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Finding Meaning in Facebook

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Finding Meaning in Facebook

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

Since the inception of the first Social Network Site (SNS), SixDegrees.com, in 1997 (boyd & Ellison, 2008), SNS have been consistently growing in popularity, claiming a foothold in the threads of cultures worldwide. In 2006, two years after its creation, the SNS Facebook was the seventh most popular site on the Web based on total page views. A year later, Facebook was reported to have more than 21 million registered members, two-thirds of whom logged in to the site at least once a day (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In 2010, Facebook reached 400 million active users (Kinetz, 2010). Just these numbers alone, and the short time in which they've been reached, are enough to warrant research.

Scholars have jumped at the chance to explore SNS in general and Facebook specifically. It's been just a little more than a decade since SNS began, and scholars have examined many, varied aspects of SNS and Facebook. However, little research has been done on the motivations of Facebook users. Scholars have examined who is using Facebook and how they are using Facebook, among other questions, but the question of why has been largely neglected until very recently.

The purpose of this study is to examine why undergraduate students at Butler University choose to dedicate their time and effort to participation in Facebook. In other words, it seeks to discover the meaning that undergraduate Facebook users at Butler attribute to participation in Facebook. With data gathered in focus groups and an in-depth interview, this study reveals that there are four distinct patterns that explain why Butler undergraduates use Facebook: (1) entertainment or distraction, (2) integration into community, (3) relationship maintenance, and (4) identity construction.

A Brief History of Facebook

When Facebook was created on Harvard's campus in 2004, it was originally only for the Harvard community (Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). Gradually, Facebook began supporting other colleges and universities, and eventually was available to anyone with a .edu email address. In 2005, Facebook began allowing high school students to join, and in 2006 the site was opened to the general public, including businesses and corporations. Today, Facebook is available worldwide to anyone with Internet access.

There are many features of Facebook that users can experience. Each user can participate in a mutually-selective friendship process, in which requests can be sent to other users and, if approved, can link the two users as Friends. Users can write public messages to Friends by posting on their Wall, private messages can be sent through an inbox system similar to email, and users can have real-time conversations with one another using Chat. Users can associate themselves with other profiles through Groups and Fan pages. Numerous Applications allow users to compete against one another in games, send each other Gifts, take Quizzes, and much much more. On their individual profile, users can post photos, videos, and Notes, and can fill out various fields of information, ranging from Basic Information like one's birthday and political preferences, to Personal Information like the About Me section or Favorite Quotations section.

Previous Research

Scholars began by defining SNS and exploring its history. boyd (2007) defined SNS as Web sites that resemble an online community and include profiles, friends, and comments. In a subsequent article (boyd & Ellison, 2008), the definition of SNS was revised to be more "comprehensive." The article put forth that SNS are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). The authors made a clear distinction between "social network sites" and "social network*ing* sites," noting that the latter is typically associated with the creation of new social ties. The authors cited a previous study (Haythornthwaite, 2005) that found that online connections are primarily related to fostering existing social ties, rather than the creation of new ones, so they chose the term "network" for the "N" in SNS.

Since the publication of their article, the definition of SNS that boyd and Ellison laid out has been revisited and revised. Beer (2008) argues that boyd and Ellison's definition is too broad, and that instead of moving toward an all-encompassing definition of SNS, scholars should be working toward creating more differentiated definitions of online cultures. Beer says: "It makes sense to try to come up with a term that captures a broad sense of what is happening in online cultures, this is much needed, but it seems to me that mutating social network sites to do this job may actually create problems" (p. 519). Beer suggests as a remedy that researchers take their cues from "the ordinary

SNSer" who lives in the midst of SNS, and the "knowing capitalist" who participates in "routine mining, harvesting and analysis of the data" about SNS and SNS users (p. 526).

Disagreements in definitions and terminology of SNS have not hindered scholarly research on computer-mediated communication (CMC), SNS in general, and Facebook in particular. Scholars have studied many aspects within these topics, including who uses SNSs and who does not (Hargittai, 2008); the psychological effects of and personality traits associated with SNS use (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006; Orr, Sisic, Ross, Simmering, Arseneault, & Orr, 2009); relationship between online and offline social networks and relationships (Haythornthwaite, 2005; di Gennaro & Dutton, 2007; Zywica & Danowski, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Weisbuch, Ivcevic, & Ambady, 2009); information disclosure, control, and privacy (Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009; Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris, & Arsoy, 2010); image construction/destruction (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Peluchette & Karl, 2010); if and how specific types of relationships are created on Facebook (Gaines & Mondak, 2008; Lewis & West, 2009); and if and how ethnic and racial identities affect SNS use (Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009; Seder & Oishi, 2009).

This is truly just a small sampling of the available literature about CMC, SNS, and Facebook. Scholars have researched many other aspects—such as the impact of these phenomena on business, health care, politics, education, marketing, medical ethics, journalism ethics, and international communication—but these areas are not relevant in

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the present study. The few studies that have explored Facebook users' motivations will be the most relevant to the present study.

Three main approaches have been used thus far in exploring Facebook users' motivations: psychology, theories of social capital, and uses and gratifications theory. In psychology, one study (Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering, & Orr, 2009) examined the motivations of undergraduate Facebook users in relation to the Five-Factor Model of personality. The study used an online questionnaire to collect data from 97 undergraduate psychology students at a university in Ontario. The study found that while personality did contribute to motivations in Facebook use, it was not as influential as the researchers expected. These findings relate to the present study to a moderate extent. For one, the fact that personality factors had less influence on Facebook use than expected indicates that there are other factors at work that lead undergraduates to participate on Facebook. Conversely, the determination that personality factors do play a role, albeit a small one, in motivating participation means that this study, not coming from a psychology background, will not be able to address or elaborate on issues of personality in motivation.

Studies that examine motivations for Facebook participation using theories of social capital are more applicable to the present study than psychology-based studies. One major study (Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2007) on social capital and SNS examined the relationship between Facebook use and the creation and maintenance of social capital. In other words, the researchers wanted to learn whether online tools, Facebook in this case, could be used to generate offline social capital. The article uses a definition of social capital from Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992): "the sum of the

resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing

a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance

and recognition" (p. 1145).

Social capital, then, lets people "draw on resources from other members of the

networks to which he or she belongs" (p. 1145). Social capital has been linked to many

positive social outcomes; likewise, the authors note, without social capital it is difficult to

maintain trust among community members, community involvement, and social order. In

addition to promoting community and social connectivity, the authors cite studies that

have found that social capital is related to indicators of psychological wellness, such as

self-esteem.

The study focuses on three different types of social capital: bridging, bonding, and

maintained. The authors draw on Putnam's (2000) distinctions between bridging social

capital and bonding social capital. The former refers to shallow connections among

individuals that could include sharing of useful information or perspectives, but doesn't

have much, if any, emotional depth. The latter, then, refers to the types of relationships

typical among family members or close friends, in which strong emotional bonds are

made. The authors introduce the concept of maintained social capital, which relates to

one's "ability to maintain valuable connections as one progresses through life changes"

(p. 1146). The authors hypothesized that the amount, or intensity, of Facebook

involvement would be positively related to users' perceived bridging, bonding, and

maintained social capital. However, both bridging and bonding social capital, they

hypothesized, would vary based on users' self-esteem and satisfaction with life.

To conduct the study, the researchers retrieved a random sample of 800 undergraduate students, to whom they sent e-mail invitations to participate in the study. A total of 246 students participated in the survey, which asked questions about respondents': demographic data; intensity of Facebook use; personal Facebook profiles; use of Facebook to either meet new people or interact with preexisting connections; self-esteem; and satisfaction with life. Conclusions were drawn about the three types of social capital based on respondents' answers to these questions. The results were summarized as follows: "...we can definitively state that there is a positive relationship between certain kinds of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital. Although we cannot say which precedes the other, Facebook appears to play an important role in the process by which students form and maintain social capital, with usage associated with all three kinds of social capital included in our instrument" (p. 1161). These findings relate to the present study because they suggest a potential answer to the study's question; it might be that Butler undergraduates use Facebook as a tool in their pursuit of the kinds of social capital that are described in this preceding study.

A subsequent study (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009) also aimed to discover whether Facebook use increased social capital among college students. Specifically, this study aimed to create a more accurate understanding of SNSs by examining their role as venues for political and civic involvement. The definitions and explanations of social capital that are found in this study, when compared with the 2007 study by Ellison, et al., indicate a general consensus about the functions and perceived benefits associated with social capital. However, rather than using categories of bridging, bonding, and maintained social capital, this study chose to follow a framework set forth by Scheufele

and Shah (2000). This framework divides social capital into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioral, which relate to "individuals' life satisfaction," "trust among individuals," and "individuals' active participation in civic and political activities," respectively (p. 877).

The authors hypothesized that intensity of Facebook use would have a positive relationship to life satisfaction, social trust, civic participation, and political participation. They also hypothesized that the intensity of use of Facebook Groups, a module that allows members to join assemblies of Facebook members with common interests, would be positively associated with civic and political participation. To test these hypotheses, the authors administered an online survey to 2,603 undergraduate students from two different universities in Texas.

The results were mixed: "Most importantly, Facebook members and nonmembers did not differ in terms of their life satisfaction, social trust or political participation. There was a marked difference, however, on civic engagement, with Facebook members reporting higher levels of participation in nonpolitical activities" (p. 888). Overall, the authors found that "the intensity of Facebook use appears to be related with personal contentment, greater trust, and participation in civic and political activities among college students" (p. 889). The authors stressed caution in attributing civic participation to Facebook, noting that Facebook might simply attract users who are already inclined toward civic participation. This study relates to the current study because it explains some of the benefits that undergraduate Facebook users can reap from Facebook use, which could in turn explain why undergraduates use Facebook.

The third approach that has been used to explore Facebook users' motivations is uses and gratifications theory. Urista et al (2009) used this theoretical framework to examine how members of Facebook and the SNS MySpace use the sites to meet their needs and wants. The authors, using Rubin's (1994 & 2002) work, explain uses and gratifications theory as a perspective that puts forth many key elements that are determining factors in media use. These elements include: "people's needs and motives to communicate, the psychological and social environment, the mass media, functional alternatives to media use, communication behavior, and the consequences of such behavior" (p. 218). In other words, uses and gratifications theory supposes that media use is actively and intentionally directed by the users' goals and motivations.

This study used focus groups to collect data from 50 undergraduate users of SNS at a California university. The researchers identified five key themes that indicated why individuals use SNS to fulfill their needs and wants, including: "1) efficient communication, 2) convenient communication, 3) curiosity about others, 4) popularity, and 5) relationship formation and reinforcement" (p. 221). As a result of these findings, the authors proposed "a uses and gratifications theory that states: members use SNS to experience selective, efficient, and immediate contact with others for their (mediated) interpersonal communication satisfaction and as an ongoing way to seek the approval and support of other people" (p. 226).

This study relates to the present study to a great extent. It comes closer than any other previous research to the methodology used in the present study, so it presumably will come closest to having the same or similar results. Qualitative and interactive data collection, through the use of focus groups rather than surveys, enables this study to get

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closer to discovering users' motivations from the point of view of the users themselves, which is the aim of the present study. The present study could almost be considered an attempt at replication, though the studies are slightly varied. Regardless, this study and the present study will allow for a comparison of results that has not yet been possible in studies that examine motivations of Facebook use with a qualitative method.

Another study (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009) used uses and gratifications theory to explore the link between the use of Facebook Groups and users' civic and political engagement. Specifically, the authors asked three questions: (1) "What are college students' needs for participating in Facebook Groups?" (2) "How are college students' demographics related to the gratifications of Facebook Groups use?" (3) "How are college students' needs for Facebook Groups use related to their political and civic involvement offline after controlling for demographics, life satisfaction, and social trust?" (p. 730).

To answer these questions, the researchers used an online survey to collect data from 1,715 Facebook Groups users ages 18 to 29 at two universities in Texas. Overall, the study concluded that "students join Facebook Groups because of the need to obtain information about on- and off-campus activities, to socialize with friends, to seek self-status, and to find entertainment" (p. 732). This study relates to the present study to a lesser extent than Urista et al's study (2009) because it employed survey methods rather than focus groups, but it will still be interesting to see how the findings of this study compare to the findings of the present study and if they support or compete with each other.

These studies of Facebook users' motivations have laid a strong foundation for the present study, though there is still more to be explored. By using focus groups, instead of the surveys that many of the studies used, the present study will come closer to understanding the participants' thoughts from the point of view of the participants themselves. Surveys give bits of information but leave interpretation to the researchers, while focus groups allow participants to work with their ideas and draw their own conclusions. Urista et al (2009) used the focus group method, similar to the method used in the present study, but the study only included students from one university. University culture can vary greatly from campus to campus, public to private school, and from West coast to Midwest; the present study examines a similar question at a different institution, which will broaden the understanding of Facebook users' motivations. The present study asks why undergraduate students who attend Butler University and use Facebook choose to dedicate their time and effort to participation in the site.

Method

The present study took a qualitative approach and used two focus groups and one in-depth interview as the vehicles for data collection. The focus groups allowed the researcher to observe the participants in a comfortable setting similar to that of the classrooms with which the participants were already familiar. Because of the focus of this study on ideas of interaction, social capital and community, the researcher chose to allow for discussion of the topic within a social setting, rather than observing informants as they actually engaged with Facebook. This allowed for more emphasis to be placed on

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the immersion into the "why" and "with what result" aspects of Facebook usage, rather than the "how" that many previous studies have focused on.

The focus groups were nearly identical to one another. A senior-level undergraduate student at Butler University, the institution that hosted the study, facilitated both of the groups. She was selected for her intellect, friendly demeanor, and her proven ability to stimulate discussion. Her course history as a student at Butler was also indicative of an ability to avoid influencing the informants' answers while posing meaningful, non-biased, extemporaneous follow-up questions. A peer, rather than a faculty member, was chosen in order to encourage more open and honest discussion among informants. While the facilitator led the focus groups, the researcher observed the discussions and took lengthy, detailed notes to aid in the discovery of key terms and main concepts that arose during the discussions.

There were four main questions asked during each group, with several more follow-up questions posed by the facilitator. The four core questions were:

1. Why do you use Facebook?

2. Does your participation in Facebook affect your life? If so, how?

3. If you did not use Facebook, would your life be different? If so, how?

4. What does Facebook mean to you?

An initial attempt to recruit informants through Facebook was unsuccessful. Ultimately, a faculty member at Butler assisted by offering extra credit to the students in one of her classes if they attended and participated in one of the focus groups. The particular class was an undergraduate core curriculum requirement at Butler, which meant that the roster was made up of students of different ages and academic specialties.

Presumably, a relatively representative sample of the Butler population was attained. The criteria for participation were that each informant had to be an undergraduate student at Butler, who is between the ages of 18 and 24, and who is a registered member of Facebook.

Demographic information about Butler, which is a private, Midwestern university with about 4,000 undergraduate students, will be helpful in understanding the population from which the sample of informants came. The main points that should be taken away from the statistical summary of Butler's population are that the majority of students are 1) white, 2) American, 3) middle to upper class, and 4) academically talented relative to other students from their hometowns. Therefore, the students at Butler and in the focus groups should not be considered representative of the American population as a whole. The study included 14 total students, who break down demographically as follows:

- Gender: Men-2, Women-12
- Age: 18-6, 19-1, 20-3, 21-4
- Class standing: Freshman-6, Sophomore-3, Junior-1, Senior-4
- Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian-11, African-American-1, Hispanic-1, Asian-1

One in-depth interview was conducted after the focus groups to attain more detailed information about some of the things that were said during the focus groups. The interview subject was chosen by the researcher from among the focus group participants for her demonstrated knowledge of and involvement in Facebook, and because she emerged as a leader during her focus group in that she consistently made comments that showed that she was engaging actively with the questions that were being asked. She often made comments that indicated deep self-evaluation, and her comments frequently

led others in the group to deeper thought and subsequent moments of enlightenment about their own Facebook use. These impressions that the researcher noted during the focus group were supported by the notes that the researcher took during the focus group.

In performing data analysis, the researcher took an inductive approach. In other words, conclusions were guided by the data rather than being judged based on the relationship between the data and hypotheses or any other previously held expectations. Transcriptions from the focus groups and the interview were read several times, main themes from the discussions were identified, and direct quotes were chosen to better illustrate the meaning of the main themes.

Results and Discussion

Four themes surfaced during analysis of the focus groups and the interview. Each of these themes contributes to this study's ability to answer the questions of why undergraduates at Butler use Facebook. These motivations go beyond the aspects of utility, like efficient and convenient communication, that Urista et al (2009) found. The themes indicate that the Butler undergraduates who participated in the study use Facebook for the following reasons: (1) to entertain or distract themselves, (2) to integrate themselves into their campus community, (3) to perform relationship maintenance, and (4) to aid in the construction of their own identities and the perceived identities of their network of Facebook Friends.

Entertainment/Distraction

Consistent with the findings from Park et al (2009), this study indicated that entertainment is a highly influential factor in motivation of Facebook use. Many participants talked about using the various games and applications that are offered on Facebook for both entertainment and escape. Some participants simply enjoy looking through others' profiles. Regardless of the specific ways in which undergraduates seek entertainment of Facebook, there was a consensus that Facebook is, first and foremost, fun.

One participant lauded the availability of many options for entertainment on Facebook: *"There's always something random to do on Facebook."* Some actively seek out entertainment on Facebook as an escape, which indicates uses and gratifications theory by indicating users' intent to use media to meet their needs and wants. One participant said: *"(Facebook) is a distraction. It's nice to not have to worry about everything and to just go through and look at people."* The extent to which Facebook matters to some users as a form of entertainment became clear when participants were asked to consider their lives without Facebook. One student said: *"I would be bored out of my mind (without Facebook)."* This student clearly recognizes the role that Facebook plays in her search for entertainment.

There is also a social capital aspect related to entertainment on Facebook. In the case of Facebook users who entertain themselves by sharing content with their Facebook connections, it can be said that they are strengthening relationships, which leads to increased social capital. One student said: *"(I use Facebook for) sharing ideas and things*

I find online, like funny stuff, YouTube videos, and funny Web sites." The creation of

social capital in this case doesn't seem intentional, so this particular use of Facebook as

entertainment falls short of relating to uses and gratifications theory.

Integration into Community

Motivations to use Facebook go much deeper than seeking entertainment, though.

The use of Facebook as a way to integrate oneself into one's community was most clearly

discernable when participants discussed the role that Facebook played in their early days

of college. For many of the participants, being a member of Facebook is seen as a vital

part of being a member of a college community. They admit that this trend has lessened

in recent years, since Facebook began accepting all Internet users rather than only people

who are affiliated with a university. Still, though many of the younger participants joined

Facebook while they were still in high school, they all still strongly associated

membership to the site with the process of becoming an undergraduate student.

One participant explained that she received a very straight-forward explanation of

the role of Facebook in the university setting: *"My sister was in college. She told me how*

important it was to have (Facebook)." This excerpt is indicative of uses and gratifications

theory, because it illustrates that users are often aware of the role that Facebook can play

in integration into one's community, and therefore users actively seek that benefit

through Facebook use. Along these same lines, many participants explained that

Facebook use was symbolic of one's status as a college student: *"I guess (Facebook*

users) kind of feel like it's a rite of passage, because, before I got a Facebook I had a

MySpace and I was in middle school, so to get a Facebook, it was a big deal because I

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felt grown up." Again, users were aware of this potential benefit of Facebook membership and actively sought it out through use of the medium, which supports the ideas of uses and gratifications theory.

In addition to feeling like a "rite of passage," Facebook membership also served the practical purpose of allowing students to meet their classmates and roommates before getting to campus, to combat what one participant called the *"pre-college jitters."* Many participants admitted to using Facebook to learn more about roommates before coming to campus: *"That's the first thing I did when I got my roommate information (in the mail). I checked her Facebook"*; *"I had a random roommate and (Facebook) was our first contact. We messaged back and forth and I stalked her profile."*

In one case, a participant explained that she checked her roommate's Facebook profile, then, based on the information contained in the profile, decided that they would not have been compatible as roommates. Subsequently, she contacted the university and was reassigned without ever meeting the student whose profile she analyzed. Another participant explained that Facebook allowed him to make *"immediate friends"* at Butler, especially through a Facebook Group for members of the incoming freshman class, which he said made the transition to college much easier.

Another way that Facebook helped participants integrate into the college community is through the Events and Groups features. In findings related to those by Park et al. (2009), students readily admitted that Facebook participation has increased their likelihood of offline participation in various campus events. The main reason is simply more access to information about what's happening: *"(Facebook) is like my social calendar. I look at it to see what's going on this weekend."*; *"It's like a planner. I know*

what's going on." One student, who is a member of various organizations that sponsor numerous campus events, also explained that she has used Facebook to get the word out about her organizations' events. Users are exemplifying social capital and uses and gratifications theories in this instance. For the former, they are using their connections and relationships to lead to more community involvement, which is a result of social capital. For the latter, it is indicated that users clearly recognize the benefits that they are experiencing and that they actively sought said benefits.

Relationship Maintenance

Relationship maintenance is another explanation as to why undergraduates use Facebook. This is consistent with the findings by Urista et al (2009) that suggested that undergraduates use Facebook for "relationship formation and reinforcement." This trend is shown in the ways in which participants used Facebook to foster their relationships with their future roommates, as described above, but there are many other ways for enactment of participants' relationship maintenance.

Participants talked a lot about using Facebook to stay in touch with family and friends from home while they are away at school, but they also mentioned using Facebook to stay in touch with friends from Butler during summer months and holidays. This is very strongly linked to the ideas of maintained social capital that Ellison et al (2007) found to be related to SNS use. One participant said that the creation of maintained social capital is one motivation of Facebook use she thinks is unique to undergraduates, since other groups of Facebook users—high school students, baby boomers, and others—are less likely to be spending extended periods of time away from

home: *"College students, more so than high schoolers, use (Facebook), since we're not home, we use it to keep in touch with family members, look at their pictures or whatever."*

Based on some of the comments during this study, it seems that the trend of using Facebook to keep in touch is not just preferable, but also necessary, to the maintenance of any long-distance relationships: *"It almost felt like you had to get (Facebook) in order to keep in touch with your friends."; "I feel like I wouldn't still have good relationships with people back home (without Facebook). Facebook is our basic means of communication, because you don't necessarily know someone's email or phone number, and without Facebook, you have no way of finding out."* One participant recounted that she had trouble getting people to return her calls, but when she contacted them through Facebook, their responses were almost immediate, indicating people's preference for communicating via Facebook. In addition to being preferable and necessary, it is also intentional and motivation driven, which relates back to theories of uses and gratifications.

In addition to keeping in touch with close friends and family members, participants explained that they also use Facebook to learn more about people who they have recently, maybe briefly, met. This finding was also included in the study by Urista et al (2009), which found that people use Facebook to satisfy "curiosity about others." This is similar to the idea of gathering information about future roommates through their profiles, but this aspect differs in that the participants did not directly link it to integration into college life. The idea of using someone's profile to gather information about them is so common on Facebook, that vocabulary has emerged to describe the action. "Stalking"

and "creeping" are essentially synonymous. One participant explained stalking and creeping as follows:

> *"I think since Facebook is such like, a culture in its own, of course there's a language attached to it. For instance, like creeping or Facebook stalking it's kind of like two in one, like it means that you're just trying to get information on somebody, like you're just trying to scope out what they do."*

Many other participants elaborated on the purposes of and motivations behind using Facebook to "stalk" or "creep": *"I don't stalk, I just do background checks."*; *"I always look through their pictures to see if how they act around me is how they act around their other friends."*; *"If I hear rumors about people from school, I will get on Facebook to see if it's true."*; *"Bumper Stickers (an application) is always a good way to check their sense of humor."*; *"(Facebook) is how I find out who's pregnant, who just got out of jail, who just got married, who gained beer weight...."*

Participants also explained that using Facebook to investigate others is common: *"People act so shocked when people know stuff about them (as a result of Facebook stalking), but you know they do the same thing."*; *"I like how if you say 'I creeped your Facebook' it's more acceptable now."* One participant added that, even though she uses Facebook to keep in touch with long-distance friends and family and to learn more about people who she does not know very well, she also is "always" on her roommate's Facebook profile. They have been friends for years and currently live together, yet Facebook still makes its way into their friendship. This point did not come up often, and in order not to lead the participants in any particular direction, the facilitator didn't dwell

on this point. Examining this occurrence in more depth could be an interesting path for future research.

Another participant noted that there are different degrees of friendships, some of which only exist on Facebook. The example that he gave is someone with whom he'd taken a course with. After the course was finished, they didn't transition into a more regular friendship outside of class, but Facebook provides the perfect middle ground that *"helps maintain friendships that are more casual and don't go beyond Facebook."*

Many participants discussed the ways in which Facebook changed the process of relationship maintenance and speculated about what life would be like without Facebook. One common change is the use of Facebook as a shortcut to learning about someone: *"People don't ask what you did on Fall Break anymore. They see that you posted pictures (on Facebook)."; "Facebook is like a summary of your life. Sometimes people don't want to take the time to talk and get to know someone, so they just click on their info. It's instant gratification."* Facebook is also seen as a substitute, rather than a complement, to other forms of communication: *"The amount of time I talk to people face to face (has decreased). I don't have a pressing feeling to talk to certain people anymore because I see their Facebook."; "Without Facebook, I might have to make more of an effort to call and talk to people."; "I bet that I wouldn't be as close to some people (without Facebook) because of the time and energy it takes to call or visit."; "I'd probably have much better communication skills (without Facebook). I feel weird talking to people face to face now."* Whether these trends are positive or negative is debatable, and possibly subjective. It's clear that, at least for this group of participants, Facebook

has greatly changed their ways of communicating, especially when it comes to relationship maintenance.

Identity Construction

Facebook has also given the participants some flexibility in constructing their own identities, as well as constructing the identities of people with whom they interact on Facebook. In some cases, Facebook was used to construct identities of people who do not have Facebook profiles. Many participants discussed Facebook in relation to their identity, but this discussion went in many different directions. Some participants explained that they intentionally omit certain aspects of themselves from their profiles: *"I'm very careful...there are things that I keep to myself that maybe others would put out there."*; *"I didn't have my religious status (on Facebook) for a long time. I have a lot of gay friends who don't have their sexual preferences up."*; *"I think one reason why people are on (Facebook) a lot is because you have to censor stuff too. You have to be on there right away to delete."* One participant explained that she is part of a Muslim community back home, so she hides certain aspects of her profile from people from her hometown, so that anything inappropriate doesn't harm her relationships at home.

Some participants acknowledged the possibility of creating an ideal form of themselves through Facebook, and one explained that Facebook has become a part of his identity:

> *"(Facebook) is becoming less of a tool and more of a part of how I*
> *am and how I see people. I really judge people off of what they*
> *have in their profile. That's the first thing I do when I meet*
> *somebody, I add them on Facebook and see who they are. You*
> *have control over presenting who you are. It's a way of showing*
> *your ideal form of yourself."*

The above excerpt also acknowledged the ways in which viewing someone else's profile can aid in the construction of that person's identity, by allowing the viewer to pass judgment and make assumptions about the profile's owner, which came up again: *"It's really easy to judge (people) on Facebook."* But, just because a person acknowledges that Facebook could help in the construction of their identity does not necessarily mean that they take advantage of it: *"There's not much of a difference between the real me and the ideal me, who I am on Facebook and who I am in real life."* Again, because users readily acknowledge the potential for identity construction on Facebook, those who take advantage of that potential are supporting uses and gratifications theory. Taking advantage of the benefit doesn't necessarily mean an entire identity reconstruction, but can involve small changes in one's behavior:

> *"I say things online that I don't know if I would ever say them in person, but it's a lot easier to flirt with somebody online than to call them. There's less fear of rejection. You can act way more confident than you may be. It's completely unique."*

But identity overhauls and the creation of entirely new identities are also possible. One student told the group that she has three different Facebook profiles: one for herself, one for her alter-ego or her "evil twin," and one for her pet cat. In this case, this Facebook user constructed an entirely different identity that allows her to say and do things that she says she wouldn't be able to say and do as the primary form of herself.

Participants also demonstrated the ways in which judgments and assumptions can be made about people who do not have Facebook profiles, through the context of Facebook use. In other words, just by not having a Facebook profile, people are making

statements about their identities, and Facebook users are using those statements to make assumptions: *"When they don't have Facebook, you're like, 'What's wrong with them?'"*; *"It seems like, if you're not on Facebook then on some level you're not social."*; *"I think that if someone's not on Facebook, it's like, how do you keep up with everything?"* The concept of identity construction as a motivation for Facebook use has not been studied in great detail yet, but the frequency with which it came up in the focus groups in this study indicate a need for future research on the topic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine why undergraduate students at Butler University choose to dedicate their time and effort to participation in Facebook. Through the use of focus groups and an in-depth interview, followed by inductive data analysis, this study found that undergraduate students at Butler University use Facebook for four main reasons: (1) to entertain or distract themselves, (2) to integrate themselves into their campus community, (3) to perform relationship maintenance, and (4) to aid in the construction of their own identities and the perceived identities of their network of Facebook Friends.

These results are, for the most part, consistent with previous studies that indicate that Facebook use is actively motive-driven, as in uses and gratifications theory, and that Facebook use has a positive effect on varied aspects of the users' life, as explained in theories of social capital. In each of the four main motivations for Facebook use that this study found, responses indicated that participants were aware of the potential benefits of Facebook use and were therefore actively seeking those benefits. It was also shown that

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some aspects of social capital—particularly community involvement and relationship reinforcement—were achieved from Facebook use, although participants did not seem to be aware of the term and idea of social capital, and therefore were not actively seeking social capital. Motivations of entertainment, community integration, and relationship maintenance had been found in previous studies, but the active and intentional use of Facebook as a tool of identity construction is a concept that is unique to this study.

This study opens up many opportunities for future research. As this study builds on the questions and methodology of Urista et al's study (2009) by using a different population, future studies could aim to do the same. Replicating this study at different universities in different regions of the United States, and even in different countries could work to provide varied results or to uphold the arguments made herein. If possible, future studies should seek a bigger sample, and maybe a more diverse sample, than the present study did. It would also be valuable to examine motivations of other groups of Facebook users, beyond undergraduate students. It was indicated in this study that the motivations of Facebook use vary greatly from high school students to undergraduate students, and it is presumed that greater variation can be found between undergraduate students and non-student users in various age groups. More exploration of the ideas of Facebook as a tool for identity construction is also warranted.

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