Individuality and Group Identity on Facebook: Managing and Maintaining both Identities

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Abstract

In today's society technology has become very integrated into our lives. Many of us use it on a daily basis and it is part of the way we communication. Some scholars believe that the level of anonymity that is enticing about online communication brings about a sense of de-individuation. In other words, these scholars believe that anonymity online allows people to disguise themselves, engage in "uncharacteristic" outburst of identity and fosters a loss of individuality. However, through my own personal experiences and general observations throughout the time that I have used Facebook, I began to notice that people are not actually hiding behind anonymity. The more I thought about it the more I noticed that people on Facebook were sharing sometimes very intimate details of their lives. At the same time, Facebook has an incredible power to bring people together if there is some sort of social issue users find important enough to express their opinions. These kinds of situations also occur when there is a topic that is heavily debated. This observation was especially emphasized during the presidential election of 2012. It seemed like every day more people were posting statuses about their thoughts on the election and where they personally stood on different issues that were debated. I wanted to explore whether there was a connection between anonymity online and social identity establishment.

This study examined how technology, specifically Facebook, has shaped the way that people manage two kinds of identity: individual and group identity. This study gathered 30 participants (female=16, male=14) who agreed to share posts with me from their personal Facebook profiles. Information pertaining to participants' identity was gathered through profile observation, which I was able to do because I had gained consent from all of my participants. The next step of this study was to

cross-examine how participants' individual identity compared to the amount of social identity disclosures they had. The main research method that was utilized in this study was observation, but in order to understand the levels of social identity disclosure each participant had based on the postings some rhetorical analysis was used as well. The findings of this study are that previous notions of anonymity and social identity disclosure are starting to become less applicable to today's computer mediated communication methods, such as Facebook. This means that the way we have used technology to communicate in the past, is not necessarily the same way we do so now. People who use social media sites such as Facebook to communicate now feel that they can maintain a level of individual identity which would be similar to the type of identity they would hold in offline settings. Along with this, Facebook users have found this site to be a tool to easily demonstrate various in-group allegiances without losing that sense of individuality.

Introduction

Facebook is by no means a new technology. This social media site has been a prominent component in many adolescent, and more recently, adult's lives since 2004 (historyoffacebook.com). Today, people use Facebook for everything ranging from connecting with old friends to posting about social events. Facebook is the largest social networking site in the world, which means there are endless possibilities for connections. Facebook allows individuals to share their personal opinions with everyone from their next-door neighbor to people across the world. Furthermore, it allows those people to respond to others' expressions of opinion. "Facebook has always emphasized two qualities that tend to be undervalued online:

authenticity and identity" (*How Mark Zuckerberg Turned Facebook Into the Web's Hottest Platform*). These endless connections and strong desire for an individual to be part of an in-group means that there are equally as many possibilities for an individual to shape themselves in the most desirable way. Online settings have typically been associated with anonymity, where individuals can shape and mold their identities online (Walther, et al., 2011). This anonymity empowers individuals to create themselves, and communicate, in a way they find most desirable. Past communication research suggests anonymous settings can create conflict, because people feel that they can air their opinions without repercussion. It is possible that online users get the feeling that Facebook and other social media outlets act as a mask in which they can both hide themselves and display themselves in a certain light.

The study of Facebook as a means of identity presentation and communication has only recently become relevant in the scholarly realm. Previously, computer mediated forms of communication were methods such as instant messenger and email. These earlier technologies did not provide many options for supplementing communication with additional information about the participants. In contrast, Facebook users can mold their profiles to be exactly the information that they want to share with others. We as a society are progressing more and more into a technological world. In many aspects of our lives we use technology to communicate, and Facebook is no exception. Think about how you use technology in your daily life. For many people, Facebook is a technology they use everyday and it acts as an easy means of communication. Yet often times technology progresses so quickly that we cannot maintain complete, scholarly knowledge of these new phenomena that are occurring, hence why new studies of Facebook are emerging at a rapid pace.

Picture this: you hear an individual give a compelling speech about the rapid growth of technology and communication, and you really would like to talk with this individual about her theories on the subject, but you had to rush out after the speech, leaving only with the speaker's full name. Being the tech savvy individual that you are, you go home and type in the speaker's full name into the people search of Facebook. Given that the speaker's profile is not private, you now have access to more information about this particular speaker; some of it may even be information that you would not have been able to learn in a ten-minute conversation. After "friending" the speaker, you can now go through and look at everything she has posted, the people that are writing on her wall, her pictures, and conversations she might have engaged in on a particular posting. Even more, you can go back and look at these interactions for months, even years. You are now able to gather knowledge you may never have learned from her.

This exact scenario is why this study is relevant. Facebook and other social media sites have changed the way that individuals interact and learn about one another. People can mold themselves strategically to appear in the most desirable way. Or, on the other end, some individuals chose to maintain a level of anonymity in their social media appearance.

Not only are people using their social media sites to form some level of identity, many are also using it as their own, controllable soapbox. Thousands of people are using Facebook to advance issues they feel are socially relevant, or just to air their opinions on a range of different issues. For example, the most recent U.S. presidential elections created a tremendous amount of discourse among Facebook users. Many users saw this election as an opportunity to share all of their thoughts about the candidates, the platform that each candidate ran on and everything in-between. There is no question that people

were talking, but who was doing the most talking? What type of Facebook user was writing the overly aggressive status and who was sticking to a more neutral type of status? This study aims to explore who is disclosing more of their social identity, is it the individual who shares every aspect of their identity on Facebook, or the user who holds back and might only give identifying information such as their real name?

For sharing opinions about social and political events, Facebook and other social media sites have been favored over face-to-face interactions (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). Facebook can be used to bring group members together, or it can highlight a divide among individuals, depending on the context of the posting, and the meaning behind posting the message. So when did a shift from face-to-face communication to computer mediated communication in regards to discussions of social issues occur? According to Kushin & Kitchener (2009) this change in communication methods started shifting in 2007 when Facebook surpassed the 70 million-member mark. As of 2011, Facebook had over one billion active users (Facebook Statistics, Stats and Facts for 2011). Thousands of these active members used their Facebooks to share information about the 2012 presidential election and the weeks surrounding it. There has been a shift in the way that individuals use social networking sites, which means that a new angle of research has emerged. I am going to be examining exactly what the implications are for the new uses of Facebook. The process for this study is listed as follows.

First, I will discuss the previous literature that has been published on this subject. Next I will discuss my methods for data collection, including the theoretical lens that the information will be examined through. The next section is the results section, which outlines the surface level of what the data means. Finally the last two sections will be the analysis section, which

delves deeper into what the results of the collected data mean. Finally, the discussion section will explore the possibilities for future research, the limitations to the study and the implications of the findings.

As previously stated, Facebook used as a tool for identity is something that is relatively new to the scholarly world. Only recently have scholars began to view Facebook as a complex form of communication and interpersonal interaction. Although Facebook research is fairly new, scholarly research pertaining to anonymity is not a new area of study. The next section first briefly reviews recent research on Facebook and then outlines three different theories of communication relating to the idea of anonymity and social identity that are used in this study.

Literature Review

Academic scholarship on Facebook is very recent. Most research about Facebook has examined social networking, and the process of "friending" people and maintaining connections that otherwise would have faded away. This is considered a form of online relational maintenance (Carr, 2012). Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) via Carr (2012) say that Facebook is used to keep connections with people, and "particularly networked individuals" (p. 179) who cannot easily have face-to-face connections. Boyd and Ellison (2008) define social network sites as: "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). This definition is important to this study because it encompasses the concept of controlled identity and self-presentation as well as

the networking and connections via Facebook. Carr (2012) describes social networking site such as Facebook as: "virtual social networks where an individual is able to present and maintain a personal image of themselves for others to observe and interpret" (p. 179). In the academic world, there have not been very many studies about Facebook and the effects that is has on society and individuals. I will briefly mention a few other studies that have been conducted recently.

A study by Zywica & Danowski (2008) found that based on people's different personality types, users act differently in online settings. They found that extroverts are more active and popular both on Facebook and in real life. Zywica & Danowski (2008) found that this was in relation to the level of self esteem that individuals felt and that introverts were more likely to compensate in online settings in order to appear more popular. This study found that introverts also revealed more about themselves online, and the nature of these revelations were things that these introverts felt they couldn't share with their real life friends (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). Child and Westerman (2013) discussed the parent-child relationships in online settings. This study found that children are more likely to outright accept their parent's friend request when there are low levels of privacy among family members. This is to say that children who accepted their parents' friend requests on Facebook had "high quality relationships" (p. 55) with their parents (Child & Westerman, 2013). They believe that young adults who are more willing to accept their parent's friend request had already changed aspects of their profile to appear more acceptable to their parents. Adolescents are likely to return to older posts and pictures that could either be compromising or reveal aspects of their identity that are undesirable and delete them (Child & Westerman, 2013). Another aspect of Facebook that has been studied is the presentation of emotions. Mansson and Myer (2011) found that there are not only the typical displays of

affection on Facebook such as writing messages saying "I love you", etc. but there is also a fourth category that is unique to online displays of affection. They say tagging one another in pictures and sending applications that are unique to Facebook are ways that affection is displayed online. They also found that women are more likely to display their affection online than men, which is also the case in face-to-face interactions (Mansson & Myer, 2011).

Unlike scholarly research on Facebook, there is long-standing research in anonymity. Scholars have been able to study anonymity across contexts. With different computer-mediated forms of communication such as email, it is clear that anonymity plays a very large role. With email, there are fewer opportunities for an individual's social identity to be made known, unless explicitly stated. Scott and Qian (2007) discuss the fact that online communication settings are huge facilitators for anonymity. There is more of an opportunity for anonymity because of the fact that there is a "disconnect" between time and space. Anonymity has been studied both in online settings as well as face-to face settings and there are a few common factors among the two. "In both online and offline environments, anonymity can be either visual or discursive (Scott, 2004). Visual anonymity refers to the condition where the physical presence of a message source cannot be detected; discursive anonymity refers to the condition where verbal communication cannot be attributed to a particular source" (Craig, 2007, p. 1430).

This study draws on three areas of research to study social identity and potential exchanges among peers occurring on Facebook. These are SIDE theory (which stands for social identity de-individuation effects), impression management and

formation and interpersonal relationships online. Each idea is interrelated with one another, and highlights individuals' uses of social media as a tool for identity.

SIDE Theory

The social identity model of de-individuation effects, otherwise known as the SIDE model, examines the effects of in-groups and out-groups in relation to social identity. In other words, it examines how others view and relate to one another in online settings (Carr, 2011; Vitak & McLaughlin, 2011). This theory looks at what makes someone a member of an in-group, or more socially accepted, and how online users determine whether a person has characteristics that align with others. If these characteristics do not align with a specific in-group, then that user is considered part of the out-group. SIDE is closely related to the concept of computer-mediated communication (CMC). With CMC there is a breach in the traditional, face-to-face processes of an interaction since that element has been removed (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). Removing the face-to-face interaction removes the cues (both verbal and non-verbal) that people look for in other individuals when interacting with them. This means that since these cues are gone, people are no longer concerned with managing those interactions that occur with face-to-face communication. Online communication shifts the focus from how an individual presents him or herself to what type of group alignment there is. Because of this, research has pointed to the fact that with social identity de-individuation, there is no longer a strong sense of individual identity, especially with the anonymity that can come with CMC

(Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). This means that the nature of social interactions online have changed because of CMC. There is much more de-individuation and a stronger connection to a group identity, hence adherence to group norms.

De-individuation is central to this study. De-individuation is not simply the idea that people tend to lose their sense of identity. It has been defined as "a psychological state of decreased self-evaluation, causing antinormative and disinhibited behavior" (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998, p. 695;Diener, 1980; Zimbardo, 1969). So, in other words, de-individuation is the act of not focusing as much on your self-presentation in an online setting, which therefore increases the likelihood that you will act in an uncharacteristic manner. It is important to note that there is a degree of variance in terms of the level of de-individuation based on situational norms. De-individuation arises when there is deep emersion into an online group, such as Facebook, and is heightened by anonymity (Carr, 2011). This is because many of the social cues that were previously there in face-to-face interactions have been removed. Individuals in online settings must renegotiate how to connect with others online, and find the social groups to which they belong. Once this group identity is found, it is easier to operate online because a user is controlled by group norms, as opposed to societal/individual norms (McLaughlin & vitak, 2011; Carr, 2011; Scott & Qian, 2007). When there is online anonymity and lack of the traditional social cues, it increases the possibility for de-individuation since there is less individual identity present and a more salient online, group identity (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). Individuals who have extreme group interaction are much more likely to adhere and identify with the group than themselves. It is not necessarily that they lose all sense of their individual identity, but just that they are more likely to see themselves as members of the group (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998).

Along with de-individuation, there is also the factor of anonymity in computer mediated communication settings (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). This means that often times, factors such as age, race, gender and class are not present or readily made available to people in an interaction. This anonymity in social media essentially removes many of the factors that people typically use to judge one another. It also puts everyone on an equal playing field since cues that would divide people in face-to-face settings are removed. An important consequence is that individuals are more likely to have a stronger sense of group unity because social cue factors are not present (Lee, 2008). Wang (2007) describes the process of anonymity as this: "Once people become anonymous […] they lose their individuality, accountability, and personal identity" (p. 2). It is especially important to note that all the members of a particular group may have never had face-to-face interactions with one another before, but because of de-individuation and levels of anonymity, it makes it easier to see appealing traits in other group member (Lee, 2008).

De-individuation and anonymity do not necessarily remove all aspects of individual identity, but rather emphasizes a change to a stronger salience of group identity (Wang, 2007). Within social networking sites, it is easier for individuals to identify as being part of the same network. Through this initial identification, individuals can further navigate their "new" social identity. When an individual has a strong sense of social identity, there is a sense of connection to various members of a social group (Wang, Walther & Hancock, 2008). The sense of a group identity means that online users feel the need to both maintain their group identity and their individual identity. It is seemingly understandable that any person would want to maintain their own, individual identity, as that is part of who they are. However, people have a desire to maintain a

group/social identity because is provides a sense of community and demonstrates alignments to in-group members on Facebook. These expressions of identity can come in various forms such as status postings, sharing pictures or commenting on another person's wall, and so on. It is important to note that when an individual engages in social identity disclosure via a status posting, this is a method than an individual can use to maintain their sense of group identity. Because CMC creates the feeling of de-individuation and therefore less individual identity, people feel that they are more able to express themselves in ways that could be considered uncharacteristic (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). These uncharacteristic expressions are mediated through statuses, messages, comments and pictures.

Free and open communication is thought to give more freedom and power to the oppressed, thus opening the flood gates for thoughts to be shared, since there is no downplay by the powerful (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). SIDE theorists believe that when an individual puts him or herself into a de-individualized setting, it influences the way that they act, communicate, and present themselves. The lack of a physical presence and group identification allows for an individual to feel more connected to members of an in-group, thus leading to more open communication (Wang, Walther & Hancock, 2008). An in-group is another way to describe the categories that any given individual falls into. For example, anyone who thinks of his or herself as an environmental activist can identify as a member of that in-group. Then, to go even further into that in-group, someone may identify as an activist for water conservation, which would create another in-group, while someone else may consider them an environmentalist with an emphasis on fighting pollution. These are two more in-groups, and people who do not identify similarly to the people of these in-groups is then considered part of the out-group. Again, the factor of anonymity

comes into effect too when there is a feeling of being able to engage in free and open communication among members of an in-group.

This level of anonymity allows an individual to feel a sense of freedom that would not be so if it were not computer-mediated (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998). Postmes, Spears and Lea (1998) describe this feeling of free and open communication as: "the notion that CMC gives people a strategic freedom to express themselves because they are unaccountable has also been identified as the cause of an ostensible increase in antinormative behavior in CMC compared to face-to-face conditions" (p. 692). What these scholars are saying is that when people do not immediately have to justify their statements, which would occur in face-to-face communication, they feel that their social identities can be expressed outright. The ability to communicate on a semi-anonymous level empowers individuals to perhaps act out or speak about something they normally wouldn't. An online setting heightens these "antinormative behaviors" since individuals don't have to take full and complete responsibility for what they are saying and they can take as much time as they would like to form responses (Wang, Walther & Hancock, 2008).

Not only do individuals have the opportunity for free and open communication because of computer mediate communication, they have many more chances to formulate, and maintain particular impressions. The reason for this is so that these individuals can still remain members of an in-group, even without direct, face-to-face interactions with other members. The next section will discuss previous scholarship pertaining to impression management online.

Impression Management

It doesn't matter whether interactions occur online, or in face-to-face settings, impressions of others are going to be formed. This impression formation and management happens differently for online settings compared to face-to-face communication. Closely related to the theories that SIDE presents are the ideas of impression management. Many theorists believe that because there is a lack of physical presence with CMC, there are fewer cues for an individual to form an impression about someone whom they are communicating with (Hancock, Dunham, 2001). Since there are so few social cues, the individual makes broad, stereotypical assumptions about the other's identity (Hancock, Dunham, 2001). When individuals interact with one another in a face-to-face setting, they use specific strategies to present themselves in their desired way (Rosenberg, Egbert, 2011).

In online settings, a specific strategy such as profile management becomes one of the main tools for impression management. A user can control the level of information that is displayed, or even provided on their personal profile page. A viewer can then use this information to form a particular impression about that user. Individuals can use a medium such as Facebook to present themselves in an appealing manner, which will then influence the impressions that viewers form (Rosenberg, Egbert, 2011).

Due to a lack of social cues and a deliberate self-presentation, there is a stronger tie to a group identity, which is what SIDE theorists argue. This is parallel to the idea that in computer mediated communication there is more likely to be a stronger in-group connection. In social networking sites, there is only so much information that is available. This means that in

order for there to be a connection, individuals must seek out identifying information. Similarly, in order for an individual to align himself or herself with a certain group identity, he or she must first create the right impression for that identity. The de-individuation and attachment to the in-group is prominent when one is forming an impression of another (Hancock, Dunham, 2001). Impression management through computer-mediated communication is more delayed compared to face-to-face communication; however, it is not completely hindered by the delay. It is important to note that over time a more complete impression of an individual is formed, especially when participants share with one another more information that can be used to form an impression (Hancock, Dunham, 2001; Walther, 1993). The feeling of a group identity among individuals strengthens this impression formation as well (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). Much like impressions changing in face-to-face communication, CMC impressions are altered with more interaction (Walther, 1993).

Because individuals can maintain a specific impression, and a controlled level of anonymity, some theorists believe that this leads to a more extreme behavior, which would not usually be seen in a face-to-face interaction. "The absence of social context cues should result in more impersonal behavior and polarization of attitudes, hence, more negative perceptions of group members. This cognitive effect is said to cause excited and uninhibited communication such as 'flaming' (insults, swearing, and hostile, intense language)" (Walther, 1993, p. 383). These people who demonstrate "flaming" are considered individuals who score low on the self-monitoring scale (Rosenberg, Egbert, 2011). The self-monitoring scale is simply exactly what it sounds like. It is a scale to rank how much impression management and self-monitoring a particular individual engages in (Rosenberg, Egbert, 2011). The "flaming" reaction is one of many ways in which individuals negotiate impression

management in online settings. Often times one will seek out cues on which to form an impression. Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) believe that individuals use social cues and comparisons when they are high self-monitors, which leads them to control the appropriateness of their social interactions. They are also more aware of their impressions that are presented to other, unlike the individuals whom experience lower scores on the self-monitoring scale.

Impression management is important to the study of online interactions because often it is the basis of computer-mediated communication. Social networking sites are structured in such a way that individuals cannot only form impressions of other users that they are interacting with, but also manage their own. This impression formation and management reinforce in-group and out-group identities, as well as provide the majority of social cues that are essential for interactions.

Interpersonal Relationships Online

Just like any face-to-face interaction, relationships are bound to form after a certain amount of online interaction. After initial impressions are made, the next step is relationship formation. However, these relationships are not always deep connections, or even beneficial to both parties. Because Facebook and other social media sties are tools for a user to create a certain identity, maintain that identity, and allow others to form impressions about said identity, there is bound to be interpersonal conflict or at least confrontation. Holt (2004) describes conflict among peers in social media as such:

> The ability of the Internet to unite those of disparate backgrounds has great potential for fostering debate and discussion of issues in the civic arena. In many cases, differences of opinion about, for example, political issues arise from lack of familiarity with the perspectives of other people (p. 125).

Research has found that people are more willing to directly confront someone through the use of social media compared to a face-to-face interaction (Cortese & Seo, 2012). This is due to the fact that there are fewer social "norms" within electronic communication, thus less apprehension (Cortese & Seo, 2012). This idea is equivalent to Rosenberg and Egbert's (2011) idea that individuals are more likely to have the "flaming" reaction when in an online context. Adrianson and Hjelmquist (1999) suggest that because there is a level of impersonality that comes along with CMC, this invokes an uncharacteristic response, with can include name-calling and insults. This can be considered the root of a conflict online. The conflict arises because of this "lower degree of concern about norm-related communication" (Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1999, p. 180).

Many scholars believe that CMC denies users complex communication, which in turn leads to people over exerting their opinion on social media, which then creates another, just as opinionated response (Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1999). Along with this is the idea that when there is no physical connection with an individual, the attention shifts from the individual to the content of a message. People are more likely to adhere to their own opinions when airing them on social media (Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1999). Cortese and Seo (2012) outline the affects of communication apprehension and the relation highly outspoken opinions. They found that an individual with high communication apprehension is less likely to engage in communication where there is potential for conflict, while an individual with low communication apprehension is more likely to either engage in conversation or express personal opinions.

Hightower and Sayeed (1995) discuss the implications of computer-mediated communication among groups with a bias. When groups, or in this case biased individuals interact through social media, they are more likely to "express their opinions and engage in extreme behavior" (p. 36). People feel more inclined to defend their opinions on social media rather than in face-to-face communication (Hightower & Sayeed, 1995).

Although online settings can be seen as a medium for uncharacteristic outbursts from individuals, many times it can also be a way for relationships to be established and maintained. Individuals in online settings look for the same elements that they would be looking for in face-to-face interactions. Similarity, attraction and self-disclosure are key to relationship maintenance in computer-mediated communication (Craig & Wright, 2012). Similarity is important, especially in initial interactions. This similarity also fortifies the idea of in-group identity. The second important element in relationship development and maintenance is attraction. Craig and Wright (2012) say that this is an equally important step for relationships in both computer mediated communication and face-to-face interactions. The last important element of relationship maintenance according to Craig and Wright (2012) is self-disclosure. "Within CMC contexts, self-disclosure is one of the primary means by which people communicate and manage information about how they wish to be perceived, and information about one's partner is necessary for the development and maintenance of relationships in general" (Craig & Wright, 2012, p. 121). Self-disclosure is essential to any relationship, as well as relationship maintenance. All three of the factors are key in face-to-face interactions, but also equally as important, if not more important in computer-mediated communication.

One of the major ideas that SIDE, impression management and interpersonal relationships fail to address is the idea that technology is rapidly changing, and thus the norms pertaining to interaction are also changing. While SIDE addresses de-individuation and anonymity, there is little discussion about online interactions, or about personal identity when the anonymity factor has been removed.

So how do all of these elements relate to the study of Facebook as an advancing form of communication? Facebook modifies both the traditional form of computer-mediated communication to allow users to control how much identifying information is shared. It is also conducive for strong in-group relationships because connecting to other Facebook users is simple. People use Facebook to not only find new connections to people, but also to maintain existing relationships. However, because this technology is advancing so quickly, these longstanding theories are now being brought into question. This study will serve to apply these ideas to this new CMC environment. The research question is:

RQ1: How does the level of anonymity in a Facebook profile relate to the level of social identity disclosure?

This research question serves as the basis to examine whether theories such as Postmes, Spears and Lea's idea of social identity de-individuation effects are still relevant and applicable to today's technologies.

The project will examine how computer mediated communication influences the amount of social identity disclosure. SIDE theorists believe that anonymity online resists the in-group, while identifying factors are more conducive to being part of the in-group (Postmes & Spears). In the study the SIDE lens will be applied to a much more contemporary setting to see if this

is still the case. This study will apply the theory that there is a stronger sense of group identity to the level of social identity disclosure that occurred during the current election.

METHODS

This study used 30 participants who all had their Facebooks from October 23rd to November 6th, 2012. There were no "at risk" individuals used in this study and all participants were of the age range 18-23. All participants were recruited via the same message that was posted to my personal Facebook, sent out using Facebook messenger or electronic email. The message was as follows:

> I am conducting a study which will explore the responses to the sharing of social identity online, specifically on Facebook. This research is part of my honors thesis for the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder. I will examine various postings that occurred from October 23rd to November 6th 2012 and the disclosure of social identity in the context of postings about public/societal events/issues. My research question is: how does the level of anonymity in a Facebook profile relate to the level of social identity disclosure? I am hoping you would be willing to share any postings on your Facebook profile that would be relevant. All information used in this study will be kept confidential, no identifying information will be used. Please feel free to contact me via Facebook message or email (Julia.harris@colorado.edu).

From this, the next step was that individuals contacted me informing they were willing to share their information, and they were guided through the steps to send me their examples of social identity disclosure. It was important to inform the participants that they must first block out any identifying factors (such as full names and profile pictures) before sending me their Facebook posts. After this process I received data from16 females and 14 males.

It was important to tell the participants that agreed to take part in my study that not only do the postings have to be from the date range of October 23rd to November 6th but they also needed to be about the political elections that were occurring. On top of that they needed to be postings where the user had posted something on their personal Facebook that served as a social cue to others in relation to the posters identity and then received some sort of feedback from other users.

These postings were demonstrations of social identity disclosure. Next I observed the profiles of the individuals that sent me data to see what the level of anonymity was for each user. The factors that I looked for when examining a user's level of anonymity were things such as whether or not the user had their full name on their profile. I also made note if they provided identifiers such as their age, job, education, political views, etc. These factors were only looked at for the people who had already provided me with consent and had shared with me their Facebook postings. I then organized these based on what type of identifiers were provided and how many as well as the levels of social identity disclosure. Later in the study are three tables, which illustrate each participants' rankings.

RESULTS

This section of the paper provides the results of the study. It is categorized into three main subgroups. First I will report on the level of anonymity that was found among participants. I will then report on the level of social identity disclosure, and finally I will report on the relationship between the two factors.

Participants

This study gathered participants from the Facebook community who ranged in age from 18-23. Some participant's ages could not be recorded because they did not provide a full date of birth but an age range could be inferred based on the nature of the rest of their identifying information. Because participants were recruited through online messages, they came from many different areas. Twelve of the participants are current undergraduate students at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and five more that are recent graduates (graduated within the last year). Two participants are current students at the University of New Mexico, two from New Mexico State University, one from The Catholic University of America, two from The University of Northern Colorado, one from St. Lawrence University, one from Bucknell University. There are also four participants that were not graduates from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Two of these participants are currently living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, one lives in France and the other lives in the Pacific North West. In this study there were 16 female participants and 14 males for a total of 30 participants. For purposes of this study, each participant was assigned a participant number for identification purposes.

When the initial call to participants was sent out, some individuals responded to my postings but did not qualify for the study because they either (1) sent me postings that were not related to the Presidential election, or (2) they simply felt that their profiles did not have any social information.

Many of the participants were more than willing to share their postings with me but one thing that I had not anticipated was the fact that I could not view people's identifying information. Initially I thought that I would be able to see this

information without having to "friend" people. However, this was not the case. In order to see the identifying information I had to friend people that I was not originally a "friend" with. Surprisingly, after learning that I was conducting a study, people did not hesitate to accept my friend request. It also helped that my friend request was not the initial contact with people as they had first responded to my call to participants and then we had exchanged informed consent. Another unexpected limitation that I came across in the data collection process was that I had to assume that all identifying information provided was in fact correct. Because I was only gathering information through observation I just had to assume that everyone was being truthful when sharing their identifying information on Facebook.

Anonymity and Identifying Information

It is first important to define what exactly anonymity means in the context of this study and to make it clear that this study is about anonymity and social identity disclosure, not about Facebook. This same study could be applied to any number of different social networking sites; it is not specific to Facebook. The anonymity elements, or lack there of, within any given user's Facebook profile played a key role in this study. Postmes, Spears and Lea (1998) discuss the fact that with online interactions, there is a de-individuated setting. Because of this, individuals must look for cues online, generally on a person's profile, in order to understand if that particular individual is part of the viewer's in-group or out-group. So the level of anonymity online, which is determined by each person, displays how many social cues that individual is willing to share with the rest of the Facebook community. If someone maintains a level of anonymity in their profile than it is harder for other

members to gather information about that particular person, thus making them a member of the out-group (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

There were a total of 13 identity factors that I examined. They were: 1) whether or not they provided their full name, 2) full birth date, 3) how much education information they provided, 4) political view, 5) religious view, 6) hometown, 7) work experience, 8) gender, 9) languages, 10) contact information, 11) family connection, 12) current city and 13) relationship status. These are presented in table 1. Each participant's total identity score is on the bottom of the chart in bold. The lowest score received was a 4 and the highest score was 13. These factors are the ones that would help an observer make judgments about the individual's identity. For this study, an individual who scored high on the identity scale was very transparent about their identity, and provided viewers with lots of social cues. Participants who scored low on this scale provided very few cues that would allow individuals to form impressions. A participant was considered neutral on the identity scale if they scored a 9. Individuals scored a 1 if they provided the full information for date of birth and education and a .5 if the information was partial. All participants who provided education information shared at least high school and college education, but some shared their major. Individuals who shared all three earned a 1 for education, while individuals who didn't share their major only scored a .5 since it was partial information. Below is the identifying information chart:

	Participant Number																														
Identifying Information	19	8	7	17	22	1	11	28	4	9	12	15	24	18	2	25	14	6	21	23	27	16	10	29	3	30	26	20	5	1
Full name	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		
Birth date	.5	.5	1	1	1	.5	.5	1	1	1	1	.5	.5	.5	1	1	.5	1	.5	1	1	.5	.5	.5	1	1	.5	.5	.5	1
Education	1	1	1	1	1	.5	.5	.5	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	.5	.5	1	1	1	.5	.5	.5	.5	.5	.5	1	.5	
Political view	1	1	1			1	1	1	1				1	1			1		1	1					1	1				
Religious view	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1		1						1	1	1	1			
Hometown	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1		1		1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	1			1	1	1	
Work experience	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1				1	1	1	1		1						1	
Gender	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1		1		1	1		
Languages	1			1		1					1	1	1	1		1					1									
Contact information	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1
Family connection	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1			1	1	1					1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1
Current city	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	
Relationship status	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1		1	1	1			1	1	1		1			1			1
Identifying Information Total:	**12.5**	**11.5**	**11**	**11**	**11**	**11**	**11**	**10.5**	**10**	**10**	**10**	**9.5**	**9.5**	**9.5**	**9**	**9**	**9**	**8.5**	**8.5**	**8**	**8**	**8**	**8**	**8**	**7.5**	**7.5**	**7**	**6.5**	**6**	**4**

Table 1: Identifying information

A higher number on this scale indicats a great amount of identity disclosure