facebook only implements this feature to allow users more ease in the tagging process. Facebook most likely archives the photos that include you even if you have removed a tag or were never tagged in the first place. I think it is also safe to assume that the site uses these templates across the web, recognizing users in external pictures and aligning information therein with Facebook input. After all, the title of the *DeepFace* research paper includes the word “verification.”

## Timeline

Each user's Timeline is the culmination of almost everything that she has done on Facebook. It displays the profile picture, the cover photo, status updates, pictures uploaded, Life Events, a summary of friends, a summary of About Page content, relationship status, places visited, and so on. The user has some choice in what is shown on this page as well, with an increasing number of internal prompts and external apps asking the question: "Show on Timeline?". Unchecking this box does not, of course, delete the information or even make it not public, it is just no longer displayed on the Timeline.

The Timeline replaced the now-extinct Wall. Purely reverse chronological by when the post was "submitted," the Wall allowed owners and their friends to post statuses and messages, respectively. Facebook's new model, the Timeline, lists, in reverse chronological order, each user's activity on the site. Status updates, photos, places, and Life Events are all added to the Timeline. Further, friends can like, comment on, and share Timeline content. Some information collected from the About Page, such as "current job," "most recent education," "lives in," "from," and "relationship status," are also present on the Timeline. There are sections to highlight photos, friends, places visited, likes, and recent activities.

An option on the right-hand side of the Timeline allows viewers to access other moments in time by clicking on the year and month shortcuts. Importantly then, all post

prompts ask “when?” This allows users to add each new Timeline item to the “correct” place in time on their Timeline. If a user does not specify, the date defaults to the present—the date and time of the submission.

On October 26, 2013 Facebook sent an email to users informing them that the option of “Who can look up your Timeline by name” would be removed. Now, anyone can look up another user by name. (Most Timeline content is still controlled by user privacy options.)

Why is Facebook removing this setting?

When we created this setting, the only way to find you on Facebook was to search for your specific name. Now, people can come across your Timeline in other ways: for example if a friend tags you in a photo, which links to your Timeline, or if people search for phrases like "People who like The Beatles," or "People who live in Seattle," in Graph Search. (retrieved from personal email account)

With this update, some Timeline content is always public. This includes a user’s name, gender, username, user ID (account number), profile picture, cover photo, and networks (if the users have networks added). Facebook claims that these “are available to anyone since they help you connect with your friends and family” (What’s considered public information?, 2014).

Again, we see hints of the promotion of an anti-anonymous culture. Facebookers have no choice (beyond deactivating their accounts) other than for the above information to be open to the public. As I discuss above in the Sign Up Page Section of this chapter, real name policies are dangerous or, at the very least, limit freedom of speech. Language, under Facebook’s expectations, is bound to gender norms and is impossible without

gendered pronouns. And, identity validation through photographs is essential despite the fact that, as the site also notes, we have unique usernames and account numbers that we could confirm with potential friends through other means of communication.<sup>12</sup> This, of course, would mean less discussion would take place under Facebook's watch.

What is also interesting about this update is the rhetoric surrounding convenience and customization. Facebook is attempting to convey the idea that if users customize their profiles their experiences will be much more convenient—others will be able to find them, and they will also more easily find new friends. Thus, taking away an important aspect that directly relates to the possibility of anonymity is deemed a convenient change that simply allows users to have more personable Facebook personae.

Staying in line with the visual culture and identification validation discussed in the Photographs Section, Facebook's administration describes the Timeline as holding a certain aesthetic that is not inherent to text. Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook Chief Operating Office, said that the "Timeline is a more visual representation of who you are" (Rose, 2011). Moreover, the Timeline is described as a tool that can encompass all of one's life.

Timeline is the story of your life, and it has three pieces; all your stories, all your apps, and a new way to express who you are. (F8 2011, 2011, p. 5)

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<sup>12</sup> I discuss this more thoroughly in the Chapter 4.

This notion that one social networking site can hold all of one's identity from birth to death directly parallels Zuckerberg's comments that we all have one identity and that Facebook helps us to uncover our "real" selves (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

As time moves on, visible Timeline entries are filtered and only "important" content is made visible.

You don't just want to show only your recent stuff because that would just be the wall, but you also don't want to show every single little thing that you've ever done because a lot of that stuff isn't really critical in defining who you are, especially as you go back in time... What Timeline does is it starts off showing all the stuff you've done recently and as you go further back in time it starts summarizing and surfacing only the important things from your life, and the further back you go, the more it will summarize for you. This month for example, Timeline might show everything that I've done, and last month a little less and then for the rest of the year before that a little less and last year even less and so on. This is the magic behind how Timeline works and it's how you can tell the whole story of your life on a single page. (F8 2011, 2011)

With this quote, Zuckerberg defines users' identification wants and needs for them. He mentions that the Timeline automatically does not show everything because there are some things that just are not "critical" in defining your identification. He also notes that the story of your whole life can be displayed on one page on Facebook.

Facebook does attempt to allow users some agency in the decision-making process regarding what content should be highlighted. Life Events are highlighted Timeline entries, "important events" (F8 2011, 2011), that users can manually add. Life Events includes the following categories and sub-categories: work & education (new job, published book or paper, retirement, new school, study abroad, volunteer work, military

service, create your own-Other Life Event), family & relationships (first met, new relationship, engagement, marriage, expecting a baby, new child, new family member, new pet, end of relationship, loss of a loved one, create your own), home & living (moved, bought a home, home improvement, new roommate, new vehicle, create your own), health & wellness (organ donor, overcame an illness, quit a habit, new eating habits, weight loss, glasses, contacts, other, broken bone, removed braces, create your own), travel & experiences (new hobby, new instrument, new language, tattoo or piercing, new license, travel, achievement or award, changed beliefs, first word, kiss, other, new sport, registered to vote, create your own).

Most Life Event prompts ask “where,” “when,” and for the “story” behind the highlighted memory. Users are also given the option to add related pictures. Finally, questions that are relevant to each event are posed. For example, “License” asks “what type?” and “New Vehicle” asks for the make, model, and year of the recently acquired automobile.

Beyond all of the options offered internally, Facebook is also interested in pulling in content from across the web. Instead of focusing the internet on all content, Zuckerberg is interested in building a “Social Web” (Zuckerberg, 2010). Experiences are social and should be documented on the site. Similar to how Yelp maps local businesses and to how Pandora maps related songs, Facebook’s Social Web would connect people based on a plethora of both Facebook input and externally collected information.

Beyond affixing cookies to users' browsers, for which I provide a more detailed explanation in the following Cookies Section, Facebook has also developed Open Graph, a way of linking Facebook users more seamlessly to their other internet performances (F8 2011, 2011). Open Graph expands the "like" button and adds buttons like "share" and "recommend" to any site that wishes to participate. Then, all of users' performances can be listed on their Timeline. Users' authenticity is arguably now judged through consistency not only through Facebook's genealogy, but also through all of their other digital performances. Further, anonymity becomes less likely if users are actively linking their actions on the web by interfacing with Facebook "buttons" that are present on nearly all sites. Even if users decide to enact some agency and choose to not interact with external Facebook buttons, as I discuss in the following section, Facebook can still track external digital practices.

### Cookies

Around 1993, advertisers began to take notice of the new "internet" space. No one "owned" it or "managed" it; but it seemed to be a place that could turn huge profits. At the same time, there was no way to measure the efficacy of advertisements on the web. In the early stages, the "click" was the central way to report value. The internet was constantly compared to television, and banner ads were popular because they resembled television commercial models. However, some professionals soon realized that advertising companies were not taking advantage of the internet's unique interactivity

characteristics. Indeed, this interactivity was actually scary to many companies both because audiences were becoming quite fragmented and because it seemed like people could escape advertising altogether (Turow, 2011).

The shift began in 1994 when Lou Montulli developed the “cookie.” Its initial purpose was to fix an issue with online shopping carts—shoppers would put an item in their cart, navigate away to continue shopping, and when they returned to their cart, the previous item had disappeared. With the help of John Giannadrea, Montulli developed a small text file—a cookie—that a site could affix to users’ browsers. Each user received an ID number along with other codes that documented how the user navigated the site. The information would later be read and the site learned how users moved around, what they purchased, and even what they had placed in the cart even if they had decided to remove it before checking out (Turow, 2011).

As cookies and the methods employing them matured, advertisers and websites began to realize their full potential. With the incorporation of user-completed profile data, sites could compare usage across different sites if they were privy to other companies’ cookie data, they could determine when certain types of people were more likely to browse, purchase goods, and so on (Turow, 2011). Today, cookies are used for a plethora of reasons including advertising, security, and research.

Facebook representatives publically differentiate the ways that other companies collect information and the ways that Facebook collects information. This is purely based

in the fact that Facebook is a social media site where users enter the majority of their own information. On the other hand, some sites aggregate information from across the web and other users just have to complete a search of your name to find information about you. This latter model, Facebook explains, we have no control over.

And then a lot of these advertising companies in the web now what they're trying to do is they're trying to learn about people but they're not trying to do it by getting people to share information directly, what they're doing is they're kind of tracking you as you go around the web and putting a cookie in your browser and seeing what websites you go to and trying to infer from that, what types of stuff you like. And we don't do that. What we do is we look at the information that you've specifically put in to your profile and we can target base off of that... So I think that there's a really big question for how the web plays out and whether it ends up with this model primarily where people have control over their information or if it ends up in this model where there's information that's available about people but people don't have control over it. (Idea to Product Latin America, 2009, p. 20)

Facebook's claim that users have control over their Facebook data is an interesting one. Users actually have a lot of control over their own information online in general if they choose to and if they know how to use the digital tools available. On the other hand, sites like Google "crawl" the web to learn about users. So, in reality, they are more similar than Facebook is making them seem. Additionally, "control" is certainly a relative term, and there is an interesting argument surrounding how much control users actually have in the Facebook space.

In particular, Zuckerberg has compared Facebook's methods to Google's. Google, he claims, crawls the web and brings in external information about their users. Using

tracking software and advertisement companies like DoubleClick and AdSense, they can build profiles that are then used as a crucial part of marketing efforts. He continues:

On the other hand, we started the company [Facebook] saying there should be another way. If you allow people to share what they want and give them good tools to control what they're sharing, you can get even more information shared. But think of all the things you share on Facebook that you wouldn't want to share with everyone, right? You wouldn't want these things crawled or indexed—like pictures from family vacations, your phone number, or anything that happens on an intranet inside a company, or any kind of private message or email. So a lot of stuff is getting more and more open, but there's a lot of stuff that's not open to everyone. This is one of the most important problems for the next ten or twenty years. Given that the world is moving towards more sharing of information, making sure that it happens in a bottom-up way, with people inputting the information themselves and having control over how their information interacts with the system, as opposed to a centralized way, through it being tracked in some surveillance system. I think that's critical for the world. That's just a really important part of my personality, and what I care about. (Kirkpatrick, 2010, pp. 323-324)

Zuckerberg is directly referring here to his notion of an identity that is authentic when it is singular and transparent. Therefore, Facebook works to coax personal information out of people instead of solely relying on cookie-based methods that are not perfect. They do this by making users feel comfortable in the space by calling network nodes “friends,” among other methods.

This is not the end of the story, however; many argue that Facebook actually *does* track users as they point their browsers to other sites, even if the users have logged out of Facebook. Indeed, the Help Center's “Cookies, Pixels, and Similar Technologies” (2014) page claims that cookies “help provide a better, faster and safer experience.” The categories of use for cookies include authentication and security, but also include

categories such as advertising and analytics and research. The page also explains that cookies are placed on browsers when allowed by other sites. Additionally, the Help Center page briefly outlines how Facebook utilizes data collected by cookies in tandem with advertising efforts.

Facebook's ad exchange lets advertisers show you ads based on websites you've visited, among other factors. This helps Facebook show you more useful and relevant ads. For example, if an advertiser is promoting an airline sale to Hawaii, they might want to show their ad to people who recently visited websites related to traveling to Hawaii. The advertiser can use Facebook's ad exchange to show people who visited those websites their ad.

This section of the Help Center was updated in November 2014, and it seems that it is no longer a secret that cookies are placed in users' browsers to send information back to Facebook about other sites visited and so on. Things have apparently changed since the above-quoted 2009 presentation and 2010 interview. Facebook however still claims to not sell or share any personal information; they just use it to aid in their deals with advertising companies and are sure that "identifying" information is not attached. What this identifying information is often includes legal names and IP addresses. Remember, however, that this does not, in any way, guarantee anonymity. Other traits can be linked and easily lead back to you.

Further, many users noticed that if they go into their browser history and review their cookies, the Facebook cookies were not deleted when they logged off. Instead, they are slightly altered and are still sending information back to Facebook. Facebook tools like sharing and liking may not be authenticated and thus not post to your Timeline, but

Facebook still silently knows everything that you have read, clicked on, etc. (e.g., Henry 2011). Therefore, it is common suggested that users delete their cookies after each time they log out and to install cookie/ad blockers to their browsers.

There are many reasons to appreciate cookies. They make it much easier to sign on to sites that we use all the time because they can save our usernames and passwords on our personal computers. They often lead to product suggestions in advertisements that are closely related to our interests and buying habits. But, as Turow (2011) discusses, they can also lead to “reputation silos”—or site-created profiles that jam users into pre-created categories and deduce users down to a simple set of beliefs, values, and buying expectations. If these trends continue, users may be stuck in a sort of echo chamber where they are never introduced to new ideas or products because every bit of web content is filtered through these silos including products, news, and entertainment.

Obviously, cookies used by Facebook across the web make anonymity nearly impossible. If you are using the same browser to visit Facebook as you are for the majority of your other online activities, Facebook can make connections between your other identifications, even if they include aspects of self that you choose to not perform through social media. Even though users think that they are being “private” while on Facebook, the site as a whole most likely already knows, or can at least deduce, these aspects that you believe to be detached from your visible profile.

## Summary

Through my seven categories—Sign Up Page, About Page, Likes, Friends, Photographs, Timeline, and Cookies—I have attempted to catalogue all of Facebook’s affordances. Although this list may not be exhaustive, and may certainly have changed by the time this dissertation is published, the point is not to perfectly recreate Facebook piece-by-piece, but to use a snapshot in time to analyze how the site’s presented affordances perhaps privilege certain identifications. By folding in related Help Center content, external discourses, and related critical literature, I have presented a structural discourse analysis that is novel in method and illuminating because it views Facebook as a mediator of information, not a neutral medium.

The Sign Up Page forces users to input real names, ages, and email addresses. It also makes each new user choose from female or male. After signing up, users are compelled to fill in the About Page template, potentially divulging information surrounding their romantic relationship, familial relationships, education, places of employment, religious affiliation, and so on. While some categories like gender are made to seem highly integral, other categories, such as race or ethnicity, are not listed on the site at all.

Facebook compels users to craft their identifications through “liking” things, places, and famous people and through friends’ posts, comments, and photographs. This is both an easy and a shallow way for Facebook to learn about its users. This quick mode

of free labor allows Facebook to easily receive dossiers of their users that aid in the target marketing process.

Friends play an integral role on Facebook because the site can glean the most about each user by the way she interacts with her networks. Just the meaning of the word “friend” has been altered by the site. Photographs, while not mandatory, certainly drive the site and identification practices and expectations therein. The default profile picture is of a female or male bust, compelling users to upload a photograph that reveals their corporeal identification. Further, the rhetoric that Zuckerberg and other employees use surrounding photographs, such as the profile and cover photos, implies that without these images, the self would not be complete or authentic. As I discuss below in the Photographs section, Facebook relies on users posting clear images of their faces so that the site’s sophisticated facial recognition software can recognize users, track them across digital spaces, and create more effective targeted advertisements.

I argue that the Timeline pushes users to include aspects of their lives that they may not want to include, but that would make their Timeline seem incomplete without. This way of chronicling one’s life could lead to authenticity seeming to be synonymous with consistency and also devoid of distinct contexts. Finally, cookies used by the site not only track and archive what users do while within Facebook’s structure, but also what they do while using the same browser, no matter if they are logged in or out. This clearly does not respect users’ rights to anonymity—the separation of identifications.

Additionally, these aggregations of identifications are used to advertise products, news content, and entertainment stories to users, perhaps creating echo chambers that compel users to never step out of their comfort zones.

The following chapters are all built on the foundation that I have established within this chapter. However, I did not let my findings interfere with my informants' narratives. Instead, I helped them to see the site in different ways, thus guiding them to be more critical about the sites that they use on a daily basis. As I show throughout the following chapters, and explicitly describe in my concluding chapter, each piece—the structural discourse analysis and the interviews—would not have been sufficient on its own. Instead, a thorough analysis of identification in any social networking site combines the two methods.

### CHAPTER 3 DIGITALLY STRUCTURED CULTURE

Because there's...really no one to argue with about it. You know, it's either be on Facebook or not be on.

*-LJ, 19-year-old white female*

Before exploring the more micro-level themes that emerged out of the discussions with my informants, I first find it salient to include the macro-level findings that they expressed. None of my informants use only one social networking site. Even those who do not have active Facebook accounts use at least two other sites. Throughout our discussions, my informants spoke about other social media such as Myspace, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Even though I was only asking them about Facebook, it was necessary for them to use these other sites to open up a better space for Facebook description through comparison.

Beyond just understanding how subscribers use different platforms, it is integral to understand the ecology of any user's chosen combination of social networking sites. This full picture is important because much identification management happens at the simple level of keeping platform identifications separate with different friend/follower lists. For almost all of my informants, Facebook holds their largest audience. Twitter and Instagram have smaller audiences, while Tumblr usually has very small audiences.

#### Media as Contexts

Social media users build different audiences based on the type of content they post in each space. Boyd (2014) argues that social media users define these different

spaces themselves—based on what they post, who they allow to see their content, and so on. Granted, she is specifically speaking about privacy, but I would still argue that she is leaving out integral points with regards to how much the sites are also defining for what they are to be used. My informants do use the spaces differently; but, because of what each site affords, they are also compelled to perform within them in different ways.

*Tay, 20-year-old white female:* The companies define them. Because...it's, like, Twitter is status updates, so right now I'm watching *Scandal*; I'm going to tweet about *Scandal*. That's what that's for. Facebook is more so you post a little of everything.

*Anna, 20-year-old African American female:* I feel like Facebook was just, like, the next level of maturity. Like, we kind of all outgrew Myspace, and so we outgrew, like, that and wanting to have a certain song on a page or wanting to have a certain background. Like, Facebook is just more straightforward; it's not all the fluff of a profile.

Tay explains that how users implement digital spaces is largely based in what the sites have afforded them. She is referring to the current popular act of “live-tweeting” or tweeting about an event as it is happening. In particular, Twitter users often use designated hashtags to join a live conversation while they watch a television show. But, Tay is clear that this type of performance is not for Facebook, it is for Twitter. Through this comparison, we can begin to see how the structures of the sites compel users to act in certain manners while participating.

Anna is comparing Facebook to Myspace to explain that the design is plainer. However, she is also noting that because Facebook does not include ways of performing the self through music or backgrounds it is actually the more mature space. When she

says that Facebook is “simpler,” she is really saying that the work the user has to put in is less—it is more “user-friendly.” Therefore, she is compelled to perform in this space differently than she previously had on Myspace.

This is an important distinction because my informants also spoke about the social interaction on Facebook as more complex, thus giving users less control than they once had on Myspace. Because friends can write on Timelines, comment on posts, share stories, and tag photographs, Facebookers feel that they have much less control over their identifications, even though they perceive Facebook’s space as “simpler.” What is important to note is that my informants did not seem to care that they had less control over their identities, whether for designing their aesthetic or for social interaction.

*Tay, 20-year-old white female:* I feel like, that, Facebook isn’t for that [customized style]. Like that’s not, like, on Facebook which I can’t care.

Again, Tay explains that there are certain acts for which Facebook exists. She, and her fellow informants, are never exactly clear why this is the case, just that certain sites are “for” certain things. And, this is not something that users necessarily worry themselves with. Comments like Tay’s make it clear that Facebook plays a large role in how the subscribers use and view the site. Because Facebook is programmed a certain way, users do not question the space’s affordances and thus rarely attempt to make any changes that subvert the normal ways of employing the site.

What I can glean from my discussions, then, is that Facebook is “simpler” because users have to do less work to perform their identity. Facebookers have less

control because the site has become more “user-friendly”<sup>13</sup> and because the site affords friends a lot of power when it comes to defining their friends’ identifications. In both examples, the actual user has less power in the way that she creates, maintains, and broadcasts the self. However, users do not feel the need to question this change simply because it is “not what Facebook is for.”

It is necessary for my informants to speak about other sites because each social network does not stand alone. There is a certain ecology that exists amongst each user’s chosen landscape of social media. I have argued in previous work that Facebook is a tentpole medium; that is, the site acts as a supporting structure for other social networking sites and other digital spaces (see, for example, Cirucci 2012). And, I argue again here this for two reasons.

First, Facebook is seen as an amalgamation of all other sites’ affordances—it is a tentpole of *interfaces*.

*Cheryl, 18-year-old white female:* Facebook is just kind of bigger, I don’t know, like, social media altogether because it’s kind of like Twitter and Instagram and everything in one.

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<sup>13</sup> The term “user-friendly” is often used to define software programs and websites that are intuitive. User experience researchers conduct studies to understand how a general user is likely to move about their product, thus learning where buttons should go and how menus should be organized. However, it also has come to mean that websites show less and less of their inner workings. Because most internet users no longer learn about programming languages and coding structures, formats and verbiage associated with these skills are seen as confusing. Thus, “user-friendly” really means that users no longer have to think about the constructed nature of websites.

*Dana, 22-year-old white female:* That we would have email through Facebook, that we would have everything we ever needed and the fact that you can go onto Facebook and actually search through things, Googling right?... I think that's really interesting.

*Deb, 18-year-old African American female:* You can link everything to it [Facebook]. So, it is still, like, the center. And, then, there's other things you can go to, but, you still come back to Facebook.

Facebook becomes a place that supports many of the actions users desire to do while online. Consequently, it becomes much more difficult to step away from the site, and the identification created there, when searching and other needs are available to Facebookers.

Second, Facebook compiles user information and other networking content—it is a tentpole of *user content*. This is made most clear when users begin to talk about how they lurk or “do research” on others.

*JM, 20-year-old white female:* I'll say this, if I, even though I say... I use other social media more, if I add someone, or if, like, someone follows me on Twitter or Instagram or something, or you know, if someone tells me about someone and I'm not sure about them, I immediately go on Facebook and try to find them before I go on anything else. I can go on Instagram and get pictures, and I can go on Twitter and see what they tweet but Facebook also tells me, like, where they're from, where they went to high school, who I'm also mutual friends with, like, all that stuff that I think it's definitely, like, you know, the principal finding out which is the next student that's about to come on into your office; we're just going through the filing cabinet.

A select few of my informants noted that they strictly use their Facebook profiles as “resumes” or spaces that only portray their professional selves. Nearly all of the informants, however, commented that Facebook is the place to collect large numbers of friends. Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr are used for more “incriminating” content, but

Facebook is seen as the space to create a much less dynamic self—a self that is reduced down to its simplest form so it is appropriate for a multitude of audiences.

Many of my informants explained that they add almost everyone that requests friendship on Facebook. In fact they feel like this is what the site calls for.

*Ashley, 20-year-old white female:* But, for some reason, I feel the need to be friends with them [anyone who requests her friendship] on Facebook.

My informants noted that the phrasing that Facebook employs makes it hard to view friendships in any other way. To say no to a new friendship is to “reject,” and to remove someone from a Facebook network is to “unfriend.” As I mentioned in the Structural Discourse Analysis Findings Chapter, Zuckerberg has commented that choosing “friend” to represent a network connection was the output of a thoughtful process—people would associate the term with the offline definition, want to friend a lot of people, feel more comfortable sharing information, and feel guilty when thinking about “unfriending.”

It is clear that Facebook’s affordances compel users to friend large numbers of people because it gives Facebook more connections that lead to more acute marketing algorithms. It is also clear, however, that these people are not all users’ traditional “friends” as we would understand them in offline context. My informants admitted that they probably “hang out” or speak with about 1% of their Facebook friends. For example, Alex, a 20-year-old Asian female explained that she has many more friends on Facebook simply because “there’s more people on there than Instagram.”

I heard this type of description throughout my research. Alex also noted that she “obviously” has more friends on Facebook. The fact that she sees this type of network size as obvious reveals the way that Facebook accommodates massive numbers of friends that do not actually mean much to each user while at the same time forces users to perform an identification that is watered down to accommodate each of the different audience contexts.

Meyrowitz (1985) discusses the idea of two contexts collapsing by inviting his reader to imagine two different social situations taking place in two rooms that are next to one another. Then, he writes, imagine that the dividing wall is removed and the two contexts are blended. Performances therein, he explains, must change. But, they cannot be the aggregate of the two contexts performances—they must be a new third performance that takes each of the two contexts into account.

These collapsed contexts do not exist without issue however.

*Rich, 22-year-old white male:* And when you let something slip, let’s say you accidentally put a swear word or something and then the next family dinner all your aunts and uncles and grandparents are like, I saw you said that and it was like three weeks ago and I’m like but why do you care, it’s been, like, you know what I mean?

*Allen, 22-year-old white female:* I have had conflicts with people that I consider close to my family or my family. Like...I have democratic beliefs and my family is majority republican and during the last political election I was hearing all this stuff and my family was posting all this ridiculous, what I found to be ridiculous, like...outrageous comments and stuff, like, that and I was trying to ignore them and I didn't even make a political comment. I read this article about Michelle Obama and some of the initiatives that she was doing as the first lady and I said, just in this silly status that when I grow up I want to be Michelle Obama. And

within minutes I had five people from my family and two of my mom's best friends from high school commenting on my status saying: 'Why on Earth would you want to be that woman?' And, it just, it seems like an easy place to create tension where there doesn't need to be. I don't know...I mean, I guess, some people would put their whole self out there but I'm just not comfortable with that because I think that there's a very fine line between enough information and too much information and when you don't have situational context and when you don't have tone, things can get misconstrued very easily. So, I think I'm putting out this, like...shallow version of myself...

Rich is describing a scenario where one of his identifications, one that swears, was mixed in with another identification where it is offensive to swear. Even though he has tried to manage his contexts, he realizes that he still managed to offend family members who saw an identification performance that was not necessarily meant for them. It is important to note that the negative consequence of his action was not felt where the context collapse took place; the issue transcended the originating medium and had repercussions in another space.

In a similar vein, the shallow version of the self that Allen mentions is necessary when such extreme context collapses occur as they do on Facebook. In her example, more conservative family members directly questioned her political affiliation by commenting on her Facebook post. She has since decided to perform a shallower version of her many identifications in an effort to not experience that scenario again. With the affordance to comment on posts, users' networks are helping to define each user. For example, her whole network is now aware that Allen's family is conservative and not supportive of her more liberal stance.

Indeed, on Facebook, accommodating many contexts at once becomes much more difficult. Users often have multiple contexts to manage. The new self that must be performed either moves away from being much like any other identification, creating a very shallow self. Or, it becomes too difficult and users find themselves choosing identifications that they want to perform at the risk of ostracizing or offending friends.

To deal with this confusing space, my informants explained that they take on a specific perception of who is actually viewing and reading their content. Similar to Marwick and boyd's (2011) *imagined audience*, my informants spoke about what I will refer to as their *assumed audience*. Even though users' digital audiences have the potential to be nearly infinite, it is easier to imagine them as restricted. This process makes it easier to craft performances and envision future selves. In a similar vein, my informants not only imagined a particular audience, but they also assumed that the members of these audiences employed the social media in the same ways that they do.

*Paula, 18-year-old white and Polish female:* I don't think people would scroll all the way [through her Timeline]. I mean, I guess that's just my thought on people. But, I don't think anyone cares what I did in 2008 when I was like in middle school. Like, you know, I was in middle school. Like, that's how many years ago, you know what I mean?

*Interviewer:* OK, so you don't do that to other people?

*Paula:* No.

*LJ, 19-year-old white female:* Yea, I do [think that Facebook collapses social contexts] but I think that everybody understands, like, there's a certain perception of yourself on Facebook. So, like, people will look at a profile and they'll know that's not totally them because mine isn't totally me.

This notion of false consensus has been studied online regarding how users understand and trust opinions or news stories (e.g., Metzger & Flanagin, 2013), but scholars have not attempted to understand how users project their own ways of using the interface onto their friends. It only makes sense—it is hard to imagine using a site like Facebook any other way than you experience it for yourself.

However, more extreme behaviors and the projection of them onto friends can become unhealthy. Either users do not lurk and therefore think that others are not lurking their spaces and are much too loose with their information, or, users are constantly lurking others' pages and comparing their own lives and are thus much too involved with maintaining an overly polished self on the site.

One variable that plays a role in this scenario is how many friends the user actually has. The more friends, the harder it is to keep track of them all. Consequently, users then become less aware of their many audience contexts and members.

*Cheryl, 18-year-old white female:* But, I feel like as you get to Twitter and Instagram it's more personal just because it's kind of like a day-to-day thing. So, it's like, it's less, like, you're more conscious of who's following you and stuff.

Cheryl is explaining that, because her Twitter and Instagram networks are much smaller than her Facebook network, she finds it much easier to think about her actual audience. However, on Facebook it is easier to simply forget that you are talking to such a large and diverse group of people. Vitak (2012) finds exactly this in her study regarding context collapse—as audience size and diversity increases so does the amount of content shared.

Because larger audiences are more difficult to keep track of, users instead not only imagine audiences for their performances as Marwick and boyd (2011) discuss, they also assume audience members employ the site in a similar ways.

### Privacy Paradox?

Although my informants were very worried about *their* definition of privacy—parents or future employers seeing “incriminating” or “controversial” content—they were adamant that Facebook is not anonymous in any sense of the word.

*David B, 30-year-old white male:* You can’t be anonymous on Facebook; that’s an oxymoron.

*Ryan A., 19-year-old white male:* It’s called “face” “book.” It’s in its name, like, put your face on the picture.

They also were very aware that this anti-anonymity extends beyond just the Facebook interface.

*Sasha, 21-year-old white female:* Facebook makes it impossible to be anonymous anywhere. It links to everything, everything can link to your Facebook. So, there’s a trail connected to this persona, and so Facebook can be a managed space on the one hand but then you’re responsible for managing all of your other activity on the internet. Which is to me, to me is terrifying.

*Flina, 22-year-old white female and an ex-user:* Myspace by nature was more, like, you wouldn’t know who I was because I was changing my name all the time and fixing my top eight and changing the layout, like, that was about personalizing your internet space, you know what I mean? I feel like it was more, more on the blog type of social media whereas Facebook was like, you know, an access card to the rest of the internet social world and, like, if you wanted people to find you, you would have your name. And, I remember people changing like the first letter of their first and last name and things like that but I would say across the board generally speaking, people had their regular names and didn’t really every change them. So, there was less anonymity.

Sasha describes the sense of fear that enters into emerging adult users' lives when they realize that there is the possibility that the things they do on Facebook will follow them throughout new stages of their lives. Not only does Flina recognize the fact that Myspace was a more personalizable space, she also mentions that Facebook has become an omnipresent force that acts as many users' connection to the rest of the internet. Finally, she directly notes that Facebook is not as anonymous as its previous counterparts.

However, there still seems to be what many scholars have labeled a “privacy paradox.” How can users be so aware of a site's shortcomings, but still use the site in a reckless manner? I am not convinced that this is an actual paradox. Instead, I argue that there is a difference between these two ways of understanding the site. Thinking about Facebook as a large corporation that has stakeholders to please and money to make is not something that users enjoy spending their time with. Facebook becomes one of your friends—it is a trusted place for many emerging adults to create their identifications and socialize with friends. In day-to-day usage, however, thinking about the actual interface is not a priority.

I refer to this phenomenon, not as a paradox, but as micro- and macro-level understanding of social networks (Cirucci, 2013c). At the macro-level, emerging adult users understand that many people can see their content, including Facebook. They have heard horror stories and are taught in their communication, business, etc. courses that social media content can be used against them. At the micro-level however, many

emerging adults tell themselves: “but that could never happen to me.” While they understand the realities of using social media, they also find it difficult to apply the scenarios to themselves.

For example, while completing an ethnography of Black students at the HBCU (Historically Black College/University) where I was an adjunct professor, I interviewed some of my students regarding their Facebook performances (Cirucci, 2013c). They shared numerous stories about friends who had been “caught” on Facebook and about workshops they had attended that taught best practices in social media spaces. Yet, when I asked if they were surprised that I searched all of them on Facebook before classes began, they were shocked. Some even called me “creepy.” Even though they were acutely aware of the possibilities, they were still disturbed learning that it had actually happened to them. Again, day-to-day worries do not include these “unlikely” breeches of privacy.

This perhaps explains then why the culture of Facebook for emerging adults is seemingly a complacent one. Generally, my informants discussed giving up their agency because to really fulfill suggested “best practices” takes too much time to figure out and set up. Even though Facebook’s privacy settings have become much more granular over time, they have also become more difficult and time-consuming, thus leading to users not attempting to activate them at all (Vitak, 2012).

Of course, on a larger scale, one way to enact agency is to not be on the site at all—this is the path that four of my informants have taken. However, it is unrealistic to simply suggest that all people not use the site. The social pressure to be connected is real. Additionally, Facebook does offer many affordances that are useful, including connecting with friends and family who live far away and learning what it means to build a digital identity.

It is salient to note here that those of my informants who are ex-users have a much deeper understanding of the benefits to leaving Facebook for good. Steve R. included that, when he was a Facebooker, he was always thinking about his Facebook profile and that this constant memory made him act differently in other settings.

*Steve R., 22-year-old white male and an ex-user:* Maybe it did make me feel like, OK, I have to act differently. Either to like debunk what's on here or prove it right, whichever the scenario called for. It was in the back of my mind. I knew this page existed, that it was a sort of like condensed version of me. So, maybe somewhere in my brain, I thought, am I going to debunk this image or am I going to go with it?

Steve R.'s reflexive ability to recognize and admit that not only was his profile a condensed version of himself, but also that his profile had implications for his identification maintenance in other spaces was something that I did not find in my active Facebook-using informants.

Similarly, Flina noted that consistency transcends the site itself; to be authentic often means to be consistent across platforms as well.

*Flina, 22-year-old white female and an ex-user:* Yeah, I guess like you aren't really, yeah, I'm thinking about it as like being a consistent, like, in the workplace vs. like with your friends and then Facebook is one of those things that may force you to be consistent across all of those boards because all of those people may be able to see you through your profile.

Flina is demonstrating at least some knowledge of not just social privacy, but also institutional privacy. Understanding these different levels is definitely one step to understanding anonymity and the importance of context for identification performances. However, I found that many users simply do not want to think about anonymity because it puts a damper on the ease and fun of using Facebook. Zizek argues that “ideological fantasies” such as this, are what constitute reality—it is not that users are unaware, they just conceive of a reality wherein they can perform as they wish (Zizek, 1989).

These select narratives aside, the general trend I found in my discussions was one of complacency. My informants feel that usage is very black and white—you are either on the site or you are not, and thus you are either anonymous or you are not.

*LJ, 19-year-old white female:* Because there's, there's really no one to argue with about it. You know, it's either be on Facebook or not be on. I think people that have joined Facebook are already OK with not being anonymous.

LJ's comment implies that users have already made some active decision before signing up for Facebook to be open and “anonymous.” However, I do not know if this is the exact order of things. First, many users signed up years ago. At this time their knowledge of the space and the affordances provided were much more in their infancy. Second, it is usually

the case that users, while caring about social privacy on the site, do not necessarily care about institutional privacy on the site (e.g., Raynes-Goldie, 2010).

As Raynes-Goldie (2010) argues, there are really two types of “privacy” in social networking sites. The institutional is the larger scale—Facebook, third parties, etc. The social is the smaller scale—friends, family, co-workers, employers, etc. Similar to my above discussion regarding micro- and macro-level understanding, even if users are aware of the institutional powers, they are more worried about social-level privacy. Beyond the fact that these concerns are more immediate and relevant to the lives of the majority of emerging adults, I also would argue that, because social networking sites are still in their infancy, we have just not yet cracked an accessible way to speak about institutional level concerns. Instead, emerging adult users often see themselves as having no choice in the institutional-level privacy debate and instead choose to ignore the issues that seem to be detached from their everyday habits.

My informants link this no-choice-culture to larger trends of government surveillance, again including that it is just the way things are now.

*Ryan B., 21-year-old white male:* I think it’s not the only factor playing into that, like, everybody knows the NSA’s spying, the drones and this and that. It’s just, you know, how knowledgeable you are on what’s really going on. I’ll speak from personal, you know, before I came to this school, I used to fly UAV’s...and there’s no way that, with the technology we have now...yes, they can physically do what they’re saying, they can spy on you... Some things get overhyped in the media, but these things do exist. It’s unfortunate, but it’s something we have to deal with in our society today.

With Ryan B.'s comment, we get a taste of the complete lack of perceived agency expressed by my informants throughout our discussions. Here Ryan B. is talking about the governmental level, similar to Raynes-Goldie's institutional privacy, but he has *still* forgotten about Facebook itself and third party advertisers and is instead discussing the government. Therefore, we see even more support for the notion that the interface level, especially regarding privacy, is easily forgotten, if thought of at all.

My informants also noted that they may want to enact some agency, and have tried in the past, but that it is too difficult. Some even admit to knowing that some things that they want to do are possible, they just cannot, or do not want to spend the time to, find them.

*Matt, 20-year-old white male:* I just don't really know how and since I don't know how, just get over it kind of thing.

*Allen, 22-year-old white female:* I wish there were more options to make myself. But, I do feel like there is some agency on Facebook in deciding how you want to, how you want others to perceive you on the site. I don't think it's easily navigated, sort of, takes away some of that choice. Like, if you don't know, if you have it, like, I had to Google how to do everything that I did. Like, if you don't have the time to do that or even know to or know that it's an option; you don't really have that choice, so.

*JM, 20-year-old white female:* Yeah, I think people tried doing that [using the privacy settings more actively] for a while and they just kind of gave up.

Users hate changes and take little to no time to figure out how to navigate through new affordances when they are introduced. (Unless, of course, they directly affect affordances that users find integral, such as affordances having to do with photographs.) A couple of

my informants even (jokingly?) compared Facebook changes to when a close friend changes—the relationship goes awry and you are sad that things have changed. Although this was presented in a joking manner, there is clearly some truth to the comments. Facebook *is* just another one of your friends, who just so happens to also have much more access to your input content than any of your networked nodes. When something so close and trusted changes, whether it is a person or an interface, the change can be jarring.

There were a few of my informants who were familiar with some of the settings that assist with anonymity and fewer who actually attempt to use them. However, they find it to be “tedious” work.

*JM, 20-year-old white female:* But, now there's all these settings of, for instance, we were talking about earlier, not adding people you [don't know]. Now it's like if I add someone, I feel like I'm going to be annoyed by them. I unsubscribe. So, now, there's just not on my feed, they're just my friend, they're just kind of floating on my friend list. But, like, there's also the ability of blocking people from seeing things, so, if I want my mom to just see my pictures, then, she just sees my pictures, she can't see my wall, she can't see my statuses. But, even then, it's such tedious work that I think people kind of just give up on it... You want so much privacy, and it's so hard to get it, so, people kind of just, like, go on, maybe once a week if they're, you know, especially if they've had it for a while and there's other social medias that they can escape to. So, I definitely think that's a big thing. Just like, wanting to have, like, you have the ability to be private for certain things, it's just, it is, it's really tedious; it's hard.

These people who just “float” on friends’ lists can be problematic because they may still be reading posts that users do not even realize they can see. Also, they may still define the user by tagging her in posts or photos. However, my informants explained that,

through example, it is very time-consuming and annoying to delete friends with whom they no longer want to be associated.

*Ryan B., 21-year-old white male:* After a while if I don't know these people, why keep up with it? and why is it still there? But, I just never get rid of it. I just don't know why, I just never take the time to get rid all of all those lost links I guess we can call it."

*Rich, 22-year-old white male:* It sucks to go through your friends list because if you delete one person then it takes you all the way back to the top

Here, Rich is specially referencing the affordance to unfriend friends, however the interface itself is very hard to work with. Thus, users are compelled to just remain friends with people even though they do not necessarily want that connection.

Some of my informants expressed an interesting fix to this problem—when Facebook notifies them of someone's birthday with whom they no longer want to be connected, they use it as a chance to unfriend that person. This is a direct subversion of the Facebook structure. The affordance is created to remind users that people are celebrating birthdays so that users can write on a Timeline, send a gift, and so on. However, some users have subverted the traditional purpose of this affordance, and instead use it to make the (long) unfriending process more efficient and less frustrating.

One informant noted that he would purposefully enter incorrect, perhaps even nonsensical, information into his profile.

*David B., 30-year-old white male:* I think it's a little bit of resistance. I like jamming them up.

David B. cited putting in a random geographical place for “hometown” and “place of birth.” Because performing these aspects of self clearly do not matter in this space to David B., instead of leaving them blank, he chooses to “mess with” the site a bit. Therefore, he is enacting his agency by subverting the expected answers to these prompts. Another informant noted that he cannot stand the advertisements on and around his News Feed. Therefore, he chooses to use his mobile interface much more often than the desktop version of the site.

Although a few of my informants do not always use Facebook’s tools as originally intended, a stark majority do not even think about alternative options, let alone perform them. Our discussions often included discussions about the different options Facebook affords, specifically when it comes to anonymity. Even with my guided directions of how to use these spaces, my informants still had no interest whatsoever in checking them out.

*Leah, 21-year-old white female:* Yeah, OK, I honestly probably wouldn’t. I know that I have a choice to do that stuff but it’s not really at the top of my concerns.

### Summary

Through my interviews and focus groups with my informants I learned that it is nearly impossible to speak about just one social media site. The sites do not exist in a vacuum and therefore users’ narratives cannot include them as if they do. The ecology that exists is salient because it is the main way that emerging adult users enact some agency by defining audiences within the different platforms.

Even with this active role, users are still unaware of the importance of understanding each platform's affordances. In particular, users claim that Facebook calls for a large number of friends which leads them to no longer be able to account for all social contexts. Additionally, while most users are concerned with social privacy, they do not have enough experience with institutional privacy measures and tend to brush off potential risks most likely because worrying about them would disrupt their everyday usage.

As Butler (2006) discusses, agency can be enacted within space; subverting from within the structure is the only way to enact our agency and still be able to exist in the larger, social space. However, I found the levels of agency within my informants to be disappointing—very few of my informants even noted that they had thought about what enacting agency within the space would mean. Even those who understand what this would consist of noted that they really had no interest in trying.

As we have begun to see through my informants' more general comments about the site's structure, and about other sites' structures, at the holistic level, the affordances that I discussed in the previous chapter play a large role in shaping how users understand each site. Users begin to assign specific tasks for which they feel each site is meant. At the same time, Facebook acts as a tentpole medium wherein affordances such as geo-location, photo uploads, status updates, GPS check-ins, among other tools, are folded in, compelling users to also fold in the activities that they are performing across a multitude

of other sites. Clearly, this leads to confusing, shallow performances and context collapses. In the following three chapters, I look more closely at my informants' reactions to Facebook's affordances by discussing the emergent Visual Culture, Celebrity Culture, and Socially Divided Culture.

## CHAPTER 4 VISUAL CULTURE

The first thing you see on someone's Facebook is their photo... You're not really looking at their About page or their little sign on the left side for information; you're looking at their picture to see: what are they? or who are they?

*-Steven W., 22-year-old Asian male*

It is no secret that visual culture plays an important role in our society. Starting at least as early as the 1880s, photographs were regarded as proofs of existence. News stories became to be viewed as less interesting, or even less believable, until a photograph was attached (Sontag, 1973). Even today, in a touched-up, cropped, Photoshopped, and edited world, visual representations represent truth.

Whenever I speak about visual culture and the power of photography, I love to use the example of the story that the *New York Post* published on December 4, 2012. The large, front page story ran: "Pushed on the subway track, this man is about to die." Below, it also read, "DOOMED." When I speak about this example, I first just throw the words up on a Power Point slide. It is rare that anyone in the audience changes their demeanor or makes any real reaction at all.

My next slide, however, shows the full page photograph that ran with the text. A man stands on the tracks, his left arm perched on the platform in an unsuccessful attempt to pull himself up and out. He looks to his right as a train is quickly approaching. Without fail, I switch to this slide and the members of the audience gasp, sit up, lean forward, and begin to comment and talk amongst each other. We learn, from birth, that photos are

powerful. With text, we may create our own images and relate more personally with the story because the visions in our minds can only be ours. But, with a photograph, we can *believe* in the event.

With the introduction of the daguerreotype, parents would have pictures taken of their dead children (Sekula, 1984; Worth, 1981). Thus, photographs not only helped to tell news stories, they also helped to write biographies. These photographs of dead family members were proof that a person existed; they acted as placeholders for the lives that were lost.

By the early twentieth century, cameras were available to the general public. “Snapshots,” or amateur photos, were prolific, documenting conformity to social norms. Amateur photographers for families, often house-wives, captured their compliance with social traditions—photographs integrated themselves into events such as birthdays, weddings, and graduations (Chalfen, 1987; Holland, 1997). Thus, photos themselves became a social tradition.

Digital photography further altered the social tradition of taking photographs to represent events and assist with creating autobiographies (Ritchin, 2009). With digital cameras, now often built into mobile devices, people can take as many photos as they like, deleting the “bad” ones until they have reached some desired outcome. Once the photo is chosen, it can go through cropping, airbrushing, and so on. Just as the daguerreotype allowed mourning parents to create their own versions of reality, we do the

same with our news and personal images. The image paired with the *New York Post* headline could just as easily been Photoshopped by me before my presentation;<sup>14</sup> but I have never received a question regarding the “realness” of the photo even though, for the majority of my audience members, it was their first time seeing the image.

Photographs are like the shadows in Plato’s Cave, the images that the prisoners see dancing on the cave walls. We, like the prisoners, assume these images, that are merely shadows of past selves, are reality (Sontag, 1973). Indeed, Barthes (1981) described images of people as “...that rather terrible thing which there is in every photograph: the return of the dead” (p. 9). Every picture of a human subject is necessarily of the past; thus it represents a self that no longer exists. Barthes concludes that a photograph is violent “not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the site by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed” (p. 91). Therefore, photos not only represent reality, they create reality (DeLuca & Demo, 2000), forcing viewers to remember past events in a very specific manner.

Consequently, beyond just looking at photographs as what we see, we should also think about what the images *want* us to see—what a photograph seems to authorize, warrant, and legitimate (DeLuca & Demo, 2000). To do this, we must first think not only about what is in the actual photograph, but how it has been decisively situated within

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<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, it is not.

some context, surrounded by other identification performances. Further, as highlighted throughout this dissertation, we must also investigate the affordances that both directly and indirectly support the choice to broadcast each photograph within each context.

#### Curating the Visible, Social You

Through my interviews and focus groups, I learned that photographs are the most important identity performance tool on Facebook. All of my Facebook-using informants spoke about how often they use photographs to update their friends regarding what they have been up to. In fact, photo posts have become such the norm for performing identifications that my informants rarely brought up status updates. This falls in line with other, similar studies—researchers have consistently found that social media users explain that pictures are the most important aspect of the sites. They mention photos frequently and note that photos are the piece they check and upkeep the most (e.g., Hum et al., 2011; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Ong et al., 2011; Siibak, 2009).

Because the visual representation through photos is so important on Facebook, users do not often utilize or think about their About Pages, or the more text-based identity performance space.<sup>15</sup> Initially, however, at sign up, users did care about filling in this space.

*Norma, 21-year-old white female:* I remember when I first did it, it was very significant. And, then I didn't think about it again after that. And, I don't really

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<sup>15</sup> One exception to the forgotten-About-Page-rule is that Facebookers *are* concerned with relationship statuses and gender. These caveats are explored in the *Socially Divided Culture* chapter.

look at other people's either. And, then going off to different social media platforms, I go through the same thing again and then forget about it again.

*Jane, 18-year-old African American female:* I think a lot has changed because right when Facebook started getting big, that's when Myspace started dying out. Myspace was all about where the person was from. I felt like I read people's profiles more often. But, Facebook is more about talking.

*Madelyn, 18-year-old white female:* With Myspace it was, like, I think a lot was a representation of how much you knew about internet and codes and stuff, so it was like you go on someone's Myspace page and it was very like, looked professional and well done. That was more of, like, the cool thing rather than how many pictures you had showing. But with Facebook, it's like how much you're doing, like, with who and I think it makes it more social, a social representation of yourself rather than a creative representation of yourself like Myspace was.

Norma explains that the About Page is not that important to users. At first sign in, when presented with a blank slate, users are compelled to fill in the vacant spaces. This is especially true of new users switching over from other sites, such as Myspace, that are more based in textual identifications through a static profile page. Without many social connections, and subsequently without much social interaction on Facebook, the quick fix to perform identification is to complete the presented identification template. Once users begin to build networks, share content, interact with friends, and so forth the static, word-heavy About Page is forgotten.

Jane notes that, with Myspace "dying out," Facebook slightly altered what identification through social media means. Instead of being about the user and their profile, now identifications are about "talking." Here, Jane is alluding to the fact that

contemporary sites like Facebook are more about interacting than creating a profile that other users may later read.

It is salient to note how identification practices change when users switch platforms. Myspace initially allowed users access to some of their code, permitting users to change visual aspects of their profiles. Even after the open code structure was terminated due to security issues, the site still provided tools for users to design their spaces. Facebook, on the other hand, presents a simpler interface that is customizable in a different way.

When Madelyn notes that Myspace pages looked “professional,” she is not implying that Myspace users who learned some HTML or CSS were viewed as professional programmers. At the time, to be engaged with social spaces meant learning at least the basics of coding. What these three informants are highlighting, however, is that Myspace was promoting some “creative you,” while Facebook promotes some “social you.” Identity on Facebook is not about filling in static templates; it is about interacting with others, and this interaction is inextricably linked with visual culture.

Along with using photographs to perform identity, logically, these visual portrayals are also the means of getting to know others.

*Audrey, 21-year-old white female:* You can definitely learn a lot from someone just by looking through their profile pictures before you, like, friend them or just to get a gist of, like, who they’re hanging out with, what they’re doing, how they view themselves.

Notably, then, the “social you” is created through visual representations. Users do not learn about who someone is, who their friends are, what friends are doing, or how they feel about themselves primarily through text-based representations. Instead, as Audrey illustrates, Facebookers learn about others through posted photographs—through the visual autobiographies they curate.

As with my captivated audiences viewing the *New York Post* cover story, not once did any of my informants mention the possibility of photographs on Facebook being edited. Multiple times, however, they commented on how people can easily lie in text-based identifications.

Some informants noted that perhaps the reason why the About Page was forgotten is because the majority of Facebook connections are people whom users already know offline. Therefore, why would friends need that profile information?

*Jessica, 22-year-old Latina female:* It’s not important to me anymore. I had an old Facebook account that I just recently deactivated, and I started a new one. And, I used to be obsessed with, like, writing everything about me. Not anymore, because I’m, like, if the people on Facebook know me, then why should I waste my time posting?

If this scenario were the case, however, why would photographs be necessary to perform identifications? Would users not be able to just write about the places they have traveled and the events they have attended? This is made even clearer through the fact that Jessica says, “why should I waste my time *posting*?” Instead of saying “filling out the profile page,” she uses a word that denotes adding a new status update—“posting.” The idea of

text-based content is overshadowed by the power that photographs have in the identification process online.

These findings are telling because they underscore a shift in cultural expectations on social media sites. When internet space was first available for people to customize their own corners, users were excited to craft a personalized space. Homepages and AOL profiles, among others, were filled with mostly text-based identification performances cataloging users' interests, hobbies, jobs, political affiliations, religious beliefs, and so on. Now, this type of identification almost seems passé. With advances in technology, users expect different capabilities while accepting, at the same time, much less choice. Therefore, only using shallow depictions of the self, such as a few photographs versus a completely personalized digital page, is not only accepted, but the norm.

As online personal broadcasting spaces become more mainstream, “user-friendly” social networking sites are preferred. Users place inherent trust in sites to present their digital identifications well. They have given up the “creative self” for the “social self.” Which, as is implicitly inferred here, means the “social self” is perhaps no longer “creative.”

Facebook has arguably aided in the proliferation of this expectation. The About Page is no longer central to the Facebook experience. The default Facebook.com page is the News Feed, cataloging recent status updates, picture uploads, and content shares by friends. When a user's name or profile picture thumbnail is clicked, it takes the viewer to

that user's Timeline. This has become the default profile for the user, instead of the About Page. Another click will finally take the viewer to the user's About Page. Clearly, however, it is not promoted as important by the site itself, and thus is not often, if ever, in the front of Facebookers' minds. This seems idiosyncratic seeing that the potential quantitative data is valuable marketing information for Facebook. However, what users "like" and share, among other actions, is more valuable since, as my informants mentioned, Facebook assists in curating the social, visible you.

#### The Visible You *Is* You

Once we understand the significant role that photographs play on the site, it is not surprising to learn about the importance of the profile picture for Facebookers. My informants explained that they rarely, if ever, use a profile picture that does not display their face—whether it is a headshot, a full body picture, or something in between. When I asked the participants why they use a profile picture that reveals their visible identification they were confused; for them, it was an inane question with an obvious answer.

*Alex, 20-year-old Asian female:* Because it's me. Yea, I'm just showing me.

*Interviewer:* OK, so the visible you is you?

*Alex:* Yeah.

*Ryan B., 21-year-old white male:* It's the image that best represents you; who I am.

*Leah, 21-year-old white female:* Because it's your profile picture; your name's attached to it. It wouldn't really make a lot of sense, or they make it seem like it wouldn't make a lot of sense, to do a profile picture of your kid or something.

Identity has become synonymous with the visible self. Unlike the popular and oft-cited cartoon featuring a dog sitting at a computer that reads “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog,”<sup>16</sup> visible identity’s significance has followed users to social media spaces. This does not have to be the case online, however. Early social media spaces were praised for the exact opposite reason. Anonymous spaces allowed users to embody any persona they wanted. Users may have had avatars or buddy icons to act as visible placeholders, but identifications were heavily based in textual representations and creative elements such as backgrounds, music, and color themes.

Myspace was one of the first social media sites to value photos, specifically the profile picture. However, Facebook is the first social networking site to place such an importance on profile pictures, photo status updates, and, more recently, cover photos. Indeed, when other users have a profile picture that does not present the user’s corporeal self, the general Facebooker becomes annoyed.

*Ashley, 20-year-old white female:* I hate when people don’t put pictures of themselves as profile pictures.

*Ryan A., 19-year-old white female:* Nobody wants to talk to a random, I don’t know, just not you picture.

*Joe, 20-year-old white male:* If you have a profile picture where it’s like ten different people in it, it’s like, who are you then?

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Steiner’s cartoon featured in a July, 1993 issue of *The New Yorker*.

*JM, 20-year-old white female:* I'll say it's definitely...in the norm to put up at least one [profile] picture with yourself in it. If I look for someone's profile and they have no profile pictures with their actual face in it, I find it extremely weird, like, why haven't they put it up? Are they self-conscious? What do they really look like? It's definitely a social norm in Facebook to have a picture, at least one, with your face on it.

Because Facebook is about promoting the “social you” and because social networking sites are situated in visual culture, users believe that this means they must be able to *see* the person with whom they are socializing. Facebook, like almost all other social networking sites, proliferates this expectation by placing thumbnails of users' profile pictures next to all mentions of their on-site actions. Every time users post statuses, upload photos, share content, comment on posts, even “like” products or pages, Facebook affixes their visible identities.

In fact, this visual culture has been reified to the point that Facebookers feel downright uncomfortable friending, let alone interacting with, users who do not have profile pictures of their corporeal selves.

*Anna, 20-year-old African American female:* Yeah, it's very misleading if you don't have a picture of yourself or one at least with you in it.

*Starman, 22-year-old white male:* It looks like a fake profile. That's what you run into, is, you think someone's fake, and then no one will be their friend. And no one wants to deal with that.

My informants exhibited noticeable discomfort when they spoke about not being able to *see* the user with whom they interact. General discussions around online predators and internet scams have caused internet users to be more cautious while online. But,

Facebook specifically also helps users ostracize those who do not post photos of themselves. While no longer an in-site option, users used to be able to “suggest” photos for friends if they were using the default image as a profile picture. Further, with facial recognition and automatic tagging, it seems only right to have a profile picture that is your face. Most remarkably, my informants were referring to users that they know offline; they are just turned off by “faceless” performances.

Clearly, there is something to be said about the need for visual identification when socializing on Facebook. My informants tended to lend this to the fact that they actually need the facial identity to differentiate and validate identities.

*Hilari, 21-year-old Asian female:* People can have the same name. But, if there’s two people, the only way you can know which one is who is by their picture, I guess.

*Audrey, 21-year-old white female:* I think so they’re recognized. Like, sometimes if I get a friend request from someone who has a lot of privacy settings, and there’s, like, twenty people in their profile picture, I can’t tell who they are. So, I might not accept right away until I can be sure that this is someone I know. And people can see, like, ‘oh that name looks familiar but what does she look like or what does he look like?’

Facebookers are compelled to use their visible identifications, and to expect others to do the same, to validate that they are who they are claiming to be. Hilari ends her response with “I guess.” This qualifier is telling because it shows that she has not necessarily thought about this norm; she just assumes it is the case because it is the culture of the site.

What I find most fascinating about my informants’ stance and about the visible culture that Facebook promotes, is that legal names are not what Facebook itself uses to

differentiate users. Obviously, legal names are not unique and would not be efficient to use in the data collecting and sorting process. Indeed, Facebook actually has *two* ways to uniquely identify each user.

The first is reminiscent of the user-chosen screen name. You can easily find your unique screen name by going to your page and looking at the URL. For example, my URL is “<https://www.facebook.com/angelacirucci>”. Therefore, my unique screen name is “angelacirucci”. Because my name is not that common, my screen name just so happens to be my name. My partner, however, for example, has a more common name and his screen name is “walt.jacob.7”. Clearly, Facebook takes the user’s inputted legal name and affixes a number depending on how many other people with that same name signed up prior to that instance.

What many Facebookers are not aware of is that they can change their screen name. All they have to do is visit “[www.facebook.com/username](http://www.facebook.com/username)”. Here, users can change their unique identifier to whatever they want as long as the choice follows Facebook’s posted guidelines.<sup>17</sup> One notable guideline is that users can only change their screen name once. Basically, users can either keep the default screen name or select their own. Therefore, users do not need visible identity validation. If they know their offline friend’s and acquaintance’s screen name, they can just type in the unique URL.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/help/105399436216001#What-are-the-guidelines-around-creating-a-custom-username?>

The second way that Facebook uniquely identifies its users is by assigning each new user a user ID. This happens at sign up and is the main way that Facebook identifies its subscribers on the programming and data sorting side. Apps created using the Facebook API also ask for this as the unique identifier. To obtain this ID, users can visit “<http://graph.facebook.com/username>”, where “username” is replaced with the unique screen name as discussed above. This number can be used in the same way as the screen name by inserting it in the Facebook URL. However, the vanity screen name is clearly much easier to use when attempting to find a friend on the site.

Getting deeper into our discussions, some of my informants began to mention that perhaps photographs are also important to the identification performance process.

*Starman, 22-year-old white male:* It’s too important of a space on the Facebook. Like, it’s, like, high real estate value. Like, you want to use that space for something to project some part of yourself.

*Norma, 21-year-old white female:* I think there’s also like a persona part that ... ‘cause it’s also like how you post. It’s not just like your mug shot, so, like, you physically know what someone looks like. It’s sort of what’s this person’s aesthetic and what are they communicating with this picture? Are they traveling?

As I have attempted to highlight, visible identities are not necessarily needed for identity validation. Instead, as some of my informants noted, the profile picture is an important part of the identification process. Users select their profile pictures carefully, and perhaps even edit the photo by cropping, airbrushing, adding a filter, etc. As Rushkoff illuminates in *Generation Like* (2014), young adults will go to great lengths to choose the “right” profile picture that captures the “true” self that attracts the most admirers.

Along with the profile picture, pictures in general are integral to the identification process.

*Matt, 20-year-old white male:* I guess with pictures because that's...if I ever do post anything, it's, like, a recent picture. And it's whatever picture I post on Instagram. I usually just post to Facebook as well and then link. I don't know, it's just a picture that I post because I like it.

*JM, 20-year-old white female:* If I add someone, the first thing I do is go through the first three or four profile picture and maybe some of their tagged photos, and then after that I might look at what they have to say. But, it's definitely my first judgment on people, seeing what visually, what they've done, what they're doing, and then I see what they have to say, follow up. But usually it's just, you know, sometimes I don't even look at that, sometimes I just look at their pictures.

Not only do Facebookers find photographs important for defining the self, they also find them important when learning about other users. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the About Page is rarely used to get to know a friend and status updates were not a popular topic of discussion. Thus, photographs work to supplement traditional social interaction.

With this much importance placed on visual culture on the site, it is not surprising that users work hard to maintain their desired identifications by policing the photographs in which they are tagged. Indeed, Facebook affords users the ability to tag each other and tell more dynamic narratives by adding characters to their visual stories. However, each user has less choice in telling her own narrative when others in her network are, at the same time, trying to fold her into their own stories. LJ describes a common scenario wherein friends want to post and tag photographs that relate to their narratives while she is fighting to remove that tag or have that photograph disappear completely.

*LJ, 19-year-old white female:* Definitely been a little vain about it and untagged myself from ugly pictures. I've untagged myself from some incriminating pictures. I untagged myself in ex-boyfriends' pictures. It was memories that I didn't want to keep. With the ugly ones, it was because I know people are going to be creeping on me, and I don't want them to see, like, the gross ones. And with the incriminating ones, because I am connected to a lot of my family through Facebook and, you know, just to be safe.

Users' desire to police their photo collections shows an awareness of how important visual culture is to the identification process. LJ highlights how Facebook constantly acts as a digital mirror—she does not want to be reminded of a past romantic relationship. She also explains that she knows others will be lurking her page.<sup>18</sup> Thus, she must keep the space “up to code.”

Clearly, many of my informants could express the importance of photographs on Facebook—photos work to tell stories and validate identities. It was less likely, however, for the majority of them to realize the general visual culture that is privileged on the site. Conversely, the ex-users in my groups hinted at this push and even implied in some instances that it was a reason they left the site.

*Steve R., 22-year-old white male and an ex-user:* It probably varies by person, some people post a lot, some people don't post any pictures of themselves. Yeah, a lot of them are really carefully manipulated or at least carefully chosen to present something, an image of themselves that they want to present. And, pictures are an easy thing to do for that because if you're going to say something, you have to think it out. Here's a picture of me at this place that says something.

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<sup>18</sup> As explored in the next chapter, *Celebrity Culture*, lurking is a critical aspect of the Facebook experience.

*Flina, 22-year-old white female and an ex-user:* Well, so, it's definitely like the anonymity thing. And, it's weird because even if people, even if we were friends and I gave you my screen name, you'd know who I was, you would know what I look like, so, it wouldn't be much different from if you saw the little Facebook chat with my name and my little thumbnail of picture. But, I mean, it definitely like holds you to your actions more so than a Myspace post. You know, like I guess the different would be, I could just know you name and find you and communicate and, like, reach out to you or stalk you and look at you on Facebook. Whereas, like, unless you knew who I was specifically, you would sort of like to happen upon my screen name or my Myspace or find me and have no idea of who I was, you wouldn't really know who I was. And, then, I think that gives you a little bit more freedom.

Steve R. acknowledges that photos are often manipulated and that while text-based ideas take time to construct, a picture is much easier to just upload and let speak for itself.

Similarly, Flina notes the strangeness of people needing visual representations to validate identity, making the site less anonymous, instead of just using the unique screen names that Facebook provides. Flina says that, while less anonymity on Facebook perhaps leads to more accountability, the identity structure on sites like Myspace allowed for much more freedom.

### Summary

Although the traditional profile space, the About Page, is not central to emerging adult users' experience on Facebook, visual identifications are. My informants noted that the profile picture is "prime real estate" and thus is a space that really should include a user's real face. Not only is this for aesthetic value, it is also seen as necessary for validation purposes. Even though Facebook provides all users with a unique username, users still feel uncomfortable if they cannot "see" the users with whom they are

interacting. This is contrary to earlier internet spaces that were popular *because* visible identifications were not valued.

Thinking of Barthes' (1981) analysis that claims images can only represent the shells of our dead (past) selves, it is intriguing that pictures of the self have become so integral to online identification—Facebookers must rely on stale visual representations. Furthermore, while text and identification prompts can seem much more fluid and resolute, images are static and invite others to read more into the selected image than any one Facebook user can control. Again, we see the loss of control that users have in the identification process due to the promoted affordances within this visual culture.

With visible identifications playing such a critical role, and nonvisible Facebookers ostracized, it is clear that the interface privileges those who are able to perform through their corporeal identification. My informants explicitly stated that they essentially ostracize those users who do not want to post images of their faces, even though they know who the account links to in the offline world. Thus, not only is the internet no longer a space to meet new people anonymously, it is also clearly moving toward a space that does not even accept known friends if they cannot “prove” who they are through visual cues.

Facebook's promotion of visual culture means that authenticity is even more linked to consistency—users are expected to look generally the same in each new photo posted and each of these photos should present them as they generally look offline. Even

if users want to enact some agency by posting pictures that subvert the visual culture norms outlined above, they, again, are ostracized by other users who feel uncomfortable interfacing with profiles that have no “faces.” Finally, anonymity is nearly impossible in this space—if users are expected to always perform through their corporeal identification, it is not possible to fully disconnect from any offline performance. Our bodies are no longer left behind. Instead, we are now expected to carry our bodies and the related baggage with us into the digital space, just as we must in offline spaces.

## CHAPTER 5 CELEBRITY CULTURE

Facebook in general, it's not about being anonymous, it's about being known.  
*-Hilari, 21-year-old Asian female*

In earlier studies (e.g., Cirucci, 2013a and Cirucci, 2014), I have explored Facebook's affordances by breaking down the site into three phases—sign up, play, and winning, using video games as a comparative structure. I ultimately argue that a main goal of social media spaces like Facebook is to promote a shallow version of the self that adheres to those identification aspects that are privileged in celebrity culture, such as a certain physical appearance or a self that values tangible (often expensive) items. Thus, winning is equivalent to becoming the “hero,” and our contemporary heroes are arguably celebrities.

Indeed, it is hard to ignore the pull that consumer and celebrity culture have on identifications. This is of course not a new issue. Celebrities and capitalistic themes have been present in the United States for some time—the glamorous life of Hollywood has always been sought after or, at the very least, followed with some envy. What has changed, however, is the finite, structured, and archived identification that is online identity. Insofar as the site *is* the celebrity identity structure (Cirucci, 2014), from the moment Facebook users sign up, they are already participating in the celebrification of self.

In other words, because the site provides specific affordances that compel users to represent many identifications and contexts, users really only have space to define shallow notions of the self. Space for status updates, while not as limited as Twitter, are still popular only when they are crafted in an entertaining and semi-brief manner. Further, the visual culture promoted on the site, as discussed in the previous chapter, places value on physical identifications. All of these concepts that are prioritized regarding the Facebook self are almost synonymous with the concepts that are prioritized regarding the celebrity self. Thus, the Facebook identity structure closely resembles the celebrity structure.

This trend is potentially problematic because what we value in celebrities is not some dynamic self. Instead, it is a self that is defined as authentic if it adheres to very specific and shallow standards, and these standards very closely mirror the prompts and type of identifications users are compelled to perform on Facebook and other social media.

As outlined below, speaking about identification and authenticity in Facebook inevitably leads to discussions surrounding self-branding, business-like mission statements, and gaining attention. I should note that I never mentioned celebrity culture, nor did I utter the word “celebrity” during *any* of our discussions. Even my informants only used the word “celebrity” or “celebrities” to talk about people they follow. Therefore, it is arguably not the case that users *know* that they are fulfilling some

celebrity equation. Instead, it has become a culture of the site, and thus is stated as normal or obvious when trying to define authenticity and identity.

Some may be inclined to ask at this point why I have chosen to speak about celebrity culture instead of “self-branding.” First, these are very similar ideas. Celebrities are taught to, and pay people to help them, self-brand. They must decide who they will be in the sea of other celebrities, crafting honest identities that follow corporation-like mission statements. However, I chose celebrity culture because I want to argue that what is happening is not some active process of branding the self. Of course some users are employing social media to craft their professional selves, whether they are trying to be stars or they are trying to rise up in the business world. On the other hand, I argue that the celebrification of self, as I am discussing it, happens in the background. The promotion of a self that is less dynamic, while also concerned with collecting friends (fans) and gaining likes, is *already* embedded in the site’s structure. Thus, users are, in one way or another, necessarily participating in the celebrification of self as soon as they sign up.

#### Is the Filtered Me Authentic?

As is clear throughout this project, being on Facebook is not simply about making connections with family and friends. There is a very distinct social and visible self that must be created, performed, managed, and broadcast. And, as I argue throughout this dissertation project, this self is not immune to the interface, or the filter, that is Facebook under the surface. However, the site has become a very important place for emerging

adults' identifications and conceptions of self. Who they are, who they want to be, and what it means to be "real" or "authentic" is crucial in this stage of their lives.

Authenticity is clearly intimately linked to identification, even if the former is much more difficult to define than the latter (without forgetting, or course, that identification is not the easiest concept to define either).

What it means to be "you" on Facebook is integral to the success of the site. If the site can promote a watered down, single version of the self they can easily market to and create algorithms for, they can more efficiently predict social and market behaviors. Identification and authenticity, however, become salient topics to analyze in this space because of the limited affordances offered in the process.

Whilst discussing anonymity in my first chapter, I introduced the idea that discussing online privacy, especially with regards to social media, is immaterial because the moment that you use the web, you are being tracked in a number of ways. I cited examples such as mouse tracking, eye tracking, facial recognition, and so on. Further, as we saw in early internet studies such as Turkle's *Life on the Screen*, to fruitfully use a space to play and experiment with identifications *necessarily* means that each user must share personal information. The safety in this process comes from anonymity. This topic is also important to consider when discussing authenticity. If "who we are" digitally is a much more concrete, archived self that is constituted of many more "keys," then what it means to be authentic is also much more concrete.

But, this defies what I argued earlier. If I were to claim that what it means to be authentic is concrete, then I am completely in conflict with my prior statements in which I argue that it is impossible to nail down authenticity. And, this is exactly my point. To be truly authentic online (as in representing many dynamic selves), if guided by the interface and filters of Facebook, is difficult, if not impossible, just as the idea of privacy in the traditional sense is an unfit method for understanding online rights.

There was a lot of discussion within my focus groups and interviews regarding what it means to be “real” or “authentic” on the site. I argue that being “authentic” on Facebook is inextricably tied to what the site affords in the self-presentation process. Again, this idea of “being” “authentic” is already problematic. “Being” implies that identification and thus authenticity is some static state, that once reached is somehow freeing or the peak of life. Additionally, the concept also implies there is some central self, some central authenticity that just needs to be uncovered. However, as I discussed earlier, authenticity is not central or static, just as identifications are on-going and multiple.

Indeed, hearing my informants’ narratives, I was quickly reminded how sticky defining authenticity is. There are two general instances in which users classify their performances on Facebook as “authentic.” In the first scenario, users explain that they are authentic on the site because their profiles wholly represent *one* of their identifications—they may not experience context collapse, but they have chosen to very openly represent

*one* of their social identifications. In the second type, users explain that their profiles present a shallow, sweeping version of the self that encapsulates many of their identifications—these informants are at risk of experiencing context collapse but attempt to avoid it by presenting a self that is a mix of many of their selves, with no one self being as dynamic as its offline equivalent. Both of these cases can also be the reason why users believe they are *not* being authentic on Facebook. Perhaps they note that they *only* include one self, or that they filter *too much* and that is not “real.”

In almost every case, however, my informants noted that they either feel they are authentic or are not authentic because they perform the latter scenario online—a shallow, sweeping, common denominator version of the self. This was commonly referred to as “filtering.”

*Jessica, 22-year-old Latina female:* I want to say that whatever I have on Facebook is accurate because I’m not listing my entire life... So, I just, like, highlight the highlights. I just post them on Facebook, if this looks like it’s interesting or whatever I feel like at the moment, I’ll post it.

*Deb, 18-year-old African American female:* I’m filtering, that’s exactly what it is. I know what and where to, I’m not not being myself. I’m not going to say one day, I’m not going to change my views or my opinions, but I’ll just hold back sometimes.

In these first two comments, Jessica's and Deb's, my informants are aligning with the notion that the self *is* authentic online when it is filtered.<sup>19</sup> Facebook is just for the highlights and of course the highlights are the “desirable” aspects of a person. Deb even indirectly notes that she is filtering so as to not ostracize or offend one or more of her audiences by saying that she “holds back” even though she would never “change [her] views.”

*Matt, 20-year-old white male:* I don't think that what we put on Facebook defines us because usually what we do is we pick the things that, the most desirable pictures, the status that, like, I don't know, like make us look like our lives are important. Those are the things that we put up but you never see the boring stuff about ourselves, like, I don't know. So, it's not really an accurate depiction of who we are I feel like.

*Lydia, 19-year-old Caucasian female:* So, if you're filtering out all of the things that you feel like you're going to get judged for or are going to be associated with, even if they're part of you what they're not letting other people see them, then, right there, you're taking away some authenticity.

*Tay, 20-year-old white female:* It just puts more of a fake front on for everybody. Well, I feel that way because everybody, you're only putting the good, no one's going to put the bad of themselves.

Conversely, in these last three comments, Matt's, Lydia's, and Tay's, my informants speak more to the idea that filtering is inauthentic, or that the self is *not* authentic online when it is filtered. The way the site is structured, and thus the way people use the site, makes it impossible to truly define the self because it is boiled down and incomplete.

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, it is redundant to say “online when filtered” because Facebook's interface is a filter and thus all content broadcast to others and back to the self is inherently already filtered. This process is thus constantly in motion while users work to present a desirable or aspirational version of the self.

Although about half of my informants shared this view, they are also quick to judge the users that post mundane, personal, controversial, political, and religious statuses and photos. Because the interface promotes a shallow identification, the notion of adding “personal” or “controversial” content is seen as a faux pas by emerging adult users.

*Hilari, 21-year-old Asian female:* It’s still accurate. I mean, even though we don’t post some stuff, doesn’t make all of the stuff that we post as sly. I’m still posting these real photos from my life so, this stuff actually happened and even if I do update my status, I’m not lying about these statuses so it’s still an accurate representation of me although I don’t put everything, all of my private life online.

It is very telling that many of my informants deemed their profiles “accurate,” both as Hilari does here and as Jessica mentions above. Defining the Facebook self as accurate is partially skirting the authenticity question. Instead, my informants were trying to portray that, at the very least, their profiles are not full of lies. After all, this is one of the fears regarding Facebook identification performance—people do not want to be viewed as flat out liars when it comes to who they are, their accomplishments, and so on. This is why they speak about filtering—about deciding what aspects of the self belong on Facebook, and what aspects are not “right” for the space or their identifications.

The trend that I saw throughout my discussions, then, was that authenticity is thought of as close to synonymous with identification on Facebook. This makes sense because the space is one that compels users to recreate their offline personal and social lives in the digital space. Accordingly, the goal is to ensure that the digital portrayal is

somewhat reminiscent of the offline self, especially since most of the users' digital connections are ones that they have established in other, often offline, spaces (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

On the other hand, my ex-users were more likely to notice that the site was not necessarily synonymous with offline identification but instead a place that was very much for creating specific aspirational selves.

*Steve R., 22-year-old white male and an ex-user:* Yeah, I wanted to project this image, like, I guess like a more controlled image it could be. I wouldn't have said that in high school, but when I think about it, that's what seems like the more honest answer.

Here Steve R. even includes that when he was in high school he would not have been able to admit that he wanted a controlled image but that now he can honestly admit that. I would add that, while maturing may have something to do with this critical distance, I would argue that deactivating his account is what truly led to his reflexivity.

#### Collecting Fans and Likes

Facebook's structure is designed in a calculated manner that promotes user interaction with one another. This makes sense for two reasons. The first is because Facebook is a social networking space—the site allows you to connect with others in a plethora of ways to build and maintain relationships. The second, however, is that the more users interact with others, the more data Facebook can collect and use to inform marketing algorithms. In this same vein, many of my informants included that they believe Facebook makes them feel like they *must* gain friends, comments, and likes.

*Jane, 18-year-old African American female:* I feel pressured to have people comment on my Facebook statuses, but I don't care on Twitter. Because Twitter to me started, I got Twitter before a lot of people had it and to me it was just kind of like a journal. I just kind of would tweet things that I was doing or thoughts that I had, and I didn't care who responded. But I feel like Facebook is more there so that people can comment.

Jane is referring to a constant culture of validation that is promoted on Facebook. This can be directly linked to celebrity culture norms—to be a celebrity means to be validated by fans, reviewers, other celebrities, etc. If fans do not first validate a celebrity's existence it is hard to “make it.” This type of validation is slightly different from the identification validation that I discuss in the previous Visual Culture Chapter. Validation as a celebrity involves becoming visible and an accepted player in a social context. Once some visibility is gained, there is a constant process of keeping up with each set of new expectations (Cirucci, 2014). In other words, a “structure of feeling” exists online that drives users to “talk back, weigh in, and be seen” (Hearn, 2010, pp. 435-436).

Additionally, because all identification performances (and all other interaction with the mediator) are archived, users have to be “on” from the beginning of their digital lives.<sup>20</sup>

*Norma, 21-year-old white female:* I think it's [constructing the Facebook self] just a lot of pressure. Because then you have to be on from the moment that you're on the internet. Do you know what I mean? Like if you post something weird when you're eight years old and you have to become accountable for that when you're

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<sup>20</sup> Recently, this becomes an extremely pressing matter seeing that many parents post pictures of, and even make separate profiles for, their children before they are born.

like running for office when you're thirty-five that's nuts. But, we do it to a certain extent.

Norma's comment aligns nicely with a quote from Turkle in a 2012 NPR interview.

They [teens] felt that on Facebook, their life story followed them through their lives ... And one said to me, "My God, it used to be that when you went away to college you got to start fresh to be a new person, and I bet that was great." This sense of the Facebook identity as something that follows you all your life is something that many adolescents feel is a burden.

Turkle discusses this notion that aspects of Facebook force users to keep up with a consistent, single-sided identification on the site. These expectations then transcend the originating space and others use the space as a way to police identification practices in other digital spaces and offline.

Obviously, this knowledge of an "always on" and archived identification influences users to perform a very specific version of self that, unless an actual celebrity offline, was not necessary in the past. Now, users talk about their identities as if they are corporations, offering an interesting twist to the "corporate personhood" debate.

*Lydia, 19-year-old Caucasian female:* But as we move towards more and more self-branding and this, like, your personality is your product.

*Leah, 21-year-old white female:* I'm thinking of it [authenticity]... like business. If you can prove that it's real, you can talk with someone that runs it; but then if you apply it to a person... I mean I keep all my profiles separate so that it is like incentive to follow me on different websites. So, if you're following me on all of them and all I post is the same stuff, just linked from each one, then what's the point of following me on everything?

Marwick (2013b) argues that in today's hyper-brand culture, people act as micro-celebrities, employing social media to their advantage to enhance both their professional

and social lives. This group of users take an active role to exude qualities similar to that of prosperous corporations—honesty and transparency. However, Marwick is discussing an active process. Conversely, what my informants exhibited were performances of self that are natural and invisible to them. Almost all of them are not trying to promote any specific talent, project, job, etc.<sup>21</sup> Instead, they are just promoting the *self*—much like “celebrities” such as Kim Kardashian who make money because they establish identifications that are extremely public. These selves are obviously not some “behind the scenes,” or backstage, selves, but a perfectly calculated and sculpted self that can be sent through many mediators.

Leah’s comment, while the most explicit, was not isolated in describing social networking selves as resembling celebrity processes. She notes that she keeps her social media performances separate, so there is then *incentive* to follow her in many spaces. Leah was not answering any specific prompt nor had we discussed celebrity or consumer culture. Instead, she just genuinely feels the need to collect friends/fans/followers across social networking sites, and she feels that she needs to create partitioned selves in an effort to increase her total fan base size. Leah’s conception of audience segregation as acting purely as incentive to follow her across platforms is directly related to the celebrity structure that Facebook presents as the identification process. Users are compelled to feel

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<sup>21</sup> One informant noted that he uses Facebook to promote his band and another informant noted that he uses Facebook to network with academics in the hopes of becoming a successful academic himself one day.

that identification is synonymous with the values that constitute celebrity campaigns—transparency, popularity, simplified and heteronormative identity aspects, etc.

Indeed, the ex-Facebookers that I spoke with noted that a large reason why they left the site was because they could no longer deal with the way the site eerily mimicked reality TV show trends.

*Kev, 20-year-old Asian male and an ex-user:* I deactivated my Facebook because I was using it for entertainment purposes. I was only reading the newsfeed because I didn't see these people anymore. But, I was using the Facebook to catch up with their lives, like, whatever they were posting, it was just, like, what they were doing with their lives. It wasn't like anything important, they were just posting, like, I went to this place, I went to that place, I ate this, I ate that. So, it was getting annoying, you know? I didn't want it for that purpose anymore.

*Flina, 22-year-old white female and an ex-user:* It's such a waste of time because it doesn't, they don't know, it doesn't affect them. It really doesn't affect me. It's just like talking about a TV show or something like that. You know, a way of entertaining myself. So, I started deleting more and more people and, you know...

Without mention of celebrity culture, Kev and Flina both spoke about the site as reminiscent of a reality TV show. I was immediately reminded of shows like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* when hearing the manner in which the ex-users would speak about Facebook.

Additionally, they described people's actions of trying to keep up as being annoying.

*Flina, 22-year-old white female and an ex-user:* Well, I guess it's consistent to trying to keep up. But, it's not consistent in, like, you have your own opinions and your own agenda for what's important, it's like your consistency is being relevant and current. You know what I mean? I think that maybe it would police some people's actions.

*Kev, 20-year-old Asian male and an ex-user:* I mean, yeah, but, like, if you have social media and you're just posting like that, you're doing it, like, consistently you're putting up a front whether or not you think you may be authentic or not, you're thinking of something to say in order to have likes. Like, the fact that, like, being able to like it on Facebook gives you the idea, like, that's a factor of like how I want to perceive myself, how much likes I want to get ... Most of the times, you'd be hunting for likes; you'd be promoting yourself in way.

Both Flina and Kev mention consistency as the ability to keep up with new expectations and trends. Authentic then is being consistently up to date and "in the know." This is exactly what it means for both businesses and celebrities to be authentic, as I discussed in the introductory chapter, particularly referring to Marwick's (2013b) definitions.

In an effort to distance themselves from their peers, a few of my informants noted that they think they are different because they do not always feel the need to post for others.

*Anna, 20-year-old African American female:* I'm, like, this is not for you, this is for me. I'm posting this because I want to, not to please you.

In their study exploring Twitter users' conception of audience, Marwick and boyd (2010) also find that young users of social media will express that they do not think about an audience or imagine that they are posting for any set of people. Marwick and boyd label this as trying to be "authentic" because it is a way for teens to create a distance between themselves and notions of self-branding or celebrity, "sold out" culture.

However, I argue that these types of responses *still* align users with notions of celebrity culture. The idea that celebrities are always being authentic and we as laypeople

are just allowed the pleasure of experiencing their performances is integral to the celebrity equation. Additionally, the idea that any one user does not have to worry about considering who may be viewing their performances is a privilege that only a select few are afforded. Even pretending to have this privilege is practicing some aspect of celebrification.

Further, it seems illogical for users to state that they do not post for anyone but themselves while still leaving privacy settings on “public” or “friends” and performing on a site that is based on broadcasting the self and interacting with others. At the same time, however, the site does promote these types of performances as common, so users find no issue with the related affordances. After all, to be anonymous is to be forgotten, and this is why any kind of digital performance, however presented and consumed, is often seen as better than being completely off the grid.

#### Water is to Oil as Facebook is to Anonymity

It is no secret that early internet scholars praised the internet for being a space that welcomed anonymity. Users had the freedom to be who they wanted. A few select spaces were used to broadcast information and reveal identities. Although there are spaces where users can have at least some levels of social anonymity today, providing full anonymity is no longer what the internet is known for. Instead, the internet has become the opposite: a place to display and perform the self as much as possible, with a few corners where partial or full anonymity is possible.

Anonymity online is understandably a confusing topic for my informants. A point of “being on” is to broadcast a self and collect validation from other users. In many instances, as I discuss above, the point is to, albeit often subconsciously, participate in this new type of public and celebrified self. If the goal is to be known, why would anyone want anonymity?

As I presented in Digitally Structured Culture Chapter, users are well aware that Facebook anonymity is an oxymoron. But, I argue that a reason this is the case is because the goal is to be noticed as often as possible; complaints only arise when users feel that specific boundaries are crossed. This way of thinking about online spaces is not necessarily a bad thing. The idea that a site like Facebook allows us to create our own histories is a new phenomenon. Never before could people feel special enough and have the opportunity to create their own story that could then be broadcast to many people.

However, the potential issue arises that users are only offered affordances that value certain, shallow aspects of identity—those that align most closely with consumer and celebrity culture.

*Hilari, 21-year-old Asian female:* Facebook in general, it’s not about being anonymous, it’s about being known. So, in the internet we can be anonymous but in Facebook, I don’t think that applies even though it’s the internet.

The internet in general is still judged as a space where anonymity is possible. However, my informants often spoke about Facebook (and other social media) as if they are

somehow separate from the web as a whole. Facebook is understood as a detached space that users can live within, away from the larger internet and its perceived issues.

This is most likely the case for two reasons. The first is because Facebook works hard to create its own ecosystem that, it hopes, will eventually subsume the internet model with which we are familiar today. The second is because users do not always have the experiences or vocabulary to conceive of and to speak about the purely immense nature of the internet. The idea that so many people have access to so much of users' information on a daily basis is hard to grasp and makes it difficult to really enjoy performing the self—instead many users would have to constantly think about all of the people and third parties that can easily gain access to their personal information.<sup>22</sup>

*Jane, 18-year-old African American female:* I mean in some instances you don't want everybody to know everything but I don't think unless you're doing something wrong, doing something that you know is illegal, why? Unless you just don't want people knowing what you're doing then you shouldn't have a media site anyway.

Jane's line of thinking is dangerous because it severely underplays the importance of anonymity in many instances. Recent news stories and afterschool specials have taught us that anonymity is directly linked to sexual predators and internet trolls. While these are

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<sup>22</sup> I would argue that this is certainly one of my main goals—to help people understand how the internet, algorithms, and so on work. But, it is seen as putting a damper on the “fun and free” experience the internet brings to many people. There is definitely a balance to be struck here, and I would be lying if I said I have found the secret formula.

real issues, it is also the case that anonymity is a right for which we should be fighting for reasons beyond carrying out nefarious or illegal activities.

More related to my current point, however, is that this view stems from thinking within the new culture of celebrity identification standards. The idea that any one person would not want to attach their full self to any one online performance is deemed ridiculous. You should want people to know who you are and you should desire their attention and validation. This, of course, is just not plausible for many people. Those who need safe spaces to perform their identifications for a plethora of reasons are easily labeled “fake” or “bad” because the expectation is that the only reason to hide something is because it is undesirable or illegal information.

The notion of authenticity without anonymity leads to the assumption that a single identity is not only authentic, but also the more honest decision. To get my informants thinking about authenticity and anonymity in new ways, I introduced to them my design idea that would allow Facebookers to separate their profiles by social contexts. Each identification would have separated likes, friends, photos, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

*Stephanie, 27-year-old white female:* That’s so tiring, you know, that’s the same idea as putting up a front, like, OK, I’m not going to say this in front of my family so I’m going to just say it to my friends. It’s just so tiring to, like, how can you be yourself when you have the have fifteen different profiles?

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<sup>23</sup> I discuss this idea further in the final chapter.

*Aurigold, 22-year-old Black female:* You created this profile, not you, like this this altered person. It's kind of weird. It's kind of like why would you do that? Are you not happy? I would think they're not happy with themselves.

Immediately my informants judged my idea as dishonest or fake and deemed it too much work. However, this is an uninformed view that a majority of social media users have. Offline, we are constantly moving through different social contexts. Even online, in some spaces, we do this. However, Facebook's culture promotes the idea that this is not necessary or genuine. Therefore, my informants cannot conceive of a more dynamic Facebook self. As Aurigold adds, having more than one Facebook self (even though it could more directly relate to one side of the offline self) would lead to someone being quickly judged for wanting more than the one, sweeping and superficial Facebook identification.

These notions of celebrification and "being known" also present one explanation as to why users have such a limited perspective when it comes to privacy and anonymity. My informants were most worried that parents and employers would see their digital performances. They very rarely mention context integrity or institutional privacy.

*Jane, 18-year-old African American female:* That's why I don't have my family as friends, aunts & uncles [as friends on Facebook], I don't have them. I have, kind of, like, a set age limit where I don't add them unless I know them well enough. Just because, things on there, like, me and my friends do stupid stuff, nothing bad but, stuff that you just would never want your aunts and uncles to see.

*Stephanie, 27-year-old white female:* The way I feel about it is, I mean, if I set something to that it's only visible to me, I know that it's visible to Facebook but I don't care. Because, if there's something that, like, because all my friends that

I'm friend with on Facebook, I know them all; so, if there's something that I don't want them to see then I don't want them to see it.

*Cheryl, 18-year-old white female:* I feel like just kind of in general, it's common sense, or, like, be smart so, like, I feel like the question that runs through my mind no matter what social media, whether it's Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, whatever, like, if my mom sees this and an employer sees this, will they be OK with it kind of thing. And, if I know that my mom will be OK with the picture and the employer will be, like, oh, there's nothing wrong with that, then I'll post because no one else can say anything. But, otherwise, I see my friends posting crazy, I mean, like I said, I'm barely on it that much and the only pictures that I post are my profile or cover photo or I'll upload pictures. But, I see my friends, and, like, I know they're my friends and stuff but sometimes I look at them, and I'm like maybe they shouldn't have posted that because this person might see it.

Beyond the select view for whom my informants accounted by naming them as groups that they do *not* want to see their content, the remaining members of their social networks are people that they *want* to see their aspirational and highlighted identifications. This mentality is essentially the yin to lurking's yang.

When a user lurks on Facebook she browses through profiles without making her presence visible—she does not like, comment, etc. Lurking is coming on Facebook and many of my informants noted, in one way or another, that they spend a good amount of time invisibly looking at others' profiles. Ryan A., a 19-year-old white male, for example, compares Facebook to Wikipedia. He continued: "You just kind of stalk." Similarly, while discussing how annoying it is that Facebook makes design changes so often, Jane, an 18-year-old African American female stated: "Well people lurk, so it's easier to lurk, and also I just feel it's easier for them to sort through the data."

Harkening back to my discussion on Facebook as a tentpole medium, some students shared stories about using Facebook to learn about a person that they met at a party or through another social networking site.

*Flina, 22-year-old white female and an ex-user:* Facebook oftentimes, like, makes its way into people's lives because you want to go find someone that you met at a party, or you think so and so is cute, or you see someone's older brother or younger sister and you go and Facebook stalk them. And, it is sort of a way of, like, courting people and finding out who they are.

And, connecting with my literature review discussion surrounding the ways in which Facebook not only projects the identifications to others but also back to the self as a type of digital mirror, some of my informants also told narratives about the work they do through proactively viewing their own profiles to learn how others will “see” them.

*LJ, 19-year-old white female:* You have to do like a proofread lurk of your own profile to see what other people see.

Facebook has publically addressed lurking and has made it a point to never reveal to other users who has visited their profiles. LinkedIn, for example, is different—this site lists visiting users for each subscriber when she signs in to her profile.

Lurking allows Facebookers to compare themselves to other users without other users knowing that they are being viewed. Lurking is a common activity. Indeed, in every study that I have conducted regarding social media my informants have mentioned that lurking is one of the foremost reasons to maintain social media profiles. In the case of social privacy, my informants are sure to block parents and employers. Even my ex-users

told stories about how they have been pressured by their peers to invisibly look at profiles.

*Davina, 19-year-old Black female and an ex-user:* Sometimes there are things where people are like, “oh, take my password so you can see this or blah blah blah, look at these pictures” or “see what’s going on on Facebook”.

Despite the fact that Davina believes herself to be removed from the culture as a non-user, even she finds herself logging in to “do research on,” or lurk, users.

In general, users craft their online performances knowing that the majority of their network will lurk their spaces—LJ, and other informants, support this explicitly by discussing their tactics regarding preparing their profiles for those who silently view them. On the other hand, there is not much thought given to the ways in which institutions “lurk.”

### Summary

Celebrity culture is an important part of social networking performances and identification. The site promotes identifications that are closely linked to consumer and celebrity culture norms and expectations such as honesty (as promoted through affordances such as the Timeline and others’ ability to police identifications over time), transparency (as promoted through afforded bounded spaces such as the About Page prompts), and popularity (as expressed through promoted affordances such as Likes, comments, and shares). This leads to watered down selves that are valued when they adhere to mainstream conceptions of identification.

This celebrified self, I argue, is a subconscious process. The majority of users are not actively promoting some product or service. Instead, like reality stars, they are promoting their social selves and have learned through Facebook's structure that to be "successful" means gaining friends and collecting Likes, comments, and shares. The self then is necessarily boiled down to the aspects that invite these types of responses. It makes sense then that the site is the celebrity structure because culturally we have already learned that to draw in this type of attention is to act like those who already do—celebrities.

To be authentic becomes a complicated equation that includes business-like mission statements, completely ignoring our multiple and ever-changing identifications. Finally, being anonymous makes no sense to users, not only because the site does not make it easy (as I discuss in the previous chapter, *Visual Culture*), but also because if the goal is to be known (and lurked) then how can another goal be to value anonymity?

## CHAPTER 6 SOCIALY DIVIDED CULTURE

I think it's the fact that you can post a picture of your race but you can't post a picture of your gender.

*-Stephanie, 27-year-old white female*

Offline, we often accept norms that, while perhaps making us feel comfortable, are also deeply problematic. With each new technological advancement, many people are cited as declaring technology the “great social equalizer” (boyd, 2014). When the internet was first entering households, a common belief was that its integration would bring a cultural and social shift. In a sense, the internet would disrupt old social expectations and “set the culture in search of new equilibria” (Agre, 2002, p. 171). Some believed that the small, virtual communities that were forming online between strangers would both increase and grow, eventually pushing for widespread social change (Rheingold, 1996).

A large reason for this optimism was the fact that inside virtual communities, users could socialize just as they did offline, but leave their bodies behind. Users could meet new people and experiment with their identities—“in cyberspace, everybody is in the dark” (Rheingold, 1996, p. 3). Prejudices were assumed to soon be a thing of the past—race, gender, and physical appearances would no longer be delineating factors.

Although it *was* clear that new information technologies could not be the sole catalyst for social change, they *were* expected to play an integral role in the realization of the many working parts of social change. For example, the global scale of the internet

was expected to lead to the majority of organizations and institutions working together as one unit (Castells, 2000). Thus, the assumption was that, because the internet was built on networks, cultural trends would move toward a more democratic, networked model. However, it seems that the main players—the large corporations who support these networks in the first place—were forgotten.

Turkle (1995) wrote that internet technology grounds postmodernism and *requires* all people to be accepting of multiple viewpoints. She writes that this new social order would call forth a new moral discourse. Early techno-utopians like Turkle were right in thinking that the internet would become intertwined with people's daily lives, just not that this intertwining would lead to a more harmonious social existence.

Today, many criticize techno-utopians for being too optimistic. Sadly, it is true—technology does not solve social issues. In fact, technologies often work to reinforce social divisions (boyd, 2014). As I discuss in my introductory chapter, those who design and program our digital spaces are not always able or have time to access or reflect on all of their own biases and shortcomings. They instead create limited spaces that we then take as semblances of offline spaces with equivalent affordances.

Indeed, the prejudices that we learn offline are very likely to journey with us into digital spaces. While Facebook may allow us to connect to new people in new ways, it also reinforces existing connections and norms transplanted from offline spaces. We

assume that all of our embodied social experiences will not transfer, such as race, gender, ethnicity, class, and so on (boyd, 2014). However, we bring our narratives with us.

Boyd devotes a full chapter to this issue in her book, *It's Complicated* (2014). She provides us with stories to show the divides that still exist online, closely resembling offline divisions. For instance, Twitter users may have diverse networks but only end up interacting with friends who are the same race/ethnicity. As another example, Myspace is considered by many young users as the “ghetto” social networking site. There is a clear racialized and classed divide between those who use Myspace and those who use Facebook. Facebook is deemed the “cleaner” space. Just as whites fled neighborhoods when racial minorities moved in, boyd’s informants admitted to leaving Myspace once racial minorities joined. Thus, these racial divides help users to decide on both their platforms of choice and how they will perform in each space.

### Digital Gender

Beyond these bigger picture platform concerns that boyd and others discuss, I also learned through my discussions with my informants that social media cannot mend the even more micro-level social divides. No matter how “liberal” a social media space or company may seem, it is difficult to leave our prejudices at the door. This is especially the case when we remember that all data must have the capability to be quantified, leading to superficial identifications at some point.

Although, as I discuss in my Visual Culture Chapter, the About Page is not of much interest to the general user, there are some “basic” aspects of the Page that users do care about—“gender,” “relationship status,” and “interested in.” Therefore, an excellent example of the affordances provided through Facebook can be seen in the site’s extended gender options. Instead of only selecting “female” or “male,” users can also now choose “other.” Once this option is selected, users can select one or more affiliations from a validated list of about 50 gender affiliations. Users can also select their pronoun—“she,” “he,” or “they”—the neutral pronoun. The majority of my informants did not even know that these new options were introduced, even though my focus groups and interviews all took place less than a month after the change was implemented. Only one of my informants stated that she changed her Facebook gender.<sup>24</sup>

The most common reason my informants gave for why they have not changed their gender was because *they* had not changed.

*Ryan A., 19-year-old white male:* I think as soon as I got a Facebook I put it and my gender hasn’t changed, though, I haven’t really changed.

Ryan A.’s explanation nicely summarizes almost all of my informants’ stances. To the average Facebook user, changing gender affiliation on the site has nothing to do with avoiding stereotypes or enacting agency to subvert the system. Instead, it is simply about filling in what is present on their birth certificates.

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<sup>24</sup> Dana changed her gender on Facebook from “female” to “Cis female.”

*Cheryl, 18-year-old white female:* I think people that, like, maybe are one of the, umm, they, maybe it'll make them feel more comfortable and, like, do you know what I mean, like, less discriminatory against them kind of thing, which I'm sure, obviously, Facebook's going to keep upgrading to try and make more people want to go on it and feel more comfortable, like, they're accepted there. But, I just think that's ridiculous. Like, on your birth certificate I really doubt it's ever going to be more than just male or female.

Cheryl is not only adhering to the apparent standard that gender on Facebook should equal sex on a birth certificate, she is also presenting her distaste for the change. Because she does not align herself with this effort, she sees no reason why anyone would feel the desire to stray from their sex as defined at birth.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, other informants found gender identification to be extremely unimportant and could not fathom why other users would want this as a visible part of their Facebook identification.

*Davina, 19-year-old Black female and an ex-user:* If you are non-binary, then, like, I feel, like, so, whoever knows you would know that. Like, does that have to be the first thing that somebody sees on your profile?

Even though gender and “interested in”<sup>26</sup> are two clearly distinct categories on Facebook, and offline for that matter, it still does not change the fact that people confuse and conflate the two.

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<sup>25</sup> Some would also note that there is a conflation of sex and gender here where the former is defined as biological and the latter as a choice within social and cultural norms.

<sup>26</sup> Facebook uses “interested in” to infer a user’s sexuality. Users can select “men,” “women,” both of these options, or neither of these options. Even with the updated gender affiliations, “interested in” remains a binary category.

*Jane, 18-year-old African American female:* I kind of appreciate it [the new gender options]. Obviously I'm always going to keep mine to female, but, like, I just think it's nice because if you can change your relationship status then you should be able to show who you actually are.

*EP, 21-year-old white male:* True, that is your, well transgender ... I can't decide whether it's a sexual thing or if it's a gender thing. I think it's both. I honestly don't know.

The misconception that gender affiliation is linked to sexuality even led some of my informants to discuss Facebook as a dating website. Facebook does not advertise itself as a dating website and actually lacks the affordances that are inherent to typical dating sites. However, the new gender options were more easily understood through this lens for many of my informants.

*Deb, 18-year-old African American female:* Because, I guess, is Facebook, I don't know if Facebook, like, does this on purpose, but, isn't it kind of like they want people to meet each other, like, dating-wise sometimes?

Even though Facebook is not actively running as a dating site, it is easy to see how it can be used, or at least viewed, in this manner. Because it is not anonymous, users can learn about potential partners through mutual friends actually making the process easier and safer—users know that they have common links and they can view more about the potential partner instead of just view a few photos and kitschy bios (the aspects on which many typical dating sites rely).

In truth, any social media site can be employed as a place to meet potential partners. It depends on how any one person prefers to meet and get to know people. With this said, comparing Facebook to a dating site was one of the few reasons my informants

could offer regarding why Facebook would add a validated gender field instead of just allowing users access to a free space.

*Flina, 22-year-old white female and an ex-user:* I knew someone in high school, there was a girl whose relationship started with a Facebook post from some guy who went to, or poke rather, from someone from a different high school. And, they didn't know each other it was just, like, mutual friends probably, you know, and they, he somehow found her Facebook and poked her and they ended up dating for a year. So, I think in a way that's why maybe like, as much as Facebook isn't a dating site, it does allow you to look through a book of faces of people that you may be able to get to through a few clicks but might not really know and by identifying your gender people can decide if you are a candidate or not for them, right, you know? And, then the race thing, I guess is like you'd be able to tell by pictures.

After speaking with my informants about Facebook's gender additions, I asked them all why they thought Facebook was doing so much gender work<sup>27</sup> while at the same time there was no space afforded to define race/ethnicity. Flina explains how Facebook can work as a makeshift dating site, implying that it was helpful for the male in her story to know that the person he was interested in was a female. At the same time, she implies that there was absolutely no need for a race category because he could know her race by looking at her pictures.

For most of my informants, it was a shock at first to learn that there was no race/ethnicity category. My white informants in particular had no idea that this was not

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<sup>27</sup> I do not mean to imply that Facebook did a lot of work to give LGBTQ groups more options. Instead, it is important to recognize that LGBTQ groups have done, and are doing, a lot of work in an effort to achieve equal rights and representation. Facebook's change to their gender affordances was simply an answer to the many protests, forum posts, petitions, and so on. Thank you to Megan Lindsay (Arizona State University) for helping me to realize the potential misconception of my phrasing.

an option, and some noted that their ignorance was most likely due to the fact that they would be unlikely to seek out such a specific space to define their race. This, of course, is the definition of white privilege (see, for example Wise, 2011). Those in the racial majority are afforded the privilege of never having to think about their race. This is in contrast to, for example, Black students who are reminded every day on Facebook that they are in fact a stereotyped racial minority (Cirucci, 2013c).

#### Gender Just Matters More

With some reflection, my informants began to conjecture as to why Facebook would include affordances to define gender but no race or ethnicity affordances. There were three main themes of these discussions: complexity, post-racial culture, and visual culture.

Some of my informants discussed that Facebook only having gender affordances but no race/ethnicity affordances is rooted in the fact that race is just more complex and complicated and thus better left out. This claim ignores, of course, that Facebook added at least 50 validated gender affiliation options, that there are actually more gender affiliations that they do not include, and that there could just a blank, open space—in other words, gender is complex as well.

*Deb, 18-year-old African American female:* I know a lot of people who have a lot of race identity.

*Dana, 22-year-old white female:* In our country, it wouldn't make sense. You'd have to do it by region, or by geographic location. Here, you know, I would fall into white or Caucasian. But in another country, you know, in Europe, you're

going to see and this is just one example, we have this influx of people from the middle east moving into places like Holland and Denmark and if they're born there, then they're going to identify themselves as Dutch. But, a Dutch person that's white is going to see them as a Middle Easterner. So, there are so many different types of race and ethnicities since it is a social construct, so, it makes sense because sex is something that we binary with gender identity.

It is certainly easy to completely push away and ignore an issue if it just seems too sticky to deal with. However, to assume that race/ethnicity are sticky and that gender is not, devalues the struggle that many communities are experiencing in fighting for more than just “female” and “male” under Facebook’s gender prompt, along with many other gender affiliation battles.

Dana attempts to problematize the issue of having a space to define race or ethnicity by explaining that, in the United States, we view our genealogies differently from other countries. However, I would argue that this makes it clear that she is already thinking too much within the Facebook-structure-box—a space that asks users for their backgrounds does not have to be a drop-down or limited in any way. Additionally, it does not have to be titled the same in every country; for example, some countries’ users see “sex” and others see “gender.”

Other informants discussed the possibility that race in particular is left out because race is no longer an issue.

*LJ, 19-year-old white female:* Umm, I like that there isn’t one actually. I think that it’s good that it’s [Facebook’s] color blind.

*Ashley, 20-year-old white female:* I don't know, I just feel like, sometimes people when they grow up ...I don't know what their race is. I just don't think it matters that much. It just doesn't define you.

Ashley's comment is particularly interesting because she begins to talk about maturity and then trails off to end with the claim that race does not define people. Unfortunately, this is a naïve way to understand racial relations, especially in the United States. First, she is implying that worrying about defining your race is somehow a dated or immature identification. This perhaps could be related to comments I included in the Digitally Structured Culture Chapter—students noted that defining the self beyond Facebook's affordances is an immature way to think about identifications, such as music and coded backgrounds. This way of viewing social media spaces is in direct relation to deeming Myspace the immature social medium. Further, when we append boyd's findings that whites flee "Black" social networking sites such as Myspace, the story becomes even more dynamic.

Second, Ashley adds that race does not define a person. Unfortunately, race *does* play a large role in how we view one another, and media play a significant role in creating and maintaining negative stereotypes. We learn how to interact with one another through physical features, and it is naïve to assume that digital spaces open up new, equal spaces (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012). As Nakamura (2002) argues, the internet has become a space for *cybertyping*. Digital spaces harbor hegemonic ideals and race

becomes just as important online as it is offline (Martin, Trego, & Nakayama, 2010; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greensfield, 2004).

In a study that I conducted with Black emerging adults at an HBCU (Historically Black College/University), I found that my informants were faced with raced issues every day on social media (Cirucci, 2013c). Although some decided to fight stereotypes and be “the shining light in the darkness” (p. 23) for their race and others chose to ignore it altogether, they *all* had to deal with the racialized nature of the spaces.

Some of my informants were noticeably uncomfortable to talk about the lack of racial identification spaces on the site. The below comments summarize those of my informants who tried to explain that categorizing by race is unhealthy division and thus does not belong on Facebook.

*EP, 21-year-old white male:* I think it might be the fact alone that it’s a dividing factor amongst people in the sense that people are obviously going to say I’m Irish, American, Asian, there are obvious demographics that divide. Whereas everything else on Facebook doesn’t really divide you, it just shows your interests.

*Deb, 18-year-old African American female:* It shouldn’t matter what someone is, like...it’s [Facebook’s] a superficial place, you’re not getting that serious on Facebook. I just feel like none of it really matters.

*Stephanie, 27-year-old white female:* I mean now that I’m in college, I’m learning that race is a socially constructed thing, so, given that there’s no option for what kind of race you are, or what ethnicity you are, I’m not, I’m not drawn into that idea of having that out there because it’s socially constructed, so, you are who you are and whatever you choose to be, so, it’s, it’s not relevant.

*Ryan B., 21-year-old white male:* I’m just, I’m indifferent about it, I guess. I mean, it’s something that I don’t think, you know, represents the individual. I

think everybody just looks too much into that. Like, individuals... just take backgrounds as an example. Oh, I'm Irish, I'm this, I'm that. I'm the kind of person that goes out saying I'm American. And, I don't think that would ever come on, so, I just, I'm just indifferent about it. I don't buy into it. I think it's who you are as a person, not the color of your skin, not where you come from, those kinds of things that really make you who you are. That's just how I feel about it.

The unfortunate truth is that even if you believe race should *not* matter, your wish does not make it so. After Ryan B.'s short speech about being "American," many of the other participants in his focus group nodded their heads and felt some common American bond with him. Unfortunately, this is not that simple of a story. Even being able to feel "American" is a distinct privilege that only some get to experience.

Ultimately, discussions within the focus groups led to considerations of visual culture.

*Deb, 18-year-old African American female:* You look at their picture, if you want to know, you get to know them; if you don't then you go on to the next thing in your life.

*JM, 20-year-old white female:* What I'm saying is you can see what they look like. And, if you want to know what their race is, you can ask them, sort of, but looking at them you really can't, like, sexuality doesn't have a color. I think people identify with that more, not to say that I agree with that, but I feel like that's how Facebook is saying it.

*Stephanie, 27-year-old white female:* I think it's the fact that you can post a picture of your race but you can't post a picture of your gender. And, I think that's why it's important to Facebook. Because you can, because, you know, like, gay men, they can cross dress, so, they can pose as whoever they want on their profile picture, but, so, ok, so, let's put race in. Like, the color of their skin, they can be a black male who dresses as a female, so, you would say oh this is a black female. But, that's only what you see.

With a nod back to the findings presented in my Visual Culture Chapter, my informants demonstrated the importance of being able to *see* the people with whom they interact. There is a certain anxiety that exists for many people when they cannot decipher someone's race or gender. This is perhaps rooted in the fact that first impressions help us to define people and stereotypes help with this. We learn about people through others' narratives and through metanarratives. It is not uncommon for many people to outright ask people "what they are" if they are restless enough and need to compartmentalize the person in question.

Stephanie even includes in her story that a space for gender is "important to Facebook." She believes that Facebook actively decided to ask for gender because they would not be able to categorize for marketing reasons otherwise. On the other hand, the site can perhaps "guess" race.

There are many ways to breakdown and analyze my informants' dynamic comments as we begun to really explore what race and gender are, how we perform them, and how we view them. Stephanie confuses gay men with men who choose to cross dress, for example. But, what I want to focus on is the fact that the majority of my informants believe that race can be detected by just looking at someone's profile picture, but that gender cannot.

Indeed, Butler (2006) argues that gender affiliation is really performativity. We are not one gender of another; instead we socially situate ourselves. Gender is not some

static “thing” that we can “be;” we are all constantly reiterating and therefore reifying gender norms through subconscious acts of performativity. Thus, we are never statically female or male. In most cases, people act in a way that adheres to the reified stereotypes that match their sex given at birth. That is, to be “manly” is a set of reified norms that only remain the custom because people keep validating them by including them in their narratives and performances. Therefore, it is impossible to separate sexual difference from discourse, linguistic and non-linguistic. Performativity is not a deliberate “act” but instead an invisible process.

Hall (1996) calls for applying Butler’s performativity to race. As with gender, hegemonic norms regarding “biological” differences are conflated with culture and lead people to think that others who look the same must also act in a homogenous manner. Further, these actions are deemed “inferior” for the simple purpose of deeming the white race superior. Like the essentialization of female and male as illuminated in Butler’s work, Hall noted that racial minorities are generalized to a shallow understanding so that they can fit easily into coherent categories. These racial stereotypes are violent in that they jam each person into a macro version of the self that rejects other identifications, implying that other identifications beyond race are unimportant.

In this vein, we could argue that it makes no sense for Facebook to have gender, race, or ethnicity categories. Instead, the way that the spaces are employed, and the ways

that the users choose to adhere or stray from stereotypical expectations is all that is actually relevant.

In contrast, Alcoff (2006) argues that visible identifications also must be taken into account. We learn how to interact with people through how they look. Although we may be able to transcend differences of the psyche, it is hard or impossible to transcend a category such as race. Not a biological difference, race has come to be understood as a social difference—the physical are used to define the “natural” differences, promoting ways of looking as “better” or “worse.”

With Alcoff’s addition, we see that, as many of my informants included, visible identification is an integral, albeit unnecessary, piece of the social process. Instead of allowing users to construct their own notions of who they are beyond their physical traits, including race, Facebook instead pushes for profile pictures that lead to others defining users as they like based on visual representations. Gender, on the other hand, becomes unsettling for many people because it is not as bound to visible representations as race.<sup>28</sup>

Revisiting JM’s comment, she includes “...I feel like that’s how Facebook is saying it.” Hidden in the many intense discourses surrounding race and gender, some informants began to mention that Facebook is perhaps the entity that is leading them think about race and gender in certain ways. To be clear, just as Facebook cannot solve

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<sup>28</sup>Here I am only discussing current American culture. In other cultures race is difficult to discern while gender is very easy.

social divisions, I do not want to claim that the site is solely creating new social divisions. Clearly, the issues discussed in this Socially Divided Culture Chapter are not new. However, in a space that could be open-minded, users are beginning to realize that the space, as a mediator, makes explicit, moral, and non-neutral decisions that often reify stereotypical norms instead of providing more open spaces for exploration and explanation. It is important to note that Facebook is reacting to the United States' current LGBTQ social movement that challenges people to change the way we understand gender; there is no equivalent movement attempting to alter our conception of race.

Butler (2006) also discusses the notion that one reason gender is such an issue in today's society is because our language is so gendered. It is difficult to ever speak about one person without having to select "she" or "he." Similarly, my informants remarked that perhaps Facebook needs a gender category because it helps people's networks to know which pronoun to use when addressing them. On the other hand, there are no "raced" pronouns, so why have a race category?

*Jane, 18-year-old African American female:* It's not like people refer to you, it's not similar to gender because gender you have to refer, like "he said" or "she said." It would be offensive if someone didn't refer to you in what you want them to refer to you as. But I feel like race ... No one refers to you to your face like that, so, why would they have it like gender?

Facebook has also attempted to solve this issue by adding the, albeit grammatically incorrect, pronoun "they" and citing it as the "neutral" option. While I did not ask this, it

would be interesting to learn if this norm transfers offline or to other online spaces, or if people still feel the need to use gendered pronouns in everyday conversations.

#### None of the Above

A dangerous aspect of Facebook is that the space for transgressive performances is lacking. The affordances granted often do not leave space for users to tell their narratives in ways that subverts the mainstream metanarratives surrounding issues of gender, race, and so on. For example, as I have included many times in this project, users must select at least one gender affiliation, and at sign up, they must select either “female” or “male.” While users can use status updates, photographs, etc. to express their gender, the static, drop-down selection remains. At the same time, the mere presence of this field privileges a certain way of thinking about identification generally and gender specifically.

Because I see this as such a pressing issue, I asked my informants why they thought there was no fourth option—an option to refrain from filling in gender. They were generally aware that gender was a category that was mandatory and offered the option of selecting the privacy setting “only me” for the gender category. Here again we see the difference between social and institutional privacy. Although gender would then be hidden from friends, Facebook and third party vendors would still have access to this information. Additionally, the selection would also still be constantly reflected back to each user.

My informants noted that they do not really remember signing up and had not thought about their gender selection much since.

*JM, 20-year-old white female:* I think when I filled out Facebook it was, like, so long that it was just kind of like, kind of like checking off a physical form, like, male, female, what are you interested in.

Additionally, my informants had assumed that categories like race and ethnicity were present on the site because official forms such as applications include these categories.

*Ryan A., 19-year-old white male:* I don't know, I just thought there was one [race category]. To me, it doesn't really matter to me, but usually in applications and stuff you see the race thing so that's why I just thought it was there, but ...

*Alessia, 20-year-old white female:* Yeah, given that when you apply on applications and stuff, like, university or work and all that, the first thing they ask you is your race; and, given that, you'd be surprised that social networking doesn't have that, especially Facebook because when you first start out with Facebook, it's an application process too, so, like, now that you point out that, have you noticed that there isn't the race and ethnicity option, I'm pretty surprised about that now because I never really thought about it.

Many of my informants compared starting a social networking profile to filling out an official form at a doctor's office, a work or school application, or the US Census. This was a main reason given for why gender as a required category needs to exist at all.

Similarly, my informants used the US Census to explain why race/ethnicity was not a Facebook category—it is a tricky category on that form, so maybe Facebook has learned from the Census' problems?

*Allen, 22-year-old white female:* I personally think it's probably better they don't include it, that, because, like, people identify a certain way and I know that a lot of the problem with the census is that they don't feel like the way they identify

can be checked off on a box. And, they don't want to be simplified to just a check on a box.

My informants compare Facebook to these official forms and applications because, even though Facebook is supposed to be a creative space, it is also viewed as an *official* space. While not necessarily a governmental or medical space, it is certainly an official *social* space. Users in general expect others to be honest online, and the way to “enforce” this “authenticity” is to take the site's prompts as seriously as expected when filling out the US Census or a job application.

Facebook promotes this way of using the site because of the affordances offered and the context in which they are offered. As I outline in the Structural Discourse Analysis Findings Chapter, just at sign up, users must enter their real names, birthdates, and gender. It is not farfetched then for my informants to be compelled to think of the space as one that is official and therefore deserving of official expectations. The problem with this is that real social and reflexive identity is not this clean cut. Narratives cannot be told solely via Censuses, job applications, and medical forms. What identification means begins to change when aspects that were once more fluid, are paired with those that are seen as static and “official.”

### Summary

I want to note that there is no one-size-fits-all answer when discussing race and gender affiliation. Online, users may want to explicitly define one, both, or neither. But my actual point is this: Facebook makes discrete decisions about what identity aspects to

ask for, how to go about allowing users to complete these prompts, and what categories are not included and are instead inferred through other methods, such as viewing photographs or checking “interested in.”

A goal of this Socially Divided Culture Chapter is not to critique my informants and write about how they are wrong for being naïve in their understanding of gender and race relations. Instead, I want to highlight the fact that technologies, in this case social networking sites, even though they have the potential to connect people across the world, are not solving our social and cultural divisions. Even though Facebook has the potential power to work toward this effort, I argue that the affordances they offer only support and reify a socially divided culture. Instead of the site offering blank spaces to define gender, race, ethnicity, and so on, they either create check boxes and validated fields or completely leave categories out.

By picking and choosing what identifications affiliations they ask for on the site and which they do not mention Facebook begins to place value on our different identification aspects. And, this leads to users privileging certain identifications over others. Of course, this can work in many ways. As I have shown in the above examples, some students believe that gender is more important than race because Facebook explicitly asks users to define their gender. On the other hand, some of my informants noted that race is a much more complex and important fight than gender, which is why

Facebook has made the decision to “stay out” of the debate by not asking users explicitly for their race affiliations.

## **CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION**

The main goal of this dissertation project was to better understand identification performances online by exploring actual interfaces and their affordances and by then using these findings to inform interviews and focus groups with emerging adults regarding their everyday social media practices. Gibson (1979) proposed that animals in nature can only work with the affordances that nature has granted them. However, these affordances are integral to animals' survival. Gibson also noted that his methods can be applied to human beings and their created structures. He warns that we must not forget that these structures are no longer neutral. Winner (1980) illustrates this claim by proclaiming that artefacts indeed have politics.

Some recent research applies the theory of affordances to digital spaces, in particular social networking sites (e.g., Neff et al., 2012). At a more holistic level, social networking sites persuasively guide us through the identification process (Papacharissi, 2009; Postigo, 2014), shaping our engagement with each platform by amplifying, recording, and spreading (boyd, 2010) our stories in ways that the general public has never experienced with previous broadcast media's one-to-many model.

These open spaces for many to promote their narratives have much changed since the earlier days of internet spaces where some technical experience was necessary. Instead, general users seek more "user-friendly" spaces and disregard any behind-the-scenes knowledge. At the same time, companies are easily collecting mounds of data

about their subscribers through their created templates and, in turn, representing users' lives back to them in new ways (Cohen, 2012).

I argue that these created spaces, that the majority of us fold so seamlessly into our daily lives, are creating new cultures—new ways of looking at the world, understanding each other, and understanding ourselves. This is a salient discussion because identifications are on-going narratives that are informed through both our conversations with others and with ourselves. In particular, I am interested in how these new cultures have implications for our definitions of authenticity, agency, and anonymity.

Authenticity should be regarded as context dependent because each time we enter a new social situation we are creating new narratives, adhering to what the social norms and physical spaces allow. Instead, notions of authenticity have become strongly linked to business-like best practices (Marwick, 2013b). Indeed, unlike previous notions of authenticity that existed outside of consumer culture, authenticity now lies in branding the self through methods much like those that celebrities and corporations employ (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Space for user agency on social networking sites is not a widely studied area in the field. Narratologists believe that agency exists within narratives—they allow the tellers to choose their stories' specifics and directions each time they tell them. Similarly, Butler (2006) argues that the only way to change mainstream expectations is to enact

agency by subverting structures from within. While many of the provided affordances are limiting in social networking sites, users can still go beyond the advertised use of the tool or even learn more about programming and “hack” the spaces.

Anonymity is often conflated with privacy. However a large goal of this project is to argue not only that the two are separate but that anonymity is the right for which we should be fighting. As seen in earlier social media spaces (e.g., Turkle, 1995), anonymity allowed for safe spaces in which to experiment with identifications. The first step to experimentation is divulging information. Therefore the issue is not actually with privacy, since privacy pertains to *content*. Instead, the issue is actually who can see what content. This is an anonymity discussion. I argue that traditional debates surrounding privacy become obsolete in online spaces simply because the “keys” to who we are and how we “interact” have changed and expanded.

To investigate my claims, I chose to empiricize Galloway’s (2013) theory, as outlined in his book *The Interface Effect*, that media should be understood as mediators. In this model, instead of focusing all research on the view through the window, or users’ identification performances through social media, we need to also investigate the window itself, or the medium and its affordances. For this particular project, I made the informed decision to employ Facebook as my case study. Facebook not only has a large user base, but it also utilizes many tools inherent to social media models such as status updates, photo uploads, geo-location, profiles, and so on.

Before speaking with users, I completed a structural discourse analysis of Facebook to answer my first two research questions: What affordances are offered by Facebook for the identification process? and In what ways does Facebook's structure privilege certain aspects of the identification process over others? I catalogued as many of the site's affordances as possible within my research timeframe. Dividing the site into seven architectural parts—Sign Up Page, About Page, Likes, Friends, Photos, Timeline, and Cookies—I listed spaces where identification performances can occur. I also explored related Facebook Help Center content, Terms of Service rhetoric, online forum posts and petitions created by users, and news media mentions of the site.

With the structural discourse analysis data, I not only gained a better understanding of the site, I also was able to begin my analysis of crafting identifications in the space, employing relevant literature to better understand the interface phenomena. Generally, taking a closer look at Facebook's architectural parts is a stark reminder that the filter is not neutral. At sign up, users must enter a real name and chose from either "female" or "male." Once at the About Page, users can then chose "custom" instead of female or male, but it is safe to assume that the originally chosen binary affiliation remains on users' records even if they choose from the custom gender list.

To answer my third and fourth research questions—How do users perceive the structure and its affordances? And How do users define notions of identity, authenticity, agency, and anonymity?—I conducted focus groups and interviews with 45 emerging

adults, four of whom are ex-users. Four themes, or “cultures,” emerged from my analysis. I label the themes as cultures because I was most interested in the new norms and expectations that Facebook’s structure promotes. Culture in this dissertation then is defined loosely as learned ways of being that mold how we view reality, others and ourselves. The following sections more closely discuss my overall findings and their implications.

#### Facebook Affordances and Privileged Identifications

By breaking Facebook into seven constitutive parts, I was able to better analyze the processes and selections that are a part of the identification processes of Facebookers. At sign up, users must enter “real” first and last names, a working email address, their birthdate, and classify themselves as female or male. This information is carried over to the About Page, and Facebook’s Terms of Service states that users must keep their contact information up-to-date. Often, users forget about the About Page, perhaps only updating it at first sign in since it is empty and Facebook prompts you to do so.

Even though the Sign Up Page only provides female and male as gender options, the About Page now has over 50 gender affiliations, along with the option to choose “she,” “he,” or “they” as a pronoun. If a user picks “other” instead of “female” or “male,” she is then given the option to enter one or more gender affiliations. This field, however, is validated—users must type in an affiliation that Facebook as already deemed a “correct” gender response. Other identification boxes in the About Page are also

suggested boxes—users can type in anything they want, but as they type suggestions are listed, perhaps denoting which are more “valued” options. Further, if a user’s place of work or education is not in the Facebook system, she can type it in freeform.

The Like button allows users to create a list of things, companies, celebrities, places, etc. that appears on their About Page. Users can also like their own and others’ photos, status updates, and so on. While users can easily perform some type of intimacy through this feature, Facebook also values this information because it connects users to products and other consumers, creating more acute algorithms. Indeed, friends are an important aspect of the Facebook marketing equation. Users’ interactions are often a more valued attribute than the static information they input into the About Page. Facebook can infer a lot about a user by looking with whom she is friends and with whom she regularly interacts. Indeed, Zuckerberg noted in an interview that he specifically chose the word “friend” because he knows it connotes a certain intimacy and would get people to share more personal information through the site—it got “people over a bunch of hurdles” (Zuckerberg as quoted in Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 312).

Previous research has deemed photographs the most integral aspect of the Facebook profile. This makes sense because we are enthralled by photographs, often needing them before we can believe someone’s narrative. The trend is further highlighted through the current popularity of sites such as Pinterest and Instagram that rely on mostly visual representations. Beyond photos that are uploaded to albums or on the Timeline,

Facebook provides two featured spaces for photos—the profile picture and the cover photo. The profile picture is literally the face of the profile while the cover photo has been described as the space where users can define themselves and allow other users to not even have to take the time to scroll down and read the rest of the profile.

Scrolling down, however, would lead users to view that user’s Timeline. Once the Wall, the Timeline is in reverse chronological order, recounting the user’s digital narrative from present to birth. Facebookers have the option of uploading old content and dating it so that it takes its chronologically correct space on the Timeline. This perhaps creates “zombie baggage” (Cirucci, 2013b)--older versions of the self pile up, making it harder for users to evolve and present new identifications.

Beyond the affordances present on the site, Facebook also has much power that exists external to the actual site. In particular, cookies track users across the web even when a user has logged out of Facebook. As long as she surfs on the same browser she uses to log in to the site, the cookies live on. As Turow (2011) discusses, this allows Facebook and other sites to create “reputation silos;” companies begin to only advertise products that they believe to be “right” for each user. Further, these models can be, and perhaps already are, applied to entertainment and news, creating digital echo chambers that never allow users to experience the world outside of their created comfort zones. Facebook has stated that their users have more power over their content than users of

sites such as Google because while Google searches the web to learn more about their users, Facebook lets their users input their own information.

### User Perceptions

On the macro-level, my informants expressed that an ecology of social networks exists. They mostly use these larger contexts as social contexts, friending certain people in each social medium and then posting accordingly. Further, it was hard for my informants to talk about Facebook's affordances without comparing the site to other social networking sites, both new and old. For example, Facebook was constantly compared to Myspace to explain Facebook's simplicity. While Myspace allowed users to personalize their pages through music, backgrounds, open-ended prompts, and so on, Facebook was described as "simpler" because it requires less work and less creativity. Generally, my informants described Myspace as the creative space and Facebook as the *social* space.

Indeed, Facebook is more "user-friendly" thus asking less of its users. Along with this change, however, users necessarily must place more trust in the interface to tell their narratives in their intended manner. Myspace was situated in a time where the ability to personalize digital spaces was new. Now, internet users are more fascinated with the ability to interact through these personal spaces. Thus, the idea of personalizing a space and being creative, has been replaced with digital interaction and being social. What my

informants seem to not be aware of is the power that they lose in this switch from “creative” to “social,” where the social self is also the unitary self.

One aspect of this lost power is the possibility for context collapse. Although users do employ platforms as social contexts, many of them describe Facebook as compelling them to friend everyone. So, even if they do use Instagram or Twitter as specific contexts to perform certain identifications, Facebook is unique because users must worry more about filtering their identification performances so as to not offend or ostracize members of each social context. This practice can become problematic. For example, as Vitak (2012) found, the more friends a user has, the less likely she is able to remember all of the members of her network and therefore the more likely she is to experience context collapse. Additionally, I found that with the often unwieldy friend networks that exist, users will not only imagine audiences as Marwick and boyd (2011) write about, but they will also infer how their friends will view and judge their profiles by assuming everyone uses the site for the same reasons as they do.

I argue then that to assume some “privacy paradox,” as many scholars do, is incorrect. Instead of understanding users as seemingly both caring about privacy and not caring about privacy, we should see that a macro-level understanding is different than a micro-level understanding. The ability to imagine everyone who has access to a user’s personal information is not only difficult, but also ruins the fun that users are having while broadcasting the self and interacting with others. Raynes-Goldie (2010) argues for

a similar understanding when she proposes that both social privacy and institutional privacy exist.

In line with this large and dynamic friend base that users have on Facebook, I argue that Facebook is a “tentpole” medium of interfaces and user content. The site affords users the ability to create profiles, manage a timeline, post status updates, upload photos, attach GIS locations, and so on. Additionally, with Facebook’s Open Graph, many other apps and sites are folded in, affording users the ability to link their social media experiences and allowing Facebook access to much more data. Users are aware of this and use Facebook as a type of phonebook or file where they can “do research” on other people and learn about who they are—this is information that they cannot obtain from a Twitter or Instagram profile.

Although through my structural discourse analysis I found that there are many morally-loaded affordances within the About Page, I learned through my informants that this page is not very central to identification and interaction processes on Facebook. Instead, my informants expressed that photographs are the way to define their Facebook identifications—visual representations of the self are *expected*. In fact, users feel uncomfortable when other Facebookers do not have profile pictures that reveal their visible identities. Most informants noted that these visuals, in particular the profile picture, are used for identity validation; this is the same reasoning that Facebook uses to

explain having made all users' names, genders, and thumbnails of profile pictures public and open to searches.

Consequently, Facebook not only promotes a self that is visible, but even more, a self that is shallow and based in consumer culture. The aspects of identifications that are privileged are similar to those that are privileged in celebrity culture. Almost all of my informants noted that they filter their identifications before broadcasting them through the site. This task includes taking all of their identifications and watering down these dynamic selves in an effort to both fit the site's templates and to create a common denominator version of the self that does not offend any one of their social contexts represented in their friend networks.

Once these identities are broadcast, users note that they feel pressured to collect friends, comments, likes, and so on, paralleling the desires that celebrities have in an effort to remain relevant. My informants explained similar sentiments in that they wanted to keep their profiles up to date and promote their filtered selves. As one of my informants noted, she keeps different performances bound to certain platforms to give people an "incentive" to follow her different social networking accounts. She is not promoting any specific endeavor, just her social self. Indeed, only a select few of my informants explicitly stated that they had professional goals that they were trying to fulfill.

Even with the ability to broadcast the self, Facebook is not necessarily seen as a space that affords users the ability to express all of their identifications without judgment. As many scholars have already argued (e.g., boyd, 2014), technology should not be expected to fix our social problems. We bring our narratives with us as we move through space and time. Even though these narratives are ever-evolving and being retold constantly, they are always couched in our experiences and preconceived notions regarding mainstream norms and expectations.

As a salient and contemporary example, I spoke to my informants about the change Facebook made regarding gender; the site added 50+ new gender affiliations and now affords users “they” as a pronoun beyond just “she” and “he.” Half of my informants were not aware of this change and only one had changed her gender. In fact, many of my informants were confused about the change and expressed that they did not think it was necessary.

Similarly, most of my informants had no idea that there is no place to define race/ethnicity in the Facebook interface. When I asked them why there was so much work being done around gender but none around race, my informants had trouble explaining this difference in representation. Arguments ranged from race being too complicated, to our society being post-racial, to visible identifications taking the place of any textual description. In general, my informants concluded that this decision made by Facebook deems gender more important than race.

Some of my informants were even angry that gender options beyond female and male were added, simply because these are the only two options present on birth certificates. In a similar vein, my informants noted that they assumed race/ethnicity existed as a Facebook prompt because all official forms such as the US Census and applications have race/ethnicity questions. Facebook is not some official governmental or medical form. However, it is seen as an official *social* space. Thus, there is a certain social contract that exists where users want other users to input a lot of “correct” information.

Holding Facebook in such high regard makes sense—users trust the site and rely on the space to allow them to promote their identifications and to connect with others. The esteem, however, is also problematic. As the official social space, users unconsciously have learned to rely on Facebook to guide them through expected cultural norms and expectations. However, it is clear that the values promoted by the site privilege specific identifications that are mostly in line with heteronormative trends.

My four Ex-User informants were few, but their comments are suggestive of larger media refusal themes. They exhibited more critical distance than my Facebooking informants in that they no longer feel bound to Facebook as a place to broadcast identifications and interact with others. They were concerned about our decreasing right to anonymity and feared the consistency necessary to upkeep Facebook identities. Even with their ability to be critical of the site, their responses regarding gender and

race/ethnicity still represented a generally divided culture that values the more mainstream gender and race representations.

### User Definitions

On Facebook, identification is described as nearly synonymous with authenticity. Because the site compels users to represent one or many offline identifications, users strive to be “honest.” All of my informants noted that they must filter their identifications because it is not possible to perform all of the self. However, some argued that they cannot be authentic because there are too many selves that have to be boiled down to shallow versions, while others argued that because they try to represent all aspects of the self they *are* authentic, even if they perform watered down representations.

Beyond being linked to corporation-like mission statements encapsulating honesty and transparency, authenticity is also closely related to visual and celebrity culture. Users desire visible validation, most often in the form of the profile photo. Instead of authenticity arising from some identification with which a user may want to experiment, she must now extend and collapse many offline identifications into one profile. Thus, users express the desire to “enhance” these offline identifications in the online space through competing for friends, likes, comments, and so on. Users also note that a goal is to keep up with both Facebook’s structural changes and with changes in cultural expectations. In sum, user definitions of authenticity are closely linked to Zuckerberg’s

and Facebook's mission of creating a space that uncovers some real, central self devoid of contexts and dynamic performances.

Although Facebook is seen as a space that values celebrity-like, less dynamic identifications, it is also considered an *official* space, much like the US Census or a medical form. This caveat adds more pressure to Facebookers, who are often compelled to complete as many of Facebook's identity prompts as possible and to remain logged in so as to not miss any important updates. I argue, then, that Facebook has become the official *social* interaction space, acting as a tentpole medium for both other social media apps and sites and for user content. Again, "authenticity" becomes crucial in the space, even if definitions therein are problematic. Instead of valuing multiple selves, Facebook drives users to perform a single, canonic self.

Agency, or thinking outside the box, on Facebook is not a frequent discussion that academics or users have. Instead, my informants expressed general complacency, noting that there are only two extreme options: being on or being off Facebook. Even if users are aware of ways to better customize their Facebook experiences, many admit that the methods are too difficult or time-consuming and so they give up. There is certainly power lost in the move to Facebook as the more "simple" social networking site. While less work is needed to maintain the profile space (unlike a site like Myspace), users often do not realize the necessary trust they place in Facebook to make morally-loaded

identification decisions for them. Unfortunately “simple” digital spaces usually afford users less power.

In the beginning of all of my interviews and focus groups, my informants were aware that Facebook anonymity is an oxymoron. However, once themes surrounding visual, consumer, and celebrity cultures were touched upon, it became clear that users not only know that anonymity is not possible, but are also comfortable with this fact because they *want* to be found and gazed upon. Beyond wanting to hide “controversial” content from parents and future employees, many users buy into the social contract of lurking on the site. Similar to Foucault’s (1979) analysis of the prison structure, Facebook acts as a reverse panopticon where users can create their own dossiers that are open for interpretation to many. This makes sense seeing the celebrity culture that Facebook promotes—users, in a sense, *want* to be watched.

Indeed, as our discussions delved deeper into user narratives, it was clear that anonymity on Facebook is a ridiculous request. Users are taught by the site’s interface that broadcasting the self and having others validate these performances is how identity works. As Turkle (2011) notes, users now go to social media spaces not to express emotions, but to instead figure out what emotions they should be having in the first place and to then have these emotions validated by friend networks before they are comfortable to actually feel them. Anonymous structures can promote this type of emotional “support;” but, remember, Facebookers who do not validate their identities through visual

representations of, and other links to, their corporeal selves are often ostracized—for my informants, the visible you *is* you.

This is made especially clear in the discomfort my informants felt speaking about race/ethnicity. When asked why Facebook has afforded multiple gender options but no space for explicit race/ethnicity, they often concluded that gender is at the same time more important and less complicated than race/ethnicity. Most interestingly, many of my informants revisited their hints at anti-anonymity to argue that race/ethnicity is not needed on the site because they can see users' race/ethnicity in their profile picture, but gender is not visible and thus needs to be defined in order to reduce any uneasiness that follows gender ambiguity. This is an interesting finding that is not true of all cultures—in many other parts of the world, race is much more difficult to “detect” than gender.

#### Future Directions

This dissertation project is unique because it is the first study, to my knowledge, that explores social media and identity by completely breaking down and analyzing a digital mediator and its affordances before speaking with users about their experiences with the interface and related implications. However, a limitation of this study design is that it is quite large and does not lend itself to focusing on any of the many issues that it brings to the surface.

Instead of one large study such as this project, I suggest that each new study that speaks to identifications in digital spaces should be more aware of the structural

affordances that are most likely guiding users to form certain perceptions of the site, others' identifications, and their own identifications. Notwithstanding, my main goal for this study is to inspire other scholars to study media as filters, suggesting new ways that researchers can examine and analyze digital spaces. These types of additions to research projects become especially salient when we realize that companies such as Facebook are completing "user experience" research all the time. However, for some reason, we have not integrated these methods into our study of social networking sites.

With a more rigorous understanding of social networking affordances, scholars will be more apt to speak to the changes in identification, contexts, norms, and so on that occur once people broadcast their narratives digitally. As I argued in this dissertation, solely analyzing the mediator's affordances was not enough, just as only speaking to current users would not have sufficed. My informants' answers differed slightly from the conclusions I would have made through only my structural discourse analysis. Similarly, I would not have been able to moderate fruitful discussions or analyze these interviews and focus groups well if I had not gained a deep, working knowledge of the site's structure first.

My future work will delve into one of the several issues mentioned throughout this project. For example, studies will focus on visual affordances and representations or gender affordances and representations. Other important issues, such as cyberbullying,

may be better understood if we first explore how identification and bullying are altered by digital affordances.

In addition, as I mention briefly regarding race and ethnicity in the Socially Divided Culture Chapter, sometimes the best analysis comes from investigating the affordances that are (decisively) omitted. These “negative affordances” are telling because their omission makes the discourse that most likely surrounded them “behind-the-scenes” invisible. Therefore, in future research, I will more precisely investigate affordances that have been left out or abandoned. For example, I plan to conduct a study that tracks Facebook’s interface changes back to its introductory structure. This historical analysis, along with exploring related news content and industry interviews, may allow me to be more informed on the current affordances and negative affordances.

Another limitation of this dissertation project is my lack of marginalized group representation. Although my informants and I spoke a good deal about the new gender affiliation affordances, only one of my informants stated that she changed her gender status to something other than female or male. Additionally, none of my informants noted that they identify as anything other than “straight.” Marginalized groups in general are an important area of research when speaking about affordances because they are the groups who are most likely to be underrepresented.

Further, marginalized groups are more likely to face issues with context collapse—the more marginalized the more likely a user is to have to code-switch or have

identifications that are more diverse. Not having to change identifications often as you travel through time and space is a distinct privilege, stemming from the fact that the identifications you perform are mostly accepted everywhere. The ultimate example of this is of course white, heterosexual males.

In future studies I intend to apply my methods to other social networking sites. Spaces like Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn offer distinct affordances that most certainly have implications for users. For instance, Twitter also affords users the space to upload a profile picture and a cover photo. Yet, users do not have to list real names. In LinkedIn, users cannot lurk unless they have paid for the premium service—each time another user views your profile page the site informs you. These affordances, among many others, clearly have implications for how users engage with and perform identity through the site. However, this dissertation research has also shown that Facebook is unique due to its role as a tentpole medium, bringing together not only many types of digital affordances, but also acting as a home base for user content.

A final limitation of this dissertation is that I chose to not interview present and past Facebook employees. Although my main goal was to understand user perception of the space and its promoted norms, including Facebook employee's voices would have added another layer and made for a more dynamic dialogue. For future studies, I plan on reaching out to Facebook and investigating the ways in which researchers, designers, and others play a role in the structural affordances and how they view the choices presented.

Beyond future directions for research, I also propose that sites like Facebook work harder to allow users the ability to experience both social and institutional anonymity. For example, Facebook could provide users with a way to represent many identifications after signing in through one, main screen. Each user would then be able to create profiles for however many identifications she desires. She would have different and separate names, friend networks, photos, About Page information, likes, and so on. Even the way Facebook handles its cookies and targeted advertising would be carried out according to the anonymous/pseudonymous profiles created by each user.

Not only would this new layer of the Facebook interface help users to avoid context collapse, it would also allow users safe spaces to play with identifications and to learn about who they are in different contexts. Offline, we understand that we have many contexts—family, friends, co-workers, classmates, etc. Online, users are trying to create distinct contexts as well—we saw this with my informants who attempt to use different social networking sites to break up their social interactions. However, Facebook compels users to friend everyone they know. Also, the site blends users' internet data collected through cookies attached to browsers. Instead, digital spaces that respect our different, sometimes entirely separate, identifications should be what the future holds for our digital performances.

### Conclusion: Do Social Networking Sites' Structures Matter?

This dissertation project started with a simple question: Do social networking sites' structures matter? The simple answer is yes. The complex, multitude of answers, as seen through the Facebook lens, exists throughout this dissertation. I began by reviewing literature regarding affordances, arguing that affordances provided by Facebook are an extremely important but forgotten aspect of the identification process. This identification process, I argued, is driven by our need for narrative, both in social situations and in reflexive conversations with ourselves. I focused on three integral aspects to maintaining the self—authenticity, agency, and anonymity.

My method was novel—I empiricized a recent theory (Galloway, 2013) that media are actually mediators, or filters, that make moral decisions when programmed to collect, broadcast, and archive users' personal information. To carry out this method, I conducted a structural discourse analysis of Facebook cataloguing most of its presented affordances and analyzing its Help Content, forums and petitions posted by users, and news media content regarding the site.

I spoke with 45 emerging adults, four of them ex-users. Many themes emerged through my multiple readings of the transcripts of our discussions, and this project details the following “cultures,” or ways of understanding identification, that I argue Facebook sustains: Digitally Structured Culture, Visual Culture, Celebrity Culture, and Social Divided Culture. For example, a digitally structured culture is promoted through more

macro-level affordances that work to set the foundation of “normal” usage for each social networking space—users find that their friend lists are larger and more diverse on Facebook related to a site like Instagram or Twitter. Additionally, Facebook’s affordances include much more in the way of personally-identifying information. Thus, users view the site as a “phonebook” or “file” where they can visit to “do research” on others.

A visual culture is promoted through much space afforded to visual representations of self. Photographs are expressed as integral to identity validation and thus safety on the site, even though all Facebookers can choose a unique username. Celebrity culture is promoted through the constant pressure to update the self while remaining true to some honest and transparent, inner self. Users feel the need to collect affordances such as friends, likes, comments, and shares.

Finally, Facebook promotes a socially divided culture by continuing to present aspects of identifications as binary, segmented, or just as “other.” For example, even though the site has provided users with 50+ gender affiliations, at sign up, new users must still only choose from female and male. Additionally, while users *must* choose a gender, there is no space to explicitly define race or ethnicity. Generally, with a few exceptions, I found that users speak about identity in the terms that Facebook promotes through its granted affordances.

In particular, my informants' definitions of authenticity, agency, and anonymity were generally problematic and much too bound to the sites' designations. Users exhibit signs of devaluing multiple identifications, spaces for enacting agency, and the right to separate, unlinkable selves. Authenticity includes filtered selves that look to corporation-like initiatives such as honesty and transparency. Agency is nearly nonexistent; users believe that the only choices are to be on or off the site. Even those users who have attempted to take some control have just given up because the tasks are too hard or time-consuming. Anonymity is not seen as an important aspect of identification, but instead as a performance for people who are unlawful or troubled. In contrast, many validation points are integral to prove that the digital self *can* be linked to other selves, especially the visible and the legal self. Anti-anonymity is promoted and accepted as a way of validating identity, even though Facebook actually affords users unique usernames.

While conducting this study, Facebook released a study exploring how emotional contagions can travel through online social networks (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). By slightly altering the algorithms that present News Feed content to users, the team found that changes in general emotions on the site (such as posts from others being all negative or all positive) can have indirect effects on the viewer. For example, if a user is shown only posts from friends that have positive content, the user is more likely to post a status, albeit unrelated, that is positive. As a byproduct, this study also revealed that Facebook had "secretly" toyed with almost 700,000 Facebookers' content.

When the method was revealed, the internet was flooded with angry academics, researchers, and users. For instance, there are more blog posts regarding the study than one person could possibly read, and academics across the country began organizing panel discussions and digital ethics workshops. I do not want to claim that ethical research is not important, and I appreciate interested scholars using the moment to gain momentum in their careers.

However, this study has become so talked about for two reasons. The first is due to the fact that people, in particular scholars, do not view Facebook as a mediator, or a filter. Content input by users through the site is *always* filtered before it is displayed and archived. After reading the study, many feel that the inherent trust they placed in the site was broken. In actuality they instead, if only unconsciously, felt a taste of the power that is lost the moment we immerse ourselves into the Facebook structure. If social media were analyzed more as non-neutral mediators that are always filtering our personal information, perhaps the study would not have been so jarring.

The second reason that this study has become so prominent in mainstream media and has angered so many users is because Facebookers see the site as the *official* social space. The site and the identifications maintained therein are important to users. Many see the site as reminiscent of the US Census or medical forms and expect that everyone is portrayed, if not “authentically,” at least “accurately.” Additionally, users go to Facebook

to experience very specific instances of intimate social interaction that must be validated through visual representations.

My argument here is solidified by the fact that a few weeks after the Facebook's social contagion study was released, the dating site OKCupid revealed that they also toy with data presented to users (Wood, 2014). One may assume that the outrage would be tenfold, considering that while Facebook friends are likely to know each other in other settings, OKCupid users are employing the site for the purpose of meeting new people along with trying to find love. Perhaps unexpectedly, the response was not nearly as strong as the one that the Facebook research team received. With my findings in mind, however, it is clear why this was the case.

Throughout this dissertation I speak about "Facebook" as if it is some autonomous subject. As I mention in my introductory chapter, this is not because I am a technological determinist, but for the sake of conciseness. Nevertheless, this is a growing problem surrounding social networking sites; users and scholars alike forget that the space is not equivalent to the offline world. Instead, we must first and foremost remember that Facebook is built, maintained, and defined by a diverse groups of people—researchers, designers, programmers, investors, users, and so on; thus, we cannot assume that the site is a neutral structure (Gibson, 1979). And, importantly, we are not *determined* by structures, but by repeatedly acting through the structures' promoted "normative" ways of acting (Butler, 2006). Thus, before we can thoroughly understand

digital identifications and enact agency, we must first fully comprehend how these structures and their rules function.

This dissertation is often driven by my assumptions of Facebook's goals. In reality, there is no simple way to discuss what the site's actual intentions for the structural affordances are, both because I did not interview employees and because they are infamous for being hard to crack. I think it is easy for some to be cynical and declare that Facebook is only in it for the money and that the employees do not care about users. Conversely, Zuckerberg has stated many times that his main concern is empowering his user base. Chris Cox, Zuckerberg's vice president of product is quoted as saying: "The key reason [that Facebook has found such success] is that Mark is not motivated by the money" (as quoted in Kirkpatrick, 2011). Zuckerberg very well may be motivated by a multitude of goals. However, we cannot forget that Facebook went public in February 2012. No matter his personal goals, Zuckerberg has a legal responsibility to his shareholders to make a profit. Therefore, while secondary goals perhaps remain unknown, it seems the primary goal is actually quite obvious.

I stress here then the importance of researchers becoming more rigorous in their social media investigations by first cataloging and analyzing affordances related to their research questions and hypotheses. Before research communities make conclusions regarding how people behave in digital spaces, they must begin by uncovering what, often invisible, forces are driving users' performances. Once these methods become

accepted and widely applied, users can become more educated in the ways in which social networking sites make morally-loaded decisions with our data that then have implications for how we view others and ourselves.

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## APPENDIX A IRB APPROVAL LETTER



**Office for Human Subjects Protections**  
**Institutional Review Board**  
 Medical Intervention Committees A1 & A2  
 Social and Behavioral Committee B  
 Unanticipated Problems Committee

Student Faculty Conference Center  
 3340 N Broad Street - Suite 304  
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19140  
 Phone: (215) 707-3390  
 Fax: (215) 707-9100  
 e-mail: [irb@temple.edu](mailto:irb@temple.edu)

### Certification of Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects

Protocol Number: **21830**  
 PI: **DUFFY, BROOKE**  
 Review Type: EXEMPT  
 Approved On: 25-Nov-2013  
 Approved From: 25-Nov-2013  
 Approved To:  
 Committee: B BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
 School/College: MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION (1700)  
 Department: SMC:ADVERTISING (17240)  
 Sponsor: No External Sponsor  
 Project Title: The structured self: Authenticity, agency, and anonymity in social networking sites

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 The IRB approved the protocol **21830**.

If the study was approved under expedited or full board review, the approval period can be found above. Otherwise, the study was deemed exempt and does not have an IRB approval period.

Before an approval period ends, you must submit the Continuing Review form via the eRA module. Please note that though an item is submitted in eRA, it is not received in the IRB office until the principal investigator approves it. Consequently, please submit the Continuing Review form via the eRA module at least 60 days, and preferably 90 days, before the study's expiration date.

Note that all applicable Institutional approvals must also be secured before study implementation. These approvals include, but are not limited to, Medical Radiation Committee ("MRC"); Radiation Safety Committee ("RSC"); Institutional Biosafety Committee ("IBC"); and Temple University Survey Coordinating Committee ("TUSCC"). Please visit these Committees' websites for further information.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit modification requests for all changes to any study; reportable new information using the Reportable New Information form; and renewal and closure forms. For the complete list of investigator responsibilities, please see the Policies and Procedures, the Investigator Manual, and other requirements found on the Temple University IRB website: <http://www.temple.edu/research/regaffairs/irb/index.html>

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions

**APPENDIX B**  
**FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. When did you first sign up for Facebook?
2. How often do you go on Facebook?
3. What do you think about the sign-up page?
4. How do you feel about the options presented to describe yourself on the About Page?
5. What do you think about how Facebook constructs and displays your networks?
6. What do you think about how Facebook prompts you about and displays your Likes?
7. What do you think about how Facebook displays your identity through the new Timeline feature?
8. How important are pictures on Facebook? How do you feel about the ways in which Facebook displays and catalogues your pictures?
9. More specifically, how important is your profile picture to your online identity? Why is it important to Facebook that you have one?
10. Are you familiar with Facebook's cookies? How do you feel about what they do and what they are used for?
11. Do you connect your Facebook to other social apps?
12. Do you log-in to Facebook so that you can sign-in to/participate in/comment on other websites?
13. How would you define authenticity? How do you think Facebook would define it?
14. How would you define agency? How do you think Facebook would define it?
15. How would you define anonymity? How do you think Facebook would define it?

**APPENDIX C**  
**INFORMANT INFORMATION**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Hometown</b>	<b>Socio-economic status</b>
Alessia	20	white	Mountaintop, PA	Middle
Alex	20	Asian	Indonesia	Middle
Allen	22	white	CA, OK, GA, & PA	Middle
Anna	20	African American	Philadelphia, PA	Working
Ashley	20	white	Newtown, PA	Upper-Middle
Audrey	21	white	Abington, PA	Middle
Aurigold	22	Black	Philadelphia, PA	Working
Bob	21	white	Mechanicsburg, PA	Upper-Middle
Cheryl	18	white	Harleystown, PA	Middle
Dana	22	white	Malvern, PA	Middle
David B.	30	white	PA	Middle
Davina	19	Black	Bronx, NY	Middle
Deb	18	African American	Silver Spring, MD	Upper-Middle
EP	21	white	Chadds Ford, PA	Middle
Flina	22	white	Wilmington, DE	Middle
Hillary	21	Asian	Philadelphia, PA	Working
Jane	18	African American	Coatesville, PA	Working
Jay	20	white	Springfield, PA	Middle
Jenna	19	white	Yardley, PA	Middle
Jessica	22	Latino	North Philadelphia, PA	Working
Jim	18	white	Harrisburg, PA	Middle
JM	20	white	NE Philadelphia, PA	Middle
Joe	20	white	Kennett Square, PA	Middle
Jose	20	Puerto Rican	Lancaster, PA	Middle
Kev	20	Asian	Philadelphia, PA	Working
Kris	20	Other	Upper Darby, PA	Working
Leah	21	white	Wethersfield, CT	Upper-Middle
LJ	19	white	Scranton, PA	Upper-Middle
Lydia	19	Caucasian	Zionsville, PA	Middle
Madelyn	18	white	Marlton, NJ	Upper-Middle

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Hometown</b>	<b>Socio-economic status</b>
Matt	20	white	Delaware County, PA	Middle
Norma	21	white	Carlisle, PA	Middle
Obehi	22	African American	Piscataway, NJ	Middle
Paula	18	white/Polish	Jackson, NJ	Middle
Rich	22	white	Holland, PA	Middle
Ryan A.	19	white	Baltimore, MD	Working
Ryan B.	21	white	NJ	Middle
Sam	19	white	Havertown, PA	Middle
Sasha	21	white	Lower Merion, PA	Middle
Sharon	19	white	Camp Hill, PA	Working
Starman	22	white	Philadelphia/Pittsburgh	Upper-Middle
Stefanie	27	white	South Philadelphia, PA	Middle
Steve R.	22	white	Atlantic County, NJ	Working
Steven W.	22	Asian	Philadelphia, PA	Working
Tay	20	white	Medford, NJ	Middle