

**Identity Performance, Gender and Social Media:  
College Students and Facebook**

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## **Abstract**

As social networking sites (SNSs) have become the dominant form of communication among internet users, the presentation of identity has become key in creating and maintaining relationships online. To understand the motivations behind the performance of virtual identities, this research study inquires how identity is constructed and performed on Facebook. College students are amongst the most avid users of Facebook, and thus the study focuses on their performance of identity. This study is unique in that it works to understand how college seniors intend to be perceived during their transition from college to the professional world. A qualitative study of their performance of identity during this period of time presented opportunities to understand issues of authenticity online and professional uses of Facebook.

This study looked at the performance of identity through the lens of gender, and found that in fact males and females do exhibit some different behaviors when performing their desired identity. However, across both genders in their senior year college seniors were most motivated and concerned about performing for potential employers. This study indicated that performance of identity existed for both males and females throughout their college experience, although in many ways the performance changed due to a difference in audience over time.

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## Chapter 1

### **Introduction**

As social media mature and are embraced by a larger portion of the population, their usage is increasingly segmented and advanced. Computer-mediated communication research is cross-disciplinary, attracting the interest of scholars of psychology, sociology and cultural studies since its advent in the early 1990s. However, the development of modern technologies has forced scholars to reconsider the effects of social networks and the communication associated with them. Under these circumstances, media scholars study social networking sites (SNSs) and their impact on identity formation, relationship maintenance, and interpersonal communication. Because online platforms influence the exploration and development of personal and social identity, users are socially entangled in an endless digital web. At the core of this entanglement is the manner by which individuals choose to identify themselves in virtual community systems.

The concept of identity performance was first introduced by Erving Goffman (1956) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. According to Goffman, individuals actively engage in performing a role, the self, for the outside audience for a number of reasons, including self-preservation. Self-presentation has been defined as the “complex process of selecting which aspects of one’s self to disclose, hide, or fake in order to create a positive impression on the audience” (Cunningham, 2013, p. 4).

Scholars have applied theories of identity construction to technology, but an application to modern SNSs is just beginning. Furthermore, existing research that explores the internet as a stage for personal self-representation, has revealed discrepancies between online identity and

reality. A question that routinely surfaced in the literature about online SNSs is the extent to which created identities reflect an actual or an ideal identity. In addition to examining gender, this study contributes information on how much of performance is based in fact or fiction.

Within the study of virtual communities, there is significant professional and popular interest in the effects of social media on college students, with a specific focus on the most popular social media website—Facebook (Junco, 2012, Abramson, 2011, and Kamenetz, 2011). Created in 2004, Facebook is an online SNS where users join to create relationships that are social in nature. Facebook has “1.18 billion daily active users” (Facebook, 2016), and Junco (2012) has suggested that anywhere between 85-99 percent of college students use Facebook. The popular online technology provides a platform for the creation of a profile, which functions as one’s identity in the cyber-network. In addition, a number of studies have shown that male and female students do not use Facebook in the same manner (Shepard, 2016; Park, Yaden, Schwartz, Kern, Eichstaedt, Kosinski, Seligman, 2016).

The senior year represents a pivotal time for many college students as they prepare to transition from being a student to a new role in the workplace. The identity performed by a student on SNSs, including Facebook, may not align with the criteria by which prospective employers hire. Increasingly, human resource professionals and future employers are able to access information on SNSs as they screen potential job candidates. Curran, Draus, Schragar, & Zappala (2014) note that college students have varying opinions on how much information they are revealing through Facebook, and how much of that information is available to employers. At the same time, little research has addressed identify performance by male and female college students on Facebook during this important time of transition.

Accordingly, this study examines the construction of online identity on Facebook by male and female college seniors who are preparing for the job market to better understand their experiences, motives, expectations and differences in identity construction and maintenance.

### **Literature Review**

Social networking sites provide a series of “networked publics” that create an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice” (Boyd, 2011, p. 38). Central to this study of media and identity are questions of how social networking sites impact our personal and professional lives. How is identity constructed, performed and perceived online? This chapter will provide a review of the existing literature on the concept of identity and the performance of identity in online spaces. It will focus primarily on the work of scholars who have been influenced by Erving Goffman’s concepts of self-presentation and identity management.

#### **Identity as a concept**

Identity, or the part of the self by which we are known to others (Altheide, 2000), can manifest itself in a variety of settings. According to Gleason (1983), the notion of identity entered social science literature in the 1950s, and scholars have more recently argued its relevance to role theory, symbolic interactionism and performance theories.

In sociology and social psychology, three distinct definitions of identity have emerged; an individual’s culture, an identification to a distinct social group, and something that brings meaning to one’s life. Calhoun (1994), for example, uses identity to refer broadly to the culture of people, and described intimate links between individual and collective identity formation.

Calhoun's definition of identity involves "a struggle for recognition in a contentious world" (Eyerman, 1995, p. 382). Others use Tajfel's (1982) definition of identity as "a common identification with a collectivity or social category" (Tajfel, p. 284). Social Identity theory developed as a reference to the collective identification one finds with a common group of people. Finally, identity can also be defined as the "parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (American Sociological Association, 2000, p. 284).

Particularly important to the concept of identity in social psychology is the idea of symbolic interactionism, developed by scholar George Mead (1934). Symbolic interactionism forms the basis for identity theory work. Identity theory developed in an effort to make researchable Mead's concept that, "Society shapes self, which shapes social behavior" (Mead, 1934). In other words, identity theory acknowledges a connection between "self" and society (Stryker, 1968). Both symbolic interactionists and performance scholars have been influential in conceptualizing identity and the self as socially constructed concepts (McEwan, p. 84).

While the concept of identity is used throughout contemporary social science, there is a considerable variation in how it has developed and how it has been applied. Stryker (1980) and Burke (1991, 1999) were among the first scholars to theorize that the relation of social structures to identities influences the process of self-verification, while the process of self-verification creates and sustains social structures. The goal of developing a theory of identity was to understand why people would choose a certain course of action or behavior in a particular situation, especially when social relationships were involved and expectations associated with identity roles existed (Mead, 1934). This notion of selecting and adopting a



particular role in society was noted by William James (1890), who wrote in *Principle of Psychology* that “persons possess many selves.”

“To refer to each group-based self, theorists chose the term *identity*, asserting that persons have as many identities as distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles. In identity theory usage, social roles are expectations attached to positions occupied in networks of relationships; identities are internalized role expectations” (American Journal of Psychology, 1980).

Perhaps the two most influential strands of identity theory come from the work of Stryker (1980) and Burke (1991, 1999). Stryker and his colleagues focused on the connection between society and identity. “Persons are seen as living their lives in relatively small and specialized networks of social relationships, through roles that support their participation in such networks” (Stryker, 1980, p. 285). Stryker’s identity theory sought to answer,

“Why persons choose one particular course of action given situations in which there exist behavioral options aligned with two (or more) sets of role expectations attached to two (or more) positions in networks of social relationships” (Stryker, 1980, p. 286).

On the other hand, Burke and his associates focused on an internal process of self-verification required to develop an identity. His research worked to understand why an identity could produce a behavior that expressed that identity (Burke, 1991). Burke proposed that behaviors can be characterized as meaningful, and that the connection between identity and behavior can be found in the meaning that they share.

“Bringing situationally perceived self-relevant meanings into agreement with the identity standard is self-verification; This is accomplished by altering the current situation or by seeking and creating new situations in which perceived self-relevant meanings match those of the identity standard.”

(Burke, 1991, p. 288).

In addition, identity theory suggests that one particular role can be salient regardless of the situation or among individuals in a similar situation (Stryker, 1980, p. 286).

The theory of extended self (Belk, 1988) suggests that creation and control of what you possess are active and intentional ways of self-expression. “A second way of having an object and incorporating it into self is by creating it ... Whether the thing created is a material object or an abstract thought, the creator retains an identity in the object for as long as it retains a mark or some other association with the person who brought it into existence” (Belk, 1988, p. 150).

In some ways similar to James’ theory, the extension of self suggests that individuals must manage varying levels of identity. To do so, individuals rely on symbols that associate them with identifiable groups (Belk, 1988). In an early study that tested Belk’s identity theory of the extended self, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) found that MBA students who were insecure about their job prospects tended to adopt the consumption patterns of a stereotypical business person, accumulating or adopting such things as an expensive timepiece, “business shoes,” and other high-status accessories. In addition to material consumption, these students also assumed physical stereotypes, keeping their hair short and face shaved. The stronger adoption of these stereotypical businessperson symbols by students with poorer job prospects demonstrates that symbolic representation of a status, or a level of oneself in this regard, is

important for influencing perception. Belk's understanding of identity is the basis for studies that define identity by what we *have*. Belk believed that, "We are what we have...self-extension occurs through control and mastery of an object" (Belk, 1988, p. 160), providing a unique perspective to the research on presentation of self. The idea that an individual can have a relationship with material possessions, and that often that relationship may determine one's sense of self, is used in contemporary studies to explain consumer behaviors and habits (Oxford Journal of Consumer Research, 1988).

Introduced in 1973 by Erving Goffman, the study of self-presentation or impression management explains how individuals construct identity and manage the impressions of others (Goffman, 1973). Goffman conceptualized of identity construction through the use of metaphors tied to dramaturgy. Goffman argued that individuals choose a particular persona they wish to portray depending on the audience and setting, allowing them to tell a different story depending on the desired effect. Goffman's explanation of identity using impression management has been an area of interest to a variety of scholars. Leary (1995) defines impression management as "the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people" (Leary, 1995, p. 17). According to Tedeschi and Riess (1981), impression management is "any behavior by a person that has the purpose of controlling or manipulating the attributions and impressions formed of that person by others" (Tedeschi and Riess, 1981, p. 3). Building on Goffman's paradigm, Tedeschi and Riess conceptualized that self-presentation includes a motivation to manage other's impression. This process includes identity development, self-enhancement, influencing others, and obtaining credit and avoiding blame for actions. Similarly, Schlenker (1980) proposed that individuals work to regulate what information is

known (and what is not known) about oneself. “In fact, over time, the ‘authentic’ presentation of self—that is showing ourselves as we believe we really are is likely to be met by the greatest internal satisfaction external approval” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 7).

Just as Goffman interprets identity through the metaphor of dramaturgy, Butler (1990) approaches gender identification in similar terms of performance. She argues that gender only exists to the extent that it is performed, and that performance is a conscious effort to influence another during an interaction. She asserts that certain acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that the acts either conform to or contest an expectation that society has created about that role. Both Butler and Goffman assert that in order for identity to be recognized it must fit with an acknowledged role. Goffman notes that roles tend to be institutionalized because of stereotyped expectations. “When an actor takes on a social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it” (Goffman, 1973, p. 27). Baumeister (1982) argued that when designing one’s self-presentation, an individual might feel pressured to present a self that is consistent with existing reputations or likely future actions. These pressures confirm Goffman’s description of the relationship between the actor and audience. “If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him” (Goffman, 1973, p. 2).

More so than Goffman, Butler’s (1990) proposition on the performance of identity and socially constructed roles highlights society’s involvement in punishing those who attempt to fit an identity mask different from their reality. “The inscription of interiority is itself a publicly

regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication” (p. 582). Butler uses the study of gender to point to identity as a socially constructed concept rather than biologically distinct from social influence.

### **Goffman and the communication of identity**

Although Goffman’s work on identity precedes the rise of social networking sites (SNSs), it is particularly useful to the study of SNSs, which provide a platform for the management of identity in multiple settings playing to multiple audiences (Cunningham, 2013, p. 4). Goffman’s approach to identity helps to make sense of the deliberate choices we make in virtual mediums.

As explained above, Goffman analyzed the structure of human interaction by developing a series of concepts that explain how individuals “perform” in order to project a desirable perception of themselves. These concepts are useful in understanding how “an individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the other will in turn have to be impressed” (Ichheiser, 1949, p. 6). For example, Goffman defines the performance of identity as the activity of an individual before a particular set of observers over whom the actor has some influence. In order to understand who the performer is, the audience will interpret this performance and the messages involved in the act.

Goffman explains that these performances take place in “front,” as in front stage, or in front of an audience. Goffman defines the front as, “That part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (Goffman, 1973, p. 22). Goffman applies this concept to an individual’s “personal front,” which refers to the items an audience “most intimately identify with the performer himself” (Goffman, p. 23). Kuzenkoff (2008) describes the personal front as

all the background elements that help the audience to understand the context of the performance, and unique the characteristics of the performer. "As part of a personal front we may include: clothing, sex, age, racial characteristics, posture, speech, facial expressions and bodily gestures" (Goffman, 1973, p. 24). To make sense of the actor's performance, the audience interprets the front stage. Important to the concept of the front, is Goffman's claim that the audience interprets a personal front using knowledge obtained from previous experiences with fronts that share similar characteristics.

"Instead of having to maintain a different pattern of expectation and responsive treatment for each slightly different performer and performance, he [the audience] can place the situation in a broad category around which it is easy for him to mobilize his past experience and stereo-typical thinking" (Goffman, p. 26).

Goffman suggests that tension between a performance and the audience can arise because, "we may not find a perfect fit between the specific character of a performance and the general socialized guise in which it appears to us" (Goffman, p. 29). It is in the "back" [stage] that Goffman says individuals become more authentic because they no longer feel pressured to perform.

A performer's motivation to present himself effectively, wrote Goffman, is to avoid the embarrassment of failure. The intention is that the audience believes what they are presented.

"When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them.

They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses

the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be” (Goffman, 1973, p. 17).

According to Goffman, the roles that one takes on can be controlled both by the individual themselves as well by societal expectations of that particular role. One way that the performer may control the performance is by presenting an idealized version of himself or herself. For example, “When the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so in fact, than does his behavior as a whole” (Goffman, 1973, p. 35). This notion is particularly relevant to the degree that this research will examine how non-verbal cues in the form of which photos or content they post might be a method of control and idealization of a version of oneself.

Goffman explores this concept of idealizing identity in his 1976 work, *Gender Advertisements*, in which he argues femininity and masculinity are represented or performed in advertisements in patterned ways. “Those who compose (and pose for) pictures can choreograph the materials available in social situations to achieve their end, namely, the presentation of a scene that is meaningful, whose meaning can be read at a flash” (Goffman, 1979, p. 8). He argues that advertisements idealized the two sexes and their relationship to each other. Goffman says gender expressions are merely a show, but that a considerable amount of the substance of society is committed to the staging of it. “What the human nature of males and females really consists of, then, is a capacity to learn to provide and read depictions of masculinity and femininity” (Goffman, 1979, p. 8). Most importantly, Goffman concludes that the difference between the scenes in the media and scenes from actual life

result from the process of editing; the “ideal” is edited from what is made available (Goffman, 1979, p. 84). Thus, Goffman claimed there is no such thing as gender identity, only “a schedule for the portrayal of gender” (Goffman, p. 8). While Goffman applied his theory of performative identities to media through his study of print magazine, his ideas about editing self-image are a precursor to more advanced identity performance using modern technology.

Scholars have found Goffman’s theory of identity performance useful for examining the presentation of identities in computer-mediated communication, because it conceptualized identity as something that is constructed and communicated. Today’s media platforms function as a kind of modern-day stage.

### **Identity Construction in a Digital Age**

The internet challenges traditional notions of identity primarily concerned with face-to-face interaction. “The internet is a medium upon which self-disclosure is made easier due to the anonymity granted by sitting in front of a computer screen, rather than directly facing another human, and the ability to present a reality-based image of one’s self and one’s life” (Davis, Lippman, Morris and Tougas, 2013, p. 70). Computer-mediated communication allows for online environments to emerge as remote spaces for human interaction and identity expression. “Regardless of the channel of mediated communication, the fact that new communication technology, or computer-mediated communication (CMC), has become so pervasive and popular in usage, across the globe, indicates that we are seeing a change in the way that people interact with each other” (Kuzenkoff, 2008, p. 15).

Contemporary scholars have extended Goffman’s work into the digital age. Turkle (1995, 2011), for example, has examined the ways that computers allow users to explore and



experiment with relationships, sexuality and identity. Her research found that people could create and navigate multiple identities successfully. Turkle's work offered "a positive view of technology because it seemed to allow users to have freedom of identity that was different than what seemed possible in 'real life'" (Cunningham, 2013, pg. 3). Almost two decades later, in her 2011 work *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Turkle writes "Over time, such performances of identity may feel like identity itself" (Turkle, p. 12). This perspective points to the increase in society's interaction with social networking sites and the growing importance of creating an identity online.

In the context of CMC, individuals still give performances, both in the construction of their roles and through their interactions with other people. "One's Facebook page is essentially a performance of self. This page functions to communicate messages about the user to others and to portray a certain image of the person" (Kuzenkoff, 2008, p. 17). Any context in which a person interacts with another human being is an opportunity for the presentation of self, also known as "engagement" in Goffman's concept of impression management or self-representation. Gonzales and Hancock (2008) argue that "instead of treating the internet solely as an outlet for social interaction, the internet also should be considered as an outlet for self-construction" (Gonzales & Hancock, p. 167).

Miller (1995) argues that electronic interaction allows more expressive resources with which to construct identity and thus the challenge of establishing and maintaining an acceptable self remains. According to Hussain (2015), the rise of "anonymous" social networking sites has blurred the lines between real identity and virtual identity. A "anonymous community" is an environment in which information, photos and videos posted online are available to all

who are considered friends (Grasmauck, Martin, and Zhao, 2009). That environment, then, could be considered a “front” stage on which an individual performs for others to communicate a particular identity.

O’Sullivan (2000) addressed the implications of interpersonal communication technology use for personal relationships. He developed an impression management model based on interpersonal communication and identity theories that helps explain how people use CMC to create and exchange messages in pursuit of their communicational and relational goals (O’Sullivan, 2000, p. 405). His model suggests that channel selection, or one’s choice of social networking platform, can be used as a means for maximizing self-presentational benefits and minimizing self-presentational costs. “What is missing in mediated channels versus face-to-face may be seen not as a problem (at least by the channel selector), but as an opportunity to regulate information exchanged between partners as a means of managing self-presentations” (O’Sullivan, 2000, p. 406). O’Sullivan’s research applied to the 2000-era technology: electronic mail, answering machines, and video-conferencing. O’Sullivan focused on individuals and the choices they make in their interactions in the context of relationships, as well as on the technology itself. “Attention to channel is more important than ever, given the increasing array of interpersonal communication channels available and the promise of new ones” (O’Sullivan, 2000, p. 427).

### **A Focus on Social Networking Sites**

Kuzenkoff, among other scholars, recognized that much of research on how people form online identities was based on technology available in the 1990s, when the internet was popularized. Modern CMC contexts present new challenges to impression management, he

wrote. A widespread use of social media is amongst the most complex of the modern changes. There is rich and varied literature on social media, mostly using college-aged participants to study the effects of such intimate technology use. In a survey of three modern social media platforms – Facebook, online first-person shooter games (FPSs), and online social support websites – Kuzenkoff found differences in impression management strategies. “Goffman would likely tell us that the individuals (or actors) in each context are portraying a particular role for that context (or audience)” (Kuzenkoff, p. 29). FPS users took actions on the site to appear intimidating and powerful in the eyes of their competitors, while social support and Facebook users preferred to appear likable. Kuzenkoff explains that these particular presentations may prove to be beneficial in these contexts, and that the users engaged with impression management differently depending on the platform (Kuzenkoff, p. 29). Kuzenkoff based his study on Goffman’s notion that “correctly or incorrectly, the audience attempts to interpret the messages the performer generates, through their performance, and come to an understanding of who that performer is” (Kuzenkoff, p. 16). In his studies, Kuzenkoff questioned Goffman’s notion that the performer has a certain level of control over their performance. His work intended to dissect how the performer may intentionally portray an idealized version of him or herself, in order for the audience to react favorably to them. Kuzenkoff found that the actors he studied portrayed the ideal version of themselves in the area Goffman called the front. “The differences in the ideal version can be attributed to the specific goals or atmosphere of each context” (Kuzenkoff, p. 31).

Papacharissi (2000) used content analysis of personal home pages to examine the same concept of users’ ability to idealize their online personality. Papacharissi believed that a

webpage provided an ideal setting for the “information game” Goffman referred to as performance. She argued that, “People choose to explore certain sides of their personalities...more extensively online, or even invent virtual-life personae different from their real personalities” (Papacharissi, 2000, p. 645).

In other research on the performer’s control over their performance, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) used Goffman’s framework to study the creation of avatars by bloggers and Second Life users. With avatars, users are able to emphasize and minimize certain aspects of self, such as appearance or behavior. This is possible because users are now editors and creators – designing and creating their self-representations, choosing what to bring to the foreground or hide in the background. In this regard, the study relies on Goffman’s contribution of a front and back stage. “The avatar has been seen as a form of mask in the online environment, and its appearance demonstrates the role or interests of its user” (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 103). The authors hypothesized that actors would strongly invest in their “costumes,” or avatars, in the context of the online environment. They examined identity in 10 cases of bloggers and Second Life inhabitants for evidence of embellishment as a minor form of either persona adoption, dividing the self, or conforming and ‘fitting in.’ For example, they looked at the difference between men and women in how they expressed their femininity or masculinity throughout their blogs. They found that women were much more interested in displaying femininity to re-affirm their persona. They also found that in the creation of SL avatars, people often were often influenced by their careers. For example, one participant who was a librarian said she created an “average looking” avatar, as to not offend library users who might encounter her in that online space.

The main finding was that blogging and SL participants were keen to present themselves in certain ways online. Participants emphasized certain aspects of the self (such as being particularly feminine, creative, fun, professional, proficient, candid or belonging to a particular group) and minimized others. While it was not established that these were examples of persona being adopted, it was clear that certain qualities could be suppressed (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 110).

While participants were keen to re-create their offline selves online, they did engage in editing facets of self. In a 2009 study of avatar personalization, Ducheneaut found that, “Users prefer avatars that look better, are fitter and stand out more than they do in real life – a form of identity exploration, to be sure” (Ducheneaut, p. 1151). But an attempt to maintain some accuracy in self-representation online may point to Schenkler’s point that, “There is nothing intrinsic to the concept of impression management that dictates that it involves deception or the creation of false persona” (Schenkler, 1980, p. 403). Similarly, O’Sullivan (2000) remarked, “Self-presentational activities are the means by which individuals convey who they are at whatever degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness that they choose” (O’Sullivan, p. 406).

The ability to edit one’s digital image presents opportunities for significant alteration of one’s appearance. However, more recent studies, of Facebook, for example, have found that individuals increasingly desire some level of authenticity in their profiles. Yet, there are other kinds of editing, such as the inclusion or omission of information.

Lieberman’s study (2013) of identity construction in modern online platforms highlights two social networking sites that have become particularly embedded in the everyday lives of individuals: Facebook and LinkedIn. While Facebook provides a “unique outlet for relational

construction and relational maintenance” (Lieberman, p. 111) and LinkedIn is usually referred to as a professional networking platform, Lieberman suggests that they share an important characteristic: the need for self-branding. Lieberman views the branding process as analogous to the process of identity construction via online networking sites. “Just like brand managers highlight and communicate the qualities of certain products to appeal to consumers and potential consumers, so, too, do Facebook and LinkedIn users highlight and communicate qualities about themselves to appeal to both existing and potential network members” (Lieberman, p. 113). Using unstructured interviews with 50 undergraduate students, his research revealed that the profiles constructed by college students on both platforms become, “effective branding mechanisms for purposes both of social and professional networking” (Lieberman, p. 121). One study participant identified the difference between the strategies of self-presentation on each platform: “Facebook is all about making friends, and on LinkedIn it is all about substantiating one’s qualifications” (Lieberman, p. 122). Branding oneself supports the notion that whereas the performance of identity is partially under one’s control, there is also a significant receiver-centered perspective that must be taken into account. As Goffman (1973) wrote,

“When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him” (Goffman, p. 9).

Liberman's *Branding as Social Discourse* provides important information about the social process that requires others to allow the user to become the self they desire. The strategy of branding oneself is much like social actors "putting on different faces, at different times, with different audiences, telling different stories using different language" (Liberman, p. 109). Liberman's study, and other studies related to Facebook and the construction of identity, have suggested a paradigm shift to the basic assumption that "online technologies provide a playground for the creation of identity, where fiction, not fact, becomes most important" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 650).

Much of the scholarly research on self-presentation on social networking sites explores the behaviors and motivations of SNS users to select certain information. "When engaging distinct audiences, such as friends, family and coworkers, with possibly discrepant expectations and norms, in a single social setting users may target specific segments of the audience, and conceal and misinform when needed." (Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman and Nuitjen, 2013, p. 36). Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman and Nuitjen (2013) examined divergence between goals, norms and actual behaviors on Facebook. Using content analysis and focus groups, the study compared how respondents discussed self-representation to the actual behaviors observed in status updates and comments on friends' posts. The study contributes to the literature on minority self-presentation with a focus on the profiles of African American college students. The majority of participants averred that constructing an authentic image was a vital part of self-presentation on Facebook because they felt that exaggerated or contrived attempts at impression management were undesirable to others. In addition, there was an overall awareness that profiles are public, and that audiences that include family members and future

employers were aware of Facebook, requiring that self-presentation be appropriate.

Along with authenticity, a goal shared by participants was monitoring their profiles. “One participant mentioned she went so far as to use multiple profiles, one for college friends, and one for family. Other participants spoke about using strategies like censoring what they say in status updates or what they put on their profiles, making use of the Facebook privacy settings” (Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman and Nuitjen, p. 22). Respondents agreed on need to be “authentic,” but disagreed on how honest one should be.

For most respondents, there was a need to remain professional and positive, even if it meant being less than authentic. “Self-presenters are expected to self-promote, be modest and accurate, all while striking a coherent, consistent persona” (Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman and Nuitjen, p. 53). Social media users may find it difficult to reconcile these needs and expectations as they relate to possible fronts. “Since fronts tend to be selected, we may expect trouble to arise when those who perform a given task are forced to select a suitable front for themselves from among several quite dissimilar ones,” wrote Goffman (1973, p. 28).

As the technology to monitor one’s profile has become increasingly advanced, scholars have asked questions regarding why and how much avid users of Facebook alter their personal pages. Curran, Draus, Schrage, and Zappala (2014) examined college student’s perceptions of the amount and degree of information available to potential employers who use social media. Using focus groups, the study found that participants believed it highly likely that an employer would review their Facebook pages, but few believed that significant information could be derived from their profile pages. While the goal of the study was to uncover important legal and ethical issues for HR professionals in regard to the use of social media as a mechanism for



employment screening, the results indicated that students had little concern over making any changes to their personal behaviors on Facebook.

### **Gender Performance on Facebook**

West and Zimmerman (1987) define gender as, “The activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category,” which they define as fitting both the biological and social criteria of the gender (West and Zimmerman, p. 127). Gender research traditionally focused on the differences between the ways men and women shape and value their identities (Erikson, 1959; Gilligan, 1982 and 1987). Important to this study is the modern proposition that the performance aspect of gender likely influences the very basic descriptive differences between the ways men and women utilize social media.

Goffman’s theory of impression management is readily applied to Facebook, and many scholars have called on his notion of performance to explain the ways people present themselves on this SNS in particular (Walsh 2014; Kuzenkoff 2008; Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman, Nuijten 2013; Davis, Lippman, Morris, Tougas 2013). Davis, Lippman, Morris and Tougas (2013) note that Facebook lessened anonymity for users, a difference from earlier forms of computer-mediated communication. They point to features like the Facebook “news feed,” which displays everything a user’s friends have done recently on the site, and extensive use of photography to present oneself physically, as well as with text descriptors.

Goffman believed that a performer interprets the audience’s feedback on their presentation, and can then make adjustments to their performance. Thus a calculated performance of gender is particularly important for Facebook users, as they will rely on their

relationships and the social context, including Facebook, for feedback on how well they have performed their gender roles. In most studies focused on SNS self-presentation, demographics and individual differences play a role. “When a group or class is examined, one finds that the members of it tend to invest their egos primarily in certain routines, giving less stress to the other ones which they perform” (Goffman, 1973, p. 33).

Walsh (2014) confirmed in his study of adolescent male and female Facebook use that gender requires a significant amount of attention to reproduce on a daily basis; in other words, “gender is not something that just ‘is,’ but rather something that must be consistently recreated and performed by the individual” (Walsh, p. 34). Walsh determined that because users’ Facebook experiences are so closely linked to their offline world, Facebook must be subject to many of the same social opportunities as their offline social world (Walsh, p. 22). His qualitative analysis of profile pictures amongst male and female teenagers revealed that for the most part the images that they showcase, particularly in profile pictures, emphasize traditional gender norms of hyper heterosexual masculinity and femininity (Walsh, p. 36).

Strano (2008) found that both female and teenage users changed their profile pictures on Facebook more frequently than other participants, and adolescent users who were motivated to use SNS for friends or networking purposes disclosed more information on their profiles than individuals using the platform to form romantic relationships. Fogel and Nehmad (2009) found that men are less choosy than women when it comes to who they friend and the private information they reveal on Facebook. Walsh’s (2014) research supports these findings, and he wrote that “this may be connected to the ways in which masculinity is performed in adolescence through greater risk taking and general buffoonery” (Walsh, p. 37). Walsh also

reported that while women in his study on average had more friends on Facebook than men, they reported that they felt men had more freedom in their comments and pictures, and therefore they felt more limited or censored.

### **Justification**

Individuals document themselves on Facebook with the intention of feedback. Beyond the differences in usage rates or the number of friends by gender, existing research on adolescents' use of Facebook does not examine the ways in which gender performance itself is enacted on the site. While scholarship indeed has become focused increasingly on how self-representation has changed due to online capabilities, this study contributes to the literature by looking specifically at the motivations of college seniors to monitor their profile pages in preparation for the job market. Most existing research in the field does not assess the backstage work that college seniors, a demographic most intimately preparing for the job market, do on Facebook. The goal of this study was to illuminate how calculated that presentation is depending on one's gender. In addition, the study works to understand what a SNS user believes is important to portray in the mask of their profile page, depending on the selected environment. The research was built on the existing concept that individuals perform certain identities depending on their audience.

This study is important because of the amount of conflicting research on just how accurately people portray themselves in social media and whether or not the information they display is accurate or idealized. Many of the existing studies that address identity management of Facebook are qualitative, and thus cannot be representative of any larger trends. Continuing to gather insight on a variety of social groups allows the existing research to become more

comprehensive. This study contributes useful dialogue to a conversation that is not expected to conclude with the continued power of social media. Further, this study also is based on the argument that females and males are subjected to “differing sorts of temptations to present altered images of themselves online” (Oberst, Renau, Chamarro, and Carbonell, 2016, p. 555). It was reasonable to presume that there would be a difference between the distinct focus groups, and that both gender and potential industry of employment would influence that difference.

### **Research Questions**

To contribute to the study of identity performance and management, this study addressed three research questions.

1. How do college seniors balance a portrayal of reality and idealization on their Facebook pages as they prepare for the job market?
2. How do college seniors adjust their Facebook profiles and practices (e.g. identify performance) as they prepare for the job market?
3. What are the differences, if any, between male and female college seniors in these behaviors?

## Chapter 2

### **Methods**

To answer the research questions, I conducted focus groups with fourth-year undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This qualitative approach allows for deeper insight into how college seniors perform identity on Facebook. Rather than isolate a specific element of the study's interest in online identity performance and use numbers to analyze it, qualitative methods of research use language to understand concepts based on people's experiences (Brennan, 2013). Thus, qualitative methods are more effective at diving further into understanding the complexities of human relationships.

Focus groups are defined as directed conversations among several people regarding a specific topic, issue or concern that is led by a trained moderator who facilitates group discussion (Brennan, 2013). Focus groups allow for observation of select groups of people – in this case, college seniors poised for the job market. In addition, focus groups create an environment in which participants can interact with one another. Focus groups are considered a user-friendly and non-threatening research method, which helps people express themselves openly about sensitive issues (Morgan, 2002). Further, focus groups have been used to study the Facebook experiences of college students (Sharrell and Lambie 2016), how social network users treat their own information versus that of others posted in online social spaces (Burkell, Fortier, Wong and Simpson, 2014), and even college student's perceptions of the amount and degree of information available to potential employers who use social media (Curran, Draus, Schragger, and Zappala, 2014).

Four focus groups were held with undergraduate seniors preparing for the job market. In total, 10 females and 15 males participated in the study, with two focus groups comprised of females and two focus groups comprised of males (see Table 1). Participants were primarily Caucasian (80%) and represented 15 different majors. The majority (84%) of participants reported accessing their Facebook accounts several times each day.

Participants were recruited through recruitment emails, flyers posted on campus, and announcements made by the researcher to classrooms and class list serves. Care was taken to recruit broadly across campus to ensure diversity of major among participants. Interested students were asked to contact the primary researcher via email or phone and were screened to verify that they: 1) were in their final semester at UNC-Chapel Hill; 2) were actively seeking employment post-graduation and 3) had actively maintained a Facebook profile page throughout their four years in college. Upon successful screening, participants were placed into focus groups by gender and major. Each participant was given a \$10 Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate. Light refreshments also were provided.

Each focus group took no more than 45 minutes and were conducted over a one week period in a private room on campus in Carroll Hall. I obtained the consent of each participant at the start of the focus group session as well as a paper-based survey of basic demographic information. Participants also confirmed their willingness to be audio recorded.

I used a semi-structured focus group guide (see Appendix A), which was developed using the parameters outlined by Kvale and Brinkman (2009). The questions asked participants about their behavior on Facebook and how it has changed over the years to indirectly approach the research questions. This allowed me to prompt for specific information as well as provide

opportunities for new insights to emerge. Focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method, which allows the researcher to identify trends or discover relationships from the ideas presented (Charmaz, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first round of coding was deductive and identified responses that directly related to the study's research questions of better understanding college seniors' use of Facebook in specific moments of time. Transcripts were grouped by gender; female transcripts were analyzed first, then male transcripts. Using a constant comparison approach, initial themes emerged during this stage. Axial coding took place next. Axial coding allows researchers to both inductively and deductively compare and code material to find patterns, themes, and broader context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, I used selective coding to identify core themes. Throughout the coding process, I made memos that guided me in developing the overall themes of my study's results.

In terms of reflexivity, as the focus group facilitator I was very cognizant of the fact that I was interviewing people my age, while also pursuing a job search of my own. I recognize that this had the potential to influence my demeanor in the focus groups and affect the analysis that followed. In particular, it is reasonable to assume that I could have imposed by own viewpoints in the interpretation of the female focus groups because of my gender. However, all of these things considered, I did my best to remain neutral and unbiased when conducting the focus groups. I refrained from reacting to conversations and sharing my personal thoughts.

## Chapter 3

### Findings

This section presents the findings from the focus group discussions. In the focus groups, I first explored how the participants had been using Facebook during their first years in college with an emphasis on how they presented themselves through their profiles. I then explored if and how their use and presentation of self had changed their senior year as they approached the job market.

#### **Female's use of Facebook**

Female participants reported using Facebook in a number of ways. First female participants indicated that they use Facebook as an investigative tool to examine other people's profiles to learn more about them. For example,

*I'd say one of my biggest uses is figuring out who people are. Like if I know their name but not their face, it's nice to be able to look them up. I honestly use it to stalk people. If my friends say, 'Oh she just hooked up with this guy' and I don't know what that is, I'll look him up. – Female 3*

Female participants also reported using Facebook as an organizational tool to keep up with the activities of the different groups to which they belong. According to one female participant,

*I would say Facebook is really important for the groups I'm a part of, especially if they are having events. For example, when I was in a sorority that was where I would get all of my important information. – Female 6*

Female participants also noted that Facebook is an important way to keep in contact with individuals they knew before they transitioned to college. For example,



*I use it to keep up with people I'm not with. So like when I moved from Albany to North Carolina for school, I was still able to keep up with my friends from high school and home on their Facebooks. – Female, 2*

Female participants also reported using Facebook as a form of entertainment.

*I have a guilty pleasure of keeping up with some people...I love to see what they're up to even though I won't see or speak to them again.*

*I just want to stick around and see what's going on in their lives. – Female 1*

Facebook was also used to signal who they are to other people, particularly early in their college experience. Although very few female participants mentioned posting statuses as a common use of Facebook, female participants signaled in other ways, primarily posting photos of themselves and friending as many people as possible. Participants said they engaged in these behaviors to appear popular.

*Especially when you knew that people were looking at your profiles a lot more freshman year, because you were meeting people constantly and becoming friends, you definitely wanted your first impression to have people thinking, 'oh she loves to go out, she goes out all the time and looks good too.' – Female 3*

According to another female participant,

*Back in freshman year we would just friend so many girls, even if we didn't know them. It allowed you to become kind of associated with each other without really having to awkwardly become friends. – Female 5*

During the beginning of college, female online performance tended to be more idealistic as they were more concerned about the appearance of their profiles. For example, one female participant said,

*I just think everyone posts the best version of themselves so you never get the whole picture. – Female 4*

Another female said,

*I know when a profile is not genuine when someone is just always acting like their life is amazing and they're always going out and having fun. – Female 10*

Female participants also noted that their use of Facebook changed over their time in Chapel Hill. Female participants generally agreed that in their junior year they began to decrease their use of Facebook to signal who they are to others. In some cases, use shifted to Facebook as a resource for “insignificant, mindless time-killing.” For example,

*I feel like I'm much less involved at this point. I still like to be tagged in pictures by other people, but I don't really upload any pictures of myself. But because I'm less involved I think care less about what my profile looks like so I tend to just repost like dumb animal videos and stuff more than ever. – Female 4*

Another female participant noted,

*I feel as seniors in general we don't care what people think as much anymore because we've found our own thing and we're on a path in life. Whatever you end up posting on Facebook is because you want to post it not because you are trying to impress people. – Female 2*

Not all female participants agreed that it was no longer important to impress people in their senior year. For example,

*Yeah if I don't like the way I look, or I thought it would be a cute picture and it didn't end up that way there is no way I'm leaving it up on my profile. – Female 8*

Female participants reported adjusting their Facebook activity in their senior year in preparation for the job market. Female participants confirmed they have become more cautious on Facebook because they know potential employers have the ability to search for them online. For example, many changed their names on Facebook and put their profiles on private status. They said this was important because it prevented unwanted attention from potential employers. For example,

*I've edited photos to like blur out a cigarette in a picture and I'll un-tag most alcohol related images. -Female 8*

Many female participants said they felt confident in the security of their profiles. For example,

*I'm pretty good about keeping my account private. People who aren't my friends can only see my public photos, cover photos and then I've blocked my profile pictures so you can't see any of the comments if you don't know me. I definitely have used Facebook to stalk my interviewers, but I'm not too worried about them looking in. I don't think they can see the stuff I don't want them to. – Female 2*

Although female participants might not have actively used Facebook this year to get a job, they were aware of the benefits of posting content online that aligned with companies that might investigate their profiles. For example,

*My Facebook is definitely related to the kind of job I want. I want to work in arts or music and there are some people that I'm friends with on Facebook that could be potential connections for me, so most of what I repost they can relate to. If they check in on me I would want them to see that I'm interested and care. – Female 9*

Although signaling to peers may have decreased by the senior year, many female participants reported taking a high level of action to keep their profiles employer-friendly.

One female participant said,

*I definitely care a lot less about my own activity on Facebook and what my close friends see online, but I still definitely have to remove stuff now and then. I'd say now I'm removing stuff to make sure nothing bad is on my profile that an employer might see. – Female 3*

Type of major also seemed to influence use of Facebook in terms of the job search.

Female participants with liberal arts backgrounds explained the importance of posting content online that aligned with the industry of their preference. For example, one female participant said,

*I'm reposting stuff by companies I look up to so that if someone ever looked at me they'd see I know what is going on in their world. I also upload videos of myself making music because if I try to get a job in production that's the kind of thing employers are looking for. I know I need to be actively posting to get their attention. – Female 4*

While participants interested in the creative industry discussed this behavior more, interestingly a female with a major in Business Administration expressed her personal interest in appearing different from her career in finance online. She said,

*I definitely don't want to take on the persona of my job. It is so corporate and business-like. Yes, I need to look professional, but I also need to look like a person not a robot. A lot of people in Business School will post their headshots and accolades to help them get a job, but that doesn't really define a personality. Maybe I'm just saying that because I already have a job though. – Female 9*

### **Male's use of Facebook**

Male participants reported using Facebook primarily as a news source, particularly news related to politics that has been posted by their friends. For example, one male participant said,

*I use Facebook as my major news outlet and I don't think four years ago any of us used it really at all for news. But I'm usually reading political articles because my friends are posting them, not because the news outlets are posting them. So I really get my news from like four people but it's easy to consume. – Male 2*

In addition to consuming shared news, several male participants noted using Facebook to express their opinions on certain topics in order to define themselves. According to one male participant,

*I think it becomes the frontier or battleground for just about anything, like hard-hitting news. You have this space where you can, like, define*

*yourself and what you believe in, you can kind of write your story.*

*People can really express themselves through what they share. – Male 10*

Male participants also indicated that Facebook was an important organizational tool to keep up with the groups they are involved in on campus.

*Almost every party I go to is like organized on Facebook now.*

*I need Facebook for all sorts of events that I'm trying to keep up with or people I'm inviting things to. – Male 5*

Male participants reported using Facebook as an information platform or social life organizational tool, but only few male participants reported using Facebook to maintain relationships. Similar to their female counterparts, male participants reported using Facebook to meet people in their first year or two at college, but that this use has changed over time. Most male participants indicated that while they were never particularly concerned with making new friends on Facebook, it was more important in earlier years. One male participant said,

*Being able to be part of a group, or added to one as you meet people and join clubs was a good way to keep centralized but now it is more a case of why does anyone care about what I'm doing? The people who do care will know about it regardless if I post or not. – Male 7*

Although not the majority, for some males Facebook was important for maintaining relationships throughout college. One male participant said,

*For me it's still the best social media for maintaining relationships because you can have a better and more personal dialogue with someone. Other platforms can feel so temporary. – Male 5*

For most however, by their senior year it was less important to perform identity for the audience that once motivated males. They reported needing Facebook less to engage with important people in their lives.

During the beginning of college, male online performance tended to be more idealistic as reported be wearier of new friends looking at their profiles. For example, one male said,

*I want people to know only the good things. I don't want them to know the negative things. – Male 11*

While male participants said they rarely ever posted photos, they did report to check their profiles more frequently in their first year of school because they were making more connections with new people on Facebook. One male participant said,

*It became kind of my contact book. Especially when I didn't feel comfortable enough to approach someone and ask for their number. If you hadn't met the person it was still ok to add them on Facebook. – Male 2*

Another male participant r said his use of Facebook has not changed all that much since freshman year.

*I think it's still fairly consistent, the amount of time and reasons I use it. – Male 4*

At the same time, male participants indicated that there was a stigma associated with how engaged males are on Facebook when they first get to college, and that that stigma continues

to affect their use of Facebook. For males, it is important to be present on Facebook, but not too active. Many male participants said the stigma didn't affect the frequency of their use so much as how active and engaged they seem online.

*It is also never, especially when you are a Freshman, it is never cool for a guy to be posting on Facebook a lot. Part of intentionally creating your Facebook persona for a guy I think involves not posting.*

Male participants said in more recent years they have decreased their friend request use of Facebook. One male participant said,

*Almost exclusively the time I spent on Facebook was accepting friend requests or just requesting other people. Now, I am pretty much declining every friend request I receive so it has just changed the way I use it. – Male 8*

According to another male participant,

*I now just purge my Facebook page to only people that I like. If I'm never going to interact with you again, then why are we still friends on Facebook? All your friends are pretty much entrenched. You have already made 90% of the relationships you are going to have in your life. You are not trying to make more friends. – Male 1*

Male participants also seemed to be more purposive in their use of Facebook during their senior year. For example, male participants reported selectively filtering out anything unrelated to their particular interests. One male participant said,

*I still check Facebook every day, but now it is only to look at my specific notifications, messages and events. I used to just sit on Facebook scrolling*



*and basically looking at nothing. – Male 3*

For at least one male participant, there seemed to be a change in motivation for posting on Facebook:

*When I post something now, it is kind of like I am posting for myself.*

*I am posting because I want to but I definitely didn't do that when I was younger. – Male 12*

For male participants, the final year of college motivated new practices on their profiles. Male participants said changes in their behavior on Facebook during their senior years were a result of preparing for the job market. Male participants reported a heightened sense of awareness of photos they were tagged in online that could potentially harm their chances of employment.

A male participant said,

*People have always warned me against posting weird pictures of myself on Facebook but I think as a senior now I've realized this is going to become way more professional than Instagram and Twitter. I'm realizing that I could be friends with past teachers or people I've worked with before in companies that I could connect with. – Male 6*

Another male participant said,

*I get notifications on my phone so every time I am tagged in something I immediately open it and if I don't like how I'm perceived in it I will remove the tag right there. I am so cautious now because I know anyone can pull up my page at anytime. – Male 11*

While most male participants agreed Facebook was not their primary tool to find a job, they did discuss a willingness and interest to comment and communicate with important connections on Facebook in order to actively network. For example, one male participant said,

*It can be a good way of keeping in touch so that they know that you actually care about them as a person rather than a resource. – Male 8*

Male participants also said by senior year they had invested more effort in presenting themselves in a way that would appeal to their industry of interest. For example, one male said,

*I always have wanted to work for a company that doesn't take themselves too seriously, so I think I kind of went along with that route subconsciously on my profile and with what I post. – Male 3*

That was not the case for all males. One male participant said,

*I purposefully try not to fit a certain mold. If you pulled my profile picture now you would see me with long hair and looking like an idiot. That certainly won't get me a job. – Male 11*

Male participants with backgrounds in liberal arts reported being more aware having a profile relevant to the field and industry they want to go into. For example, one male participant said,

*I'm interviewing for all sorts of advertising and media jobs. When I look up the people who are going to interview me they always have highly creative and super artsy profiles that are made up of high-quality and funky pictures. I feel like I don't look anything as interesting in comparison which makes me nervous about my prospects. – Male 1*

One participant also reported feeling somewhat influenced to maintain a certain image on his profile because he wanted to keep aligned with other former employees from his past internships in case he needed them as connections again. He said,

*I definitely keep up with the people I used to work with and I'm well aware of what their profiles look like. I guess that is influencing me to some degree to keep my profile looking similar to theirs. – Male 10*

Some male participants however, expressed a lack of concern over characterizing themselves through their profiles. One male participant said,

*Unfortunately, as much as it would be good to hire for personality, I think the very idea is if you don't pass the resume test you aren't getting in. – Male 4*

### **Comparing responses by gender**

Male and female participants responded similarly about their use of Facebook as a tool and as a platform in many ways. Both male and female participants said they used Facebook most actively during their first year of college when they were making new friends. For male and female participants, Facebook served as an important resource in identifying their social groups and feeling accepted in college. Male and female participants both said one of their main uses of Facebook today is as an organizational tool to keep up with the social groups they identify with, as well as a surveillance tool.

All groups generally attributed a decrease in concern about their Facebook profiles to an increased sense of security in themselves and their social groups.

Both male and female participants said that while they might not have actively used Facebook this year to get a job, they were aware of the benefits of posting content online that aligned with companies that might investigate their profiles. Both male and female participants agreed that their final year of college made them more cautious and aware of the appearance of their profiles because employers had the ability to search for them online. Both genders said their main concern for appearance by their final year in school was due to the fact that they needed to seem appropriate during job recruitment.

At the same time, there were differences based on gender. Most notably, female participants continue to use Facebook more heavily as a resource to maintain relationships with people they don't directly interact with on a day to day basis. While male participants did report checking in on old friends from time to time, they said they were actively deleting and minimizing their networks on Facebook by their senior years. Females reported using Facebook to do research on strangers more than did males. While most male and female participants reported checking their Facebooks several times per day, their activity during that time differed by gender. Female participants said they didn't mind scrolling through a congested newsfeed, whereas male participants preferred a highly personalized and targeted selection of information to look through.

One other interesting point of discussion was participants' perceptions of what their Facebook use will become after graduating from college. Female participants agreed that once they leave college, Facebook will no longer be an organizational tool, but rather a resource to check in on old friends. In addition, female participants said that much less maintenance will be required of their Facebook pages after they get their first jobs mostly because of a change in

lifestyle. Participants said outside of the college-lifestyle, typical precautions will be less common. While most male participants said during their senior year they have deleted many people as friends, many did agree they will have a renewed interest in Facebook friends now in new places. Some male participants did mention the need to keep maintenance under scrutiny in their first jobs. For example, one male said:

*When you're the new guy in the office other people will be looking at your page to get a read on you, so you need to make sure there isn't anything ridiculous up there. – Male 7*

However, most participants in general did not mention a need to make new impressions for a new audience. A female participant said,

*Mainly I'll be using it to keep up with people I'm already friends with now. Especially if they fall into my second tier friend group once we're out of college it will be nice to just know what they're doing. – Female 10*

A male participant said,

*The older I get the less I'm going to post, and when I do it'll just be to update people I used to be close to about big events in my life; Major milestones they wouldn't have known about otherwise. – Male 9*

## **Chapter 4**

### **Discussion**

This study substantiates the role of SNSs as platforms for self-construction. Identity manifests itself in social networking sites as users construct a representation of themselves online. In exploring that manifestation of identity, this study explored college seniors' use of Facebook, and more specifically, how they use Facebook to perform for salient others during a seminal time of transition from college to the professional world.

Research question one asked how college seniors balance a portrayal of reality and idealization on their Facebook pages. The literature suggests that because of societal expectations, SNS users attempt to control their online performances by presenting an idealized version of themselves. For example, Hussain (2015) indicated that online communities created an environment where the lines between virtual identity and real identity were blurred. Kuzenkoff (2008) echoed this, suggesting that a SNS user would portray an idealized version of themselves online so that their audience would react favorably to them. He attributed any differences between the ideal version and real version of one's identity to the specific goals of each relationship in which an SNS user was engaged.

The findings in this study support the existing literature's claim that to some degree users create a version of themselves online that intentionally highlights, or edits, particular aspects of themselves. Both male and female participants in this study discussed the inevitable need to monitor their Facebook profiles to show the best qualities of themselves. When participants were asked to discuss how accurately a stranger could gauge their personalities from their digital profiles, most participants agreed that they actively worked to portray a more

positive image of themselves online. For example, one participant said she knew everyone's lives weren't as great as they seemed on Facebook because most people avoid posting any negative or unimportant content on their profiles. This investment in one's profile can be connected to Goffman's theory of the "front." Goffman's research established the idea that in order to communicate a particular identity, a performer could choose certain characteristics to bring to the "front" and present to their audience. In the case of this study, those characteristics were important to display through photos online, so that as new college students the participants might be perceived well by their classmates.

Paracharissi (2000) observed that one's profile allows users to explore certain aspects of their personalities that might be different from their real personalities. In this way, users could balance reality with idealization. This study supported that contention. Many participants in this study said they were hesitant to post anything controversial or too personal in the beginning of college. They said when first making friends in college it was preferable to fit in rather than make a statement.

According to Goffman (1956), the roles that one takes on can be controlled both by the individual and by societal expectations of a particular role. Most participants in this study had a goal of finding and being accepted into a social group in the first year of college. They did so by signaling through their Facebook profile what they perceived an ideal persona to attract others. At the same time, participants noted feeling more secure in themselves and in the groups they had joined on campus. The shift in the use of Facebook to an organizational tool suggests that participants no longer needed to create an idealized version of themselves that would more

likely appeal to other people. Once Facebook became an organizational tool, college students no longer needed to project an idealized version of themselves to make friends.

Research question two, asked how college seniors adjust their Facebook profiles and practices (e.g. identity performance) as they prepare for the job market. The literature suggests that when college students create their Facebook identity, they do so to communicate a particular message to an intended audience whose relevance is tied to a specific moment in time.

For example, Kuzenkoff (2008) said that one's Facebook page functions to portray a certain image of a person. Stryker (1980) explained that people live in specialized networks of social relationships, and to exist in the network, one must take on a particular role that supports it. In addition, the literature also reported that performance is calculated and can be adjusted based on the audience. Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman and Nuijten (2013) specifically indicated that when engaging with distinct audiences, users can target specific segments of an audience and conceal and misinform information about themselves when needed.

This study's findings align with prior research of about idealization in that participants confirmed putting more effort into managing their profiles early in their college careers for a peer audience. Participants reported higher activity their first year in college because they were interested in finding friends and social groups and were concerned with how these audiences would perceive them. Female participants, in particular, said their Facebook use was heavily focused on posting photos of themselves going out in order to appear social, engaging, and fun. Male participants also confirmed that it was significantly more important to have an updated and acceptable profile their first year in college because they were working to make



connections with new people. In the beginning of college students clearly were performing the values of the audience they hoped to attract rather than their own values.

However, by their third year in college, most participants agreed that a sense of confidence in themselves and their social groups allowed them to use Facebook more as a habitual social outlet rather than tool for engaging with new peers. The fact that participants reported caring less about the way they looked and what they posted on Facebook suggests that they were no longer concerned with impressing their peer audience.

Another shift in performance seems to take place as participants begin to prepare for the job market and recognize prospective employers' ability to investigate their profiles. Reflecting the work of Curran, Draus, Schrage, and Zappala (2014), most participants expected prospective employers to review their Facebook pages, but few believed significant information could be derived from their profiles because they had taken precautionary action to hide anything unwanted from their pages. Beginning their final year of college made participants more aware of Facebook's function as a professional platform. However, participants change in behavior as a result of this realization suggests that Facebook now had a networking function based on achieving goals rather than creating relationships. The fact that many participants changed their names on Facebook, or took extra care to edit and delete incriminating photos, suggests that they had begun performing for a new audience; the employer.

This finding seems to contradict what Curran, Draus, Schrage, and Zappala (2014) found in their study. Whereas they found that students had little concern over making any changes to their personal behaviors because of employment screening, the seniors in this study were actively altering what they were doing on Facebook specifically because of the employers,

including posting articles in their senior year relating to the industries in which they hoped to work.

In sum, the findings from this study reflect this idea of impression management, as participants noted and adjusted their Facebook performance for different audiences and purposes across their four years in college. Participants created a calculated version of their identities first to establish themselves and signal to others who they were. In doing so, college seniors are deliberate in selecting the Facebook routines in which to invest. College seniors are portraying a specific role for a certain context.

The third research question in this study asked, what, if any, are the differences between male and female participants during this time? The literature suggested that gender likely influences the very basic descriptive differences between the ways men and women utilize social media. Several studies stated that male and female students do not use Facebook in the same manner (Shepard, 2016; Park, Yaden, Schwartz, Kern, Eichstaedt, Kosinski, Seligman, 2016). Although both male and female participants are clearly performing their identity online, there were some differences by gender in this study. One major difference was that male participants reported never or rarely having posted photos to Facebook, while female participants certainly did. Many male participants said a primary reason for refraining from posting photos was because creating an acceptable masculine profile was to appear inactive on Facebook. This reflects an active effort to create masculinity; a concept that Walsh visits in his research.

Facebook served as both a utility and a relationship mechanism for male and female participants. However, female participants' indication that they still use Facebook to do

research on individuals they didn't know suggests they were more inclined than male participants to keep Facebook as a resource for maintaining and creating relationships in their senior years. Walsh's research proposed that male participants typically feel like they had more freedom online and thus feel less inclined to censor their media profiles. The findings of this research however suggest that male participants are equally as concerned about the content on their Facebook profiles as female participants, when it came to appearing appropriate for potential employers. While female participants provided more examples of the efforts they had made to keep their profiles clean and private, male participants noted that they would immediately remove any images that could give an interviewer the wrong impression.

The literature on gender differences focused heavily on Goffman's exploration of gender expression as performance. While the results of this study do not question Goffman's notion that gender is preformed, it does contribute a suggestion that gender performance may not be central to the maintenance of a profile as it relates to finding a job. Neither female nor male participants said they felt it was important to make their profiles feel more masculine or feminine to associate with the job they wanted.

This study was conducted to extend the existing knowledge about online performance to college seniors' transition from school to the job market. In the exploration of this transition, one other interesting finding emerged. Walsh's research proposed that Facebook users' experiences are closely linked to their offline social world, and therefore are subject to many of the same social opportunities. This study supports this, as participants described relying on Facebook to make friends in their first year of college. Participants clearly submit that their

sense of comfort and satisfaction from their college experiences were due largely in part to their ability to connect with others via Facebook. Although Walsh's work focused on the connection between the offline and online *social* world, I found support for college students using Facebook to connect their offline and online *professional* worlds as well. To effectively signal oneself to others, making a connection between one's offline interests and online presence is clearly important. Participants in this study were largely motivated to represent themselves accurately and positively online. This allowed participants to achieve their goals socially, which they then applied to professional endeavors.

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to examine how college graduates use Facebook to link their online and offline worlds once they begin their first jobs. Individuals might return to the behaviors from the social world they described when first beginning college, because they would likely begin performing for a new audience? Cunningham (2013) found that selecting certain aspects of oneself to disclose, hide, or fake to create a positive impression on the audience, clearly takes different forms at different stages. Another future research idea would be to continue exploring professional networking online and look at the differences in performance between on LinkedIn and Facebook. O'Sullivan (2000) has suggested that the technology itself and channel might heavily influence the choices people make online. With what this study presents about the concern over a professional audience, it would be interesting to know what kind of maintenance is required on LinkedIn.

### **Limitations**

As with any study, there were limitations to this research. The study was conducted with just 25 participants, who do not represent the views of college students at UNC-Chapel Hill nor

across the entire country. In addition, relying on the research participant pool and favors subjected the study to some unenthusiastic or uninterested individuals that contributed little to the conversation. While this method allowed the study to obtain a more in-depth perspective of identity performance through the use of focus groups, they were not intended to make generalizations about the views of all college seniors preparing for the job market.

## **Conclusion**

This study used the existing information on how SNS users create online profiles to explore the performance of identity as it relates to college seniors' preparation for the job market. The findings align with Goffman's groundwork on the performance of identity. Based on the responses of the focus group participants, it is reasonable to conclude that college seniors consciously work to create a desirable perception of themselves online. The calculated construction of identity through one's Facebook profile has continued to exist since the beginning of college, and is strategic regardless of social versus professional motivations. Analyzing shift in audience for college seniors to potential employers, allows for a new understanding of Goffman's suggestion that tension can arise between a performer and their audience. As a result of this research, one can assume that college seniors are in fact strategically creating a perfect fit between the specific character of their performance and the general socialized guise in which that character fits. Despite some differences in behavior and usage, both male and female participants are aware that they have the ability to influence their audience. As Goffman suggested, no act is unintentional and no actions are unplanned.

Before this study, little research had addressed identify performance by male and female college students on Facebook during this important time of transition. This presents

interesting implications that performance extends beyond the maintenance of social relationships, and also applies for professional reasons.

**Table I: Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants.**

	N	%
<b>Sex (n=)</b>		
Female	10	40
Male	15	60
<b>Race/ethnicity (n=)</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	22	80
Black, non-Hispanic	0	0
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	1	4
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander	1	4
Other	1	4
<b>During a typical week how many times do you access your Facebook account?</b>		
Several times each day	21	84
Once each day	4	16
Every other day	0	0
Only once a week	0	0
Only if I get a notification	0	0
Rarely	0	0
<b>Major</b>		
Business Administration	4	16
Communication Studies	3	12
Economics	3	12
Journalism	2	8
Political Science	2	8
Computer Science	2	8
Mathematical Decision Sciences	2	8
Psychology	2	8
Advertising	2	8
Art History	1	4
Asian Studies	1	4
Public Relations	1	4
Public Policy	1	4
Environmental Science	1	4
Interdisciplinary studies in food business	1	4

\*Includes individuals with double majors

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Guide

#### **Focus Group Protocol—Identity Performance, Gender and Social Media: A focus group study of college seniors**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study today. My name is Alex Paré and I'm a senior in the School of Media and Journalism. I'm working on an undergraduate honors thesis which focuses on the theory of identity performance in online spaces. In particular, I'm interested in learning more about how college seniors manage identity on Facebook during a period of job recruitment. Our discussion will last for about one hour and your responses will be completely confidential. All identifying information, such as names and places will be cut out from the interview transcript and will not be included in any publications. If it is all right with you, I will be taking notes and audio recording our interview to make sure that we are capturing your thoughts accurately. Does that sound ok?

Before we begin, please let me know if you would like to be identified with a pseudonym. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers and you are not allowed to discuss the content of this meeting outside the focus group.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

#### **RQ1: How do college seniors balance a portrayal of reality and idealization on their Facebook pages as they prepare for the job market?**

#### **IQ1: How have you been using Facebook while you've been an undergraduate at Carolina?**

- To identify and join?
- To check-in and keep current with what's going on with current groups/friends?
- To comment on what your friends/groups are doing?
- To signal who you are?
- Have you always cared about how people interpret your Facebook profiles, or has that increased/decreased over the last few years?

#### **IQ2: What is the importance to you of your Facebook profile specifically in relation to how you use Facebook?**

- Why is that?

*Transition: Great! That was all very helpful. Now let's switch gears and talk about Facebook in the context of your senior year. As we're all seniors in the room, and we're going out on the job market...*

#### **RQ2: How do college seniors adjust their Facebook profiles and practices (e.g. identify performance) as they prepare for the job market?**

**IQ1: How has your activity on Facebook changed this year?**

- What have you stopped doing?
- What have you started doing?
- What have you edited?
- What have you deleted?
- How do you decide when to eliminate or edit a photo?

**IQ2: Why did your activity on Facebook change in these ways?**

- Become more “grownup” (not a college student anymore).
- New audience (employers)
- Preparing for next stage friend groups.

**IQ3: What aspects of your Facebook use have changed the most your senior year? Why?**

*Thanks, this has been really helpful. I have just a few more questions for you all.*

**IQ4: What role do you think Facebook will play in your life after you get your first job?**

- More about professional persona?
- More about family?
- More about keeping in touch with now distant friends?
- Making new friends?

*Thank you so much for taking the time to share your unique viewpoint and experiences with us. Our time with you has been extremely valuable.*

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Email

Dear Friends,

I'm conducting a study for my honors thesis to examine how college seniors use Facebook during their senior year and I'd love your help recruiting participants for some focus groups.

In order to participate, participants must identify as male or female, be active on Facebook, AND be a senior between the ages of 18 and 24 who plans to be on the job market upon graduating.

Each participant will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card. The focus groups will take place before Spring Break on campus and last approximately one hour. Snacks will be provided.

Please share this email with people you know who meet the criteria! My contact info is below and I've attached the study recruitment flyer.

Best,

Alex Paré

770-883-8249

[ampar@live.unc.edu](mailto:ampar@live.unc.edu)

## Appendix C

### MEJO Research Pool Recruitment Information

Title of Study: **Identity Performance, Gender and Social Media: A focus group study of college seniors**

#### WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

This study examines how college seniors use Facebook during their senior year. Based on theories of identity performance and gender, this study will examine how college seniors present themselves online and if there are differences between males and females.

#### WHAT HAPPENS DURING THIS STUDY?

Participants will join seven other students of the same gender in a focus group to be conducted in the School of Media and Journalism. During the study a moderator will ask open-ended questions about how and why seniors are using Facebook. The focus group will last approximately one hour. Refreshments will be provided.

#### WHAT DO I GET OUT OF PARTICIPATING?

In addition to a new and interesting experience, each participant will receive one hour of MEJO research participant pool credit for this study. Refreshments will be provided.

#### HOW DO I KNOW IF I CAN PARTICIPATE?

Participants are required to identify as either male or female, be active on Facebook, AND be a senior between the ages of 18 and 24 who plans to be on the job market upon graduating.

**CONTACT ALEX PARE FOR MORE INFORMATION**

(770)883-8249

ampar@live.unc.edu



## Appendix D

### Campus Recruitment Flyer

## **RESEARCH VOLUNTEERS NEEDED**

Title of Study: **Identity Performance, Gender and Social Media:  
A focus group study of college seniors**

### WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

This study examines how college seniors use Facebook during their senior year. Based on theories of identity performance and gender, this study will examine how college seniors present themselves online and if there are differences between males and females.

### WHAT HAPPENS DURING THIS STUDY?

Participants will join seven other students of the same gender in a focus group to be conducted in the School of Media and Journalism. During the study a mediator will ask open-ended questions about how and why seniors are using Facebook. The focus group will last approximately one hour. Refreshments will be provided.

### WHAT DO I GET OUT OF PARTICIPATING?

In addition to a new and interesting experience, each participant will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card. Refreshments will be provided.

### HOW DO I KNOW IF I CAN PARTICIPATE?

Participants are required to identify as either male or female, be active on Facebook, AND be a senior between the ages of 18 and 24 who plans to be on the job market upon graduating.

## **CONTACT ALEX PARE FOR MORE INFORMATION**

(770)883-8249

ampar@live.unc.edu

## Appendix E

### Participant Demographic Survey



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* NORTH CAROLINA  
*at* CHAPEL HILL

#### **PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

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**1. What is your major?**

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**2. What is your gender?**

- a. Male
- b. Female

**3. What is your age?**

- a. 18-19 years old
- b. 20-21 years old
- c. 22-24 years old

**4. To which racial or group(s) do you most identify?**

- a. Black or African-American
- b. Hispanic
- c. Asian/Pacific Islanders
- d. White or Caucasian
- e. Native American
- f. Other

**5. During a typical week, how many times do you access your Facebook account?**

- a. Once each day.
- b. Several times each day.
- c. Every other day.
- d. Only once a week.
- e. Only if I get a notification.
- f. Rarely.

## Appendix F

### Participant Consent Form



THE UNIVERSITY  
of NORTH CAROLINA  
at CHAPEL HILL

### Consent to Participate in a Research

#### Study

**IRB Study #** 17-0034

**Consent Form Version Date:** February 8, 2017

**Title of Study:** Performance, Gender and Social Media: a focus group study of college seniors

**Principal Investigator:** Paré, Alexandra

**UNC Department:** School of Media and Journalism

**UNC Department Phone Number:** (919) 962-1204

**Study Contact:** Alexandra Paré

**Study Contact's Phone Number:** 770-883-8249

**Study Contact's Email:** ampar@live.unc.edu

#### What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or any research team member, any questions you have about this study at any time.

#### What is the purpose of this study?

This study examines how college seniors use Facebook during their senior year. Based on theories of identity performance and gender, this study will examine how college seniors present themselves online and if there are differences between males and females.

#### **How many people will take part in this study?**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 32 UNC-Chapel Hill seniors.

#### **How long will your part in this study last?**

Your participation will last approximately one hour.

#### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

Participants will join seven other students of the same gender in a focus group to be conducted in the School of Media and Journalism. During the study a moderator will ask open-ended questions about how and why seniors are using Facebook. The focus group will last approximately one hour. Refreshments will be provided.

#### **What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You may not benefit personally from being in this research study.

#### **What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**

We do not expect any risks or discomfort to you by being in this study. If you are embarrassed to answer any question asked, you have the option of not answering. All participants are encouraged to keep comments made during the group discussion confidential. It is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future. Therefore, we encourage you to be as honest and open as you can, but remain aware of our limits in protecting confidentiality.

#### **How will your privacy be protected?**

Every effort will be taken to protect your identity as a participant in this study. Your name will not appear on any transcripts. You may also choose to use a false name during the group discussion. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study or its results.

#### **Will you receive anything for being in this study?**

You will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card for your participation (research pool version will be one hour credit toward research requirement).

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**

There will be no costs to you for being in the study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at (919) 966-3113 or by email to IRB\_subjects@unc.edu.

**Participant Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

**Sign** 

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

**Print** 

\_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Research Participant

**FOR OFFICE USE ONLY:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent