

**The costs of bonding: negotiating personal information  
disclosure among Millennials and Boomers on Facebook**

by

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## ABSTRACT

Since early 2010, Facebook.com, the world's most popular social network site (SNS), has come under a storm of media criticism over the commercial use of its users' personal information. Yet even as more became known about the fact that Facebook sells publicly shared information to companies for advertising purposes, two years later the SNS amassed one billion members in October 2012.

Based on in-depth interviews 30 Millennials (18 to 32-year olds) and 10 Boomers (48 to 58-year olds) that are daily users of Facebook, this dissertation provides a qualitative analysis of attitudes toward privacy and personal information disclosure on Facebook. What steps—if any—are being taken by users to regulate their personal information disclosure? How do users feel about the website selling their personal information to advertisers? What are the benefits of using Facebook and do they outweigh the risks of having one's information used for commercial purposes? Or is it even seen as a risk at all? What are the sociological implications of users' answers to these questions?

I challenge prevailing conclusions that the intensity of Facebook use is associated with higher levels of social capital and that Facebook is especially useful for maintaining and building bridging ties to one's acquaintances. On the contrary, among Millennials in my study, the website is used for maintaining bonding ties between close friends and family members, not bridging ties between acquaintances; that the maintaining of bridging social capital is by comparison merely a passive benefit. As well, while the Boomers in my study use Facebook to maintain bridging ties, maintaining social capital is not a consideration. In arriving at this conclusion, I thematically broke out the benefits of using Facebook as *Facebook is my life online*, *Facebook is my primary connection to others*, and *Facebook is a convenient communication and information tool*. As well, the perceived risks of using Facebook involve a *lack of privacy* and, to a lesser extent, *issues of control*. For the Millennials and Boomers in my study, the practical benefits of using Facebook outweigh the perceived risks, and the perception of *control* on the user's part is a key factor in rationalizing their ongoing use of the website.

As a practical application of my findings, I propose how the marketing research industry might apply these findings toward learning more about consumers.

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I am enormously thankful for my mother and father and their enduring support of my decisions—academic or otherwise, and for the early sacrifices they made to ensure that I would focus on post-secondary education without the burden of financial debt. They are my role models in countless ways. I am also thankful for my sister, who always believed in me and of whom I could not be more proud.

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## **DEDICATION**

*To Irina*

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## CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE SCENE

*“Remember five years ago when no one was on Facebook and you didn’t know what the guy you took high school biology with was having for lunch? Remember how that was fine? Let’s go back to that.” ~Jimmy Kimmel, Host of Jimmy Kimmel Live!*

In 2008, Webster’s New World College Dictionary selected “overshare” as the Word of the Year.<sup>1</sup> It was defined as follows:

Typically a verb, but also used as a noun, it is the name given to ‘too much information,’ whether willingly offered or inadvertently revealed. It is the word for both the tedious minutiae on personal Web sites and blogs, and the accidental slips of the tongue in public.

Indeed, there have been many stories in the media about oversharing on Facebook, the world’s most popular social networking site (SNS). In each case, the outcome for the “oversharer” was an unfortunate one. For example, on December 2011, an 18-year old male was arrested by police in Pittsburgh after he and his younger accomplices posted pictures of themselves posing with cartons of candy and cigarettes, as well as \$8,000 in cash, from a convenience store that they burglarized only an hour earlier. The photos were seen by a family member of one of the teens, who immediately alerted the police.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See “Overshare is Webster’s New World® Dictionary’s 2008 Word of the Year” <http://wordoftheyear.wordpress.com/press-release-overshare-is-word-of-the-year/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See “Man jailed after posting Facebook pictures of his store burglary” [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083\\_162-57348684-504083/man-jailed-after-posting-facebook-pictures-of-his-store-burglary/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-57348684-504083/man-jailed-after-posting-facebook-pictures-of-his-store-burglary/) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

As well, a CBC documentary entitled “Facebook Follies”<sup>3</sup> (October 2011) told the story of an 18-year old UK Scottish guardsman who was not permitted to participate in the Royal Wedding of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge because he posted on his Facebook Profile that Kate Middleton was a “*stuck up cow*” and a “*posh bitch*.” He was removed from Royal Wedding duty in a decision that the documentary describes will “likely haunt his military career.”

Moreover, a March 2012 Seattle Times article<sup>4</sup> on oversharing among teens cited a police officer who claimed that teens “don’t lock down their accounts, they pass around photos they shouldn’t, and they give out their passwords to friends.” Given such examples, one can see why the synopsis for a February 2011 CBC documentary called “Peep Culture”<sup>5</sup> proclaimed that “increasingly for this generation ‘privacy’ is a relative concept and no longer an inalienable right.”

However, media stories about the drastic consequences of oversharing are by no means limited to young people. For example, a January 6, 2011 CNBC documentary called “The Facebook Obsession”<sup>6</sup> tells of a 56-year old Massachusetts school teacher with a PhD in Education. Wrongly believing that her Facebook Profile was only visible to her family and friends, she had been updating her Profile with messages like “*The parents are so arrogant and snobby*” and “*So not looking forward to another year at Cohasset schools.*” She also referred to the students as “*germ bags.*” After some of her

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<sup>3</sup> View “Facebook Follies” here: <http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/episode/facebook-follies.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See “Temptation to overshare online can come back to haunt teens” [http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/business/technology/2017692604\\_ptteentween11.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/business/technology/2017692604_ptteentween11.html) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See “Peep Culture” <http://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/passionateeyeshowcase/2011/peepculture/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> View “The Facebook Obsession” here: <http://www.cnbc.com/id/39618344/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

students' parents discovered that she was using her Facebook account to vent frustration about her job, the school's administration asked her to resign.

In another story from "Facebook Follies," an on-duty South Carolina police officer stopped to have his police car washed by women in bikinis as part of a charity fundraiser. Some bystanders took photos, which ended up on Facebook. The local police chief believed the incident to be a violation of the rules governing the use of police vehicles, which reflected poorly on the force. The officer was fired.

As well, in March 2012, the Chief Financial Officer of a Houston-based apparel company posted messages to his public Facebook Profile like "*Earnings released. Conference call completed. How do you like me now, Mr. Shorty?*" and "*Audit committee. Damn you Paul Sarbanes! Damn you Michael Oxley.*" A few months later, he was fired for having "improperly communicated company information through social media."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, oversharing on Facebook has also been a boon to divorce lawyers in cases like when a mother denied in court that she smoked marijuana but was caught having posted photos on Facebook of herself smoking pot; or when a husband denied having anger issues but was caught having written "*If you have the balls to get in my face, I'll kick your ass into submission*" in his Profile's "About You" section.<sup>8</sup>

While stories like those above serve as cautionary tales for citizens to be mindful of the information that they upload about themselves online, they also serve as anecdotes

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<sup>7</sup> See "When social media gets you fired: Francesca's CFO is out" <http://www.latimes.com/business/money/la-fi-mo-social-media-francescas-20120514,0,2912412.story> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> See "Facebook is divorce lawyers' new best friend" [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37986320/ns/technology\\_and\\_science-tech\\_and\\_gadgets/#.UDBBi6ODI8E](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37986320/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/#.UDBBi6ODI8E) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

for policy-making bodies that seek to protect citizens from what should be perceived as serious and constant threats to their privacy in the digital age. For example, a 2010 brochure published by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada titled “Privacy in a Changing Society”<sup>9</sup> begins with the following statement: “Concepts of privacy are evolving rapidly in today’s world, and so are the factors that are emerging to threaten it.” The primary issues identified by the Office are information technology, genetic information, public safety, and the integrity of personal information. The brochure asks the reader to imagine a world in which “ubiquitous computing” requires individuals to be implanted with RFID chips, allowing anyone with the right technology to track one’s every move and build a profile on an individual without their knowledge. It paints a picture of today’s world of constant consumer surveillance and behavioural tracking that essentially treats individuals as commodities. Furthermore, a 2011 publication by the same Office titled “A Matter of Trust: Integrating Privacy and Public Safety in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”<sup>10</sup> warns that “as new technologies and social practices emerge and shape our conception of privacy, they can also raise new security concerns.”

As well, the Office’s website aimed at young Canadians, YouthPrivacy.ca, informs visitors that “from the time we get up in the morning until we climb into bed at night we leave a trail of data behind us for others to collect, merge, analyze, massage and even sell, often without our knowledge or consent.”<sup>11</sup> In a 2012 blog post,<sup>12</sup> the Office stated:

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<sup>9</sup> See “Privacy in a changing society” [http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/pub/priv\\_201003\\_e.pdf](http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/pub/priv_201003_e.pdf) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> See “A matter of trust: integrating privacy and public safety in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” [http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/pub/gd\\_sec\\_201011\\_e.pdf](http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/pub/gd_sec_201011_e.pdf) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> This Web page provides a sample outline of the trail of data left behind by a student on a typical day: <http://youthprivacy.ca/en/life/privacy.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

In this digital age, where our online activities can so easily be tracked, stored, shared and analyzed, and we are under constant pressure to share more and more personal information, we [citizens] are all feeling a bit uneasy about all that personal data floating around in cyberspace.

In another initiative aimed at Canada's youth—a graphic novel titled, “Social Smarts: Privacy, the Internet, and You,”<sup>13</sup> a talking smartphone explains to a high school student how she should think of herself while online:

Everything you add to your profile, every place you check into, every event you attend can be used to create ads made specifically to appeal to you! So don't think of yourself as a customer when using these sites—what you really are is the **product!**

The emergence of every new communication technology has sparked the interest of scholars in how the technology will affect various aspects of society, including changing perceptions of what is private and public. The early stages of debate about the disclosure of information and privacy concerns, however, is often marked by more misinformation and rhetoric, intentionally and unintentionally, than empirically sound insight. As such, we must proceed with caution.

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada is playing a key role in the public debate of these issues, but it may be using unwarranted scare tactics and embellishing the facts to raise awareness. For example, I recently discovered what appears to be an instance in which the Office is misleading the public. On April 4, 2013,

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<sup>12</sup> See “On Privacy Day, think less is more” <http://blog.privcom.gc.ca/index.php/2012/01/23/on-data-privacy-day-think-less-is-more/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> View it here: [http://www.youthprivacy.ca/en/gn\\_eng.pdf](http://www.youthprivacy.ca/en/gn_eng.pdf) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

the Office posted a news release<sup>14</sup> titled, “Canadians increasingly anxious about privacy in the face of new technology, poll suggests.” The news release opens with a finding that “56%” of Canadians are “not confident that they understand how new technologies affect their privacy.” However, upon inspection of the actual study, I discovered a major reporting error. Indeed, the study (OPC 2013:10) claims that:

The majority of Canadians (56%) are **not** confident that they have enough information to know how new technologies affect their personal privacy.

This is the highest expression of a lack of confidence in this since tracking began in 2000.

However, by looking at the figure below on which this finding was based, one can easily see that only 40% (not 56%) disagree with the statement “I feel confident that I have enough information to know how new technologies might affect my personal privacy.” The other 16% neither agree or disagree with the statement, which indicates that they have a neutral opinion about the statement. As a researcher, I believe it is categorically misleading to claim that neutrality about a statement can be tacked on to either side of a balanced scale, in this case to show that a *majority* are not confident about their knowledge of the privacy implications of new technologies.

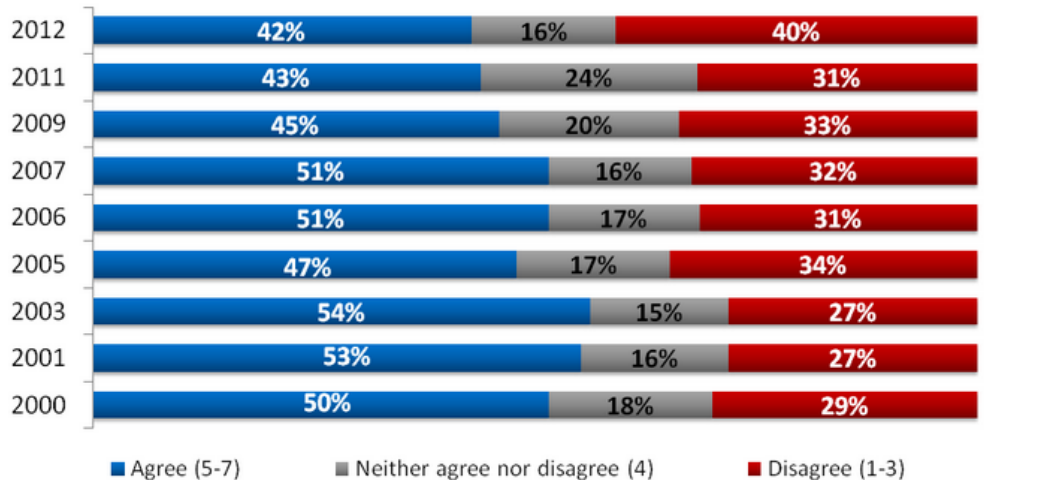
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<sup>14</sup> See “Canadians increasingly anxious about privacy in the face of new technology, poll suggests” [http://www.priv.gc.ca/media/nr-c/2013/nr-c\\_130404\\_e.asp](http://www.priv.gc.ca/media/nr-c/2013/nr-c_130404_e.asp) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

## Figure 5: Knowledge about New Technologies Affecting Personal Privacy

Q8: Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

*I feel confident that I have enough information to know how new technologies might affect my personal privacy.*



Base: All respondents

Phoenix SPI for OPC; December 2012

2000-2009: n=2028; 2011 n=2001; 2012 n=1513, DK/NR = 1%

Furthermore, the study (OPC 2013:7) reports that 66% of Canadians are “very concerned” about the protection of their privacy. However, does being *concerned* about the protection of one’s privacy (66%) and *not being confident* that one knows how new technologies affect one’s privacy (56%) amount to being “anxious”—as the Office’s news release put it? To be anxious is to *experience* anxiety, uneasiness, or nervousness, which I believe is different from being “concerned” (the actual wording from the study). To this end, I feel that the Office has misled the public by issuing a news release that substitutes the comparatively tamer word from the actual survey question (“concerned”) with an arguably more alarming one (“anxious”).

In addition, the study (OPC 2013:26) also reveals that 68% “chose not to use a site or a service because they were uncomfortable with the terms that were set out in the

privacy policy.” However, just a few questions earlier fully half of the sample reported that they rarely (26%) or never (25%) read the privacy policies for Internet sites they have visited (OPC 2013:25). To me this suggests that, among the 68% who opted out of using a website due privacy concerns, for many of them it was a rare occasion since 50% of the sample claim to never or rarely read privacy policies. Therefore, we should not jump to conclude that 68% of Canadians are vigilant about their privacy online, and we should be weary of the subtitle of the news release in question, which states: “Research indicates Canadians avoid downloading apps or using certain websites and services due to privacy concerns.”

The study also reports that only 12% of Canadians have been negatively affected by information that has been posted about them online and fully 85% have *not* (OPC 2013:18). It also reports that 54% have not taken any steps to limit the tracking of their Internet activities (OPC 2013:21). As well, it reports that “only about one in five Canadians have ever actively sought out information about their privacy rights” (OPC 2013:11). However, despite these findings, the Office titled its news release “Canadians increasingly anxious about privacy in the face of new technology, poll suggests.”

While the extent to which the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada is using scare tactics and embellishing its research to influence public opinion can be debated, this example raises the larger question of whether or not there is actual cause for alarm—among governments and citizens—over citizens’ personal information disclosure on the Web.



## The end of privacy?

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, is claimed to have said that people have become more comfortable sharing private information online and that privacy is no longer a social norm.<sup>15</sup> Since early 2010, Facebook has come under a storm of media criticism over its privacy policy and commercial use of its users' personal information. Links to articles that outlined the increasing word count in the website's privacy policy, for example, as well as those that detailed the increasing number of steps required to maximize one's privacy settings,<sup>16</sup> have gone viral.<sup>17</sup> Many of these awareness efforts reveal that all of the information provided by a Facebook user, including all photos, status updates, private and public correspondence—everything a user uploads—is archived indefinitely by Facebook (even after a member deactivates<sup>18</sup> their account). Other efforts point out the fact that Facebook sells publicly shared information to companies for direct advertising purposes, including a user's date of birth, hometown, school or alma mater, hobbies, jobs, Friends' names, and number of Friends. This awareness continues to spread with every new media story, Facebook group, YouTube video, blog, and status update that condemns the social network's commercial practices. An example of how Facebook users warn others about privacy changes is this status update that went viral in late April 2010:

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<sup>15</sup> See "Privacy no longer a social norm, says Facebook founder"

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/jan/11/facebook-privacy> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> See "Facebook privacy: a bewildering tangle of options"

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/05/12/business/facebook-privacy.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013). To manage your privacy on Facebook, you will need to navigate through 50 settings with more than 170 options.

<sup>17</sup> To "go viral" means to spread quickly across the Internet as people share with each other something of interest using all available forms of online communication. It most often occurs with videos, but it can also happen with photos and marketing campaigns.

<sup>18</sup> Deactivating one's account results in one's Profile and all associated information disappearing from the Facebook service. One can return to the service at any time; everything will look the way it did before leaving. Deleting one's account results in the removal of all personally identifiable information from Facebook's database. The user is not being able to regain access to their account again.

*“FACEBOOK is at it again SHARING your personal information: As of today, there is a new privacy setting called ‘Instant Personalization’ that shares data with non-facebook websites and it is automatically set to ‘Allow.’ Go to Account > Privacy Settings > Applications and Websites and uncheck ‘Allow’—it’s at the bottom of the page. Please copy & repost.”*

Yet on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, the morning after a study of 70,000 Americans revealed that Facebook scored very poorly on customer satisfaction,<sup>19</sup> Facebook announced it had officially reached 500 million users, an increase of 100 million over just five months. As of June 2013, Facebook has 1.15 billion monthly active users, over 699 million of which log on to their account on a daily basis.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the enormous popularity of Facebook in spite of the website’s commercial use of its members’ “private” data has piqued the interest of scholars in explaining the seeming paradox. Susan Barnes (2006) is widely cited for her use of the term “privacy paradox” in helping to frame the issue of oversharing among young people. As she put it:

While American adults are concerned about how the government and corporations are centrally collecting data about citizens and consumers, teenagers are freely giving up personal and private information in online journals... Herein lies the privacy paradox. Adults are concerned about invasion of privacy, while teens freely give up personal information.

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<sup>19</sup> See “Facebook hated as much as airlines, cable companies” [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38324957/ns/technology\\_and\\_science-tech\\_and\\_gadgets/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/38324957/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> See “Key Facts” <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

However, it may be argued that a *paradox* is commonly understood as an argument or statement that is inconsistent or contradictory. Therefore, it does not make sense for the term to be applied to two separate generations (teens and adults) with broadly differing online behaviour. It is like saying that while high school teachers work hard on preparing and delivering captivating lectures, during class students are fantasizing about their upcoming weekend plans; or more generally, while adults are being responsible, young people are being irresponsible. The situation is not a paradox; it is simply a symptom of generational differences.

Perhaps a more accurate explanation of a privacy paradox in the digital age is that while people of *all* ages—not just teens and young adults—*claim* to be concerned about online privacy, they continue to use SNSs like Facebook that track their every click and keystroke. Put differently, the real privacy paradox is that supposedly privacy-conscious citizenries are willingly exchanging the tracking and selling of their personal information for regular access to a website. This version is best illustrated by findings about young adults by Kate Raynes-Goldie (2010), and by Alyson Leigh Young and Anabel Quan-Haase (2012), and could potentially be applied to users of all ages. In an ethnographic of study of young adult users of Facebook, Raynes-Goldie (2010) distinguished between “institutional privacy” and “social privacy.” The former refers to how Facebook and its corporate partners might use a person’s personal information, while the latter refers to controlling others’ access to one’s personal information. The respondents in her study seemed to be far more concerned with social privacy than with institutional privacy. As well, in a study consisting of 77 surveys of university students and 21 in-depth interviews, Young and Quan-Haase (2012) found that there was more concern for social

privacy than institutional privacy. They concluded that “little concern was raised about institutional privacy and no strategies were in place to protect against threats from the use of personal data by institutions.”

My interpretation of the privacy paradox is also more in line with what Helen Nissenbaum (2010, 2011) called the “transparency paradox.” She coined this term to describe how—despite the supposed public call for corporate openness—the detailed disclosure of a policy often leads to users immediately giving their consent without reading the policy. As Nissenbaum (2011:36) explained: “If notice (in the form of a privacy policy) finely details every flow, condition, qualification, and exception, we know that it is unlikely to be understood, let alone read.” She argues that individuals need to be shown a policy that they will actually read (and that such readability must be determined by the context of the situation), so that a person makes an entirely conscious decision to allow the use of their data by corporations and governments on a case-by-case basis. In this regard, understanding how citizens are sharing information and negotiating privacy becomes a pressing research question of our times.

**“You can’t have a thousand friends.”**

On November 3, 2010, late night talk show host, Jimmy Kimmel, calling into question the authenticity of one’s friendship with hundreds of Facebook Friends, proposed National Unfriend Day on November 17, 2010.<sup>21</sup> “Friendship is a sacred thing and I believe Facebook is cheapening it,” Kimmel said. “I go on this Facebook, I see people with thousands of what they call ‘friends’ – which is impossible. You can’t have a

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<sup>21</sup> “Jimmy Kimmel calls for National Unfriend Day on Nov. 17” [http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9195469/Jimmy\\_Kimmel\\_calls\\_for\\_National\\_Unfriend\\_Day\\_on\\_Nov.\\_17](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9195469/Jimmy_Kimmel_calls_for_National_Unfriend_Day_on_Nov._17) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

thousand friends.” He went on to say that if you were to post a status update<sup>22</sup> that said, *“I’m moving this weekend and I need help,”* those who respond to your update are your real friends. Everyone else is the “Facebook fat” that needs to be trimmed.

Although Jimmy’s campaign had little impact (or none that was reported in the media), his complaint lies at the core of my study’s goal, which is to understand why users of Facebook (and, by extension, other similar SNSs) are sharing information about their personal lives with hundreds of people that they know on a very casual level, and how they justify such disclosure. As danah boyd (2006) put it in one of the first scholarly articles to address the meaning of “friendship” on SNSs: “The public nature of these sites requires participants to perform their relationship to others.” In other words, while one’s handful of close offline friends are able to view one’s posts on Facebook, so too are hundreds of acquaintances on Facebook—both groups are, unless otherwise specified, given equal access to one’s personal Profile. With a single click of the mouse, one can allow anyone who requests access to spend hours each day on one’s personal Profile page, reading—or copying—their notes and status updates; viewing—or downloading—each of their hundreds or thousands of photos; and monitoring their Facebook activity minute-by-minute as reported in the News Feed.<sup>23</sup> A Facebook Friend<sup>24</sup> can do all of this for any amount of time without the Profile owner ever knowing.

Given such access, I have for years wondered about whether Facebook users were concerned about their privacy, especially in light of mainstream media reports that tend to

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<sup>22</sup> The status update feature allows users to post messages for all their Friends to read. In turn, Friends can respond with their own comments, and also press the Like button to show that they enjoyed reading it. A user’s most recent status update appears at the top of their Facebook Profile.

<sup>23</sup> The News Feed is the centre column of one’s home page. It is a constantly updating list of stories from the people and Pages that one follows on Facebook.

<sup>24</sup> “Friends” with a capital ‘F’ refers to the people that belong to the respondent’s Friend List (list of contacts) on Facebook. Those with whom one has an offline friendship will be referred to as “friends” with a lowercase ‘f’.

suggest that the answer has been moving increasingly toward the negative.<sup>25</sup> However, I believe that the answer is more complex than can be explained by anecdotal evidence that focus on the fallout of personal information disclosure without explaining the “victim’s” rationale for doing so. Furthermore, the extent to which Facebook users are aware of the commercial uses of their personal information and how they negotiate the risk, relative to the rewards of using SNSs, are questions that have been addressed by only a few scholars (Raynes-Goldie 2010; Young and Quan-Haase 2012). My study helps fill these gaps in understanding. What are the primary benefits of using Facebook, and what are the perceived risks? How and why do users negotiate the type and amount of personal information that they disclose on Facebook as their knowledge about the website’s commercial practices increases? What steps—if any—are being taken by users to regulate their personal information disclosure? How do users feel about the website selling their personal information to advertisers? What are the benefits of using Facebook and do they outweigh the risks of having one’s information used for commercial purposes? Or is it even seen as a risk at all? To answer these questions, I began my study by conducting 30 in-depth interviews with young adults, ages 18 to 32, who are daily users of Facebook. However, as I was reporting my analysis I came to suspect that some findings may be specific only to this age group.<sup>26</sup> To begin testing this case, I decided to conduct 10 additional interviews with older adult users, ages 48-58. For both sets of interviews I requested that each respondent add me to their Facebook Profile and provide

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<sup>25</sup> See “Online sharing: The rock ‘n’ roll of the digital generation?” [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-12-15/tech/online.privacy.generation.1.privacy-settings-keg-older-users?\\_s=PM:TECH](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-12-15/tech/online.privacy.generation.1.privacy-settings-keg-older-users?_s=PM:TECH) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> This was a rather late discovery that occurred well into the reporting of my original data. Time constraints prevented me from interviewing a larger number of older adult users.

me with full “Friend” access. This was done in order to obtain context for some of my interview questions.

A thematic analysis of the data revealed three themes that help explain the primary benefits of using Facebook: *Facebook is my life online*; *Facebook is my primary connection to others*; and *Facebook is a convenient communication and entertainment tool*. The risks associated with using Facebook are around issues of *privacy* and *control*. For the Millennial and Boomer respondents in my study, I found that there is no question that the benefits of using Facebook overwhelmingly outweigh the risks, and the perception of *control* on the user’s part is a key factor in rationalizing their ongoing use of the website. In this regard, I discuss the sociological implications of my findings, which adds to the limited yet growing scholarly research on the changing nature of privacy within SNSs that cross all geographical borders. I also add to the ongoing debate between a highly regulatory approach and a market driven approach to online privacy policy. In addition, I discuss how the implications of my study might inform the way marketing researchers approach Facebook and other SNSs in order to generate value for their clients. Finally, I present a case for why, from a respondent experience perspective, SNSs like Facebook are the ideal platforms for hosting online communities for the purposes of marketing research—a \$48 billion industry globally.

### **Working hypothesis**

#### ***“Maintained social capital”***

In *The Forms of Capital*, Pierre Bourdieu (1986:248) defined social capital as follows:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

Six years later in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant (1992:14) defined social capital in a similar way, but changed the word *potential* to *virtual*:

Social capital is 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.

Although the change in wording from *potential* to *virtual* was likely a case of using a synonym, it foreshadowed the applicability of social capital in today’s Internet age, where *virtual relationships* of all kinds are managed daily. Indeed, the once strictly academic term “social capital” has recently made its way into social media lingo thanks to websites like Klout.com, PeerIndex.com, Kred.com, and Radian6.com that measure its users’ “social media influence” or “social capital” online. For example, the more *followers* that one has on Twitter, the greater is one’s social capital or “Twinfluence.”<sup>27</sup>

Fifteen years after Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), noting that the term “social capital” lent itself to multiple definitions across a variety of disciplines, Nicole Ellison,

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<sup>27</sup> See “How to improve your Twinfluence and Twitter grade” <http://mashable.com/2008/10/23/how-to-improve-twinfluence-and-twitter-grade/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).



Charles Steinfeld and Cliff Lampe (2007:1146) proposed the term “maintained social capital” to describe the process of maintaining and leveraging weak, bridging ties through the use of SNSs to determine “whether online network tools enable individuals to keep in touch with a social network after physically disconnecting from it.” In their study of 286 undergraduate students, the researchers borrowed from Robert Putnam (2000), who in his book *Bowling Alone* distinguished between bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital refers to the loose connections or “weak ties” that make an individual’s network larger but do not usually provide emotional support (Granovetter 1982). Bonding social capital refers to strong ties—the tightly woven, emotional connections that exist within relationships like those between family members and close friends. The rapid growth of SNSs suggests that individuals are creating virtual networks that consist of both bonding and bridging social capital. Facebook is currently the most popular SNS, serving as—among other things—a social utility for individuals to maintain strong and weak offline ties in an online environment. As well, unlike face-to-face interaction, people can instantly form new connections with people in a targeted fashion by specifying parameters based on similar interests and backgrounds.

Maintained social capital, then, refers to those relationships, and the benefits we derive from them, that people maintain despite having shifted geography, interests or workplaces. As Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007:1148) outlined:

Social networks change over time as relationships are formed or abandoned. Particularly significant changes in social networks may affect one’s social capital, as when a person moves from the geographic location

in which their network was formed and thus loses access to those social resources.

In the case of Facebook, such relationships may be the ones that users forged in high school with people who went off to different colleges.

However, the measures for the Maintained Social Capital Scale that Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) employed in their quantitative study were hypothetical rather than behavioural, and included statements like “If I needed to, I could ask a high school acquaintance to do a small favor for me,” or “I’d be able to stay with a high school acquaintance if traveling to a different city.” They did not ask if respondents had ever *actually requested* a small favor from a high school acquaintance, in what context, and what the outcome was. The open-ended nature of my study will allow me to pose these kinds of probes. As well, while Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) applied the concept of maintained social capital to undergraduate students, I will be applying it to a variety of relationships that are augmented on Facebook, such as those between family members, friends, schoolmates, and co-workers. For example, the ability to monitor information about friends and family simply by surfing through their online Profiles allows people to have a way of staying in touch with each other on an ongoing basis, to be informed about new events, and to create informal knowledge together without the necessity of meeting face-to-face. As well, the user volunteers information to be seen by others. Today, it is commonly proposed that SNSs represent the easiest way to stay in touch with others and to reinforce social capital. As well, while Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) concluded quantitatively that “Facebook appears to be much less useful for maintaining or creating bonding social capital [than bridging social capital],” my qualitative study provides

evidence for the opposite. For the respondents in my study, Facebook is *more* useful for maintaining bonding social capital than bridging social capital because it is the relatively few *strong* ties, not the numerous weak ties, that they are thinking about when uploading personal information about themselves to the social network. I also demonstrate that it is the strong ties—not the weak ones—that respondents mean to nurture via Facebook, at the risk of having their personal information exploited for commercial purposes.

Because my sample size is 40, and because Facebook has over one billion registered users, I am unable to formulate a scientific hypothesis or an “if-then” statement that can be formally tested. As well, even if I were to accumulate a much larger sample, the qualitative methodology of my study would not enable me to subject any hypotheses to Popperian tests of falsifiability. Therefore, rather than lay out a formal hypothesis for testing, I have developed a working hypothesis that anchors my discussion of the literature and my analysis of the data. In his book, *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry*, John Dewey (1938:145) conceived a working hypothesis as a “provisional, working means of advancing investigation” that also leads to the discovery of other important facts. To this end, the working hypothesis for my study is as follows:

**Despite concerns that have been raised about privacy issues, the benefits of maintaining bonding social capital on Facebook through uploading personal information about one’s self are perceived to outweigh the risks of having that information used for commercial purposes.**

In examining the data, however, other reasons for disclosing personal information on Facebook may arise (e.g. impression management, convenience, cultural cachet), and they will be considered throughout the analysis and discussion.

### **Review of the literature on Technology and Society, SNSs, Facebook, and Privacy**

In order to substantiate the need for this particular study, I will review a number of things. I will begin by reviewing how society and scholars have responded to new technologies, in particular the emergence of the Internet, over the years. I will then look at how anonymous Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs)<sup>28</sup> gave way to SNSs that thrive on users putting forward their real life names and faces. Within this discussion, I will examine the changing nature of privacy in the era of SNSs, including the role that Facebook has played in it. I will also discuss the role that the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada has played in protecting the privacy of individuals online—nationally and globally. I will then review the literature on Facebook as the go-to place for peer interaction online, including issues of managing personal disclosure. Finally, I will discuss the relatively recent interest in Facebook among advertisers and marketing researchers in the digital age, in which consumers and companies are more closely linked than ever before.

### ***Continuum: the evolution of society with technology***

It is certain that the emergence of every new communication technology has sparked the interest of scholars in how the technology would affect various aspects of society. Marshall McLuhan is widely known for illustrating electric media's contribution

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<sup>28</sup> A MUD is computer program, usually running over the Internet, that allows multiple users to participate in virtual-reality role-playing games.

in the 1960s to knowledge and communication technology at a local and global level. In his most cited work, *Understanding media: the extensions of man*, McLuhan (1964:7) uses the concept of prosthesis to explain a medium as “any extension of ourselves.” For example, a hammer is an extension of the hand, a pedal is an extension of the foot, and a telescope is an extension of the eye. In terms of communication technology, while letter mail allowed one’s words to travel across great distances, the telephone enabled such communication to be rapid, frequent, and more personal (De Kerckhove 1997; McLuhan 1962, 1964). Another scholar, Richard Davis (1999:34), in discussing the impact of new communication technologies on the political process, explained that the printing press disseminated information to the public; the radio reached exponentially more people by rising above the hurdles of illiteracy; the television gave citizens a view of the political players and landscapes, and cable gave them a less filtered one.

The Internet, however, blazed a multi-directional trail past the relatively incremental steps made by its preceding communication technologies. According to Robert Klotz (2004:43) in his book, *The Politics of Internet Communication*, while the Internet does not create a new world, it gives people an opportunity to communicate better in the physical world. Put differently, while the Gutenberg press allowed for information to travel great distances to those privileged enough to receive books (McLuhan 1962), the Internet allows for information *from* all over the world to be shared *all over* the world within seconds. As McLuhan (1964:310-311) put it nearly 50 years ago:

Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, free from fragmentally specialism as never before—but also

involved in the total social process as never before; since with electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience.

According to a 2012 Pew report on trends in news consumption, 50% of Americans get their news from one or more digital platforms (Pew 2012a). This claim could certainly not have been made a decade ago when news stories were still being broken in newspapers' *paper* publications instead of online, and when a day passed between story updates or corrections—when newspapers, in a way, printed the past. Today, news stories are broken on a newspaper's website first—before the paper publication—and mistakes are corrected instantly online. What occurred around the globe a day ago could be dismissed as “old news” considering more and more citizens are now getting their news from major news sources (including those that own the print editions) in real-time via their websites, news aggregators, RSS feeds, and SNS pages (Pew 2012a). As an adult in his early thirties, I have difficulty imagining the days when an individual's work day was bookended by the consumption of the morning newspaper and evening news. Why wait until the 6 o'clock news when you can get up-to-the-minute coverage of events in between data entries at the office or during a department meeting via a smartphone? Why pay for a newspaper to arrive with stories that you read about yesterday afternoon?

Furthermore, until the Internet emerged, the corporate and institutional control of the media created a world of one-way communication (Castells 2000). It was the computer and the Internet, then, that enabled everyday citizens to do more than shout at the television screen by providing the means to express themselves and actually be heard

without the filter of journalists or newspaper editors. As Derrick De Kerckhove (1997:159) observed over a decade ago in his book, *Connected intelligence: the arrival of the Web society*, “TV brings you the world, while computer networks bring you to the world.” In other words, the spectators have become the participants.

### ***The Internet utopians and dystopians***

Early Internet researchers predicted that the Internet would have positive social consequences in people’s everyday lives because it increased the ease and frequency of interpersonal communications among people. In his 1993 book, *The Virtual Community*, Howard Rheingold provides examples of finding love and emotional support on the Internet (as well as stories of deceit and deception). In her widely cited book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle (1995) observed that we can have multiple personalities on the Internet, solve personal problems, and play out fantasies, all in our “life on the screen.” As well, she argued that online gaming provided a comfort zone for those with little preference for social interaction—especially during a teenager’s formative years, even though other scholars contended that such people should overcome their shyness rather than further isolating themselves behind a computer screen (Putnam 2000; Sunstein 2001). As well, Manuel Castells (2000:392) asserted his book, *The Rise of the Network Society*, that email represented the revenge of the typographic mind and the recuperation of the constructed, rational discourse.

However, as Pippa Norris (2001) notably pointed out in her book, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet*, a “digital divide” exists—in access and within access—among citizens. While the digital divide conventionally refers to the gap between people who have the Internet in their homes and those who do not,

Norris (2001:4) discussed it in terms of a *global divide*, the “divergence of Internet access between industrialized and developing societies”; a *social divide*, the “gap between the information rich and poor in each nation”; and a *democratic divide*, the “difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in public life.”

Still, in his 1993 book, *Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Neil Postman posed a question in order to frame how we should investigate the response of society to a new communication technology—a question that is especially relevant today: “To whom will the technology give greater power and freedom? And whose power and freedom will be reduced by it?” (1993:11). In this regard, I agree with Paul DiMaggio et al. (2001:321), who in their article about the social implications of the Internet described *political polarization* as “the most central question for sociological analysis of changing technical structures of interpersonal and mass communication.” With its inherent competing ideologies of power and freedom, I think that political polarization is a useful frame of reference for discussing the utopian and dystopian responses to the entrance of the Internet into mainstream society.

The early debate over the effect of the Internet on the political process involved the contrast between two perspectives: the cyber-optimists / utopians and the cyber-pessimists / dystopians. Cyber-optimists viewed the Internet as a medium that would not only hold governments accountable, but also bring citizens together in the form of political communities that provided direct input into the political process (Hill and Hughes 1998:181). The Internet would level the political playing field by giving voice to the voiceless and, as is often remarked, “Power to the people.” In their book,



*Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet*, Kevin Hill and John Hughes (1998:182) predicted that “politics and society will *change the Internet*” instead of the Internet radically changing politics. In this regard, according to Davis (1999:65), the Internet would be harnessed by political parties as a tool to update their members, mobilize their activists, and educate the public. Such predictions were in line with what was referred to as “mobilization thesis,” which suggested that the Internet would mobilize groups that were previously underrepresented in the political arena, especially the young, the uneducated, and the poor.

On the other hand, cyber-pessimists believed that the Internet would not only confuse the public and politicians by supplying too much information or misinformation, but it would also lead to irresponsible decision-making by politicians giving in to mob demands (Hill and Hughes 1998:181). As well, although Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis (2003:167-168) predicted that the Internet would play a key role in mobilizing activists, they also predicted that it “will not produce the mobilization of *voters*<sup>29</sup>.” Moreover, cyber-pessimists predicted that the Internet would neither inform the uninformed nor engage the disengaged. Rather, according to “reinforcement thesis,” the new medium would be employed by those who were already interested and active in politics, which might only further distance them from the politically apathetic. As Hill and Hughes (1998:44) observed, “an ‘offline’ person today who does not care about politics will be someone with a computer and Internet connection who still does not care about politics tomorrow.” Further, it was believed that governments and media conglomerates would make sure that the status quo remained so by anticipating and adapting to political sea changes online (Davis 1999; Norris 2001).

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<sup>29</sup> Emphasis added.

Further studies revealed that the Internet did not and likely would not improve the quality or quantity of political discourse (Barber 1998; Wilhelm 2000; Norris 2001), that the content of political discussion online did not and would not represent public opinion (Davis 2005), and that the reinforcement thesis was the closest explanation of political reality. That is, while the Internet has provided unprecedented opportunities for people to connect to the world around them about the issues they are passionate, it also forces some to learn more about what is happening in the world than they may actually wish to learn. In addition, people now have a wider range of choices given the increasing number of options and tools for customization. According to Cass Sunstein (2001) in his book, *Republic.com*, the availability of such choices meant that some people would try to find material that made them feel comfortable, or that was created by and for people like themselves. In other words, if citizens wanted to restrict themselves to receiving either conservative, moderate, or liberal points of views, they could do so with a few clicks of the mouse. In this regard, Sunstein (2001) wrote that the Daily Me would balkanize the public sphere (Putnam 2000), polarize communities, and draw new boundaries along ideological rather than geographic lines. He cautioned that such operations might become “echo chambers” in which the like-minded would communicate only with each other, reinforcing their own perspectives but precluding their exposure to new ones. For Sunstein (2001), the result could be further fragmented societies as well as a constrained and impoverished political discourse. In other words, the Internet could eventually lead to a deterioration of critical thinking as citizens expose themselves only to news and perspectives that fit their personal interests.

However, DiMaggio et al. (2001) and Bimber and Davis (2003) found such fears to be overblown. While Bimber and Davis' (2003) study of online campaigning in U.S. elections provided evidence for the kind of selectivity that Sunstein (2001) described, they argued that the "echo chamber" effect is mitigated by the fact that the Internet "supplements and augments" (Bimber and Davis 2003:170) rather than replaces television, newspapers and other media. The authors found that very few citizens got all their information online and concluded that it was unlikely that "the Internet will create the highly polarized, fragmented audiences that some fear" (2003:169-170). Furthermore, later evidence again countered dystopian predictions when the spotlight was aimed at younger voters. After analyzing the role of the Internet in youth civic engagement, Diana Owen (2006:36) concluded in her book chapter, "Internet and Youth Civic Engagement in the US," that the image of the young, politically disengaged Internet user was not accurate. And the more time young people spent online, the greater their tendency was to seek news and information about current events, explore and express opinions, and create politically oriented Web pages. Finally, in their book, *Digital Citizenship: the Internet, Society, and Participation*, Karen Mossberger et al. (2008) reported that more younger Americans used the Internet to get a range of political and election news than older Americans. As well, theirs was the first study to demonstrate the positive association between email and chat rooms and voting. They credited the availability of information online in their findings that Internet use increases the likelihood of voting and civic engagement, especially among the young. "Given the close presidential elections of 2000 and 2004," the researchers stated, "politics online matters for politics off-line" (Mossberger et al. 2008:87).

Indeed, the Internet developed along a continuum of communication technology. Like the inventions of the telephone and letter mail long before it, the introduction of the Internet has changed the nature of people's interaction with others, which inevitably has scholars making predictions—and the media making assumptions—about the implications of the new technology for society. In hindsight, the “techno panic” has been overblown. Though turning on a television can have the effect of bringing an entire room of people to silence, it has not destroyed social interaction. Though mobile phones have resulted in people being reachable from anywhere there is a satellite connection, they are not being forced to answer any calls. And though the Internet has provided simple, direct access to more information than can ever be consumed, it has not resulted in a highly fragmented citizenry, consumed by “echo chambers” that reinforce their own perspectives. Given this, I argue that SNSs are simply the latest iteration along the continuum, the emergence of which I will now discuss.

### *From MUDs to SNSs*

In the early '90s, some studies on virtual communities focused on the fact that virtual relationships took time to form given the absence of physical cues like facial expressions and body language. In reflecting on the seven years he spent participating in virtual communities, Rheingold (1992) observed that “in virtual communities, you can get to know people and then choose to meet them.” As well, in her book chapter, “The Emergence of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication,” Nancy Baym (1995:157) wrote that “social information unavailable in the immediacy of the face-to-face context can be gained verbally through computer-mediated interaction; the ‘social penetration process’ just takes longer.”

Other studies focused on the notion of “time-shifting” in that virtual communities empowered participants to contribute a well-constructed message at a time that was convenient to them. As Hiltz and Turoff (1994) explained in their book, *The Network Nation: Human Communication via Computer*, unlike face-to-face encounters in real life, in computer conferencing one could take the time to craft a thoughtful question or response before presenting it when convenient. As well, in her article, “Virtual Communities: The 90’s Mind Altering Drug or Facilitator of Human Interaction,” Jaye A. Lapachet (1994) observed that virtual communities “provide a forum for discussion of topics that may otherwise not be discussed on such an open scale.” This again speaks to the benefit of such platforms in enabling people to fashion considered positions about sensitive topics before sharing them with others.

However, to me the most significant scholarly research on virtual communities at the time was on the nature of community on these spaces, in particular how a virtual community acted as a “third place”—with different characteristics from being at home or at work (Oldenburg 1989). In her research on MUDs, Turkle (1995) likened the Internet to an enormous brain that was evolving and changing, and that there was a place in the world for both the real and the virtual. Similarly, in his book, *Being Digital* (1995:185), Nicholas Negroponte declared: “In a very real sense, MUDs... are a ‘third’ place, not home and not work.” In his edited book, *Cybersociety*, Steven Jones (1995:2) coined the term “cybersociety” to describe the social formations that occurred on virtual communities, which are in part a result of the ability to “share thoughts and information instantaneously across vast distances. As well, Lapachet (1994) cautioned that participants could become so involved in the relationships they forged with others in a

virtual community that it eventually “becomes their reality,” causing them to “[lose] touch with physical reality.” She also observed that “virtual communities are fostering interaction between people that would never have taken place without computer mediated communication and the respective virtual community of choice.”

However, since Internet years are similar to dog years, given the fast pace of technological change, the early work on virtual communities—in particular the notion of them being a “third place”—has aged. While works by Turkle (1995) and Rheingold (1992, 1993), for example, are seminal in examining how people learned to adapt to new forms of communication and develop virtual communities, the *context* has been supplanted by so many technological evolutions that have changed the model of “community.” While there were over 300 MUDs based on at least 13 different kinds of software in 1997 (Turkle 1997), today only a handful of SNSs play host to hundreds of millions of users. As well, whereas friendships between users developed in MUDs over a long period of time, or sometimes never developed (Parks and Floyd 1996), on Facebook the user experience *begins* with the adding of “friends” to one’s Profile, most which the users already knows in some way in real life. Finally, whereas MUD users spent about 12 hours per week on MUDs (Utz 2000), Facebook users spend an average of two hours per week on the SNS.<sup>30</sup> Given these stark differences, it is clear why no one is attributing “old” claims about MUD users to SNS users today.

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<sup>30</sup> See “Top US Web brands” <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2011/august-2011-top-us-web-brands.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

However, when the number of people creating “virtual selves”<sup>31</sup> on SNSs increases every minute—and when one can still communicate with someone on the other side of the planet at little or no cost, at any time, and for any duration—the foundational research on virtual communities remains important. For example, the question of why—in an information society characterized by speed and efficiency (Castells 2000)—more and more people are engaging in a more time-consuming method of communication (email, social networking) instead of a quick telephone call<sup>32</sup> is important to understanding social relationships today. Why phone someone when you can email them? Why drop by for a chat when you can chat online? These are important questions especially considering the absence of body language and the misinterpretation of a person’s “online tone of voice.” For example, when angered by someone, the keyboard can be used as a weapon. It is much easier to vent feelings of irritation or even rage through email impulsively than to wait for a face-to-face confrontation in which time to compose oneself has been allowed. Indeed, people are usually more diplomatic when confronting someone in a real life scenario. Such questions echo those asked by Rheingold (1992) over 20 years ago about virtual communities: “Who censors, and what is censored? Who safeguards the privacy of individuals in the face of technologies that make it possible to amass and retrieve detailed personal information about every member of a large population?”

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<sup>31</sup> Whether or not a person’s virtual self is “fictional” remains a subject of scholarly debate (Weber 2008; boyd 2008a; Stald 2008) as the number and popularity of websites and online games that revolve around the creation of user Profiles or avatars increases day-by-day.

<sup>32</sup> Or perhaps it is that telephone conversations never really were as quick to begin with (what with all the introductory formalities).

## ***Facebook.com***

Originally having the URL, [www.thefacebook.com](http://www.thefacebook.com), Facebook was created by Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg in February 2004 as an internal network—or campus intranet—that enabled students to communicate with each other via personalized Profile pages. The fact that over half of the Harvard student population signed up within the first month is evidence of the perceived convenience of such an online network (Phillips 2007). A month later, students from Stanford, Columbia, and Yale were permitted to sign up, followed by other Ivy League institutions, and steadily most colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. In September 2005, an invitation-only version of Facebook for high school students was launched. One year later, on September 26, 2006, anyone 13 years of age or older with a valid email address could join. In such a short time the website has become the most popular place to interact with other people via the Internet and it is now a normal day-to-day activity and a part of mainstream culture in many societies. A 2012 Nielsen survey of 1,998 adult social media users in the U.S. found that users devote more time to Facebook on both PCs and mobile devices than any other website (Nielsen 2012). Today, the average number of Friends a person has on Facebook is 229 (Pew 2012b); for teens, the median number of Friends is 300 (Pew 2013a). The website provides a very convenient form of communication in which people can effortlessly share endless amounts of information (photos, music, links, etc.) in just a few seconds. It provides a means for people to “stay connected” without having to ever leave their homes, and it does so for more than 19 million Canadians.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See “World's highest: Facebook stats show 14 million Canadians check their newsfeed every day” <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/technology/personal-tech/World+highest+Facebook+stats+show+million/8788700/story.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).



Once one accepts someone as a Friend on Facebook, the two Friends can see things on and about each other's account. For example, the first thing someone sees upon logging on to Facebook in its default setting is the News Feed, which provides a real time stream of updates—what Jim is doing, how Frank is feeling, where Nancy is going, which photo album Erin updated—of every Friend on one's list. The same goes for notes and video uploads, tagging<sup>34</sup> notifications, and application updates.

Indeed, particularly for secondary and post-secondary students, Facebook is now an integral part of their daily social lives (boyd 2007; Jones et al. 2009; Kabre and Brown 2011; Pempek et al. 2009; Robards 2012; Zhang, Jiang, and Carroll 2010a); they are revealing more information about themselves and take in more information about others than any generation in history (Pew 2013b). For years, it has been their go-to place for reuniting, reminiscing, event planning, gossiping, photo-sharing, and status updating (Ito et al. 2008; Pew 2007a, 2007b, 2011e, 2013a). Moreover, by viewing the Profiles and information of their peers, young people gain a sense of what are the normal activities among their counterparts (e.g. through photo uploads of parties and college events) and what circumstances and emotions are considered typical (e.g. remarks of frustration,<sup>35</sup> confusion, stress, etc.). Anecdotally, after making a new acquaintance at a college party, one is less likely to hear “What's your phone number?” Instead, a new relationship is more likely to begin with the words “I'll add you on Facebook.” As scholars like Susan Herring (2008) and boyd (2008) pointed out, the time when young people got together at dances and parties to meet one another has also given way to sitting in front of the

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<sup>34</sup> A tag links a person, page, or place to something one posts, like a status update or a photo.

<sup>35</sup> The number two status update trend of 2009 was “FML,” which stands for “Fuck My Life.” See “Facebook's Top Status Updates of 2009” [http://www.pewworld.com/article/185286/facebooks\\_top\\_status\\_updates\\_of\\_2009.html?loomia\\_ow=t0:s0:a38:g26:r2:c0.014130:b29487100:z0](http://www.pewworld.com/article/185286/facebooks_top_status_updates_of_2009.html?loomia_ow=t0:s0:a38:g26:r2:c0.014130:b29487100:z0) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

computer at home, keeping oneself occupied with Net-surfing and instant messaging until an alert is sent from a dating website indicating that someone has responded one's profile. For many parents of teenagers, they can only stand by and watch their children engage in the Internet world (Herring 2008).

### ***Facebook and the changing nature of privacy***

According to danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007), SNSs 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.

Put differently, a SNS is a micro-society centred around the user, offering them the possibility to link with other users. What happens during this linking with others is what intrigues sociologists. In her book chapter, "Producing Sites, Exploring Identities: Youth Online Authorship," Susannah Stern (2008:96) argued that the "desire for meaningful feedback [on personal websites] is particularly acute during adolescence, when individuals increasingly crave social and self-acceptance." As well, in their book, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2008:260) argued that people do not get involved in politics because of technology; rather, technology is the medium that brings people together. And in her article, "Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation," Sonia Livingstone (2008:116) observed from interviews with 16 teenagers that young people are primarily excited by the "peer-to-peer opportunities" that the Internet affords, in which they give and receive "responsiveness, criticism, humor, feedback, openness, and networking." In

other words, having easy access to others may make a person feel more strongly supported by and better connected to one's peers and to society in general. However, others question the *quality* of such online relationships and have argued that the rise in Internet communication may lead to weaker social ties because people have less reason to leave their homes and actually interact face-to-face with others. In a longitudinal study of the first two years of Internet usage among 169 people in 73 households, Kraut et al. (1998) found that the more participants used the Internet, the less time they spent with family members in the household, the smaller their social circles became, and the more they experienced feelings of loneliness and depression. As well, in a study of email communication of 23 "heavy" and 22 "light" users of email, Janell Copher, Alaina Kanfer and Mary Walker (2002) found evidence of "communication overload" and that heavy users had less face-to-face communication with others than did light users. Finally, in a time diary study of 6,000 Americans between the ages of 18 and 64, Norman Nie, Sunshine Hillygus and Lutz Erbring (2002) concluded that Internet use at home had a strong negative impact on time spent with friends and family during weekdays and weekends, and that usage at work had a similar negative impact on time spent with colleagues.

Indeed, although the Internet has made social interactions more possible in a number of ways, it has also made them seem less *real*. From my experience, instead of socializing, many of my peers (who live a few blocks away from me) prefer to speak (or "chat") online via Facebook or an instant messenger than over the phone or face-to-face. In her book, *Life online: researching real experiences in virtual space*, Annette Markham (1998:124) pointed out that one of the positive aspects of computer mediated

communication is that users have control, that users can “limit the extent to which others can view or touch them, physically and, presumably, psychologically.”

According to James Gillies and Robert Cailliau (2000) in *How the Web was born: the Story of the World Wide Web*, when the Internet first emerged, there was a distinct feeling of autonomy and freedom. People could interact anonymously on online message boards and chat rooms without fear of retribution. The Internet was in some ways a liberator for people who have been hiding behind or have been handicapped by personal traits like age, class, and physical appearance. Behind the keyboard, individuals could befriend those that they would not have met in the course of their everyday real lives. As well, in the preface of his book, *The Internet and Society*, James Slevin (2000:iv) remarked that “once we are online, we seem to enter and become submerged in a different world.” Moreover, according to Klotz (2004:43), the Internet did not create a new world as much as it gave people an opportunity to communicate better in the physical world. As well, the Internet allowed an individual who may have been considered “unique” within his or her social circle to find others with similar interests. It was also a place in which ordinary people could enjoy the spotlight, if what they wrote resonated with others.

However, other scholars view this somewhat utopian framework to have rapidly eroded. For example, Usenet, a popular online discussion board divided into newsgroups, had been touted as the ultimate democratic forum because it supposedly allowed for well thought-out responses—by anyone—at a time of one’s convenience. But according to research by Davis (1999), Usenet was unrepresentative of the population; the loudest person was heard; there was no moderator to regulate debate; people talked past one

another when they were not verbally attacking each other; and several conversations would occur at once. As well, Davis (1999:153) observed that the discussion board was full of insults, criticisms, contradictory information, and non-factual statements; increasingly, anonymity became undesirable or even objectionable.

In contrast to anonymous discussion boards, SNSs like Facebook, are often used for the ongoing disclosure of what not long ago was considered private information, including one's full name; personal photos like honeymoons, ultrasounds, and home renovations; one's relationship status (Jon is *Married to Irina Callegher*); state of mind (Jon is "*really stressing about finals*"), or personal whereabouts (Jon is "*at the library 'til 5*"). Not only is this growing trend toward transparency over privacy (Nissenbaum 2010, 2011; Pew 2006, 2013b) argued to be endangering one's personal security (e.g. Jon essentially announced that his home is currently unoccupied until he returns from the library),<sup>36</sup> but the *voluntary* relinquishing of personal information has only recently been of sociological concern. boyd (2008b) explored how Facebook users responded to the introduction of the News Feed in 2006, when the personal updates to a user's seemingly personal Profile page were suddenly displayed to all of their Friends. Susan Waters and James Ackerman (2011) investigated the perceived motivations and consequences of voluntary disclosure toward improving relationships with family and friends. As well, though not a sociologist, philosopher Helen Nissenbaum (2010:108)—mentioned earlier—examined the tradeoffs between incentives and moral considerations in regard to personal information disclosure online, or as she put it, the “force of countervailing interests and values.”

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<sup>36</sup> See <http://pleaserobme.com/> (last accessed August 28, 2013). As the URL hints, the website was created to raise awareness about oversharing by aggregating the disclosure of personal whereabouts among users of popular SNSs into a live stream for the world—burglars and all—to see.

Online personal information disclosure was also a concern for Castells (2001) and Donald Gustein (1999), but both addressed the issue only in terms of government surveillance and admitted that such information gathering would be of no serious consequence to the average user. However, since the focus of my study is on the *voluntary* disclosure of personal information, the issue of surveillance is beyond its scope. Still, it is worth mentioning that Anders Albrechtslund (2008) referred to the voluntary exchange of personal information on SNSs as “participatory surveillance,” a concept he described as a “mutual, empowering and subjectivity building practice.” In the context of SNSs, it “changes the role of the user from passive to active, since surveillance offers opportunities to take action, seek information and communicate.” From this perspective, SNSs make surveillance “fundamentally social.” Yet, while Tara Marshall (2012) examined the impact of Facebook surveillance of one’s ex-partner on postbreakup adjustment, and while Marshall et al. (2013) explored surveillance as it relates to jealousy within romantic relationships, to the best of my knowledge no other scholars have built upon Albrechtslund’s (2008) concept of “participatory surveillance” to date.

In addition, it should be noted that neither Albrechtslund (2008), nor Castells (2001), nor Gustein (1999) addressed the ability for *anyone*—not just one’s social peers online—to access an individual’s personal information that is posted on the Internet. That is, it may be argued that the “acquaintance” is today more of a threat to one’s personal privacy than “big brother.” Not only can one Google a stranger’s home phone number and get their address, but one can also view a satellite photo or even a street-level view of

their house on Google Earth.<sup>37</sup> At what point, then, does “Googling” cross the line from curiosity to snooping or even stalking? According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008:39), we have little control over our “digital dossiers”: all the digital information held about a given person in many different hands online. As Robert Heverly (2008:216) put it in his chapter “Growing up Digital: Control and the Pieces of a Digital Life,” there is a “potential problem in the way our youth interact with digital media, creating artefacts with potentially pernicious permanence, yet we have identified no clear way to prevent it.” A video uploaded online can be easily downloaded to another person’s personal computer. One can also download and save hundreds of photos uploaded by one’s Friends—or Friends of one’s Friend—on Facebook and save them to a hard drive, an online server, or upload them to another website. As part of a research project on Facebook privacy which was published in 2005, two MIT students were able to download over 70,000 Facebook Profiles from four universities using an automated script (Jones and Soltren 2005). Furthermore, in May 2008 a BBC technology program called *Click* demonstrated that personal details of Facebook users and their friends could be stolen by submitting malicious programs masquerading as harmless applications.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, publicly revealing personal information can potentially have long-term consequences (Mayer-Schönberger 2009; Palfrey and Gasser 2008). Increasingly, for example, many prospective employers and college admissions counsellors are searching SNSs and excluding applicants who have engaged in questionable activities as revealed

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<sup>37</sup> Try Google Earth here: <http://www.google.com/earth/index.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> See “Identity at risk on Facebook” [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click\\_online/7375772.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click_online/7375772.stm) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

by the content of their Profile page.<sup>39</sup> In addition, many law enforcement agencies review local SNSs in their routine background checks of individuals (Hinduja and Patchin 2008:136). boyd (2008:19) therefore had a point when she wrote that “privacy is not an inalienable right – it is a privilege that must be protected socially and structurally in order to exist. The question remains as to whether or not privacy is something that society wishes to support.”

boyd’s view notwithstanding, perhaps it is not so much a question of society supporting privacy as much as it is a question of the *nature* of privacy changing. In a survey of 343 undergraduate students, Emily Christofides, Amy Muise and Serge Desmarais (2009) found that while three quarters of students were concerned about privacy and information control, they still disclosed a great deal of personal information on Facebook, including details such as birthdays, email addresses, hometowns, school and degree major, and intimate photographs. Given this reality, whether or not it concerns people that the information they put online may be accessed by anyone without having obtained consent may reveal new insight into attitudes toward privacy in the era of SNSs. Moreover, how can personal information be considered private when it is posted online? For Nissenbaum (2010:127), this question must be answered on a case-by-case basis through the proper design of online environments that “prescribe the flow of personal information in a given context.” Websites that do not allow users to make an informed decision in consideration of the traditional understanding of privacy (public vs. private divide) are committing a violation of what she terms “contextual integrity.” However, it is too early to tell if the availability of simple and readable privacy policies would result

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<sup>39</sup> See “Thirty-seven percent of companies use social networks to research potential job candidates” <http://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?id=pr691&sd=4%2F18%2F2012&ed=4%2F18%2F2099> (last accessed August 28, 2013).



in people being more careful about what they share online. In part, my study aims to contribute to this discussion.

### ***Canada and the safeguarding of privacy online***

The Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) is a federal law on the topic of data privacy in Canada. Passed in the late '90s to promote consumer trust in electronic commerce, the Act governs how private-sector companies can collect, use and disclose personal information.<sup>40</sup> It requires reasonable personal information management practices to be implemented, which includes obtaining consent for, or giving notification of, the collection, use or disclosure of such personal information by the various organizations involved. It also requires reasonable safeguards for the storage of such personal information, and limits the time it may be retained.<sup>41</sup>

In 2008, students at the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic at the University of Ottawa filed a complaint under PIPEDA, identifying potential problems with the privacy policies and practices of Facebook. A year later, the federal privacy commissioner launched an investigation and concluded<sup>42</sup> that the website contravened Canadian privacy laws in the following four areas:

1. A lack of adequate safeguards to restrict outside software developers – of games, quizzes and the like – from gaining access to personal Profiles of users and their online friends.

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<sup>40</sup> “Personal Information” under the Act means information about an “identifiable individual.” Examples include one’s name, race, ethnic origin, religion, age, height, weight, or Social Insurance Number. For employees of an organization, personal information does not include name, title or business address or telephone number.

<sup>41</sup> See “Your Guide to PIPEDA” [http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/02\\_05\\_d\\_08\\_e.pdf](http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/02_05_d_08_e.pdf) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> See “Report of findings into the complaint filed by the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic” [http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/02\\_05\\_d\\_08\\_e.pdf](http://www.priv.gc.ca/information/02_05_d_08_e.pdf) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

2. Facebook's indefinite retention of personal information of people who have deactivated their accounts.
3. A lack of clarity about how Facebook material can be used in the event of a person dying.
4. A lack of protection of information about non-users – people who may not have their own Facebook accounts, but whose personal data may be on friends' or associates' pages.<sup>43</sup>

As a result of the investigation, Facebook introduced a number of new privacy features to bring its services in line with Canada's privacy law. The company gave users more simplified control over who can see the items that they post and it provided a clearer explanation about its information-sharing practices to its hundreds of millions of users globally. It also began requiring that applications (e.g. games, quizzes) inform users of the kind of personal information needed to make them run and to require consent to use that data. While such changes were approved by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada in September of 2010,<sup>44</sup> it is certain that the investigation itself marked only the beginning of Canada's involvement in the evolution of Facebook's privacy policy, which is subject to the laws of every country in which it operates.

### ***Facebook as a place to see and be seen***

It may be argued that a major reason why SNSs like Facebook are so popular is because they disseminate information so effectively. After all, posting to an audience

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<sup>43</sup> Summary taken from "Facebook gets poked by Canada over privacy"  
<http://www.thestar.com/News/Canada/article/667700> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> See "Facebook privacy changes approved by watchdog"  
<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2010/09/22/facebook-privacy-commissioner.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

within a network is easier than e-mailing people individually, and for some it is also more fun. As mentioned earlier, young people are recording their lives in detail, exposing themselves through a medium that will outlast their youth. This was especially of interest to early researchers of Facebook. In 2005, Ralph Gross and Alessandro Acquisti (2005) provided a list of explanations for why Facebook members are so open to sharing their personal information online. Three of these explanations were that “the perceived benefit of selectively revealing data to strangers may appear larger than the perceived costs of possible privacy invasions”; “relaxed attitudes toward (or lack of interest in) personal privacy”; and “faith in the networking service or trust in its members.” As well, in a 2005 study of MIT students, Harvey Jones and Jose Soltren (2005:4) found that “Facebook was firmly entrenched in college students’ lives, but users had not restricted who had access to this portion of their life. In this instance, the researchers wrote that in light of the threat to privacy it will come down to the ‘common sense’ of users to moderate the disclosure of their own information as they become aware of the consequences. However, in finding that there was little attempt among young people to conceal information and that the emphasis appeared to be about revealing as much information as possible in line with one’s projected image, the researchers concluded that such notions of ‘common sense’ will likely shift along with changes in the understanding of and values attached to privacy. Indeed, Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck and Jason Martin (2008:1830) found that on Facebook one strategically creates interpersonal relationships with other people by highlighting certain aspects of one’s life over others, while still creating a genuine impression of who one is. This is a digital age example of what Erving Goffman (1959) called *impression management* (to be further addressed later). As the researchers put it:

The hoped-for possible selves users projected on Facebook were neither the ‘true selves’ commonly seen in MUDs or Chat Rooms, nor the ‘real selves’ people presented in localized face-to-face interactions. The Facebook selves appeared to be highly socially desirable identities individuals aspire to have offline but have not yet been able to embody for one reason or another.

Moreover, in creating highly socially desirable identities on Facebook, the user can also emphasize what they believe to be their best qualities. boyd (2008a) described a social network site<sup>45</sup> as having “created a stage for digital flâneurs—a place to see and be seen.” However, when a person creates a virtual self on Facebook there is only *one* impression they can make—a one-shot creation of the self that everyone who is a virtual Friend (or even a stranger browsing through Profiles) can see. While Facebook does provide the user with the opportunity to make only certain information available to certain users, it still does not provide them with the ability to modify or tailor the information for different viewers. One can only block certain viewers from seeing certain things, and problems arise when users fail to or forget to do so: photos of a weekend of binge drinking may impress one’s peers but repulse a prospective employer; one’s strong religious views may attract dialog from those of the same faith but offend those with different or no religious beliefs; listing one’s favourite musical artists, television shows, and films may make one appear cultured, or silly, or shallow, or pretentious depending on what is listed and who is viewing it. Thus, in a way unlike anything experienced in the real world, the user must struggle with creating an identity for themselves that can appeal to multiple people by finding a balance among their various personality traits and

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<sup>45</sup> In this case Friendster.com

eccentricities, downplaying or omitting character flaws, and promoting only what most people would regard as strengths. In other words, as Joseph Walther et al. (2008) and Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) observed, when one uses Facebook (or similar social networks), it is not like picking up the phone, hearing someone's voice, and subsequently responding. It is about putting one's best face forward; expressing oneself in a manner that might please viewers of one's Profile.

By design, then, Facebook is primarily a tool for sharing information with one's Friends. Akshay Java et al. (2007) referred to "daily chatter" as the largest and most common use of Twitter,<sup>46</sup> in that most posts on the social network are disclosures about personal daily routines or what people are currently doing.<sup>47</sup> In the case of Facebook, for example, the reason one uploads a photo album to Facebook as opposed to only storing it on one's hard drive is because one wants his or her friends to—at the very least—see it, and possibly comment on it and Like<sup>48</sup> it. In other words, Facebook and similar SNSs are not about securing one's information but allowing for easy information sharing between individuals and groups, as well as the public disclosure of what traditional norms would consider personal information.

While mainstream media stories like those provided at the beginning of this chapter suggest that attitudes toward privacy have changed since the emergence of SNSs, findings by scholars have been mixed. For example, even though most SNSs encourage—but do not force—users to reveal things like their dates of birth, mobile

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<sup>46</sup> Twitter is a social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's Profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as followers.

<sup>47</sup> Other uses include maintaining ongoing conversations, sharing information and URLs, and reporting news.

<sup>48</sup> The "Like" button lets a user share their content with friends on Facebook. When the user clicks the Like button within Facebook or on another website, a story appears in the News Feeds of the user's Friends that contains a link to the Web page that is "Liked."

phone numbers, or where they currently live, Acquisti and Gross (2006:2) marvelled at the nature, amount, and detail of the personal information some users provided, and questioned how informed this information-sharing was: “Changing cultural trends, familiarity and confidence in digital technologies, lack of exposure or memory of egregious misuses of personal data by others may all play a role in this unprecedented phenomenon of information revelation.” As well, in their before and after study, Tabreez Govani and Harriet Pashley (2005) noticed that most students did not change their privacy settings on Facebook, even after they had been educated about the ways they could do so. Other studies have found that there is little relationship between SNS users’ disclosure of private information and their stated privacy concerns (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini 2007; Livingstone 2008; Tufekci 2008). Furthermore, a 2012 Consumer Reports study<sup>49</sup> of more than 1,300 U.S. households that are active on Facebook projected that nearly 13 million Facebook users in the U.S. neither set privacy controls nor were aware of them. They also projected that 4.8 million Americans have used Facebook to reveal their plans on a certain day, which they suggest is a “potential tip-off for burglars.”

On the other hand, in a study of 9282 randomly selected MySpace profiles, Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin (2008:125) found that, when considered in its proper context, the problem of personal information disclosure on SNSs may not be as widespread as many assume, and that the “overwhelming majority of adolescents” are using such websites responsibly. In addition, a 2010 Pew study concluded that reputation

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<sup>49</sup> See “Facebook & your privacy: Who sees the data you share on the biggest social network? Consumer Reports magazine: June 2012” <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/magazine/2012/06/facebook-your-privacy/index.htm> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

management has now become a defining feature of online life among young people, in that 71% of 18 to 29-year olds have adjusted their privacy settings on their Facebook Profile to limit what they share with others online (Pew 2010b).

Even though the cited studies have over time revealed mixed results on the issue of responsibly managing one's personal privacy online, on both sides it remains true that users of SNSs are not uploading personal information about themselves for their own sake, but because they expect that others will view it. As Livingstone (2008:393) found:

While younger teenagers relish the opportunities to recreate continuously a highly-decorated, stylistically-elaborate identity, older teenagers favour a plain aesthetic that foregrounds their links to others, thus expressing a notion of identity lived through authentic relationship.

Moreover, for young people seeking approval from their peers, Facebook becomes a place to perfect themselves in front of their peers by creating a "digital self" where they reveal the parts of their lives that they feel are important for others to know about. Amanda Nosko, Eileen Wood, and Seija Molema (2010:415) also found that young people seeking a relationship were far more inclined to disclose on a variety of personal topics than those who did not indicate a relationship status. Moreover, in a study of how impressions are formed based on visual cues, the Profile owner's gender, and the evaluator's gender, Shaojung Sharon Wang et al. (2010) learned that both males and females were more willing to initiate friendships with opposite-sex Profile owners with attractive photos. As well, Christofides, Muise and Desmarais (2009) discovered that the more students shared, the more attention they received from their online peers. In all these cases, people *want* to be seen by their peers. Finally, Joseph Walther et al. (2008)

showed male and female participants a simulated Facebook Profile that contained a neutral Profile picture along with positive and negative comments from Friends whose Profile pictures varied in physical attractiveness. The participants were asked to review the simulated Profile with respect to attractiveness and credibility. The researchers found that the perceived attractiveness of the *commenters* positively influenced the way participants perceived the attractiveness of the simulated Profile.

### ***Unintentional broadcasting on Facebook***

According to Bernardo Huberman (2009), while the standard definition of a social network embodies the notion of all the people with whom one shares a social relationship, in reality people interact with very few of those “listed” as part of their network. One important reason behind this fact is that attention is a scarce resource in the age of the intricate World Wide Web; users faced with many daily tasks and a large number of social links default to interacting with those few people that matter and that reciprocate their attention.<sup>50</sup>

However, when using Facebook to communicate with their primary audience members (those of their peer group) users may forget about their secondary audience members (e.g. aunts, uncles, mentors, authority figures). In a study of 506 Facebook users, for example, Acquisti and Gross (2006) found that a significant minority of users were vastly underestimating the reach and openness of their own Profile. In fact, most Facebook users believe that those who most often visit their Profile pages are members of their offline social networks (Skoric et al. 2009)—people that they see in person

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<sup>50</sup> For example, a casual search through recent calls made through any mobile phone usually reveals that a small percentage of the contacts stored in the phone are frequently contacted by the user.



relatively often. So a user's Profile on Facebook is not meant for strangers to judge them, it is meant for staying connected with people they already know.

In addition, this raises another issue: not everyone knows a person in the same way. The way a college student speaks with his family members, for example, may be quite different from the way he speaks to his best friends. This brings me to the often-referenced concept of *impression management* when discussing identity on Facebook (Barash et al. 2010; Rosenberg and Egbert 2011; Shafie, Nayan, and Osman 2012). According to Goffman (1959), we adjust our performance—our appearance or behaviour—based on the people and circumstances surrounding us. Through impression management, one creates the best “first impression” for a given situation by strategically highlighting certain aspects of their life while still maintaining a genuine impression of who they are. In the case of performance on SNSs like Facebook, the focus must be on the fact that the performer is able to more *carefully* craft their performance. However, just as one might craft their performance upon entering into a new environment (like a workplace or a classroom), as time passes and as familiarity with one's peers and the environment increases, less attention and effort is put into maintaining the original impression that one first strived to make—and one's authentic self is revealed (Rosenberg and Egbert 2011). Furthermore, with one in seven people using Facebook globally, users are increasingly likely to have combinations of family, friends, and co-workers as part of their social network; and members of each of these groups are likely to have access to all of the content that one uploads. A college student might boast to a Friend via Facebook about being “*so drunk and high last night... skipped class today,*” and not realize that such information may be visible to his family members, mentors, or even teachers.

Therefore, in my study we may find that, on Facebook, respondents do *not* switch between different roles when interacting with their Profile that is viewable to hundreds of people with whom they are associated in very different ways—which runs counter to *impression management*. If we were to ask respondents who they think about when they update their statuses or post photos, and if we compared the number of people named with the respondent’s total number of Facebook Friends, it is likely that we would find that the *intended audience* is significantly lower in number in proportion to the actual audience size, and that they are broadcasting their personal information to a larger audience than they realize. The important question, however, lies in the extent to which respondents believe that there are costs or risks involved in their broadcasting to a large audience and how they *negotiate* such perceived costs or risks.

### ***The commercial use of member data by Facebook***

Advertising remains the primary source of revenue for most SNSs. In 2011, the amount of advertising money spent on SNSs was just over \$3 billion, which is an increase of 55% from the previous year. Overall, social media advertising spending has been predicted to increase to \$4.7 billion in 2012 and \$8.3 billion by 2015.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, SNSs are changing advertising profoundly, not just by cutting into traditional media budgets, but also by revolutionizing the way advertisers reach consumers. The benefits of Facebook to companies and organizations have resulted in a noticeable shift in the way that they not only attract and engage consumers but also through direct interaction, learn how to better serve them (Di Pietro and Pantano 2012;

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<sup>51</sup> See “Facebook drives US social network ad spending past \$3 billion in 2011” <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Facebook-Drives-US-Social-Network-Ad-Spending-Past-3-Billion-2011/1008180> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

Harris and Dennis 2011; Kodjamanis and Angelopoulos 2013). For example, Facebook allows local and national businesses and organizations such as restaurants, bars, cafés, sports teams, artists, churches, health and fitness centers, and even politicians to create pages which users can Like (or become “fans” of) and then interact with, similar to the way they would with a virtual Friend. Advertisers can also enter into partnerships with Facebook to create “social ads” that allow users to display the items they bought or rented, or the services they purchased for all their Friends to see on their News Feed. Because the information comes from a Friend they perceive they can trust, users are more likely to pay attention to the advertisements that come through in the form of News Feed updates.<sup>52</sup> Advertisers are also eager to help these users create conversations about brands and engage them on a level that is completely different from the one-way, passive advertisements of traditional media. Although transferring the responsibility of creating brand messages to consumers initially might seem risky to brand managers, conversations about brands tend to be relevant, interesting, engaging, and have proved to be effective in the long run (Dolan, Goodman, and Habel 2012; Hassan and Pervan 2011; Li and Bernoff 2008; Shaw and Coker 2012; Wallace, Buil, and de Chernatony 2012). In a study consisting of 132 Facebook users aged 18 to 22, Melissa Airs and Lawrence Ang (2012) found the interactivity of brand pages to be most important in influencing attitudes toward the page, brand, and purchase intention. As well, Beneke (2012) found that interactivity—not richness of media (e.g. images, audio, video)—had a positive effect on the attitudes of Facebook users toward a brand.

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<sup>52</sup> For example, a News Feed update that a Friend is attending the latest Cirque du Soleil show, followed later by an update containing the Friend’s review and rating of the show.

While advertisers have been quick to take advantage of the potential of SNSs like Facebook, marketing researchers have been comparatively slow to capitalize. In past decades, marketing research involved sample specification, respondent recruitment, in-depth survey design, and lengthy interviews. While working with intermediary agencies, key deliverables that included data analysis and results presentations took weeks to put together. At the beginning of the new millennium, *online* marketing research rapidly evolved, quickening the survey and interview process and making it more cost effective (Cho and Khang 2006; Schibrowsky, Peltier, and Nill 2007). Meanwhile, the nature of the research did not change—brand managers were still mainly interested in brand awareness and perception, with the brand as “broadcaster” and the consumer as the passive receiver of messages (Li and Bernoff 2008).

In recent years, however, the way online marketing research is conducted has changed dramatically as a result of the new way in which individuals (or consumers) have been using the World Wide Web. Social networking not only changed the manner in which individuals communicated with family members and friends but with businesses and organizations. That is, social networking brought consumers and companies closer together.

At the centre of the social networking phenomenon in the marketing research world is Facebook.<sup>53</sup> A company with a large number of fans (people that Like the company’s Facebook page) can use the social network to ask to both polling questions and open-ended questions. This takes little time to set up, costs little, and requires little time to obtain results that may refine the scope of a larger research objective or in some

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<sup>53</sup> In the academic realm, Facebook is but another rung on the ladder of SNSs that have come and gone, beginning with SixDegrees.com in 1997 (boyd and Ellison 2007).

cases help the company make a major decision. The fact that generalizability and sampling methodology is an obvious issue is trumped by the low cost and high speed with which results are delivered and decisions can be made in the digital age.

Businesses may also create their own micro communities—or “groups”—on Facebook to communicate with their consumer base through regular status updates.<sup>54</sup> Targeting potential group members for research is simple since individuals are now sharing more about themselves on SNSs than ever before (Pew 2013b). Everything that individuals publicly share about themselves on their Profiles, such as date of birth, hometowns, alma maters, hobbies, jobs, photos, friends’ names, and number of friends, can be used by marketing researchers for recruitment purposes.

Most recently, the trend in marketing research has been toward “listening” to what consumers are saying by acting as a fly on the Wall in the innumerable number of groups, blogs, chat rooms, message boards, and forums on the Web (Berkman 2008; Rappaport 2010). Technology allows for marketing researchers to mine data (Bonneau, Anderson, and Danezis 2009) for keywords and conversation topics (e.g. the name of a company or brand), although these conversations can come from anyone, anywhere, and are in uncontrolled online environments. However, in a controlled space like Facebook, “listening” has now become an established tool in online marketing research through data mining the spectrum of publicly disclosed information—the conversations, musings, status updates, and photo-sharing among and between average users. By studying a user’s Facebook Profile, businesses can learn much more about the members of their current

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<sup>54</sup> A 2010 report by Chadwick Martin Bailey and iModerate Research Technologies has shown that people will consider a brand archaic or myopic if it is not integrating Facebook or Twitter into its consumer outreach. See “Why social media matters to your business” [http://www.cmbinfo.com/cmb-cms/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Why\\_Social\\_Media\\_Matters\\_2010.pdf](http://www.cmbinfo.com/cmb-cms/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Why_Social_Media_Matters_2010.pdf) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

and prospective target consumer groups. As well, marketing researchers<sup>55</sup> are able to build better respondent relationships than they could with one-off surveys, especially among young people—the most coveted of demographics. Yet, although Anthony Patino, Dennis Pitta, and Ralph Quinones (2012) argue that social media and the changes in consumer communication patterns have reduced the effectiveness of traditional techniques in marketing research, to date I have been unable to find any scholarly research that goes beyond “listening” and reports on the efficacy of actually *integrating* social networking sites into the marketing research process.

### ***Attitudes toward the commercial use of member data***

In the midst of this shift in marketing research and advertising practices, just how aware of these commercial goals (aside from banner advertising<sup>56</sup>) are Facebook users? This has yet to be determined and a qualitative study is a good way to lay the groundwork. Judith Donath and danah boyd (2004:77) warned that participants in SNSs make a wealth of personal information publicly available and that “... users of on-line social network systems should be aware of the value of the data they are making available on-line—and the ways in which it can potentially be used.” Certainly, following the emergence and popularity of social networking websites like Facebook, privacy concerns and expectations have been changing. While social networking is a free service,

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<sup>55</sup> Of course, marketing researchers are not the only ones intrigued. What marketing researchers call “listening,” social scientists have called “online ethnography” or “netnography” (Kozinets 1998). Social network sites—and the data offered and exchanged by members who use them—has been of interest to social scientists for five years (Beckenham 2008; Beer and Burrows 2007; boyd 2007; Fono and Raynes-Golide 2006; Gross and Acquisti 2005; Hodge 2006; Rheingold 2006). After all, these websites contain rich sources of data with no permission required for access (Lewis et al. 2008), and in the scholarly literature that exists, Facebook stands out because of its popularity, diversity of members, and its effects on business and social interaction.

<sup>56</sup> When I changed my relationship status to *engaged*, many of the ads were about wedding photography and planning. Now that my status has changed to *married*, all the ads are about baby products and home mortgages.

abdicating control of personal information, photos, writing, videos and memories is arguably a high price to pay. However, as concerns over trading privacy for service increase (boyd 2008b; Fogel and Nehmad 2009; Guha, Tang, and Francis 2008; Nissenbaum 2010, 2011; Raynes-Goldie 2010; Roberts 2010; Stutzman et al. 2010; Wang et al. 2011; Waters and Ackerman 2011; Young and Quan-Haase 2009, 2012), it may be that the concerns diminish when there is a potential benefit. Bernard Debatin et al. (2009) concluded that the gratifications of using Facebook tend to outweigh the perceived threats to privacy. However, the researchers focused more on the means through which users (rather weakly) protect their privacy on Facebook as well as on routinization and ritualization. In fact, the authors called for future research that investigates the relationship between perceived gratification and risk perception, and the mediating factors that motivate users to change their privacy-related behaviour. Such research, they argued, would allow for the development of strategies for user education and recommendations for effective and transparent privacy protection techniques.

According to George Higgins, Melissa Ricketts, and Deborah Vegh (2008:231), some young people are concerned that “the distance that the Internet creates does not insulate the students from recognizing some of the risks of posting personal information on the Facebook website.” Therefore, it is likely that the respondents in my study will be aware that their personal information is being used for commercial purposes by Facebook. As mentioned earlier, the fact that all information provided by a user is archived by Facebook, even after a member deactivates their account, has sparked a controversy that has received wide publicity. How they interpret and negotiate the costs of their information disclosure with the perceived benefits is in part what I aim to investigate.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### Recruitment

In order to understand the attitudes toward personal information disclosure among Millennials and Boomers, I conducted 40 in-depth interviews (see sample description below). I was aware that the results of my qualitative study would not be generalizable from a statistical standpoint and I therefore relied on a carefully thought-out, purposive sample. Using the snowball method of recruitment, I began recruiting from my own list of Facebook Friends and recruited further from among their acquaintances. These Friends were among only a handful of seed respondents needed to begin the snowball sampling. While concerns of respondent bias is justifiable when studying personal acquaintances, my study required that respondents trust me enough to give me access to their personal Profiles. For this reason, I needed to begin with those with whom I already had a “Facebook Friendship.” I then relied on those preliminary respondents to—based on their positive experiences participating in my study—recommend participation to their Friends. I believe that the “virtual introductions” to new respondents that were facilitated by my Friends made those respondents less apprehensive about having me view their Profile for research purposes and being interviewed in-depth. A recent example of success through a similar recruitment method was explained by Fabiola Baltar and Ingnasi Brunet (2012). In trying to recruit a sample of a “hard-to-reach” population (Argentinean immigrant entrepreneurs in Spain), the researchers found that the method of snowball sampling through Facebook—in comparison to the traditional (i.e. real world) method—raised the level of confidence among participants because the researchers shared their personal Profiles.



Each respondent in my study was given a waiver that requested their consent to have their Facebook Profile reviewed before the interview stage of the study. Before signing the waiver form, the respondent was informed that I would be gathering information from their Profile toward designing questions for the interview. The respondent was assured that any identifying information, such as last name, phone number, and e-mail address, would not be revealed.

## **Sample description**

### *Millennials*

The first sample in my study consists of 30 young adults—14 males and 16 females—between the ages of 18 and 32. With respect to their occupation, 17 are students and 13 are working professionals. The mean age of the respondents is 25. The respondents log on to Facebook on a daily basis and regularly post status updates, comments, photo albums, Wall posts, photo tags, and notes. Their real names have been replaced with pseudonyms. For a respondent breakdown, see Table 1.0 on page 60.

Given that all but one of the respondents in this sample were born in or after 1980, it is acceptable to refer to the entire sample as members of the “Millennial” generation. This is primarily because all of them have greater use of and familiarity with digital technologies, media, and communications than earlier generations, which is a defining characteristic of Millennials (Howe and Strauss 2000). All of these respondents used the Internet during some of their elementary school years and throughout their secondary school years; and all were part of the widespread adoption of SNS sites like Facebook in the last five years.

Within this sample of Millennials, I have distinguished between two cohorts: 50% are *Young Millennials*, ages 18 to 24—most of which are in college or university; and 50% are *Old Millennials*, ages 25 to 32—most of which are in or entering into full-time employment. While I have predominantly reported on the sample in aggregate, I have in a few cases reported on themes that emerged within a specific cohort only.

Finally, because I am investigating frequent users of Facebook, I have selected respondents whose occupations require daily computer usage and access to the Internet. These include students as well as occupations in areas like office administration, law, research, web design, government, project management, and students, as opposed to skilled trade occupations in areas like machinery, construction, or installation.

### ***Boomers***

The second sample in the study consists of older adults between the ages of 48 and 58. It is important to note that I made the decision to add this sample well into the reporting of my original data from Millennials. I wanted to test whether or not my findings were specific to 18 to 32-year olds by comparing them to data from an older cohort. However, due to time constraints I was only able to obtain participation from 10 respondents—five males and five females. The mean age of these respondents is 51. Eight of the respondents were full-time working professionals, three of which had teenage children; two of the respondents were stay-at-home moms.

The respondents in this sample are members of the Baby Boomer (Boomer) generation, and are able to recall a time in which phone calls were often a costly “treat” and when news from friends and family came by letter mail. Boomers grew up during a time in which relationships were formed and maintained based on geographical location.

Anecdotally, if they were looking for conversation while standing in line for a store opening, they could speak to the stranger behind them. Today, that stranger in line may be too busy conversing with their friend or family member on the other side of the world via a smartphone. In other words, Boomers are likely to have a better appreciation of adult life before and after the emergence of the Internet and SNSs, in comparison to Millennials, who started getting accustomed to the new technology during their formative years.

In 2009, Pew reported that older adults use the Internet more for information seeking and less for socializing. Since then, however, the usage of the Internet and social media among Boomers has risen steadily. According to Pew (2011a), SNS usage among Boomer Internet users grew 100%—from 25% in April 2009 to 51% in May 2011. As well, *daily* SNS usage among Boomer internet users grew 60% (from 20% to 32%) (Pew 2011a). As of December 2012, 67% of *all* online adults and 52% of online Boomers use social networking sites (Pew 2013b).

Like the sample of Millennials, I have recruited a sample of Boomers that have regular access to the Internet, including at work. They log on to Facebook at least once per day and vary in their level of activity while on the website. Their occupations are in the areas of office administration, law, research, consulting, sales, and full-time parenting; none of them are retired. Their real names have been also been replaced with pseudonyms. For a respondent breakdown, see Table 2.0 on page 61.

**Table 1.0 – Respondent Breakdown: Millennials**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Adam	Male	26	Assistant at a veterinary clinic
Alexandra	Female	31	Sociology PhD student
Anthony	Male	31	Lawyer in a utility company
April	Female	19	2nd Year Arts student
Arnold	Male	30	Computer Science PhD student
Avery	Female	23	Communications Studies MA student
Caroline	Female	28	Executive assistant in a fashion company
Charlotte	Female	19	1st Year Health Sciences student
Cynthia	Female	27	Government social services worker
Donald	Male	23	Entering dental school
Elizabeth	Female	30	Marketing director in a software company
Irvin	Male	24	Strategist in a media buying company
Jacob	Male	24	Project manager in an analytics company
Lester	Male	18	1st Year Fine Arts student
Lindsay	Female	28	1st Year Applied Health Sciences student
Lisa	Female	19	2nd Year Communication Studies student
Lizzy	Female	26	5th Year Arts student
Marina	Female	20	3rd Year Anthropology student
Martin	Male	21	3rd Year English student
Michaeline	Female	29	Coordinator in a community health organization
Michelle	Female	27	Office administrator
Nate	Male	18	1st Year History student
Naveen	Male	32	Policy analyst in the energy sector
Nicole	Female	28	Data coder in a research company
Richard	Male	22	Graphic designer in a media company
Roger	Male	25	Communications Studies MA student
Sabrina	Female	23	Sociology and Communications Studies MA student
Tamara	Female	30	Social marketing manager in a web design company
Timothy	Male	21	4th Year Psychology student
Trent	Male	21	3rd Year Anthropology student

**Table 2.0 – Respondent Breakdown: Boomers**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Angela	Female	48	Executive assistant
Anna	Female	52	Office administrator
Colin	Male	55	Lab technician
Doug	Male	54	Accountant
Frank	Male	50	Logistics director
Meredith	Female	48	Stay-at-home mom
Eleanor	Female	52	Social worker
Patrick	Male	49	Advertising manager
Raymond	Male	58	Business consultant
Vivian	Female	48	Stay-at-home mom

## **Methodology**

I created my own data set based on a two-stage approach. For each respondent, I first reviewed their Facebook Profile after being granted full access; this was followed by a semi-structured in-depth interview. The interviews with Millennials took place in January and February of 2011, at each respondent’s home or at a mutually agreed upon location like a coffee shop or campus student centre. The interviews with Boomers took place in July and August of 2012, at each respondent’s home or over the phone. Each interview lasted approximately 75 to 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded using a digital-recorder.

### ***Stage 1: Review of respondent’s Profile***

For each respondent, the first stage of my data collection involved reviewing their Facebook Profile. My primary goal during this stage was to make note of any examples of oversharing by the respondent or by their Friends via tagged posts over the previous

six months. I used my own judgement to determine what text or images were tantamount to oversharing or divulging “too much information” that may be personal or risky in nature. Examples of such text include politically-charged rants, updates on family hardships or tragedies, passive-aggressive statements about co-workers, emotional outbreaks, the disclosure of one’s current whereabouts, and religious or politically-charged rants. Examples of such images include binge drinking, scantily clad or sexually suggestive poses, ultrasounds, the inside of one’s home, as well as photos of the respondent’s young children or those of their friends.

I did not make notes on such instances of oversharing for the purposes of catching a respondent in a lie or creating a detailed inventory of incidents of oversharing. Rather, I made notes in order to obtain context for some of the questions during my semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the respondent (the second and most important stage in my data collection). For example, if I asked a respondent if they recalled ever posting a status update on Facebook that was risky or personal in nature and they answered in the negative, I would refer to my notes about their Profile and articulate an example of what I felt could be construed by some as risky. At that point, the respondent would either dismiss the example as not risky and provide a rationalization (per my request / probing), or they would say something like, “Oh, I completely forgot I put that up there.” In the latter case, I would use that example as a framework for subsequent questions in my interview schedule, such as “When you post a photo of [every newly furnished room in your home], who on your Friend List are you thinking about?” As well, I would use my notes to set up a question, such as “When you post something like [‘Grrr... work sucks’] to your Profile, do you expect a response from your Friends?”

Finally, during my review of each respondent's Profile, I made general notes about the amount of personal information being posted; whether or not the personal information being disclosed had more depth than breadth, or vice versa; and how the respondent's Friends reacted (through comments and Wall posts) to this information disclosure. When applicable, I used such information to set up a question from my interview schedule or a question probe.

### ***Stage 2: In-depth interviews***

The second stage of my data collection consisted of a semi-structured, in-depth interview with each respondent. As discussed in the previous sub-section, I drew upon my notes about the respondent's Profile that I made prior to each interview in order to inform some of my interview questions.

Broadly, the goal of each interview was to gain further insight into attitudes toward personal information disclosure on Facebook as well as the commercial use of member data by Facebook (see Appendix A – Interview Schedule). Before asking questions, I thanked the respondent for agreeing to participate as well as for having given me access to their Profile. I began the interview by asking a rather abstract question: "To you, what is Facebook." I then asked the respondent to think back to when they first heard of Facebook and to describe their impressions when they created their account. This was followed by questions about their login frequency, duration, and time of day, as well as how many times, if ever, they cancelled or thought about cancelling their account during the years in which they have been a member.

I then asked the respondent another relatively abstract question: "How does Facebook play a part in your everyday life?" This was followed by specific questions

about the ways in which they access their account (e.g home computer, work computer, smartphone, etc.) and their most common actions taken upon logging in. Getting the respondent to think about their “Facebook routine” provided a natural segue for asking them about how they would feel if they alone were no longer permitted to access Facebook or, in another hypothetical scenario, how their life would change if Facebook were to shut down entirely.

I also asked the respondent to describe how they use Facebook as a method of communication and how, in their opinion, Facebook compared to other ways of communicating. Since at this point the respondent was likely to talk about their family and friends, it was a good time to ask about for whom their Facebook posts are generally intended and not intended. I also asked about the approximate number of Friends that they actively follow (by visiting their Profile pages) and how many Friends they believe are actively following them. I then asked whether the things they see on Facebook impact how they think about or interact with other people and, if so, how.

In order to understand how the respondent decided what to post to their Profile, I began by asking questions about their Profile picture—how often they change it; what drives the need to change it, if anything; and what criteria the picture needed to meet. I then asked them to describe the types of status updates that they post to their Profile, including the general tone of their updates. This provided a segue for asking about whether they desire feedback from Friends after posting something and whether they feel pressure to update their Profile with content on a regular basis. I then asked the respondent to reflect and recall whether they had ever disclosed something on Facebook that most people might consider highly personal information, and how they negotiate



keeping such information on Facebook. If they reported that they posted some highly personal and then took it down, I asked them to explain the circumstance(s) surrounding that decision. And if they reported that they had never posted anything that could be considered highly personal, I referred to my notes and invited them to respond to my observation of something they posted within the past six months that some might consider quite personal (e.g. baby photos, photos of the respondent in swimwear, etc). This discussion about disclosing things of a personal nature set up my next of questions on privacy settings. I asked the respondent if they were aware of Facebook's privacy settings, how they used them (if at all), and how frequently they checked and / or adjusted them.

Although I was aware that my analysis of the data would reveal nuanced themes about the advantages and disadvantages of using Facebook, I also wanted to ask the respondent directly. Therefore, I asked about the benefits they receive from updating their status or uploading a photo or photo album, as well as about the drawbacks of using Facebook. I asked them about the effect of Facebook on the quality of their relationships with their close friends and family. I also asked if they had ever been confronted by a Friend who disapproved of content on the respondent's Profile and how that confrontation affected their friendship, if at all. Finally, I asked if they had ever blocked someone from viewing their account, and if they ever worried about their photos being downloaded to a hard drive by Friends or strangers.

When it came to asking the respondent's awareness of Facebook's commercial practices, I began by asking whether they had read the company's Terms of Use and, if so, to recall their impressions. I then asked what, if anything, they believed Facebook did

with the information they are sharing on the website. If they were not reasonably aware of Facebook's commercial practices, I explained that the company uses some of their demographic information and information about their special interests (e.g. the brands they Like) to help its advertisers target advertisements at them. I then asked how they felt about Facebook selling their data to advertisers. This was followed by three important hypothetical questions. First, "If you found out that your Profile picture was used in an advertisement that appeared on your Friends' Facebook page, how would you respond?" Second, "If you found out that Facebook was storing your photo albums and selling them to companies for research purposes, how would you respond?" And finally, "If you found out that Facebook was recording your private Inbox emails between Friends and selling your conversations to companies for research purposes, how would you respond?"

Before concluding, I asked each respondent if there was anything they wished to add upon reflecting on the interview. Given the length of each interview and the exhaustive list of questions and probes, it was not surprising to me that only a few respondents provided additional / closing thoughts, aside from commenting positively on the extensiveness of the discussion.

### **Analysis of interviews**

In order to uncover themes surrounding the perceived benefits and risks of using Facebook, I employed a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As a primary guide during my application of this approach, I referenced Kathy Charmaz's 2006 book, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. I began by conducting line-by-line coding of the data from each interview transcript and created potential broad themes that could potentially appear in

subsequent transcripts (Charmaz 2006:50-53). This strategy also helped me to summarize responses and identify the overarching areas of discussion. Next, I used focused coding (Charmaz 2006:57-60) in order to synthesize the broad themes that were established. Finally, I employed the technique of memo-writing (Charmaz 2006:72-95) to capture my thoughts on how themes might relate to or be distinguished from one another, and to work toward building a framework for my report through repeated clustering of themes ('teasing out' potential paths).

Because my interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions, which meant that respondents were free to take a discussion point in any direction until I drew them back to my original interview questions, it is impossible to provide counts of how many times a certain phrase was uttered in proportion to the total sample since every respondent answers open-ended questions in their own way. Indeed, some respondents were more forthcoming and elaborated on certain points, which led to additional insights. And some were more reserved; despite my probing, they had little to add. As well, I did not ask any closed-ended questions during my interviews, and questions that presumed a "yes or no" answer (e.g. "Have you ever cancelled your Facebook account?") were often answered in an open-ended or conditional way (e.g. "I've thought about it many times, but never seriously").

Moreover, because my interview schedule was designed to be semi-structured, I often *re-worded* questions based on the level of rapport that I established with each respondent, *re-ordered* questions based on the context of each respondent's answers, *omitted* questions if I felt that they would be redundant given an earlier response, and *added* questions in the form of probes.

### *Analysis of data on Millennials*

As mentioned earlier, it was during my reporting of the data on Millennials when I decided to interview a sample of Baby Boomers. Therefore, most of my analysis of the data on Millennials was completed before I began interviewing Boomers. This subsection explains how I arrived at the major themes and sub-themes in regard to Millennials and how such themes are interlinked. The detailed investigation of these themes and how I attempted to further investigate certain connections are explained throughout Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

As discussed in my review of the literature on Facebook, the fact that the benefits of using Facebook outweigh the risks is obvious given that its membership exceeds one billion. Put differently, if the risks of using the website outweighed the benefits, then it would be highly unlikely that its membership would climb from 200 million to 500 million in just over a year, and from 500 million to one billion in just over two years. However, what has not been obvious is the precise nature of those benefits and risks, and more importantly how users negotiated between them to justify using the website.

I began my analysis by looking for themes that suggested the benefits of using Facebook. The responses to questions like “To you, what is Facebook?,” “How does Facebook play a role in your everyday life?” and “If Facebook were to shut down, how would you feel?,” in addition to a host of questions surrounding *why* respondents post status updates, upload photo albums and select Profile pictures, and *why* they have never seriously considered cancelling their Facebook account, enabled me to arrive at the following theme: *Facebook is my life online*. Through memo-writing and clustering I determined that, for these respondents, Facebook is an extension of their everyday life. I

also discovered that, as is the case in everyday life, the need to be acknowledged also occurs online, which Facebook's technology makes possible. However, such a need—I learned—is directed at one's close friends and family members with whom one is Friends on Facebook, not at the weak ties with whom one has a passive or superficial “friendship.” In other words, my analysis of this theme revealed that Facebook is more useful for maintaining *bonding* social capital between strong ties than bridging social capital between weak ties.

As well, the results from questions like “How do you use Facebook as a method of communication?” and “When you post something like [example provided] to Facebook, for whose eyes is that information intended specifically?,” as well as questions surrounding the tone, frequency, nature, and intended audience of posted information helped me arrive at another major theme: *Facebook is my primary connection to others*. It became clear that each respondent believed that they had particular Friends—weak ties—that they would almost certainly lose touch with indefinitely were it not for Facebook. However, the data from this small sample consistently showed that respondents had a relatively handful of people in mind when posting information to Facebook, especially information that might be perceived as personal in nature. Such ‘intended audiences’ were again described as the respondents’ close friends and family members. Thus, during my exploration of this theme and the one previously discussed, it became again clear that Facebook was primarily used for maintaining *bonding* social capital as opposed to bridging social capital.

In addition, I uncovered a major theme that sounds comparatively superficial in its lack of nuance, but that should not be diminished in a digital age in which there are

seemingly limitless choices at one's fingertips: *Facebook as a convenient communication and information tool*. I arrived at this theme after reviewing the data from questions like "What are all the ways in which you access your account?" and "What are the three most common things you do on Facebook?" as well as hypothetical questions like "If you were suddenly banned from accessing your Facebook account, how would you feel?" My analysis of the data revealed that Facebook is appreciated for being a convenient, single point of contact for both strong and weak ties, as well as an all-in-one place for sharing and viewing not only messages and photos but news and entertainment. The fewer the clicks that are involved in completing everyday yet meaningful tasks, the more valued Facebook becomes, especially among students and professionals for whom free time is scarce.

After identifying the major benefits of using Facebook, I analyzed the data in search of perceived risks. To my surprise, although certain risks were made evident, they were of much less importance in terms of how the respondents reported them. That is, the risks associated with using Facebook were communicated as being rather negligible and fleeting in nature, as if they were only thought about seriously when someone (like me) raised the topic or when it appeared in the mainstream news or on a popular website. The primary risk that I identified was around privacy issues. This was revealed through analysis of questions about the respondents' usage of Facebook's privacy settings and knowledge of its Terms of Use; the extent to which they are concerned about their Profile being seen by the wrong people; and how they feel about certain types of disclosure by others on Facebook.

The second risk that I identified was around issues of control. It was revealed particularly through my analysis of the drawbacks of using Facebook and how respondents felt about Facebook's commercial practices in relation to their user data. I interpreted that the website can be thought of as a "useful burden," one that takes up the respondents' time and focus, yet also provides practical benefits. And while respondents admitted to being somewhat concerned about the commercial use of their data by Facebook, it is not something that has or will preclude them from using it. This common sentiment also helped frame my analysis of how respondents negotiate the benefits of using Facebook with the perceived risks, which I identified as having to do with trusting both their peers on the website and Facebook itself. Furthermore, another important theme in negotiating the benefits with the risks is the perceived control that respondents have, which can be attributed to the availability of privacy settings (which most do not regularly check) and the knowledge that no one is forcing them to use Facebook—it is a free service that they use voluntarily.

Finally, I analyzed the data from my three hypothetical questions about how respondents would respond if Facebook were to sell their images and private messages to advertisers for research purposes. Overall, the respondents would be more concerned if Facebook used their Profile picture in an advertisement than if Facebook sold their photo albums to companies for research purposes. The difference I identified is that in the former case the advertisement would be viewable to one's Friends, while in the latter case their photo albums would be viewed by anonymous researchers and analyzed in aggregate; the former is considered personal, while the latter is thought to be impersonal. However, many respondents did draw the line at having their private conversations sold

to companies for research purposes, which is revealing in terms of what respondents consider to be publically sharable versus private information on Facebook.

### *Analysis of data on Boomers*

My analysis of the Boomer data occurred after my analysis of the Millennial data. Given that I had only ten transcripts to analyze, I shared the concern that the reader may have in regard to making inferences based on such a small sample. As such, my analysis focused primarily on identifying any stark differences in opinion and experiences between Millennials and Boomers in relation to the themes and sub-themes that I earlier established, in addition to whether Boomers more or less had similar perspectives. Again, the original purpose of this exercise was to explore my suspicion that some findings might be unique to members of the Millennial generation. In my reporting, instances in which my analysis revealed overwhelming similarities or dissimilarities among Boomers were discussed at the end of each chapter in some detail, along with how these results inform the overall discussion on attitudes toward personal information disclosure in the digital age.



## **CHAPTER 2: THE BENEFITS OF USING FACEBOOK**

Broadly, my study is about exploring attitudes toward personal information disclosure on Facebook among Millennials and Boomers, and how they negotiate the benefits of using the website with the perceived risks. However, my primary focus is on the sample of 30 Millennials, and Chapters 2, 3, and 4 discuss the themes that were identified from my data analysis. At the end of each chapter, I outline what I learned from the sample of 10 Boomers, in particular the thematic similarities and differences between the two samples.

Analysis of the data from the Millennial sample revealed three distinct themes that explain the primary benefits to respondents of using Facebook: *Facebook is my life online*; *Facebook is my primary connection to others*; and *Facebook is a convenient communication and entertainment tool*. Each theme forms the basis of one of the next three sections and helps to explain why Facebook is more useful for maintaining *bonding* social capital between strong ties, as opposed to *bridging* social capital between weak ties.

### **FACEBOOK IS MY LIFE ONLINE**

#### **Facebook as an extension of everyday life**

In 2011, General Motors introduced a new service that enabled drivers to have their Facebook updates read to them via voice automation while in the car. The auto company produced what would become a much talked about Super Bowl commercial<sup>57</sup> for its new Chevy Cruze. It featured a teenage boy who, only seconds after nervously dropping off his date at her doorstep, drove off in his Cruze and with the click of a button

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<sup>57</sup> View the ad here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8qPQbLdhmU> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

anxiously commanded the vehicle's computer system to read aloud his "Facebook News Feed." To his relief, the first update announced by the automated voice was by Jennifer French—the girl he just dropped off—"Best... first... date... ever." The young man sighs in relief, smiles, and drives off into the night as the narrator concludes, "The all new Chevy Cruze with real-time Facebook status updates. When the good news just can't wait."

While the 'Facebook Car' ad was certainly an amusing campaign to launch GM's new service, it also offered a perspective into how much Facebook is being woven into daily life. Indeed, engagement in SNSs is on the rise among teens and young adults (Pew 2010a, 2013b), and Facebook has been "driving" this forward more than any other SNS company. Adults have also been adopting the use of multiple SNSs like Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn, the latter being a networking community for professionals (Pew 2011a). For the respondents I interviewed, Facebook is used to communicate online with *offline* friends and family members on a regular basis—their *strong ties*—while having a direct line to their acquaintances—their *weak ties*—that may include former classmates, distant relatives (genealogically and geographically<sup>58</sup>), and friends of friends or partners, among others. As Michelle, a 27-year old office administrator put it: "It's a communication tool for my friends and family, but I'm also connected to people like cousins who I hardly talk to." In their use of Facebook, respondents shared status updates and photos to keep others updated about their lives, as well as random thoughts and links to videos and articles of interest to entertain one another. In the paragraphs that follow, I will explain in greater detail how respondents regard and utilize Facebook as a place to

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<sup>58</sup> Through Facebook, I recently became Facebook Friends with a few of several hundred cousins—two and three times removed on my father's side—who live in Italy.

socialize and the ways in which the platform represents—sociologically—an extension of their everyday lives.

Over half of Facebook's one billion members log on to the website on a daily basis.<sup>59</sup> The respondents I interviewed are no exception. For many of them, Facebook is the first website that they visit upon accessing the Internet; along with any time they check their personal email. Some also received instant activity notifications via their smartphone. Indeed, logging on to Facebook is part of a daily morning routine for some, especially among undergraduate and graduate student respondents who reported that they often logged on to the website via their Internet-connected laptops at the start of their day and let it run in the background (even throughout classes) until the late hours. A few of such users also assumed that certain other Facebook Friends are always logged on as well, and expected to hear from them throughout any given day.

Indeed, for this group of respondents, Facebook is the primary way of knowing what is happening in the lives of people they know. It also adds an extra channel of communication between friends, rather than waiting until weekends to get caught up with each other. So important is this channel that many respondents admitted that they would be frustrated, anxious, and annoyed if they were not able to access their Facebook account for a few weeks. Lisa, a 19-year old 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Communication Studies student, did not hesitate to answer: "That would be a definite problem. There would be withdrawals, not knowing what's going on with whom." As well, not having access to Facebook for a few weeks would "probably drive me crazy at first," said Timothy, a 21-year old 4<sup>th</sup> Year Psychology student, whose reflections often demonstrated an

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<sup>59</sup> See "Key Facts" <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

understanding of his academic discipline. He added: “To not have access would cause me to be very anxious and frustrated.”

For respondents, Facebook is such an important and often used social online space that the majority have *never* seriously thought about cancelling their account. For the undergraduates especially, doing so might make one an institutional outsider, having performed “social suicide” given Facebook’s acceptance as a place where students communicate with each other, organize events, swap stories, make friends, and maintain relationships. Indeed, in the digital age, it is not surprising that quitting the most widely used social network would be difficult. One runs the risk of being left out of event invitations, being less knowledgeable of the comings and goings of peers, and being less reachable by those for whom Facebook is their only point of contact.

Overall, respondents agreed that communicating through Facebook has had an overall positive effect on their relationships with their offline friends. In a few cases, however, it has had a negative effect. For example, when someone is not invited to a special event, one might be offended at learning through word-of-mouth that the event had occurred without them. However, it is much worse to see dozens of photographs of one’s peers enjoying themselves at the event and then reading about how much fun had been had as each photo is commented on by those who attended. The following story that Michelle told is a good illustration:

In my younger days, my girlfriends and I used to always go out. One night something happened and nobody called one girl in the group to go out.

The next day, pictures were posted and she’s like, “Why didn’t anybody call me?” and completely lost it on all of us. We didn’t really recover from

that, honestly. I just showed up and appeared in some of the pictures, but I got blamed for it. We moved past it and we're acquaintances now but it hasn't been the same.

In a similar vein, respondents also recalled occasions in which they were the ones that felt left out. In a survey of 380 undergraduate students, Amy Muise, Emily Christofides, and Serge Desmarais (2009) found a significant association between time spent on Facebook and jealousy-related feelings and behaviors experienced on Facebook. However, the researchers looked primarily at serious dating relationships, not friendships. In Lisa's case, for example, she admitted to feeling insecure when her three best friends each posted the same "inside quote" as their status update and were laughing about it. She recalled what went through her mind: "I'm like, 'Why am I not a part of this? What's going on? Did you guys get together without me?'" Charlotte, a 19-year old 1<sup>st</sup> Year Health Sciences student, explained that she could not stand learning via Facebook that her friend, with whom she felt certain that she had a strong bond, was spending an evening with someone else: "It sucked to see that she was out with another friend and not out with me."

Other examples of how what respondents see on Facebook has a negative impact on their relationship with others include: misinterpreting comments or images uploaded by others; insulting someone via one's status update; and catching friends in a lie when their offline excuses do not match their Facebook activity. In an example of the latter, Lindsay—a 23-year old 1<sup>st</sup> Year Applied Health Sciences student—had on a number of occasions been asked to cover a weekend shift by a co-worker who claimed to be sick, only to later see photos of the co-worker drinking at a party the same weekend. Lindsay

asserted: “It’s like, just tell me the truth. I’m a student and I have homework to do. If I need to come in to cover your shift, then don’t lie to me—that’s the least you could do.” As well, a few respondents claimed to have had strong arguments with their romantic partners over pictures of them or their partner posing closely (e.g. a playful kiss on the cheek) with someone of the opposite sex. Overall, female respondents had no trouble recalling such examples of what they referred to as “Facebook drama,” while the male respondents had trouble remembering. In this regard, Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd (2011) found that “drama” on Facebook was a gendered process that propagated typical gender norms. Still, members of both sexes in this sample agreed that situations like those described above (which have in some cases nearly ended romantic relationships), would be far less likely to occur were it not for the ease with which photos can be shared on Facebook.

The above examples illustrate how Facebook can play a causal role in relationship problems. In addition, there are also plenty of examples that illustrate how the website definitively affects people’s attitudes to particular relationships, especially between weak ties. That is, the majority of respondents indicated that reviewing the Facebook activity of certain Facebook Friends had shaped or solidified their attitude toward them—for better or for worse. This relates to a concept in social psychology called “mere exposure effect” (Zajonc and Markus 1982), which refers to the enhanced attitude one has as a result of repeatedly being exposed to someone or something. Until recently, most studies have provided evidence that essentially proves that familiarity (as a result of frequent exposure) leads to fondness. When Robert Zajonc (1968) introduced the concept, he based his conclusions on the exposure of subjects to “nonsense” words (1968:14),

Chinese-like characters, and photographs of male university students. The repeated exposure to certain words, characters, or photographs enhanced his subjects' attitudes towards them when compared with similar items in the respective categories.

Subsequent studies also demonstrated that repeated exposure to a stimuli resulted in subjects preferring the familiar to the unfamiliar (Bornstein 1989; Bornstein and D'Agostino 1992; Fink, Monahan, and Kaplowitz 1989; Gordon and Holyoak 1983; Miller 1976). However, in a 2007 study called "Less Is More: The Lure of Ambiguity, or Why Familiarity Breeds Contempt," Michael Norton, Jeana Frost, and Dan Ariely (2007) learned from a series of surveys, as well as from pre- and postdate data from online daters, that the more one learned about a person, the more one became aware of that person's *dissimilarities*, and the *less* they liked that person. In other words, as the researchers concluded (and quipped): "The occasional houseguest may indeed grow on us, but on average, the majority will not... Although people believe that knowing leads to liking, knowing more means liking less" (Norton, Frost, and Ariely 2007:103). However, in a study called "Familiarity Does Indeed Promote Attraction in Live Interaction," Harry Reis et al. (2011) argued that Norton, Frost, and Ariely's (2007) study lacked personal interaction and context. While I think Reis et al. (2011) were right to point out the importance of personal interaction when discovering common interests, on Facebook it is difficult to discover deep common interests between weak ties when the sharing of information takes the form of broadcasting rather than of interaction. On Facebook, people are more likely to evaluate each other based on the writings, photos, and links that one shares with everyone on their Friend List, and not on direct comments or one-to-one messaging that is more applicable between strong ties. In the context of Norton et al.'s

findings, if most of what my Friend with whom I have a weak relationship shares on Facebook is photos of his cat, then I am likely to regard his posts—and, by extension, *him*—as annoying because I do not like cats and I am not close enough with him to engage in personal interaction toward uncovering common interests.

In addition, many of the respondents discussed having made mental notes on which of their Friends use the website as a tool for stirring up conflict—“calling out” other people and instigating arguments via their status update. Respondents perceived such Friends (often weak ties to begin with) as more or less hotheads, with whom one should use care when interacting online or offline, or with whom one should avoid directly interacting at all. Tamara, a 30-year old mother of two and manager of a web design company, reflected with frustration:

I have one Friend who is always posting things about her spouse. She hates him. She loves him. When I see this, it honestly makes me not want to have face-to-face contact with her, simply because she doesn't have the sense to realize how she's coming across to people. If you don't know how to behave on Facebook, then I really don't think I'll have the patience to deal with you in person.

Indeed, respondents have reported that people can be quite personal and frequent in their Facebook updates, resulting in learning more information about that person than one might deem necessary. Research has shown that online communication lends itself to personal information disclosure. In terms of Facebook, Nosko, Wood and Molema (2010) found that the amount of personal disclosure decreased as age increased, and that those who were seeking a relationship disclosed the most information that could be interpreted



as highly sensitive and stigmatizing. As well, a decade earlier Adam Joinson (2001:187), in one of three experiments conducted by involving dyad-based computer-mediated communication (CMC), concluded that “heightened private self-awareness and reduced public self-awareness led to significantly higher levels of spontaneous self-disclosure.” Moreover, Lisa Tidwell and Joseph Walther (2002) conducted a study of 158 unacquainted participants in which one half met face-to-face and the other half met through CMC. They found that those who met through CMC were less inhibited in their questioning and disclosing, as well as more intimate in their probes and replies, in comparison to those who met face-to-face. Indeed, even Joseph Walther’s (1996) research from over 15 year ago still holds true today—that the reduced nonverbal cues of computer-mediated communication encourage users to feel less inhibited and more likely to disclose their inner feelings. As Martin, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Year English student observed: “There are certain things you don’t see in people face-to-face than from behind the curtain. When they don’t have to look someone in the eye to say it, they’ll type it freely.” And as Timothy reflected, “I would be a lot less socially inclined without Facebook.” However, before concluding that this says more about Timothy’s personality than it does about Facebook’s utility, consider that some respondents readily admitted that a benefit of posting to their Facebook Wall was that it enables them to be passive-aggressive, saying more to other people online *about* other people in their life (Facebook Friends or not) than they would say in person. For example, Sabrina, a 23-year old Sociology and Communications MA student, once posted the status update: “I know I’m not the most interesting person, but would you mind not checking your Blackberry every two seconds when I’m talking to you?” And as Martin once wrote in reference to a noisy stranger in

the school library: “Turn your music down. The ‘80s are over and some of us have work to do.”

Still, the focus of my study is not on how Facebook causes people to act in ways that they would not likely attempt in person. Rather, I aim to identify what the benefits are of opening up and disclosing on a regular basis on Facebook, a question that has not been investigated in the scholarly literature. In the following sub-section, I argue that Facebook serves to fulfill an important human need—the *acknowledgment* that one’s voice has been heard.

### **Social sharing: acknowledging and being acknowledged**

Anyone who has had a Profile on a social network will likely agree that most people use the website to *share* information—about themselves and others; about their opinions and experiences; about their joys and frustrations; about world events—with specific people or with no one in particular. As it applies to Facebook, people use the website to share things that they believe might be of interest to some or all of those on their Friend List. The primary way users share such information is through their personal status update, where they can share texts and links to outside texts, images, and video. Examples gleaned from a content analysis of the respondents’ Profiles include updates on one’s weekend plans, song lyrics, quotes from funny movies, requests for charitable support, homework frustrations, and links to videos and movie trailers, to name a few.<sup>60</sup> According to Tamara, the primary reason she shares information on Facebook is for the *enjoyment* she gets from sharing; she enjoys sharing a moment of her day or something

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<sup>60</sup> Other examples are humorous statements; witty observations; news or pop culture article or video links; famous quotes; motivational one-liners; frustrations about school; passive-aggressive comments; “nothingness”; publically appreciating someone; event notifications; one’s location; and milestone updates.

that she found to be funny with others: “I sometimes take photos with my phone specifically to upload to Facebook. I capture things to share them with friends, just like you would go home and say to your wife, ‘You wouldn’t believe what happened at work today.’”

Another popular way of communicating is through uploading photos to one’s Profile page.<sup>61</sup> Examples of this include photos of weddings, vacations, birthday parties, binge drinking Thursday nights out, as well as one’s children and pets, again to name only a few. On the topic of sharing photos of her children, Tamara admitted: “As a parent, you want to show off your kids. You’re assuming that people are interested in what’s in your world.” For example, Michaeline, a 29-year old community health coordinator, uploads photo albums so that her friends can have access: “You want to share with friends things you’ve done or are excited about, just as you would take out a photo album when a friend visits. And if you go out with friends, you want to share with them what happened that night so you can all have a good laugh.” Martin believes that people upload photo albums to share something that’s important to them: “Photos are memories. If you take a photo, it’s preserving a moment in time that’s important to you. And if something’s important to you, it’s usually something that you want to share with people.”

It should be noted that the information shared by respondents and their Facebook Friends has not always been about sharing happy memories. Rather, disclosure has occasionally been negative, tragic, and highly personal in nature. To this end, *why* individuals shared or did not share specific kinds of information about themselves online

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<sup>61</sup> On average, over 300 million photos are uploaded to Facebook per day. See “capturing growth: photo apps and open graph” <https://developers.facebook.com/blog/post/2012/07/17/capturing-growth--photo-apps-and-open-graph/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

has been of interest to scholars since the popularity of anonymous forum-based websites in the '90s (Rheingold 1993; Stone 1991; Turkle 1994, 1995). Such studies of course emphasized the role of anonymity in reducing people's inhibitions and giving way to the level of self-disclosure that one might not have risked if one's full name was made known, let alone one's personal headshot. As well, in such forums, the drastic misrepresentations of oneself (e.g. a man posing as a woman; a 40-year old posing as a teenager) were not uncommon. Only in the mid-2000s have researchers turned their attention to websites that required the user's full name to be made visible (boyd 2004; Marwick 2005; Stutzman 2006). As Internet usage gained in popularity, it became more difficult to misrepresent one's self online when one's real life / offline peers began joining them in niche communities or on popular social networks.

In regard to the effect of using Facebook on self-esteem, Amy Gonzales and Jeffrey Hancock (2011) exposed groups of undergraduates students to either a mirror, their individual Facebook Profile, or neither, and gave them identical questionnaires. Of those who had access to their Profile, some were permitted to interact with it and some were not. The researchers found that participants who were encouraged to interact with their Facebook Profiles measured at a higher level of self-esteem than those who were simply given a mirror or could not see their Profiles. These participants also had higher self-esteem than those who could see their Profile but were not permitted to interact with it. Thus, the researchers viewed editing one's Facebook Profile as a means of optimizing self-presentation (Goffman 1959). That is, since Facebook users can be selective about what they say or present about themselves in words and photos, they can present the "optimal self" (Gonzales and Hancock 2011:82). They concluded that in choosing to

reveal information about themselves while filtering out anything unflattering or negative, users see a more positive version of themselves, which boosts self-esteem. Their study, however, focused on the *effect* of self disclosure on self-esteem while my study in part examines the drivers behind self-disclosure on Facebook. The primary driver or benefit of self-disclosure that I identified was that of *acknowledgment*, specifically the acknowledgement that one's voice had been heard or that one's information was seen by a known peer, which was touched on by Acquisti and Gross (2006) and Livingstone (2008). This is a digital age example of the *looking-glass self*, a concept created by Charles Horton Cooley (1902). It is the sense of self that a person develops by imagining what others think of the individual's behaviour and appearance. Cooley (1902:183-184) described the *looking-glass self* as follows:

The social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self—that is any idea he appropriates—appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind.

According to the respondents in my study, the primary benefit of sharing information—positive or negative—on Facebook is receiving acknowledgment. Whether one shares a link to a humorous video, a news story, an announcement that one either “rocked” or “bombed” a job interview, or one's vacation plans, most respondents—though they do not necessarily *hope* for them—appreciate receiving comments on the information that they share. Such comments need only come in the form of a brief acknowledgment that is playful, positive, and reinforcing—like “hahaha,” “congrats!,” or “nice!”—and let the respondent know that what they shared was seen by someone. The

acknowledgement that what one has shared, in a sea of competing stimuli, has been seen by others is considered personally fulfilling by the majority of respondents. When Richard, a 22-year old graphic designer, comes up with what he believes to be a witty observation, he will post it to his Profile because “It’s like blood in the water for sharks,” meaning he knows that his equally witty Friends will provide him with positive feedback. Or as Roger, a 25-year old Communication Studies MA student reflects: “When I have a large number of comments, it’s indicative of a large number of people having read what I posted. It’s kind of nice to be acknowledged.” “After all,” said Lisa, “it’s nice to know that people are interested in or care about your life.” Indeed, be it browsing, or simply having a Profile on Facebook, or even actively posting on Facebook, some may feel like they are not actually *there* until someone else acknowledges them.

As well, some respondents used Facebook to get support from their Friends for personal goals by posting information on the stages of their weight loss program or the number of days that they have remained sober. Elizabeth, a 30-year old marketing director in a software company, described her weight loss routine: “If I make public my commitment to lose weight, then I have to stick it.” In her mind, she has many people holding her accountable, regardless of not knowing exactly who is paying attention. For others, posting something on Facebook is a way of saying something aloud when they are alone in front of the computer screen. On the recent death of her aunt, Charlotte posted “*RIP Aunt [name].*” “Saying it in your head is not enough,” said Charlotte, “because no one can hear you saying it.” In this regard, in a survey of 88 undergraduate students, Adriana Manago, Tamara Taylor, and Patricia Greenfield (2012) learned that participants with a larger number of Friends believed that a larger number of these Friends were

viewing the participant's status updates. As well, this group also perceived higher levels of social support on Facebook. Moreover, in a study of 391 college student Facebook users, Junghyun Kim and Jong-Eun Roselyn Lee (2011) identified a relationship between users' subjective well-being and a higher number of Facebook Friends. However, the researchers found that such feelings of well-being were not associated with perceived social support. Rather, they concluded that "happiness derived from the number of Facebook friends may be due to visualization of Facebook friends, which reminds the users of their social connections, and to subsequent affirmation or enhancement of self-worth" (Kim and Lee 2011:362). One explanation for why this analysis is different from that of Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield (2012) is that these researchers also asked the participants to answer questions about 20 randomly selected Friends on their Friend List. These questions were about the participant's specific communication with each Friend, which may have caused the respondent to reflect more deeply upon their relationship with each individual Friend. In the case of Kim et al. (2011), respondents were simply asked about perceived social support based on a seven-item index.

In addition, recognizing someone on Facebook by tagging their name in one's status update<sup>62</sup> is a way of directly acknowledging someone while knowing that others will see the tag and read the accompanying message. For many respondents, acknowledging someone "publically" via Facebook is a gesture that represents a higher level of recognition. Anthony, a 31-year old lawyer in a utility company, explained why he tagged his wife's name in a status update on Valentine's Day:

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<sup>62</sup> For example, a status update by John Smith might read: "John Smith had a wonderful dinner with Jane Jones and Peter Parker." The latter two Friends would receive notifications that they were "tagged" in a comment made by John Smith. In the case of all three Friends, John Smith's status update would appear in each person's News Feed.

I want the world at large to know whatever my thought is about my wife and about my relationship with my wife. It's kind of like a gift of flowers delivered to the office. It's says something to my wife, but it also says something to other people.

It should be noted that Anthony also gave his wife an actual bouquet of roses. As well, Timothy believes that publically acknowledging Friends for doing something good serves as “reinforcement”—encouraging those Friends to perform more kind acts to him and / or others in the future.

Moreover, actual words of acknowledgement need not apply. For respondents, the simple click of the Like button, which depicts a “thumbs-up” and appears next to all status updates and photos, is often enough. The Like button<sup>63</sup> deserves some attention here since many respondents have pointed it out as an effective way of giving and receiving positive acknowledgment with one click. Indeed, while it can be agreed that human beings desire acknowledgement, giving and even receiving it can be time-consuming, especially in the digital world which predominantly requires typing instead of speaking. The Like button, therefore, enables one to give and receive acknowledgment without having to be thoughtful or witty, or to invest a lot of time or effort. It also makes it easier to provide feedback to a Friend that one does not know very well; as it is in everyday life offline, conversation need not apply when one gestures a thumbs-up<sup>64</sup> to the other. What matters to respondents is that they received some kind of positive feedback;

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<sup>63</sup> See “Facebook celebrates one year of the Like button.” <http://www.allfacebook.com/facebook-celebrates-one-year-of-like-button-2011-04> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Against some demand there is no Dislike button. See “New buttons coming to Facebook, still no ‘dislike’”: [www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2011/09/20/new\\_buttons\\_coming\\_to\\_facebook\\_still\\_no\\_dislike/](http://www.boston.com/business/technology/articles/2011/09/20/new_buttons_coming_to_facebook_still_no_dislike/) (last accessed August 28, 2013).



someone paid attention to what they shared and acknowledged them for it. With every acknowledgment, they are also reassured that Facebook does indeed provide the functional value that they anticipate—a communication medium (to be discussed further in the next section).

When one does not receive a form of acknowledgment or a Like from a Friend for something they uploaded to their Profile, most respondents admitted to being mildly disappointed. Sabrina, who is an avid runner, said:

I don't like the ones [her status updates] that don't get comments. I consider them duds. I expect just a general reaction. With my runs, I get people saying that I'm crazy running in this weather or they Like my runs, which to be honest is kind of a nice thing.

Others, like Irvin, a 24-year old strategist in a media buying company, admitted to feeling “kind of lonely” when no one commented on his status updates. Michaeline felt “hurt” when no one commented on or Liked her vacation photos, which she painstakingly edited. As well, Lisa asserted that she felt “uncomfortable” on the occasions that she posted an update and no one commented on it, and consequently took corrective action: “If a couple hours have passed and no one's said anything, I'll delete it. I think people who don't get comments look sad.”

### **Narcissism... or openness?**

At this point, the reader may be inclined to think that there are elements of narcissism here. Indeed, some of the respondents even described their own behaviour and that of certain other Facebook users as “narcissistic.” For example, as April, a 19-year old 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Arts student put it when explaining why she posts status updates: “There's also

some narcissism, wanting to show off where you've been, what you've bought, if you lost weight." Donald, a 23-year old in dental school, described those who use Facebook Places to display their geographic location for others to see (to be further discussed in Chapter 4) as "narcissistic and attention-seeking." And Nicole, a 28-year old data coder in a research company, reflected on her past Facebook usage with some embarrassment:

Looking back, it was very narcissistic. Me and others were using it to puff up everything we've done for people in the past to see. I had old pictures of my past travels to create the impression that I was doing everything under the sun.

However, my analysis of the data has led me to believe that the characterization of such actions as "narcissistic" is misplaced. Indeed, there is a difference between narcissism—which is about excessive self-love especially with respect to one's physical appearance—and the seeking of acknowledgement from others. Until only recently, scholars might have disagreed with me. In 2010, Soraya Mehdizadeh collected self-esteem and narcissistic personality self-reports from 100 Facebook users at York University and performed a content analysis of their Profile pages. Mehdizadeh (2010) discovered a relationship between having higher levels of narcissism and lower self-esteem and greater activity on Facebook. Also in 2010, Lin Qui, Han Lin, and Angela Ka-yee Leung conducted study on the effect of Facebook browsing on self-awareness and social well-being. Respondents completed a Narcissism Personality Inventory before researchers observed their online browsing behaviour and administered a Public Self-Awareness Subscale. Qui, Lin, and Ka-yee (2010) concluded that individuals with high levels of narcissism raised their public self-awareness while those with lower levels of narcissism

reduced their public self-awareness. As well, in 2011, Tracii Ryan and Sophia Xenos administered tests to 275 adolescents (Grade 7 to Grade 9) in Singapore. Their respondents also answered questions about the frequency of their Facebook use and, if they appeared in their current Profile picture, ranked their physical appearance in the photo. Ryan and Xenos (2011) concluded that narcissistic adolescents rated their Facebook Profile pictures more favourably than their less narcissistic peers did. Finally, in a 2012 study of the self-promoting behaviours of 292 Facebook users, Christopher Carpenter (2012) found that those with a high level of narcissism were more likely to update their status frequently, tag themselves in photos, and rate highly their Profile picture.

However, while the above studies have demonstrated that Facebook may be a platform for those with higher narcissistic tendencies, there is no evidence to suggest that it *turns people into narcissists*. In fact, in a 2012 study of 233 undergraduate students, Bruce McKinney, Lynne Kelly, and Robert Duran (2012) found a significant relationship between “openness” about sharing personal information and frequency of self-updates on Facebook. However, higher levels of narcissism were only associated with having higher Friend count, not with frequency of Facebook use. Thus, although Facebook may attract “narcissists” (as measured psychologically), it does not necessarily create them. Rather, in addition to other personality types, Facebook can be a platform for both narcissists and those who are simply open about sharing about themselves. While I did not administer a narcissistic personality scale to the respondents in my sociological study, my analysis of the data leads me to believe that most of the respondents belong to the latter category.

They are open about sharing and appreciate—but do not necessarily seek—acknowledgement from Friends.

When it comes to acknowledgment on Facebook, it should be noted that respondents often kept negative comments about a Friend's online behaviour to themselves. Michaeline gave the example of her mother's reaction to seeing photos that Michaeline's Friend posted of herself in her hospital bed, covered in dried sweat, having finished giving birth:

I was showing my mom pictures of my Friends' birth of her second child.

And she had pictures of "just born" baby pics. It's not a very flattering photo of the baby or of the mother. It is, however, very intimate. My mom saw that and made a remark like, "Oh gosh, [name of Friend]."

In cases like this one, respondents often opted not to leave a comment but noted that there were always others who did, and that many of such commenters shared the last name of the oversharer in question, which suggests that they are relatives.

As one might glean from these examples, most of the respondents that were likely to feel affected by the absence of acknowledgement were female. However, a few males in this sample did admit to fretting over not having their updates acknowledged. For example, Naveen, a 32-year old energy sector policy analyst, confessed to overanalyzing not having his posts commented on or Liked by others: "It's like, 'Nobody noticed. Nobody cared enough to click Like. Have I lost touch? Has the relationship weakened? Or am I just posting about a boring issue?' I do think about it." Still, studies have shown that females are more active on Facebook than males (Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 2009; Pew 2011a). Given this fact, it would be interesting to learn whether or not

females feel more invested than males do in receiving forms of acknowledgement on Facebook and more offended when they do not get them.

Overall, while many respondents admitted to being mildly disappointed after seeing that no one had left comments, all of them stated that they had soon gotten over it. It also does not stop them from giving acknowledgment by commenting on certain information shared by others or by simply clicking the Like button. As Roger put it:

If it's something that I think is genuinely an attempt by that person to communicate something that is special to them, then I want to affirm that. Much in the same way that if somebody ran into me on the street and told me they got a new job, it would be rude of me to stand there and just look at them.

Still, not all information shared by others is deemed to be worth acknowledging. For example, as Irvin put it: "I don't comment when people are complaining that they're sick—I don't care; it's not a place to be doing that." It is therefore not surprising that respondents also reported that they strove to share information that was generally positive in nature.

### **Dramaturgy is unmanageable on Facebook**

Although one might be tempted to conclude from the above that this sample is comprised of attention-seeking Millennials that are constantly putting up information in order to have it validated by others, I found evidence that suggests the contrary. That is, most of the respondents say that they do not feel any need or pressure to post new information to their Profile regularly. Sabrina explained: "I try to keep it infrequent and light-hearted. I don't take Facebook too seriously." For most of the Young Millennials

(18 to 24-year olds) in my study, the affordability and popularity of text messaging has in recent years competed with Wall posts for contacting close friends (to be discussed further later). As for the Old Millennials (25 to 32-year olds), most of which have full-time jobs, nearly all of them claimed to log on to Facebook much less than they did several years ago, when they were in undergraduate or graduate school. Thus, for many in this group, the novelty of sharing information on Facebook has worn off since the website was introduced in 2004, and they therefore post much less frequently to their Profile than they did in the past. Over time, people pay less attention to its maintenance and upkeep, but still rely on it to transfer messages from Point A to Point B and beyond. That is, for Millennials, Facebook has become a taken for granted *extension* of everyday life.

The fact that the respondents take Facebook for granted as part of their everyday life leads me to question the concept of *impression management* in the context of dramaturgy. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) analyzes processes of human interaction through the lens of theatrical performance. In his *dramaturgical approach*, he compares people's everyday self-presentation to stage acting, where the individual—the performer—plays a role for an audience. It should be noted, of course, that Goffman's dramaturgical approach was developed before the Internet, let alone before SNSs were even conceived. However, the performers are the same people as before, only now they have a new arena for social interaction or self-presentation.

In the "Facebook theatre," the performer has a stage in which he can both shape his identity and put his best face forward. The theatre is divided into two key areas: the

*front stage* is comprised of the Profile page, which displays personal information about the user, his wall posts, photos and photo albums, Friend List, and status updates. This stage is viewed by his audience of Facebook Friends. But instead of performing different roles for different audiences, performers have the ability to determine the level of access that an audience member or group of audience members will have to his performance; the more Facebook Friends one has, the greater the need to make this distinction. Indeed, some respondents are very careful about the impression they want to make on those who view their Profile picture. For example, Martin changes his Profile picture twice a year. For him, his Profile picture is a very personal thing: “It’s who you are—the individual. I’m a very simple person.” As well, in Charlotte’s and Lindsay’s case, it can certainly be argued that they are carefully creating an online image for themselves, using a Profile picture from years ago. Charlotte only displays Profile pictures that contain her with friends: “I’m shy and I only have a few close friends, so I want people to see that I have friends.” Lindsay has not changed her Profile picture in years. She likes having one photo that people associate with her, which is from a professional photo shoot when she was “skinny and lived in Toronto.” For her to change it would require a special event to take place in her life, “like having a child,” she said. Speaking of having children, the three respondents with young children changed their Profile picture more frequently than the others in their age group—about every two to four weeks. Anthony’s primary way of sharing photos of his growing young children with others is through changing his Profile picture to one of his son or his daughter: “If there’s a cute pic of my son’s birthday, I’ll make an active effort to make sure it’s a picture of him.” In Anthony’s case, he simply

uses Facebook as a means of sharing his young children's growth and progress with others.<sup>65</sup>

There are many more examples of what respondents choose as their display photos—from special occasions and milestones, to weight loss and muscle building progress, to holiday trips and award receptions. Moreover, the frequency of (and reason for) changing one's Profile picture depends on the individual—some change once a week, others once a year; some change when they are bored with their current photo or when a good photo is taken of them that they want to share (and get affirmation); and some even change their Profile pictures seasonally (e.g. not wanting a winter photo in the spring). With that in mind, what is clear from my study is that a lot of thought is put into the selection and changing of Profile pictures by respondents, which gives some support for impression management. Lisa was explicit about this; she admitted that all the photos in her Profile picture album speak in some way to the impression she wants others to have of her:

I post albums so people can see that I have a life and that I go out. Or that I do things with my life. Or that I'm pretty. Girls like to show off what they have in photos—getting dolled up. If you spent an hour and a half getting ready, you want people to know that you looked good that night.

As mentioned earlier, Lisa also hopes for comments—or acknowledgement—from others when posting things about herself. Cynthia, a 23-year old government services worker, also admitted to managing her Profile picture in order to create the best impression:

You want to seem interesting. You want people to know that you're out there and doing interesting things. I think a lot of people want to impress

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<sup>65</sup> Children's photos and Facebook will be discussed in later chapters.



people on Facebook, so it's like, "Hey look at my life, it's so great. I'm doing all these amazing things."

*However*, not all respondents—including Lisa and Cynthia—have done an impeccable job of managing their image—their *front stage*—beyond that of their Profile pictures. Indeed, most respondents were able to recall a time when their information disclosure went too far or could have been considered inappropriate. Examples includes photos of the respondent posing nude in a bubble bath; brand new tattoos with redness; racy bachelorette party photos; directly or indirectly calling out / telling off a Friend in a status update; updates on upcoming sexual encounters; updates on a child's hospitalization; denunciations or loathing of one's university while in a student leadership position; anti-religious statements; announcing one's vacation dates; details of a family member's death or illness; random inflammatory outbursts; and dirty / naughty talk. When probed about whether they felt such disclosure was inappropriate or if they considered the consequences before posting them, the general reply among respondents was one of apathy. Michaeline's reply represented a common reflection: "I wasn't really thinking about it. There doesn't have to be a psychological or sociological explanation—I just did it." Indeed, just as concerns about the etiquette on talking on a mobile phone in a public place became an after-thought as more and more people adopted the use of mobile phones, I think that Facebook has become a taken for granted communication tool in a similar way. Just as many people make calls on their mobile phone while riding a bus, so too might they update their Facebook status to say "*Finally left work*" or "*This bus is smelly*"—to pass the time.

Indeed, many respondents agreed that sometimes they put little thought into disclosing things about themselves on Facebook. “It’s a reactive thing,” said Charlotte about why she does not put much thought into her updates. Respondents also recalled examples of posts by other people who they believe were simply bored or put little thought into what they were posting, like a Friend’s 200 vacation photos—complete with blurred images and accidental shots of the floor—or trivial status updates such as “Eating eggs.”<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, applying Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach to explain impression management requires assuming that people carefully think about the impression they might make every time they log on, which can be for seconds, minutes, or hours at a time on a daily basis, during a variety of life stages. Doing so consistently is unmanageable, as the respondents in this sample have demonstrated. While the dramaturgical approach does help frame what people are doing when they create their Facebook account for the first time (creating their ideal self) and in the management of their Profile pictures, the results of my study suggest that we need to be careful about applying the concept to the ongoing use of the website, especially after years have passed and the novelty of managing a Facebook account has worn off. For while some respondents admitted to carefully selecting their Profile picture, putting extensive thought into status updates, and deleting unflattering tagged photos of them, others insisted that they uploaded photos and posted random thoughts simply because they *could*, because they wanted to share, or because they were bored.

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<sup>66</sup> Despite admitting to not taking their own Profiles that seriously, respondents did admit that their impressions of their Facebook Friends were definitely shaped by what they read in their status updates, especially those with whom they have little offline contact. Anthony’s comment summed it up nicely: “I think some people post things that are so mundane, which I think says something about them. And those who post less often but “better” and more selectively, I think that says something about them too.”

### **Intended audiences: the case for maintaining *bonding* social capital**

Whether people are sharing deeply private thoughts or random musings, photos of a funny license plate or of one's newly renovated bedroom, or links to a political article or a music video, the question lingers: for whose eyes is such information intended *specifically*? Prior to my study, I was unable to find any answer to this question in the current literature. Based on this qualitative investigation, the answer is both a "relative handful of people" and "no one in particular," which I will now explain.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the average Facebook user has 229 Friends, and the majority of respondents in my study have hundreds more. However, these respondents also admitted to being *close* friends with less than one or two dozen of the Friends on their Friend List. It is *those* close friends and family members that respondents reported thinking about when they shared information on Facebook, especially information about their personal life, which was also often related to offline events that were experienced with those same people. This caveat flies in the face of the popular scrutiny that Facebook users have become wannabe celebrities<sup>67</sup> who are interested in anyone and everyone knowing their private business. It also subverts studies that suggest that Facebook users are knowingly putting themselves in danger through oversharing (Barnes 2006; Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini 2007; Fogel and Nehmad 2009; Peluchette and Karl 2010).

Overall, the majority of respondents said that they started and contributed to Facebook conversations with *close* offline friends in mind—from graduate students posting segments of poorly written undergraduate essays for their fellow classmates to

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<sup>67</sup> See "Facebook and Twitter are creating a vain generation of self-obsessed people with child-like need for feedback, warns top scientist" <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2020378/Facebook-Twitter-creating-vain-generation-self-obsessed-people.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

ridicule,<sup>68</sup> to posting the geographic coordinates of one's upcoming cottage that a core group of friends will be visiting over the weekend. Such posts, though viewable to all or to the overwhelming majority of people on one's Friend List, are typed with specific people mind. Such people, respondents admitted, are those who know the respondent well enough to understand their point of view or appreciate the motivation behind a post. Such people are also among those most likely to acknowledge their posts with a brief comment or a Like. Avery, a 23-year old Communications Studies MA student, sometimes posts funny things that students write in papers: "It's usually intended for my friends who are in grad school. It's mainly a personal outlet for when I'm frustrated." Charlotte posts inside jokes that only fellow members of her ringette team would understand. Martin posts song lyrics by artists that both he and his friends appreciate. And Michaeline shares "activist articles," knowing that her friends with strong social justice interests will take notice. In this way, Facebook serves as a conversation starter, especially between *strong* ties. Indeed, respondents noted how they and their close friends expressed themselves more easily and more often via status updates, only needing to say a few words to inspire each other in conversation online or offline. For Elizabeth, after a close friend of hers posted on her Wall, "*Cancer is evil... I'm devastated,*" she immediately called the friend to ask her what was wrong and if she needed to get anything off her chest. "And she did," Elizabeth reflected. "The Internet as a whole is a place for people to say things they normally wouldn't say—good and bad. She felt a loss—she just put it out there."

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<sup>68</sup> Occasionally, graduate students are caught in the act of ridiculing undergraduates. See "York TA apologizes after criticizing students on Facebook" <http://www.thestar.com/news/article/956501--york-ta-apologizes-after-criticizing-students-on-facebook> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

In general, respondents recalled more uplifting examples of their Friends' status updates that inspired them to more or less say, "I read about what you've been up to," the next time they saw each other in person. In a way, Facebook provides respondents with the headline of every story that a friend deems worthy of sharing.<sup>69</sup> "So, when you get together for lunch," said Nicole, "you can dive into the stories that are more interesting." For example, when a friend is having a bad week, one might say something like, "I read that in your Facebook post. I've been meaning to ask you about it." As Caroline, a 28-year old executive assistant in a fashion company explained: "They don't have to remember something to tell me. I can always talk about something I saw on their Profile that interested me." Trent, a 21-year old 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Anthropology student who has his parents and siblings, aunts and uncles on Facebook, recalled times at the dinner table when his parents asked, "What was that [status update] about?" or observed, "I saw that you'll be attending a birthday party." As well, Richard's brothers often bring up witty status updates at the dinner table, which he says are always "good for a laugh."

Another important finding that has not been addressed in the current literature revolves around the extent to which users *cared* that their posts for an intended audience were being seen by hundreds of other acquaintances on their Friend List. Surprisingly, most of the respondents admitted to never having dwelled much on such a question. Even more surprising was their collective reasoning for not have dwelled on it: if something is worth sharing with one's closest Friends on Facebook, then it is okay if all others on

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<sup>69</sup> Indeed, depending on the frequency with which one's Friends update their Profiles, respondents receive a degree of insight into their days that often serves as point of departure, shaping the conversation when meeting those friends in person. However, while most respondents report the benefit of not having to wait until they see their friends in person to catch up, a few others claim that when this happens there ends up being nothing much to talk about. As April put it, "I have one friend who updates her status all the time. And I think that if I see her, there's going to be nothing to talk about—I already know everything!"

one's Friend List have access to it as well—be it a bare-bellied pregnancy photo, a cuss-filled diatribe against the Conservative government, or a cousin's wedding photos.

Finally, respondents also admitted that they sometimes had *no one in particular* in mind when posting information to Facebook—personal or general. Given the sample size and methodology of my study, I was unable to identify a precise pattern that might help categorize the kind of information disclosed by respondents and whether they had an intended audience in mind. However, in sharing information on Facebook, it is clear that the respondents alternated between what could be referred to as “casual” and “deliberate” postings. The former is characterised by more frequent updates that are typically mundane, such as “*Eating breakfast*” or “*Watching Mad Men.*” The latter occurs less often and is aimed at conveying an important message, such as “*Graduation Day today!*” or “*Joshua is 5 years old today.*”

In summary, while the dramaturgical approach of impression management is useful in explaining the careful selection of one's Facebook Profile picture as a means of creating the ideal self, the data from my study demonstrate that the concept is not useful in explaining one's ongoing use of the website. As most respondents reported, they do not take Facebook too seriously. Many post statements and photos on Facebook as randomly as they say things and point things out to their offline friends and acquaintances in real life. Facebook, therefore, can be looked upon more as an extension of one's everyday life (Kujath 2011) than as a place to construct and carefully manage the ideal self. As in everyday life, people often say and do things with specific audiences in mind or no one in particular. That is, rarely does someone perform an action with three or four hundred acquaintances in mind. Rather, one more often acts with one's *strong* ties in

mind or none at all. Therefore, it is also more realistic to look upon Facebook as more useful for maintaining *bonding* social capital between strong ties than bridging social capital between weak ties. In the section that follows, I will provide more evidence to support this statement.

## **FACEBOOK IS MY PRIMARY CONNECTION TO OTHERS**

For the majority of respondents, Facebook is their primary way of communicating with friends, acquaintances, and some family members, namely other siblings and cousins that also belong to the Millennial generation.<sup>70</sup> They identified many features that made Facebook such a valuable communication tool, including no-cost long distance communication; the ability to update several people with a few clicks (mass messaging); multi-way communication in multiple forms (words, photos, links, video); and the speed of communication between users. Indeed, Facebook is especially known for its usefulness in preserving relationships that are separated by geography, like when a group of friends graduate from high school and attend different universities, or when family members move away (Aubrey, Chattopadhyay, and Rill 2008; Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2007; Haspels 2008; Joinson 2008; Johnston et al. 2011; Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2008, 2009). Knowing that the people one cares about are likely to check their Facebook accounts multiple times per day makes maintaining bonding social capital easier, wherever one ends up geographically. As Alexandra, a 31-year old sociology student explained:

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<sup>70</sup> Particularly among undergraduate students whose family members live in other cities, Facebook is the main way of communicating. For example, Lisa's brother attends a different Ontario university. The siblings do not call each other. Rather they "talk" on Facebook through the Chat (instant messaging) tool.

I have a good friend in England who I don't see often, obviously. But we chat on Facebook. I know that she checks her Facebook often so if I need to talk to her about something I know she'll be there within a day. So that friendship is more or less facilitated through Facebook.

Indeed, the respondents I interviewed reported using Facebook more than they used the telephone, mobile phone, text messaging, or email to keep in touch with their friends, acquaintances, and family members.<sup>71</sup> So frequently do respondents use Facebook, and so much have they come to rely on it, that many confessed that they would feel "disconnected" without it, even though other methods of communication exist. In fact, aside from vacationing in another country, no respondents were able to recall a time that they did not log on to Facebook for an extended period. That is, not a single respondent reported "taking a break" from Facebook during final exam week, for example, or during days leading up to an important client deadline or a presentation to one's boss. In fact, when I asked respondents how they would respond if they suddenly learned that they would be unable to access their Facebook account for a period of three weeks, many admitted that such a scenario would be very difficult to handle. Alexandra confessed: "Um, I probably wouldn't survive that. It would be very hard. I would probably try to create another Facebook account. It's part of my daily routine, so it would be like not being able to brush my teeth. That wouldn't work for me." Lizzy, a 5<sup>th</sup> Year Arts student, said that she would be "lonely" if her Facebook access was suspended and said that she would likely attempt to log in via her close friend's Facebook account in order to see what had been happening in the lives of others: "I would probably try to access my best friend's account so I could see." She compared it to losing one's mobile

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<sup>71</sup> Most commonly young family members (siblings and cousins), as opposed to parents.



phone: “You feel at a loss. It’s hard to even think about.” For Tamara, not having access to Facebook would be “absolute insanity.” Moreover, in answering my question, a number of respondents used the word “addicted” to describe their reliance on the platform. As Michelle put it:

If I couldn’t access my account for three weeks, I’d like to think that I’d be normal but I would probably be exploding. There’s been times when it’s been down because something’s not working and I’ve been surprised by how frustrated I get with it because I don’t think of it as something that’s important in my life. But when something goes wrong and I can’t log in, I do kind of flip out a bit. Like an addict, I’m refreshing and Googling why Facebook isn’t working.

Notice that Michelle said, “I don’t think of it as something that’s important in my life,” which is consistent with earlier remarks by her and others that suggest that respondents do not take Facebook very seriously. There is a difference, however, between not taking one’s use of the website seriously versus not caring if one was not permitted access to it. Like someone who does not pay close attention to the radio while driving, they may still become irritable when it ceases to function. For example, a 2010 study of 1,000 students in 10 countries found that a day without Facebook can lead to feelings of isolation, cravings and sensations similar to quitting drugs.<sup>72</sup> Still, despite the feeling of frustration, many of the respondents in my study acknowledged that they would probably think they were missing out on more than they actually were. As Adam,

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<sup>72</sup> The global study, led by the University of Maryland, is called “The World Unplugged.” More results by country can be viewed on the study’s website: <http://theworldunplugged.wordpress.com/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

a 26-year old assistant at a veterinary clinic explained: “I’m sure that if I logged on after three weeks, nothing would have really changed at all. But knowing that I can’t *see for myself* would be frustrating.”

### **Replacing the phone with Facebook**

According to Pew, 91% of U.S. adults have a mobile phone (Pew 2013). In 2011, Pew (2013b) reported that half of such phone were loaded with apps. Indeed, Facebook reports that 819 million active users currently access the website through their mobile devices each month.<sup>73</sup> As well, another 2011 Pew study reported that, of the 73% of adult mobile phone users that send and receive text messages, 31% said they preferred texts to talking on the phone (Pew 2011c). Moreover, among those who exchanged more than 50 text messages per day, 55% would rather receive a text than a voice call. The report also found that Young Millennial mobile phone owners exchanged an average of 109.5 messages on a typical day.

The Pew findings are evidence that, among mobile phone owners, voice communication is not the sole purpose of having such a device, and that text messaging and social networking via apps is on the rise. It also suggests that, among younger adults, text-based communication through mobile phones is displacing voice communication. This shift in behaviour was first discussed by Bonnie Nardi, Steve Whittaker, and Erin Bradner (2000) who coined the term “outeraction” to explain their ethnographic findings that instant messaging was mostly used for informal communication as opposed to a deeper exchange of information. As well, in a qualitative study of teenagers’ text messaging practices, Rebecca Grinter and Mark Eldridge (2001) found that teens

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<sup>73</sup> See “Key Facts” <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

primarily use text messaging as an affordable, fast, and easy way of coordinating meet-ups with family and friends. And more recently, research by Turkle (2011) revealed how teenagers get anxious when text messages are not immediately replied to. However, to date there has been no scholarly research that has investigated the trend with respect to SNSs displacing the phone. My study provides some qualitative support for such a shift in usage and attitudes. For example, while respondents have the phone numbers and email addresses of their *strong ties*, the majority claim that they are far more likely to use *Facebook* to communicate with them. Instead of calling a friend like they did before Facebook, the respondent will write on his or her friend's Facebook Wall or send them a private Inbox message. Over the course of Facebook's rise in popularity, respondents reported having changed their communication habits from dialling a phone and calling their friends, or from texting their friends "Can I call you in 5 minutes?," to sending their communication using Facebook. Facebook, therefore, might be referred to as the 'go-to place' when one wants to reach a friend. It is regarded by respondents as both less formal and less time-consuming than using the phone. As such, the option of calling a friend to communicate a brief message rarely comes to mind.

Furthermore, a number of respondents passionately stated that they hated using phones to communicate. April, who pulled out her mobile phone and showed me that her last archived phone call was from over 6 months ago, confessed to feeling apprehensive when hearing her phone ring, a sound that would have made her feel gleeful when she was a teenager: "If I see someone calling, I'll take a long time before answering. Sometimes I'll ignore it but then text the person back. When I was fifteen, I was a phone

person. I'm not a phone person anymore." Lizzy went as far as discontinuing her voicemail service:

Voicemail to me is so archaic. I'm not listening to voicemail—I won't do it. I see your phone number on my phone and I will call you back when I get a chance. You're best off to text me or Facebook me.

### **Staying in touch without being in touch**

When it comes to strong ties, many respondents claim that Facebook has improved their relationship with friends and family members. In fact, so much has Facebook become the primary way to stay in touch and up to date with one's close friends that many respondents admitted to having *lost touch* with once-close friends and loved ones who opted not to join Facebook.<sup>74</sup> Caroline has a 17-year old sister who is not on Facebook, as well as a 20-year old brother who has an account that he rarely uses. Even though her brother does not often use Facebook, Caroline claims that she is still able to understand him from a different perspective based on the comments that his Friends post on his Wall. In the case of her sister, however, she feels removed from her. As Caroline put it, "I don't know her life."

Indeed, most respondents reported that the relationships with their non-Facebook-using friends were negatively affected, in that communication became much less frequent and email communication felt like an inconvenience. For example, if her no-longer-close friend had a Facebook account, Alexandra believes that their friendship would be nurtured more regularly and without headaches. She complained about having to "pick up

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<sup>74</sup> Respondents described their friends who opted not to join Facebook, including: teachers who did not want to be found online by their students; compulsive yet self-aware people who do not want to get "sucked in" by Facebook; those who are against Facebook in principle (mainly because of privacy concerns); and those who saw Facebook as a passing fad.

the phone and physically call her,” adding, “I fricken hate the phone. It’s super annoying.”

Certainly, being able to review the latest updates about friends on Facebook enables users to keep tabs on others without the need for phone or face-to-face interaction. Put differently, following someone on Facebook reduces the need for conversations or catch-up meetings since the website provides an ongoing glimpse into other people’s lives. Users are able to remain up to speed on their friends’ life experiences via their status updates that are reported in the News Feed. Such “headlines” provide the user with an ongoing sense of closeness regardless of their distance apart. This has important social implications in that, at a minimum, Facebook has changed the way we keep up with the people we know; it is less personal, but more frequent—a “lazier” way of staying in touch. An unfortunate outcome of this, according to several respondents, is that when they meet with Facebook Friends that are geographically distant, there is not much to talk about, since both parties are caught up on each other via status updates. Face-to-face meetings become less exciting and feel less necessary.<sup>75</sup> The user does not need to inquire about what is new in their friends’ lives; they simply witness what their friends choose to disclose in words and / or pictures. Still, Joinson (2008) suggested that the ‘social searching’ and surveillance functions—maintaining and reconnecting with the people one knows and keeping up-to-date with what old friends are up to—were the most important to Facebook users. As Nicole explained: “Right now, I

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<sup>75</sup> The very poor attendance at my recent high school reunion is a good example. Organized primarily through Facebook, the reunion ironically aimed to bring together classmates that had already taken it upon themselves to reunite through Facebook. Hundreds of alumni declined to attend, many of them more or less joking, “Who needs a high school reunion when you have Facebook?”

don't have time to call people or meet with them. But I still see what's going on with them so I feel more connected to them.”

Therefore, in an increasingly busy world Facebook helps position at the top of one's mind the people that one knows. Michaeline told a story of when, at a yoga retreat, she finally met someone with similar interests who lived in her city. The two of them later got together for coffee and discovered more of their interests. However, there was one thing in particular that they did not have in common:

I asked if she was on Facebook and she explained that she refuses to join.

The relationship has since fizzled out. Obviously, I can't say that it's because she wasn't on Facebook, but I really think that if she *was* on Facebook, she would have been present in my everyday kind of thoughts and vice versa. I could have made easier steps to continue that conversation, to continue that interaction, which may have led to us being better friends. But instead each of us had too much going on that nothing ever happened.

Michaeline's story is another example of Facebook as an extension of everyday life. As with relationships in the world offline, respondents do not actively cut out the majority of their weak ties from their lives. Rather, such friends are eventually forgotten until a reminder about them happens to come about. As well, for many respondents, a Facebook page is the *only* point of contact that they have with their acquaintances (those not in their close circle of friends and family); while they may have email addresses and phone numbers of close ties, they only have a “Facebook connection” with their weak ties. Without Facebook, many respondents believed that they would have far fewer

interactions with certain people, if any at all; maintaining relationships with such weak ties would require too much effort.

### **Maintaining bridging social capital is not supported**

The preceding three sub-sections suggest that keeping up with weak ties is a key benefit of using Facebook, as identified by the respondents. That is, without Facebook, respondents believe that it would be very difficult to remain aware of people with whom they are not very close, and that they would lose touch with them indefinitely.<sup>76</sup> They are only preserved because respondents are able to passively read about the things those acquaintances are doing. Such relationships, according to respondents, are maintained *because of* Facebook. Said Timothy: “[Facebook] has maintained relationships with people that I would have otherwise fallen off the radar with.”

Given that respondents feel they have access to more people and therefore more resources available to them, one might be inclined to conclude that they are taking advantage of it. That is, one might assume that respondents have recognized some added value to having a connection to hundreds of weak ties and have called on one or many of them for a favour or assistance, or at least aim to do so (Aubrey, Chattopadhyay, and Rill 2008; Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2007; Johnston et al. 2011; Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2008, 2009). *This has not been the case.* Only a few respondents asserted that the acquaintances on their Friend List might be of value to them in the future, and in each case they only made reference to a handful of people, and in each case they had not actually reached out to them yet. The rest did not think that calling in a favour of an

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<sup>76</sup> Of course, there are a few like Trent who say that if you really want your friends in your life, you should figure out a way to make them a part of it; one should not rely solely on Facebook to maintain relationships. This outlook was particularly shared by males.

acquaintance on Facebook was realistic. Naveen's reflection captured how respondents felt:

At the back of my mind there's a part that thinks there will always be a gain from maintaining those relationships—you never know when you're going to need people and in what context. However, realistically it's probably not going to be the case.

As well, as Jacob, a 24-year old project manager in an analytics company put it, "I would like to think that they'd be of value to me in the future, but I highly, highly doubt it." Therefore, just because one is able to stay in touch with weak ties, it does not necessarily follow that a bond has been forged between them, or—as Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007), Joinson (2008), and Sebastián Valenzuela, Nasmu Park, and Kerk F. Kee (2008, 2009) have suggested—that such weak ties give us social capital. In fact, when asked directly if they believed that their acquaintances on Facebook might be of benefit to them in the future—like providing a place to stay or helping to arrange a job interview—most of respondents answered "no." This is in line with conclusions by Bae Brandtzæg and Oded Nov (2011), who in their longitudinal study of 311 Facebook users in Norway found that Facebook does not significantly affect offline social capital, in spite of the significant increase in its use from 2008 to 2010.

As well, in their paper, "Calling All Facebook Friends: Exploring Requests for Help on Facebook," Nicole Ellison et al. (2013) analyzed the status updates of 20,000 Facebook users whose Profiles were unrestricted and therefore viewable by anyone with a Facebook account. The researchers found that "mobilization requests" such as recommendations, invitations, favours, opinion polls, and requests for information made



up just 4% of the 20,000 status updates that were analyzed. I view this as further evidence that such instances of social capital are a relatively insignificant benefit of using Facebook, even though the researchers concluded by pointing out that such a small percentage still represents millions of mobilization requests given Facebook billion-plus membership.

In summary, while Facebook enables users to remain in contact with those with whom they have a direct or indirect relationship—like close friends and relatives; friends and relatives *of* close friends and relatives; and former classmates, teachers and co-workers, the fact remains that all respondents admit to regularly visiting the actual Profile pages of a mere handful of *close* friends. The majority of acquaintances on the respondents' Friend List were not added or accepted because of their potential value as a resource. Though such acquaintances are called “Friends” on Facebook, and though they may share information about themselves with each other, friendship accompanied by social capital benefits is built upon more than the passive intake of another's updates. As such, they have not fooled themselves into thinking that by virtue of having access to the Profiles of hundreds of weak ties that they also have hundreds of additional sources of social capital. Put differently, the respondents in my study use Facebook to *stay more easily in touch* with strong and weak ties, not as a means of maintaining social capital.

Thus, if a case for maintaining social capital had to be made, given that respondents actively follow the Profiles of and keep in regular contact with their *strong* ties, then—as stated earlier, Facebook is more useful to respondents for maintaining *bonding* social capital than bridging social capital.

## **FACEBOOK AS A CONVENIENT COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION TOOL**

The themes that were discussed in the previous two sections spoke to the benefits of using Facebook among respondents. I also demonstrated that Facebook is more useful to respondents for maintaining bonding social capital between strong ties than bridging social capital between weak ties. In this section, the underlying theme is comparatively superficial in its absence of nuance, yet it has sociological relevance in the digital age. The third benefit of Facebook is that the website is a convenient communication tool and source of information.

### **Convenience is king**

In *Delete: the Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (2009), Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argued that while it is easier and more affordable in the digital age to store information about ourselves online, it is becoming increasingly difficult to permanently remove such information or control how others access it and what they do with it. As opposed to past centuries during which forgetfulness was seen as a disadvantage to be overcome through the invention of new technologies, in the digital age “forgetting” is the exception rather than the rule. Mayer-Schönberger provided examples of people who have been denied entry to another country or disciplined by their employers after details of their past were either deliberately searched for or somehow surfaced online. In many cases, those being punished had no idea that the incriminating information was online in the first place.

After discussing an incident in which a would-be teacher was denied her teaching degree after a photo of her wearing a pirate hat and drinking from a plastic cup—titled

“Drunken Pirate”<sup>77</sup>—was seen on her MySpace page by her supervisor, Mayer-Schönberger (2009:110) suggested that “once we realize that information can reach anyone, we’ll err on the side of caution, and if in doubt censor ourselves rather than risk incalculable damage.” However, the evidence in my study suggests otherwise. Not only were all respondents aware that their photos on Facebook could potentially be accessed by anyone, but only a few respondents also acknowledged the drawback of archiving all of one’s personal photos on a website as “digital footprints” that might never be erased. For the overwhelming majority, the *convenience* of having Internet access to hundreds or thousands of one’s personal library of photos trumps any ongoing concern about the repercussions should some of those photos be seen by unintended audiences. In an era of hundreds of millions of Web pages, many respondents view the Facebook Profile page as a kind of personal Web page to showcase one’s life—“a place that is mine”—akin to having a blog within a large network of blogs like WordPress.com, but without having to program themes and navigation bars or install plug-ins and updates. For some respondents, uploading photos to Facebook is the easiest and most efficient way of organizing one’s memories without worrying about things like hard drive failure or a lost memory stick. They rely on Facebook as a kind of archival tool, especially with respect to their photos. As Lisa put it, “My entire life is on Facebook.” As well, some respondents admitted to not having any back-up copies of the hundreds of photos they uploaded to Facebook. Elizabeth, for example, has all of her photos—many of her young child—stored *only* on Facebook. As a result, respondents like Elizabeth said that the shutting down of Facebook—were it to happen—would be immensely distressing. As she

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<sup>77</sup> View the photo here: <http://i.cdn.turner.com/dr/teg/tsg/release/sites/default/files/imagecache/750x970/documents/0426072pirate1.jpg> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

put it: “I’d be devastated. All my photos are there. I’ve stopped backing up all my stuff to a hard drive.” For Caroline, “That would be terrible, that would be awful—because I’d lose all my pictures.”

In fact, one of the most surprising findings in my study is how much respondents not only relied on Facebook but also extol its virtues as if no other tool has existed that could perform similar functions. For example, many respondents mentioned the indispensable value of Facebook’s Events application, which enables the user to create an event by giving it a title, a time frame, and a description, and allowing invitees to RSVP by clicking Yes, No, or Maybe. However, upon taking a moment to consider how one goes about organizing an event in the digital age, it becomes obvious that one could easily use *email* to invite one’s friends to a party and ask people to RSVP by simply clicking the reply button. In another example, Elizabeth believed that she would not cope well as a single mother without Facebook: “In my particular situation, being a single mom and so busy, I would be a shut-in. I would be a lonely, lonely person if I didn’t have social media outlets and technology to help me maintain relationships.” It is as if having a social life was not possible before the invention of Facebook, which speaks to how engrained such SNS technology has become in her everyday life.

Respondents also pointed out the benefits of being on the receiving end of Facebook communication, which are also similar to that of *text messaging* and *email*. They said that receiving messages through Facebook allows them time to think about their response as opposed to being under pressure to reply immediately, which would be the case in face-to-face conversation. As well, respondents pointed to other benefits of Facebook as a communication tool that could just as easily be applied to text messaging

and email. For example, Nicole, who immigrated from Eastern Europe, viewed Facebook as a better communication tool than the phone because with text-based messaging she did not get tripped up by people's accents. Lizzy feels more comfortable communicating via Facebook: "I don't like you being able to see my face when I'm talking to you." Avery used Facebook to coordinate when her friends that were studying at other institutions would be returning home from reading week. Cynthia's friend set up a Facebook Group for her entire wedding party (all those in the party had Facebook accounts) so that everyone could get information on fittings and meeting times. Jacob found Facebook to be an easy way to plan events by simply clicking the names of invitees from his Friend List. For those friends who are not on Facebook, one has to copy and paste the content from the Events page and send those people a separate email. Said Jacob: "You basically have to do an extra step in your party planning, which is annoying."

### **Better than email**

Jacob was not the only respondent who lamented having to accommodate a friend that did not have a Facebook account. In fact, most of the respondents in my study have become *accustomed* to communicating with friends via Facebook instead of email. According to Terry Judd (2010), between 2005 and 2010, the use of Facebook has come close to reaching an equilibrium with email use. Indeed, most respondents had no problem admitting that keeping in touch with friends who are *not* on Facebook was inconvenient as it requires extra steps for interaction. For example, receiving photos by email, downloading them, and opening them one-by-one requires more steps than browsing through photo albums uploaded to Facebook. Responding to emails is seen as an extra step when nearly all of one's correspondence with friends takes place through

Facebook. As well, not only does having a close friend that is not on Facebook make it relatively difficult to remain informed about that person's life, it has been as a *nuisance* when required to do so through alternative means. The conviction with which Alexandra expresses her frustration in the following story was common among most respondents:

I have a good friend who refuses to join Facebook. She has children now, and she'll send a monthly email that includes an update of what she's been up to and pictures of her children, and I hate it. And every time she sends it, I'm like, "Why don't you join Facebook?" She more or less posts all her would-be Facebook stuff in an email—"Son's name] is walking now. [Daughter's name] has three teeth." So now I have an email with 12 pictures of her kids that I have to download each one manually to look at, and then read her fricken email. It's just stupid when she could post it all on Facebook.

Furthermore, keeping in touch with friends who are not on Facebook can also be expensive if they live far away, in which case phone cards need to be purchased and call times scheduled to accommodate lengthy "catch-up" conversations. Elizabeth lauded the cost-saving benefits of communicating with friends and family members through Facebook and talked about the inconvenience of having to pay to reach her favourite cousin who refuses to join the network:

Argh, it kills me because I have to get a calling card and spend an hour talking to her over the phone. Facebook is like a free method of talking versus a paid, time-consuming method—one that I also have to coordinate against my son's sleep patterns.

Indeed, getting caught up with faraway contacts by *passively* reviewing each other's News Feeds on a daily or even weekly basis is more cost-effective than arranging long distance phone calls and more efficient than logging on to a different website and typing a lengthy email update. As well, with far fewer moves involved in opening an array of different emails, potentially hundreds of people on one's Friend List can read what any person has to say. For users who crave attention, this feature is very attractive. It was difficult to get respondents to admit that they sought attention (which is in part why I arrived at the theme of acknowledgment) but many believed that *others* on their Friend List used the website to fulfill their need for attention.

Finally, some respondents said they would not have a proper contact list without Facebook. In the case of email, one must have the email address of anyone they wished to contact. It is often the case that one does not have the email accounts of one's friends and acquaintances properly catalogued, or that the email address one has on file is no longer used by the recipient. Using Facebook to send a message to a large group of people is much simpler. As Lester, a 18-year old 1<sup>st</sup> Year Fine Arts student explained: "You don't always remember everyone's email but you always remember their *name*. With Facebook messages, you just type in the first few letters of their name and it comes up. It's very little work." Of course, with most modern email programs, it is also the case that one only needs to know the first few letters of a recipient's name when looking through an email contact list. Thus, it may be that because email requires the *extra step* of having to log on to one's email account, it is seen as an inconvenience in that one would have to navigate away from Facebook to use it. Perhaps the real reason Facebook *feels* like a more efficient communication tool than email is because, as a frequently visited website,

one is more often logged in to it.<sup>78</sup> As Cynthia put it, “It’s set up in a way that makes it easy for lazy people to get a hold of people.”

### **A reliable source of news and information**

Another surprising finding was that, for many respondents, Facebook is their *primary* source of news and information. From the 2011 Japan earthquake, to Canada and U.S. election campaign highlights, to the killing of Osama bin Laden, to the newest viral YouTube video, Facebook provided respondents—most of whom did not claim to closely follow news headlines—with current event information that they might have missed or learned much later. In fact, even for some *graduate* students, Facebook is their main source of news. As Alexandra explained: “The only source of news that I get is from Friends. I feel that it’s because if something *really* important is happening in the world, someone’s going to post something about it on Facebook.” While one’s first impression after reading such a comment may be one of disappointment (especially coming from someone who is pursuing an advanced graduate degree), consider that such news is coming from those that one might consider trusted sources—one’s Friends, a dozen of which may be “news junkies.” Thus, for those who are not news junkies, relying on those who *are* to share what they believe to be newsworthy saves the respondent the time of sifting through newspapers and news websites. After all, one did not handpick the editorial staff of newspapers and news websites, but one did select the Friends on one’s Friend List. Moreover, unlike a newspaper editorial staff, one has a direct line of communication with the Friend who shared the news story. It might therefore be argued that Friends on Facebook and similar relationships on other social media sites are

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<sup>78</sup> Unless one clicks “log out” when ending a session, Facebook automatically logs the user in when visiting Facebook.com.



increasingly becoming people's *trusted* sources of information. In this regard, in their description of an algorithmic approach (called "social filtering") to comprehending recommendation systems online, Matteo Dell'Amico and Licia Capra (2006) argued that the trustworthiness of a recommender is based either on similarity of tastes (i.e. "I trust those that agree with me") or on social ties (i.e. "I trust my friends, and the people that my friends trust"). The latter is especially applicable to how the respondents in my study viewed links to news stories from Friends.

This is not to say that the respondents who rely on others for their news do not themselves share information, such as movie trailers, humorous photos, or comics, which might be of interest to the respondents' Friends—"news junkies" or others. In this regard, in their exploratory study of the links posted to the Profile pages of 98 Facebook users, Brian Baresch et al. (2011) found that the overwhelmingly majority of links were those that the participant found on their own. They also found that the most common genres of links were news (21%), general interest (21%), products (17%), and commentary (10%).

As well, if one shares a link on Facebook, like a controversial op-ed piece, other users can re-post the link to their own Profiles. The information sharing is therefore mutually beneficial in that both parties enjoy information that they would not have otherwise sought out. This continues as more Friends of Friends view the article, share it, and so on. Therefore, an online article discovered by one person and shared with a few hundred people on their Friend List (all of whom have the capacity to share the article with their own Friend List), has the potential to be shared by exponentially more people in a matter of minutes. As Martin put it: "Everyone can contribute to public posts. It's

like a pool that's always open to jump in." Such a "wave" of sharing often begins with one person coming up with a clever thought or uploading a unique image and clicking "Share." Indeed, when this kind of sharing occurs over *email*, like the once popular "chain letters" of the '90s, they are often regarded as spam. Spam intrudes upon an email account that may only receive a handful of messages from peers on a given day. On one's Facebook page, any piece of information is merely one of hundreds of other messages that are viewed throughout the day. Put differently, messages that one might consider spam in an email account stand out *less* on Facebook and are therefore less objectionable.

Finally, tools like the Wall, photo albums, comment fields, and Chat<sup>79</sup> serve as forms of entertainment for respondents. For them, Facebook is not just about updating others and getting updated—it is also very *fun* to use. In fact, while a number of respondents did not hesitate to refer to Facebook as a tool for "killing" or "wasting" time, for others, logging on to Facebook was referred to as a reward. Among the 25 to 32-year old respondents in the working world, accessing Facebook from their office computer or mobile phone was thought of as taking a quick break. As Richard put it, "Smokers have cigarettes, I have Facebook." It is during this time that many respondents fulfill their curiosity about others on their Friend List and get informed about news and current events. As well, some respondents who were undergraduate or graduate students reported rewarding their productivity during events like exam-studying or paper-writing with a few minutes on Facebook, while others admitted to using Facebook as a fun distraction from getting school work done.

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<sup>79</sup> Chat is Facebook's instant messaging system.

## **Fewer clicks**

While the entertainment and information benefits of Facebook have been addressed by other scholars (Chen, Shen, and Ma 2012; Consalvo 2011; Jacobs and Sihvonen 2011; Losh 2008; Shrivastav et al. 2012; Whitson 2011; Zhang, Sung, and Lee 2010b), the respondents in my study brought forth a yet unexamined benefit that I believe is distinct to members of the Millennial generation: fewer clicks.<sup>80</sup> From the sender's point of view, a key advantage of Facebook over email for peer-to-peer communication is the fewer number of steps or "clicks" required to convey a message. That is, having all of one's communication and sharing platforms consolidated into a single website, as well as being passively presented with a steady stream of articles and entertainment via one's News Feed, is extremely convenient. Indeed, during the course of my interviews, it became clear that a highly alluring component of Facebook is that one can perform so many tasks within a single online space. In one place, users can send messages to one or hundreds of people via the Wall and Inbox, store and sort contacts on their Friend List, organize events, share photos, publish notes, share news articles and videos, and play games by themselves or with others. Nate, an 18-year old 1<sup>st</sup> Year History student, broke down the convenience of Facebook as follows:

I can share all my photos on Flickr. I can update my status and follow news stories on Twitter. I can follow Blogger and Tumblr through my Gmail account. But I can't do all of that in one place. But I can do that on Facebook where you can link them, consolidate them all together.

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<sup>80</sup> Not only did the preference for fewer clicks come through in my interviews, but evidence can be seen in the uptick of news aggregators like RSS feeds and Digg, as well as social media aggregators like Streamy, Flock, and FriendFeed over the years.

During a typical session, which may occur multiple times per day, respondents reported that they checked their News Feed, notifications, Inbox, Wall, and (for some) Facebook Chat. In the same session, all respondents took the time to review the latest photos uploaded by their Friends and photos in which Friends were tagged, and many also typed comments on or Liked the photos of others—information that is all streamed via the News Feed. Most updated their status and / or commented on the status updates of others multiple times per week. Some additionally checked the pages of their favourite Groups, others played game applications like Farmville, and a few even poked<sup>81</sup> their significant others.

According to Paul Resnick (2002) in his chapter contribution, “Beyond Bowling Together: SocioTechnical Capital,” the availability of such digital tools is an example of how certain technologies enable the convenient formation of productive social relationship). In a digital space of close to 645 million websites,<sup>82</sup> including those that were and are being created solely for the purpose of instant-messaging, or emailing, or photo-uploading, or game-play, or event organization, or forum discussions, the fact that millions upon millions of Millennials are using a single platform that consolidates most of their online peer interaction says something about the need for convenience among a generation that is generally regarded as one that is highly accustomed to having a multitude of choices and options (Jones and Healing 2010). However, saying that such consolidation is what makes Facebook convenient is not enough. Rather, Facebook is convenient because the user is required to complete far fewer steps in order to perform an

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<sup>81</sup> When one “pokes” a Friend, the Friend receives a poke alert on their home page. It is typically used to say hello in a playful manner.

<sup>82</sup> See Netcraft’s “March 2012 Web server survey” <http://news.netcraft.com/archives/2012/03/05/march-2012-web-server-survey.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

action. That is, with just one click, a user can post a thought or link for everyone on their Friend List to see. As Trent explained: “Instead of having the same conversation with three aunts, then cousins, and hundreds of friends, I post things once and let all of them converse, react or whatever.” Thus, when it comes to updating others about their life, Facebook enables users to do so with one click. While, on the surface, this sounds quite obvious, to me it represents an important shift in the mindset and expectations of the Millennial generation that has yet to be investigated. For example, according to respondents, if a message is intended for a specific group of people but the content is more or less impersonal, then they do not feel the need to engage the intended audience members directly. This can be beneficial when one wants to *inform* others but not *engage* with them. Caroline wanted to let her friends know that she was in the process of moving to a new apartment, so she simply wrote on her Wall, “MOVING!!,” because she believed that such information would be “silly to directly email people something like that.” More importantly, being busy moving, she did not want to receive personal responses from others. By posting on her Wall, not only did she share her update with her Friends with the click of a mouse, but doing so “publically” via her Wall rather than privately via the Inbox system or personal email enabled her to circumvent the pressure of having to reply to people directly. She continued: “I wanted to announce that I was moving. I didn’t want to exclude anyone from that and I didn’t necessarily want to address any responses from people.”

### **Typing in Facebook**

Another interesting finding was with respect to how respondents described the experience of writing messages through Facebook versus writing email messages, which

provides some new insight into how people, especially young adults, regard email. When it comes to email, Nicole said that she always felt “obligated to write something big.” When sending a private message to a Friend via Facebook, however, she said that there is no pressure to be formal or to write a lot; Facebook fosters a casual writing space for self-expression.

Further, not only do respondents believe that the Facebook private messaging system is conducive to sending short notes, but it is also taken *less seriously* than email and therefore eliminates the burden of writing in a professional manner. They do not have to worry about formal greetings and the often misunderstood formatting and grammatical rules that are more likely to apply to letter-writing via email. As well, Facebook’s Inbox interface contains a very small typing space / canvas, which is conducive to and encourages the sending of short messages rather than long ones. In terms of purpose and ease of use, then, Facebook’s Inbox messaging system might be thought of as an optimal medium between text messaging and email<sup>83</sup>—one that is convenient, casual, fun, and free.

### **Bridging social capital as a by-product of using Facebook**

In summary, in the course of my interviews I got the very clear sense that—from the respondents’ perspective—Facebook was regarded *more* as a convenient way of *keeping in touch without being in touch* and for staying *informed and entertained* than as a tool for self-expression, the latter being an area where much of the research on

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<sup>83</sup> One area in which email is superior to Facebook’s messaging system is security. Some respondents believe that email is more secure and therefore use it to send more important communication, regardless of length. Another advantage of using email over Facebook is that most, if not all, email platforms enable the printing of emails; there is currently no “print” function built into the Facebook Inbox system. With this mind, then, it may be fair to say that the efficiency of online communication depends on the nature of the topic.

Facebook has been conducted (boyd 2007; Herring 2008; Halpern and Gibbs 2013; Kramer and Chung 2011; Livingstone 2008; Stern 2008; Stutzman 2006; Weber and Mitchell 2008; Zhang, Jiang, and Carroll 2010a). All respondents believe that Facebook is an efficient way of communicating; it is a way for users to quickly receive information from people they know as well as to efficiently communicate with their strong ties. The easier Facebook makes it for them to perform more tasks with fewer steps, the better.

Furthermore, the fact that respondents are able to receive links to news and information particularly from the weak ties on their Friend List suggests that they are experiencing a *bridging* social capital benefit on a regular basis. In a longitudinal study of Facebook users and social capital between 2009 and 2010, Moira Burke, Robert Kraut, and Cameron Marlow (2011) found that “using [Facebook] to passively consume news assists those with lower social fluency draw value from their connections.” However, while it may be true that the respondents in my study benefit from such an ongoing stream of information (the value of which can be debated on a post-by-post basis), it does not change the fact that their relationships with individual weak ties remain distant and passive. One might derive similar benefits from simply keeping their local talk radio station audible in the background throughout the day. While respondents do share links to news and entertainment on their Profiles, such action has no effect on the type and amount of information that their Friends are sharing in aggregate. Put differently, being able to receive information from one’s Friends is not the reason why respondents disclose personal information about themselves; the former would occur with or without one’s self-disclosure by virtue of amassing hundreds of Friends. For respondents, maintaining bridging social capital in the form of news gathering is a by-product of having a

Facebook account; it is not a benefit that is met by self-disclosure, as is the case with maintaining *bonding* social capital.

### **Boomers: Facebook is *not* my life online**

When it came to the Boomers, the first thing I noticed about this sample was how low their Friend count was in comparison to the Millennials I interviewed. While the Friend count in my Millennial sample was in the range of 200 to 500, in the Boomer sample it was between 70 and 200. For most of the Boomer respondents, many of their offline friends are not on Facebook, so it was difficult to even add a large number of Friends from the beginning. Moreover, unlike the Millennials who added Friends during their school years, the Boomer respondents were not as likely to make new casual acquaintances offline, let alone add them to Facebook.

I also noticed that nearly all of the Boomers I interviewed had a misunderstanding about some aspect of Facebook, which was not the case for anyone in the Millennial sample. One of them thought that blocking<sup>84</sup> a Friend meant that the Friend would simply no longer see her status updates. A few others did not know how to tag people in photos. And half of them believed that there was a way for Friends to find out if the respondent had viewed their Profile, which is currently not possible. While I do not feel that such misunderstandings affected the accuracy of their responses to my questions, it is worth pointing out that the Boomers seemed to have a less sophisticated *technical* understanding of Facebook than the Millennials.

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<sup>84</sup> Blocking someone on Facebook would result in the blocked individual having no access whatsoever to the user's Profile. The blocked user would not even be able to find the user's name in a search.



Overall, the Boomers seemed to value the photo-sharing aspect of Facebook the most. Like the Millennials, the Boomers believe that Facebook is a “one-stop shop.” As Anna, a 52-year old office administrator put it:

I like that you get this kind of newspaper-style page, with a person’s name, their picture, and their friends. It’s very one-stop shopping—easy to get at.

Whereas email has things like attachments, which can be really inconvenient.

For Colin, a 55-year old lab technician, Facebook is a nice way to see people’s lives in pictures: “It’s great for looking at their vacation pictures. You can basically keep in touch with people without necessarily picking up the phone or getting together with them.”

However, most of the Boomers did not actually upload photos very often. As Frank, a 50-year old logistics director put it: “I’m more of a taker than a giver on Facebook. You come to my page, you’re not going to get much.” With that in mind, another thing I noticed immediately was how *few* Profile pictures had been uploaded by the respondents over the past three or four years. Angela, a 48-year old executive assistant had only one; Frank had three; Douglas, a 54-year old accountant had four; Raymond had five; and the others had less than a dozen. Respondents were unanimous in their reasoning for having so few Profile pictures, which was always accompanied by a degree of laughter: essentially, they had so few pictures of themselves that they liked.

Upon further reflection, the respondents also observed that very little has changed in their lives that would warrant a photo to be shared. As Patrick, a 49-year old advertising manager put it: “My general disposition in life hasn’t really changed.” Indeed,

unlike Millennials, the Boomers in my study are more settled in their lives, with fewer milestones to celebrate and perhaps with fewer friends in their age group that are throwing birthday parties, graduating from college, or getting married—occasions that would likely result in the respondent’s image being captured on film.

Like the Older Millennials in the sample, the Boomers logged in to Facebook much less often than the Young Millennials, most of whom were full-time students. It was clear that the Boomers in my study valued their free time and did not see “using Facebook” as the best use of it, especially when it could be spent interacting with loved ones in person. Patrick summed it up this way:

If you’re under thirty, Facebook has been around in your social network and it’s a bit more of a binding agent. I think those that are in their forties or fifties probably tend to nest a little more with those that are geographically close to them, or are closer with their tighter friends because they’re probably raising young families. So their social time is more precious and social media probably doesn’t play a big part in their life.

Compared to the rest of the Boomers, the two stay-at-home moms, whose teenage children were at school during weekdays, stood out among the rest as being much more active in their frequency of logins and in their uploading of content. As Meredith, a 48-year old stay-at-home mom explained: “It’s almost like an addiction—I’m constantly updating. It’s pretty pathetic, actually. I’m on it first thing in the morning and before going to bed, and throughout the afternoon.” She continued:

When we're away on vacation, I miss it. It's pathetic (laughs). I miss keeping up with what's going on with people. (Probe: How do you deal with that?) Oh, I'll get my kids to go on for me on their iPhone, and ask them to post something. If I'm in a situation that I really want to put something on there, it frustrates me that I can't.

As well, Vivian, also a 48-year old stay-at-home mom, checks her Facebook as part of her morning routine and uses Facebook Places to "check-in" at her local gym. For every 10<sup>th</sup> check-in, she gets a free personal training session. Meredith and Vivian were the only two respondents that said they would be very disappointed if Facebook suddenly shut down. As Meredith put it: "Ahhh! At first it would be a shock to the system, I think for sure. You're used to seeing these people." Vivian said, "I'd be really disappointed that my photo albums would not be arranged the way I arranged them there."

For the rest of the respondents, however, Facebook shutting down would not be a big deal. As Anna put it: "It wouldn't bother me if it shut down because I don't really get that much out of it. What I do on there, I could do in other ways. It's just that right now we're doing it this way." Indeed, for most of the Boomers in this sample, logging on to Facebook is yet another thing to do in their already busy days. That is, the website is seen as just another way of getting information from strong ties that could be—and used to be—communicated via phone or email. As Angela explained:

Sometimes I get phone calls [from her friends]. "Did you see the pictures?" Yeah, I did. You told me to go look and they're great. "Well how come you didn't *Like* them?" Why do I have to *Like* them if I'm going to talk to you in a few minutes and tell you that I like them? I find

that there's a lot of overlap in life these days between the phone on your desk, your cell phone, your email, your texts. A lot of time they're about similar things. It's redundant and time-taking, and my time is important to me.

Thus, for Angela, Facebook is simply another delivery system for communication, which she finds very inconvenient. Indeed, unlike the Millennials, for the Boomers in my study Facebook is *not* seen as a tool for passing the time—since they have so little extra to spare, *nor* is it their primary communication tool. Most of them keep in touch with their closest friends through established means that pre-date SNSs—the landline phone or email. As Colin put it, “Facebook is mostly a way of connecting with people I don't see, because I mostly connect with people I do see through email and phone.” In other words, for the Boomers in my study, unlike the Millennials, Facebook is primarily used to stay in touch with *weak* ties. Given their age, Boomers are more likely than Millennials to have more friends that, over time, re-located to other parts of the country or the world since their days in high school or post-secondary school. In fact, for the Boomers I interviewed, the main benefit that they recognized upon creating their Facebook account was that they could connect and keep up with friends around the world with whom they had lost touch, whereas the Millennials I interviewed first saw the website as a fun way of communicating with their nearby friends and classmates. For Raymond, who uses Facebook to stay updated on how his Friends who live in Australia and South Africa are doing, “Facebook is not a major communication channel. It's an *interest* communication channel.” And as Frank explained: “In real life you have your main friends, your secondary friends, and then your acquaintances. On Facebook, it's a

good way of keeping up to date on those secondary friends and acquaintances.” For Patrick, “Facebook is just a way of keeping in touch with old friends. That’s about it.”

The main point here is that the theme “Facebook is My Life Online” that I applied to the Millennial sample definitely does not apply to this—albeit smaller—sample of Boomers. For these Boomers, the primary benefit of using Facebook is staying updated on and maintaining communication with their weak ties. Note, however, that this benefit does *not* amount to maintaining *bridging* social capital. Indeed, social capital has little or nothing to do with why they use Facebook. None of the Boomers believe that the people with whom they have little direct interaction with on Facebook will be of any functional value to them in the future; they simply enjoy seeing occasional updates about their lives. Indeed, like the Millennials, the Boomers report that they would not feel a loss if those with whom they had little or no interaction on Facebook suddenly disappeared from their Friend List. Eleanor, a 52-year old social worker put it this way:

I couldn’t care less. It’s not that I don’t wish them well or anything. They just have nothing to do with my life and I have nothing to do with theirs. If Facebook was never invented, I probably wouldn’t have remembered them anyway.

Boomers also have strong opinions about how the increased visibility of weak ties on Facebook affects the nature of friendship. While Douglas observed that the website increases visibility of weak ties, he does not see a causal relationship between visibility and the strength of a relationship. As he put it: “Because of Facebook, you see people more regularly in your mind than you would normally see them, but I don’t think that makes them better friends; it just makes them better connected.” Frank put it this way:

If you were to shave your head and wear a pink tuxedo in real life, those real life acquaintances might not say anything to you about it if they saw you, but they would definitely go home and tell their family and friends about it behind your back. This hasn't changed with Facebook. If you post something revealing about yourself, those acquaintances are still going to look at your post, but they're not going to comment on it or confront you. But they'll still show their spouses or friends how silly you look.

Thus, while maintaining bonding social capital is not applicable to the Boomers in my study since few of their strong ties are on Facebook, neither does maintaining bridging social capital apply.

In summary, the primary difference that I identified between the two samples is that the Boomers do *not* use Facebook for the purposes of *bonding* social capital. Unlike the Millennials, many of the Boomers' strong ties do not have Facebook accounts. As such, despite the increasing popularity of the website, these Boomers are still using the phone and email as their primary communication tools. For the Boomers, the main benefit of using Facebook is reuniting and keeping up with *weak ties*, like seeing how their old friends have changed since high school or college, or to keep in touch with friends and colleagues that have relocated around the world. However, like the Millennials, they do not feel that such people will be of value to them in the future—social capital is not a consideration. If the weak ties with whom they have little one-to-one interaction were to suddenly disappear from their Friend List, the Boomers would not feel a loss.

## CHAPTER 3: THE RISKS OF USING FACEBOOK

By thematically analyzing the three key *benefits* of using Facebook as identified by respondents—*Facebook is my life online*; *Facebook is my primary connection to others*; and *Facebook is a convenient communication and information tool*—the previous chapter made the case for why Facebook is more useful to respondents for maintaining *bonding* social capital between strong ties, as opposed to bridging social capital between weak ties. This chapter explores the *risks* associated with using Facebook, which involve concerns about *privacy* and, to a lesser extent, issues of *control*.

### PRIVACY ISSUES

Despite the conventional wisdom that younger Internet users tend not to care about the privacy of their data, Facebook chief privacy officer Chris Kelly reported that more teenagers than adults use privacy controls on the social network, at a rate of 60% to about 25-30%.<sup>85</sup> However, just because young people know more about and make greater use of privacy controls, it does not necessarily mean that young people are disclosing less personal information about themselves—even though past quantitative studies suggest just that (boyd and Hargittai 2010; Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield 2010; Young and Quan-Haase 2009). The evidence provided by such studies is primarily based on closed-ended surveys about young people’s privacy settings and concern for personal privacy online. Little, if any, data were gathered on the *kind* of information users were sharing and, more importantly, *to whom* the information-sharing was intended. This section addresses that gap from a qualitative perspective. While studies have up to now suggested

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<sup>85</sup> See “Will 2009 Be the Year of Multiple Digital Identities?” <http://www.technewsworld.com/story/Will-2009-Be-the-Year-of-Multiple-Digital-Identities-65768.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

that young people are more responsible about what they disclose about themselves online than older generations by virtue of their knowledge of privacy settings, I will be suggesting that having knowledge of privacy settings does not necessarily result in carefulness about self-disclosure.

### **Privacy settings: knowledge and use**

All of the respondents acknowledged Facebook's reputation for being scrutinized by its users and the media over seemingly frequent changes to its privacy policy, along with changes to the look and functionality of its interface. At the same time, all of the respondents were aware of Facebook's privacy setting options and claimed to have occasionally adjusted them. Most have their settings set to "Friends Only," which means that only those who are on their Friend List can view their full Profile, including status updates, photos, and notes. A few undergraduate students permit access to their university networks, which means that anyone who belongs to the same university network as the respondent—including students, staff, and faculty—can view their Profile.

None of the respondents have set their privacy settings to "Everyone," a setting of which all were aware and chose to avoid. A few respondents also made their Profile unsearchable; that is, their name would not appear in the "Search" field were someone to look them up. Many respondents reported having blocked at least one person (but never more than two or three) from having access to their Profile. Such people would neither be able to add the respondent as a Friend, nor see their Profile even if it was set to "Everyone." This kind of action was typically performed when a friendship or a romantic relationship failed and the respondent did not want the person in question knowing their personal business or even seeing their Profile picture. Richard blocked the access of his



ex-girlfriend and “her informants”—those Facebook Friends that he suspected would continue to view his Profile and report any noteworthy updates back to his ex; Michaeline blocked what she described as an “abusive” ex-boyfriend; and Lindsay blocked a client of her Facebook Friend who is a female escort. Thus, when it comes to Facebook, if the respondents never wanted to have communication with someone again, disabling the ability of that person to reach them via Facebook would be an obvious course of action.

Overall, the respondents’ knowledge and use of Facebook’s privacy settings are consistent with conclusions by danah boyd and Ezster Hargittai (2010) and Fred Stutzman and Jacob Kramer-Duffield (2010) that teenagers and young adults have a sophisticated understanding of how to navigate and apply Facebook’s privacy settings, even with the frequent changes. As well, in their qualitative study of youth and adults in Norway, Bae Brandtzæg, Marika Lüders, and Jan Håvard Skjetne (2010) found that younger Facebook users were more skilled than adults over the age of 40 in their understanding and use of the website’s privacy settings. However, there is an absence of scholarly investigation into the *kind* of data being shared by Facebook users. By focusing only the user’s *knowledge* of privacy settings and not *what* they are actually disclosing, an impression is formed that users are vigilant about deciding what personal information to reveal and to whom.<sup>86</sup> I argue that just because users are knowledgeable of privacy settings and report using them, it does not necessarily mean that they are vigilant about self-disclosure in their daily use of the website. For example, given the caution taken in

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<sup>86</sup> The only example of real vigilance came from Nicole who, being 7 or 8 months pregnant at the time of our interview, kept her pregnancy from the Facebook world: “If you only knew me through my Facebook Profile, you have no idea that I was pregnant.” She also asked her close friends to refrain from making reference to her pregnancy on her Wall.

establishing one's privacy settings, it was surprising to learn that *only one respondent*<sup>87</sup> had ever read through Facebook's Terms of Use (now called "Statement of Rights and Responsibilities,"<sup>88</sup> which is accessible on every page and can be viewed at any time. Moreover, once their privacy settings had been set, only a handful of respondents reported checking them periodically to ensure that nothing had changed. Alexandra occasionally checked that her boyfriend's ex-wife still could not see her Profile, Elizabeth made quarterly checks to ensure that only those on her Friend List were able to view photos of her son, and Lizzy occasionally reviewed the sets of privacy settings for four distinct groups—elementary school friends, high school friends, work colleagues, and family members. Among the rest, however, only when there occurred spikes in media chatter over the latest Facebook privacy controversy did some respondents check their privacy settings. April explained that she only checked her privacy settings when Perez Hilton, a celebrity gossip blogger, reminded his audience to do so. Anthony, a lawyer, admitted to being vaguely aware of Facebook's privacy settings; he has checked his settings only a few times over the last five years, only when media hype caught his attention or when his tech-savvy Friends posted updates on adjustments to Facebook's privacy policy.

Thus, while respondents may have taken care to set their privacy settings upon creating their accounts, they have done very little in terms of monitoring those settings, in spite of ongoing public scrutiny—even condemnation—of Facebook's privacy policy and

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<sup>87</sup> Only Anthony, the lawyer, claimed to have quickly skimmed the Terms of Use when he first signed up. "In the end," Anthony acknowledged, "you have to make a choice—yes or no." For lawyers like Anthony, there is an element of frustration when reading the Terms of Use because, as he put it: "A lawyer always wants to negotiate terms of use or any terms. Ultimately, one has to make a cost-benefit analysis, usually ending in compromising one's standards to derive the anticipated benefits of the product."

<sup>88</sup> See "Statement of Rights and Responsibilities" <https://www.facebook.com/terms.php> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

commercial user of member data. Moreover, as we will see, my study suggests that, while the respondents say they are concerned about the risks surrounding self-disclosure online, they perceive the potential for abuse of their personal information by those on their Friend List to be a remote or negligible risk.

### **Real friends vs. the rest**

As has been made clear throughout earlier chapters, as in the offline world, the respondents in my study distinguished between acquaintances and close friends<sup>89</sup> on Facebook. Those with whom they have or had a close relationship *offline* are also the ones with whom they interact the most on Facebook. By comparison, those who they know only casually, such as former classmates or co-workers, are the ones with whom they rarely interact, if at all, on Facebook. Respondents admitted that, were such acquaintances to disappear from their Friend List, they would go unnoticed and unmissed—just as someone is not likely to notice that a distant offline acquaintance left the country. If the respondents were to notice anything at all, it would be the decline in their Friend count, which some have linked to a sense of status (to be discussed later). Overall, respondents reported that, on a regular basis, they communicated with less than 20 people (in some cases just two or three people) on Facebook, regardless of how many Friends they had. Most of these people are those with whom the respondents have a relatively close offline relationship.

If acquaintances are as unimportant to respondents as they make them sound, then why have respondents given acquaintances access to their Profile in the first place? Put

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<sup>89</sup> Respondents agree that using the word “friends” to describe those in their Friend List is inaccurate. A more realistic term might be “people I know.” It is not a list of people that one sees on a regular basis; it is a list of people that one knows or *did* know since respondents are highly unlikely to add people to their Friend List or to accept Friend Requests from people they do not know at all.

differently, why are respondents granting hundreds of people access to their personal photos and ruminations when they are hardly exchanging a word with them offline or online? To the best of my knowledge, the question has never been asked in the scholarly literature, and the answers add to the limited yet growing discussion on communication within online communities (Cole and Vaughn 2008; Helvie-Mason 2011; Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield 2012; Roberts and Dunbar 2010; Van Cleemput; Xia et al. 2007).

According to respondents, most of their weak ties on Facebook were offline acquaintances that had *requested* to be added to their Friend List. That is, the respondents did not add those acquaintances as Friends; rather, the acquaintances had sent them a Friend Request (to be added as a Friend), which the respondents accepted. Interestingly, the *reasons why* the respondents accepted such Friend Requests essentially come down to not wanting to offend anyone. In other words, the respondents reported accepting Friend Requests from acquaintances—allowing access to their personal Profile pages—in order to simply avoid appearing rude. When probed on this, the most common reason for accepting a Friend Request from an acquaintance was to *avoid confrontation* should the two ever meet in person in the future. This was especially common among undergraduate respondents who were being added by fellow classmates, as well as among professionals who were being added by co-workers. In both cases, seeing the Friend requester again in person was imminent. Declining a Friend Request was seen as a *negative action* that could result in an awkward face-to-face encounter.<sup>90</sup> That is, even though respondents barely knew who some of their Friend requesters were, they did not want to risk being confronted by them in person should they decline. As April explained: “Some people get

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<sup>90</sup> As a compromise, two of the respondents reported accepting such Friend Requests but assigning the new Friend limited viewing privileges.

angry if you don't add them. You're basically saying 'no' to someone who asks to be friends with you. You wouldn't say 'no' if someone asked you in real life to be your friend, would you?" As in everyday life offline, when two relative strangers meet in person, in order to be polite they may both act in a way that suggests a friendship could be formed. However, after they part ways, and as a time passes, they tend to forget about each other.

Still, while rejecting a Friend Request can be performed with the click of a mouse, the decision to do so is often a difficult one to make, especially for the Old Millennials. For example, Naveen, rather than face the guilt of declining a Friend Request, has over 60 pending requests: "Because if I'm going to add you as a friend to a private network, I need to make sure that you are truly my friend. I don't subscribe to 'Hey, let's become Facebook buddies.'" Naveen's tactic was unique among this group, however, in that the majority of respondents believed that an unanswered Friend Request was just as bad, and could lead to an awkward encounter that could have been avoided by simply clicking "Accept." Working professionals, on the other hand, were more likely to ask themselves, as Caroline put it, "When am I going to see this person from elementary school again?"<sup>91</sup> and simply deny the request. When someone who Cynthia only met once wants to add her as a Friend, she wonders to herself, "Do I *really* want this person to be my Facebook Friend?" She often denies the request because she has neither an interest in talking to them nor in developing a friendship with them. As such, she sees no adequate reason to give that person access to her information. Finally, Tamara asks herself: "If I saw this person at the mall, would we stop and have a conversation? Or would I smile, nod, and

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<sup>91</sup> Unlike undergraduates who often receive Friend Requests from fellow students on campus, professionals are not likely to run into former classmates.

keep walking?” If the answer is the latter, then Tamara would be okay with ignoring the Friend Request.

Thus, just as they make distinctions between ‘friends’ and ‘acquaintances’ offline, so too do respondents distinguish between ‘friends’ and ‘Facebook Friends’ online. This is not to say, however, that Caroline, Cynthia and Tamara do not feel bad about declining a Friend Request, as is also the case with other respondents who admit feeling a twinge of guilt. In other words, while rejecting a potential Friend can be done with the click of a mouse, it is not always that easy—the social conventions are still being established. In fact, most respondents admitted to carefully considering factors like whether they and the requester had any mutual friends, how close were those mutual friends to them offline, and whether a face-to-face encounter was on the horizon. While some respondents, namely undergraduates, had accepted Friend Requests from people they barely knew in order to “not ruffle feathers or be rude,” as Sabrina put it, they made the decision on a person-to-person basis.

### **For the sake of diplomacy, not social capital**

As discussed, all respondents were able to provide examples of receiving Friend Requests from weak ties that include work colleagues, former classmates, friends of friends, partners of friends, distant relatives, cousins, ex-partners, people met at parties, parents, and even parents of Friends. When discussing such cases with me, not a single respondent mentioned having accepted a Friend Request because they believed it would be a smart career move or because the person would potentially be of value (e.g. a place to stay, a job contact) in the future. For all of the respondents in my study, social capital was *not* a consideration for accepting someone to one’s Friend List. This finding provides

some evidence to challenge the findings of studies that suggest that users value Facebook for its social capital benefits (Aubrey, Chattopadhyay, and Rill 2008; Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2007; Johnston et al. 2011; Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2008, 2009). For this group, the accepting of Friend Requests was rooted in *diplomacy*, not social capital; in avoiding confrontation, not in gaining a potential resource.

Maintaining social capital is also not the reason why respondents have *kept* such acquaintances on their Friend List. Most of the respondents have hundreds of Friends that they have had no interaction with in a number of years and do not expect to in the future—on Facebook or offline. While it has been made clear why the respondents had accepted such Friends in the first place, one cannot help but wonder why—after years of non-interaction—they did not eventually remove them from their Friend List. A few respondents thought seriously before removing or “de-Friending” someone because they did not want to risk offending them, which (as is becoming a theme) could result in an awkward encounter should the two of them meet in person in the future. Said Marina, a 20-year old 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Anthropology student who admits to having no interaction with about 550 of her 650+ Friends: “If I was de-Friended, I would think it was because I did something to offend the person.” In such cases, the answer has nothing to do with maintaining social capital. However, the *overall* reasons why respondents kept such acquaintances on their Friend List were surprisingly superficial: reputation management and laziness. These will be discussed below.

### **Reputation management**

In Chapter 2, I discussed that my study offered partial support for the concept of impression management as it applied to setting up one’s account in the first place, yet the

concept does not adequately explain one's ongoing use of the website. However, the concept can be applied when determining whether or not to *delete* a Friend, a decision that respondents report having seriously considered numerous times. This is because it is not only their Profile picture that provides a glimpse of who they are to Friends and non-Friends, but also the *number of Friends* they have, which is displayed on one's Profile by default. Especially among the undergraduates respondents, the most common reason for keeping people that they barely know on their Friend List was the sense of status associated with having a high number of Friends—a high Friend count. Most of the undergraduate respondents believed that it reflected poorly upon them to have a small number of Friends (recall that the average Facebook user has 229 Friends). As Lisa put it, “I don't want just a hundred friends. That's kind of sad, especially for someone my age.” In this regard, there are a few quantitative studies that have investigated the relationship between Friend count and the appeal of the user. For example, in a survey of 132 undergraduate students, Stephanie Tom Tong et al. (2008) asked participants to view one of five Facebook Profile mock-ups—each of which were consistent in content (e.g. photographs, wall posts, etc.) but varied in Friend count, from as low as 102 to as high as 902—and rate the Profile according to measures of social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, and extraversion. The researchers found that:

...in the condition where the profile owner had the fewest friends (102) ratings of the individual's social attractiveness were among the lowest. Ratings of the individual's social attractiveness were highest when the profile displayed that the profile owner had approximately 300 friends. Beyond that level of friends, ratings of a profile owner's social



attractiveness declined to a level approaching the 102 friends condition (Tom Tong et al. 2008:542).

The researchers concluded that an excess of Friends raises skepticism over a Facebook user's popularity and desirability.

As well, in their analysis of 6,705 Facebook status updates and the feedback they triggered, Valentin Schoendienst and Linh Dang-Xuan (2011) found both users with a small and an excessively large number of Friends received less feedback (in the form of comments and Likes) than those with a moderate Friend count. Indeed, on Facebook, as in the world offline, the number of Friends one has or is perceived to have is an indicator of one's popularity, and perhaps having too many or too few friends makes one appear unapproachable.

Finally, as Zywica and Danowski (2008:22) explained in their study of how Facebook is used to compensate for unpopularity offline:

Popularity is more than just something that exists in real life. It also exists on Facebook and perhaps on other SNSs. This adds a new level of complexity to the social lives of some youth. They may not only want to be popular in school, but also in virtual spaces, and some with less popularity offline appear to strive extra hard for it online.

Therefore, one may have 275 people on their Friend List but only interact with 25 of them; the rest, to put it plainly, are "for show." As April explained why she had not deleted a Friend who posts nothing but anti-U.S., pro-Iranian comments and images: "I know it's egotistical, but I don't want my Friend count to go down just because I don't like his spamming. I don't delete people unless I've had a major falling out with them."

## Laziness

A secondary, yet popular, reason for not removing such acquaintances from one's Friend List is less conceptually-layered than reputation management: laziness. As outlined in Chapter 2, an important benefit of Facebook to respondents involves the relatively minimal number of clicks required to perform a task. In fact, their use of Facebook is far more passive or reactive than active. In general, so much of one's time spent on Facebook involves passively scrolling through the News Feed, occasionally initiating or contributing to a conversation, and briefly commenting on status updates, photos, or links that are of immediate interest to them. For example, respondents reported only occasionally scrolling through their News Feed when logging on to Facebook, and only visiting the personal Profile of a handful of their close friends (which requires extra steps). Thus, it may not be surprising that a popular reason why respondents keep Friends with whom they rarely interact is because they simply cannot be bothered to remove them. Sifting through their Friend List and deleting Friends one-by-one is viewed as time-consuming work (clicking on names), requiring some personal reflection about each person on the proverbial chopping block. They are simply too busy or, as many put it, "too lazy" to do so. Said Martin, "I've thought about cutting it down to close friends, but it's a lot of work." Said Cynthia, "I'm just lazy, I guess." Most of such weak ties, respondents said, were and would be of little value to them, and they would have no issues deleting them *but for* the personal effort involved in doing so.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Having reflected on the number of Friends they have on their Friend List that are not "real" friends, a number of respondents told me that—following the interview—they would be trimming their Friend List. However, I checked their Profile pages a week later and noticed that each of them still had the same Friend count as they did before the interview.

According to the respondents, the only drawback of holding on to weak ties may be the damage to one's reputation if posts were to be misinterpreted by weak ties that do not have an insider's understanding of what was posted. The fact that so many respondents do not whittle down their Friend List "out of pure laziness," as Jacob put it, again speaks to the theme of not taking Facebook that seriously. Put differently, it is more convenient for respondents to give weak ties continued access to their personal Profile than it is to delete them. Indeed, most respondents believed that, without Facebook, they would almost certainly lose contact with the majority of people on their Friend List indefinitely; it would require too much effort to locate them through other means. As Avery summed it up: "It's just nice to know that you have an easy way of contacting people if you ever need to."<sup>93</sup>

### **Little support for maintaining bridging social capital**

Only a handful of respondents admitted keeping weak ties on their Friend List for reasons that had to do with maintaining social capital. These were the same respondents that had *accepted* such Friend Requests on the same grounds. As well, in each case, the notion of "Friend as future resource" applied to a limited number of Friends. Adam, an elementary school teacher on the supply list, has someone on his Friend List that he never talks to other than to ask them questions about teaching in another province. Others retain weak ties because, as a few put it, "you never know" who might be of value some day in a particular context. For Elizabeth, it may be in the form of a daycare recommendation. Timothy liked knowing that he has a direct connection to people if he ever had to ask a favour in the future. The others saw some friends as potential job contacts. However, all

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<sup>93</sup> At most, this is an example of weak social capital. It is not that different, however, from looking up a person's last name in the White Pages.

of these respondents were quick to admit that the *likelihood* of them actually soliciting those Friends for favours was very low. As Charlotte put it: “You never know when you’ll need them back in your life again, but chances are you probably won’t.”

What the above discussion demonstrates is that, for respondents, there is no relationship between sharing private information about oneself and maintaining bridging social capital. That is, while there is some evidence that suggests respondents understand the value of maintaining weak ties, they are definitely not updating their Profiles with weak ties in mind or for the sake of nurturing those relationships. The weak ties are simply there—able to witness what is going on—because the respondent did not want to offend them by removing them or was simply too busy or lazy to do so.

### **Little concern with giving equal access to strong and weak ties**

In summary, as discussed in Chapter 2, like email, Facebook’s messaging system reduces social inhibitions by virtue of its functional nature (writing versus speaking).<sup>94</sup> However, respondents pointed out that Facebook’s messaging system is more open and overt in that a Wall post can be seen by hundreds of people and could potentially be shared by exponentially more through the “share” button (for Web links). Respondents also admitted that the Wall fosters a lazier way of communicating in that many people post messages on their Wall—viewable to hundreds of people—that are intended for a handful of people to read. While such messages are for the most part intended for specific audiences—in most cases, their close group of friends—to see, the majority of respondents do not mind that others might see the messages too. As Cynthia explained her posting of “Excited for [Friend’s name]’s bachelorette”:

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<sup>94</sup> The same can be said of forums, message boards, and blog comments.

It was mainly intended for a group of girls who were all participating in it and who were also posting stuff about it. [Probe: Why post it on your Wall?] Cuz you want other people to know that you're going out for your friend's bachelorette and you want everyone to share in that excitement.

As well, as Trent put it when rationalizing why he posted his whereabouts (*"At the library from 4pm to 6pm"*): "I was announcing where I was for my Anthro friends. It's targeted at a specific group of people but it's not harmful to the rest." Trent said he was not worried that by announcing that he was at the library he was also announcing that his house was unoccupied because "few know where I live and I trust those that do know." The handful of respondents that did have such concerns used the Facebook private messaging system instead.

Why are respondents fine with hundreds of people seeing information that was primarily shared with a small number of people in mind? The answer is that respondents do not feel that what they are sharing is personal enough to be considered private. The most common refrain was: "I only post things to Facebook that I'd be okay with anyone seeing." By "anyone," respondents were also referring to anyone outside of their Friend List; they do *not* take for granted that the information they share on Facebook will remain only there. Anthony put it plainly:

I'm expecting that Facebook uses my information to make their pitch to advertisers and marketers or other similar third parties. I would not be surprised that, through the Patriot Act and other legislation, my information was obtained by governmental organizations to facilitate investigations. I therefore monitor my Facebook postings not just with an

eye to friends or the five-hundred million users, but on the expectation that the American government, the Canadian government, the Saudi Royal Family and others can get access to it if they paid the right price or implemented the right laws.

However, given what I had witnessed respondents revealing during my cursory review of their Profile pages, I cannot help but call into question this seemingly collective rationalization. That is, respondents *say* that they are not taking their information-sharing for granted, but in practice they have on occasion done so. During my pre-interview content analysis, I was able to identify something in every respondent's Facebook Profile that would raise a proverbial eyebrow—from vacation details and ultrasounds to surgery scars and photos of their young children. Thus, the more people have access to one's Facebook Profile, the greater are the chances that the information on the Profile can be used and abused. As mentioned earlier, Facebook users have been fired for things that they have posted online. In a much worse case, a British woman was murdered by her ex-boyfriend for changing her relationship status from married to single.<sup>95</sup> However, I found that respondents consider such risks to be unique and remote, and are unlikely to happen to them, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

## **CONTROL ISSUES**

On January 24, 2012, Facebook announced that it would soon be converting all Profile pages to a new interface called Timeline, which replaces the Profile and Wall pages and appears as a reverse-chronological display of a user's usage history and

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<sup>95</sup> See "Partner guilty of Facebook murder" [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/wales/south\\_east/8248942.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/south_east/8248942.stm) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

milestones dating back to when they first created their account. This is intended in part to make it easier for users and their Friends to access long forgotten status comments, conversations, photos, and other records of activity. A non-optional feature, users were given just seven days from when Timeline took effect on their account to delete or hide content that they did not want displayed before it became visible to all of one's Friends. Given this mandatory change, it was not surprising that many users criticized having to become accustomed to a new interface when they were already comfortable with the previous one. However, similar criticisms were voiced in 2010 when the previous interface had replaced the one before it, as well as when the News Feed was introduced in 2006. Before each major change took effect, the grumblings came from a minority among hundreds of millions of users, and *after* each change was implemented Facebook continued to amass hundreds of millions more users. With that in mind, while the previous sub-section addressed issues of privacy, which was a primary concern about Facebook among respondents, this one focuses on a less pressing but no less relevant issue—control.

### **Facebook as a useful burden**

Despite the benefits of using Facebook described in Chapter 2, the cliché “It’s a love-hate relationship” can certainly be applied to how some respondents feel about using the website. When asked how they would respond if Facebook were to shut down, a few respondents said it would feel like a burden had been lifted, relieving them of their “addiction” or the pressure to keep their Profile updated. Marina reflected, “If Facebook was gone, I would feel freer.” Many respondents believe that they would have more time on their hands and be more productive if Facebook had never entered their lives.

As well, when considering all the time and energy that is involved in using Facebook, some respondents, especially undergraduates, believed that they would gain more privacy. As Lester explained:

There's a lot of upkeep that goes into it, like 'I hope no one took pictures of that thing I was at. And when you say you're in a relationship or *out* of a relationship, everyone comments. I could do without all that.

Others believe that they would have less access to “useless information” about the people in their lives—like what they had for breakfast—which would be a welcomed change. As Irvin put it, “We would all be better off without Facebook,” implying that the time people spend using Facebook could be put into being more productive in other areas of life. These respondents asserted that, at most, if Facebook were to disappear they might be a little disappointed at first, but they would soon get over it. Said Lizzy, “There was life before Facebook and there can be life without it.” Such a life, however, would likely not involve hundreds of one's acquaintances having access to information about one's personal life—and the majority of respondents would be okay with this.

More interesting than the fact that some respondents would continue to use a service that often made changes to its format and privacy policies was that many of them admitted to being aware of how “sad” it was to be making such a compromise. Said Avery, “It's addictive. That's the sad truth. I am addicted to Facebook.” As well, Lindsay reflected:

I feel like I'm in this relationship in which I'm being violated but I'm getting something at the same time. It's sort of a compromise. It's like



being with a guy who provides shelter. Even though you don't like what he does, you're getting some benefits out of it.

While respondents said they would eventually get over not having Facebook, most admitted that they would join another social network if they knew their offline friends were also going to join.

### **Relinquishing control over “friendship”**

A pertinent example of giving up control involves Facebook's use of the word “friend.” That is, the results of my study speak to a larger point on the relationship between Facebook and what respondents describe as people's “lazier” attitudes toward friendships in general. In the offline world, the word “friend” suggests a certain level of intimacy. In the world of Facebook, however, “Friend” is the label given to every person that one adds or accepts to one's list of contacts—aptly named the “Friend List.”

Whether, offline, someone is one's sister, mother, co-worker, best friend, teacher, cousin, or spouse, on Facebook they are one's Friend—and the user has no control over such a label.<sup>96</sup> There are some Friends that, through the frequency of their Profile updates, remain on one's mind every day, while others who are inactive become no more than an icon on one's Friend List.

Overall, respondents had strong opinions on the impact of Facebook on the *meaning* of the word ‘friend’. All respondents agreed that, in the world of Facebook, the word ‘Friend’ is associated with acquaintances. “It's made it more of a looser term,” said Donald. He continued: “It doesn't have the meaning that it did, say, twenty years ago. It's factored in acquaintances—they are now your ‘friends’ on Facebook. It's lost some of its

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<sup>96</sup> In September 2011, Facebook added the ability to create Lists that enable user to distinguish between “Close Friends” and “Acquaintances”, but the broad category “Friends” remains the default.

meaning.” Jacob asked, “If someone has seven hundred friends, how many are actually meaningful relationships?” Indeed, one may have a lot of Facebook Friends, but as Naveen contemplated, “How many of them would come out for your birthday?” He continued: “Some people can have seventeen hundred Friends on their list, but I bet some of them would have a tough time getting seventeen of them out for their birthday party.” As well, Michelle, who has 322 Friends, asked, “Could I count on all those three hundred twenty two people if something happened in my life? For sure not.” Tamara gave an example of having a Facebook Friend who is only her Friend because she noticed Tamara’s tattoos when they met in the bathroom of a bar:

We started talking about tattoos and somehow realized that we had a mutual friend. Do I consider her a friend? Not at all. But Facebook has diluted the meaning of the word ‘friend’—like acquaintances are now your friends. Facebook has made ‘making friends’ into a much easier endeavour.

Indeed, many respondents reflected that Facebook had “diluted” the meaning of the word friend. Lizzy had to sort out her thoughts a number of times during our interview over the use of the word ‘friend’. She said, “I’m sitting here and staring at you every time you say the word ‘friend’ because I’m thinking, ‘I don’t have three hundred twenty four of those.’ I have Facebook Friends that I wouldn’t count as real life friends.” Thus, in the Facebook sense of the word, a Friend is not a person that one spends time with every day. A Friend is a co-worker, a professor, a friend’s partner, or even the friend of one’s friend’s partner. Put differently, a Facebook Friend is someone that is reachable

by virtue of the social network—someone with whom one can *communicate* when one needs to, as opposed to someone on which one can *depend*.

### **Uncertainty about control**

The World Wide Web has come such a long way since the '90s. Gone are the days when one hesitated uploading a photo of oneself out of fear that the photo might be manipulated and abused. No longer does one think twice about providing their full name and address into an online database. Today, over 300 million photos are uploaded each day to Facebook alone, and entering one's credit card information online in order to purchase a product or make a reservation is a common practice. However, while it becomes easier to collect and store information about people via the Web, individuals are also increasingly not in control over that information. That is, once one posts something online, one no longer has control over where it may appear next, let alone who may see it and in what context. As Jeffrey Rosen (2010) put it in his *The New York Times* article, "The Web Means the End of Forgetting":

For many, the permanent memory bank of the Web increasingly means there are *no* second chances—no opportunities to escape a scarlet letter in your digital past. Now the worst thing you've done is often the first thing everyone knows about you.<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 2, Mayer-Schönberger (2009) illustrated the growing body of information about individuals in society, including what we do, who our friends are, and how we interact with them in direct or indirect ways. He framed the issue in terms of remembering and forgetting. That is, while in the past it was difficult to

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<sup>97</sup> See "The Web means the end of forgetting" <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/magazine/25privacy-t2.html?pagewanted=all> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

remember things and easy to forget, today the opposite is true and the consequences of this shift can be witnessed on a daily basis among users and non-users. Put differently, the *sharing* of personal data online, therefore, can more appropriately be described as the *copying* of personal data. When I share a book with a colleague, for example, the book is no longer in my possession. When I share a digital text file from my computer, however, the original version is unaffected and remains stored on my computer, and a copy is sent to my colleague. Similarly, when a user uploads a photo to their personal Profile on Facebook, the image is available for anyone who is on their Friend List to download<sup>98</sup> to their personal computer. The image is also stored on Facebook's servers, which the user must trust will not be hacked or compromised. The user does not have the ability to control the terms of the data storage and the social conventions around sharing data that belong to other users are still being established. As Charlotte put it: "On the Internet, it's not your and your friend's conversation; it's between you two and whoever else wants to hack into it."

Furthermore, given that the Facebook phenomenon is relatively new among Internet users compared to, say, the launch of Hotmail in 1997 or Google in 1998, I was not surprised to detect among some respondents an undercurrent of uncertainty about the website, especially where its future lies and how its future would affect them. Jacob was concerned about how a company that has so much information about him and hundreds of millions of people stored in its servers might use, control or manipulate it:

At the end of the day, what bothers me the most is the amount of control that this company has over the lives of five hundred million people except

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<sup>98</sup> Underneath every photo is a "Download" button that enables the viewer to begin downloading the image to their desktop with one click.

the Chinese for the moment. It's scary to know that one company controls that much.

Indeed, users do not have control over how their data are used by Facebook and its partner companies. This is unlike other areas of life, in which we freely give our personal information and assume that it will be kept private—like hospital records, bank accounts, and personnel files. Instead, the vast amount of personal data that users upload to Facebook are aggregated and sold to third parties for the purposes of targeted advertising, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

### **The ownership dilemma**

Facebook is not the only company selling user data, of course. As individuals create multiple accounts on multiple websites, with each click and keystroke they leave behind a trail that defines their interests, preferences, explorations, and more. While such information is incredibly fragmented, when brought into context through continuously advancing algorithmic calculations it becomes hugely valuable to companies that want a deeper understanding of their target consumers. Indeed, some would argue that users should have the rights to control their online identity and data, including while on Facebook, and that a framework for preventing the abuse of one's personal data needs to be built.<sup>99</sup> Put differently, privacy in terms of *security* and the protection of personal data does not seem to be an issue of contention. That is, most people would agree on the importance of having the best security possible when surfing the Web and sharing information online. The real issue is over *how much* control the user should be able to

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<sup>99</sup> See “Facebook Is Using You” [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/facebook-is-using-you.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/facebook-is-using-you.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1) and “Amid privacy fears, some still resist Facebook.” <http://dawn.com/2012/02/02/amid-privacy-fears-some-still-resist-facebook/> (each last accessed August 28, 2013).

have over the information they share on websites like Facebook, which are private companies that—one might argue—should have the right to do what they would like with the data that their users freely choose to upload. From this perspective, privacy is ultimately the responsibility of the user, and not the responsibility of the service. However, Canada Post is not allowed to open our personal mail and Black’s Photography is not allowed to keep copies of our personal prints, and so others might argue that Facebook users should own their data and have the right to control how the information is used. However, unlike Canada Post and Black’s, Facebook is a *free* service and it could be argued that Facebook should own the words and images that are keyed and uploaded into its platform by users—all of whom agreed to the Terms of Use upon joining. From this perspective, it is not my personal Facebook account; rather it is the property of Facebook that I am using. The same applies to email account providers like Gmail or Hotmail or to the countless online discussion boards hosted by moderators that can perform a data download with the click of a button.

Finally, another way of approaching the issue is that *both* the user and the website own the user’s data because, when using the platform to interact with others, the two parties are *co-creating* that information. For example, when a user creates a photo album on Facebook, they are providing the images and Facebook provides the album software.

### **Saying ‘no’ to strangers**

While my study demonstrated that respondents are not very concerned about their information being seen by weak ties, they are concerned about *strangers* having access to their data. That is, even though some respondents have as much as 300 or 400 Friends with whom they share their weekly thoughts and personal photos yet rarely interact, it is

*their decision* to keep those Friends; they have *control* over who their Friends are and—by extension—over who has access to their life online.

If their full Profile was visible to *all users* of Facebook, the overwhelming majority of respondents would not hesitate to take dramatic action. To start, most would delete all their photo albums, tagged photos, and Profile pictures. Others would also delete their status updates and closely monitor the messages that Friends posted on their Wall by checking up on their Profile more frequently. While the primary reason for this was to not be contacted by “strangers, creeps, and weirdos,”<sup>100</sup> as Lisa put it, some respondents were also conscious of being contacted by known others. For example, Avery, a Teaching Assistant, would not want her undergraduate students looking through her photos, and Michaeline would not want her abusive ex-boyfriend to learn anything about her. However, most of the respondents said that they would stop short of cancelling their account. In fact, only five respondents would do so, which speaks to the importance of the other benefits of using Facebook that were discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Empowering users**

In an online environment increasingly cluttered by distracting pop-up advertising, it was no surprise that the majority of respondents mentioned Facebook’s “clean” look and feel as important part of its appeal. Indeed, all respondents have taken measures to ensure that their account is kept uncluttered, even if it meant hiding<sup>101</sup> Friends, like those who too frequently post the type of “chain-letter spam” discussed in Chapter 2 that it

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<sup>100</sup> Many of the females respondents recalled having received (and subsequently denied) Friend Requests from random men. For example, “Hey, you’re cute. Wanna hook up?”

<sup>101</sup> After hiding a Friend, their updates no longer appear in one’s News Feed.

became objectionable; or those who frequently post too many details about their kids;<sup>102</sup> or game updates or invitations; or anti-Western propaganda; or lovey-dovey comments about their partners;<sup>103</sup> or overly-opinionated comments written in all caps that come across as yelling; or random song lyrics;<sup>104</sup> or home-business advertising; or comments that are perceived as bragging; or updates that might be considered “TMI” (too much information). Jacob provided a common example of the latter case: “It was annoying. The guy was posting stuff about random songs and the smell of his farts. Some of his comments were funny. But most were very trivial and I got to the point where I didn’t need to follow this person anymore.” Respondents also took care to untag<sup>105</sup> themselves in unflattering photos, but most did not request that the photo be taken down from their Friend’s Profile. As Lindsay put it: “The photo belongs to the other person. If it’s not on my Profile then to me it doesn’t exist. What matters is that I don’t see it on my Profile.” Thus, because Facebook gives members the ability to perform actions like untagging themselves from comments and images, deleting Friends, accepting or rejecting Friend Requests, and assigning limited viewing privileges to certain Friends or Groups, users feel *empowered* and in control of their Profile. A noteworthy example of this has to do with Facebook advertising. That is, Facebook does not sell its members’ email addresses to advertisers, something respondents would have a problem with if the company did. As Michelle put it: “I draw the line at being spammed with email and mail. If it’s on my Profile, it doesn’t bother me—I don’t even notice it. But if they take it to my email, that’s

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<sup>102</sup> Said Alexandra: “I don’t care how much their child poos or pees.”

<sup>103</sup> Said Elizabeth: “One guy was so in love with his new girlfriend that it was disgusting, so I hid him.”

<sup>104</sup> Said Mary: “One guy was constantly posting depressive song lyrics and talking about how horrible his life was. It was clearly an attention issue. I didn’t know how to deal with it so I just hid his status updates.”

<sup>105</sup> Untagging removes the link to one’s name from a post and also takes the post off one’s Profile. The post itself will still be visible in other places unless the person who posted it takes it down.



when it gets me because that's not Facebook anymore." Instead, Facebook sells to advertisers aggregate data that are specific to an advertiser's target audience. The user is not forced to view or click on these ads in order to access certain features; they are free to ignore them. However, the ads are present on the right hand side of every page within a user's Profile. While users cannot hide these ads from their Profile, they can choose to delete them until ads appear that they prefer. That is, Facebook enables the user to "close" ads that they do want to see, in which case the ad is replaced with another one that can also be closed to reveal a new one, and so on until a preferred (or tolerable) ad appears. The website also enables the user to choose—from a wide selection of businesses and brands—what kind of advertisements or "updates" they would like to see.<sup>106</sup> In this way, Facebook directly involves the user in the advertising relationship *and* sharpens their understanding of the particular user's likes and dislikes.

In summary, Facebook privacy settings give respondents a sense of control, which is especially valuable to users when engaging in a new or frequently changing online environment. The results of the study run counter to a December 2010 Gallup / USA Today poll that found that two-thirds of consumers oppose online behavioral tracking and targeted advertising based on it.<sup>107</sup> The poll found that 67% of consumers said advertisers should not be allowed to present ads based on their Internet use, while only 30% said marketers should be allowed to do so. It also found that only 35% said tracking by marketers was justified because the practice allows for continued free access to websites, and 61% said free access was not worth the loss of privacy. On the contrary,

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<sup>106</sup> To view the categories and lists, log on to Facebook and go here: <https://www.facebook.com/pages> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>107</sup> See "Gallup: two-thirds of consumers would back 'Do-Not-Track'" <http://www.dnnews.com/gallup-two-thirds-of-consumers-would-back-do-not-track/article/193260/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

when respondents are empowered to construct their own framework of personal privacy by tweaking with the available privacy settings, it becomes less relevant that Facebook has all of one's user activity (e.g. photos, conversations, clicks, etc), stored in its servers. This suggests that respondents view the loss of privacy as the price to be paid for a world of dramatically improved means of communication and other benefits of SNSs, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

### **Boomers: Millennials are oversharing**

Unlike the Millennials I interviewed, the Boomers did not associate having a higher Friend count with a sense of status. As Raymond, a 58-year old business consultant explained: "I'm not a Friend 'collector.' There's nobody on my list that I wouldn't want having my home phone number." However, like the Millennials I interviewed, the Boomers are in agreement that people today are simply more comfortable about sharing information about themselves within sight or earshot of strangers. An example that came up a few times is that of the mobile phone, a communication technology of which these Boomers are able to vividly recall living without. Eleanor passionately explained the link she saw between the mobile phone and oversharing in public:

Nowadays you can hear people talking on the phone everywhere they go, saying things to their friends on their phone that I would never have heard twenty years ago because we didn't have cell phones. So you couldn't be fighting with your mother or your boyfriend on the phone in the grocery store for my child to hear you swearing.

Indeed, the Boomers were just as quick as the Millennials to describe instances of oversharing. Yet, like the Millennials, Boomers have not been quick to remove such people from their Friend List because they do not want to risk *offending* the oversharer.

As Vivian explained:

There's one guy who I went to school with who's a total pot head and he's constantly putting on about what's-his-name who's in jail for being an activist for the marijuana industry. You know what buddy, I really don't want to read all this. I would delete him but it just would feel so funny deleting him. I'd feel awkward if he found out.

As well, Frank has some Friends with young children of which he could stand to see far less pictures:

A number of my younger "friends" [*makes air quotes*] have kids and they're graduating from grades one, two, or three. And of course, they post a hundred pictures of junior. It's annoying, but I don't want to delete them since it's bad enough that I don't really talk to them—I wouldn't want to offend them.

Even though they "put up" with oversharing from their peers, the Boomers believe that the younger generation have re-drawn the lines of what is now considered acceptable to share with others. Angela reported cautioning her two teenage daughters about oversharing, but feels that her message may not be resonating:

I've told my daughters that it's not appropriate to be posting pictures of themselves at the beach in bikinis. They have a very false sense of security in Facebook, and so do all of her friends. I've talked to their parents too,

and they all say their kids feel very safe in putting these pictures up on their Profiles; they don't see anything wrong with it.

I noted Angela's wording—"false sense of security"—and asked her if she meant that she felt her daughters and their friends had cavalier attitudes about their privacy. She did not believe that was the case, but that they were just in a period of figuring it all out: "The whole issue of privacy is just confusing for young people who have been using Facebook from such a young age. Older people are more set in their ways about privacy. Kids need to learn how to protect themselves and be careful."

Eleanor agrees that young people today are more prone to making self-disclosure blunders compared to their counterparts of the '70s and '80s. As she put it:

Facebook preys on inexperience. You're supposed to *not* know what you're doing from age sixteen to twenty-five. You're going to do stupid things—we all do. The difference is that, in the eighties, the ways that I could screw up for the whole world to see were a quite a bit more limited than now. You can screw up spectacularly now!

For example, a sixteen year old today can make the mistake of taking a scantily clad photo or a binge drinking photo of herself with her smartphone and share it with hundreds (and potentially millions) of people in far fewer steps than it would take 30 years ago when one would have to buy a film cartridge, load it into a camera, bring the cartridge to a photo lab, pay for its development, return to pick up the prints, and have extra copies made for distribution to friends and family. In this example, what would have taken days to perform 30 years ago takes merely seconds today.

While I acknowledge that the sample sizes are small, the data suggest that there is a difference in the way Boomer respondents and Millennial respondents think about sharing personal information on Facebook. That is, Boomers seem to be *more conscious* than Millennials that there are potentially very big risks involved—from a privacy standpoint—in using Facebook, yet they are still willing to take them. As Colin explained, “The privacy issues are obviously important, but I don’t feel like I’m particularly at risk. I know that’s naiveté or a fool’s paradise, but I’m just not sure of the extent to which I’m at risk.” And as Raymond reflected:

I think we don’t fully understand the risks, which is why everybody is glib about it. There is gonna be some event when a hundred million Facebook accounts have been hacked and it creates grave damage – whatever. I think that’s coming down the line, but we don’t really understand the risks because we’re all oblivious as to what could happen.

Raymond then referred to the risk as a “highly improbable event with huge impact.” I asked him to elaborate:

I know there will be an ‘aha moment’ when suddenly something happens that creates a big problem for me and I’ll say ‘Oh shoot, I shouldn’t have done that. If [a privacy breach] does happen, it will be a tsunami, but the likelihood of the tsunami happening is perceived by people as small. We know it can happen but it’s probably not going to happen. I know cerebrally that there is potentially a risk, but it’s hard to connect the dots on what I am going to lose if suddenly my Facebook Profile was accessible to everyone.

In light of comments like Raymond's, I was especially curious about how some of these Boomers felt about uploading images of their children to Facebook, especially given the many government warnings about identity theft and media stories about child abduction over the years. As Meredith explained, "I know I shouldn't be posting pictures of my kids on there, but I do it anyway because I want to show people my kids. I'm proud of them. I want my family to be able to see it." Eleanor admitted to essentially relying on the odds being very high that the pictures of her children will fall into the wrong hands: "I'm aware of the Internet dangers, but I don't think what I post is likely to inflame anybody's interest." Therefore, like those in the Millennial sample, the Boomers find the privacy risks associated with being on Facebook to be negligible.

## **CHAPTER 4: THE BENEFITS OF USING FACEBOOK OUTWEIGH THE RISKS**

Broadly, the benefits of using Facebook identified by the respondents in my study are: *Facebook is my life online; Facebook is my primary connection to others; and Facebook is a convenient communication and information tool.* The risks identified by respondents involve a *lack of privacy* and, to a lesser extent, *issues of control.*

Do the benefits of using Facebook outweigh the risks of using Facebook? For the respondents in my study, the answer is a decisive yes. That is, respondents admitted to having recognized the risks involved in using Facebook and for the most part regarded them as remote or negligible compared to the benefits. A close review of their responses reveals a very clear theme: trust. According to Harrison McKnight (2005), people trust a technology when it has been proven to have desirable and useful attributes, and operates reliably. Nancy Lankton and Harrison McKnight (2008) found that Facebook users trust the website as both a technology (in terms of functionality and reliability) and a quasi-person (in terms of competence, integrity, and benevolence beliefs). Catherine Dwyer, Starr Hiltz and Katia Passerini (2007) concluded that users expressed significantly greater trust in both Facebook and its members than in MySpace and its members, and were more willing to share personal identifiable information. In this study, trust can be broken out into two sub-themes: 1) trust in those on one's Friend List—both real life friends and casual acquaintances; and 2) trust in 'the system,' which includes Facebook and the culture of Internet usage over the years.

## **Trust in those on one's Friend List**

Despite the media hype over identity theft and real life anecdotes of revealing too much online, most respondents simply believe that their peers are not likely to exploit their personal data; that their Friends would be “decent enough” not to download their photos or use their information without first obtaining their permission. As Lizzy put it: “I would expect that the person downloading my photos would have the integrity to notify me as I would have the integrity to notify them.” I wanted to explore this further, so during each interview I provided respondents with a few examples of personal information disclosure that I gleaned from reviewing their Facebook Profile—things like vacation announcements, photos of an intimate nature, or medical updates—and asked them, “Why post that?” The majority of respondents had difficulty answering this question, pausing long before finally replying “I don’t know” or “Just because.” Indeed, not being able to answer such a question suggests that as Facebook continues to be treated as an extension of the respondents’ everyday lives, the less explanation is needed for why they say or do certain things. In other words, “I did it because I felt like it,” or “I wasn’t really thinking about it” should be acceptable answers for why people share information on Facebook. As in everyday life, there does not necessarily have to be an underlying set of psychological or sociological drivers to explain why people post what they post on Facebook. On the photos of him French-kissing his girlfriend, which are viewable to hundreds of his Friends, Richard explained, “I think they’re harmless. It’s just part of an album.” On her bare belly maternity photos that are viewable to hundreds of Friends, Elizabeth said: “I’m not offended by them. I was happy with them. You don’t like them, don’t look.” She added: “When you put yourself out there, people react in



different ways. It's not always favourable." On uploading a close-up picture of her friends buttocks in a black dress during a night out, April explained: "I wasn't thinking who would see it. I just posted it because it was funny." Thus, most respondents admitted to not really thinking about the risks involved in other people having access to their personal information. Like many of the actions performed or words spoken in their daily lives offline, *they simply do them without prior thought*. This finding is in line with a study of regrets on Facebook by Yang Wang et al. (2011) of 569 U.S. Facebook users, in which not thinking about the reasons for posting or the consequences of posts was a possible cause of why users make posts that they later regret.<sup>108</sup>

Moreover, Elizabeth sees the convenience of sending a mass update directed at close friends and family about her son's growth as outweighing the risks of acquaintances seeing the information: "Everyone [family and close friends] gets an update about my son with one click." From Elizabeth's point of view, those in her inner circle get updated on information they want to know, while the remaining hundreds can ignore the information or get further interested. Whatever the potential response among their weak ties might be, most respondents do not consider it before uploading personal information. Part of the reason for this may be because respondents often upload rather banal information—photos of themselves, their family members and pets; links to videos or articles; and comments that are positive or light-hearted.

However, that does not mean respondents are not at all concerned with the risks. Some claim to be mindful that what they post to their Profile could be downloaded by

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<sup>108</sup> Other causes that were identified were: users want to be perceived in favorable ways; they misjudge the culture and norms within their social circles; they are in a "hot" state of high emotion when posting, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol; their postings are seen by an unintended audience; they do not foresee how their posts could be perceived by people within their intended audience; and they misunderstand or misuse the Facebook platform.

Friends or strangers and they therefore think carefully about the information they share—only posting photos and status updates that they would not mind *anyone* seeing or sharing. Moreover, most respondents do not believe that many others beyond their close circle of friends on their Friend List are actually looking at the information they share. One reason they might believe this is because, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is *those* strong ties that they have in mind when they are doing routine things like posting photos and updating their status. As Cynthia admitted: “I know that everyone can see my photos but I don’t really feel like a lot of people look at them because I usually post for myself and my direct group of friends.”

Of those who admit to being bothered by the thought of others downloading information from their Profile, they are quick to acknowledge that the risk is a very minimal one. As Anthony put it, “There is always risk, but it’s a remote risk.” As well, as Sabrina explained (on the likelihood of her Friends abusing the information she shares):

I only worry when people bring it up, like you just did [laughs]. Even though there’s the potential, I don’t think it’s really going to happen. And if it does, I don’t know that any of the people who would download it are going to do anything bad with it.

### **Trust in ‘the system’**

As discussed in Chapter 3, while all respondents were mindful about personal privacy, not one respondent had actually read Facebook’s Terms of Use, which can be reviewed at any time. A few stated that they skimmed it when concerns were brought up in the media, but all believed that nearly no one has read the Terms of Use because it is

either too long or boring; the font size is very small;<sup>109</sup> the use of caps lock makes it difficult to read;<sup>110</sup> the text area is small;<sup>111</sup> and the most popular reason—legalese. Said Nate: “It’s just like software. There’s a huge terms of service—you don’t read it.” This attitude is reflective of the culture of “instant gratification” that exists among Millennials (Prensky 2001, Taylor 2005), where there is “very little perceived value in the traditional value of delay of gratification” (Taylor 2005:101). As Charlotte put it: “It’s not necessary in life. No one is making you read it. You don’t care what’s in it, and Facebook does what you want it to do.” Like all software agreements, respondents simply clicked “Agree” upon creating their Facebook account. Respondents trusted that changes to their privacy settings will catch the attention of the mainstream media, inspiring them to look over their settings to see if anything changed. Irvin explained, “If I see something on the news or if someone posts an article in my feed, then I’ll most likely look into it.” Thus, by relying on the media and watchdog groups to police Facebook’s changes to its privacy policy, respondents do not often check their privacy settings. Put differently, it is not that respondents trust Facebook per se, but that they trust others who are “plugged in to the system” to inform them when changes have been made and to recommend how to respond to them. Furthermore, the respondents trust that Facebook will not be “doing anything crazy.” As Cynthia put it, “You assume that they are good.” She continued: “You assume that Facebook is a legitimate thing and they’re not going to do anything bad.” Tamara put it in a broader context: “For most people who go on the Internet, there is this inherent belief that so long as you click the links you’re supposed to and don’t

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<sup>109</sup> The font size is actually the same as every other page on the website.

<sup>110</sup> There are only a few instances of paragraphs in caps lock.

<sup>111</sup> The text area is actually full screen and easy to read.

stray too far out of the safety zone then you're fine." As well, Marina explained it in terms of managing risk in everyday life:

You run the risk of warranted and unwarranted privacy issues everywhere in life. Every time you pay with your credit card at a restaurant, they keep the paper transaction; they've got your signature, the numbers, everything. You live with this inherent risk of your privacy being violated. If you don't want to, then stay in your house and don't talk to anybody.

Finally, like all Terms of Use, if one refuses to accept it, one cannot use the product or service. As Trent put it: "What's the point of reading through it? If I don't agree to it, then I can't use Facebook. And I want to use Facebook." As well, the fact that not only have one's friends and peers clicked "I Agree" to the Terms of Use, but also hundreds of millions of other users, makes the decision to join very easy. Still, a few respondents reflected on their not having read the Terms of Use, joking that they were aware they were probably "selling their soul" or their "first born" by accepting them. As Michelle put it: "I don't think people, including myself, realize that we're actually entering into a *contract* with Facebook, just as we would with iTunes." This of course did not stop her or others from joining. That is, while respondents may report mindfully regulating the nature of the personal information they are disclosing on Facebook, how the information they choose to share is stored, used, and sold by Facebook is far from being on one's mind.

### **Awareness of targeted ads**

Given that none of the 30 respondents in this sample had carefully read the Terms of Use, it was not surprising that most respondents admitted to not knowing exactly how

Facebook uses their information. Some were aware that Facebook collected their demographic information, and a few incorrectly believed that Facebook not only owned all of their data but had the right to use it in any way it wanted. Despite this, practically all respondents acknowledged that Facebook is a business, and that their ‘free’ usage of the technology is supported by advertising, just as it is with TV shows and radio programs. As April explained: “MTV Skins [aimed at teens and young adults] has commercials for Dominos Pizza and acne medication. It’s kind of the same thing.” The majority of respondents came to terms with this reality upon noticing the steady stream of targeted ads<sup>112</sup> on the right side of their Profile. For example, Alexandra, who lives in Kitchener, Ontario, noticed ads boasting the “Top 10” things to do in her city. Elizabeth, a 29-year old single mother, noticed ads inviting 29-year old women to meet local men. Naveen, a student of Aikido, has been inundated with ads about martial arts classes on his Profile. Nicole recalled seeing ads for strollers and baby clothes as soon as she changed her relationship status from “Engaged” to “Married.” And Marina, who purposely clicked “male” upon creating her account, had been frequently presented with ads to “meet single *girls*” in her neighbourhood.” Indeed, the majority of respondents have noted the specificity of the ads suggests that Facebook “knows,” for example, where they live, their relationship status, and their interests. While most admitted that Facebook’s scanning of their demographic and pushing of targeted ads to them was “weird” or even quite “creepy,” they did not find them to be intrusive or to have negatively influenced their user experience. As Lester put it: “As long as [the advertisement] is not annoying on the right hand side, or doesn’t pop up, I don’t really care. I don’t think they take away or

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<sup>112</sup> Targeted ads are a type of advertising in which ads are placed so as to reach consumers based on various traits such as demographics or purchase history. On Facebook the majority of targeted ads are located on the right side of any module (e.g. News Feed, Photos, Messages).

influence my experience on Facebook.” As Jacob explained: “They haven’t so far made it infringe on the actual usefulness of Facebook, like the annoying pop-up ads on YouTube have done.” He continued: “I don’t mind it so much to do anything about it. I find it a little annoying but it doesn’t invade the quality of my life to a degree that has me weighing the pros and cons of using it.”

Therefore, as long as ads on Facebook do not interfere with the user experience (as they do on MySpace, YouTube, and others), then they are considered tolerable to respondents. Further, Facebook has not yet entered into the realm of selling email addresses to advertisers, which would likely lead to the spamming of user email accounts and be considered highly invasive, as discussed in Chapter 2. As Timothy explained: “If they were selling my email address, then I’d mind. But in this instance, I can just ignore the ads as they’re not really interfering with the experience.” Indeed, as in the world offline, there are ads everywhere one looks, and most respondents claim to be uninfluenced by them.<sup>113</sup> As Adam put it: “I have the final choice. If I don’t click on their ads, I’m not being sold anything.” Indeed, this provides further support for conclusions by Christian Maurer and Rona Wiegmann (2011) that Millennials do not perceive that ads in Facebook influence their purchase decisions.

Furthermore, respondents are so conscious of the fact that Facebook needs to please its advertisers in order to remain a free service that they have little tolerance for those who complain about its data mining. They believe that it is not productive to get mad at Facebook, arguing that if one does not like what the company is doing, then they should stop using it—just as they would do with any other business. As Michelle reflected on a recent change to privacy policy:

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<sup>113</sup> A few use ad blockers.

Listen, Facebook is a business. So when everybody got up in arms about it, I understand the annoyance with it and the feeling of vulnerability with it, but they're there to make money. We're not paying for this and everything comes at a cost. For me, I was irritated but I wasn't angry despite the media blitz over it. It's the price you pay, otherwise don't have a Facebook.

### **Okay with Facebook selling data to advertisers**

Not only do respondents understand that Facebook—like TV shows, radio programs, magazines, and newspapers—has to answer to its advertisers, some even proclaimed that Facebook would be silly not to exploit the access they have to the personal data of hundreds of millions of people. As Tamara reflected:

From a business standpoint, it makes perfect sense. If I was Zuckerberg, you're damn right I'd be doing the exact same thing [selling user data to advertisers]. People come to his site, get what they want out of it, and the kid's a billionaire. Honestly, if Facebook wasn't doing it, I'd be like "these guys are idiots."

Indeed, the respondents in my study are an example of a generation that has accepted the role of advertising in experiencing the things they enjoy—from ballparks and arenas, to TV and radio stations. However, there is a difference between TV and radio advertising, which directs ads to a specific demographic of viewers or listeners, based on data collected in aggregate over a certain period in time, versus Facebook advertising, which data-mines the user's every action within the website and adjusts its advertising to changes in the user's interests, relationship, and location—among other

things—almost instantly. What that in mind, I found that the overwhelming majority of respondents were surprisingly apathetic when asked what they thought of Facebook collecting and selling their personal data to advertisers. This finding is in line with that of Katherine Roberts (2010), whose study of undergraduate students from four colleges across the U.S. revealed that students' views of Facebook and its advertisers did not lean heavily in a particular direction.

As well, the respondents in this sample are an example of a generation that has become increasingly familiar with the role that *marketing research* plays in their everyday lives (Cooper and Evans 2006; Overton et al. 2008), including grocery store checkouts that monitor purchasing behaviour; “rewards” credit cards that do the same for any purchase, anywhere; and when giving one’s postal code at a retail store. Alexandra’s remarks are a sign of the times:

Selling my info doesn’t bother me. Everyone is selling information about everything. For example, when you go to the grocery store and you have a points card, and you let them swipe your card, they keep track of everything you purchase and sell that info to companies. They tie your information to your spending habits; they sell that information and they use that information in marketing and stuff. So I don’t see that as any different from Facebook selling ad space based on the fact that I live in Kitchener.

Most respondents are not at all bothered by Facebook’s business model because it is just another way in which their data are being sold for commercial purposes. Google and Yahoo!, for example, store users’ search history and sell it to advertisers, which cannot



be avoided. Every click can be tracked and every page that is visited can be logged toward maintaining an ongoing stream of direct advertising throughout the entire time that one spends online. “My information has been sold for a long time,” said Trent. “I’m kind of used to this model.” Avery also confirmed: “Pretty much everything you do online involves having your info sold to advertisers.”

This is not to say, however, that some respondents are not bothered by the fact that retailers asking shoppers for personal information has become increasingly mainstream. As Richard explained in giving his opinion of Facebook’s data mining of his information:

It doesn’t bother me that Facebook does it, specifically. It bothers me that it’s a pervasive thing. If I buy something at Old Navy, they want access to my information—what I’m buying there, my demographic information, how much I shop there. It irks me that it’s something that’s becoming a norm—not only with respect to Facebook.

Richard then added, “But I’m not all that concerned.” As well, Nicole reflected on how marketing research is a part of her typical shopping experience: “It’s everywhere, in every store. I don’t know how to refuse when I buy something and they ask me for my postal code or email address. I just go with it. It’s not a big deal.”

### **On the selling of user data: 3 questions**

In order to get a deeper understanding of where respondents draw the line with respect to personal information disclosure, it makes sense to further explore their attitudes toward data-mining of their Facebook activity—the tracing and selling of every mouse-click—by Facebook for its corporate customers. To explore this, I asked the following questions:

*1) If you found out that your Profile picture was used in an advertisement that appeared on your Friends' Facebook page, how would you respond?*

*2) If you found out that Facebook was storing your photo albums and selling them to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?*

*3) If you found out that Facebook was recording your private Inbox emails between Friends and selling your conversations to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?*

The responses to these questions were surprising in their uniformity. In response to the first question,<sup>114</sup> most respondents claimed that they would be quite angry at seeing their personal photo used in an advertisement,<sup>115</sup> but not angry enough to leave Facebook. As Avery reflected: “I’d probably be pretty upset and freaked out. I don’t know if I’d cancel my account but I’d definitely have a problem with it.” Donald also said that it was going too far, “but not far enough to make me stop using it.”

As noted earlier, respondents take little issue with Facebook selling their data to advertisers for the purposes of creating targeted ads. However, they are not okay with having their images used in ads, even if it is just for the purposes of advertising to their Friends. As Arnold, a 30-year old Computer Science PhD student put it: “Demographic information is one thing, but pictures—this is very, very personal. It identifies you as an individual, not just as part of a demographic. They should need to get my personal

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<sup>114</sup> *If you found out that your Profile picture was used in an advertisement that appeared on your Friends' Facebook page, how would you respond?*

<sup>115</sup> For example, if I happen to Like Coca-Cola, it is possible that my photo may appear in an advertisement on my Friend's page that reads “Jon Callegher likes Coca-Cola,” which contains a link to the Coca-Cola page to which I belong.

approval before doing that.” A few others joked that they would expect to be paid royalties for the use of their image: “Where’s my money? Where’s my money?!” asked Naveen. “If I can make some money off of it, it would be fantastic,” said Lindsay. “Otherwise I wouldn’t like that.” Still, for most of the respondents, seeing their Profile picture used in an ad would not be so annoying that they would discontinue their use of the website. Similar to the experience of noticing targeted ads, they would soon get over the minor irritation in favour of Facebook’s many benefits. Again, the phrase “It’s the price you pay” [for a free service] was a popular refrain.

In response to the second question,<sup>116</sup> most respondents would be okay with Facebook selling their *photo albums* to companies for research purposes. For example, a glassware company may want to see the albums of people ages 25 to 49 that include “Birthday” in the album title; the company may want to look for themes around how partygoers hold their wineglasses when celebrating or for unique ways in which clean glasses are arranged. Given the relatively personal nature of most of the respondents’ photos—of family and friends, of vacation and parties, of sobriety and drunkenness—it was very surprising that the overwhelming majority<sup>117</sup> of respondents answered without hesitation that they would have no problem with it. What was even more surprising, however, was their consistency in explaining *why* they would be okay with Facebook selling their photos to researchers. There were two common reasons. The first reason was that respondents believed that since they were already sharing their photos with hundreds of people on Facebook, many of whom were weak ties, it did not matter if faceless companies were seeing them too. As Richard explained: “If they’re photos that I want to

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<sup>116</sup> *If you found out that Facebook was storing your photo albums and selling them to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?*

<sup>117</sup> A few would untag themselves in certain photos and a few would delete their account.

share with Friends on Facebook, then they're safe for Facebook. I wouldn't care if they were using it for research." As well, like targeted ads and having their Profile picture used in an ad, some respondents would be uncomfortable with it at first but believe they would soon get over it. Said Michelle: "It would be little bit unsettling that someone at some research firm is looking at photos of the inside of my house, but at the same time it was my choice to put them up there."

Indeed, respondents acknowledged that by uploading photos to their Facebook account, they were putting their photos in the public eye and that people other than their strong ties had access to their information. These hundreds of Friends could easily exploit the respondents' information, although as discussed earlier, the respondents believed this to be a *minimal* risk. Therefore, in a way, Facebook photos are thought of as being in the public domain. Just as one might not mind being observed by a researcher while interacting with their spouse in a public park—having notes made on their style of dress and the brand of coffee they're drinking—they also might not mind if that researcher took a photo of them and extracted information from it. Anthony summed it up this way: "Taking a picture and *replicating* it is offensive. Taking a picture and *extracting* information from it is not offensive."

The second reason why respondents would be okay with Facebook selling their photo data to companies for research purposes lies in the presumption that such data would be provided *anonymously* and be one set of hundreds of millions being analysed. Said Tamara: "Even if they were being sold for research, it would be so general that who would care?" For Alexandra as well, the law of large numbers would make it okay:

It would almost be okay because they would have so many pictures. It wouldn't just be me; it would be four thousand other people. It would be the same as me filling a survey and telling the researcher what colour the walls are in my living room.

Furthermore, the idea of anonymous researchers (or faceless corporations) mining their demographic data is much more palatable than if random *strangers* were to have access to their Profile page, which—as discussed in Chapter 3—would be highly intolerable. From this group's perspective, research professionals are not going to do anything “harmful” with the information they collect, whereas *strangers* might do so; the former group is tolerable while the latter is not.

Before the reader concludes that the respondents' willingness to hand over their photo albums to corporations for research purposes is an example of a generation that is eager to sacrifice privacy for fun and convenience, read on—for the answer given to the third question<sup>118</sup> by the majority of respondents suggests otherwise. Since the Inbox is used for private conversations between Friends, most respondents would consider it to be a serious breach of privacy if Facebook were to sell their private Inbox conversations to companies for research purposes, much like if businesses were to tap their phone conversations. Trent reflected: “If Facebook was selling my conversations? Class action lawsuit. That's pretty bad. That's ridiculous. That's a big line—a Facebook deletable offense.” Irvin said it would be “unethical.” Cynthia would definitely quit Facebook: “They're private messages for a reason.” Arnold would consider it be a “serious privacy problem” and would discontinue using Facebook. Even April, who relies heavily on

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<sup>118</sup> *If you found out that Facebook was recording your private Inbox emails between Friends and selling your conversations to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?*

Facebook to communicate with her close friends on a daily basis would take serious action:

If Facebook was selling my conversations, I think I would deactivate and definitely not come back because that's very, very invasive—that's not good. Inbox messages are very personal and taken seriously. Selling that information is not something a trustworthy company should be doing. I don't care if all my friends are still on Facebook, I would leave.

Clearly, for respondents there is a difference between publically shared information and private communication. While demographic information and even photo data are for the most part fair game, many draw the line at data-mining private Inbox conversations. Were this to occur, many respondents said they would quit and others would seriously consider quitting. This is line not to be crossed. As Tamara put it: "Pictures are millisecond in time. Conversations are totally different." Indeed, the respondents *do* have a strong opinion about Facebook going "too far" in its mining and selling of their data.

However, while many claim that they would definitely deactivate or delete their account, there are still some respondents that would continue to use Facebook. That is, while more respondents would be more likely to quit Facebook if it was selling their *private conversations* than if it was selling their photo albums, there are still those for whom the benefits of using Facebook are too important. As such, while these respondents said they would certainly become indignant over what they believe would be a serious breach of privacy, they admitted that they would take measures that would enable them to continue using Facebook while avoiding having their private communication exploited.

Put differently, they would simply avoid using the Inbox tool. As Tamara explained: “I would immediately delete all the private conversations that I’ve had, and I would probably never create another. I would never use the Inbox. I wouldn’t stop using Facebook, though.” Timothy would be “pretty furious” if his conversations were being sold: “The whole idea of the Inbox system is for private messages. I wouldn’t stop using Facebook, but I would stop using the Inbox.” Alexandra would definitely regulate her Inbox use to “cursory comments.” Lester would “sue them” but would still use the platform with the exception of the Inbox. Lindsay would feel “violated,” and would “consider not sending private messages anymore,” but she would not cancel her account.” Indeed for these respondents, the benefits of using Facebook are too valuable to give up.

### **Facebook Places**

Another way of understanding how the benefits of using Facebook outweigh the risks was to ask respondents about their use of a Facebook tool that had recently been introduced and had come under the media microscope: Places. Places is a location-based application that enables smartphone users to “check-in” via a Facebook application, which instantly adds the user’s location to their Friends’ News Feed. For example, upon arriving at a Starbucks, the user would tap the “Check in” Facebook button on their smartphone, which captures their geographic coordinates and displays “[Name] checked in at Starbucks” along with a close-up map of the venue and surrounding streets.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Many businesses have already flocked to Facebook as both an advertising and marketing platform, and now they can have their address, map, phone number, as well as all the public social activity that is going on at their location, like who checked in, number of Likes, the Wall, and more.

At the time of these interviews, only a handful of respondents were familiar with Facebook Places,<sup>120</sup> having noticed only one or two of their own Friends’ “check-ins” in their News Feed. When asked for their opinion on this tool, many respondents agreed that the tool was rather pointless and unnecessary; that it was not very different from a status update and yet somehow more revealing by providing one’s geographic location. Said Nate, who thinks that anyone who would want to know his real-time whereabouts is creepy: “I have a phone. If you really want to track me down, you can call me.” Many also suggested that it was dangerous to let others know one’s whereabouts, leaving one open to being stalked or to home invasion. As well, many respondents simply believed that letting others know your whereabouts in real time was just too personal and that the people who use it are attention-seeking or potentially needy. Indeed, under that paradigm one would want people to Like that one is at Starbucks, or at a baseball game or movie theatre. As Martin put it: “People who use it are desperate for attention. I don’t need to know that you checked in at McDonald’s. They are posting their location for a reason—to grab attention.”

Finally, all respondents asserted that they would most likely never use Facebook Places.<sup>121</sup> However, this was before I explained that Facebook was entering into *partnerships* with local businesses. By checking in with a mobile device at a business, the update appears in one’s News Feed, which is visible to all of one’s Friends and is therefore a form of advertising. By advertising for the business, the user might be

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<sup>120</sup> As of late 2010, only 30 million Facebook users had tried Facebook Places. See “Foursquare Doomed? Facebook Places Has 7X More Users” <http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-places-may-have-30-million-users-but-none-of-them-use-it-very-much-2010-10> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>121</sup> Places seems to have rolled out without a great deal of privacy concern among users. This may be in part because it is an opt-in service. With Places, the user chooses whether or not to share their location when they check in at a place. When they check in, they can tag Friends who are with them but only if those Friends’ have settings that allow their location to be tagged.



rewarded with a product discount. A business like Starbucks, for example, might give a discount to the user each time they checked in at Starbucks via their smartphone. Or a cosmetic business might give away 1,000 mascaras and free makeovers to those who check in on Valentine's Day.<sup>122</sup> To my surprise, many respondents changed their position about Facebook Places after learning about potential incentives. As Lisa put it:

If they started giving me discounts for using it, then yes I would probably use it because I have no money. I'm a university student and any little bit off on Starbucks or the Body Shop would be absolutely fabulous.

Everybody can be bought!

However, many noted that their "checking in" to such establishments would only be to get the discount, not to let others know their location. As Sabrina stated: "I might use it just for the deal, but it would have nothing to do with showing people where I am." Indeed, there is an element of consumer savvy in using Facebook as an instrument to get discounts. By checking in and subsequently receiving discounts at various businesses over the course of a month, one may be generating savings that are going to offset the monthly costs of using the mobile device. As long as one is conscious that their location is being shared with Friends and marketing researchers, this economic model might be especially beneficial to college and university students on a budget. However, to date it has not caught on. That is, while 46% of U.S. adults use location-based smartphone tools to get directions or recommendations based on their current location, only 18% use social media services in which their location is automatically included in their posts on those services (Pew 2012c). Perhaps for many the incentive is not strong enough or it is simply

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<sup>122</sup> Debenhams, a UK department store, did just that. See "Facebook Places UK Deals: Starbucks, O2 and Yo! Sushi sign up" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/8292744/Facebook-Places-UK-Deals-Starbucks-O2-and-Yo-Sushi-sign-up.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

slow to become a part of consumer behaviour, which is driven by habit (Martin 2008; Scholderer and Trondsen 2008). As such, the success of Places would be conditional on the extent to which it can become second nature to consumers. Given that smartphone ownership among all U.S. adults is already at 56% (Pew 2013c), it does not look like checking in on Facebook Places is destined to become as “natural” an activity to users as updating their status is now.

### **Attitudes toward self-disclosure online among cohorts**

Given the sample size, it is not possible to make any definitive conclusions about the differences between 18 to 24-year olds and 25 to 32-year olds with respect to the findings in my study. However, there were several instances in which certain kinds of responses were far more common among the members of one cohort than the other.

Overall, the 18 to 24-year olds in my study were far more comfortable revealing information about themselves on Facebook and were more accepting of the convergence of business and social media. Not only were those among the undergraduate cohort less likely to speak about concerns over privacy infringement, they were also enthusiastic about playing a role in helping companies understand their customers’ needs. As Lisa reflected: “If my Profile helps provide information about my demographic, it’s kind of interesting to be a part of that.” In addition, far from being turned off, some of the 18 to 24-year old respondents believed that targeted ads were helpful to them. As Lester explained, “They’re trying to make it more personalized for stuff that I’m interested in.” As Charlotte put it, “If there’s going to be ads there anyways, they might as well be toward you.” As well, Timothy, again mentioned that it was his choice to upload photos to Facebook. He wondered if having them mined by researchers would “make my life

better in the long run, because now they'll target products to me that I like." All this is supportive of recent conclusions by Shu-Chuan Chu (2011:39), who in a survey of 302 18 to 24-year olds found that "Facebook's college-aged users have favorable attitudes toward advertising delivered through social media. Thus, social media are a potentially rich avenue for viral advertising campaigns."

Indeed, the 18 to 24-year olds in my study were also more *trusting* of social technologies than 25 to 32-year olds, which may not be that surprising given their generation's reliance on Wikipedia for information (Head and Eisenberg 2010; Judd and Kennedy 2010) and their being accustomed to viewing YouTube videos in class to stimulate scholarly discussion (Burke, Synder, and Rager 2009; Duverger and Steffes 2012). Against this backdrop, the undergraduate students in my study were far more passive about their self-disclosure online. On the other hand, those among the professional cohort often pointed out the mistakes in judgement being made by those in the younger group, especially with respect to their naiveté toward "digital footprints." Thirty-two-year old Naveen predicted: "Amongst the younger users, their notion of privacy is going to hit a wall, especially as they start entering the working world—that's a hard reality of life." Put differently, it may be that the attention paid to privacy concerns is less related to one's generational cohort than to one's life situation, which changes as one ages. This makes sense in a digital age in which checking a prospective hire's Facebook Profile is increasingly part of a hiring manager's first steps.<sup>123</sup> However, it should be noted that among the undergraduates interviewed, most acknowledged that

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<sup>123</sup> According to a study of 300 hiring professionals by Reppler, and "online image management" company, 91% use social networking sites to screen prospective employees. Of this group, 69% have rejected a candidate because of what they saw about them on a social network. See "Managing your online image across social networks" <http://blog.reppler.com/2011/09/27/managing-your-online-image-across-social-networks/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

they would need to change their online behaviour and “clean” their Facebook Profile when the time came to start looking for a job.

Something else I noticed in my study was the difference in attitudes toward accepting Friend Requests of non-friends / acquaintances between undergraduates and professionals. Those in the former group were more likely to have people on their Friend List that are only there because they worked on class project together, or because they are the Friend or romantic partner of the respondent’s real friend who is on Facebook. As Charlotte explained: “If your friend’s boyfriend adds you, you accept it even if you don’t want to just to keep things nice.” A number of undergraduate respondents admitted having people on their Friend List that they do not know; they forgot how they became acquainted. This might be linked to the need to feel included and accepted during one’s undergraduate tenure in order to fit in. Therefore, the respondents who were *students* did not want to risk alienating themselves by declining Friend Requests. However, the respondents who were professionals / not in school were much more considerate about who they decided to accept to their Friend List. Caroline, for example, “didn’t want to bring a co-worker into [her] world.” However, in order avoid a sense of awkwardness or—worse—confrontation at work, she “caved” and accepted the request.

Finally, with respect to one’s Friend count, according to the older respondents their attitude changed as they settled on new ways of obtaining affirmation, such as through their spouse, children, or career. Their sense of what was important or deserving of status was not tied to such a superficial thing like their number of Facebook Friends.

## The elements of control

As discussed in Chapter 3, the fact that Facebook allows its users to adjust their privacy settings in terms of who may view their Profile is behind what gives them a sense of *control* over their accounts. Right now, the user still has control over the information that they share. For example, if Facebook was *constantly* recording one's geographic location via a Facebook smartphone app to a master database, users may have a serious problem with that because they would lose control over their privacy. Indeed, it is possible for Facebook to track one's whereabouts in real-time, but this would require one to keep the GPS on one's smartphone operational at all times *and* to actually opt in the functionality. In reality, Facebook is only taking information that users have freely chosen to provide and selling it in aggregate to interested parties. This maintains one's privacy because, as the contributor, one has the power to contribute or not. If Facebook became a service that was *taking* from users information which they did not freely contribute, then that would be a major inroad against privacy. Indeed, many respondents felt justified in their use of a platform that is selling their data to advertisers by reminding me that it was *their choice* to use Facebook. "I'm letting them sell my data," said Cynthia. "I have control over that decision."

Therefore, control is a two-fold theme. First, it is important for the respondents to have the tools of control, which Facebook provides in the form of privacy settings that can be manually adjusted. In this way, the respondents are essentially in control of who sees what with respect to their Profile. This is in line with what Raynes-Goldie (2010) described as having more concern for *social* privacy than *institutional* privacy (discussed in Chapter 1).

Second, the respondents themselves bring a sense of control through acknowledging that it is their choice to use the service—no one forced them to sign up or to upload content on a regular basis. Again, there was a general consensus among respondents—regardless of age group—that one would be silly to upload a lot of personal information about oneself to Facebook and subsequently complain about lacking privacy online. As Sabrina argued: “I can’t imagine someone saying, ‘I’m going to put all of my personal information on Facebook, but how dare you share it. *You* are sharing it! You run the risk of strangers seeing your stuff. That happens all the time.”

In summary, while it is possible that another social networking platform will eventually emerge and replace Facebook, with a membership of over one billion, its displacement seems far from imminent. The SNS has offered its users something that appears to have done a wonderful job of mitigating pushback en masse—it has given users a sense of control. By allowing users to adjust their privacy settings and manage the kinds of ads that are presented, Facebook empowers users with a sense of ownership over their privacy within the network. While periodic controversy over the company’s privacy policy can be annoying, the fact that one can “keep a handle on the negatives,” as Donald put it—through managing one’s privacy settings and consciously deciding what to upload—makes it much easier to put up with. Respondents have therefore chosen convenient communication over certain privacy and control worries that make them only slightly uncomfortable when raised. This uneasiness comes in knowing that they are playing an active role in the advertising process, but it is not seen as having a significant negative impact on them.

### **Boomers: On the selling of user data**

Given that the Boomers in my study claimed to be very mindful of the type and amount of information that they disclosed about themselves online, how would they respond to having the information that they chose to share on Facebook exploited by the company for commercial purposes? In order to achieve this understanding, I asked them the same three hypothetical questions that I asked the Millennials.

In response to the first question,<sup>124</sup> I was initially surprised to learn that most of the Boomers would not care if their Profile pictures appeared in an advertisement on their Friend's Facebook page, especially given their concern for personal privacy. However, it soon became clear that, like the Millennials, the Boomers understood that Facebook is a business—that the free use of the website had to be paid for somehow, and creative advertising is just one way. As Anna reflected “It would definitely be weird, but it wouldn't change anything for me. They have to make money somehow.” And Colin joked, “I'd be fine as long as my photo was used to sell guitar amps. People would think I'm a rocker.”

In response to the second question,<sup>125</sup> like the Millennials, most of the Boomers would not care if Facebook was selling their aggregate photo data to companies for the purposes of marketing research. In fact, Boomers were more likely to remind me that they were already very careful about the images they uploaded, and that such images are considered “safe” for use. Vivian responded to the scenario of Facebook selling his photo albums this way:

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<sup>124</sup> If you found out that your Profile picture was used in an advertisement that appeared on your Friends' Facebook page, how would you respond?

<sup>125</sup> If you found out that Facebook was storing your photo albums and selling them to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?

I think that would be pretty smart. It wouldn't change the way I use Facebook. I think that anyone who's putting all these pictures up and honestly believes that it's just their friends who are viewing them, I think they're being pretty naive.

Thus, like the Millennials in my study, the Boomers believe that censorship begins with the individual. As Patrick put it, "I more or less self-filter. I'm more self-aware that whatever few photos I post can be seen by pretty well anybody who wanted to see them."

However, the Boomers draw the line when it comes to their private Inbox conversations, which was the similar case for most of the Millennials. That is, in response to the third question,<sup>126</sup> all but one of the Boomers I interviewed said that they would leave Facebook if the company began selling their private conversations for commercial gain. As Anna exclaimed: "If Facebook was selling my conversations? Oh my god, there's a reason it's confidential! No, I would go off Facebook." As Eleanor explained: "I'd be very perturbed. Private, person-to-person conversations are done in private for a reason—even if it's done within their media. I would leave Facebook." And as Colin said: "I'd get off of it. That would be pretty heavy stuff. I wouldn't be happy about that."

### **Boomers in control: awareness and acceptance of risks**

Despite the fact that the Boomers I interviewed seemed to be more reflective about the privacy risks associated with using Facebook, they too had never read the Terms of Use. Like Millennials, they believed that software agreements are meant to be

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<sup>126</sup> If you found out that Facebook was recording your private Inbox emails between Friends and selling your conversations to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?



accepted without much thought. “If you don’t accept it, you can’t use it,” said Patrick, “and you want to use it.”

As alluded to earlier, the Boomers were quick to point out that the personal information they posted to Facebook is the kind of information that they are okay with *anyone* seeing. As Vivian explained, “My view is that if I post it on Facebook, it’s open to the world.” As Patrick put it, “I don’t post anything of a terribly personal nature that I wouldn’t feel uncomfortable if it was let out into the ether.” As well, Eleanor stated:

I don’t trust technology enough to believe that people can’t hack into my page. If people hack into my page, they can see pictures of my children, and they’ll see one’s that I’m okay with. There’s nothing in there that tells anyone where we live or shares information about my children that I wouldn’t share with anybody.

Finally, Meredith said, “If the whole world accidentally saw my Profile or my wall or my photos, it wouldn’t bother me because there is nothing on there that I don’t care to show. To me, it’s a huge public venue.”

In addition, the Boomers I interviewed were also just as accepting of *targeted advertising* as those in the Millennial sample. The Boomers acknowledged that targeted advertising in exchange for the free use of the website is the “cost of doing business.” As Raymond reflected: “I’m sure there are little algorithmic gremlins running in the background, feeding ads to me that are context sensitive, and aggregating my information with all other fifty-eight-year old men in my city.” As well, Angela explained, “I would expect that they would do something like that—they’re a business.” And as Frank put it,

“I understand that by using Facebook, Facebook is using me as well.” That is, the business model is not new to them and they are fine with it. As Patrick reflected:

Look, today in the real world credit card companies do that, retailers do that, telephone companies do that, everybody does that. Maybe it’s a new normal that’s wrong-headed, but it’s so ubiquitous that if you were to systematically delayer yourself out of that, you’d be living in the middle of some green space, growing your own tomatoes, and raising your own chickens.

For Douglas, as with many of the Millennials, the ads are not intrusive: “It’s fine. I mean, who doesn’t do that? I think it’s gone on forever, and the more aware you are, the less attention you pay to it. Plus, the ads aren’t offensive and they don’t offend me at all, so I don’t mind.”

As well, like the Millennials in this sample, Boomers rationalized their acceptance of Facebook’s commercial use of their data by claiming to be *in control*. As Angela put it, “I’m choosing to be on Facebook. Nobody has a gun to my head. It is something that I choose to do. Besides, the advertising doesn’t bother me.” Frank said, “My privacy settings happen beforehand, in that I practice my own censorship by thinking before I post.”

However, the Boomers in this sample were also more critical than Millennials of Facebook Places and similar “check-in” services that were described in earlier, stating that the activity is highly intrusive. As Colin put it, “I don’t like the geo-tagging thing. It’s dangerous. It’s more about privacy. I don’t want people to know where I am. I don’t want people to track my movements.” According to Anna, “It’s crazy. There’s a danger

in it. I'm private about my life and I would never want somebody to know where I am. There's a lot of crazy people out there." Finally, Eleanor said:

First, I don't go anywhere that interesting to be letting everyone know.

Chances are no one's going to meet me there anyway—number two. And number three, people don't need to know where I am all the time. Frankly, if you really need to get a hold of me, just call the house—I'm never away for more than two hours.

Indeed, Patrick believed that young people are simply more trusting of technology than those in her generation: "I think young people trust it more. I remember before there was an Internet and before everyone followed each other around on computers. It wasn't that long ago. For me, it's a new thing and I'm still pretty guarded."

As well, Angela's answer was one of deep concern about young people's use of check-in technologies today:

You raise your kids telling them not to let people know where you are.

The big thing when the Internet started was, "Don't put your real address. Don't put your phone number out. Don't do this or that." You teach your kids to be safe. And then they go on to Facebook and all of a sudden it's cool to say, "I'm right here at this location! I'm this old! I look like this!"

When asked if they would ever use Facebook Places in exchange for retail and service discounts, all but Vivian, who uses Places to get discounts at her local gym, said they would not. As Douglas explained "My privacy is worth more than seventy-five cents off a three dollar coffee." As Raymond put it, "The value proposition would have to be more comprehensive than a clothing discount." Clearly, older adults with full-time jobs

may be in less need of everyday product discounts than the Young Millennials in my study (most of which are full-time students), and may therefore be much less willing to trade that kind of information disclosure for minor savings.

Thus, the fact that the Boomers in my study are concerned with the amount of personal information that younger generations are disclosing on Facebook, and the fact that these Boomers are highly mindful of the content they themselves are uploading to Facebook, show that personal privacy is important to them. Yes, through Facebook, one can share private information more quickly and easily, but the Boomers do not believe that one would share such information if they were uncomfortable with it. As Anna explained:

For people who were on the fence about being more public and out there, maybe Facebook tipped them over. But I think the population of people that are actively posting about themselves on Facebook are the type of people that, before Facebook, didn't have a problem being open in public. I don't think Facebook created them, I think they were always sort of that way, and Facebook became a venue for them to express themselves.

Another important difference is that the Boomers seem to be more careful about their self-disclosure on Facebook, which is reflected in their far fewer amounts of Profile pictures, photo albums, and status updates, and in their much lower numbers of Friends that are able to see such information. They were nearly unanimous in their critique of geo-location applications as dangerous (as opposed to silly), and they all shared their concern for how younger generations are re-drawing the lines of appropriate sharing.

However, this does not mean that the Boomers are against non-Friends having access to their information. That is, like the Millennials, the Boomers feel that once they deem information as okay to share on Facebook, it is also okay for anyone else who stumbles upon it, or for a company to exploit for marketing research purposes, which most assume is already happening on Facebook and in their everyday lives as consumers. They understand that Facebook is a free service and that selling ads supports the service. It is a compromise they are willing to make. Or, put differently, it is the price they are willing to pay.

## **CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

In this final chapter, I begin by briefly reviewing how my findings challenge prevailing conclusions that the intensity of Facebook use is associated with higher levels of social capital and that Facebook is especially useful for maintaining and building bridging ties to one's acquaintances. I then apply what I have learned to the *tetrad of media effects* (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988) to show that there is no need for "techno panic." I also discuss what these findings mean for the debate between a highly regulatory and a market-driven approach to online privacy policy. Finally, by building on what I learned about user attitudes to personal information disclosure on Facebook, I make a case for why marketing researchers should be looking to Facebook as an ideal platform for hosting online research communities.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

As discussed in Chapter 1, Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) concluded that the intensity of Facebook use is associated with higher levels of social capital and that Facebook is especially useful for maintaining and building bridging ties to one's high school acquaintances. However, the results of my study of Millennial users suggest otherwise—that Facebook is used with one's close friends and family members in mind, not acquaintances. As well, other studies have showed support for Facebook being more useful for maintaining or creating bridging social capital between weak ties (Aubrey, Chattopadhyay, and Rill 2008; Johnston et al. 2011; Valenzuela et al. 2008, 2009). However, my study provides evidence that the website is primarily used for maintaining bonding ties among Millennials, not bridging ties; that the maintaining of bridging social capital is by comparison merely a passive benefit. The weak ties are actually hundreds of

bystanders, only a handful of which are called upon as a resource and the majority of which respondents would not miss *except for* their nominal value as part of an overall Friend count. This finding is also supported by Marko Skoric et al. (2009), who in a telephone survey of 249 Facebook users found that respondents maintain their closest relationships on Facebook with a smaller collection of their Friends—the group of people who they know and spend time with offline. Indeed, the importance of Facebook for preserving offline bonding relationships cannot be underestimated. As the authors put it: “One of the main reasons for people joining Facebook is to share pictures and information about themselves with their close friends and family.”

As well, in a longitudinal study of Facebook users at a U.S. university, Charles Steinfield, Nicole Ellison, and Cliff Lampe (2008) reported an increase in bridging social capital among users over time. Such bridging ties provided access to resources for the user that would have otherwise been unavailable within their close social circles. However, while in a survey of 507 undergraduates Jennifer Aubrey, Sumana Chattopadhyay, and Lesile Rill (2008) found the use of SNSs to be positively associated with online bridging and bonding capital, they concluded that this did not translate to offline social capital. As well, my study revealed that while respondents from both the Millennial and Boomer samples may be conscious of having access to resources by virtue of having a connection to hundreds of weak ties, this benefit is far from being on one’s mind and it is not among the primary reasons why people use Facebook—unless “keeping updated about people” means the same thing as having access to resources through such people, which—in my opinion—it does not.

## **Is Zuckerberg right? Applying McLuhan's tetrad**

In Chapter 1, I wrote that Mark Zuckerberg allegedly remarked that people are more comfortable sharing private information about themselves online and that privacy is no longer a social norm. While the data from my study provide some support for the first part of his statement, I did not find any support for the latter part. That is, while the respondents in my study believe that they and most others living in the digital age are more comfortable with sharing their opinions and photos with hundreds of people online, personal privacy is still very important to them. Furthermore, I believe that the issue of privacy online will continue to be an important issue, especially as younger people come to expect increasing control over privacy settings as they grow older and, as has been suggested by Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010), as they pay more attention to regulating how the information they share online is seen and used by others.

Indeed, the intensifying surge of the Internet into the lives of individuals globally since the mid-'90s has left people thinking about the point at which real life ends and the virtual life begins. Between families and friends, clients and customers, as well as governments and citizens, the Internet has had a major impact on the way relationships are reinforced, business is conducted, and politics is practiced. In the last decade, a new era of the Internet emerged, which many call Web 2.0: the ability of average users to easily create, share, and collaborate over content online. The most widely known platforms that have empowered individuals with such an ability include YouTube, Blogger, Amazon, and a number of SNSs, from Friendster to MySpace—and, of course, Facebook. This empowering nature of Web 2.0 is why Jerome Armstrong and Markos Zúniga (2006:177) called it a threat to established powers: "It is leaderless. It cannot be



harnessed, controlled or co-opted... It returns power to where it belongs in a democracy—to the people.” Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 1, the mainstream media continue to be intrigued by the limits to personal information disclosure that citizens are willing to cross, and the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada is concerned about its citizens endangering themselves through the use of social media and other websites.

But has the era of Web 2.0 and Facebook really changed things that much? Are the media and government justified in their respective hype and serious concern? In this sub-section, I use McLuhan’s *tetrad of media effects* to explain why—based on the qualitative data from my study—there is no reason to panic.

The *tetrad of media effects* was devised by McLuhan as a way of understanding the effects of a technology on society (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988). The four laws, which he framed as questions on which to reflect, are as follows:

1. What does the technology enhance or intensify?
2. What does the technology displace or render obsolete?
3. What does the technology recover that was previously lost?
4. What does the technology produce or become when pushed to an extreme?

For example, the *mobile phone* enhanced the voice; made the telephone booth obsolete; recovered the act of shouting in public as children tend to do; and when pressed to an extreme becomes a leash to which people are constantly tied.

As an exercise in understanding, I have applied McLuhan’s *tetrad* to some of the data and themes that I identified, toward illustrating how the effect of Facebook on society has been much less revolutionary or transformative as it has been *amplificatory*.

As well, I addressed the questions in reverse order, so I could end with a longer discussion about what it is that Facebook enhances or intensifies, along with its role in respondents becoming “passively less private.”

***What does Facebook produce or become when pushed to an extreme?***

Even though this question is meant to be reflected upon hypothetically, the answer is not far from reality. In June 2013, the U.S. National Security Agency became embroiled in a scandal over leaked documents about a top-secret government surveillance program called PRISM, which has been in place since 2007. The purpose of the program, which reportedly had the cooperation of technology giants like Facebook, Apple, and Google,<sup>127</sup> is to monitor foreign communications that pass through U.S. servers. However, most of the media attention has been on the ability of the NSA to use PRISM to obtain direct access to the personal online data (i.e. emails, photos, chats, documents, Google searches) of individual U.S. citizens.

So, when taken to its extreme, Facebook becomes an Orwellian “Big Brother” network of surveillance. The major difference, however, is that citizens would have the ability to monitor each other. Although individuals can currently monitor each other’s behaviour on Facebook, it is only as a result of voluntary Friend-making. If taken to its extreme, every citizen’s Profile would be viewable to everyone in society, a situation which (as discussed earlier) would cause the respondents in this study to delete all of their photos and status updates, and closely scrutinize their Profile on a regular basis. Thus, the paranoia associated with being under constant surveillance in the real world

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<sup>127</sup> See “Technology giants struggle to maintain credibility over NSA Prism surveillance” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/09/technology-giants-nsa-prism-surveillance> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

might certainly be exhibited online, perhaps with greater intensity given the amount of time individuals have become accustomed to spending online while in their homes. However, retreating from Facebook might result in social costs, examples of which can be seen today. As discussed in Chapter 3, new undergraduate students hoping to make friends and attend events would be creating “social suicide” by abandoning Facebook—an unofficial but extremely popular social and event planning hub. Moreover, as other SNSs gain in popularity and become the dominant means of social exchange, any citizen who retreats from them may incur losses in social capital. From the self-proclaimed “informed-citizen” who, Twitter-less, suddenly finds himself as the last person to learn the latest news; to the industry professional who, after denying hundreds of requests to join LinkedIn, is looked upon as out-of-touch and unapproachable; to the grandmother who, unwilling to use a webcam, sees her faraway grandchildren once a year instead of daily or weekly through video chat.

As well, upon further reflection, another less obvious scenario comes to mind. That is, when taken to its extreme, Facebook becomes a return to kindergarten, where everyone is everyone’s friend. In fact, in looking at the impact of Facebook on the usage of the word ‘friend,’ one might argue that the company has tactically assumed ownership over the word for marketing purposes in order to help sell its service to users, and to help users feel an emotional connection to Facebook. After all, it is not a stretch to say that people like to feel that they have a lot of friends, and Facebook has been forthright in presenting to the user exactly how many Friends they have. However, what is most interesting is that while Facebook may have diluted the meaning of the word ‘friend,’ its

impact on actual *friendships* has been one of scale, in that it is possible to have many more degrees of friendship than it was in the past. As Anthony reflected:

Prior to the Internet, you had to communicate with people by calling them on the phone or meeting in person. You could maintain only so many friendships. It's like the difference between a black and white TV and a high def TV. There are more gradients, shades, intensities in HDTV than there is in black and white TV.

Facebook, Anthony concluded, while not the epitome of HDTV, certainly has more colours and variants than the monochromatic methods of maintaining relationships that people had prior to the Internet, Web 2.0, and Facebook. Indeed, on Facebook one can maintain relationships with people that one does not see on a regular basis; the website provides an opportunity to rekindle the sparks that may once have led to a friendship. As Michaeline put it: "When we don't have contact with people, it's easy to assume that a person doesn't think of you. That's not true, especially with Facebook, because you're reminded of them more often." Facebook, therefore, enables multiple parties to recall shared values and experiences, allowing them to remember why certain people were important to them at a certain time; it enables friendships to survive without much intimacy. As Arnold put it: "It allows me to keep the channels open. It is an easy way of making sure that everyone is okay." On Facebook, constant contact is not required in order to show that one cares about someone. As well, as Michaeline alluded, through the use of the website people are reminded that they are still cared about and that they touch other people's lives. Put differently, whether or not one shares information regularly, in the world of Facebook a "friend" is not someone that one *interacts* with on a

day-to-day basis, but someone who reaches out and provides support sporadically, in small and diverse ways.

***What does Facebook recover that was previously lost?***

McLuhan's popular phrase, "global village," describes the effect of new technologies (television, radio, telephone) in bringing once fragmented people over vast distances much closer together. Like a village, a global village is where you could learn about people and events thousands of miles away as if they had just happened down the street (McLuhan and Powers 1992). Going on this concept, Facebook recovers a *tribal sense of community* because of the direct access to people, including friends and family members, regardless of their location in the world. Moreover, through the use of smartphones, this idealized community can be brought with us and accessed anywhere there is an Internet connection, which makes family members, friends, groups—or neighbourhoods, in the old-fashioned sense—more relevant in our daily lives. As an illustration, in a 2009 study of 100 Canadian Facebook users' Friend Lists, Nathan Nash (2009) found that only one of his respondents did not have a Facebook Friend that lived in another country. Of the remaining 99 Friend Lists, he identified 1,761 international Friends from 95 countries on all continents.

The difference, however, between such neighbourhoods of the past and those virtual ones today, is that individuals today feel a greater compulsion to share information about one's personal life, in great part thanks to the influence of new forms of entertainment like reality TV and YouTube (Holmes 2010). As Michelle reflected, "Thanks to celebrities and reality TV, we've all deluded ourselves into thinking that everyone cares about what we're doing or what we have to say." Still, as mentioned in

Chapter 3, when it comes to things like their image, their family issues, or their financial situation, people would be concerned if such information were to be made public. Thus, it may be that people want both to be a kind of Internet celebrity and to have privacy; they want to be the ones controlling what is shared about them and what is private—a luxury that “real” Hollywood celebrities are not afforded. Yet, this is not how it works on Facebook, where information that is shared can be taken and manipulated by those on one’s Friend List. It is therefore not possible to sustain a tribal sense of community if one desires both celebrity and privacy.

Another thing that Facebook recovers is a *tribal version of democracy* by allowing anyone in the “village” to participate in the public forum. As Klotz (2004:204) pointed out, the Internet allows individuals and groups to be “everywhere but nowhere,” and even the most powerful leaders cannot completely control the flow of electronic information in, out, or within their nations. In his book, *Blogosphere: the new political arena*, Michael Keren (2006:150) observed that the blogosphere provides a sense of freedom from the reins of government and business, in which falsehoods are exposed and civil concerns are freely expressed without manipulation from above. In other words, as blogs and SNSs like Facebook become more salient, it provides citizens with a sense of victory in that the “truth” is getting out.

However, as discussed in Chapter 1, we have not seen leagues of citizens journalists rise up to displace mass media. That is, while television news programming forced print media to compete with the visual image by including more photos and illustrations (Postman 1993), SNSs have forced television news to *re-invent* itself in order to remain in touch with average citizens (Montgomery 2007). The one-way dissemination

of information about world events via the six o'clock news from ABC headquarters to its affiliate stations nationwide, for example, has given way to 24-hour newscasts from mainstream and alternative outlets that are constantly streaming and providing content online, including directly to smartphones and other hand-held devices. In other words, rather than trying to destroy or destabilize the reach of SNSs like Facebook, mainstream news companies have themselves embraced it.<sup>128</sup> And by using SNSs like Facebook and Twitter, mass media is even more “mass” than it ever was. Every major journalist has a blog, Facebook, and / or Twitter account, and it seems like the news stories that citizens are re-posting and re-Tweeting are those penned by large news organizations like CNN, Fox News, and BBC.

***What does Facebook displace or render obsolete?***

From the perspective of communication technology, it cannot be said that Facebook renders anything obsolete. Rather it *reduces* the use of certain communication tools that are still important. The respondents in my study, for example, still send text messages, use email, and talk on the phone (especially the Boomers). Facebook is just a convenient way for them to share with a larger number of people with the least amount of effort, despite the fact that its use comes with greater risks. That is, regardless of who is the respondent's *intended* audience, the information can be viewed by others that have access to it, which can be hundreds of people. Not only do respondents forget how many people can see what they have posted, but they also pay little mind to the permanence of their information, especially if that information were to leave the “closed” space that is

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<sup>128</sup> Turn on CNN 24-hours news, for example, and you will see that, in addition to the network itself, each individual host or news anchor can be contacted through his or her Facebook or Twitter account. Many of them also reference their Facebook Page while on the air and read aloud Tweets from viewers.

Facebook by means of a Friend downloading one's photo or copying and pasting one's status update to their personal blog. Yet, as discovered, these are risks that respondents consider to be unique, remote, and unlikely to affect them. Thus, if anything, Facebook *renders obsolete* the need to keep general conversations private online, similar to how the mobile phone displaced the need to keep such conversations private in public places.

Facebook also *reduces* the significance of traditional media, and gives a voice to everyone. As a source of news and information, it reduces the top-down model of mass communication. The Web campaign in politics is a good example of how this now works. Klotz (2004:63) argued that the Internet allowed for low accidental exposure to a candidate; audience discretion in choosing when and what communication to receive; interactivity on the mass level; and unlimited time and space—forever changing the way candidates conduct their campaigns. For example, announcing one's candidacy via online video instead of to a news anchor, and creating an official Facebook Page has in recent years become an important part of kicking off a campaign. It is an effective strategy that allows candidates to deliver their message without the immediate follow-up questions one would receive at a press conference. It also allows for tight scripting and editing, so the message should be exactly what they hope to get across compared to the uncertainty of a live announcement.

However, having a large base of support on a Facebook page does not necessarily result in a winning campaign. Yes, just before the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, while John McCain had over 600,000 supporters on Facebook, now-President Barack Obama had over 2.5 million.<sup>129</sup> However, just one month before the 2011 Canadian federal

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<sup>129</sup> See "Snapshot of presidential candidate social networking stats: Nov 3, 2008"



election, Conservative Party Leader and Prime Minister Stephen Harper had just over 52,000 Facebook supporters, NDP Party Leader Jack Layton had almost 54,000, and Liberal Party Leader Michael Ignatieff had over 64,000.<sup>130</sup> On Election Day, not only was Ignatieff defeated in his own riding, but his party lost 43 seats; it was the worst result in Canadian history for an incumbent Official Opposition Party. In other words, while Facebook may *reduce* the significance of traditional media to get one's message out, it cannot be said that it displaces it or makes it obsolete, or that it would be wise to exclusively rely on it.

### ***What does Facebook enhance or intensify?***

During a period in which the conventional “rules” of using SNSs are still coming together, it would not be appropriate to conclude that the widespread adoption of Facebook has resulted in drastic changes in human behaviour. In the case of SNSs like Facebook, I think McLuhan (1964) is correct in his widely cited argument that people use new forms of media to supplement—not replace—older forms of media. Rather than having transformed human behaviour, Facebook has been treated as an *extension* of everyday life, and in my study I have provided empirical evidence to support this perspective. One's Facebook Friends, for example, are an extension of the phone book or rolodex. Facebook not only extends the ability to communicate and unite with others, but also the ability to track them down in the first place. Facebook also enhances the voice in that it enables one to express their opinions and feelings to a large audience in a way that is akin to using a megaphone to communicate a message for anyone who is nearby to

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<http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2008/11/03/snapshot-of-presidential-candidate-social-networking-stats-nov-2-2008/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>130</sup> See “Canada's election 2011 Web popularity poll”

<http://www.9thsphere.com/blog/canadas-election-2011-web-popularity-poll> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

receive. In addition, all of the messages that one broadcasts on Facebook are automatically archived. In this way, it is also an enhancement of the diary or journal and by extension enhances one's ability to recall previous thoughts. In fact, Facebook's new Timeline format is set up in a way that encourages people to document their lives in a diary-like interface, beginning with a clickable *Now* button, followed in descending order by *2012*, *2011*, and so on until *Born*. Therefore, uploading pictures of a party to one's Timeline *while at* the party so that one's Friends can view it and provide feedback can be seen as *enhancing one's appreciation* of the experience. Indeed, the theme *Facebook is my life online* is an illustration of how Millennials are maintaining an online record of their experiences.

Thus, in applying what I have learned in my study to McLuhan's *tetrad of media effects*, we see that Facebook is merely an extension of established communication technologies—it has not obsolesced any of these technologies; and it has not completely recovered a tribal sense of community or democracy. Facebook, then, is simply another system for delivering information to one's peers. Furthermore, even though it has over one billion registered users, Facebook is not itself a one-of-a-kind communication medium as was the telegraph, radio, or television. Put differently, it is not the only communication tool that enhances the voice, the diary, or the appreciation of an experience. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of similar SNSs of varying sizes around the world that enhance communication in the same way—from Cyworld in Korea, to Grono in Poland, to Orkut in Brazil. As well, any blogging website, which emerged many years before SNSs, provides the same enhancement. From this perspective, Facebook is but one of many SNSs that extend things like the contact list, the voice, and the diary.

Furthermore, it is these kinds of extensions, and the benefits associated with them, that have caused respondents to be “passively less private,” which I will discuss below.

### **Passively less private: toward a more open world**

While respondents believe that they and others deserve privacy, there is an agreement that notions of privacy have changed since a generation ago; that Millennials are definitely more open to “broadcasting” things that they would not have announced before Facebook. Roger proudly believed that his generation is much more comfortable with sharing who they are with others: “That’s what our generation is going to be remembered for—for being more open than our parents, in which what happened in their homes weren’t known to their neighbours. I think that when we get to their age, it’s going to be a much more open society.” Marina believed that her generation represented a “cultural shift” in that more people are sharing things nowadays that could have been considered taboo a decade ago, and that it is considered “cool” to be an open book. As she put it: “It’s like saying, ‘Everyone, I’m okay with myself and I can say whatever is on my mind.’”

While Facebook may not necessarily have been the catalyst for being less private, it is a good indication of the shift that has happened—that people do not mind expressing themselves and revealing more about themselves than they did a decade or more ago. Further, respondents agreed that most people do not realize how much they are disclosing. As Cynthia put it, “We see so much more that I think we’re desensitized.” Indeed, in the times prior to SNSs, people would go on vacation and perhaps make some enjoyable yet regrettable decisions, known to just a few—typically only those who were directly involved. Today, what happens in Vegas does not stay in Vegas. In fact, taking

pictures of binge drinking weekends and sharing them with one's Friends on Facebook has not only become a widely accepted post-event ritual but an expected one. Such images then become available to hundreds of one's Friends, each of which has the ability to download and share them. If those images were to be shared on a public website, anyone with an Internet connection would be able to access them at any time, including employers, college and university admissions officers, and—as has been demonstrated numerous times—political campaign rivals.<sup>131</sup> The reality is that, on Facebook, something is not shared privately between two Friends or even among a large, fixed number of Friends; it is shared between them and whoever else stumbles upon it (or is determined enough to seek and find such information). In the digital age, according to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, people do not realize that they are disclosing more about themselves than they probably should. The reason for this—as suggested in my study—may be that users are thinking primarily of their *strong* ties when sharing such information. The respondents in my study are not consciously choosing to be less private; they are simply sharing information about themselves without bystanders in mind, and they are more comfortable doing it given that their peers are doing the same.

Certainly, the evidence in my study does not suggest that respondents are putting less value on personal privacy. Rather, it suggests that they simply do not think about the repercussions of sharing information about themselves on Facebook. They have become *passively less private*, giving up privacy for utility, while not being acutely aware of the exchange. As such, the Internet continues to be the new Wild West, with laws and enforcement still being established. Even if one's work (documents, photos, diaries, etc.)

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<sup>131</sup> See “Candidate’s racy Facebook photos showed ‘lack of judgment’: B.C. NDP leader” <http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2009/04/20/bc-facebook-ray-lam-facebook-photos-james.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

is protected, when it is hosted on the Internet there is no guarantee that it will not be used. One should therefore expect that any content shared on the Internet will likely remain there in one form or another. Indeed, if one were to listen to the mainstream media stories, they would get the sense that Facebook is a public medium, with user Profile activity being offered as evidence in court cases,<sup>132</sup> fodder for scandalous news stories,<sup>133</sup> and playing a serious role in employee hiring and firing.<sup>134</sup> Meanwhile, as the evidence in my study suggests, Facebook users often think of the platform as a more of a *private* medium in that they carefully consider people before adding them or accepting them to their Friend Lists, and that they often share messages that are intended for a *specific* group of people—among their hundreds of Friends—to see. From this perspective, it seems rather unfair that someone could get fired for what they share on Facebook, since it could be likened to sharing something in a private forum.

At the same time, the respondents in my study claimed that they are only posting information to Facebook (with intended audiences in mind) that they are okay with unintended audiences seeing, should they happen to see it. As Donath (2007) observed, while users may be concerned about their personal privacy, many still use Facebook as a signalling tool to their peers by disclosing personal information about their hobbies and relationships. As Internet users and social media technologies are evolving together, it is clear that the past paradigm of communication, in which people generally revealed very little about their personal lives, has given way to a new paradigm that might be

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<sup>132</sup> See “Facebook posts mined for court case evidence” <http://www.itnews.com.au/News/246329.facebook-posts-mined-for-court-case-evidence.aspx> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>133</sup> See “Rob Ford accused of giving mother and daughter the finger” <http://www.thestar.com/news/article/1030393> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>134</sup> See “17 people who were fired for using Facebook” <http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-fired-2011-5#a-waitress-cant-deal-with-a-bad-tip-1> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

characterized by personal transparency. It has shifted from creating a scripted version of oneself for the public to revealing as much about oneself as desired on a given day. Privacy today, therefore, is not about the information that we want to keep to ourselves. Rather, it is about *the information that we have chosen to reveal to others while expecting them to keep it discrete*. Having said this, given that Facebook’s mission statement is to “create a more open world,” it is worth questioning the wisdom in trusting the company to keep discrete the information that we share within it. Indeed, a major finding of the study was how tolerant respondents were about their information and activity data being used by Facebook for commercial purchases. The respondents have little concern with the information that they share with their Friends on Facebook being sold to third party brands for advertising and marketing research. It is not that they *want* their personal information to be shared with brands, but that they *tolerate* it and see it as inevitable in a digital age in which no “free” service comes without having to give something up.

### **Government regulation of personal information disclosure**

According to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, the personal information of consumers has become a valuable commodity for companies, especially in the digital age; it can be collected, stored, broadcasted, analyzed, and traded quickly and easily. As such, an important challenge for privacy regulators lies in finding the right balance between the privacy rights of citizens and the commercial interests of companies with which citizens willingly interact online.<sup>135</sup> While targeted advertising, for example, can make product searches more personalized and online shopping more convenient, at

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<sup>135</sup>See “Should Consumers Control Their Own Data?” [https://www.privacyassociation.org/publications/2012\\_04\\_12\\_should\\_consumers\\_control\\_their\\_own\\_data](https://www.privacyassociation.org/publications/2012_04_12_should_consumers_control_their_own_data) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

what point does the collection and storage of consumer data become unwanted? To put it in a broader context, as the evolution of SNSs like Facebook brings with it changes in society's outlook of privacy, what does it now mean to have one's privacy violated? While answering this question may have been difficult in the context of past generations, it is even more difficult to answer today. Yet, the government has for the most part left it up to individuals to make that determination on their own—by ensuring that users can opt out of services that collect data for commercial purposes, by enforcing that SNSs make privacy controls available and accessible, and by appointing a Commissioner to enforce rules and address concerns. In other words, even though regulation has become increasingly challenging, the onus remains on the individual user to be vigilant about their privacy. In this way, if consumers want more stringent privacy policies on a SNS, the company must determine whether giving in to consumer demand will be good or bad for business.

However, as the results of my study suggest, the likelihood is slim that more than a handful of the millions of SNS users in Canada will ever navigate away from their favourite place on the Web and fill out a Complaint Form on the Office of Privacy Commissioner of Canada's website. Not only did most of the respondents in this study admit to being lazy about managing their privacy on Facebook, but they also empathized with the business goals of the provider of the “free” service and some even saw the value in empowering companies with whatever personal data that are needed to create better products and product advertising. This is not a group of respondents that uses Facebook begrudgingly; they appreciate what it offers and consider the risks of using it to be limited. More importantly, because they can and do manage their own behaviour, they

believe that they are able to mitigate the privacy risks. As Trent put it: “As long as I’m careful about how I’m using it, I’m not putting myself into a situation where the information I put out can hurt me—as far as I know.”

Broadly, my study suggests that while young people may appreciate knowing they have the right to stand up for their privacy, very few will actually do so if it requires clicking away from where they spend most of their time. Incidentally, with Facebook accounting for one out of every five page views worldwide,<sup>136</sup> Millennials are likely spending most of their time online on Facebook. Given this, a highly market-driven approach to privacy legislation may not be wise considering what is on the line, in a digital era that continues to rapidly evolve around a cohort that is arguably too young to appreciate how the nature of privacy has changed in the last decade.

As well, the privacy paradox as I have described it in Chapter 1 and the transparency paradox as explained by Nissenbaum (2010, 2011) apply to citizens of all ages, and they are compelling cases for why the Government of Canada may need to protect citizens from digital criminals and, to an extent, from themselves. As attitudes toward privacy disclosure change in favour of sharing more of their personal lives in online spaces that can be accessed with an email address and a password, citizens are putting themselves at greater risk. Indeed, the results from my study broadly suggest that the benefits of using Facebook far outweigh the perceived risks. To me, the fact that most of my respondents would be okay with Facebook selling their photo data in aggregate to advertisers for research purposes, and that some would take little issue with having their private conversations sold for the same purposes, suggests that SNSs like Facebook have

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<sup>136</sup> See “Hitwise: 1 in 5 U.S. pageviews belong to Facebook” [http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023\\_3-57370786-93/hitwise-1-in-5-u.s-pageviews-belong-to-facebook/](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57370786-93/hitwise-1-in-5-u.s-pageviews-belong-to-facebook/) (last accessed August 28, 2013).



the potential to use intimate information about its members with little pushback from the public. While the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada has done commendable job of influencing Facebook policy, the restraint is only required of Facebook and not of its users.

I am not suggesting that the government should regulate the content and frequency of information shared by individual citizens to such networks. Stringent government regulation is unlikely to be adaptable to the pace and scope of advancements in online social networking. I am simply pointing out that a market-driven approach might give a tremendous advantage to the market as citizens continue to disclose more about themselves online despite claiming to be concerned about their online privacy. Therefore, governments may need to strike the right balance between leaving it to individuals and SNSs to constantly negotiate privacy policies and being poised to swiftly step in if the circumstances call for it. Indeed, it could be argued that if citizens were made more palpably and frequently aware of the potential risks of online disclosure on SNSs, going beyond merely press releases of bodies like the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, perhaps their memberships would more conscious about the personal information they are uploading, and perhaps such websites would take greater steps toward protecting the information shared by their users.

### **SNSs and the future of online community research**

*The 2011 GreenBook Research Industry Trends report found that 58% of research buyers saw online community research in their future, ahead of*

*mobile surveys (41%) and text analytics (47%) and just behind social media analytics (68%).<sup>137</sup>*

*95 percent of top performing organizations identified getting closer to customers as their most important strategic initiative over the next five years.<sup>138</sup>*

The following sub-sections explore how the marketing research industry might capitalize on such attitudes toward personal information disclosure (especially among hard-to-reach Millennials) to generate richer insights for its clients. As competition intensifies and as new consumer behaviours constantly emerge, brands must actively identify new sources of differentiation in order to remain relevant over the long term by reaching and understanding their customers in new ways (Curran, Graham, and Temple 2011; Li and Bernoff 2008). At the same time, getting the kind of insight needed to create opportunities for innovation is difficult in a research space dominated by quantitative methodologies that do not allow for consumer interaction with each other and with the brand. In the last decade, online research communities have played an increasingly important role in meeting this need (Li and Bernoff 2008). From a marketing research perspective, an online community is a group of people online, brought together to help an organization gain insights into its brand. They enable brand leaders to get a unique perspective into the lives of their current or potential customers, to understand their needs, and to collaborate with them in ways that are not possible through other point-in-time methodologies. Specifically, online research communities allow for

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<sup>137</sup> See “GRIT Spring 2011 executive report” <http://issuu.com/researchshare/docs/grit-spring-2011-exec> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

<sup>138</sup> See “IBM 2010 global CEO study: creativity selected as most crucial factor for future success” <http://www-03.ibm.com/press/us/en/pressrelease/31670.wss> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

engagement with key audiences, the co-creation of new offerings, and the gauging of their reactions to new ideas, messages, products, or campaigns. By generating ideas for new products and services alongside prospective customers, by evaluating customer experiences through product diaries, blogs, discussions and surveys, and by refining product concepts and collaborating on concept iterations, online research communities are a powerful tool for achieving a deep level of customer insight. Finally, by tapping into a targeted group of participants on an ongoing basis (weeks, months, even years) online, brands can save thousands in recruiting, incentives, facility rental and travel.

However, there are drawbacks to online research communities, including the initial lack of trust experienced by respondents when joining; costly member attrition over time; and the burden of community management, all of which negatively affect the quality and quantity of data. Such drawbacks are being discussed within industry forums<sup>139</sup> and inevitably point to mobile compatibility as the next stage in the evolution of the online research community. While I believe that mobile phone integration is a logical step given the growth in mobile phone and smartphone adoption, it is simply an extension of the existing methodology and in no way represents a marked shift in the way online research communities are managed. On the other hand, *Facebook* has become known in the marketing research industry as an essential tool for bringing brands and consumers closer together. More importantly, the fact that respondents admitted to being comfortable with having their data mined by Facebook and its partners—not only accepting it but *expecting* it—opens the door to exploring ways of *transparently* conducting marketing research within the network. In the sub-sections that follow, I will

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<sup>139</sup> See “To understand Millennials, you need more than surveys” <http://millennialmarketing.com/2011/07/to-understand-millennials-you-need-more-than-surveys/> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

expand upon the problems associated with a current marketing research methodology and explain how some of the key findings in my study can be applied as solutions.

### ***Addressing non-response through trust***

In recent years, a major challenge for marketing researchers (and online survey companies, generally) has been respondent attrition and non-response.<sup>140</sup> Half of senior marketing research executives claim that the refusal rate is increasing; 37% report it is staying the same; while only 6% say it is decreasing. The challenges of managing an online research community often begin at the recruitment stage, during which new members enrol in an online research community only to question its legitimacy and viability (Tippins and Marquit 2010). Put differently, they are hesitant to trust it. As such, many newly enrolled members never return, which means that the community needs to be refreshed at additional costs until there are at least 100 members willing to give the community the benefit of the doubt.

In response to the shift in consumers' online behavior, survey companies would be wise to adapt to the wide array of channels where people spend their time online. Facebook, as we learned from respondents, is a *trusted* platform with one billion registered users. Potential members of an online research community can therefore be confident that the community within which they will be sharing their personal stories, experiences, and opinions will not suddenly be shut down.

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<sup>140</sup> See "Market research non response errors" <http://www.citeman.com/4840-market-research-non-response-errors.html> (last accessed August 28, 2013).

In addition, while branded research communities tend to have a higher overall level of participation than unbranded ones,<sup>141</sup> some argue that branded communities lead to biased results. However, I believe that when members of a community are asked by a familiar brand—as opposed to a mysterious moderator—to give them honest feedback, trust is more easily established, and this gives members greater incentive to participate. Thus, by hosting a research community within Facebook, the brand is not actually “Friending” the respondent, but it still benefits from the *trust* that has for years been established and nurtured between the respondent and the social network.

### ***Combating attrition through familiarity***

As websites increasingly integrate social media technologies like Facebook and Twitter into their platforms, consumers have become more and more accustomed to their presence on any Web page. Moreover, as Facebook has consolidated popular online activities like photo-sharing, discussions, private messaging, as well as an efficient mechanism to locate people and brands, consumers have become accustomed to accomplishing more online with less navigation and therefore less effort. As a result, a major challenge faced by online community researchers is getting groups of respondents to log on to their website on a daily basis. One such group is young people, who require extensive effort to be engaged in a dialog online, let alone *remain* engaged over time. They are busy students, they are hyper-stimulated, and they spend most of their time on Facebook. Getting young people to spend their already limited time on an external research community with minimum incentive is wishful thinking. Anyone who is an

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<sup>141</sup> See “Marketing Research Online Community (MROC): a special kind of research panel” [http://www.polarismr.com/Portals/58820/newsletters/survey\\_methodologies/MRP\\_0710\\_MROC.htm](http://www.polarismr.com/Portals/58820/newsletters/survey_methodologies/MRP_0710_MROC.htm) (last accessed August 28, 2013).

online community researcher knows of countless would-be respondents who simply did not want to be burdened with the extra clicks involved each time they have to log in to a separate online community with a separate username and password, and having to learn how to navigate an entirely new interface than the one they use on a daily basis. That is, potential respondents are lost because of the inconvenience of having to go to and learn how to use a new platform. However, a research community hosted within Facebook helps to overcome those hurdles since nearly 700 million people, especially young people, visit Facebook on a *daily* basis. It is more convenient to participate in an ongoing online research study when one does not have to navigate away from the space where they spend most of their time. Indeed, given that so many people spend so much time on Facebook, it makes sense to conduct more research within the Facebook interface where the community member does not have to learn the inner workings of an entirely new platform. A research community hosted within Facebook would have the same look and feel as Facebook itself—similar fonts, fields, and functionality. Moreover, by keeping respondents within Facebook, they can be studied without removing them from where they are most comfortable. When respondents are in a familiar environment, it is easier for them to open up.

As well, as we learned in Chapter 2, users like Facebook because there are *fewer clicks* required to access all that is important to them. Indeed, less than a decade ago the mantra in the research world used to be “young people are online, engage them there.” I believe it is time to narrow the focus to “young people are on *Facebook*, engage them there.” While email has historically been the most important medium through which survey companies solicit potential respondents, it is becoming increasingly difficult to

engage respondents through email alone. Emailed community updates get buried among a host of competing messages from a variety of industries in addition to those from one's friends and family members. Put differently, the medium through which online research community companies rely on the most to reach respondents is less effective than ever. Keeping respondents engaged is essential to the success of an online qualitative research study. As email becomes a secondary communications channel among young people, a key way to keep respondents engaged is to make community updates available within the online space in which they most active—Facebook.

### ***Improving community management with the click of a button***

For a moderator / researcher in an online community comprised of hundreds of respondents with a diversity of opinions in both quality and quantity, acknowledging each of their contributions by typing superficial messages like “Thanks for your contribution!” or “Great—thanks!” can come across as insincere and repetitive, and can be quite time consuming. However, acknowledging respondents' contributions within the community is critical; if it is not done, respondents may feel ignored or unappreciated and consequently leave the study (Tippins and Marquit (2010). A “thumbs-up” via the Like button, however, allows the moderator to make a personalized gesture that at minimum says “I hear you.” As already discussed, respondents have come to *expect* acknowledgement after posting a status update or a set of photos, and it makes sense that they would expect it from other online contexts in which their opinions are being sought. In a research community hosted within Facebook, the moderator can meet such expectations with the click of a button. By providing them with a sense of acknowledgement that their voices are being heard, community members are more likely

to give back in the form of sharing both private information about themselves, including feelings, desires, and fears, as well as robust feedback on ideation and co-creation.

### ***Brands as Friends***

In summary, with so many marketing researchers diving into the world of Facebook without a well-planned strategy or much knowledge of users' relationship with each other or with the platform itself, the results of my study have important implications for online communities research. Facebook is the fastest growing two-way communication platform of all time, and as companies increasingly make the social network a key hub for their marketing and communication strategies with various stakeholders, it is crucial that they understand what drives engagement in the digital age. Indeed, brands have in recent years taken notice of the usefulness of Facebook for maintaining an ongoing relationship with their supporters and attracting potential new customers through contests and promotions by having them Like the brand's page to become a "fan" (Beneke 2012; Dolan, Goodman, and Habel 2012; Gummerus et al. 2012; Shaw and Coker 2012; Wallace, Buil, and de Chernatony 2012). Brands with a high level of cultural cache have fans in the tens of millions. For example, as of August 2013 Coca-Cola has over 72 million fans; Disney has over 45 million; and Starbucks has over 35 million. Smaller brands, like Second Cup (a Canadian coffee franchise), for example, have fans in the tens of thousands. However, be they popular or niche, in both cases brands are not doing enough to leverage the consumer insight that is literally accessible by their fingertips. By visiting any brand's Facebook page one will see questions being asked of consumers using status updates or the occasional poll question—both intended to generate insight but are simply regarded by users as "filler" content until the next



contest or promotion launches. For example, a 2012 Wall post by Second Cup reads, “Is Coffee and Chocolate a match made in heaven?” Another reads, “Do you have a favourite coffee related blog? If yes, share it with us!” Brands are therefore missing out on the opportunity to engage loyalists within a website that they frequently visit and with which they have an established level of comfort to open up about themselves. They are missing out on the chance to join forces with their consumers toward growing the brand in new directions and into new markets through topical deep dives and exploration.

Indeed, in recent years there have been only a few scholarly discussions concerning the ethics of conducting research in Facebook (Bruckman et al. 2010; Hossmann 2011; Zimmer 2010). In 2012, though, Megan Moreno et al. (2012) recruited 132 18 to 19-year olds by examining their publicly viewable Facebook Profiles. They interview participants about their opinions on the research method. Only 15% reported feeling uneasy or concerned, while 36% were neutral, and 56% viewed the method positively. This suggests that young adults with publicly viewable Profiles are not opposed to being recruited through Facebook. Indeed, the results of my study suggest that hosting research communities *within* Facebook would be an important step in transforming the way consumers (especially Millennials) and brands engage in research together.

## **LIMITATIONS**

While a qualitative approach was appropriate for a study like mine that aimed to extract deep insight, there are some limitations. First, given the sample size, the results of my study cannot not be considered generalizable, especially the sample of Boomers, which is comprised of only 10 people. A future qualitative study could seek to examine

the privacy attitudes and practices of a larger sample of Boomers in order to make deeper or more nuanced comparisons between the two cohorts.

Second, a few of the respondents may be considered friends or acquaintances of mine—those that began the snowball sampling method—and so the possibility of bias exists. Despite the fact that I had an existing relationship with the respondents which I believe served to encourage honest conversation, it is possible that some of the respondents refrained from articulating completely honest opinions given the somewhat sensitive nature of the interview questions. However, I did not perceive this during our interviews.

Third, the respondents in the Millennial sample were interviewed during the early months of the 2011 Winter Term (January to February), a period when the undergraduate respondents in particular were more likely to be spending more time indoors and therefore online and on Facebook, as opposed to during the Spring or Summer term. Therefore, it is possible that respondents were more active on Facebook during this interview period than they would be during others, which may have affected the ways they answered certain questions, like how integral Facebook was to their everyday lives.

Fourth, this sample was not so diverse in social class and ethnicity to yield noteworthy differences within such factors; there were also no glaring differences between male and female respondents. A much larger and more diverse sample may help identify and understand any of such gaps. Moreover, respondents in the study were limited to those living in Ontario and were between the ages of 18 and 32 and between 48 and 58. Future research on the benefits and risks of information disclosure among Facebook users could be extended to include other demographics like elementary school

and high school students (Generation Z); Generation X-ers; seniors; teachers and professors; as well as a geographically and internationally wider demographic base. Indeed, a future study that compares the results of the current one with those of other countries would provide valuable insight into how the benefits and risks of using Facebook are perceived across different cultures, especially with respect to privacy and social capital.

Fifth, the respondents from both age cohorts were similar in their frequency of Facebook use, in that they logged on to the website at least once per day and regularly updated their Profiles. As such, it is possible that the themes that I uncovered, such as *Facebook is my life online* and *Facebook is my primary connection to others*, may not be applicable to others in the same age cohorts who log on to Facebook only a few times per week. As well, among the Millennial sample, all of the respondents were either working professionals or students in an undergraduate degree program or higher. It is possible that such uniformity in education and socioeconomic status may have biased my results.

Finally, given that only one type of SNS was investigated, future research should also examine through qualitative inquiry the nature of information disclosure on other SNSs like Twitter, Google Plus, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and how users of such SNSs interpret and negotiate the costs of their information disclosure with the perceived benefits, compared to users of Facebook.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, contrary to studies that have argued that Facebook is more useful for maintaining or creating bridging social capital between weak ties (Aubrey, Chattopadhyay, and Rill 2008; Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2007; Johnston et al. 2011;

Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2008, 2009), the data from my study reveal that the Millennial respondents are using Facebook primarily for maintaining *bonding* social capital between strong ties. The data also reveal that maintaining bridging social capital is not seen as a benefit of using Facebook; rather, respondents simply enjoy being able to stay updated on weak ties. The data also show that, while Facebook is their primary connection to others—strong and weak ties—they are using Facebook primarily with their strong ties in mind; weak ties are seen as little more than bystanders. As well, my study suggest that, despite the concerns that have been raised about privacy issues, the benefits of maintaining bonding social capital through uploading personal information about one's self outweigh the risks of having that information used for commercial purposes.

In addition, while media stories and the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada suggest that people are being less concerned about their privacy, the data from this study suggest that this is not the case—that the respondents in my study are simply more open about sharing their opinions and photos with people through online platforms. The reason for this is that Facebook is useful for maintaining *bonding* social capital, as opposed to bridging social capital. That is, respondents are willing to reveal personal information about themselves to weak ties as part of the convenience of connecting easily with strong ties. Not only are respondents okay with weak ties having access to the information they disclose openly on Facebook, but also with anonymous marketing researchers who want to mine their data for the purposes of advertising.

However, it does not follow that the respondents do not care about privacy. In fact, the respondents identified privacy issues as the primary risk of using Facebook. They simply believe that the benefits of maintaining bonding social capital on Facebook

outweigh the privacy-related concerns, including the misuse of their data, which they consider to be a remote risk; and having one's personal data sold by Facebook to advertisers, a business model to which they have long been accustomed. In this way, the flow of information on Facebook is both its strength and its weakness. However, this paradox is not new in terms of the technologies we are using today. Wiretaps exist, but we still use phones. Credit card accounts are hacked every day, but we still order products online. Online passwords can be cracked, but most of us use the same one for several of our most private accounts. In each case, the benefits of using the technology are deemed to outweigh the risks. For many of the respondents in my study, Facebook is the sole place where they store their digital photos (as opposed to on their computer's hard drive), not necessarily for the purposes of sharing with their Friends but because of the convenience of the website. In the new era of cloud computing, it is not that uploading one's photos online is the socially expected thing to do (so that others may be able to view them), but the practical thing. Hard drives crash, memory sticks get lost, but the cloud—supposedly—is reliable and accessible anytime and from wherever there is an Internet connection.

Indeed, Facebook has affected the social relationships of respondents—Millennials and Boomers— by increasing the frequency and speed of the visibility of their friends and acquaintances to them and of them to others. Yes, since the advent of the mobile phone we have been airing our private lives in public, but those likely to overhear such daily conversations are a relatively small number of strangers in the supermarket, on the bus, or in an elevator. In the age of Facebook, those who can “overhear” us (i.e. read

our conversations, musings and event plans; view our photos) are primarily those who already know us in some way.

However, while Zuckerberg wants the world to be more open and connected and while cloud computing becomes increasingly popular, it is a mistake to jump to the conclusion that people want less privacy. On the contrary, privacy remains an important social issue, one that is seen in healthcare, advertising, census-taking, and more. While ordinary citizens may not be demanding or insisting on a certain level of privacy on Facebook, they do want to know that there exists an option of having control over their information. How one chooses to manage their privacy is up to the individual user, and in some ways it is as much a negotiated process online as it is in other areas of life. Thus, Zuckerberg's quote (or misquote) from Chapter 1 that privacy is "no longer a social norm" is polarizing; it suggests that privacy either exists or does not exist. As well, in saying that people want a more open and connected world, Zuckerberg makes an exclusionary assumption about those who are using online social technologies. His statement ignores those for whom privacy and disclosure are ongoing issues that are constantly considered—like victims of serious diseases or mental illnesses, or those with disabilities, who must contend with stigma in their daily lives offline. While social technologies may have "shrunk" people's sense of personal space online, it does *not* mean that they do not want privacy or that there are not things that they consciously keep private.

Privacy, therefore, is a sliding scale. It is more appropriate to say that privacy today has more variations than to say it is no longer a social norm. Indeed, since the advent of Facebook and similar SNSs, people have not been clamouring for surveillance

cameras on the streets or in their bedrooms, but they are nowadays *more comfortable* controlling the kinds of information they disclose about themselves online.

Still, with so many people using Facebook and its various plug-ins on a myriad of popular websites that benefit from being associated with the website, even the most privacy conscious user cannot avoid having a digital representation of their desires, needs, and purchasing behaviour created online; one that reveals more about the user than they may realize. Given the inevitability of this process, my findings are even more relevant when considering that every day hundreds of millions of Facebook users add new information to their digital footprints within the social network. In exchange for using a tool that consolidates all their media interests—photos storage and sharing, link sharing, private and public messaging, blogging / note-writing, and gaming—into one website, respondents seem content with paying the price of their privacy. Hence, as long as people feel like they are *in control* of their decision to share information and are being rewarded for it, marketing researchers are in a position to actually tap into a willing sample. Thus, rather than providing consumers with “flexible” yet costly tools like pocket camcorders or asking them to provide feedback via mobile devices, brands would be wiser to engage consumers—especially Millennials—in marketing research activities on *their turf* and on *their terms*. For now and the foreseeable future, their turf is Facebook. Their terms, however, will remain variable.

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## APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### History and frequency of Facebook usage

- To you, what is Facebook?
- How long have you been using Facebook? How did you find out about it? Tell me about the time you first created your account? How many accounts do you have right now?
- When you first started using Facebook, what were your impressions? Describe your feelings at the time?
- Have you ever cancelled your Facebook account? Have you ever thought about cancelling it? Why or why not?
- How often do you log on to your account? For how long?
- During what times of the day do you log on (e.g. first thing in the morning, during or after work hours)? Would you say that you have a “Facebook routine?” Describe it.
- About how many times do you post information on your Profile like a status update, status comment, photo comment, or photo upload?

### Facebook in everyday life

- How does Facebook play a part in your everyday life?
- What are all the ways in which you access your account (e.g. at home, at the library, at work, on a mobile phone)?

- On a daily basis, what are the three most common things you do on Facebook (e.g. update status, look at photos, scan the News Feed)?
- Have you ever not logged on to Facebook for an extended period of time? How did you respond to this? How did your Friends respond to this?
- If you and only you were suddenly banned from accessing your Facebook account or creating a new account, how would you feel?
- If Facebook were to shut down, how would you feel? How do you think your life would change?

### **Facebook and peer communication**

- How do you use Facebook as a method of communication? How do you personally use (messaging / Wall / status / chat)?
- How does Facebook compare to other ways of communicating?
- Is Facebook an efficient way of communicating?
- When you post something like [from content analysis: an image or status update of something personal in nature] to your Profile, for whose eyes is that information/image intended specifically / who on your Friend List are you thinking about?
- When posting this kind of information/image, to what extent do you think about the other Friends to whom the information/image was *not* intended?
- You have about [#] Facebook Friends. Of these [#] Friends, about how many Profiles do you actively follow?
- Of your [#] Facebook Friends, about how many are actively following you that you know of?



- Thinking of your daily Facebook use, do you actively follow Friends or do you passively inform yourself?
- Do the things you see on Facebook impact the way you interact with or think about other people? How so?

### **Types of personal information disclosed**

- How often do you change your Profile picture? What drives you to change your photo? Do you have any requirements that your Profile picture must meet?
- What sort of things are you most likely to post in your status (e.g. personal feelings, announcements)?
- What is the general tone of your status updates (e.g. humourous, depressive, witty)? When updating your status, do you hope others will comment on it? Is so, what kind of comments do you expect?
- Thinking back, have you ever disclosed what most people would consider highly personal information about yourself in your Profile (e.g. sexually suggestive photos, post-surgery photos, updates on family tragedies)? Why post it?
- How about highly personal information about other people? Thinking back, have you ever disclosed personal information about one of your Friends on their Wall? Why or why not?

### **Facebook and frequency of information disclosure**

- How does the amount of self-disclosure on your Profile compare to your other Friends' Profiles?
- Do you feel like you have to post stuff on your Profile often? Why or why not?

- Do you comment on other people's statuses? What is the nature of your comments—brief acknowledgement (e.g. cool!) or more in depth? Do you feel that you have to comment on your Friends' posts (updates and photo uploads)?
- If you suddenly stopped posting stuff or commenting on your Friend's statuses for one week, would your Friends notice? How do you think they would respond to this?

### **General awareness of and attitudes toward Facebook privacy settings**

- Are you aware of Facebook's privacy settings?
- [If yes] How have you used them? How often do you adjust your settings?
- Do you ever re-visit your privacy settings to make sure nothing has changed? If so, how often and why?

### **Rewards/benefits of personal information disclosure**

- For you, what is the benefit of updating your status? How do others benefit from you updating your status?
- Does having a Facebook Profile affect the quality of your relationship with your close friends? How about with family?
- When you post something like (use example from content analysis) to your Profile, do you expect a response [i.e. validation] from your Friends in the form of comments (e.g. "I agree – that song rocks!")?
- When posting a photo album or status update, do you hope for feedback/comments from your Friends?

### **Risks/drawbacks of personal information disclosure**

- Do you ever wonder if someone might be looking at comments or photos on your Profile and disapprove of them? How do you get around that?
- Have you ever been confronted by someone who disapproved of comments or photos you've uploaded or comments you've made *on your own* Profile page? Describe the situation and how you dealt with it.
- Has anyone ever uploaded a photo of you to their Profile page that you disapproved of? How did you deal with it?
- Do you believe that there are people in your Friend List with whom you've had little contact who are looking at your Profile page? Does this matter to you?
- Do you ever worry that the photos you upload to Facebook may be downloaded to a hard drive by your Friends or strangers? If yes, how has that affected your photo uploading? If not, why?
- Have you ever downloaded a Friend's Facebook photos to your hard drive? Describe.
- Do you follow anyone closely on Facebook who in all likelihood does not know you are following them? If so, why?
- Have you ever blocked anyone? Why?
- Have you ever been blocked? Do you know why you were blocked? How did it make you feel?

### **Determining appropriate and inappropriate disclosure**

- When uploading a photo album, how do you decide which photos to upload?

- Can you think of a time when someone posted something to their Profile page that you felt was inappropriate? Describe it for me.

### **Awareness of Facebook's commercial use of personal data**

- Have you ever read through Facebook's Terms of Use? If so, what were your impressions of it? If not, how come?
- Do you think most Facebook users have read the Terms of Use? Why or why not?
- Do you think Facebook does anything with the information that you upload? What do you think it does with your information?
- [If respondent is not aware] Did you know that Facebook uses some of your demographic information and information of about your special interests (e.g. football, horror movies) to help its advertisers target ads at you?

### **Attitudes toward Facebook's commercial use of personal data**

- Describe when you first became aware of Facebook selling your data to advertisers. What did you think of this when you found out?
- Do you mind that Facebook is selling your personal data to advertisers? When it comes to Facebook sharing your information with advertisers, where do you draw the line?
- If you found out that your Profile picture was used in an advertisement that appeared on your Friends' Facebook page, how would you respond?
- If you found out that Facebook was storing your photo albums and selling them to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?

- If you found out that Facebook was recording your private Inbox emails between Friends and selling your conversations to companies for research purposes, how would you respond? How would your Facebook usage change, if at all?